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Centering Community College Students' Experiences: A Multiple Methods Study of Multiple Measures for Writing Placement

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CENTERING COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES: A MULTIPLE
METHODS STUDY OF MULTIPLE MEASURES FOR WRITING PLACEMENT

by

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ABSTRACT

CENTERING COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES: A MULTIPLE METHODS STUDY OF MULTIPLE MEASURES FOR WRITING PLACEMENT

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Old Dominion University, 2022
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Community colleges are trying to reform their placement procedures from use of a single placement test score to a system that collects multiple measures to be used either as a replacement solitary measure or in conjunction with other measures for more accurate placement into writing courses than what occurred with the placement test, which often resulted in disparate impact for students of color. In this study of multiple measures placement assessment for writing courses, I critique several large studies of community college multiple measures assessment for the lack of a community college perspective. The studies largely supported use of high school grade point average as a replacement for placement tests, but I found some of the reasoning to be faulty or unsupported by the data in the studies.

I offer my own study of students at a community college in the Midwest as evidence of why high school grade point averages cannot be used fairly and accurately for all students in a community college system. In this study, I collected and analyzed multiple measures variables from 34 students and then supplemented it with qualitative data collected during student interviews to assess why for some of the students in the study, their paths were predictable and college credits were earned successfully but for others, the path was less linear, less predictable, with the collected measures not predicting success with any reliability. In a paradigm shift from most multiple measures research, I center qualitative data, particularly from the students who

were not college-bound while in high school, as a means to explain the gaps in the quantitative data findings. In the final chapter, I interviewed four students from the initial study, where their stories built on my early conclusions regarding why high school transcripts and test scores are insufficient as solitary measures for writing placement for some community college students and suggest that we should also broaden our definitions of and measurement of success at community colleges.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

This dissertation emerged to address the problem of how to place students into the writing sequence of courses at one particular community college, with the hope that what was learned could help other community colleges. Midwest Metropolitan Community College (MMCC) is where I have worked for around twenty years, and I know its students and contexts well. In 2015, a placement test that was widely used by community colleges for placement, COMPASS, was disbanded, which led to many community colleges exploring placement alternatives. In 2018, MMCC's home state recommended that placement should move from reliance on a solitary test for placement and shift to use of multiple measures instead. Multiple measures placement collects several pieces of information about students—including high school grade point average (hsGPA) and other transcript data, any standardized tests the student has taken, and other variables that are often non-cognitive—to provide a more complete assessment of the student's abilities to potentially provide a more accurate placement assessment. My goal in embarking on this dissertation study was to determine which placement variables could be used fairly and with more accuracy than the previous method of relying on a solitary placement test score for MMCC students. I did not want to presume that because multiple measures collected more information that that information could be used uncritically without creating new placement problems. My primary audience for this work is faculty members, staff, and administrators at two-year open-enrollment institutions who are interested in the stories behind the placement data.

When students apply to a selective university, they must prove that they meet certain thresholds in order to be admitted before they register for courses. Because community colleges are open-admissions institutions that accept all students, they face a greater challenge to evaluate which students are likely to pass transfer-level courses the first time they are taken instead of needing the support and pace of a developmental course. Some students have what have traditionally been considered to be clear markers of college-readiness: SAT or ACT scores in upper percentiles, high school grade point averages above a 3.5, and/or successful completion of college-level coursework from another institution. The rub is that many open-admissions students do not have these markers, and the distinction between ready for college-level writing coursework vs. unprepared is not as clear as a boundary line between two test scores on a placement chart.

Historically, higher education institutions have turned to testing companies to provide solutions for their placement needs. While these tests have been used to assess students in math, reading, and writing, the focus of this dissertation is on writing placement where writing assessment scholars have challenged placement tests for over fifty years (Elliot, 2005; Hassel and Giordano, 2011; Inoue & Poe, 2012b; O'Neill, Moore, & Huot, 2009; White & Thomas, 1981). In spite of the research on how placement tests are an ineffective and unfair method for writing placement, a Conference on College Composition and Communication survey of two-year college writing programs performed in 2005 found that “76 percent of respondents used placement test scores for mandatory student placement into classes; 35 percent used placement data for ‘recommended’ placement somewhere in their language arts curriculum” (Sullivan, 2008, p. 15), with the Midwest being one of the regions identified as using it as their primary means of assessment (p. 9). An oft-cited Community College Research Center article by Judith

Scott-Clayton (2012) stated that 92% of community colleges used placement tests to sort students into developmental or transfer-level coursework, often using those test scores as the only placement measure (p. 1). A Center for Analysis of Postsecondary Readiness found that 98% of the community colleges surveyed used standardized tests for placement for reading and writing with 37% using high school performance measures (Rutschow et al., 2019, p. ES-5).

In 2015, ACT Inc. discontinued its college placement test, COMPASS, acknowledging, “A thorough analysis of customer feedback, empirical evidence and postsecondary trends led us to conclude that ACT Compass is not contributing as effectively to student placement and success as it had in the past” (as cited in Fain, 2015). This led to a kairotic moment for community college placement reform (Toth, 2019). Community colleges across the nation that were not already working on placement reform quickly demanded new placement methods that could be enacted with similar efficiency but greater accuracy for student success. Institutions were increasingly feeling pressure from legislators and journalists who were concerned about dismal completion rates for developmental students (Adler-Kassner & Harrington, 2006; Gleason, 2000), with the result that initiatives are/were implemented on hasty timelines with subpar methods (O’Neill, Moore, & Huot, 2009); meanwhile, faculty desired some stratification for pedagogical reasons but also sought fairness and accuracy for their students, and students wished to complete their education without undue financial or time burdens while also feeling supported and capable in their educational endeavors.

The kairotic moment in placement assessment provided the exigency needed for community college administrators and state legislators to acknowledge the problems of placement testing and its impact on student success rates. Many community colleges are now advocating for placement reform more broadly (Klausman, et al., 2016); one such reform

movement is for placement test scores to be replaced or supplemented with multiple measures placement assessment, where instead of students being assessed by a score on a solitary test, the students can be placed by the highest of several measures or a combination of measures. These measures can include standardized test scores but also data presumed to represent abilities over time, like high school grade point averages. Multiple measures placement assessment (MMA) is widely regarded to be more successful for placing students accurately than use of a single placement test score, but that does not necessarily mean it is enough of a reform to address the problems created by placement tests, particularly for the community college demographic. In both math and English, the Community College Research Center has found that MMA places more students into credit-bearing classes across all student demographics than when placement tests were used, but students are not passing the classes at equal rates (Barnett et al., 2020; Cullinan & Biedzio, 2021), potentially shifting the problem from one type of misplacement to another.

Community college students are a tricky group to define, and therefore also a difficult group to apply one set of standards to. Characterizing community college students as a homogeneous group is a fool's errand, but they have often been first-generation college students, older than traditional university students (although community colleges receive their fair share of recent high school graduates and dual credit students as well), more likely to be employed and/or work as caretakers for family members, and more likely to have an amalgamation of these nontraditional markers and many more, such as speaking multiple languages, having social and physical disabilities, and having socioeconomic factors that sometimes hinder their progress in school (Ostman, 2013). Community colleges pride themselves on being an equalizer in education (Pickett, 1997; Toth, 2018), as institutions with the potential to level the playing field for students

who may not have expected to go to college so they may attain a college degree and do so at both a lower cost and with lower risk than if attending a university (Sullivan, 2015). The students in high school college preparatory classes who have been preparing for the transition to college learning are generally able to succeed in college-level work, but community colleges must also sufficiently place the rest of the students, students who were told in a variety of ways that college was not for them or who had to wait to further their education until life gave them an opportunity to attend.

When I set out to create the study for this dissertation, I was very mindful of the students who tend to see community colleges as their only choice, who worried they were not prepared for a full four years of university studies yet. As noted earlier, the context of this dissertation is the community college I've been teaching at since 2002, which I've provided with the pseudonym of Midwest Metropolitan Community College (MMCC). MMCC had allowed me and others in the English department to investigate alternate placement options starting in 2014, but the departmental research was halted in 2018 when college administrators chose to replace the discontinued COMPASS test with ACCUPLACER, a similar placement test from The College Board. Because state legislation was recommending community colleges implement multiple measures placement, I sought and obtained permission to take a one-semester sabbatical in Fall 2018 to perform a research study with students enrolled at MMCC to ascertain which placement variables would be fairer and more accurate than use of solitary test scores. All of the decisions I made about which variables to study were directly influenced by the circumstances at MMCC and austerity measures in place in 2018. I focused specifically on writing placement and not more broadly on reading and writing because at the time, reading and writing were different courses taught by a separate set of instructors.

The original goal of my sabbatical study was to potentially develop an MMA for writing placement that could include an alternate type of placement exam, high school performance markers, and a noncognitive measure to replace use of ACCUPLACER as the primary method for placing students into writing classes. I crafted a multiple measures research study where I recruited already enrolled students to see whether placement using alternate variables would have resulted in fair and accurate placements for the students in the study, using final grades in their writing classes as a measure of success. In a two-week mid-semester window, I held eighteen sessions where a total of 34 students granted permission for me to collect data that could be used in forming an assessment design. Because the college was still considering a homegrown placement test at the time, I also offered students a gift card if they took that test. And then, because how students feel about writing is important, I had students take the Daly-Miller Writing Apprehension Inventory. When combined, the variables collected from their high school transcripts, standardized tests they'd taken (including state tests), and the instruments from within my study could represent a historical record of their perseverance, a score for their rhetorical awareness, their writing anxiety levels, and all of the traditional placement variables such as hsGPA, ACT/SAT scores, and ACCUPLACER scores. All students in the study granted permission for their English grades to be collected from the school's system for two academic years. My original intent was to parse all of this data to examine whether solitary measures were in themselves predictive or should be combined for students at MMCC for greater validity by comparing their potentially predictive variables to their record of success at the institution.

At the same time that I collected the quantitative data from students, I interviewed them about their perceptions of their previous writing experiences and the extent to which those experiences prepared them for college-level writing assignments in order to get some of the story

behind the data provided in their high school transcripts. What I discovered was that the quantitative data was not as predictive as what students were saying about their high school writing experiences, and these experiences were not discernible from their high school transcripts. I found that the variables that are often used in multiple measures placement are not an accurate reflection of predictive success for all community college students, so rather than continue to seek alternate variables, I began to more closely examine the research studies about multiple measures and also to explore my collected qualitative data to determine why the exact same variables tended to predict success for some students but not for others. I started asking what was not being captured in the multiple measures placement assessment method and whether the method could be improved to be a better fit for community college students at MMCC.

What I discovered synchronized with my growing concern about the research regarding multiple measures placement emerging out of organizations like the Community College Research Center (CCRC), the Center for the Analysis of Postsecondary Readiness (CAPR), and MDRC (which is now its full name and no longer an acronym). These organizations reported that MMA is a robust solution to community college placement problems (in both math and English), but in smaller moments within the studies they acknowledged that the placement method is not a placement reform panacea, and that MMA has been more appropriate for some student demographics than for others. These educational research organizations also emphasized what they call shortening the developmental pipeline and opening the gates, to get students into transfer-level courses with as much efficiency as possible, with the implication that they can then graduate in order to successfully enter the workforce. Because graduation rates are lower among students who have been required to take developmental coursework, the organizations tended to perceive developmental education as unsuccessfully sending students to transfer-level

coursework (Bailey & Cho, 2010; Bailey, Jeong, & Cho, 2010), often citing from journals in educational measurement and economic studies but neglecting scholarship from within the disciplines and within developmental education. Academics in both developmental math and English, especially those at community colleges, know that developmental education is necessary to get some students to where they need to be in order to pass transfer-level coursework. Because much of the research about placement is being performed by organizations that have the funding to pursue initiatives that benefit the work force, their messages that developmental education is costly and wholly ineffective are propagated more widely than what is known amongst developmental educators (Goudas and Boylan, 2012). Sound bites about the success of multiple measures and the lobbying done by philanthropic initiatives like Achieve the Dream assure the shift in allegiance from placement tests to multiple measures placement by administrators and legislators, even as research from disciplinary silos regarding placement tests has been less visible and research about development success continues to be ignored.

As noted in studies by CCRC, CAPR, and others, high school grade point averages (hsGPA) may be a good predictor for some students as a primary placement measure, but the group for which it would be best is only a portion of the overall community college demographic. The over-arching theory behind use of hsGPA for placement rests on the correlation between high school grades and grades earned in college. The premise is that students who do well in high school should do well in college; this is not revelatory. Belfield and Crosta found a community college student who had:

a HS GPA of C will, after three to five semesters, have a college GPA of 1.6. A student with a HS GPA of B will have a college GPA will be [*sic*] 2.5. An A student in high school will have a college GPA of 3.3. In general, a student's college GPA was about 0.6

units lower than the student's HS GPA. (2012, p. 17)

CCRC and others applied this .6 difference across the huge swath of student life to say that statistically speaking, a student who earned a passing GPA in high school should then be able to earn passing grades in college. This research is predicated on data from students who were already placed into transfer-level coursework. If the theory is that students who do well in high school should do well in college, then the less often discussed corollary is that students who failed classes in high school are statistically more likely to fail classes at the community college, too. Additionally, that leaves a spectrum of students who performed at a C level or who earned As or Bs in some classes and Cs and Ds in others with the result that they appear to have an average overall GPA. Too many of the MMA studies focus primarily on students who were already likely to succeed and neglect the types of students who need the most help and are logistically more likely to attend community colleges prior to transferring to a four-year university.

