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Relentless Engagement with State Educational Policy Reform: Collaborating to Change the Writing Placement Conversation

Heidi Estrem, Dawn Shepherd, and Lloyd Duman

ABSTRACT

This article describes the educational reform efforts surrounding writing placement in one state context. We propose that placement offers a particularly useful engagement point because it is often controlled by state-level policies and it directly impacts the lived experience of first-year college students. To document how we worked across institutions in our state, we describe a series of events that occurred over several years and that fostered collaborative exchanges. Then, we explore the challenges and opportunities afforded by our long-term engagement with policymakers. Ultimately, we propose strategies that writing program administrators might consider as they become engaged with state-level higher education policy.

WRITING PLACEMENT AS OPPORTUNITY FOR ENGAGEMENT

Writing program administrators excel at collaborating with colleagues in writing programs and across campus; as instructors and program leaders, WPAs also work to foster collaboration within classrooms. Sustained cross-institutional partnerships, however, are rarer. But as oversight of public higher education becomes increasingly consolidated and influenced by external organizations (e.g., Complete College America), joint efforts at the state level to influence state educational policy are not just important but increasingly critical if we are to provide input on decisions that affect ourselves and our students. Here, we describe how we have engaged with higher education policy decisions in Idaho and what we have learned along the way.

Much like the “rigid constraints” described by Beth Brunk-Chavez and Elaine Fredricksen (78), the Idaho state colleges and universities operate under a set of state-mandated writing placement practices that allow for little local flexibility. In 1999, our State Board of Education (SBOE) established cut scores based on standardized tests that place students into (or exempt them from) first-year writing courses at every college and university across the state, regardless of local context. While this approach offered consistency and efficiency, composition scholars will recognize that it is an approach that meets few expectations for purposeful, sound writing assessment.

In this article, we illustrate how WPAs might actively seek out and then use state policy pressure points, such as writing placement, to institute change, precisely because so many stakeholders are involved. Placement is one example of a site where many interests converge and refract, and it is that very complexity that makes the detailed policy work interesting and provocative for all of us. We propose that state-level educational policy is at a “just right” level for many WPAs to engage with: it directly impacts work at state colleges and universities, yet it moves beyond local campuses. Placement was our starting issue; it offered us a particular opportunity to work across institutions and to demonstrate, collectively, what Chris Gallagher describes as “writing assessment leadership” across Idaho (32).

We situate our exploration of this claim within the extended collaboration we have enjoyed in our state, and we have included as appendices some of the genres we were called to write. While our context is not yours, we also know how critical it has been for us to understand how others, in other contexts beyond our state, conduct research to respond to placement policies (see Ruecker; Isaacs and Molloy) or work creatively within current educational policy (see Brunk-Chavez and Fredricksen). Careful, informed scholarship by colleagues across the country shaped our work together across institutional boundaries within our state context, and it is our hope, in turn, to illustrate how our engagement and our collective advocacy evolved around this particular issue.

Statewide Advocacy for Writers and Writing Through Placement

In a 2011 *WPA: Writing Program Administration* article, Barbara Cambridge describes how educational research does or does not impact policy. She summarizes the results from Nelson, Leffler, and Hansen’s work indicating that “many other factors currently take precedence over research evidence, including ‘political perspectives, public sentiment, potential legal pitfalls, economic considerations, pressure from the media, and the welfare of indi-

viduals” (qtd in Cambridge 136). Cambridge offers four suggestions for WPAs interested in, or in need of, engaging with policy makers on particular issues, and two are especially relevant here. First, she suggests WPAs get to know important decision makers and “their values, their knowledge bases, and the conditions of their professional political lives” (139). Second, she notes,

because policy making is fraught with ‘volatile and insecure circumstances,’ knowing those conditions is important in attempting to work with a policy maker. Getting to know the person and the conditions for that person’s work can help refine a sense of that policy maker as audience for the information to be shared from research and/or practice. (141)

By recommending that we understand the needs of situations we address, Cambridge positions the work of WPAs as rhetorical. Although it should go without saying, approaching what we do with rhetorical awareness allows us to address situations more effectively. In particular, we can rethink how we position ourselves in relation to our audiences. Although she does not address it directly, Cambridge marks the artistic proof *ethos* as an important to WPAs’ work. The flipside of acquainting ourselves with policy makers is that they also get to know us, which provides an opportunity for establishing credibility. In classical rhetorical terms, *ethos* has three components: *phronesis* (practical wisdom), *arete* (virtue), and *eunoia* (good will) (Aristotle 121). As Cambridge notes, educational research may not hold sway in policy discussions. However, if policy makers know us better, then we may draw on other factors, such as our trustworthiness or kindness, when making recommendations to them. Throughout the historical narrative portion of this article, then, we provide examples of how WPAs and English department chairs strengthened credibility through demonstrating our good-faith commitment to relentless engagement in the writing placement conversation across the state.

Placement as Politicized Assessment

Writing placement is an especially powerful act of assessment that has direct implications for students. At the same time, it is a particular kind of educational practice, and one where external stakeholders—like state educational governing bodies—sometimes intervene. Writing course placement, as Brian Huot notes, is an assessment practice that “actually decide[s] for a student where she will be placed for the next fifteen weeks or, perhaps even more importantly, where she will begin her college or university writing instruction” (6). Because of this impact on individual students—and

the secondary impact on instruction, placement is also “one of the most common reasons WPAs and writing teachers become involved in writing assessment outside the classroom” (O’Neill, Moore, and Huot 80). Sound placement—that is, a process that results in a student being in the right class at the right time—is important to get right.

Within writing studies, scholars have identified several important guiding principles for sound writing assessment. In *A Guide to College Writing Assessment*, Peggy O’Neill, Cindy Moore, and Brian Huot propose that assessment should be “site-based, locally controlled, context-sensitive, rhetorically based, accessible, and theoretically consistent” (57); these principles are extended and explored in both the NCTE-WPA “White Paper on Assessment in Colleges and Universities” and the CCCC “Writing Assessment: A Position Paper.” Writing assessment scholarship also invites us to consider how, in addition to Huot’s principles, assessment practices might be ethical through “examining not only the assessment itself but also its impact on the community in which it takes place” (Schendel and O’Neill 202). Building placement approaches that reflect these values and principles is a daunting task but one that numerous scholars within our field have willingly engaged with.

Two innovative, research-based approaches to placement are especially relevant here (see O’Neill, Moore, and Huot for a useful summary of a larger variety of placement approaches). First, some schools have developed approaches that allow for a direct assessment of student writing. Under these approaches, students might submit a portfolio of texts (see Belanoff and Elbow for one example). Alternatively, they are asked to complete a series of writing tasks that attempt to engage them in writing similar to that expected within the college environment (for example, Les Perelman’s iMOAT program). Secondly, some institutions have developed variations of Directed Self-Placement (DSP), an approach that gives students the autonomy to make their own placement decision. Originally implemented at Grand Valley State University, DSP has been adapted at a number of institutions (see Royer and Gilles’ “Directed Self-Placement” and their edited collection, *Directed Self-Placement*). These two distinct kinds of approaches adhere to as many of the principles for sound writing assessment as they possibly can—and they are sensitive to the local context, culture, and purpose for placement. They are rooted in writing assessment scholarship and often generate ongoing study and research. For example, careful research led to the implementation of DSP at University of Michigan; continued study led to recent revisions and adaptations (see Gere, Aull, Green, and Porter; Gere, Aul, Perales, Lancaster, and Vander Lei).

Often, though, research-based evidence is not enough to effect change on its own. As Emily Isaacs and Sean Molloy explain in their study of the SAT Writing exam, writing studies scholars and WPAs hold substantially different views of placement than do other “senior administrators and decision makers” (518). They note,

Forty years of research and study have convinced writing studies scholars that writing is a complicated, variable, and inconsistent intellectual process involving multiple brain areas and social interaction thus the preference for assessing (and teaching) writing only after students have engaged in various processes, social and intellectual. In contrast, measurement specialists and senior administrators often see writing as an uncomplicated process of transmitting ideas from brain to paper—thus the preference or at least high tolerance for assessing writing that has been written quickly, without social mediation or opportunity for engaging in various intellectual processes. (518)

Arguments from research—no matter how compelling—will not always trump arguments from stakeholders who are invested in expediency and transparency. At the same time, WPAs have a professional obligation to continue to engage in the discussion surrounding issues like placement. We can use these discussions to keep our field’s research in the foreground while getting to know key constituents, as Barbara Cambridge recommends.

All of this is to say that placement is assessment, assessment is political, and writing scholars need to be in the conversation. Because understanding advocacy’s importance is one thing and imagining how such advocacy might unfold is another, we offer our historical narrative of statewide collaborative efforts surrounding writing placement.

