Moving Away from ACT for Placement: A Three-Year Journey to Implementing Directed Self-Placement

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Abstract

While writing scholars have long been arguing against the use of standardized tests for writing placement, many universities still use them. Other, more effective, placement methods, such as portfolio assessment, are often difficult and time consuming. Thus, many have moved to Directed Self Placement (DSP) as a more ethical and time-effective solution. This article is a detailed chronicle of three years of work, struggle, wrong steps, and ultimate success, in implementing DSP. This article explains the day-to-day work necessary to make large program changes. The goal of the article is for readers to find value in the details of the story and not only learn from our mistakes, but hopefully avoid them.

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, in the fall of 2020, our university went "test optional," meaning that students who applied to the university did not need to take the ACT or SAT. As we began returning to "normal" operations in the following years, one of the things that stuck was "test optional." Through the efforts of our Associate Vice Provost (AVP) for Diversity and Inclusion and several other parties, the push to do away with the ACT requirement became a reality. Writing scholars have long been arguing against the use of standardized tests for writing placement because (1) They are biased against minorities (Johnson and VanBrackle; Moos and Van Zanen); (2) They do not do a good job of placing students accurately (Isaacs and Molloy), and (3) The tests are inauthentic writing situations that can't accurately assess what students can do (Isaacs and Molloy; Nastal; Robertson). In addition, using standardized tests for placement is using them in ways they were never meant to be used. They were never meant to be placement tests for any discipline. Although it had been a long-standing goal in our department to discontinue the use of the ACT for placement, other priorities had taken precedence. Now, placement automatically became the highest priority because without ACT scores, we had to have another way of placing first-year writing students.

Because of my experience with Directed Self Placement (DSP) from my time as an instructor at a previous university, I quickly brought it forward as a potential option. DSP begins with the assumption that students know their own writing skills better than anyone and that they can choose their

own course accurately if given the appropriate amount of direction. Typically, DSP comes in the form of a questionnaire that asks students about their experiences with writing, such as their confidence in their writing ability and/or the feedback they have been given on writing, and then students are given a recommendation as to which course seems the best fit for them. However, students are given the option to choose a different course if they believe that recommendation is incorrect. As defined by Royer and Gilles, "DSP can be any placement method that both offers students information and advice about their placement options (that's the 'directed' part) and places the ultimate placement decision in the students' hands (that's the 'self-placement' part)" (2). Some schools have a writing task as part of the DSP, some use students' standardized test scores or their GPA as part of it, but the commonality among them all is that students are given the agency to choose their own writing course rather than being placed by someone else. What follows is the story of how, after three years of work, struggle, wrong steps, and ultimate success, we have finally implemented DSP at our university. I hope that readers can find value in our story and not only learn from our mistakes, but hopefully avoid them. I believe the story and the advice I give are relevant to most any large-scale programmatic change.

My university is a rural, Midwestern state school with a total enrollment of just over 10,000 students. We have a two-course composition sequence that most students take. This sequence consists of Composition I: Academic Literacies, which focuses on writing researched academic arguments, and Composition II: Writing as Engagement, which focuses on writing for non-academic communities, writing in multiple genres for different audiences, etc. In addition, we have an Introduction to College Writing course for students not quite ready for Composition I, and an Accelerated Composition course for those who are skilled and confident writers. The Accelerated Composition class combines the content of Composition I and II into one course. Students had placed into Introduction to College Writing if they had below an 18 ACT English sub-score, and they had placed into Accelerated Composition if they had above a 27 ACT English sub-score. If students placed into Introduction to College Writing, we had a writing challenge they could take to try to test out of the class. The writing challenge was simply an essay test that I graded. If they passed the writing challenge, they could enroll in Composition I.

