

# Review of Jessica Nastal, Mya Poe, and Christie Toth's Writing Placement in Two-Year Colleges: The Pursuit of Equity in Postsecondary Education

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What does it mean to be college-ready? Who belongs in the first-year composition classroom versus developmental English courses? Why these students and not others? How is the decision made? And is that decision truly equitable? If not, what can faculty and writing program administrators do about it? Responding to questions like these and to a long-standing call for change in writing assessment and placement practices in higher education, *Writing Placement in Two-Year Colleges: The Pursuit of Equity in Postsecondary Education* showcases how eleven different community colleges from across the United States have tackled the challenge of reform in both big and small ways.

The authors included in this work acknowledge the harm that traditional writing placement methods have caused, such as chronic underplacement, especially to BIPOC and other marginalized students, and offer a multitude of approaches for implementing more equitable writing placement practices. Where each college is in this process and what the results look like vary, but every chapter in this collection showcases the stories, research, data, and strategies used by faculty members to affect real and lasting change at their colleges.

The book is designed to be read in a couple of different ways, depending on the needs and interests of the reader. Firstly, broken up into three overarching sections (The Long Road of Placement Reform, Innovation and Equity in

Placement Reform, and Pandemic-Precipitated Placement Reform) the book presets the case studies and methods used by timespan. The eleven chapters advance from pre-COVID-19-pandemic efforts and methods prompted by internal institutional push for change, to pre-pandemic externally prompted change, and finally to pandemic-driven efforts and speculation for post-pandemic continuances. The case studies range from methods that have been implemented and data recorded and analyzed, to “in the thick of it” changes and efforts, to hopes for lasting change and further efforts to reform and adapt. For alternative ways of reading, the introduction presents charts which inform the reader how to read by specific placement method or by region, accrediting body, and state. These options allow the reader freedom to navigate the eleven chapters and find what would best aid them for their unique position and desires. On the whole, this collection “reminds us that scholars at two-year colleges are at the forefront of advocating for and developing transformative and humanizing writing placement assessments that create more equitable conditions for historically minoritized students at two year colleges” (p. xi).

Diving deeper into the book, section one, *The Long Road of Placement Reform*, details four two-year colleges’ attempts to reform, create, adapt, and refine writing placement assessments for their students. The first chapter, “No Reform Is an Island: Tracing the Influences and Consequences of Evidence-Based Placement Reform at a Two-Year Predominantly Black Institution,” by Jessica Nastal, Jason Evans, and Jessica Gravely of Prairie State College, looks at over a decade of the college’s history with writing placement. While the school did not use standardized testing as a placement method, the authors point out that “even well-intentioned homegrown placement tools also reproduce the flaws and betray the influences of the larger system” (p. 35). They highlight how reforming the “placement ecosystem” (p. 53) does not happen in a vacuum but requires institutional buy-in and effort on every level. “From ACCUPLACER to Informed Self-Placement at Whatcom Community College: Equitable Placement as an Evolving Practice” by Jeffrey Klausman and Signee Lynch is the second chapter of the work. It surveys the development of Whatcom Community College’s efforts to move from the ACCUPLACER test, which mainly focused on grammar and editing skills, toward an online multiple-measure, directed self-placement process which they call Informed Self-Placement. Chapter three is an article by Kris Messer, Jamey Gallagher, and Elizabeth Hart titled, “A Path to Equity, Agency, and Access: Self-Directed Placement at the Community College of Baltimore County” which presents their reflections on how self-directed placement for students has acted as a “catalyst for a shift in not just [their] pedagogy but [their] curriculum” (p. 100). Rounding out section one, “Welcome/Not Welcome: From

Discouragement to Empowerment in the Writing Placement Process at Central Oregon Community College,” by Jane Denison-Furness, Stacey Lee Donohue, Annemarie Hamlin, and Tony Russell highlights how the writing placement assessment is one of the first introductions students have to college and how standardized testing can have harmful effects on the mindset of these students. They document their efforts to reform writing placement practices alongside redesigning course structures and curriculum. Section one presents stories and data to highlight that more equitable reform is possible and acts as a guide for long-term, systemic reform for those looking to start their own efforts or to refine processes already in place.