IDAHO HIGHER EDUCATION CONTEXT

Idaho is a small state with relatively few public colleges and universities. Each of our eight public higher-education institutions (three universities, one four-year college, three community colleges, and one technical college) operates within unique circumstances. Our contexts, missions, student needs, resources, and instructor backgrounds differ substantially; additionally, our state is largely rural with geographically isolated populations. For example, North Idaho College, located in the northern panhandle, primarily serves a five-county area with a population that varies from semi-urban to vastly rural and whose occupations range from logging and mining to tourism. The College of Western Idaho is only five years old, quickly growing, and serves the state’s largest urban area. Smaller state universities serve

regional communities while a fast-growing metropolitan university in the state capital accommodates a student body population that is increasingly made up of traditional students. Yet despite these differences, our State Board of Education (SBOE) set a statewide placement protocol in the early 1990s—a move that resulted in a number of unanticipated consequences that are now more readily visible. Figure 1 summarizes this timeline of events, and the subsequent sections briefly document the history of these efforts.

1998	English department chairs brought together to propose common placement scores for SAT, ACT, and ACT COMPASS
1999	SBOE implements policy III.q, which differs from the scores proposed by the department chairs
2000	English department chairs and WPAs establish annual meetings
2007	English department chairs and WPAs brainstorm how to re-establish placement conversation
spring 2008	Placement white paper presented to Council on Academic Affairs and Programs (CAAP; a statewide provosts' council)
summer 2008	CAAP establishes the English Placement Task Force
fall 2008	English Placement Task Force 1.5 day placement workshop
2009	Pilot placement projects
winter 2010	Pilot placement reports presented to CAAP
summer 2010	Placement Report and Recommendations presented to SBOE policy representative
2010-2012	Current policy temporarily suspended to allow for continued pilot projects
spring 2012	ACCUPLACER workshop
fall 2012	SBOE establishes Complete College Idaho plan, in collaboration with Complete College America
fall 2013	Full implementation of the first campus-specific placement process (The Write Class at Boise State)

Fig. 1. Timeline of Statewide Advocacy Around Placement

PLACEMENT AS A STATEWIDE ISSUE

1999: Establishment of Statewide Cut Scores for Placement

In 1999, in an effort to increase transparency and to ease transfer among institutions, our SBOE established a placement chart for entrance into first-year writing. At the time, courses across our state had neither agreed-upon outcomes nor necessarily transferred between institutions. Seeking to rectify this perceived inconsistency for incoming students and their parents, the SBOE set definitive guidelines for how students would be placed into initial writing courses. Initially, English department chairs and faculty from across the state were asked to provide recommended cut scores for popular standardized tests (ACT, SAT, COMPASS); however, the imple-

mented policy differed from those recommendations. All colleges and universities in this state were subsequently required to follow the same placement chart for first-year writing (see fig. 2).

- c. Placement in entry-level college courses will be determined according to the following criteria.

Placement Scores for English

Class	ACT English Score	SAT English Score	AP Exam	COMPASS Score
English 90	<17	>200	NA	0 - 67
English 101	18-24	>450	NA	68 - 94
English 101 Credit English 102 Placement	25-30	>570	3 or 4	95 -99
Credit English 101 and English 102	>31	>700	5	

Fig. 2. Idaho State Board of Education Post-Secondary Education Policy III.Q Placement

Once implemented, this policy shifted more students from English 101, our traditional first-semester course, into two courses: 1) English 90, a three credit hour developmental writing course that counted toward financial aid and scholarships but bore no college-level credit and 2) directly into English 102, a second-semester, research-intensive course. At Boise State University, for example, the new score cut-offs created the need for four to five additional English 90 sections each year. All institutions, from our flagship university to our technical college, were required to follow this chart.

2000–2007: Sharing across Institutional Boundaries

This move to standardize placement caused challenges for WPAs and English department chairs across the state, and it was the implementation of this policy that spurred us to meet annually. These meetings provided an opportunity to explore responses to the challenges raised by this new policy. Eventually, the regular gatherings also provided a forum to discuss other issues as they arose, from the rapid increase in dual-credit programs in the early 2000s to the sharing of course outcomes in first-year writing. Institutions used the gatherings to profile productive practices (on issues such as concurrent enrollment, programmatic assessment, and curriculum, for example) and to share ideas across institutional contexts.

2007: Deciding to Act on Placement

While the challenges of this placement chart had been on the agenda at our yearly gatherings, our advocacy work began to take shape at the fall 2007 meeting. In addition to prior concerns about under- and over-placement,

the SBOE-mandated use of the COMPASS test raised significant problems. This low-cost grammar-and-usage test, which students could take multiple times in a single testing session, both placed students into English 102 and provided them credit for English 101. This struck us as both an inappropriate placement tool and a questionable educational practice. Although faculty recommendations had been ignored earlier, we decided to share our concerns with the SBOE and to gather evidence that might lead to a change in state board policy that year. We wanted to document what we knew so that we had a shared point of reference, and so we agreed to collaborate on a statement of best practices. We left our meeting resolved to write *something* to *someone* about these challenges.

As noted earlier, Barbara Cambridge recommends getting to know the audiences for policy change and the conditions in which they operate. We understood that while our SBOE members were a critical audience, we might be better served by at least initiating the conversation with another audience in mind. Our on-campus administrators encouraged us to write a white paper on writing placement for our statewide provosts' council. Our provosts, stakeholders invested in cohesive statewide policy and sensitive to supporting student learning, were key allies, and we wanted them to understand the challenges we were facing.

2008: Establishing Professional Expertise through a Placement White Paper

Immediately following the fall 2007 meeting, we collaboratively wrote a placement white paper, using our listserv to exchange drafts and ideas (see appendix A). White papers are used to clarify, provide background on, and contextualize an issue. As we wrote, we were able to mine our collective professional knowledge on placement and assessment. At the same time, we shared research and scholarship with one another to expand our collective knowledge base.

As educators, we had long felt the tension between how we and other stakeholders understood writing placement. On the one hand, we see placement as helping us to “[discover] what students are doing in the process of schooling” (Adler-Kassner and O’Neill 86). On the other hand, policy makers seemed to view placement as an assessment practice that “[proves] students are doing something that they are supposed to do” (Adler-Kassner and O’Neill 86). Writing this report enabled us to establish our expertise as scholars in composition and rhetoric, an expertise the SBOE may not have understood but that our provosts could recognize. Additionally, drafting the white paper gave us a unified voice. We were no longer positioned as individuals who did not share the state’s values of consistency and clarity

but instead became a group of educators proposing pedagogically sound, research-based approaches to placement to our administrative colleagues. We also were using a genre unfamiliar to us as writing program administrators that better met the needs of our audience, a choice that allowed us to demonstrate not only our expertise but also our good will.

2008: Initiating Conversations via the English Placement Task Force

Several of us met with our own provosts to discuss the white paper and to strategize about next steps. At one provost's invitation, we presented our white paper via video conferencing to the statewide provosts' council. They, in turn, appointed us to create an English Placement Task Force and to establish the goals, timeline, budget, and deliverables of this group (see appendix B). We were now faced with a new writing occasion: outlining the context and purpose of a task force, an organizational model that wasn't common in our state. Writing this plan together helped us sharpen our goals, engaged us in dialogue as colleagues, and provided us an opportunity to collaborate with key on-campus colleagues who were not writing specialists but who could provide additional viewpoints on the implications of our work. Likewise, the statewide provosts' council wisely required us to include a much wider range of stakeholders on the Task Force: faculty and administrators as well as representatives from student affairs and the registrar's office at each institution.

2008: The English Placement Task Force's Framework for Placement

The English Placement Task Force included faculty, administrators, and student affairs representatives from each institution as well as the SBOE's Student Affairs Program Manager. This early presence of an SBOE representative—and of colleagues from student affairs, who often facilitate students' understanding of issues such as placement—proved to be critical, as it required us as faculty to articulate best practices in ways that would be meaningful to non-academics. Since maintaining momentum felt significant, we set specific goals and a brisk timeline and quickly brainstormed what we might need a budget for since we hadn't anticipated being asked to assemble one. The statewide provosts' council approved our proposal which included funding for a one and a half day workshop on placement and assessment.