As the Composition Coordinator (WPA), I am a tenure-track faculty member, with two course releases (out of a 4/4 normal teaching load) for administrative work. While I am given release time for my administrative work, I am not given any extra pay for summer work. In addition, my colleagues, one in my department and one in Computer Science, who helped

extensively, did not receive any compensation for their time. My colleague in my department worked on the project as part of his regular work as a member of our Expository Writing Committee (although he definitely went above and beyond what is typically asked of members of that committee). Our colleague in Computer Science just worked on it in his "free" time, and, while he did end up winning a service award from the university in part because of his work with us, I have, throughout this project, wished there was more we could have done to compensate him for his work.

At the beginning of fall 2020, we were still using the ACT to place students, even though many of the tests had been canceled. We began using the writing challenge for anyone who did not have an ACT score, but we recognized that as we continued to not require ACT scores, more and more students were going to come without one, and the writing challenge would eventually become unfeasible (since I was the only one who graded those tests). This push was what we needed to do what we already knew we should: stop using the ACT for placement.

For me, the most important criticism of standardized tests in general is that they are biased against minorities. Almost 30 years after Crowley asked whether we could "serve diverse student bodies well through placement?" (90), we are still attempting to answer this question. In 1974, the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) published the statement, "Students' Right to their Own Language," which argued that all forms of English should be valued equally. In addition, linguists have long claimed that Standard American English (SAE) is only one dialect among many, and that no dialect is more valuable than another (see, for example, Cameron; Wolfram, Adger, and Christian). However, standardized tests such as the ACT, continue to evaluate students' college-readiness based on their ability to conform to racist standards of language production. For example, Johnson and VanBrackle found that raters of standardized writing tests were biased against students who wrote in Black English, giving lower scores for students who had "errors" that were typical of Black English speakers than they did for errors that are more typical of white students. More recently, scholars have explained that standardized tests evaluate students' ability to produce habits of white language or HOWL (Inoue, "What's the Problem"). When we force students of color to use HOWL to be accepted into college, we are participating in what Inoue calls "White Language Supremacy" ("2019 CCCC Chair's Address").

The above criticisms of standardized testing led me to believe that DSP might be a better option. The next few months were spent reading research articles on DSP (such as those discussed above), talking with people at other universities who were using it, and gathering examples of DSP questions

used. I wanted to make sure that DSP was the right choice for us, and I wanted to have research to back up our decision if we needed to justify that choice to university administrators. The texts we read affirmed that DSP was an accurate way of placing students into composition classes (Aull; Blakesley; Crusan). One of the things we felt was most persuasive about DSP was the agency it gives to students to choose their own course. We felt like this would greatly improve the classroom morale in Introduction to College Writing because students wouldn't be forced to take it; they would choose to take it. We always had a good number of students take the writing challenge every year, and we had all experienced students in our classes who were not happy about having to take Introduction to College Writing. We felt like moving to DSP would eliminate this problem.

In creating the first draft of questions for our DSP survey, we relied on Toth and Aull's "Directed Self-Placement Questionnaire Design," which is a comprehensive survey and analysis of DSP questionnaires. We also received samples of DSP questionnaires from The University of Washington, Boise State University, and the University of California, Santa Barbara, and had Zoom meetings or email exchanges with the WPAs at those institutions to discuss their placement process and the process of implementing DSP. These institutions were chosen simply because I knew they had been successfully using DSP for many years. These discussions, along with the research consulted, greatly aided in getting the DSP to pass through the various university committees that needed to vote on it. I was able to discuss what the research said, how people used DSP at other institutions, and why I believed it would work here.

We then spent several months working to draft our own questions based on a compilation of questions from other universities and other questions we came up with ourselves. This process took nearly a full academic year. By the end of spring 2021, we had a first draft of our DSP questionnaire. After much discussion, two pilots, and several revisions (discussed in detail below), our final version was completed by early 2023. It begins with an introductory video in which I explain DSP to students (see full transcript below). The questionnaire has sixteen questions that ask them about their experiences with reading and writing, their confidence in writing for the college level, and the kinds of feedback they have received on writing in the past (see the appendix for full list of questions). When they finish the online questionnaire, a video pops up that explains, in detail, the course that is recommended. They are then given several prompts that ask whether they feel that recommendation is correct or if they would like to watch the videos that explain the other options. The final question says, "The course

I have chosen to take is . . ." and they chose from a drop-down menu. Students are free to choose whichever course they think is best for them.

