

A COMPELLING COLLABORATION: THE FIRST YEAR WRITING PROGRAM, WRITING CENTER, AND DIRECTED SELF-PLACEMENT

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At Rhode Island College (RIC), Becky Caouette, Director of Writing, and Claudine Griggs, Writing Center Director, are invested in helping students become better writers. That's our job, and our privilege. While we share this goal, we each work under markedly different institutional scaffolding. Perhaps nowhere was this difference more apparent than in our former writing placement testing process for RIC's First Year Writing (FYW) courses, where *all* of the work was done by the writing center. In what follows, we talk about how the uneven work distribution provided the exigency to change our placement process, and how we turned to Directed Self-Placement (DSP) as a possible solution on two fronts: providing better placement procedures for our students and creating more egalitarian (and collaborative) working conditions between the writing center and the FYW Program.

Institutional and Departmental Backgrounds

Our situation will be familiar to many readers: RIC is a mid-sized four-year state college that serves about 9,000 full- and part-time students. The FYW Program is housed in the English Department, and almost all of the instructors who staff FYW courses are adjuncts. The writing center falls under the Office of Academic Support and Information Services (OASIS), which provides the writing center budget.

Consequently, we hold different institutional identities. Becky, who is the administrator for the FYW Program, has a tenure-track full-time 9-month faculty appointment in the English Department. Claudine, the Writing Center Director, serves as a part-time instructor in the English Department (teaching two classes per year) and as a part-time staff member of OASIS. She has a 12-month renewable 3-year term contract and is designated as a part-time (87.5%) employee with full-time equivalent benefits. But while Becky's role and responsibilities are generally clear and familiar, Claudine's can become murky. For example, she reports to the director of OASIS in her staff role, receives teaching assignments/evaluations from the chair of the English

Department, "collaborates" with the Director of Writing, and occasionally gets work from the academic and admissions VPs.

Since Claudine's contract began several months before Becky's (May versus August 2009), Claudine made a policy decision based, in large part, on necessity: despite a job description that required her to "collaborate with the Director of Writing" and with him/her to "administer college placement exams," Claudine decided in spring 2009 that unless the new Director of Writing opposed the decision, all writing placement exams would be filtered directly through the writing center. Because of this decision (which Becky later did not dispute), the writing center has remained the exclusive home of the college's writing placement exams since 2009, which means a good deal of work for Claudine and her staff, and also raises questions about institutional identities, working conditions, and how best to serve students.

Placement in First Year Writing Courses, Then and Now

Until the spring of 2013, incoming RIC students who scored above a 430 on each of the written and the verbal components of the SAT were automatically placed in Writing 100: Writing & Rhetoric (now First Year Writing 100: Introduction to Academic Writing). Students who earned a "C" or higher in Writing 100 received General Education credit and fulfilled the College Writing Requirement.

Students who scored a 430 or below on either the written or the verbal components of the SAT were required to sit for the college's Writing Placement Exam, and the writing center sent them information describing the two-hour exam and 17-18 possible test dates/times that were generally offered from late April to early August, the majority of which occur in May and June, including 4-6 Saturdays and 8-10 late afternoon/early evening sessions. Students then called the writing center to register, writing tutors proctored the exams, and the Writing Center Director was typically on site for all testing. In 2013, the writing center administered 527 writing exams and coordinated the subsequent scoring sessions that

required four meetings involving 20 faculty members and 40 faculty hours.

Students had a maximum of two hours to complete the exam, were asked to choose between one of two questions (both personal in nature), and were allowed to draft a preliminary outline or essay in one of two “blue books” that were provided. Their final essays were then read and scored by Claudine along with a group of English Department adjunct instructors who were selected based on their previous FYW Program experience; Claudine also led a “norming session” prior to the first exam reading. Readers would then “place” students either in Writing 100 or English 010 (Basic Writing)—a course whose credits do not “count” towards graduation or a student’s GPA (students then needed to pass ENGL 010 before enrolling in WRTG 100). Each exam was scored by two readers; in cases where two readers disagreed, a third reader would break the tie, so to speak. The writing center would report the scores to students by mail, and the center’s administrative assistant would enter all results into the online records system. English 010 students would be blocked from registering into Writing 100 until successful completion of Basic Writing.

Given the different institutional identities and workload for each WPA, it’s no wonder that there had sometimes been tension between the former Director of Writing and the Writing Center Director, both of whom retired from RIC during May 2009. While we were hired at the same time, Claudine had been a RIC adjunct faculty member for six years before taking charge of the writing center. She knew that administering the writing exams (sometimes evenings and weekends), hiring the adjuncts to score them, and entering the results into the college records system had created stress when either the previous Director of Writing or Writing Center Director complained that the burden was unfairly divided.