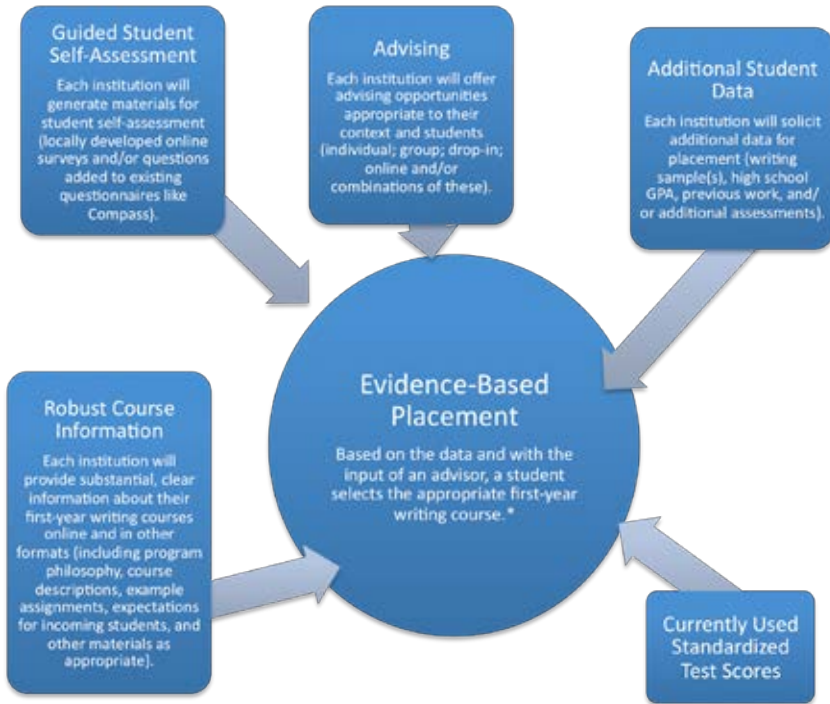
In the fall of 2008, the thirty-person English Placement Task Force gathered for a workshop led by Peggy O'Neill and Diane Kelly-Riley. As these two writing assessment scholars presented best practices in assessment and helped us consider what statewide models might look like, attendees

had a particular purpose for learning from one another and building trust. The time together allowed us to articulate our concerns and values. During the workshop, we shifted from a solely “values-based” approach—a dogged commitment to our own beliefs and values surrounding assessment, no matter what—to what Adler-Kassner and O’Neill describe as an “issues-based” approach (95). We had begun this work with individual passions and commitments to certain “long-term values” surrounding writing placement (97). However, if we were going to collaborate usefully with a range of stakeholders, we needed to engage actively with others whose interests and passions were likely quite different, as such collaborations could lead to “short-term, tactical actions that might represent both [our faculty] interests (and values) and those of potential allies” (97). For example, our colleagues from advising offices across the state were most heavily invested in clear, consistent, standardized placement across the state, but they also shared our commitment to first-year student success and understood placement’s role in that work. Institutional faculty administrators highly valued autonomy and research-based practices even as they too were committed to clear, statewide policy.

During the second day of the workshop, we worked in small groups to brainstorm what a new model for statewide placement might look like—one that honored the SBOE’s values of transparency and consistency while also providing opportunities for research-based placement approaches. Some participants wanted simply to revise the existing chart, but writing faculty were invested in fostering a placement process that was locally controlled. We wanted to be able to meet our own students’ needs—and the contexts of our first-year writing courses—at institutions that differ in mission, student preparedness, and first-year writing program contexts. These very real differences required more than a new standardized system.

After hours of discussion, we began to shape an approach to placement that highlighted research-based practices—the use of multiple measures, for example—while also providing a mechanism for consistency. Over the last few hours of the workshop, a new framework for placement that would guide individual approaches emerged: “Evidence-Based Placement: a Framework for Placement into First-Year Writing Classes in Idaho” (see fig. 3). We committed to developing pilot projects that might reflect this framework differently; we agreed that each pilot should integrate at least four of the five framework principles and be developed with our local context and constraints in mind.

A Framework for Placement into First-Year Writing
Courses at Idaho Public Colleges and Universities
English Placement Task Force
November 2008



*If the data points to a decision between two courses, students will be able to select between those two only (90 or 99/101, 101/102). In other words, a student will not be able to place into 102 if the data suggest English 90.

Fig. 3. Idaho Placement Framework

A written product helped us both to clarify our values and to intervene on other stakeholders' perceptions of students and writing courses. The term *evidence-based placement* was used quite deliberately, seeking to underscore the research-based foundation of a multiple-measures approach to writing placement. At the same time, the term *framework* offered a substantially different way of considering how student literacy might be accounted for and understood. A *framework* provides a structure with room for adaptations as needed; a *cut-off chart* implies that these decontextualized numbers can predict student potential and performance in writing classes. We began to see how this approach might enable very different approaches to placement at different institutions while maintaining our professional commitment to using multiple measures to inform placement. In hindsight, this brief time together also provided a critical opportunity to share professional

expertise, to demonstrate our goodwill, and to show administrators and external audiences that we shared with them the goal of student success. Perhaps most importantly, it became clear that these deep commitments to this issue from all sides were rooted in an investment in our students—a value we all shared.

2009: Pilot Proposals and Results

The Idaho Placement Framework provided a mechanism for guiding our pilot placement projects, which were a key step in gathering data and continuing to build relationships with various constituencies. While national research-based recommendations were useful, our state educational policy makers are often especially interested in approaches that are designed for our state context. In light of this preference, the pilot projects offered us a way to 1) ground the assessment research of our field in campus-based research, 2) provide data on alternatives by testing their efficacy and efficiency, and 3) engage students in new assessment models.

Four very different institutions hosted pilot placement projects. Through responding to and working within the Idaho Placement Framework, each local team developed and piloted a placement system that best matched their local needs and interests. Since we were not always used to seeing ourselves as researchers on issues like this one—and since we were attempting to design context-appropriate placement processes while honoring a consistent, statewide framework—the process of developing and implementing these varying pilots on the campuses was as important as the results.

Throughout this time, faculty held regular meetings with key stakeholders at our institutions while the statewide English Placement Task Force listserv discussions continued. These overlapping and ongoing conversations demonstrated our expertise, built trust by revealing to others how important this issue was for our writing programs and our students, and solidified our commitment to understanding the payoffs and drawbacks of placement alternatives. We learned that it takes a remarkable institutional commitment to sustain changes in approaches to placement. Most important, we discovered these projects demonstrated how the statewide Idaho Placement Framework could provide a structure within which a variety of placement approaches might be both possible and appropriate. The Idaho Placement Framework worked as a kind of weighted chart that allowed each campus to emphasize different areas in accordance with local contexts. The following brief portraits give an indication of how diverse the approaches were—all the while meeting student needs more effectively and efficiently and simultaneously honoring the common Idaho Placement Framework.

Early Pilot Implementation: North Idaho College. North Idaho College (NIC) serves a diverse population of students with a variety of educational needs and aspirations: students who transfer to four-year institutions, who earn professional/technical degrees or certificates, who increase their skills in order to be successful in college-level classes, who receive workforce development or customized training, and who complete their GEDs. Because NIC's mission is to help students achieve success regardless of their educational goal, advising is an important tool to address students' needs and to offer them the best opportunity for success.

NIC's pilot placement project emphasized the advising aspect of the Idaho Placement Framework, developing a comprehensive advising model that would assist students not only as they began their educational journey but also as they navigated the educational system. Research (Moltz; Kolovach; Bradley) demonstrates that initial course placement bears a direct relationship to student retention, and proper placement speeds students' time to graduation and reduces their educational expenditure. Proper placement also allows the institution to allocate resources in an efficient, practical manner; to maintain higher retention rates; and to support higher completion rates. To provide a more robust placement process, NIC increased the course information (e.g., descriptions, syllabi, transfer information) available for students and modified a self-reflection intake sheet to include a reading and writing history. In addition, NIC implemented a new reading assessment; for this open-door institution's population, it was necessary to develop an efficient way to assess a large number of students with diverse needs. Previous institutional research had demonstrated that students with a reading score below college-level had only a 50% success rate in reading-intensive courses while those who scored at college-level had much higher success rates—in some cases up to 78%. As a result, NIC's pilot included a larger battery of COMPASS-based reading and writing tests as well as the inclusion of a student's high school GPA when appropriate. The results of conducting the pilot process in 2009 with 107 students in three different cohorts appeared to confirm the original hypothesis: a single measure of writing assessment, COMPASS Writing, gave a distorted picture of a student's capabilities, oftentimes placing the student in a remedial writing course.¹ On the other hand, multiple measures offered an advisor a richer view of a student's preparedness. In many instances, advisors were able to place students into gateway writing courses.

While using two standardized tests might not initially seem to meet best practices for writing assessment, the triangulation of COMPASS Writing, COMPASS Reading, high school GPA, and careful one-on-one advising opens the door for student-advisor interaction to discuss not only these

placement scores but to discuss non-cognitive issues with the student as well; it is this approach to thoughtful discussion that is so crucial to their success. Likewise, because NIC serves a range of students, the college needs to place them into a wider range of courses and program options than are available at four-year institutions such as Boise State University. The state-wide Idaho Placement Framework, then, helped NIC to develop multiple placement tools—a student’s self-assessment and prior history as well as a fuller set of standardized test scores—to make more informed decisions for the campus and its students.

Early Pilot Implementation: Boise State University. Boise State University (Boise State) is the largest institution in the state, serving a population that is increasingly made up of traditional students while also meeting the needs of working adults in the metropolitan area. About 2800 students complete registration each spring and summer, and so, in addition to responding to the Idaho Placement Framework, the pilot placement team at the institution wanted to devise an pilot placement project that would: 1) privilege efficiency and usability through an online format, 2) communicate to students the differences between courses, and 3) emphasize the importance of both reflection (i.e., self-assessment) and projection (i.e., considering future goals).