Another gap in the multiple measures research is recognition that the use of correlation studies, even with sophisticated regression analysis, can only be as strong as the variables being studied. High school grade point averages are being used as static variables that measure the same quality equally for students of all ages and from all schools. This is, simply put, not the case. Success rates may differ for students based on whether or not the students were in college preparatory classes. Success rates may also differ depending on which high school was attended, as not all high schools have the same level of rigor, nor the same funding. Add to this that students in community colleges are likelier to enroll in college at different times in their lives, so the hsGPAs are not being applied in the same time frame (i.e., during high school for dual credit students, directly after high school for traditional students, and anywhere from 5 years to 20+

years after graduation for returning students, with students having varying levels of additional writing experience since graduation).

The placement problem at community colleges needs solutions that are centered on the heterogeneity of the community college population, and they need to be proposed by people who understand the unique pedagogical concerns of teaching to rooms of students with a variety of previous educational experiences (Klausman et al., 2016). The president of the American Association of Community Colleges, Walter Bumphus, wrote, “As representatives of the most diverse sector of higher education, community colleges bear a special responsibility to champion the values of inclusiveness and equity” (2016, p. ix). In a 2019 special issue about writing placement in community colleges for *The Journal of Writing Assessment*, Toth, Nastal, Hassel, & Giordano noted, “The underrepresentation of two-year colleges in the writing assessment literature is an urgent ethical issue given the racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic diversity of two-year college students” (2019, p. 1), and, further, it is something that deserves to be undertaken by community college teacher-scholars, or critical reformers, to use Warnke and Higgins’ term (2018). Higgins and Warnke discussed the ways that community colleges need reformers who recognize the capitalism inherent in some of the critiques of community college success rates while also acknowledging that social justice needs merit change in how some elements of the community college function: “We believe the social justice validity of doing progressive work requires moving outside of market-oriented metrics that fixate on outcomes rather than engaging with the laborers whose work makes the achievement of those outcomes possible” (2020, p. 7). Like Warnke and Higgins, in this study, I try to shift the focus away from an economic cost/benefit analysis and to the learning outcomes, emphasizing community college contexts and students’ needs.

Toth et al. emphasized that any reform of community college assessment must be undertaken with cognizance of the unique contexts in community colleges, including the “missions and student populations served, constraints on institutional resources, writing instructors’ varying disciplinary backgrounds and professional identities, limitations on faculty governance and academic freedom, and the current reform-minded policy context in which two-year college faculty are undertaking their work” (2019, p. 2). Hassel and Giordano advocated that placement research at community colleges “must account for the distinct learning needs of students at open-admission campuses and, in order to be most effective, must be administered by faculty from the English department who actually teach the courses into which students are being placed” (2011, p. 53).

By nature of the work they do with disenfranchised students, community college teacher-scholars tend to center students in their research, focusing on both their lives in and outside of the classroom. For instance, in the *JWA* forum, Hassel and Giordano advocated for placement assessment reform to move beyond merely classifying students into a placement and instead try “identifying the learning environment(s) that are most likely to help students successfully develop the college-level literacies higher education promises to cultivate” (Gilman et al., 2019, p. 3). Community college teacher-scholars prioritize the mission and the students over the economic factors. It is for this reason that the TYCA White Paper on Placement Reform recommends that faculty be involved in placement reform at the institution level and that disciplinary knowledge be honored in the process (Klausman et al., 2016).

This perspective is crucial to who I am and where I teach, and because of that, the work in this dissertation will be viewed through my community college teacher-scholar lens. I am very mindful that community colleges are more often written about from an outside perspective than

they are by people from within. I agree with Patrick Sullivan (2017), who says that the community college lens shapes “the kind of data we collect and privilege” and adds: “How we judge the value of community colleges will depend in some very important ways on what kinds of benchmarks we establish to measure ‘success,’ who sets these benchmarks, and what these benchmarks assume about students attending college” (p. 8). In particular, I argue that we cannot continue to define and assess community college placement by selective university standards. It is also of utmost importance to have input from the faculty who teach all levels of the courses being discussed, especially when the basic writing program is successful, as much of the outside perspective is generally anti-developmental education.

The backlash to developmental education largely stems from how graduation data is presented in white papers and fact sheets by researchers focused on both education and economics. CCRC’s research overview stated that only 28% of developmental students ever graduate from college and only 29% of students in developmental English pass their gatekeeper English course (Jaggars & Stacey, 2014). These grim statistics arise from research by CCRC researchers that will be discussed in Chapter II. The statistical story for developmental writing courses is less dire than it appears here, but the numbers are not positive for community colleges overall. First of all, Bailey, Jeong, and Cho admitted that they included students who placed into developmental education but never enrolled in the class as part of the reported low percentages of students who never passed their developmental class (2010). According to the National Center for Education Statistics, in 2003-2004, 68% of community college students took a remedial course in any subject with 28% of two-year college students taking a developmental reading or writing course; on average community college students took 2.9 remedial courses in any subject (Chen, 2016, p. 15). The Center for Analysis of Postsecondary Readiness (CAPR) published

similar numbers a decade later: by 2013-2014, 60% of community college students took at least one developmental course, but the average of 2.9 overall courses remained the same (2022).

CAPR's findings were that 71% of students at four-year institutions graduated if they did not take remedial coursework compared to 38% if they had any remedial courses; the numbers were

less different at a community college where 16% of students complete a bachelor's degree without needing any developmental coursework, and 9% of developmental course takers

graduate with a bachelor's degree. The difference at two-year colleges dwindled to 1% for students who earn associate's degrees with students who took at least one developmental course

graduating at a rate of 20% and students who did not take remedial courses graduating at 21%.

Students who enrolled in developmental English courses at a two-year college completed all of their English developmental requirements at 63%, some at 16%, and none at 21% (Chen, 2016,

p. 22). The low graduation rates should be a concern, but at the community college level,

graduation rates are low across the board and not solely because of developmental coursework,

and this is especially true of English coursework which has had less of an issue than math

remediation (Barnett et al., 2018; Barnett et al., 2020; Cullinan et al., 2019). While lengthy

developmental course requirements present higher chances that students will drop out of the

pipeline (Adams et al., 2009), students in basic writing programs that are challenging and aligned

with the first-year composition course's goals have greater probability of success (Nicholes &

Reimer, 2020).

Within rhetoric and composition/ writing studies (RCWS), basic writing exists as a subdiscipline to support students who are unprepared for college-level writing courses. Students labeled as unprepared are as difficult to define as community college students, but they generally need support in learning how to navigate being a college student while also developing literacy

skills in both reading and writing. Publications in this field are ripe with tales of how time is a significant factor in helping students to develop; students in basic writing courses should not be immediately written off as unable to complete English program coursework, but they will need more time and practice with generating their writing and transferring those skills to other writing situations. This is, after all, why basic writing courses are often referred to as developmental writing classes. I intend to use “developmental” as a blanket term for pre-transfer courses when discussing both reading and writing coursework and also when referring to the research done by educational organizations, as it is the umbrella term often used by them since applies to both math and English. But I prefer basic writing, as it is the term embraced by my subdiscipline and my department, so I will use it when writing from my perspective.

Basic writing has always existed as a balance of hope and dismay, aspiration for the future and frustration with the present (Otte & Mlynarczyk, 2010). When enrollment is up and programs swell with students seeking to change their economic status, teachers are hired and materials are supplied to address the needs of a new type of student population, but “when economic crises loom, the racialized, non-middle-class version of ‘remedial writing’ is immediately slated for removal” (Villanueva, 2013, p. 99). External budget constraints occur as entities outside of the program contemplate its worth, generally emphasizing a return on investment. This is especially true of selective universities but has also applied to community college systems.

The originator of the term “basic writing,” Mina Shaughnessy, wrote that the students are not a homogeneous group with the same deficits and strengths (1977). Basic writing was never designed to be a quick fix because the teaching has always needed to be customized to the class of individual students in front of the teacher; therefore, basic writing was also never designed to

casually go away, as if there would never be more writers in need of assistance on their way to a democratic education. In a longitudinal study of basic writers, Sternglass (1997) collected papers and interviewed students over a six-year time frame; her findings were that students in basic writing courses succeeded at accumulating higher reasoning skills when given time, support, and challenging coursework, even in spite of their frequently difficult life circumstances.

Although studies of students in basic writing courses performed by practitioners tend to show that students can succeed, they are generally not enough to sway public opinion once it has been rallied against basic writing, in part because the studies are siloed in journals for basic writing practitioners with researchers often reiterating their positions rather than participating in a conversation with other scholars (DeGenaro and White, 2000) and in part because the subdiscipline is stuck in the crisis and panacea cycle prevalent in composition studies (Connors, 1994) even as outside perspectives only ever emphasize the crisis (Adler-Kassner & Harrington, 2006). Popular narratives that humanize educational ventures, such as Rose's *Lives on the Boundary* (1989), Gilyard's *Voices of the Self* (1991), and Villanueva's *Bootstraps* (1993), haven't saved basic writing's public opinion either.

As I'll explain in Chapter III, Midwest Metropolitan Community College has had a strong basic writing program with a rich history of upholding basic writing scholarship and pedagogy, with a successful end-of-semester portfolio assessment that honors student agency. Students who pass basic writing classes at MMCC tend to perform as well as or better than students who were placed directly into the transfer-level ENG 101 course based on their placement test scores. MMCC, like many other community colleges, has had a significant problem with disparate impact caused by the placement tests, with many more students of color being placed into developmental coursework than into transfer-level courses. At the same time,

the English department has generally regarded their basic writing program as a success that could be more successful if the placement process were fairer with fewer students misplaced into basic writing.

In my sabbatical study and the longitudinal research that followed, I emphasized methodology and analysis that placed the needs of community college students and the needs of the students in basic writing at the forefront instead of continuing to privilege the group already likely to succeed without further intervention. This is a paradigm shift from how multiple measures is generally studied, as most of the studies focus on which thresholds are needed in order to have the most students succeed in the shortest amount of time and at the lowest cost. By shifting the emphasis from the students likely to succeed to the students who fall through the cracks, I had hoped to discover a more inclusive approach to placement, and therefore a placement process that is fairer to community college students. This dissertation foregrounds students, their educational histories, and their perspectives. In addition to collecting information from student transcripts over a two-year period to see how they succeeded after my initial interviews and data collection, I did follow-up interviews with a smaller sample of students on different occasions to learn from their writing experiences.

As I re-interviewed this small group of students two years after the initial set of interviews, I found that the stories they told of both their high school experiences and whether they aligned with their college-level writing classes so far were not visible as usable data in the variables I had collected for multiple measures placement assessment and that I needed to explore both qualitative and quantitative methods to get a clearer understanding of the needs of community college placement. The multiple methods became a recursive loop that helped me to learn more about the students' experiences and how they impact not only their placement but

also their learning in the writing courses. In this dissertation, I intend to show that community college students' lives are more complicated than how they appear when only examined via quantitative variables for multiple measures assessment. While statistical analysis favors the norms and will still apply to many students at the college, overall community college students are too diverse for all of the variables to be read and applied in the same manner in order to yield a successful prediction of college success with both validity and fairness.

CHAPTER II

NATIONAL EXIGENCY FOR PLACEMENT ASSESSMENT REFORM

Focusing on multiple measures placement, this dissertation explores potential measures to determine which will be effective and fair for determining which students should begin in first-year composition or in basic writing coursework. In order to understand how placement measures are currently assessed, it is necessary to explain how placement assessment has been evaluated in the past and also why community colleges view multiple measures as a more valid means of placing students than relying on placement tests alone. If an assessment method is found seriously lacking in reliability, validity, or fairness, then it is unsound and should be replaced. Placement tests were logistically easy and inexpensive for community colleges to administer, which is why they persisted as the primary means of placement for such a long time, but they were also found to have issues with both validity and fairness. Multiple measures placement assessment promises to be more successful than placement tests, but I will show that community colleges still need to be cognizant of reliability, validity, and fairness when evaluating whether the multiple measures in use are succeeding.