To back up, though, over the summer of 2021, one of my rhetoric and composition colleagues worked with a faculty member in the Computer Science department to create the online survey implement. This process was much more difficult than I imagined. Creating the online platform took expertise that our lack of web building and coding experience would not have allowed us to do. His involvement has been crucial to our success. Thus, here is my first piece of advice: get someone in computer science or IT to help you early on. It is not feasible to do paper questionnaires, so you will need to create an online questionnaire that can gather the data and store it securely as well as upload it into systems such as Banner and Degree Audit for the registrar, advisers, and others to be able to access and use as necessary.

In the fall of 2021, we did a test of the DSP by having students in our composition courses take it. We then compared how the DSP placed them with how they were placed via ACT. The first test gave us some important information: there were several questions that did not correlate with either the final placement with the DSP or their placement via ACT. When I say they didn't "correlate," I just mean that, for example, answering "highly agree" on one question did not necessarily mean that their final score was high or that they had a high ACT score. This lack of correlation caused us to rethink those questions because they seemed to be outliers. A student might say highly agree on that one question but then put highly disagree on everything else. We felt that those questions needed to be revised or deleted because we were trying to get consistent patterns. For example, we found that questions about a students' enjoyment of writing did not strongly correlate with their placement. On the other hand, the question about their experience writing in multiple genres had high correlation, as did a question about whether they like to challenge themselves to work on difficult writing tasks.

In addition, we saw too many students whose ACT score placed them into Introduction to College Writing place into Accelerated Composition via the DSP. We assumed we would see fewer students in Introduction to College Writing than we previously had, but we did not think that those students were ready for Accelerated Composition. At this point we did not have the videos that described the classes yet, so we were going simply by the scores. We took the rest of the fall to rethink many of the questions, revising, deleting, and adding others that we thought would help us get the results we needed. We also reset the cutoff scores to account for the results and added the videos at the end. We knew that most students should go to

Composition I and wanted only those who needed the most support and those that were the most accomplished to go to Introduction to College Writing or Accelerated Composition. We set the cutoff scores with this in mind.

In the spring of 2022, we did the test again with the new set of questions and cutoff scores. The correlations were much stronger throughout, and we felt confident moving forward with the instrument, knowing we could revise it again later if we needed to. At this time, we started bringing in other parties to let them know what we had been doing and how it would affect them. While earlier in the year we had discussed the potential use of DSP with the dean and head of academic advising, we needed to have more in-depth conversations. We met multiple times with the dean, the registrar, the director of our Student Success Center, the advisers, IT, etc. I would say this was a bit too late in the process for these meetings. It worked out fine because we had mentioned it to them already, but it probably would have been beneficial to get those people more involved earlier. Thus, here is my second piece of advice: do not wait that long to bring stakeholders into the conversation. These in-depth conversations happened in the spring of 2022, when we were hoping to get it up and running in time for the beginning of fall 2022. While this did make us have to push back our timeline, it had potential to cause worse problems. For example, if there was lack of support for the change, and we ultimately were not able to implement it, we would have wasted a lot of time.

After getting the thumbs up from all the people we met with, it was time to make the change official by going through the formal course and program change process. We were getting towards the second half of the semester, and if we wanted to have any chance of having this ready for fall of 2022, we needed to hurry up because the proposals had to be approved by many different committees and groups. First, I had some extended conversations with our department's executive committee and our full department. At first the major discussion point was whether it was effective to allow students to choose their own course. People in our department didn't seem to feel like students could accurately choose for themselves. After summarizing the research on DSP, talking through the full process and the pilot studies we had conducted, and trying to highlight the "directed" nature of the self-placement, we still had one person in the department vote "no" on the proposals. The proposals passed unanimously in all other university-wide committees. At each of these committee meetings, I was there to explain and advocate for the DSP. I was prepared to use all the research and the pilots we conducted to argue our case. Fortunately, that wasn't needed. However, here is another piece of advice: get as much research

behind you as possible and be ready to answer any questions that might be posed. Anticipate pushback from many different areas and be ready with research in hand.