This pilot project began as a small-scale placement process titled “Evidence-Based Placement@Boise State” and, over the next several years, became “The Write Class.” Early versions were developed with the support of colleagues in institutional assessment, the registrar’s office, and the vice-provost for undergraduate studies. The initial pilot placement project utilized an online form to gather the data from students: self-assessment of writing confidence and experience, self-reflection on first-year writing courses, high school GPA, and standardized test scores. Throughout the process, students could seek advising for further information. Based on the evidence submitted, students were placed into one of two initial courses. The highest-scoring students had the option to create a portfolio application in order to be considered for the second-semester course.

The first pilot in 2009 included 250 students, and it provided evidence that this kind of innovative process was sustainable, efficient, and effective. First, students placed differently; fewer applied to begin in English 102 or chose to begin in English 90. Second, participants in the pilot earned higher grades (3.02 for pilot participants; 2.79 for the test-placed comparison group) and enjoyed higher course completion rates (91.3% for pilot participants; 84.6% for the test-placed comparison group) than those of their peers. Finally and most critically, since the pilot placement process required

students to reflect on which course might be best for them, the conversations with advisers at orientation shifted substantially. Instead of automatically asking for their test scores, advisers were able to ask about students' confidence, experiences, and sense of the courses. Choosing the appropriate first-year writing course became part of beginning the college experience for students who volunteered to participate in the pilot study.

Two additional pilot projects took place at two other institutions, the University of Idaho and Idaho State University. University of Idaho's pilot experimented with a model based on expert readers; faculty found it engaging but too labor-intensive to sustain beyond the initial pilot. At Idaho State University, the composition director piloted guided self-placement. For a variety of institution-specific factors, this approach also remained in place for only one year.

The range of these pilots served multiple purposes: among other things, they gave us renewed energy and interest in trying new approaches at our various institutions, offered a mechanism for important on-campus conversations and collaborations, and helped us all to identify processes that were more or less sustainable within our contexts.

Most importantly for the writing community in Idaho, the pilot projects provided data that we needed in order to make a sound argument about how this nuanced approach might work in our state. Although not all of us decided to continue with our pilots, trying the four different approaches to writing placement demonstrated that we could "use systematic, careful placement processes in addition to the ACT/SAT scores used for admission, without disrupting ease of transfer" (White Paper in appendix A). These collaborations seemed sustainable on a larger scale, and they demonstrated that all we needed was room to implement programs that were best for students after admission. We recognized that the opportunity to pilot these different approaches gave us the time and space to do exactly what a pilot should: test out ideas, try other approaches, and gather data. Our next step was to compile our data and generate recommendations.

2010–2012: Documenting Local Implications and Shared Expertise

After the pilot projects, we again collaborated on an extended report and presentations on our pilot project results for the statewide provosts' council in spring 2010. This time, our recommendations were made not only in light of others' research, as was the case with the initial white paper, but also in light of our research and for our state context. Following the pilot presentations, several of us met with SBOE policy writers and drafted recommendations with their input (see appendix C). Overall, the report continued to

communicate our priorities in light of what was best for students, and we made two primary recommendations: 1) implement the Idaho Placement Framework to encourage context-specific placement practices and 2) ensure that all college-level writing courses earn college credit, including English 90.

Those recommendations were forwarded to the SBOE in 2010. For the next two years, the SBOE “sunsetting”²² the placement process so that our pilots could continue at NIC and Boise State, but they were still considered pilot (and optional) programs. At NIC, intensive advising and the integration of various aspects of reading assessments continued. At Boise State, half of the 2011 incoming class (898) used a newly revised and much more robust online system that had a more fully integrated a weighted algorithm in it. Data continued to demonstrate that a multiple-measures approach, responsive to the Idaho Placement Framework but adapted for our campus contexts, could have a positive impact on student performance. We shared these ongoing positive results and received some encouragement, but the placement cut-off chart remained in our course catalogs.

Throughout 2010–2012, we continued to meet with SBOE representatives to discuss next steps, but no clear changes emerged. Our SBOE did not prioritize implementing new statewide policy, and so conversations stalled. While it felt like we had established good relationships with our SBOE representatives by demonstrating our expertise, trustworthiness, and good will, we also did not feel as though we were continuing to intervene on how placement was understood by policy makers.

May 2012: Mandated ACCUPLACER Workshop

Meanwhile, in an effort to increase college enrollment rates, the SBOE began funding the SAT for all Idaho high school juniors. Included with the SAT package was the ACCUPLACER, a standardized test designed as a placement instrument. In April 2012, writing faculty from across the state were required by our provosts to attend a 3.5-day ACCUPLACER cut-score setting workshop. The ACCUPLACER, we were told, would serve as another option for writing placement.

The ACCUPLACER group was made up of many of the same faculty who had been involved with the English Placement Task Force for several years and was a challenging enterprise for us as writing specialists. The entire premise of the workshop—to identify specific standardized test questions that would identify someone as college ready—went against everything we had described in the white paper, discussed at the English Placement Task Force workshop and meetings, and developed on our campuses.

Though all worked to honor the best intentions of the workshop, it became apparent that at least one sub-group of workshop participants simply could not in good conscience make any specific recommendations. After consultation with our newly appointed SBOE Chief Academic Officer (CAO), our colleagues in that group wrote a memo explaining their concerns with the test. While we felt that our ongoing placement work had been devalued by the very premise of the ACCUPLACER workshop, our continued attempts to be both reasonable and principled resulted in the CAO's willingness to bring our concerns to the SBOE. This time, they must have listened. The ACCUPLACER has not yet become part of our statewide placement process, and further discussions of it have receded.

2012: Issues-based Collaboration via Complete College Idaho

Still reeling from the troubling workshop on ACCUPLACER in May, we were told during the summer of 2012 that our state had joined the Complete College America initiative (completecollegeamerica.com). Several of us had heard about Complete College America (CCA), and some faculty were deeply distrustful of the motives and intentions of external constituencies like CCA. Within the CCA literature, we realized that there were opportunities to realign our goals within a CCA-oriented perspective. For example, we had long advocated for students receiving college credit for doing college-level work in English 90, and that idea was reflected in our recommendations to the SBOE in 2010. In those recommendations, we had framed this issue in terms of awarding college credit for college coursework, acknowledging that our non-credit-bearing writing courses were not “remedial” in any pedagogical sense. CCA, on the other hand, used the research on the detrimental “cooling out” effect of non-credit-bearing coursework to advocate for reducing (if not eliminating) the number of “remedial” courses a student must complete. While there are reasonable professional concerns over the increasing involvement of organizations like CCA in higher education (see Adler-Kassner “Liberal Learning”) we also knew that resistance to an approach that our SBOE had already adopted would be counterproductive. (Pragmatically, we also knew that our research-based, data-driven presentations to the SBOE were not persuasive on their own.) Beyond that, we would miss an opportunity to make changes for which we had long advocated.

To continue to have a voice in these statewide conversations, we shifted our language on placement and course credit. For example, our earlier report to the State Board in 2010 (appendix C) included the following recommendation:

1. The English Placement Task Force recommends a change in wording to SBOE Policy III.Q, “Admission Standards,” to distinguish between admission and placement.

Standardized test scores are suitably efficient, reliable tools for admission into our institutions at this time. However, educational policy can permit the development of more sensitive placement mechanisms for introductory writing courses *after* students have enrolled and committed to a particular institution. A change to policy III.Q will permit institutions to expand and refine the placement processes that have been piloted.

With the Complete College Idaho plan at the forefront for the SBOE, we knew our language needed to change. For instance, WPAs at Boise State now stated, in response to our provosts’ request that we detail our approach to “reduce remediation” in English, that

The SBOE goal to transform remediation has long been a goal of the First-Year Writing Program at Boise State University. This academic year, we are piloting several initiatives aimed at both reducing remediation and increasing retention in first-year writing courses (English 90, 101, and 102). . . . Continuing to rely on tests like COMPASS or ACCUPLACER, which have been demonstrated to misplace students, will force students into remedial coursework and will make the other proposed reforms of little effect. (see appendix D)

At each campus, others made similar tactical decisions. Critically, we had continued to engage with one another across campuses throughout the stalled period, and WPAs and other English faculty were contacted for collaboration as soon as the Complete College Idaho plan was established—a sign that we were now seen as engaged partners rather than recalcitrant faculty, a misperception that plagued our earlier work.