How Reliability, Validity, and Fairness Evolved

In 1999, Kathleen Blake Yancey identified writing assessment in America as materializing in three waves: the first wave in the 1950s-1970s built on educational measurement where reliability was the primary concern; the second wave (from 1970-1986) ushered in an interest in construct validity, and the third wave (1986-2000s) issued another paradigm shift where overall validity was given greater influence than reliability, as writing assessment scholars

explored whether multiple samples of a student's work might be more representative for assessment purposes than a single writing sample, even if reliability was harder to discern (p. 484). The field is undergoing another paradigm shift in its current fourth wave, where scholars are arguing that fairness should be of even greater concern than either reliability or validity when determining whether an assessment is successful (Elliot, 2016).

It is necessary to understand that these waves do not slowly build, break, and then fade into nothingness as they reach a shore; Yancey characterized them as "occurring in overlapping waves, with one wave feeding into another but without completely displacing waves that came before" (1999, p. 483). Each wave of assessment is still ongoing, having moved us somewhat forward chronologically and conceptually, each used with more prominence in various parts of the country and in various types of assessment, whether programmatic, classroom, or entry/exit assessment (Yancey, 1999, p. 491). Indeed, O'Neill, Moore, and Huot preferred not to think of writing assessment's chronology in terms of waves but rather webs "with trends cycling in and back as a result of ongoing negotiations among various groups including educators, researchers, test designers, and legislators" (2009, p. 10). This is especially important as the latest paradigm shift does not introduce a new method of assessment, like essay testing or portfolios, but rather questions the methodologies of evaluating assessment, so the methods of assessment in the first three waves will persist, as the methodologies for determining their success will continue to evolve.

Even in the latest writing assessment paradigm shift, reliability and validity remain important concepts that must be understood in order to move forward with identifying methods and methodologies focused on social justice. Reliability often amounts to the consistency in the assessment and validity may be broadly defined as the connection between the score/results and

the quality being assessed. Many scholars have maintained that reliability is the foremost criteria, as validity cannot exist without reliability (O'Neill, Moore, and Huot, 2009; White, 1995a); however, this belief has been critiqued over time, with changes in how validity is perceived and argued (Kane, 2013; Messick, 1989; Moss, 1994a, 1994b; O'Neill, Moore, and Huot, 2009). Today, it is understood that assessments may not be declared valid in general; they can only be valid in particular circumstances or for a specific goal or task: as noted by researchers in educational measurement, if the controls or applications of the assessment are altered, all validity studies must be performed anew for the new situation (AERA et al., 2014; Cronbach, 1988; Kane, 2013; Messick, 1989). All three of the first waves of writing assessment, particularly when applied to writing placement assessment, were concerned with the extent to which imperfect reliability or validity should be tolerated.

The Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing have been developed jointly by the American Educational Research Association, the American Psychological Association, and the National Council on Measurement in Education to define the very best practices across multiple disciplines; they define a test as being intended to “elicit responses that provide a sample of an examinee’s behavior or performance in a specified domain. Coupled with the test is a scoring procedure that enables the scorer to evaluate the behavior or work samples and generate a score” (AERA et al., 2014, p. 33). Reliability is studied to determine whether the results from an assessment may be trusted to be precise and consistent each time the assessment is given. Several elements may be measured to report this type of consistency: “in terms of standard errors, reliability coefficients per se, generalizability coefficients, error/tolerance ratios, item response theory (IRT) information functions, or various indices of classification consistency” (AERA et al., 2014, p. 33). To analyze reliability is to try to protect against or

account for various types of errors. A perfect assessment would yield the same score for the same student on each occasion it is given, provided no change has occurred; however, it is understood that even with perfect assessments, students vary from day to day, hence any variations that cannot be attributed to the test are recorded as errors of measurement (AERA et al., 2014, p. 33).

Validity is reported in much the same way as reliability but is much more rhetorical in its determination as it is more subjective than reliability, defined as “the degree to which a test measures what it was intended to measure” (Elliot, 2005, p. 266). Several types of validity were established in 1954’s *Technical Recommendations for Psychological Tests and Diagnostic Techniques*: content validity, predictive validity, concurrent validity, construct validity, with construct validity found to be of greatest significance (Elliot, 2005, p. 267). Content validity explores whether the assessment matches its overall objective. Predictive validity examines whether the score or measure correlates with success rates for the quality that was being assessed while concurrent validity correlates the score or measure against another assessment that attempts to measure the same quality. Construct validity asks whether the assessment’s theory works. If a math teacher were assessing a student’s addition skills, an example of each would be as follows: content validity would require that addition and only addition was being tested, while predictive validity could compare the test scores to overall grades in the math class at the end of a quarter or semester, and concurrent validity would see how the test compares to other addition tests the student has taken. In construct validity, researchers evaluate whether the types of addition questions fit with the approach of the math class: were the questions overly difficult, were the same questions asked repeatedly or did the test have a variety of numerical values represented, did the test design interfere with the test-taker’s ability to complete the test in any

way? In composition studies, construct validity has been especially fraught with tension, as the writing construct is the essence of writing that is valued by the assessment, but often assessments are indirect measurements of qualities related to writing without directly assessing the student's writing. This divorcing of the construct from the assessment has been problematic for placement testing and may represent an issue for multiple measures assessment.

As RCWS emerged more into its own discipline, writing scholars questioned the use of multiple-choice tests for assessing the writing construct as the gap between classroom instruction and assessment practices widened. The dilemma was that reliability was still king and very much valued by the testing industry. In the late 1980s, several educational measurement scholars and psychologists published articles that altered the notion of validity arguments, giving validity greater prominence in assessment measurement. Lee Cronbach (1988), best known for creating Cronbach's alpha, a measure of a test's internal reliability, was one of the first to challenge traditional views of validity, suggesting that rather than only use positivism's methods of empirically gathering evidence that a test is valid, a researcher should hypothesize arguments against the test and its elements. In his condemnation of traditional validity, Cronbach directly stated that traditional standardized tests by the College Board for English have consistently positive criterion correlations but regression analysis reveals only "a modest fraction of the samples showed a pattern indicative of validity" (1988, p. 9). This statement reinforces White and Thomas's 1981 study of the CSU English Placement Test (EPT), where disaggregated data revealed the EPT does not have the same score trajectory for all ethnicities in the institution. Essentially, both the College Board test and the EPT may correlate to other tests or even to success rates, but they are not fair measurements for all of the students, and therefore their

validation argument for the construct is weak. The emphasis on disaggregation of data by ethnicity allowed fairness to become a potential focus in validity studies.

In the 1980s Samuel Messick united all of the various forms of validation under the roof of construct validity and insisted that construct validity “subsumes” content validity and criterion validity because both are important to the argument about the overall construct (AERA et al., 2014; Messick, 1989, p. 8; O’Neill, Moore, & Huot, 2009). In Messick’s view, construct validity became the most important part of an overall validity argument; this view of validation as an argument, not a state of being or not being, was a new way of thinking about assessment. Educational researchers were placing a higher burden on validity and arguing that a test that has reliability and some correlation to success is not proof that the test is valid; the theory of the test is significant and needs to be interrogated as well. Messick and others also stipulated that educational measurement needed to consider consequential validity, the intended and unintended consequences of the assessment, which, again, is related to fairness (Cronbach, 1988; Messick, 1989; Moss, 1994). Conceptual understanding of validity continued to evolve with the *Standards* only recognizing Cronbach and Messick’s view of united validity in their 1999 edition (O’Neill, Moore, and Huot, 2009). Even though the educational measurement community and also RCWS assessment came to view validity in more expansive terms, placement tests were still primarily assessed through correlational or predictive validity.

Fairness has recently moved from the periphery of assessment measurement to a more central position for both writing assessment and educational measurement scholarship. Norbert Elliot began his “Theory of Ethics for Writing Assessment” with this statement: “Fairness is the first virtue of writing assessment. Conceived as the structuring of opportunity, the aim of fairness unifies foundational measurement concepts of validity and reliability into a framework of

principled inquiry organized to achieve an ethical outcome” (2016, §1.0). Elliot often situated fairness first, prior to reliability and validity (§2.1.1), unlike the *Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing*, which embedded fairness as an element of validity rather than its own concept (AERA et al., 2014). Elliot’s proposed theory of fairness was, “Fairness in writing assessment is defined as the identification of opportunity structures created through maximum construct representation. Constraint of the writing construct is to be tolerated only to the extent to which benefits are realized for the least advantaged” (2016, §1.3). Fairness was placed at the forefront because regardless of reliability and validity, if fairness is unresolved, then the method of assessment cannot ethically be used (§1.4): “The theory is intended to get in the way of that which does harm” (§1.4).

Elliot’s definition of fairness is part of what Behm and Miller call the fourth wave of writing assessment scholarship: one that developed out of the previous history of writing assessment “to critique that tradition, revealing how theories and practices of assessment are racialized and identifying how writing assessments construct and are constructed by inequitable racial relations that have exploited and excluded students of color” (2012, p. 136). They further stated that this wave will analyze “the ways in which assessment practices and interpretations of data constitute and are constitutive of a white *habitus*” (p. 136). Asao Inoue and Mya Poe (2012b) argued, “From our point of view, reporting writing assessment results by race is critical to understanding test design, legal issues, and ethical concerns, including construct representation, disparate impact, and social justice” (p. 346). In *Antiracist Writing Ecologies*, Inoue (2015) extolled:

If we are to enact helpful, educative, and fair writing assessments with our students, given the history of whiteness and all dominant academic discourses

promoted in schools and disciplines, we must understand our writing assessments as antiracist projects, which means they are ecological projects, ones about sustainability and fairness, about antiracist practices and effects. (2015, pp. 3-4)

In order to discern the impact of an assessment on students of color, the results must be disaggregated by race and ethnicity to verify that any single group of students is not being adversely affected by the assessment. Inoue and Poe (2012a) wrote,

We need studies that look at the mix of sociocultural variables that students bring to our classrooms as well as studies that focus on individual variables such as gender or race. This second perspective means that we ignore gender, for example, when we study race but that race is ‘starred’ in our analysis; however, it doesn’t mean that we forget about other influential factors in students’ lives, such as gender or socioeconomic class. The dual approach to research will open possibilities for validating assessments, especially in terms of response formations. (p. 2)

Elliot argued that “fairness demands score disaggregation by group to identify those who are least advantaged so that positive action may be taken to minimize those differences” (2016, §3.1). Fairness demands intentionally seeking ways the assessment could be causing further issues for marginalized groups of students.

Why Placement Tests Are Unfair

In the view of writing assessment scholars, placement tests have been unfair for many decades. In a 1981 article, White and Thomas disaggregated the test scores of students who had taken the Test of Standard Written English (TSWE), a portion of the SAT written by the College

Entrance Examination Board, and scores on California State University and College's English Placement Test (EPT), co-written by CSUC faculty and the Educational Testing Service. The TSWE was a 30-minute 50 question multiple-choice test where students identified an error in a sentence (or whether there was an error in the sentence), while the EPT combined scores from four sections, including an essay portion and three multiple-choice sections: reading, sentence construction, and logic and organization. White and Thomas's findings were that the TSWE test scores disparately impacted Black students, with 11% of the Black students receiving the lowest score possible and the overall distribution of the scores continuing to be vastly different from the testing majority (1981, p. 280). The scores by Black students on the essay portion of the EPT followed the normed curve of the majority, further suggesting a serious flaw with the multiple-choice sentence error portion of the TSWE as a placement test. In 2012, Inoue and Poe replicated portions of White and Thomas's study; they disaggregated scores from the EPT and compared the 2008 scores to the 1978 scores from the previous study (Inoue & Poe, 2012b). What they found is that the EPT also needs to be interrogated for consequential validity, as "most students of color at CSUF [California State University Fresno] in 2008 perform similarly, in terms of average mean scores— that is, they score lower than their White counterparts," which was particularly a problem as the difference often occurred at the dividing line between remedial and transfer-level placement (p. 355). When disparate impact for students of color is caused by placement test score use, that should disqualify the placement exams as a valid placement protocol when using consequential validity arguments.

Writing scholars also take issue with placement exams from a construct validity perspective. According to Irvin Peckham, "[...] there is almost universal agreement among writing teachers that we should look at writing samples to assess writing ability both because of

construct underrepresentation and the social consequences of using multiple-choice tests to assess writing ability” (2012, p. 172). Broad explained the impact of tests on curriculum and pedagogy as well: “Researchers have found consistently that one of the most damaging effects of large-scale, big-stakes standardized testing in the schools has been: (1) to oversimplify what’s taught in school; and (2) to severely constrict what is taught to only those items most likely to appear on an upcoming standardized test. (Sacks, 1999, p. 128)” (2016, §3.0). He argued that the manufacturers of the placement exam were guilty of “structured ethical blindness” (§4.1), something that he said was less their fault as the burden is on society more broadly to correct. Like others in writing scholarship (Hamps-Lyon & Condon, 2000; Hawisher & Selfe, 1997; Klages & Clark, 2009; Yancey, 2012), Broad supported use of portfolio assessment as more likely to be valid assessments for the following reasons:

- Multiple rhetorical performances
- Performances in a variety of rhetorical situations or genres (on different topics, for diverse audiences, forums, and purposes)
- Writer’s choice and development of topics about which she strongly cares; questions, topics, and issues that matter to the writer
- Robust writing strategies and processes: invention, drafting, research, response, revision, and proofreading
- Significant time (weeks and months) for pursuing various writing strategies
- Multiple and different audiences and evaluators. (2016, §4.1)

Portfolios as an assessment tool combat many of the problems of other assessments, as they are more directly related to the skills being assessed and give students many opportunities to succeed, but they are also time consuming to assess. While portfolio assessment is generally

considered too cost prohibitive to use for placement assessment, particularly at community colleges, the concept of assessing the student more holistically is foundational to multiple measures placement assessment.