In spring of 2013, we decided to change our placement procedure in an effort to better serve our students and better balance the workload. The FYW Program collaborated with the writing center for the first phase of Directed Self-Placement, or DSP. Dan Royer and Roger Gilles first published about this process in their 1998 article “Directed Self-Placement: An Attitude of Orientation.” DSP gives students control over placement and, according to Royer and Gilles, successful self-placement “often begins with a proper estimation of one’s abilities” (70). Thus, students are given tools to make an informed decision—commonly, and in our case, students fill out a self-efficacy questionnaire to help them in the process. Students can also receive counseling or

advising at RIC, often by Orientation faculty, and our FYW faculty are asked to gather writing samples from students during the first week of classes and to counsel any students about “questionable” course selections or refer them to Becky. But instructors are *not* allowed to drop students from their FYW sections: if students believe they chose the right course, instructors are advised to defer to the students.

We consider this to be the first phase of DSP because we are still determining what tools our students need to make their decisions. For example, we are currently, and possibly in the future, requiring students who score below the previously mentioned SAT cutoffs to sit for the college’s Writing Placement Exam; on the other hand, we might open DSP up to all students, regardless of SAT scores (see below), making DSP truly universal. Students now receive their exam results from the writing center via an evaluation form that states, “Based on your Writing Placement Exam, instructors *recommend* that you take...,” and a box is checked indicating one of three possible selections: English 010, FYW 100, or FYW100Plus (a recently added six-credit course that includes elements of Basic Writing and Introduction to Academic Writing and meets the College Writing Requirement). But students are still free to choose whichever FYW course they want—even if that selection contradicts the exam readers (we speak, below, on our separate perspectives of this requirement—and its future).

Moving From Then to Now: Impetus and Consequences

As Claudine will admit, she found the idea of DSP to be a hard sell. Many of RIC’s first-year students are under-prepared for college writing (about half of the incoming class score 430 or below on the written and/or verbal portions of their SATs). Because Claudine has worked with many basic writing students who insist that their writing “is fine,” she doubted that DSP would be practical for RIC students—many might register for FYW100, regardless of skill, and fail. But after discussions with Becky and reading recommended articles, Claudine began to appreciate the potential of DSP. First, if other state universities and colleges, like Grand Valley State, could successfully use self-placement, so might RIC. Second, the concept of student empowerment through choice was something that appealed to Claudine’s 1960s sense of justice and personal freedom. Third, DSP could reduce the writing center’s workload in administering writing exams each year to 500-600 students.

For Becky, DSP seemed to be an instant "panacea," even though Ed White warned against such thinking, adding that "All kinds of unforeseen problems lurk behind the implementation of DSP, perhaps most pointedly a shift in perception of who should be responsible for academic decisions" (29). But for Becky, it would help remove one concern that had weighed heavily on her since her arrival at the college: the fact that the writing center did almost all the work to place students in courses of the program that Becky directed. Beyond the regular writing center responsibilities, DSP could remove or reduce Claudine's writing assessment workload: scheduling, organizing, proctoring, scoring, reporting, phoning, and mailing. Claudine and her administrative assistant often emerge from the months of May and June exhausted and bleary-eyed.

For Claudine, though, taking on the work of the Writing Placement Exams was important. Claudine sought to offer Becky more time in her first year to get to know the FYW Program, to weigh its strengths and weaknesses, and to begin planning improvements. Her "self-sacrifice" in claiming jurisdiction over the writing tests was not without self-interest. Claudine wanted a cordial and productive working relationship with the new writing program director, and she wanted Becky to focus on FYW without worrying about mounds of freshman exam books. Also, because Claudine had already worked for six years with the English Department's adjunct faculty before becoming the Writing Center Director and now supervised the writing tutors who served as the proctors, it seemed natural for her to coordinate the adjunct and student employees regarding the exams.

Labor, of course, is at the heart of Becky's concerns. Because of the staffing realities—and inequities—of the FYW Program, she is hyper-aware of the ways in which her tenure-track faculty line offers privileges not afforded to Claudine or the exam readers. Becky scores placement exams as needed, often on an emergency basis, but we both would rather offer stipends to the adjunct faculty, many of whom cobble together a living by teaching at one or more institutions. At the moment, DSP has not reduced but rather has increased the workload in the writing center because the placement exams are still required as part of what is called "Informed Self-Placement" (ISP) during its pilot year,¹ and we wanted students to take the exam and receive faculty recommendations before learning about DSP. Claudine believes that RIC should continue an "informed DSP" in the best interest of students; she conversely would like to drop or reduce the testing requirement to focus on other ventures like expanding

the writing center's faculty writing retreats, offering similar events for students, or conducting more research about teaching and learning.