Barbara Cambridge suggests that WPAs should remain informed on developing policy matters (141). In this case, timing was critical, and we were already available, knew each other, and had established ethos with the SBOE’s Chief Academic Officer even before the Complete College Idaho work emerged. In the Complete College Idaho initiative, the stated strategy of “transforming remediation” through “[developing] a statewide model for transformation of statewide remedial placement and support” intersected with our 2010 English Placement Task Force recommendations for “continued institutional commitment to the collaboratively-developed Framework for Writing Placement” and “a change in . . . [state educational policy] to distinguish between admission and placement” even though they were stated differently (see figure 4):

KEY STRATEGIES:

STRENGTHEN THE PIPELINE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure College and Career Readiness • Develop Intentional Advising Along the K-20 Continuum that Links Education with Careers • Support Accelerated High School to Postsecondary and Career Pathways
TRANSFORM REMEDIATION	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clarify and Implement College and Career Readiness Education and Assessments • Develop a Statewide Model for Transformation of Remedial Placement and Support • Provide three options: Co-requisite model, Emporium model, or Accelerated model
STRUCTURE FOR SUCCESS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communicate Strong, Clear, and Guaranteed Statewide Articulation and Transfer Options
REWARD PROGRESS & COMPLETION	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish Metrics and Accountability Tied to Institutional Mission • Recognize and Reward Performance • Redesign the State's Current Offerings of Financial Support for Postsecondary Students
LEVERAGE PARTNERSHIPS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strengthen Collaborations Between Education and Business/Industry Partners • College Access Network • STEM Education

Fig. 4. Complete College Idaho Goals and Strategies

Certainly, the narrowing of the college and career readiness platform and the corporatization trend in higher education continue to challenge us, and we considered the implications carefully before engaging with this initiative. However, rather than resist these goals because of the substantially different values of the CCA organization, we instead subverted them by finding common ground and openly drawing on the Complete College Idaho plan's language when making our own arguments for policy change. For example, when a CCA representative emphasized implementation over modest pilot projects, Boise State worked quickly to scale up The Write Class as it was a proven and more flexible placement approach. While a full explanation of the immediate opportunities for new curricular approaches and placement strategies is beyond the scope of this article, the presence of CCA spurred the full implementation of this research-based, locally-controlled placement process at Boise State—after years of pilots. At the same time, Boise State was able to offer all students credit-bearing coursework via a new course, English 101 Plus, that allowed students to take English 101 concurrently with a one-credit writers' studio; the other Idaho institutions quickly moved in that direction as well. Both of these monumental changes would not have been possible without the added external perspective of CCA. Indeed, Idaho's participation with Complete College America gave writing program administrators an opportunity to present directly to the SBOE about these efforts, an opportunity we had asked for but had never been given in previous years.

Building from this initiative, we requested support for a week-long summer institute for faculty from across Idaho. Since we were able to frame our institute within the Complete College Idaho goals, this effort was funded by the SBOE. In June 2014, then, seventeen first-year writing faculty and administrators representing nearly all institutions in Idaho gathered for a full week of presentations, workshops, and small-team inquiries that resulted in productive, context-appropriate projects on curricular initiatives in first-year writing. In other words, rather than waiting for a top-down mandate on reforming remedial writing classes, we were able to leverage our established ethos to develop English 101 Plus curricula with pedagogical best practices and students' best interests in mind, all with the support of our provosts and SBOE.

Writing placement, then, became the issue that we returned to again and again. It provided the initial exigency for ongoing conversations, conversations that were often frustrating and even disappointing. At the same time, these collaborative efforts were exhilarating and productive as well—and without the groundwork of decades of work, we wouldn't have been positioned to engage with and define CCA-related initiatives in quite the same way.

CONCLUSION: RELENTLESS ENGAGEMENT ON EDUCATIONAL POLICY THAT MATTERS

As WPAs, we have learned from this extended collaboration across institutions throughout Idaho. While we know that our state is not yours, we offer the following strategies for engaging with state-level policy:

Engage now; don't wait for a crisis

The Idaho WPAs and English department chairs had met annually for over a decade; we were colleagues who already knew each other. Those relationships facilitated our early work together. Further, the years of the English Placement Task Force required us to collaborate beyond just WPAs and department chairs. In hindsight, it has been critical that we had established relationships with colleagues in advising, the registrar's office, and orientation programming across our campuses.

Practice patience—and know that change takes time

Initially, some of us had assumed that the one-year pilot placement programs—and the data that came out of those—would lead to policy change in the year after that. Seven years later, we still do not have revised state-

level policy. But change is on the horizon, and continued engagement has been crucial.

Honor institutional contexts and commitments while developing shared values

We quickly learned to listen to one another. Even among the WPAs in our state, there were substantially different beliefs about the kinds of placement processes that were realistic for institutions and useful for student populations. We grew to understand and respect one another's hard work and commitment to student learning—and that helped us see beyond differences.

Become flexible writers

Most of us teach first-year writing curricula that encourage students to be flexible, adaptive writers; our engagement with statewide policy required us to expand our writing repertoire as well. One of our goals in writing this article has been to document some of the genres that we learned to write together—white papers, reports, task force guidelines, funding proposals. We had to work to understand the purpose and context of these new-to-us genres; while our attempts are undoubtedly imperfect, administrators noticed that we were trying to speak to them, and we were able to build credibility through those efforts.

Keep an open mind

We were hesitant and more than a little dubious when we learned of Idaho's participation in Complete College America. By approaching the situation with an open mind, we were able to engage with the mission of this initiative and make significant changes that support our students. Through the implementation of English 101 Plus, for example, we moved more students into credit-bearing courses more quickly without sacrificing course outcomes or pedagogical beliefs. If engagement with initiatives such as CCA seems distasteful, we need to consider how to get involved even earlier. While larger efforts like running for public office or working for political campaigns may be beyond our capacity, consider volunteering for the Council of Writing Program Administrators' Network for Media Action or hosting small-scale meetings and conferences within your state. It is important to find ways to effect change and invest our energies early in reform processes.

Be present. Relentlessly

These documents also trace how our initial collaborative work as faculty, which largely began in frustration, changed into a kind of advocacy. As Linda Adler-Kassner describes, our work started with “individual principles—from an individual’s anger, passions, and . . . *emotions*,” and grew into a “change-making [movement]” (23). Throughout the past several years, we have become differently pragmatic as we’ve realized that refusing to engage with stakeholders whose values might differ significantly—even diametrically—from our own can lead to even worse results. Likewise, we have learned that we share at least one key value—a commitment to the success of our students—with administrators on our campuses, SBOE members, and state legislators. Balancing differing perspectives and deeply held beliefs with our shared dedication to our students has allowed us to make headway on reform in our state.

For us, placement policy became a critical focal point for intervening on commonplace understandings about writing development, literacy, and student performance. It is a big issue; in fact, placement is at the core of what Adler-Kassner identifies as one of three “central questions” of our field: “How should students’ literacies be defined when they come into composition classes?” (*Activist* 14).

Many other issues might seem small and yet have the potential to spur statewide conversations and action: dual enrollment; transfer credit questions; accreditation; labor challenges. Because of the unique position of first-year writing, policies related to these kinds of issues can initially strike a WPA as either overly fine-grained policies that only affect specific students at one institution—or they can seem overwhelmingly complex. What we hope we have done here, though, is encouraged you to seek out these kinds of policy-related challenges to engage with colleagues from across your state; collaboration across institutional contexts can offer new opportunities to intervene on assumptions about student literacies and the teaching of writing.

In hindsight, we can see how important those years of conversation and pilot projects and reports were. Collectively, we turned placement into a focal point for careful, faculty-led research and experimentation which gave us a meaningful context (and a rich set of data) when the new statewide goals as outlined in the Complete College Idaho plan provided another way to consider and work through this challenge together. We are confident that we can help guide future policy changes. Patient listening and continued dialogue matter, and we will continue to engage. As we do so, we will advocate for approaches to placement that focus on the context of that

work. We find solace in Adler-Kassner and O'Neill's reminder at the end of *Reframing Writing Assessment* that this kind of work is important—and that it is never done (190).

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The authors would like to thank their generous, smart, and flexible Idaho colleagues for their years of work on these issues. They are also grateful to Dominic Delli Carpini and two anonymous *WPA: Writing Program Administration* reviewers for their insightful feedback on an earlier version of this article.

NOTES

1. We are well-aware of the problematic assumptions in the term *remedial*. As we describe later, we had long argued that the non-credit-bearing writing courses in Idaho were rigorous, pedagogically-progressive courses and that they were not designed to remediate students in any sense. However, State Board of Education policy clearly defined these courses and prevented students from receiving credit for them. The institutional and state-level perception of these courses as “remedial” remained.

2. Our State Board of Education's term for a policy that is temporarily suspended.

APPENDIX A: PLACEMENT WHITE PAPER PRESENTED TO PROVOSTS' COUNCIL IN JUNE 2008

Placement in First-Year Writing Courses at Idaho Colleges and Universities

*Prepared by Heidi Estrem, Director of the First-Year Writing Program,
Boise State University*

Endorsed by colleagues from the following Idaho colleges and universities:

[List of Names]

May 14, 2008

Recommendation: Idaho college students can be placed more appropriately into first-year writing courses (English 90, 101, and 102) by research-based, pedagogically-sound placement systems developed at each university or college. We propose that a task force be established to explore placement options and initiate pilot systems at different universities.