To recapitulate, the fourth wave of writing assessment is concerned with greater construct validity and fairness in any potentially high stakes student assessment. By the 2000s, in a major shift from his previous perspective about placement tests, renowned writing assessment scholar, Ed White, wrote that, “placement testing as now generally practiced has shown itself to be a political and economic rather than an academic activity” and should be discontinued (2008, p. 137; 1995b); educational measurement researchers reached a similar conclusion about placement tests for very different reasons and to a different purpose. In 2012, through correlational validity studies, educational statisticians found the placement tests to be not as predictive as they were previously found to be (Belfield & Crosta, 2012; Scott-Clayton, 2012). Although several validity and fairness arguments suggest that placement test scores are problematic placement measures, Belfield, Crosta, and Scott-Clayton ask whether the test scores could be more predictive if used with additional information, perhaps in a predictive algorithm based on previous data, in a placement method known as multiple measures assessment. The move to multiple measures assessment is generally seen as more progressive than use of placement tests alone for placement into transfer-level coursework, but the multiple measures placement protocol still has as a primary element a type of placement assessment that has already been found to be problematic and perhaps unsalvageable. For that reason, validity and fairness arguments of the other potential measures are also incredibly important to weighing whether multiple measures placement assessment may be a fair and valid method for placing community college students.

Multiple Measures Assessment

As of 2019, 51% of community colleges were using a form of multiple measures assessment for placement for reading and 57% for math (Ganga & Mazzariello, p. 2). Multiple measures assessment (MMA) may take one of several different forms, though. The most basic is a waiver system, where one assessment variable, once met, is enough to place the student into transfer-level coursework; multiple variables (or measures) may be submitted, but whichever results in the highest placement is what is used for placement into transfer-level coursework, unless all options are exhausted without meeting any of the thresholds for placement into transfer-level courses. I will refer to this form of MMA as multiple-singular measures (Estrem, Shepherd, & Sturman, 2018). Depending on whether a placement test was already part of an institution's multiple-singular measures placement protocol, the placement test would then be administered to the student as a final measure with the student being placed into developmental courses if the score was below the cut-off threshold. A second method of MMA is decision rules or a decision zone. Individual variables may be used as discrete barriers or thresholds for placement, with a zone in between where further rules or logic are applied, or several rules may be in place with if/then logic being used as decision rules (Cullinan et al., 2018). The most complicated type of multiple measures placement is placement formulas or algorithms, where institutional research is done to determine which variables have the best potential for predictive validity and are then weighted accordingly; once created, measures can be input into the algorithm for a placement determination to be made from a combination of each variable, with each being given weight according to studies of historic college data (Barnett et al., 2020). A survey by the Center for Analysis of Postsecondary Readiness found that for reading and writing placement in 2015-2016, of the community colleges who responded that they use multiple

measures, 49% indicated that they used one measure, 28% used two measures, and 22% used three or more measures (Rutschow et al., 2019, p. 13). All of these methods are covered by the term “multiple measures assessment.” Writing assessment scholars generally regard the multiple-singular measures method as insufficient and would prefer versions of multiple measures that are “complex and integrative rather than singular” (Estrem, Shepherd, & Sturman, 2018, p. 61).

Context About the Studies Being Reviewed

At the same time that writing assessment scholars were critiquing placement tests from a theoretical perspective, some educational researchers were critiquing it using statistical analysis for economic reasons. While the writing assessment scholars were most concerned with construct validity and fairness, the educational measurement community was still primarily focused on predictive validity and determining the extent to which certain errors may be tolerated. In educational measurement, regression analysis is valued as a method to determine which score or grade thresholds will place too many students into developmental coursework versus too many into transfer-level coursework, as well as investigating which combinations are most likely to predict student success at a level considered to be acceptable. In contrast to the validity arguments by writing assessment scholars that tend to focus on the impact of the placement on students, the studies by educational statisticians often have an economic bottom line focused on the cost to the institution and/or the government, as the researchers explain the burdens of developmental education with frequent reminders that the return on investment for developmental education is low, as graduation numbers remain dismal for community college students overall, but especially so for students who started college in developmental coursework.

The conclusions from these analyses are reduced to overall take-aways and promoted in publications like *Inside Higher Education* and *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, where institutional decision-makers are likely to heed the recommendations while not reading the original studies for their methodologies and limitations. An alphabet soup of organizations have the funding –whether via educational grants or corporate philanthropy– to complete large studies, using data collected from community colleges, that are then first published on their websites and only sometimes subsequently being published in peer-reviewed academic journals. This funding permits them to run much larger studies than what occur in the community colleges themselves (Goudas and Boylan, 2012). The dearth of published research about community college placement assessment is no surprise: most assessment analysis is only completed and shared in-house. MMCC’s institutional research department, for instance, has most often been a department of only one person. Meanwhile, the funded organizations are able to assemble and oversee large inter-institutional studies while also having a dedicated research team to do the quantitative analysis.

Goudas and Boylan noted these organizations publish “a plethora of literature and research marked by varying qualities of methodology and data analysis accompanied by sometimes conflicting and sometimes consistent conclusions” that have been “used to produce countless policy recommendations for states and institutions” (2012, p. 2). Goudas and Boylan’s biggest critique of the organizations is that they operate from a standpoint that any student who has taken developmental coursework should then be more successful than students who did not require additional coursework, which means they are holding a subset of students who have often have multiple barriers to success—socioeconomic factors and less educational preparation-- to a higher standard or they may (and do) declare developmental education to be an economic

academic failure (Goudas & Boylan, p. 2). Of great concern is the fact that the conclusions that are reached and then promulgated as sound bites in other more public venues often contradict the smaller findings within the articles. Goudas and Boylan explained how this happened in several of the articles that use the regression discontinuity analysis:

Since remediation does not show an increase in comparison rates for students just below to those just above a placement's cut-off, then this perceived failure of remediation is expanded by these authors—and many more who cite them—to include all developmental courses at all levels. This is in spite of the fact that two of the three RD studies clearly state that their results only apply to students just beneath a placement test's cut-off score. (2012, p. 4)

Goudas and Boylan concluded that the messages within the articles using regression discontinuity analysis clearly showed that the situation in developmental education is not as dire as reported. Further, the new standard wherein developmental education students are expected to perform at a higher success rate than their fellow cohort members who are in “gatekeeper classes” in order for developmental education to be determined a worthwhile program has been “generated by researchers, many of whom are economists and have little to no experience or investment in higher education” (p. 4). Within writing assessment and basic writing publications, developmental education would be deemed successful if students were passing the transfer-level coursework in similar percentages as the students who were not assessed as needing developmental coursework first.

The cost of educating students in developmental coursework is a recurring feature in the articles published by the only organizations well-funded enough to do these large data studies about community college students. I have chosen to focus specifically on the studies by CCRC,

CAPR, and MDRC because language from them is part of the fabric of the state mandates and recommendations for placement reform that MMCC is using as one basis for its decisions about placement—cost being the other factor.

Who are these organizations? The Community College Research Center (CCRC) is located within the Teachers College at Columbia University. CCRC's partner, the Center for Analysis of Postsecondary Readiness (CAPR), referred to itself on its website as "A Research Center on Developmental Education" and averred, "CAPR's goal is to inform policymakers and practitioners about common approaches to remedial education, promising innovations in course placement and instruction, and trends in developmental education reform" (About CAPR, 2021). Like CCRC, CAPR was funded by the Institution of Education Sciences as part of a government grant and works within the CCRC and with MDRC. MDRC is over 20 years more established than CCRC, having been founded in 1974 by the Ford Foundation. MDRC is no longer an acronym, having dropped the "Manpower Demonstration Research Center" moniker in 2003. Their website explained their credentials:

Our staff members have an unusual combination of research and organizational experience, with expertise in the latest qualitative and quantitative research methods, data science, behavioral science, culturally responsive practices, and collaborative design and program improvement processes. To disseminate what we learn, we actively engage with policymakers, practitioners, public and private funders, and others to apply the best evidence available to the decisions they are making. (About MDRC, 2022)

MDRC's research interests are much more varied than that of CCRC, which focuses purely on community college research topics. If any of the staff for CCRC have experience teaching at a community college or in developmental education, it was not noted in their staff biographical

notes on the organization's website. Of the nine people in CCRC leadership, one had experience teaching at a middle school and another worked in student affairs at a community college (CCRC Staff, n.d.); the ten senior researchers and fellows list no mention of direct experience with community college students or developmental education, although the biographies emphasized repeatedly that they have researched such topics. What is emphasized instead is the many degrees in public policy and economics. The white papers published by CCRC, CAPR, and MDRC on community college reform are written from a public policy and economic perspective; additionally, the lack of direct community college experience shows in how community colleges are held to the same standard as universities in spite of receiving less funding and being open enrollment schools with different missions from other educational institutions.

For the studies of multiple measures, the organizations secured the funding for the research – often from philanthropic organizations with their own agendas– and offered their data analysis, while the community colleges being researched provided access to the data. Barnett et al. (2020) emphasized that faculty at the community colleges in their study were involved in determining the cut scores for the multiple measures algorithms used in the study (p. 11), but it is also subtly noted that these cut scores were determined based on analysis provided by the CCRC researchers, so the community college faculty involvement was minimal. Other scholars have found that when institutional researchers have community college experience, it “enhances the value of their perspectives” (Willett, Newell, & Hayward, 2021, p. 263), and one would think these perspectives should be built into the research being done about community colleges, but the vast majority of the analysis by CCRC, CAPR, and MDRC has been done to minimize costs not to the student or the institution but rather the U.S. Department of Education. As I will show in analysis of several of the white papers, a community college practitioner lens is often missing

from this important research about community college students, so some of the data analysis ends up being misleading or inaccurate.

Of particular concern to this dissertation is CCRC and CAPR's analysis of community college students and their hsGPAs. presents students as a homogeneous group, but community college students are anything but: community college students do not all enroll directly after high school, they were not all in the same types of high school courses, and their GPAs vary. Willett, Newell, and Hayward noted institutional researchers can fall into a trap of the "tyranny of the average" where policies are created to benefit the most which "will help students on average but fail to address special needs" (2021, p. 273). The language of educational statistics is one of overall success rates and averages, but when the student population is more rather than less diverse, many types of students become invisible in the overall trajectory of the statistics. The most vulnerable student populations tend to be most subject to this type of invisibility unless data is deliberately disaggregated to identify their part in the overall data story. Because of community college's open enrollment policies, they have many more types of students who fall into these vulnerable student subgroups than in other institutions; for both validity and fairness arguments when assessing placement methods, these student populations need to be studied individually and not consolidated into the overall study of success rates and what will work for "most students."

Multiple Measures Studies and Their Limitations

The most recent publication of a large-scale MMA study is entitled, "Increasing Gatekeeper Course Completion" by Cullinan and Biedzio of MDRC. The use of "gatekeeper" in the title is a key signifier that this study is performed from a different lens than that of boots-on-

the-ground instructors, who generally balk at the idea of their transfer-level courses serving as gates to allow some students to enter the college while others presumably are kept out because they view the mission of open enrollment as gate-opening, not closing. Cullinan and Biedzio's perspective was clearly that they would rather have as few students as possible in developmental education: "Despite the promise of MMA, millions of students each year are still being enrolled into developmental classes in math and/or English" (2021, p. ES-1). They, like many others, implied that it is the existence of developmental education, not anything about the students' abilities or their overall precarity, that prevents students from graduating from community college in a timely manner (2021, p. ES-1). Cost has also predictably been another primary concern, as economists have estimated developmental education costs at least \$1 billion with students having only small, statistically insignificant economic benefits long term (Martorell & McFarlin, 2011, p. 436). The approach of the MDRC study, as well as others that will be featured in this section, was to compare placement using MMA to the placement exam method already known to be faulty. The theory for the studies often amounts to a description of the methodology, which is foregrounded in predictive validity terms and use of regression discontinuity research strategies. Each of the studies referred to in this section included analysis of placement for both math and English, but I will focus on writing placement throughout.