Claudine is quick to point out that, while she has done her best to protect the writing director's time from exam responsibilities, Becky has exceeded her part of the bargain by strengthening the FYW program, implementing DSP, and embracing the writing center as a program partner. This collaboration, which began with an informal agreement between two directors, has been good for us and, we believe, our students. And Claudine understands that a writing center *is* part of a writing program, whether acknowledged or not, because FYW students occupy a large share of the writing tutorials. For example, 39.2% of RIC's 1,626 writing center service hours in fall 2013 were provided to English/FYW students; fall 2012 came in at 35.0%; and fall 2011 was 44.4%. The three spring semesters (2011-13) averaged at 27.8%. We may disagree on some individual policies and procedures, but we agree that the collaboration has benefited RIC's writing program as well as its writing center.

Existing Concerns and Future Remedies

DSP might help alleviate the labor inequality in our FYW program, but there was an additional—indeed primary—motivation behind implementing the process. After all, Becky could have assuaged her guilt by simply splitting duties with Claudine or shouldering the entire responsibility for student placement. DSP was appealing to Becky and, eventually, Claudine, because it offered a new way to think about student placement. In addition to exploring a workload reduction, we acted together to implement what we believed was a *better* placement method. While possibly addressing the labor issues was a big draw, we both agreed that if, at any point, DSP proved ill-suited to RIC's students, we would reevaluate our placement methods—even if that meant returning to the previous system.

While very little has been written on the relationship between writing centers and FYW Programs regarding DSP, Phyllis Frus reports in "Directed Self-Placement at a large Research University: A Writing Center Perspective" that the University of Michigan's Writing Center, though the coordinator of placement, was often divorced from curricular and pedagogical decisions in the first-year writing program. But DSP at least opened a conversation about the issue, and Frus and her colleagues wanted "to find ways to overcome the split between the Sweetland Writing Center and First- and

Second-Year Studies because that limits the effect DSP can have on pedagogy in introductory composition” (187).

DSP brings together the RIC Writing Center and FYW Program. Because students are no longer mandatorily “sorted” but are instead asked to have a conversation with themselves and others (family, faculty, friends, orientation advisors, academic advisors) about placement, there is more discussion about RIC’s FYW courses along with the benefits and risks in selecting FYW100, FYW100Plus, or English 010. As an instructor, Becky even asked students to take the DSP Questionnaire in her own class to compensate for possible anomalies in our beta test. And as noted, all instructors are now expected to obtain a first-week writing sample from students; FYW faculty are having active conversations about placement instead of simply checking their rosters to make sure students are in the right course according to the placement exam. We believe these are good steps.

As of this writing, RIC’s DSP process is under review. Our first full pilot year illustrated areas that need improvement. DSP questionnaires were mailed to students, yet many students did not receive or ignore them. Thus a crucial aspect of DSP—students’ self-assessment—was compromised. Orientation advisors often had to counsel students “on the fly” about course options, and while the advisors are skilled and supportive of the FYW Program, they are not trained writing instructors. Further, students may defer to their advisors instead of critically estimating their own abilities.

In fact, students often complied with the recommendations provided by readers of the Writing Placement Exam; in a confidential survey of FYW100P students, 50% indicated that they followed the recommendations of the Writing Placement Exam readers. Claudine prefers that students continue sitting for the exam and receiving their scores as a recommendation; for her, the instructor recommendations serve as another piece of data for students to consider (see Bedore and Rossen-Knill). Becky has concerns about whether students will overly privilege that institutional voice.

Fortunately, we have no evidence that supports Claudine’s initial concern about higher student failure rates. However, for spring 2014, we had to cancel our only section of ENGL 010, Basic Writing, because of under-enrollment, and this caused concern among ourselves and upper administration. We know that some students *need* a two-semester FYW sequence (ENGL 010 followed by FYW 100), but we worry that too few students may enroll in ENGL 010 to justify spring sections. Thus, some students who place

themselves in ENGL 010 may find themselves without a course and feel compelled to enroll in FYW 100Plus or FYW 100, which may not be a good fit, in their efforts to complete the College Writing Requirement within their first year.

One suggestion that we are considering is that those students whose Writing Placement Exam recommends ENGL 010 be limited to selecting either ENGL 010 or FYW 100Plus; these students would not have the option of enrolling in FYW 100. While some of our colleagues still see this as a “choice,” Becky and Claudine are concerned that this may degrade the spirit of DSP. Of course, some student groups are not involved in DSP: those whose SAT scores place them automatically in FYW 100 and those in special grant-based admissions programs that simply follow the Writing Placement Exam recommendations. Thus, if we further limit options for students whose Writing Placement Exam scores consign them to ENGL 010 or FYW 100Plus, only about 30% of incoming first-year students would participate fully in DSP.