A more accurate placement system will both enable students to take course work for which they are prepared and ensure that all universities and colleges are able to

deliver their first-year courses more effectively and efficiently. A revised placement process will also address the SBOE goal of “develop[ing] and maintain[ing] strong . . . placement programs, particularly in reading, writing, and mathematics.”ⁱ A strong placement program for first-year writing courses will also correct many of the problems with the current system, as outlined below.

Background on the Current Placement System: Incoming students at all Idaho public colleges and universities are placed into English 90, 101, or 102 based on ACT/SAT scores. Institutions also use COMPASS scores to place students into 101 or 102. Additionally, students can receive credit for English 101 based on their COMPASS score or ACT/SAT score.ⁱⁱ

Problems With the Current Placement System:

1. *Standardized test scores are not valid or reliable as placement instruments.* Research on standardized tests and placement in writing courses has documented, time and again, that placement decisions almost never match with future performance.ⁱⁱⁱ Our professional organizations agree. A recent white paper by a joint NCTE (National Council of Teachers of English) and C-WPA (Council of Writing Program Administrators) task force notes that “A single off-the-shelf or standardized test should never be used to make important decisions about students, teachers, or curriculum.”^{iv} Even the testing agencies for ACT, SAT and COMPASS advise that their test scores be used as only one piece of data on which to determine placement.^v
2. *Placement based on standardized tests misplaces students.* According to a survey of Idaho English department chairs and writing program administrators who have been analyzing the effectiveness of the current system, this placement system allows under-prepared students to take courses for which they are not ready and hinders others from advancing to coursework for which they are prepared.^{vi} Standardized tests prioritize speed and efficiency; however, they do not take into account either students’ reading and writing abilities or the first-year writing curriculum. Students who are inappropriately placed are often frustrated when they are placed into a course for which they are not ready.
3. *Standardized test scores have never been intended to be used as a basis for awarding course credit.* No standardized test meaningfully represents the experience of a full college writing course. None of the testing agencies claim that their tests are valid or reliable indicators upon which to give course credit.
4. *Awarding course credit based on standardized test scores inaccurately represents the content of college-level courses.* At all colleges in Idaho, first-year writing courses are taken seriously and taught with rigor and care. When students are able to take and re-take a test (e.g., the COMPASS) that has nothing to do with the curriculum, the reputation of Idaho universities is harmed by communicating to students that one \$5 grammar and usage test is equivalent to an entire sixteen-week college-level writing course.
5. *Using standardized tests for either placement or course credit does not reflect best practices or current research on writing.* Seventy-seven percent of the English

department administrators in Idaho universities and colleges are dissatisfied with the ACT/SAT as a placement method, and 92% are dissatisfied with the use of COMPASS.^{vii} There are many other robust writing placement methods that better reflect recent understandings of first-year writing courses. Program administrators charged with providing high-quality first-year writing courses for all incoming students view writing placement as an opportunity for positive programmatic development that will directly enhance the educational experience of Idaho college students.

Writing Placement Models: While there are many possibilities for placement systems that might be developed, briefly outlined here are two current systems that adhere to sound principles for placement system design: guided self-placement and portfolio placement. According to current research, the most effective writing placement systems

- Use multiple samples of writing
- Encourage student self-efficacy through engaging them in the placement process
- Align placement with the content and pedagogy of courses
- Are locally developed and responsive to student population needs.^{viii}

Guided self-placement is based on current research in learning and self-efficacy, for it “present[s] students with real and important choices about their education.”^{ix} Students are provided with detailed descriptions of course work and expectations; they have the opportunity to discuss each course with advisors or program directors; they are guided in self-reflection on their past writing experiences. Then, students place themselves into the appropriate course. According to research done at universities where directed self-placement is in use, students place themselves *more accurately* than previous placement systems had placed them.^x

Portfolio placement recognizes that writers should be placed into course work on the basis of multiple writing samples and the judgment of “expert readers,” or those most closely engaged with teaching the course sequence.^{xi} For portfolio systems, students prepare and submit a portfolio of multiple writing samples to a committee of instructors from the targeted courses. The students’ writing is directly assessed according to the course goals and expectations, and the portfolio readers then decide on the most appropriate course for that student.

There is real interest in addressing placement creatively and thoughtfully through different approaches to placement at each university. Over 75% of the survey respondents would like to develop some version of directed self-placement; others are interested in exploring portfolio-based or online writing placement. A change in placement, then, is both an opportunity to enhance students’ educational experience and an opportunity for writing scholars at each college to implement a pedagogically sound, research-based placement system that best serves each campus.^{xii}

Statewide Support: The challenges of the current placement system have been of concern to Idaho writing program administrators and English department chairs for many years. The time is right for reconsidering writing placement structures in

Idaho colleges. Locally-based, ethically sound writing placement systems can serve to help students have even more positive and educationally appropriate experiences in their first years in college while also upholding the integrity of college-level work. We welcome the opportunity to work with our local and state-level colleagues to implement writing placement systems that better place students, more accurately represent the content of these courses, and reflect current best practices in writing placement research.

ⁱ (Section III. R. f. (3)). <http://www.boardofed.idaho.gov/academics/index.asp>

ⁱⁱ The ACT “tests emphasize reasoning, analysis, problem solving, and the integration of learning from various sources, as well as the application of these proficiencies to the kinds of tasks college students are expected to perform.” Its tests “are designed to assess students’ general educational development and their ability to complete college-level work” (www.act.org). The SAT assesses “the critical reading, mathematical reasoning, and writing skills students have developed over time and that they need to be successful in college.” Its tests are designed “to assist students, their families, and educators in assessing students’ ability to succeed in college-level studies” (<http://professionals.collegeboard.com/k-12/prepare/sat>). The COMPASS diagnostic exam only measures grammar and usage: “Punctuation, Spelling, Capitalization, Usage, Verb formation/agreement, Relationships of clauses, Shifts in construction, Organization”

ⁱⁱⁱ Haswell, “Post-Secondary”

^{iv} NCTE/WPA White Paper on Assessment (forthcoming)

^v www.act.org; www.collegeboard.com

^{vi} See survey, attached

^{vii} See survey, attached

^{viii} see Haswell, “Post-Secondary;” Broad, *What We Really Value*; Huot, *ReArticulating Writing Assessment*; Harrington, “Learning to Ride;” NCTE/CCCC Statement on Assessment <http://www.ncte.org/cccc/resources/positions/123784.htm>

^{ix} Harrington, “Learning to Ride”

^x Royer and Gilles, *Directed Self-Placement*

^{xi} Yancey, “Looking Back”

^{xii} Student needs and populations differ at each Idaho university. Writing program administrators across the state are committed to providing similar kinds of experiences in similarly numbered courses while also remaining sensitive to local needs for specific kinds of curricula. So, while these courses may remain comparable in content—and Idaho writing program administrators and English department chairs are committed to and value this kind of articulation—individual campuses can and should implement placement methods most appropriate for their student population and that best represent their curriculum.

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APPENDIX B: ENGLISH PLACEMENT TASK FORCE CHARGE, MEMBERSHIP, TIMELINE

English Placement Task Force
appointed by Provosts' Council July 2008
Updated September 24, 2008

English Placement Task Force Co-Chairs: Heidi Estrem, Boise State University,
and Whitney Smith, College of Southern Idaho

Charge:

The English Placement Task Force (EPTF) is charged with studying, piloting, and recommending new placement systems at Idaho state colleges and universities. The task force is guided by the understanding that all constituents—students, faculty, administrators—will be best served by placement systems that are valid, pedagogically reliable, and responsive both to best practices in writing placement and to local needs and contexts.

The EPTF is charged with

- a) surveying current best practices in English placement at a range of institutions nation-wide;
- b) soliciting the input of writing placement experts to devise new placement systems;
- c) piloting new placement systems at identified volunteer institutions;
- d) assessing and reporting on those placement systems;
- e) presenting recommendations for English placement at Idaho public colleges and universities to the provosts' council

Membership: The EPTF should have robust representation from a range of institutions and constituents.

Faculty:

[Names and Institutions]

Registrars and Academic Advising:

[Names and Institutions]

Administration:

[Names and Institutions]

Designee from Office of State Board of Education:

[name]

Designee from Idaho State Department of Education:

[name]

Timeline:

AY 2008—2009; Fall 2008:

- Explore benefits of current models for writing placement and related benefits for Idaho schools through written materials and through attending a placement workshop

- Consult with writing placement/assessment scholars during the placement workshop on current innovative and reliable models
- Identify the appropriate placement programs for different kinds of institutions in Idaho
- Provosts' Council will inform and brief SBOE at the SBOE October 9-10 meeting in ____
- Establish an appropriate assessment plan for the placement models
- Solicit institutions to host pilot placement programs

Spring 2009:

- Begin implementing pilot placement programs on a voluntary basis for incoming students

AY 2009—2010

- Continue implementing pilot placement programs
- Generate and interpret preliminary data on the pilot placement programs
- Report on research and make a proposal for English placement to Provosts' Council

Deliverables to Provosts' Council:

January 2009—Initial Writing Placement Report, detailing:

- The placement programs that are being piloted and an explanation of how that placement model meets the charge for this task force
- The placement programs considered and an explanation of why each institution chose to pilot the program
- Projected benefits and challenges of each pilot placement program
- Projected costs, if any
- The assessment plan for each pilot program

October 2009—Preliminary Pilot Programs Report, detailing:

- The results from each pilot program
- Assessment of each pilot program
- Actual costs, if any
- Unexpected challenges and/or benefits.