The first study by educational economists to identify placement tests as problematic was done in 2012 by Judith Scott-Clayton for CCRC; "Do High Stakes-Placement Exams Predict College Success" is frequently cited as a rationale for discontinuation of placement exams such as COMPASS and ACCUPLACER. Scott-Clayton analyzed enrollment data from a large urban community college system (LUCCS) to determine whether the placement test scores were predictive of success or whether alternate measures should be considered, using a sample of

nearly 70,000 first-time degree seekers from 2004 to 2007. The community college system, similarly to MMCC, had a version of multiple measures where any student with an ACT/SAT score above a cutoff would be placed by that score but would otherwise take the COMPASS test. The majority of students who were required to take COMPASS placed into developmental writing coursework: 72%. Overall, 55% of LUCCS students placed into developmental writing (p. 12). The high rate of placement into developmental writing courses suggests LUCCS needed placement reform. Scott-Clayton used regression analysis to determine whether placement using MMA would be more successful than the placement exam.

Her work depends on Sawyer's statement that as long as "25 percent or fewer of the students are assigned to the remedial course, then the [placement accuracy] procedure described here will estimate the conditional probability of success with reasonable accuracy" (as cited in Scott-Clayton, p. 8). She, and others who wrote subsequent reports, used this 25% guideline to say that students have been misplaced if the placement measure sends more than 25% of the student population into developmental coursework, regardless of other validity measures. Sawyer's article (1996) referred to a paper presented at the American Educational Research Association where Houston had run a computer simulation of placement tests and found that the standard error rate is only 6% if the "placement group is truncated at 25%," and if the placement group were permitted to be larger, then the standard error rates would grow (Sawyer, 1996, p. 280). Sawyer's decision theory validation relies on the relationships between the placement test scores and grades earned in the transfer-level class. The interrogation of this model is entirely built on statistical theory. Sawyer cites from Kane, an educational measurement scholar, who was abundantly clear in his 1992 article, "An Argument-Based Approach to Validity" that validity of test scores must go beyond mathematical analysis of test scores: "A test-score

interpretation always involves an interpretive argument, with the test score as a premise and the statements and decisions involved in the interpretation as conclusions” (p. 527), yet Sawyer continued to only make statistically based arguments more concerned with reduction of standard error rate than determining why the errors might exist. The 25% figure was adopted by Sawyer from another researcher’s placement testing context and then used by Scott-Clayton and others at CCRC and CAPR uncritically.

Sawyer’s decision theory validation is foundational to Scott-Clayton’s work in a way that is underacknowledged within Scott-Clayton’s methodology and the methodologies of others who used her model in subsequent studies. In decision theory, only the students who were *not* placed into developmental coursework may be tracked because remediation as the treatment could have an impact on how the students perform in the transfer-level course, so the statistical analysis was focused on the relationship between the placement scores of students who placed into the transfer-level coursework and the grades they earned in the course (Sawyer, 1996). In other words, the statistical analysis focused entirely on the students who were classified as not in need of the additional instruction, so the analysis is of whether the placement test successfully placed the transfer-level students and not a judgement of whether or not remediation was needed for the developmental students. Further, Sawyer argued:

Even if most students' academic preparation is accurately assessed, even if remedial instruction is provided to the underprepared students, and even if nearly all the underprepared students eventually succeed in the standard course, the result still might be unsatisfactory. This would occur if an institution diverted resources to remedial instruction to such an extent that the achievement of students in standard courses was adversely affected. (p. 273)

While Sawyer's argument about a drain on institutional resources is not explicitly stated in the articles published by CCRC and CAPR, it is a tacit underlying rationale, and it is important to see that conservation of resources for students who have qualified for transfer-level coursework is a contributing factor for why the 25% threshold for placement was adopted and used uncritically for determining how many students should or should not be placed into transfer-level courses according to these studies. The work is presented as a neutral assessment of whether the placement models were successful, but it has an underlying economic ideology that remediation takes funding away from transfer-level coursework instead of being a source of potential support to future transfer-level students, and because the data is analyzed through this lens, any positive elements of the developmental coursework tend to be minimized while discrepancies between success rates are magnified.

While I would argue that there is not a specific threshold that should be applied across all institutional contexts to determine proper placement of students into developmental writing, most institutions would not wish to have over half of their student body place into developmental English classes, as was the case at LUCCS in Scott-Clayton's study. She analyzed several factors for predictive validity: scores on placement tests such as ACCUPLACER or COMPASS; hsGPA, both cumulative and by subject area; indicators that the student was in college preparatory coursework, both overall and in relevant subject area. Placement test results were examined in conjunction with the high school variables and then further analysis of that combination with the following demographic variables was done: whether the student graduated from a local high school and how long it had been since high school graduation, both used as "proxies of student motivation and maturity" (Scott-Clayton, 2012, p. 13). The four potential

multiple measures categories were then studied for predictive validity using the following success criteria:

- 1) whether the student earns a B or better in the first college-level course taken in the relevant subject,
- 2) whether the student earns a C or better in the first college-level course taken in the relevant subject, and
- 3) whether the student passes the first college-level course taken (at LUCCS, this requires earning a D- or better) in the relevant subject. (p. 13)

Students who withdrew or earned an incomplete were included with the students who failed the course; while Scott-Clayton acknowledged that many others would choose to omit such students, she included them with the students who failed because the students who withdrew:

represent a significant proportion of the sample (roughly 16 percent withdraw from their first college-level course in our sample) and because withdrawal decisions are not likely to be random, but rather may be closely linked to expectations regarding course performance. (p. 14)

Her first conclusion was that it is easier to predict success for students in the B or better category than in the C or better or the criterion of a D- or above: “In other words, it is easier to distinguish between those likely to do very well and everyone else than it is to distinguish between those likely to do poorly and everyone else” (p. 16). This is true of many of the multiple measures studies and consistent with institutional data studies at MMCC as well.

High school achievement factors were more predictive across the board than the placement tests when analyzed alone, but especially so for English placement tests, which Scott-Clayton recognized may be “more difficult than math skills to measure in a brief placement

exam” (p. 16). Combining high school achievement variables with the placement scores resulted in higher predictive validity than each measure alone, with 10% of the variation in grades being explained when placement tests, high school measures, and demographic data were all combined (p. 17). Her final conclusion was that “predictive validity of placement exams scores alone is low” (p. 17). I question the continued use of the placement exam scores in combination with other factors when the predictive validity of the exam scores is already acknowledged to be low.

In continued analysis, Scott-Clayton plotted a predicted success model by performing a regression analysis based on the students who passed the classes in the earlier model and combining it with demographic data she earlier acknowledged would be “unethical” to use in placement (p. 13), but said she did so as a means to “estimate the accuracy of a more restricted placement algorithm” (p. 19). The demographic data Scott-Clayton included to estimate the accuracy was age, race/ethnicity, and whether or not the student was a non-native English speaker (p. 19). Again, this data was used to confirm whether the students placing developmentally aligned with trends in placement based on socioeconomic levels and was done by an educational economic prior to the advent of the fourth wave of writing assessment. In the current wave of writing assessment, scholars recommend using the same data to disaggregate the results to ensure that all groups are being placed fairly and not by their socioeconomic factors (Inoue, 2009; Inoue, 2012; Inoue, 2015; Poe & Cogan, 2016).

Using regression analysis, Scott-Clayton found the following severe error rates for placement: 33% when placed via placement test, 34% when all students were placed into developmental coursework, and 30% when placed into all transfer-level coursework (p. 26). When the placement thresholds were then configured so students were placed into developmental English at a level more acceptable to policy-makers, she found, “the only drawback to allowing

all of these ‘marginal’ students to enter college-level directly is a modest decline in the college-level success rate (from 71 percent to 64 percent)” (p. 28). This “modest decline” may be acceptable from an institutional standpoint of trying to maximize the number of students in a transfer-level course who then have the prerequisites to enroll in other transfer-level courses, but is it acceptable for the 7% of students who could have succeeded in a developmental course and then potentially passed the first-year composition course the first time it was taken? Additionally, the economic lens of the analysis increases the invisibility of pedagogical impact: What happens to the classroom learning environment when only 64% of the students are passing the course?

Scott-Clayton, Crosta, and Belfield used the same data from the LUCCS in their 2012 working paper for the National Bureau of Economics that was funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and later published by a peer reviewed journal. In the peer reviewed 2014 article, Scott-Clayton, Crosta, and Belfield gave the following rationale for why MMA should be explored:

One potentially rich source of additional information is a student’s high school transcript, used either in conjunction with or as an alternative to placement tests for deciding on remedial assignment. Transcripts are readily accessible, as most students submit their high school transcripts as part of the admissions process, and may yield a wealth of information on cognitive skills, subject-specific knowledge, as well as student effort and motivation. Moreover, because they are accumulated over time, high school grade point averages (GPAs) and courses completed may simply be less noisy than brief, “one-off” exams. Yet to the best of our knowledge, high school grades and coursework have not been widely utilized or even studied as potential screening tools for assignment into remediation. (p. 376)

This was the only part of the article that approached a theoretical justification for use of MMA. As is not all that unusual in articles about educational measurement written by economists, the methodology of the study was given preeminence over theoretical considerations, almost as if the methodology was the theory, something Jabbar and Menashy have named the economic imperialism of educational research (2021). Like the methodology in the Scott-Clayton solo article, the methodology in this Scott-Clayton, Crosta, and Belfield study focused on the severe error rate (SER): “Specifically, the SER combines the proportion of students predicted to earn a B or better in college level but instead placed into remediation [...] with the proportion of students placed into college level but predicted to fail there” (p. 377). Their equation for predicting which students will earn a B or better combined separate vectors for placement test scores, high school achievement measures, and demographic variables such as “race/ethnicity, gender, age, English as second language (ESL) status, years since high school graduation, and an indicator of whether or not the individual previously attended a local high school” or just race/ethnicity and gender (p. 378). Scott-Clayton, Belfield, and Crosta noted, “Even though these demographic variables cannot be used in the assignment process, they help improve the predictions that underlie our estimated error rates” (p. 378). How the vectors were determined was not available or explained within the article and, to my mind, was a vital missing component, as these vectors define whether or not students are believed to have succeeded in the programs. Scott-Clayton, Crosta, and Belfield’s overall findings were that “one quarter to one third of tested students are severely misplaced depending upon the sample and subject” (p. 381); in English courses, they determined that “more than one in four students [...] are placed into remediation even though they could have earned a B or better in the college-level course” (p. 381), but, again, how it was determined that any individual student “could have earned a B” was

not explained in the article beyond an equation that references the aforementioned vectors. Additionally, the models appeared to have as their premise the fact that socioeconomic factors are often closely correlated with success rates, so the determination of the validity of the placement model was based on factors that cannot and should not be used in a fair placement system. For example, while a student's home zip code may correlate with low success rates for students in transfer-level courses, that particular student should not be placed into developmental coursework based on the location of their home. The fourth wave of writing assessment demands disaggregation of data to increase fairness, not use a student's socioeconomic or demographic data to place them into developmental coursework.

Belfield and Crosta (2012) replicated Scott-Clayton's LUCCS study with data from a statewide community college system (referred to throughout as SWCCS) from between fall 2008 and summer 2010. They found that other transcript information, such as grades in English courses, was only "modestly useful" (p. 18) and that it may not be used as a substitute for the overall hsGPA. Their overall conclusion was:

The relationship between HS GPA and college GPA is so powerful that it would seem important for colleges to more fully consider this measure in deciding on placement. Our rule-of-thumb association is that a student's college GPA tends to be one grade notch below that student's HS GPA. If success is defined as a C average in college, we expect this would be attained by all students with at least a C+ average in high school. It might therefore be justifiable to waive college placement tests—and so waive developmental education—for students who have HS GPAs above this threshold. (p. 39)

A C+ hsGPA is a 2.3. The article does not address whether students have As and Bs in some subject areas and Cs and Ds in others, only the overall hsGPA's impact on the overall college GPA.

Belfield and Crosta's study also did not provide a breakdown of the student sample population, nor did they provide clear numbers of the overall sample and then the smaller subset, which, I believe, created a limitation that went unaddressed in the article. They did admit:

For a subset of students, we were able to match the college transcript data to the high school database that provided transcript and GPA information. However, missing data and discrepancies in matches of the available datasets reduced the sample available for analysis. (p. 6)

Very briefly and disconnected from that admission, they mentioned that only half of their sample was "matched with high school achievement data," and that this half was "a subset of younger students who recently attended a public secondary school within the state" (pp. 7-8). Considering community colleges are well-known for their open admissions policy that contributes to greater representation of students who are older than the traditional college student, the concentration of recently graduated students in the sample is of great concern. Early in their article, Belfield and Crosta assured readers: "[hsGPA] should be readily available [as a placement measure], at least for younger and American-born college enrollees" (p. 3), but their own sample showed that at the time, high school transcripts were not available for half of *their* sample. In the meantime, their analysis neglected the *rest* of community college students, the students who did not recently matriculate from a local high school.