At the same time as we were trying to get the proposals through, I was also informed that the actual survey platform that our computer science colleague had created was never meant to be the permanent solution. He had built it as a prototype on his personal GitHub account and was not keen on leaving it there long term. One reason for this was the security issues. We did not want student data to be hosted on a site that we did not feel was going to keep it secure. At this point we were given two options, neither of which were ideal. Our IT department could re-create the survey implement and have it hosted internally on our system, but the predicted timeline for this was six to eight months. Or, we could have it externally hosted by the company that currently hosts our new student orientation materials. This option was expensive and would give us less control. I wanted us to be able to have control of the implement and be able to make changes quickly and easily if we needed to. In the end, we decided to use the prototype that our computer science colleague created until our IT department could create an internally hosted version. This issue could easily have been avoided if we had gotten our IT folks involved earlier in the process.

Every summer, our university hosts several Student Orientation and Registration (SOAR) days. We try to get all incoming students to come to one of these days. We decided that the best choice was to have students take the DSP during SOAR. However, because the schedule for SOAR was already packed (and couldn't be changed for the year), for the sake of time, the person who runs SOAR decided to only have students take it whose ACT placed them into Introduction to College Writing or who did not have an ACT score on file. This decision was made without consulting me. Needless to say, I was not happy about this. At our university, incoming student schedules are created for them before they come to SOAR. All the students had been registered for a composition class based on their ACT scores, and anyone without an ACT score was put into Introduction to College Writing, pending their taking of the DSP. Having only the students who had already been registered for Introduction to College Writing take the DSP was potentially going to cause a scheduling nightmare. We knew that switching to DSP was likely to cause us to need fewer Introduction to College Writing classes and more Composition I courses, but with only the Introduction to College Writing students taking it, there would only be shift up, and no shift down.

And that is exactly what happened after the first two days of SOAR. The only person from our department who typically attends SOAR is an

advisor who meets with students who have declared Language, Literature, and Writing as their major. Thus, neither I nor anyone else who worked on the DSP had considered that we might need to attend. The people who run SOAR set up computers for students to take the DSP and had someone there to explain and monitor it, and we hoped that the process would be effective. We were wrong about that! After the first two days of SOAR, only two students who took the DSP were still in Introduction to College Writing and several had skipped up to Accelerated Composition. At this point, I made two decisions: first, we raised the cutoff scores for which course they were recommended to take, and, second, I decided to go to SOAR and explain and monitor the DSP myself.

What I found when I attended SOAR leads me to my next piece of advice: be onsite to see the project in action. Even if others do it right, you can learn a lot from being there yourself. To begin, I just observed what was happening so I could see if there was a problem with how the DSP was being explained. The first problem I noticed was that the person who was monitoring the DSP very clearly did not understand what it was. This leads to another piece of advice: make sure everyone involved really understands the program change you are making. In the case of DSP, it is a fairly big ideological shift and those in charge of explaining it to students really need to fully comprehend it.

When a student showed up to take the DSP, they were in a hurry to get to their advising appointment, and the person explained the DSP by simply saying, "This is your English placement questionnaire. Just answer the questions as honestly as possible." Then when students were done, they just took their score and left, with no discussion or explanation telling them that they could choose their own course, that the DSP was just a recommendation, etc. Not only that, but after students finish the DSP, there is a video they are supposed to watch that explains the recommended course in detail and then tells them that if that course doesn't sound right for them, they should talk to their advisor about changing to another course. While I was sitting there, a person walked by and told the student "You don't have to watch the video." I was quite shocked because the videos were extremely important to the process we had set up. I stopped the person and said "Actually, no! They do absolutely need to watch the video all the way through!"