We are now faced with the difficult choice as to whether this pilot is worth pursuing, and readers will recall that our objectives were twofold. One, we wanted to provide a better placement method for our students, but only a third of incoming freshmen may benefit from DSP. Second, we wanted to reduce Claudine’s workload, yet DSP has increased it; not only does Claudine and her staff have to proctor and score Writing Placement Exams, they have to mail out additional information to students, change how they enter information about exam scores, and field questions from students about course choices.

Still, we can’t quite walk away from DSP at this time. We’ve received positive reports from several camps about the conversations happening about writing. Susan McAllister, one of our colleagues in student services, wrote: “I have been thinking...the DSP effort provided the opportunity, before coming to orientation, for our freshmen to give some thought to their writing skills, and it sent a message to them that we consider this an important part of their first year at RIC, which in turn provided a great introduction to Writing [FYW] 100P, etc.” Such comments indicate an unanticipated, but key, benefit of DSP—conversations about writing across campus. Then, too, DSP has helped codify an FYW policy that we had encouraged before, but never required: the first-week writing samples and discussions about course outcomes and goals. And in line with Royer and Gilles, Directed Self-Placement just *feels right* (61).

The recent news about changes to the SATs—especially the potential for an optional essay

component—will likely affect how our college places students. It may expand the number who are invited to self-place (with or without the Writing Placement Exam), and we still need to refine our communications with students about DSP. But if we fully implement DSP to all incoming freshmen, that may make the process more meaningful on our campus. There are many moving parts to this pilot, not all of which were anticipated.

Final Thoughts

Writing centers can sometimes be undervalued, viewed as remedial way stations for developing writers or exam depots for incoming students. And writing center directors may be looked upon as WPA wannabes because they are “staff” or “faculty-staff” or “term appointees” (Claudine has even heard the term “quasi-faculty”). But in addition to training new peer tutors and coordinating tutoring services, which are primary concerns, Claudine tries to promote the writing center as a full-service “center for writing,” and beyond traditional tutorials, she also collaborates with the Director of Writing; facilitates two week-long faculty writing retreats² each year; and meets with other department faculty at their request to discuss student writing. Becky’s and Claudine’s work has been especially interactive and constructive because of a mutual desire to improve writing at RIC. We share the belief that writing centers contribute to FYW Programs and students in better programs are more likely to enjoy and succeed in their writing courses.

Becky will continue to analyze data from this pilot year and meet with stakeholders, including Claudine, to adjust Directed Self-Placement for the upcoming academic year. Claudine will anticipate the spring’s writing placement exams even as we consider unexpected consequences from this past year and potential responses. And we will analyze, synthesize, talk, read, compare, and talk again. Not just about DSP, but about teaching and learning in RIC’s First Year Writing Program. We’ve been doing this for almost five years, and it seems unlikely that our Directed Self-Collaboration will end anytime soon.

Notes

¹ Pamela Bedore and Deborah Rossen-Knill ask probing questions about student perceptions of “choice” in their essay “Informed Self-Placement” (ISP). While their research at the University of Rochester parallels many of our challenges/experiences at RIC (communicating effectively with students about placement options;

asking students and instructors to discuss writing samples in class, etc.), the authors note Royer and Gilles’ approach:

Although this may sound ideal, we must ask ourselves how the student—the incoming freshman—can make an informed decision about the future (college writing) based only on the past (high school writing)...Not only is it asking the student to do guesswork that he or she may not be qualified to do, but it also contradicts what we hope to teach the student about academic work: that one should conduct contextually relevant research if one hopes to make an informed statement about an issue. (56-57)

At the U of R, staff and faculty use standardized test scores, student writing samples, and conversations with students to ensure that students feel as if they have a choice and, conversely, that they make the choice with some confidence. At Rhode Island College, Becky and Claudine differ in their interpretations about how students use/privilege the information provided about FYW course selections, but we believe, like Bedore and Rossen-Knill, that “freedom and choice are contagious” (71). And while we applaud U of R’s individualized conversations with students, we are not certain, given RIC’s students and resources, that this is a viable option for us. Still, Bedore and Rossen-Knill’s work demonstrates that RIC is not alone in asking students to consider others’ perspectives in their decision-making process.

² For further information about writing centers and writing retreats, see: Ellen Schendel, Susan Callaway, Violet Dutcher, and Claudine Griggs. “Assessing the Effects of Faculty and Staff Writing Retreats: Four Institutional Perspectives.” *Working with Faculty Writers*. Eds. Anne Ellen Geller and Michele Eodice. Logan: Utah State UP, 2013. 142-62. Print.

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