They did offer a caveat or two, in explaining the impact of studying only a subset of the students, but only for a different demographic in the sample. One of their concluding notes was,

“A final caution is that we only have data on a subset of SWCCS students. Those with missing data—especially those students who place directly into the college-level classes without taking a placement test—may exhibit different patterns” (p. 40). In this statement, Belfield and Crosta were concerned about the students who were not part of the study because their ACT or SAT scores enabled them to bypass taking the placement exams used in their correlations. They argued:

if the students with HS GPAs were on average of lower ability than those students with missing data, this might bias our analysis. However, the differences between our sample and the students without HS GPAs were not large. Students with HS GPA information had higher math but lower English placement test scores than students without HS GPAs. Similarly, there was some attrition by placement score; students with placement test scores had slightly lower HS GPAs than students without placement test scores. (The mean HS GPA for students with placement scores was 2.52; the mean HS GPA for students without placement scores was 2.69.) Overall, this nonrandom attrition is unlikely to be driving our results. (p. 8)

I see a couple of concerns with these statements. First, they claimed that the difference between the students who were required to take the placement test and those who qualified under ACT/SAT was not large, but the means of the hsGPAs were at fairly critical juncture for MMA, with some schools requiring students to have a 2.6 GPA for transfer-level placement, and others suggesting that best chances of success requires a 3.0 or above (Cullinan et al., 2018; Goudas, 2017; Illinois Community College Board, 2020; Middlesex Massachusetts Community College, 2022; North Carolina Community Colleges, 2015). That the means (or averages) for the hsGPAs of these groups were so close to the thresholds indicates that there were plenty of students both

above and below that mean. The “tyranny of the average” was being used here to flatten the data to a single hsGPA when a chart showing the GPA trajectories of both groups would have been useful to see whether or not the groups followed a similar pattern with only half a notch of GPA difference whether they were below or above the mean.

My second concern is that the rather large number of students who were eliminated from the sample due to a lack of available placement test scores was not clearly mentioned within the article, but the smaller subset of test-takers with SAT or ACT test scores on file was addressed as a potential limitation. I suspect based on the history of small percentages of students at MMCC who have officially reported their ACT/SAT scores that the sample of students who had to be eliminated because they did not take a placement exam was far smaller than the group of students who were removed from the sample because they had missing high school transcripts. The oversight of the larger potential limitation makes the overall data set appear to fully represent the community college demographics when it in fact only represents some of the community college students who had recently graduated; students under the age of 22 represent only 56% of the community college student population (American Association of Community Colleges, 2022). Because community colleges enroll a very diverse range of students, fairness and validity studies demand disaggregation of results by varying subgroups to ensure that the placement protocol is fair and accurate for all students, not only half of the students.

Another limitation that needs to be addressed is both the 2012 and the 2014 articles’ treatment of student withdrawals and incompletes as the same as failures in their analysis. Belfield and Crosta (2012) do so (p. 8) without explaining why or running a separate analysis with the withdrawals and incompletes left out. As stated earlier, Scott-Clayton (2012) chose to include the withdrawals because they represented 16% of the sample, and “withdrawal decisions

are not likely to be random, but rather may be closely linked to expectations regarding course performance” (p. 14). Anyone with direct community college experience would know that withdrawals are not usually random, but they are not always closely associated with course performance. In a data-mining study where students were asked to report their reason(s) for withdrawing from a course, the results indicated:

Of the 11 attrition categories identified in the text analysis model, the top four involve nonacademic reasons related to time-schedule, personal-other, job-work, and family.

These are followed by a combination of both academically and nonacademically related withdrawal reasons involving negative views of the course and/or faculty, financial issues, online course issues, health, information technology (info technology) and federal service commitments. (Michalski, 2014, p. 817)

Community college students withdraw for many reasons and to presume that the withdrawals and incompletes were purely from a lack of academic preparation for the coursework rather than place them into a category of their own and run a separate analysis was perhaps due to confirmation bias from researchers more accustomed to a selective admissions process. It also ignored the fact that community college students may be academically prepared for a course and still withdraw from it or fail the course for reasons that are not academic, which is a significant contributing factor to the complexity and difficulty of using any success metric as the only correlational measurement at a community college, yet these are the foremost studies cited in legislation and state recommendations for placement reform in MMCC’s home state.

In a later joint study by CCRC, MDRC, and CAPR, Barnett, Kopko, Cullinan, and Belfield (2020) implemented an experimental study of students at seven partner colleges in the Northeast with a methodology statement and data charts that are easier to replicate than the

previous studies, with numerical breakdowns provided for the readers. Students were randomly put into a program group of students who were placed via the newer multiple measures assessment and a control group of students who were placed using the former placement test method; the students entered college from Fall 2016 through Fall 2017 and were studied through Fall 2018 with data collected in early 2019 (Barnett, Kopko, Cullinan, & Belfield, 2020).

I would like to note that my dissertation study in part coincides with this timeline. In 2018 when I did my initial data collection, I had access to the initial reports from CCRC and CAPR that indicated students were being placed into first-year composition courses in higher percentages (Barnett et al., 2018; Cullinan et al., 2018). Their full reports of the success of MMA as a placement method were published after my initial collection and while I was in the process of analyzing my findings (Barnett et al., 2020; Cullinan and Biedzio, 2021).

Barnett et al. found that the students placed by MMA had higher rates of placement into, enrollment in, and completion of a college-level English course across all semesters studied. While gains declined over time, in the third term, program groups students were still 5.3 percentage points more likely to enroll in and 2.9 percentage points more likely to complete a college-level English course (with grade C or higher). (2020, p. 4).

In the group that used multiple measures assessment, 51% of the students experienced a change from where they would have been placed using the placement exam (Barnett et al., 2020, p. 17): 44% of the students “bumped up” to place out of at least one developmental course and 7% of the students “bumped down” into at least one more developmental course than they would have if using placement test scores alone (p. 18). Some of the students diverted from the recommended placement, but most of them –93% – followed the recommended placement for

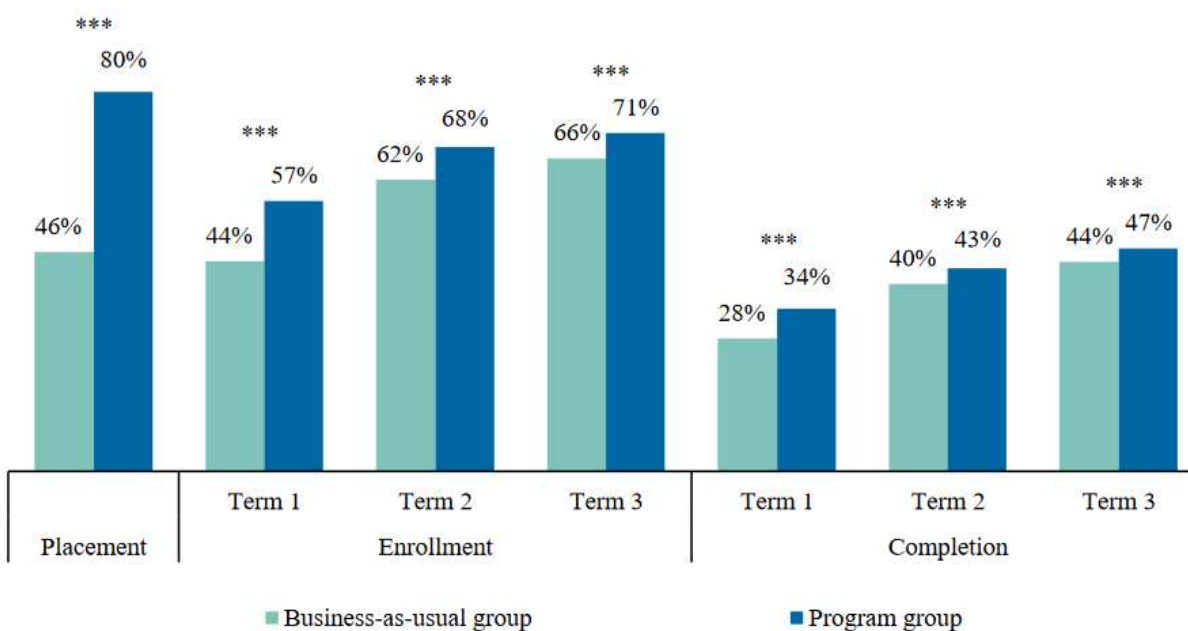
English (p. 18). In all semesters, more students enrolled in transfer-level courses from the MMA group than from the placement test group (13%, 6%, 5% difference in enrollment per term) and the difference in completion rate (defined as earning a C or above in the transfer-level course) is also a positive association: 6%, 3%, 4% higher pass rates by term when the two groups are compared to one another within a term. Because the study was done from an economic cost/benefit perspective, the completion rate is emphasized since more students enrolled in and therefore completed the course than in the control group. The authors report the positives as evidence of MMA's success over placement exams because more students succeeded overall in one group than in the other, in part because enrollment numbers were higher in the group that used MMA.

From an assessment perspective, the pass rates are more pertinent to validity studies than the differences between the two groups. Using the data provided on the same chart that notes the positive associations and using the mathematical equation stipulated in the article for the calculation of pass rates (Barnett et al., 2020, p. 21 and p. 43), the pass rate is slightly higher for all terms for the control group than it is for the MMA program group. Pass rates for the first term were 64% for the placement test group and 60% for the MMA group (.28/.44 and .34/.57), for the second term were 65% for the placement test group and 63% for the MMA group (.40/.62 and .43/.68), and for the third term were 67% for the placement test group and 66% for the MMA group (.44/.66 and .47/.71). To recapitulate, the completion rate difference by term is 6%, 3%, 4% (subtraction between groups per term) but the failure rate difference is 4%, 2%, 1%, all with the MMA group having higher percentages of failure than the placement test group. If the MMA placement of students into transfer-level coursework were an unqualified success, then the students placed by MMA would be passing the classes in much higher rates than the students

who placed using only the one measure that has already been found to be less predictive than desired, especially given that 34% more of the students were eligible for placement into transfer-level coursework when in the MMA group compared to the placement test group (see Figure 1 below, from Barnett et al, 2020, p. 21).

Figure 1

Transfer-Level Course Enrollment and Completion Rates from Barnett et al. (2020)



*** $p < .01$, ** $p < .05$, * $p < .10$.

Source permission provided by CAPR 1

Barnett et al. (2020) noted, “Students assigned by the algorithm earned 0.35 college-level credits more within one term of testing ($p < .01$) and 0.31 college-level credits more within the first two terms ($p < .1$)” (p. 22). While this was a positive change, the impact to the overall success was negligible with the result that over time, the study authors did “not find any sustained differences in persistence or degree completion within five terms of testing for the first cohort of students” (p. 25). “Program group students earned slightly more credits than business-as-usual group students in the first and second terms, but the gain became insignificant in the third term. No impacts were found on student persistence or associate degree attainment” (p. 4). In fact, the pass rate for college-level English was slightly higher for the placement test group at 67% than it was for the students who “bumped up” at 65% (ES-9).

The mixed results of the success of the multiple measures placement may pertain to the methodology used to determine the multiple measures for the study: the historical data that was used was only from students who had taken transfer-level English classes without taking developmental first (p. 8), which means the data is focused only on a subset of students who were already deemed likely to be successful at the community college. Faculty were then asked to choose the new cut scores for student placement based on the findings, choosing to either keep the placement rates about the same or not (p. 9). The sample of predictive data was predicated on the success of students who did not need developmental coursework, which means the sample of the historic data is potentially skewed, especially as students who were required to take developmental coursework represented a not insignificant portion of the student population at that time. The rationale for why is legitimate: it is impossible to estimate the extent to which the developmental coursework contributed to the success in the transfer-level class, but the potential differences between the two cohorts is never referred to as a limitation of the study, and the

analysis of the students who did not need developmental coursework was then applied to the students who did. As 86% of the students in the study sample enrolled in at least one developmental course (either in math or English), it stands to reason that there may have been significant differences in high school performance levels between the majority of students at the college and the relatively smaller percentage of students who did not need to take any developmental coursework.

In the beginning of the report, Barnett et al. (2020) highlighted the positive impact on placement for various student subgroups:

All gender, Pell recipient status, and race/ethnicity subpopulations considered (with the exception of men in math) had higher rates of placement into college-level courses using the alternative system. In English, these led to program group course completion rates that, compared to their same subgroup peers, were 4.6, 4.5, 3.0, and 7.1 percentage points higher for women, Pell recipients, non-Pell recipients, and Black students. (p. 4)

But much later in the report, they admitted that although the placement improved for students in these subgroups, the completion rate did not: “Yet, gaps between gender, Pell recipient, and race/ethnicity subgroups were not reduced with regard to enrollment in or completion of college-level English courses” (p. 31). Again, only the positive correlations were promoted in the article, but the negative implications could be deduced from the information provided in the charts.