At that point I took over the explaining of the DSP and began giving students about a two-minute advising session after they had taken it. My explanation went something like this:

> We allow students to choose their own writing course. We have three
> levels of writing courses that you can choose from depending on your
> writing skills and your confidence in your writing. We don't place

> you based on your ACT score or your grades or anything like that. We believe that you know your writing skills better than anyone. What you are about to do here is not a placement test. It's just a questionnaire that will help guide you in choosing the right course for you. It will ask you questions about your experience with writing, your confidence in your writing ability, the kinds of feedback you got from teachers, etc. At the end of the questionnaire, a video will play that describes the class that, based on your answers, *seems to be* the right one for you, but it's still completely up to you. So, answer the questions as honestly as possible, and then watch the video all the way to the end and really think about whether that sounds like the right class for you. When you're done, I'll come over and talk to you about whether you think that's the right course or if you'd like to know more about the other two options.

This speech eventually became the transcript for the welcome video that plays at the beginning of the DSP questionnaire that we now use.

After students finished, I would come over and ask them if that placement sounded about right, if there was anything in the description that made them nervous or have concerns about. Very often, I would suggest that they watch one of the other videos so they could compare. Students seemed to take the DSP seriously and really think about which class was right for them, often asking further questions about the classes. A question I found incredibly helpful when students were having trouble choosing between two classes was something like, "Do you want to take a course where you feel very confident that you can be successful, or are you someone who likes to challenge yourself to do something a bit harder even if you might struggle to get the grade you want?" This question was great to get them thinking about what kind of experience they wanted to have in their first semester of college. Often students chose the lower option when I asked this question. After that first day, over half of the students stayed in Introduction to College Writing, and none went to Accelerated Composition. These numbers were much closer to what we had expected, and these numbers held fairly steady throughout the rest of the SOAR sessions. We continued to have myself or one of the people who had worked on the DSP attend SOAR, and the process seemed to work well.

At this point, we had several lingering issues that we needed to address. First, the person in charge of new student orientation wanted the DSP to be sent to students before SOAR so they could take it at home, and we could have them already registered for their composition class. I was not convinced this was the best choice, but we are going to give it a try. I was not confident that students would read the explanation of the DSP

carefully or would fully understand their agency in choosing their course. To counter this possibility, I created a video that plays before they start. It basically says exactly what I told students at SOAR (the transcript above). They are required to watch this video all the way through before starting (the "start" button doesn't appear until the video is finished playing). I also wasn't sure if they would watch the video explaining their recommendation all the way through and really think through their choices. I believed that the two-minute advising session I gave students at the end of the DSP was incredibly valuable in helping them decide effectively. In response to this concern, the placement was designed so that students are not able to click out of the program without watching the video all the way through, and we have several questions at the end such as, "does this placement sound right for you?" We also added a chart for easy reference when they are making their choice. It shows each course, the kinds of reading and writing done in that course, and the skill level and dispositions of students who typically take that course. The DSP ends with a question that states "I have chosen to take . . ." with a drop-down menu for them to choose from. We are hopeful that this will work well.

A second concern we had at that time was what to do with international students and dual credit students. All international students are required to take the TOEFEL for admission to the university, but for placement, they had, up to this point, all been taking the writing challenge. We had to decide whether to continue using the writing challenge, to create a separate DSP questionnaire for multilingual international students, or to simply have international students use the same DSP questionnaire as our domestic students. The CCCC advocates DSP as a viable and appropriate placement method for second language writers (*CCCC Statement*). In addition, Crusan as well as Ferris, Evans, and Kurser argue that DSP is an effective placement method for multilingual writers. These arguments being considered, we decided to move forward with having international students take the same DSP as all the rest of the students.