Spring 2010—Recommendation Report for English Placement in Idaho Colleges and Universities, detailing:

- Proposed recommendations for statewide English placement
- Rationale for each placement program chosen
- Budget proposal, if needed
- Ongoing assessment plan for each placement program

APPENDIX C: PLACEMENT INTO WRITING COURSES AT IDAHO POST-SECONDARY INSTITUTIONS

Findings and Recommendations

Submitted to

Council of Academic Affairs and Programs (CAAP; a statewide provosts' council)

June 2010

by

The English Placement Task Force

Entering college students need clear, flexible, and appropriate initial course placement to ensure early success. As detailed in the full report submitted to the CAAP in May 2010, the English Placement Task Force (EPTF) has researched and gathered data for recommendations on changes to initial writing course placement at colleges and universities across Idaho. We were charged with surveying best practices in placement; soliciting the input of writing placement experts; piloting new placement systems at volunteer institutions; and assessing and reporting on those placement systems. This condensed report presents our findings and recommendations to the Provosts' Council. We look forward to continuing to address these issues with you.

Part One: English Placement Task Force Findings

In 2009-2010, four institutions (North Idaho College, Idaho State University, Boise State University, and the University of Idaho) drew from the EPTF-designed cohesive Framework (see attached) to design pilot placement programs that were both responsive to the Framework and adaptable to local needs. For example, North Idaho College's unique student profile led them to use individual advising and additional assessment measures to better place students into first-year writing courses. Alternatively, the much larger numbers of incoming students at institutions like Boise State University and Idaho State University led them to develop placement programs that were online and interactive.

Overall, the pilot studies demonstrated the potential for locally-developed post-admissions placement processes to place students more accurately and effectively than test scores alone. The changes in writing placement procedures made in the pilot studies had two significant effects:

1. Instructional Appropriateness and Greater Self-Efficacy: Additional placement measures led to a positive initial experience in college during a critical transition period into college.
 - a. At North Idaho College and Boise State, students who participated in the pilot placement performed better in their courses than did a peer comparison group.
 - b. At North Idaho College and Boise State, assessments demonstrated that students appreciated knowing more about the courses and having the opportunity to give additional input into their first-semester options.

2. Efficiencies: Institutions and students managed resources more efficiently.
 - a. The number of sections each institution needed to offer could be reduced through more accurate placement. Potentially, for example, Boise State University might be able to reduce the number of course offerings by at least four sections per year, resulting in an institutional savings of at least \$13,000.
 - b. Students placed more effectively are retained in higher numbers and make quicker progress toward their degrees. (One example: in Boise State's pilot, 18 students who would have been required to begin in English 90 were able to begin in English 101 and yet still successfully completed the course. Those eighteen students saved that cost.)

Part Two: English Placement Task Force Recommendations for Placement

The pilot projects offer an initial demonstration that institutionally-developed placement processes for first-year writing can be effective and efficient. However, current SBOE policy (see Policy III.Q Admission Standards) does not permit further expansion of placement processes. Our recommendations for continuing this work follow.

1. The EPTF recommends continued institutional commitment to the collaboratively-developed Framework for Writing Placement (see attached).

The Framework offers consistency in focus, even though the particular methods adopted at each institution may differ. As institutional needs, national best practices, and student demographics evolve, the Framework will need periodic review and discussion.
2. The EPTF recommends a change in wording to SBOE Policy III.Q, "Admission Standards," to distinguish between admission and placement.

Standardized test scores are suitably efficient, reliable tools for admission into our institutions at this time. However, educational policy can permit the development of more sensitive placement mechanisms for introductory writing courses *after* students have enrolled and committed to a particular institution. A change to policy III.Q will permit institutions to expand and refine the placement processes that have been piloted.
3. The EPTF recommends that the current placement chart for first-year writing (III.Q "Admissions Standards") be reviewed and placed differently within the policy.

The current ACT/SAT cut-off scores can serve as admissions guidelines, and they *may* serve as placement guidelines for any institutions that do not adapt locally-responsive placement models. However, we recommend

removing the “COMPASS” column so that institutions may continue to develop other placement processes that better address current student needs.

4. The EPTF recommends that CAAP consider how to award students college credit for course work actually taken.

Currently, students can receive up to six college-level course credits based on test scores alone. We have discussed the possibility of moving the core composition requirement to a 3-6 credit requirement. One advantage of this system is that students would earn credit for course work actually completed; another is that it may allow for more rapid progress toward degree for some students. The disadvantage, though, is that students may feel more pressure than ever to take only the second first-year writing course. We welcome further discussion of this issue.

APPENDIX D: REDUCE REMEDIATION CAMPUS PROPOSAL EXAMPLE

MEMO

Date: September 13, 2012
To: Marty Schimpf, Provost
From: Heidi Estrem, Director of the First-Year Writing Program; Dawn Shepherd, Associate Director of the First-Year Writing Program; Michelle Payne, Chair, Department of English
Re: Transform Remediation Plan and Budget Proposal—English

Writing Plus: Transforming Remediation in First-Year Writing

The SBOE goal to transform remediation has long been a goal of the First-Year Writing Program at Boise State University. This academic year, we are piloting several initiatives aimed at both reducing remediation and increasing retention in first-year writing courses (English 90, 101, and 102). Below, we have described the three main initiatives within this program (collectively known as “Writing Plus”) and the outcomes linked to each initiative. Then we delineate the funding needs if these are to expand into permanent program offerings.

Evidence-Based Placement

The cornerstone of the Writing Plus Program is an evidence-based placement procedure that incorporates multiple measures to position students for a successful first-year writing experience. A long line of research within writing studies has demonstrated the need for an approach to placement that takes into account multiple measures, and we have been working alongside our colleagues at other Idaho institutions and partners from the SBOE toward a placement solution for years. In addition, we have successfully piloted an online placement process during summer orientation sessions.

Continuing to rely on tests like COMPASS or ACCUPLACER, which have been demonstrated to misplace students, will force students into remedial coursework and will make the other proposed reforms of little effect. Two examples: First, in the late 1990s, when the COMPASS scores were changed by the SBOE, suddenly more students were required to take English 90. Subsequently, English 90 students were not retained at twice the rate of their 101 counterparts. Second, this spring, the Institutional Assessment office looked for any statistically significant correlations between SAT, ACT, or COMPASS scores and success in English 101 or 102. There were none. Instead, we propose a streamlined evidence-based placement procedure based on the following weighted factors:

- *60% Digital Evidence-Based Placement* score: Students are guided through The Write Class, an online self-assessment that gathers data about each student. It also includes a question about SAT/ACT scores as a general assessment of college readiness.
- *40% Prior Academic Writing Evidence*: High School English GPA for traditional students OR an additional portion of the online Write Class assessment for returning students who have been out of high school for more than five years. As was presented by the Western Governors' Association representative at the Reduce Remediation provosts' meeting this summer, a student's GPA is a far better predictor of collegiate success than her test scores.

Key Performance Indicator: With this placement approach, students will both have a better sense of collegiate work expectations and feel as though they've been better placed in the appropriate course for them. We will use student satisfaction surveys, institutional research on GPAs and retention, and direct assessments of sampled student writing to assess the placement process.

English 101+

The second aspect of the Writing Plus program is a reconfigured credit-bearing first-year writing course, English 101+. In our efforts to reduce remediation at Boise State University, we seek to support all first-year writing students who might otherwise be required to begin in English 90, or who might choose to begin in English 90. To that end, we have created a four-credit English 101+ experience. In this program (pilot beginning spring 2013), students who would have formerly taken English 90 will be mainstreamed into English 101 classes and enrolled in a one-credit writers' studio with their English 101 instructor. Research indicates that additional time, focused instruction, and increased feedback are what many English 90 students need, and those aspects will be key in the one-credit studio courses. At the same time, less-confident writers will benefit from being integrated immediately into credit-bearing courses. Our approach draws from many features of the Accelerated Learning Program at the Community College of Baltimore County, coordinated by Peter Adams (see <http://alp-deved.org>) and referenced in the Complete College America materials.

Students will benefit immediately by no longer being required to take three credits of pre-credit-bearing work. Additionally, students who *want* the additional

support can obtain it within the context of a credit-bearing course. Institutional research in 2008 revealed that our English 90 students perform just as well as their counterparts by the time they reach English 102—but that more than three times as many of them drop out along the way. With this model, students will gain confidence in coursework and won't feel as though they are “behind.”