I was particularly interested in the success rates for Black students since that is the group of students most likely to be affected by disparate placement at MMCC. As noted above, the study authors claimed success for Black students because their course completion rate was 7.1 percentage points higher than their peers placed by the placement test. Black students in the MMA group passed the transfer-level class at 28%, 37%, 43% while Black students in the

placement test control group completed the course at 19%, 30%, and 36% in corresponding terms, for a difference of 9 percentage points in the first term and 7 percentage points in the second and third terms. When the data in the charts is converted to pass rates, the story is a bit clearer. The pass rate for the first term is 48% for the placement exam group and 47% for the MMA group (.19/.39 and .28/.59). In the second term, the pass rate is 51% for both groups of Black students (.30/.59 and .37/.72). In the third term, the pass rate is 55% for the placement test group and 57% for the MMA group (.36/.65 and .43/.75). In the first set of numbers, the comparison is between unequal groups, as the students were not placed and therefore did not enroll in the courses in equal percentages. Of the students who enrolled in the transfer-level classes, the passing rates hovered around the same low percentages whether the Black students were placed by placement exam or multiple measures assessment. Even if the students placed into the transfer-level course in a higher percentage than they would have in the previous placement method, if they did not pass the class in similar higher percentages, that equates to *more* students failing the class than they would have using other placement protocols, so although the higher placement rate into transfer-level English was a perceived improvement, disparate impact in overall success rates remained as the end result.

The multiple measures placement procedure was counted as more economically beneficial by the authors because the program students were “more likely to both enroll in and complete college-level English” (Barnett et al., 2018, p. 21). They note, “Placement by the algorithm caused an additional 158 students to complete college-level English within three semesters” (p. 21). While this is a net positive number, a whopping 2,415 students were in the bump up zone for English placement in the program group, so less than 7% of the students who were in the bump up group fully completed college-level English in the time frame of the study

(Fig. 3.1, p. 36). At the end of three terms, the two groups were within a percentage point of each other for the original cohort for both persistence and degree attainment with only 25% of the placement test group and 27% of the MMA group persisting through the fifth term and degree attainment at 5% for both groups in the fourth term and 8% for both groups in the fifth term (Fig. 3.8, p. 26). The students in the control group were placed into more developmental coursework than the program group, so the percentages should not be the same at the end of four or five terms (since being required to take developmental coursework inevitably means students will have at least one semester, if not two, of additional coursework, depending on if the student is taking courses full-time or part-time, and whether they were also placed into developmental math). While the figure of 158 students passing college-level English at the end of the study was presented as a success, I cannot help but wonder about the remaining 2,257 students in the bump up group, and what percentage of those students failed transfer-level English repeatedly when they could have placed into developmental English and then potentially have succeeded in their transfer-level credit English class the first time it was taken.

In the most recent study by the same organizations but at a different community college system, Cullinan and Biedzio (2021) reported on MMA at community colleges in Minnesota and Wisconsin, focusing less on the difference between placement exam use and MMA and more on whether use of MMA had an effect on completion of transfer-level coursework (which they routinely refer to as gatekeeper courses) and accumulation of college-level credit. The study was also of three semesters, focusing on the students who were placed into a higher placement zone by the use of multiple measures, which they term a “bump up.” In this study, only 15% of the 17,000 students in the study had a placement that would have been altered by use of multiple measures instead of the placement exam (2021, p. 8).

A key element of the Cullinan and Biedzio study is that 100% of the program group was placed into transfer-level English on the merit of their hsGPAs, noncognitive scores, or both, while the entire control group was placed into developmental English by their placement test scores. Cullinan and Biedzio reported that the bumped up students were “16 percentage points more likely to have completed the course by the end of their third semester than their control group” (2021, p. ES-7). This number was arrived at by subtracting the percentage of students who passed in the control group of students placed by ACCUPLACER from the percentage of students who were in the group who bumped up to a transfer-level course by use of a multiple measure. Using this same method, one could report that students in the bump-up zone were also 8.7 percentage points more likely to fail the transfer-level course and 5.4 percentage points likelier to withdraw from the course for a total of 14 percentage points (p. ES-5) (provided via chart but not mentioned in the text). This means that the students who were placed by multiple measures were both 16% more likely to have completed the course and 14% more likely to *not* have completed the course than the group placed by ACCUPLACER, so while success rates were higher in the program group, failure rates were higher in the program group than the control group, too. Of significance is the fact that the program group had 1,126 students in it compared to the 688 students in the control group (p. ES-5); comparing the two groups should have ideally been done using pass rates, not differences between the two groups’ percentages because the two groups were not of equal size.

Cullinan and Biedzio did include the pass rate for the English program group of 68% (43 percent out of 63 percent) (p. 19); they left out of the text that the pass rate for the control group was 81% (27 percent out of 33 percent) (data from Fig. 3.1, p. 16). As expected, fewer students enrolled in the transfer-level course in the control group, but fewer students failed it or withdrew

from it, as well. The students who passed the developmental program succeeded in the transfer-level course at a higher rate than the students who were placed there using the newer multiple measures placement algorithm. As someone who teaches developmental English classes, my view of this data is that the developmental English classes are succeeding in teaching students the skills and/or attitudes that assist them in completing the transfer-level coursework. Cullinan and Biedzio's conclusion, though, was that too many students were still being placed into developmental coursework because more students enrolled in college courses after placing into transfer-level coursework than the students who had placed developmentally (p. 38), but again, this "more" is defined as overall net numbers and not percentages of the groups.

Cullinan and Biedzio surmised that students were more likely to enroll in any class if they received a transfer-level class placement and did so at 81%, while the control group *only* enrolled at 78%, a difference they used to speculate that "It is possible that a developmental placement itself was a barrier to students' overall enrollment because it could prevent students from enrolling in classes that most interested them" (p. 16). This conjecture was based on a difference of a mere three percentage points.

The trend of over-stating the differences continues with college credits earned; the students in the program group who were likelier than the control group to pass a college-level English course and to have accumulated a slight increase in total credits earned: 14.35 compared to 13.09 (p. 5). These are indeed positive results; they are also *expected* results if one considers that the placement tests have already been found to lack construct and predictive validity. When I see these figures from the perspective of a basic writing teacher, I cannot help but note that the significant increase in who was eligible to take college-level coursework should have resulted in more significant gains than what was being reported. As it is, Cullinan and Biedzio found that

the control group earned slightly more credits after three semesters than the program group: 16.9 total credits earned compared to 16.55 with only a slight difference in college-level courses completed at the end of three semesters: 4.78 in the program group compared to 4.46 in the control group (p. 5).

Cullinan and Biedzio also continued to support use of hsGPA as a placement measure, claiming that the impacts were “robust,” and “Overall, all subgroups of students benefited from multiple measures placement, and MMA generally had positive impact estimates on enrollment in and completion of gatekeeper courses in English and math” (p. 37). This is in spite of acknowledging,

While GPA seems to be the best predictor relative to these other measures, none of these models had great predictive performance overall. The highest AUC [area under the curve] of any model was only 0.66, which is closer to a coin flip than perfect predictive performance. (p. 29)

Neither the LASSI scores nor the Grit noncognitive assessments improved the predictive accuracy for either English placement or math (p. 25). They also found, “Students in the better-performing subgroups (those with higher GPAs or LASSI scores, higher placement, or placement in both subjects) experienced a bigger impact on enrollment from MMA than those with lower scores.” (p. 23), which suggests that, like the original Scott-Clayton and Belfield and Crosta 2012 studies, predictive validity is more successful at the higher end of the spectrum than with students in the middle or lower ranges.

The passing rate for transfer-level English classes was only in the 60 percent range, but Cullinan and Biedzio concluded,

Multiple measures placement systems may improve outcomes for more students by

lowering GPA cutoffs. Among all randomized students, students with GPAs below 3.0 experienced positive impacts on enrollment into English and math gatekeeper courses, and among students in the bump-up zone, the impacts on enrollment in and passing of these courses were not lowered by lower GPAs. These findings suggest that lowering the GPA cutoffs further might increase the enrollment of additional college-ready students into the gatekeeper courses, thereby increasing their completion. (p. 38)

I do not understand why Cullinan and Biedzio suggested that more students with hsGPAs below the threshold used in the study should be placed into the transfer-level course when the passing rate was, to use a phrase they used, “closer to a coin flip than perfect predictive performance” (p. 29).

The change that was applied to the program group only widened, not restricted the access to college-level coursework, so students who were placed in much higher percentages into developmental coursework in the control group, without access to courses that require college-level English courses as a prerequisite, should be performing well behind the students who were in the program group if the assessment were solidly predictively valid. Cullinan and Biedzio reported that 12.1% of the program group failed the transfer-level course and an additional 8.3% withdrew from the course (p. 5). In a community college system, this likely means that because these students were now failing or withdrawing from a transfer-level course instead of in a developmental pathway the impact was greater to their financial aid and academic standing than it would have been if the course were pass/fail and did not count toward their GPA (as is the case with developmental coursework at MMCC). With 63.3% of the program group enrolling in the transfer-level course compared to the mere 33.1% of the control group, if the multiple measures

assessment was truly predictive, then students who were placed into the transfer-level courses should have been succeeding in higher percentages.

Overall, all of the studies confirmed what has been found in other studies of hsGPA and overall success in college: there were positive correlations between hsGPA and success in transfer-level coursework and graduation metrics (Allensworth & Clark, 2020; Hodara & Lewis, 2017; Yu, 2017), but these correlations remain strongest for the students with the highest test scores and hsGPAs. Students were likelier to be placed into the transfer-level courses at a higher rate than if based on placement tests alone because the placement qualifications were widened, not narrowed, and the students were passing the courses, sometimes at higher rates, but very little has been written about the students who were not passing or completing the course. Particularly in the studies where the percentages of students who passed at higher rates nearly equal the percentages of students who failed and withdrew at higher rates, the placement model cannot be labeled an unqualified success. When the data were disaggregated by ethnicity, the overall information was reported in positive terms: again, all demographics placed into transfer-level coursework in higher rates. What was not mentioned, except in perhaps a small aside buried within a paragraph, was that not all ethnicities succeeded in as high of rates as they were placed, which means that students were being granted access to transfer-level courses but were not succeeding there. Scott-Clayton (2012) and Cullinan and Biedzio (2021) suggested that the thresholds could be lowered until all ethnicities passed at higher rates, but a closer look within the data suggests that this would place just about everyone into transfer-level coursework, where, presumably, failure rates would continue to climb because, as noted in my analysis, the success rates were already not particularly high given how many students were bumped up in these studies.

The multiple measures data would benefit from being analyzed through not only a community college lens but also through the perspective of someone who does not actively disparage developmental education. One CCRC researcher, Susan Bickerstaff, said of developmental education in a recent interview, “College could be really deflating if in your first semester, you're basically taking what you took in high school” (as cited in McCoy, 2022). Without any evidence that developmental coursework is a direct repetition of high school education, CCRC researchers and others are casually discounting the curriculum and instruction without considering what these programs may offer to students who were not prepared for college by their high school instruction. Nationally, in the choices made about methodologies, in the messages about study limitations, and in the emphasis on costs and return on investment, placement research continues to focus on the students who were already prepared for college-level writing instruction instead of the students who need additional support, and this presents a major drawback for community college placement research.

CHAPTER III

INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT: WHY PLACEMENT REFORM IS NECESSARY

Placement assessment at community colleges involves juggling several concerns. In Chapter II, I discussed the national issues, particularly the concerns of educational economists. While the larger national issues usually spur change, it is the local concerns that often dictate how those changes will be implemented. Local concerns will (and should) have an impact on any assessment decisions, including pragmatic issues of budgets and staff availability, as well as student logistics and departmental values (Harrington, 2005; Huot, 2002; O'Neill, Moore, & Huot, 2009).

The research undertaken in this study is directly related to the work that I have done every day of my twenty-year career of teaching basic writing and first-year composition at Midwest Metropolitan Community College (MMCC). As the pseudonym suggests, MMCC is in a metropolitan area of the Midwest. It is of medium size for a community college. Like most other community colleges, MMCC has undergone changes in enrollment, and more attention has been given lately to both recruitment and retention, which also tends to bring renewed attention to placement concerns. In the early 2010s, my colleagues and I were forewarned about future declines in enrollment due to trends in population growth. Full-time professors in the English department had been voicing their concerns about the placement test process for as long as I had been at the college (2002), but these concerns were brought back to us around 2015, when we were asked as a department to investigate alternatives to bring to the administration because the placement test we were using at the time, COMPASS, was going to be discontinued, and the timing was right to suggest placement reform.