The second section is titled Innovation and Equity in Placement Reform and showcases four colleges’ responses to various mandates on writing placement reformation to better address issues of equity. The first entry of this section is chapter five, “Narrowing the Divide in Placement at a Hispanic Serving Institution: The Case of Yakima Valley College,” by Carolyn Calhoun-Dillahunt and Travis Margoni. This case study illustrates how “placement reform plays an important role in the college’s mission as an HSI and serves as a foundation for reforms across campus toward more equitable and antiracist practices” (p. 131). In chapter six, “Putting ACCUPLACER in Its Place: Expanding Evidence in Placement Reform at Jamestown Community College,” Jessica M. Kubiak shows how her college is moving toward a multiple measures assessment, and she considers how non-matriculated students impact the discussion and efforts of writing placement reforms. The case study that makes up chapter seven, “Tracking the Racial Consequences of Placement by Probability: A Case Study at Kingsborough Community College,” highlights the authors’, Annie Del Principe, Lesley Broder, and Lauren Levesque, challenges with using a writing sample as a single method of placement. Instead, they argue that a multiple measures assessment would hold more validity, especially for students of color. Chapter eight’s article, “Mind the (Linguistic) Gap: On ‘Flagging’ ESL Students at Queensborough Community College” by Charissa Che, “demonstrates the need to reconsider the complexities of ‘ESL student’ identities for more equitable writing placement” (p. 191). Altogether, section two provides examples of how to navigate externally mandated reform of writing assessment and placement from a variety of levels, from state to local to institutional policies.

Finally, the third section, Pandemic-Precipitated Placement Reform, reveals how faculty at various colleges used the pandemic’s effects on schooling to create more equitable and ethical writing placement assessment methods. Faculty of Cuyahoga Community College, Ashlee Brand and Bridget Kriner, start this section off with their article, “Pandemic Placement at Cuyahoga

Community College: A Case Study,” which acts as chapter nine. Dealing with the limitations that the pandemic placed on their college’s previous methods of writing assessment, the ACCUPLACER exam and ACT or SAT scores, the authors note how the thrown-together—and originally meant to be temporary—multiple measures assessment has had beneficial impacts not only on the student population but also for the college faculty. In chapter ten, “A Complement to Educational Reform: Directed Self-Placement (DSP) at Cochise College,” Erin Whittig of University of Arizona, Cathy Sander Matthesen of Cochise College, and Denisse Cañez of Cochise College reflect on the use of directed self-placement as the writing placement method over the course of the first eighteen months of the pandemic. During this time, it evolved from an emergency, pandemic-driven measure to a full pilot program. The final chapter of section three, “Community College Online Directed Self-Placement During the COVID-19 Pandemic” by Sarah Elizabeth Snyder, Sara Amani, and Kevin Kato of Arizona Western College, relays how pre-pandemic efforts to create a more equitable writing assessment option for the primarily multilingual student body unexpectedly became the main form of placement due to its online modality. After sharing their methodology, the authors also describe the early positive effects this method had on the placement of their students. Despite the pandemic-driven disruptions to the educational landscape being (to some extent) behind us, section three’s stories of quick pivots highlight how unexpected opportunities for positive reform should be grasped, and they provide examples of how these opportunities can be used to create space for equity and justice where it was previously pushed aside.

*Writing Placement in Two-Year Colleges: The Pursuit of Equity in Postsecondary Education* is a collection of various ways more equitable and just writing assessment and placement practices can be implemented. For those looking to start or further reform at their own two-year institution(s), this book is a great place to start. However, it does not portray these practices in a vacuum. This book calls attention to how writing placement and its effect on both students and faculty are “always part of a broader local assessment ecology that encompasses classroom assessment practices as well as sites like supplemental instruction for accelerated learning, writing centers, exit assessments for course sequences, and assessment practices that involve writing across the curriculum” (24). The work and research being done at two-year colleges is not done in isolation, but instead can inform practices at all educational levels. This book serves as encouragement, a guide, and a call for further change for anyone looking to pursue justice and equity in writing education.