Performance Indicator: In alignment with Progress Metric 3 in the Complete College America technical guide, we will compare student cohorts from 2007-12 (under the current remedial sequence of English 90-101-102) to the 2013-14 cohort (who complete the English 101+ and 102 sequence). Our goal is that English 101+ students will be retained at a higher level than and complete English 102 as successfully as the comparison cohort.

Projecting Learning, Understanding Success (PLUS) Program: Support for Repeating Students

The third aspect of this program to reduce remediation is a new initiative for students repeating a critical gateway first-year course (English 101 or 102). Institutional research here and elsewhere indicates that students who repeat a course are more than twice as likely to be unsuccessful the next time they attempt it. Drawing from research within writing studies, psychology, and adult learning, we have developed and are currently piloting our PLUS program for repeating students, which includes:

- early-semester communication with repeating students;
- a checklist of low-stakes tasks for these students, designed to foster ownership, confidence, and planning for success;
- faculty-initiated check-ins;
- guided reflective interviews with peer mentors.

Repeating students too often reproduce the same problematic behaviors. To remedy this challenge, the PLUS Program aims to help them reframe how they work in first-year writing and what they're doing differently during the repeated experience.

Performance Indicator: This initiative is aligned with Progress Metrics 3 and 5 in the Complete College America technical guide. Over time, this program, in addition to the availability of 101+, will increase the opportunities for the success of repeating students, thus saving students and the institution emotional and financial costs.

Writing Plus Budget

The success of these placement, curricular, and student-support initiatives, designed to directly impact the vulnerable population of first-year students, hinges on two critical yet realistic requirements: a careful implementation and a stable team of experienced instructors. We anticipate some one-time startup costs as these significant changes take place, followed by the use of ongoing funds to main-

tain them. Here, then, we first delineate the one-time costs that we predict with this significant shift in how we support and retain students. Then, we delineate the two proposals for ongoing funds.

Writing Plus Implementation

As a result of the ongoing commitment by SBOE, at colleges and universities across the state, and on the Boise State campus in particular, we have already invested in piloting the placement, curricular, and student-support initiatives. Effective full implementation of the Writing Plus program requires investment in one-time startup costs that will ensure that all parts of the program run smoothly.

One-Time Startup Costs	
Placement Implementation Revisions to online placement (The Write Class) (\$1000/website changes, \$2000/new student videos; \$1000/website editing and revising \$300 annually for data hosting) Summer Placement coordinator at orientation sessions, as liaison with faculty and staff advisors and to handle Informational outreach related to these changes (for high school counselors, parents, on-campus advisors, and so on) (200 hours @ \$10) <i>Note: Once fully implemented, The Write Class will be fully funded through a minimal student test fee of \$5.</i>	\$4300 \$2000
Writing Plus Launch Program materials to communicate with internal and external stakeholders Communication campaign to academic advisors and campus programs, Direct mail campaign to incoming students, high- school guidance counselors Table tents and banner for use at orientation and other campus events	[pending quote from University Printing]
total anticipated one-time costs	\$TBD

Writing Plus Budget—Ongoing Funds

Evidence-Based Placement

Once implemented, placement costs will be minimal for both the institution and for students. Periodic Write Class updates and one-on-one placement advising for unusual student cases (e.g., returning students, unusual transcripts) will be covered by a \$5 student fee for The Write Class (in lieu of offering the COMPASS

test for \$10). This solution will generate enough funds to cover both revisions to the assessment tool and administrative support.

Writing Plus and PLUS Support Program:

For the Writing Plus program to succeed, it will be critical to have full-time, innovative instructors who are able to engage in the additional mentoring and support that this approach requires. Currently, over 84% of first-year writing courses are taught by either “part-time” adjuncts or new graduate teaching instructors. We need to begin by investing in resources that provide the greatest immediate impact. The bulk of our proposal, then, is for labor costs: five lecturer positions. These will be positions specifically dedicated to English 101+ instruction. Five new positions will cover current projections and will allow for expansion of these offerings in the immediate future as we account for the large number of pre-English 101 international and multilingual students currently in the pipeline. English 101+ is well positioned to support their needs in college-level writing courses, as well.

On the following chart, which proposes a fully funded Writing Plus program, we have included data on current costs so that savings are also reflected. Our program improves and *replaces* a portion of existing funds rather than only adding to current costs.

Current Institutional Costs and Fully Funded Writing Plus Proposal			
Current University Costs of English 90		Writing PLUS Program: Proposed University Costs of ENGL 101+	
Instructional staff		Instructional staff	
PT Faculty: 11 sections (81%)	\$30,657	5 lectureships ¹	\$232,791
Lecturers: 3 sections (19%)	\$11,400		
Total instructional cost for 14 sections of English 90	\$42,057		
Total instructional cost for 14 sections of ENGL 101 students would take after ENGL 90	\$42,057		
Total instructional cost for 6 credits of 90/101	\$84,114		
Additional support for course		Additional support for 101+	
Course release for mentoring and training (from department’s summer revenue)	\$2,787	Course release for mentoring and training	\$2,787

WPA 38.1 (Fall 2014)

Ongoing professional development for instructors to ensure skilled pool (every other year, 5-10 participants @ \$500 stipends) Estimated figure here is 7 participants @ \$500 stipends (from department summer revenue)	\$3,500	Innovative First-Year Pedagogies Fund (stipends for summer pedagogy workshops, ongoing professional development, teacher-research grants)	\$5,000
Assessment (% of sections of 90 & 101 students would take) = 11% x Assessment budget of \$4000)	\$440	Assessment	\$1,000
Tutors for English 90 (using # of students registered for FY12)	\$9,090		
Staff hours: permission #s, verifying test scores, etc. (approx 10 hours per week @ \$16.06 per hour over 52 weeks)	\$8,351		
		PLUS Support Program:	
		GTA Coordinator (communicate with students, outreach, follow up with instructors, monitor and asses program)	\$5,574
		Undergraduate Peer Mentors (\$200 stipends for 14 mentors/year)	\$2,800
Total costs for ENGL 90 & 101 (English 90 cohort in English 101)	\$108,282	Total Ongoing Funds Requested for Writing PLUS (101+ AND PLUS)	\$249,952
		Less A260 funds & Lecturer salaries for 14 sections	-\$84,114
			\$165,838

¹ \$38,000 + (\$38,000*.2165) + \$8550 x 5

Partially Funded Writing Plus Proposal

With a partially funded approach, we would lose a lecturer position and would fully cut the PLUS initiative to support students repeating first-year writing. At this level, we would meet 2012 student needs but would not have enough capacity to accommodate projected growth from multilingual/international students in the pipeline, thus hindering this growing and important student population's progress toward degree.

Proposed University Costs of 101+ Only (one fewer lecturer, no PLUS program)	
Instructional staff	
4 lectureships	\$186,232
Additional support for 101+	
Faculty support position (course release for faculty to lead mentoring and training)	\$2,787
Innovative First-Year Pedagogies Fund (stipends for summer pedagogy workshops, ongoing professional development, teacher-research grants)	\$5,000
Assessment	\$1,000
Total Funds Requested	\$195,019
Less A260 funds & Lecturer salaries for 14 sections	-\$84,114
	\$110,905

Student Savings

In addition to a streamlined curricular approach that supports students' progress toward degree, the monetary savings for individual students are critical as well. As the next chart demonstrates, a full-time in-state resident saves over \$400 with this model, and an international student saves nearly \$1200.

Current Student Costs, Writing Plus Student Costs, and Proposed Savings

	Current Costs¹	Writing Plus Costs²	Proposed Savings³
Resident (59% of Fall 12)			
PT (\$252 per credit)	\$1,512	\$1,008	\$534
FT (\$2942)	\$1,177	\$785	\$422
Non-Resident (41% of Fall 12)			
PT (252 + \$101 per credit)	\$2,118	\$1,412	\$736
FT (\$5720)	\$2,288	\$1,525	\$793
International (24% of Fall 12)			
FT (\$8662)	\$3,465	\$2,310	\$1,185

¹Total of 6 credits per student (3 for ENGL 90, no elective credit; 3 for ENGL 101, core credit)

²Total of 4 credits per student (3 for ENGL 101, core credit; 1 for ENGL 197, elective credit)

³ Includes removal of \$30 ENGL 90 course fee

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Dawn Shepherd is an assistant professor of English and Associate Director of the First-Year Writing Program at Boise State University. She is the co-author, with Carolyn R. Miller, of two book chapters on genre and weblogs, and her work on romantic matchmaking and algorithmic culture has been featured in local and international media, including *BBC World* and *The Times of London*. She teaches upper-division and graduate courses in rhetoric and writing with a new media emphasis and regularly facilitates workshops on integrating mobile strategies into the classroom and teaching with technology.

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