In addition, dual-credit (DC) students had been allowed to take Composition I in their high schools if they had the required ACT score. Over the past year, all DC students had been taking the writing challenge instead. However, it is a state requirement that we use the same placement method for DC students that we use for our incoming first-year students. So, while I have a bit less confidence in the effectiveness of DSP for DC students, because of the state requirement, we have to use it for them as well. We had to set up a separate survey platform for the DC students, and I made a separate welcome video that is more specific to DC. Also, since they don't have multiple options, we don't use the videos at the end. We just use their score.

At the end of the DSP, if they score forty or higher, they get a message that says, "Your score indicates that you might be prepared to take this course. However, please think carefully about whether you are really ready for this challenge before deciding." If they get below a forty, it just says, "Your score indicates that you are not quite ready for this class. Please take your regular high school English class instead." I have not seen any scholarship on using DSP for dual-credit composition, so this is new territory.

Lastly, we are already considering how we might assess the DSP in the short and long term. Aside from comparing completion rates and GPAs from before and after the DSP, we are also going to assess student perception. We are planning to do a simple assessment survey near the end of the term that asks the students to tell us whether they believe they made the right choice of course or whether they feel they should have been in a more challenging or less challenging class. This simple assessment will only give us student perceptions of whether the DSP worked effectively as a placement tool, but I think that's valuable information to have.

The lingering questions lead me to two last pieces of advice: (1) Understand that any large-scale program change is going to be complicated and time consuming and will take much longer than you hope to get into place; (2) Even after you have something in place, it will likely need constant monitoring, assessing, refining, and updating. In the end, even with the ups and downs and challenges of getting the DSP in place, I believe this will be a positive change for our students, and I hope that the story of our experience is informative and helpful to readers.

Acknowledgment

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Appendix: Final Version of Our DSP Questionnaire

These questions are on a 4-point scale: strongly agree = 4, agree = 3, disagree = 2, strongly disagree = 1. Stating "strongly agree" on every question equals 64 points. Students get a recommendation of Introduction to College

Writing if their score is 39 or below, Composition I if their score is between 40 and 59, and Accelerated Composition if their score is 60 or higher.

Relationship With Reading

Please answer the following questions, reflecting on your relationship with reading, and the role it plays in your life, whether in school, at work, or elsewhere.

- I read articles and books in my free time about topics that interest me.
- I read carefully and often take notes, especially when reading for school.
- I read most assigned reading for school without difficulty.
- I read a variety of texts in high school, including literature, non-fiction, essays, reports, news stories, fiction, poetry, etc.

Attitude toward Writing

Please answer the following questions, reflecting on your attitude toward writing, how you feel about it, whether in school, at work, or elsewhere.

- I enjoy learning and applying new ideas to my own writing.
- I feel confident organizing my paper around a focused idea.
- I feel confident revising, editing, and proofreading my own writing.
- I enjoy the challenge of working hard on writing difficult or complex papers.

Previous Writing Experience

Please answer the following questions, reflecting on your previous experience in writing, whether in school, at work, or elsewhere.

- I have written at least two documents of 5 pages or more that received good grades and/or positive feedback.
- I have written at least three different types of writing, including essays, reports, news stories, fiction, poetry, that received good grades and/or positive feedback.
- I learned and improved based on the feedback and/or grades I received on writing assignments.
- Based on my previous experiences, including grades and/or feedback, I expect to do well in writing for college courses.

Skills

Please answer the following questions honestly, thinking about all the experiences and attitudes you've thought about throughout these questions, reflecting on your writing skills based on previous grades and/or feedback.

- I have received good grades and/or positive feedback on my ability to adapt my writing style to different audiences and purposes.
- I have received good grades and/or positive feedback on my ability to find, evaluate, and integrate sources in my writing.
- I have received good grades and/or positive feedback on my ability to produce clear, readable sentences in an appropriate style.
- I have received good grades and/or positive feedback on my ability to craft an argument, a thesis effectively supported with evidence.

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