At the time of the study, MMCC had two levels of developmental reading (ENG 91 and 92), two levels of basic writing (ENG 95 and 96), and two levels of first-year composition (ENG 101 and 102). In ENG 95, ENG 96, and ENG 101, students wrote essays as a process, receiving many opportunities for practice and feedback before the essays were assessed by a committee. For many years, the stated mission of ENG 95 was for students to develop fluency, defined departmentally as the ability to generate an essay-length text on a focused topic. Students in ENG 95 may have needed to add to the essay gradually with feedback given in between drafts in order for it to grow incrementally from half a page to almost two pages in length. In ENG 96, students were presumed to be able to generate text in a quicker amount of time and with less assistance, but they may have needed more guidance and time with organization, academic genres, and clarity before being able to pass ENG 101 with a C or above. Eligible students could take ENG 96 simultaneously with ENG 101 in the Accelerated Learning Program (ALP) classes with the same instructor on the same day (Adams, et al., 2009). All levels of basic writing (both then and now; see Figure 2) submit a portfolio at the end of the semester that is anonymously evaluated by at least two other basic writing instructors who look for a holistic level of proficiency in the cover letter and two essays that comprise the portfolio (Broad, 2016; Yancey, 1999).

Most of the students who were in ENG 95 and ENG 96 also had to take one or two levels of a reading course before being eligible for ENG 101. Students placed into ENG 91: Reading Comprehension had to successfully complete ENG 92: Critical Reading before entering ENG 101. Students in ENG 95: Building Writing Strategies could have bypassed ENG 96: Preparing for College Writing on the merits of a strong portfolio, but the only way for students in the reading course to shorten the developmental pipeline was to take ENG 92 as an ALP course with

ENG 101 after they had fulfilled any developmental writing requirements. A placement of ENG 91 and ENG 95 guaranteed at least two semesters of additional coursework for a student and potentially two academic school years for part-time students. By fall 2021, the four courses were reduced to two integrated reading and writing courses: ENG 94 and ENG 97 (see Figures 2, 4 and 5). The focus on writing as a process remains, as does the holistic portfolio assessment.

Figure 2

Developmental Placement Options at MMCC: 2018 and 2022

Placement paths when the study was done	Current placement paths
Only placed into reading: 91 → 92 → 101 91 → 92/101 ALP	94 → 97 → 101 94 → 97/101 ALP
Only placed into writing: 95 → 96 → 101 95 → 96/101 ALP 95* → 101 96 → 101 96/101 ALP	94* → 101 97 → 101 97/101 ALP
Placed into both reading and writing: 91/95 → 92/96 → 101 91/95* → 92/101 ALP 91/96 → 92 → 101 91/96 → 92/101 ALP 92/95 → 96 → 101 92/95 → 96/101 ALP 92/95* → 101 92/96 → 101	*course may be skipped via portfolio assessment
*course may be skipped via portfolio assessment	

MMCC had technically already had a superficial version of multiple measures placement assessment, as the college has always accepted ACT and SAT scores over a cut-off range as a means to enter the college at transfer-level ability. When we were first investigating placement in 2014, the cut off to place into ENG 101 with an ACT score was 24. In 2018, the cut-off for the ACT English score was above 22 or an SAT Reading score of 29 or over and a Writing score of 28 and over to enroll in ENG 101 without taking the placement test. Few students knew of or used this path to entering coursework as it was not mentioned on the college's website as a method for placing into courses. Most took the placement test when they came to register, or they had been given the placement exam in their high school setting and had a test score on record already.

My colleagues in the English department were open to exploring more robust use of multiple measures or directed self-placement or other types of placement tests. Directed self-placement was dismissed as not possible due to the administration wanting English and math to have the same placement process and austerity measures at the time that would have meant not enough academic advisors to meet with all students. Because of the same austerity conditions, a direct writing sample was not considered, as we would not be able to pay faculty for the labor of assessing the essays, but one of my colleagues had proposed an alternate home-grown placement exam that would focus more directly on the core principles of the writing courses. His idea was that this placement instrument, although still an indirect measure of writing, would represent more of the writing construct than what was being tested in COMPASS and ACCUPLACER, which only focused on grammar, mechanics, and style. I was granted a course release of 4 hours a semester (reducing my load from 5/5 to 4/4) to implement and analyze the results of the test, named the Rhetorical Analysis Diagnostic Exam (RADE) that was constructed by my colleague

to see whether it would be a suitable replacement for the placement test that was being discontinued. I found the homegrown exam to be more predictive for the ENG 95 and for ENG 101 courses than COMPASS, and in the meantime, the math department had found a free placement instrument by their textbook publisher that was directly connected to their curriculum. The college began to explore implementation of these separate instruments before there was a change in college leadership in 2018. All reform measures were halted, and the college reverted to switching to ACCUPLACER, a similar placement test to COMPASS but from a different testing company.

ACCUPLACER is a multiple-choice test of three sections: math, reading, and writing skills. It has an option, at added cost, to have students respond to a writing prompt that is then scored by a machine; however, MMCC has never used the additional essay component (whether provided by COMPASS or ACCUPLACER), so all of the placement assessment of writing ability has been via a multiple-choice skills test. The portion of ACCUPLACER that was in use for writing placement at MMCC in 2018 and still is, to some extent, is called Sentence Skills. It has 20 multiple-choice questions where students determine which option is most correct for an underlined portion of a sentence, and each sentence is presented in isolation without any context.

Long term use of placement exams (ASSET, COMPASS, ACCUPLACER) created disparate impact at the college, or “unintended racialized differences in outcomes resulting from facially neutral policies or practices” (Poe & Cogan, 2016, p. 1), with Black students placing into basic writing courses at a much higher rate than White students even though Black students are in the minority at the institution. MMCC is certainly not alone in the disparate impact caused by placement exams. Prairie State College, a community college in Illinois, has a student population that is 54% Black, but Black students accounted for 82% of the students placed into the lowest

level of basic writing (Nastal, 2019, p. 6). In a survival analysis, Nastal found that only 56% of the students who enrolled in ENG 098 passed the class, and then 34% of the students who could have enrolled in 099 did not, with further losses happening at a 28% rate in between ENG 099 and ENG 101 (p. 9). Of the students who began in ENG 098, only 12% passed ENG 101, with a pass rate of 9% for the Black students who had been placed into the class disproportionately (p. 9).

MMCC is a primarily White institution in a suburban area in the Midwest.

Approximately 60% of the student population is White, 20% Black, and 5% Hispanic, with the percentage of Hispanic students on the rise. Percentages have varied, but in my 20 years of teaching at MMCC, the basic writing classes have always had a problem with disparate impact. When I have walked by an English computer lab classroom, I have generally been able to tell at a glance if the class was transfer-level or not based on which race was most prevalent in the classroom. According to Bivens and Wood, “only 32.1% of Black men and 31.6% of Black women experienced success (e.g., earned a certificate, degree, or transferred) within six years of their enrollment in the community college” (2016, p. 16). Graduation rates, particularly for Black male students, have been very low at MMCC, and the placement process is at least one cause, as students placed in ENG 91 and ENG 95 must take several non-credit courses before being permitted to take ENG 101, which is a prerequisite for other courses required for graduation. Disparate impact alone is cause for discontinuation of placement tests (Elliot, 2015; Inoue, 2009; Inoue, 2015; Poe et al., 2014; Poe, Nastal, & Elliot, 2019).

Even if ACCUPLACER were not creating a disparate impact at the college, it is still an inappropriate method for placing students into the writing courses at MMCC. Prior to August 2021, MMCC offered two pre-credit, non-transfer, pass/fail classes: ENG 95: Building Writing

Strategies and ENG 96: Preparing for College Writing. Both courses shared course objectives with ENG 101: Rhetoric and Composition I, objectives based on the canons of rhetoric and the Writing Program Administration Outcomes Statement (Council of Writing Program Administrators, 2014). The WPA statement has been widely used to promote a view of writing as a multifaceted, complex construct that is dependent on context; students use their previous experiences to hone their craft, not arrive at a specific standard. The WPA Outcomes Statement privileges rhetorical knowledge and critical reading, thinking, and composing while de-emphasizing the sentence skills that are assessed in writing placement exams. In both the WPA Outcomes Statement and MMCC's course objectives, correctness is listed as one item within a larger section that also values rhetorical understanding of conventions and genres; therefore, ACCUPLACER is an insufficient method for predicting success as it reduces preparedness for the course to awareness of sentence-level skills when rhetorical awareness is privileged by both the discipline and the institution. As noted in Chapter II, ACCUPLACER's sentence skills portion of the test lacks construct validity for placement into MMCC's writing course sequence, with a reading comprehension portion being used for placement into developmental reading.

MMCC uses the same course objectives in all four levels of the writing program with emphasis placed on specific sections of the objectives, depending on the level of the courses. The objectives are listed in Figure 3. In both ENG 95 and ENG 96, the first four categories were introduced. In ENG 101, the first 4 categories are introduced and emphasized. In ENG 102, they are reinforced with research being added as an emphasis. This approach was revised when the four levels of developmental English classes were reduced to two courses for an integrated reading and writing approach (see Figure 4 and Figure 5), but both courses retain the department's commitment to students writing rhetorically based essays in basic writing courses,

rather than an incremental building block approach of sentences to paragraphs and paragraphs to essays.

Figure 3

Course Objectives for ENG 95, 96, 101, 102

By practicing writing as a recursive process (inventing, drafting, reviewing, revising, and editing), successful students will:

Invention

- Engage in inquiry through writing, reading, discussion and research;
- Employ creative and critical thinking;
- Collaborate with peers in developing topic and purpose;
- Articulate their writing choices, strategies, growth, strengths, and weaknesses.

Presentation

- Achieve rhetorical purpose to meet readers' needs, expectations, and contextual constraints;
- Collaborate with peers to foster competent and professional presentation;
- Proofread and correct their revised text;
- Employ appropriate format and citation conventions.

Arrangement

- Construct texts around a central controlling idea;
- Support a main idea with concrete and worthwhile details, examples and reasons;
- Develop an organizing principle that supports rhetorical purpose;
- Compose in multiple genres appropriate for multiple contexts;
- Collaborate with peers to engineer cogent arrangement.

Style

- Construct an effective ethos to achieve rhetorical purpose;
- Cultivate style and tone by strategically employing rhetorical devices appropriate for the situation/circumstance;
- Make conscious, skilful [*sic*], and/or artistic choices regarding language use;
- Collaborate with peers to improve and adapt writing style.

Figure 3 Continued

<p>Research</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">● Engage in research as a process of inquiry and discovery, formulating research questions and developing (or following) appropriate methods for pursuing those questions;● Interact with a variety of primary and secondary written/visual/aural texts, discovering individual insights and formulating their own stance throughout the writing process;● Gather sources and evaluate their reliability, accuracy, value, and currency.
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Figure 4***The New Objectives for ENG 94: Integrated Reading & Writing***

<p>Reading:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">● Acquire and use new vocabulary words as well as utilize context clues to understand the meaning of unknown words within the text;● Learn reading strategies to help remember, understand, and use information;● Obtain sufficient background knowledge to adequately comprehend material;● Understand implied meanings and recognize literary concepts such as symbolism and irony;● Make connections text to text, text to self, and text to world;● Analyze (break down) text to better interpret purpose and meaning;● Piece information together in order to draw conclusions or create new material;● Improve comfort, enjoyment, and fluency by reading a variety of material;● Share reading experiences and responses. <p>Writing:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">● Achieve rhetorical purpose to meet readers' needs, expectations, and contextual constraints;● Construct various texts and essays around a central controlling idea;● Support a main idea with concrete and worthwhile details, examples and reasons;

Figure 4 Continued

- Revise texts for both higher order (global) and lower order (local) concerns;
 - Proofread and correct the revised text;
- Articulate reading and writing strategies, growth, strengths, and weaknesses in order to continue improvement.

Figure 5***The New Objectives for ENG 97: College Writing Strategies***

By practicing writing as a recursive process (inventing, drafting, reviewing, revising, and editing), successful students will:

- Achieve rhetorical purpose to meet readers' needs, expectations, and contextual constraints;
- Construct texts (mainly essays) around a central controlling idea;
- Support a main idea with concrete and worthwhile details, examples, and reasons;
- Respond effectively to the ideas of others from readings and class discussion;
- Work collaboratively to maximize rhetorical effectiveness;
- Cultivate style and tone by strategically employing rhetorical devices appropriate for the situation/circumstance;
- Use the revision process to explore how others can help the writer to re-see, re-think, and develop the ideas underlying the essay, and to use other readers to help the writer formulate an effective organizational strategy;
- Proofread and correct their revised text;
- Articulate their writing choices, strategies, growth, strengths, and weaknesses in order to become more successful writers.

The Differences Between the Courses in the Writing Sequence

The ENG 95: Building Writing Strategies and ENG 96: Preparing for College Writing classes were pass/fail non-transfer level courses of three credit hours (in contrast to the graded three credit hours of transfer-level credit in ENG 101: Rhetoric and Composition I and ENG 102: Rhetoric and Composition II). In ENG 95, the emphasis was on building students' confidence to develop their ideas in writing. Most of the students in that level had been told in several ways throughout their K-12 school experiences that they are not strong writers or have learned to believe that school is not for them (Sullivan, 2011; Tinberg, 1998; Tinberg & Nadeau, 2010); many struggled to write more than a paragraph initially. The students in the second level of basic writing, ENG 96, had always been less homogeneous. Confidence in writing was often still a concern in ENG 96, but more emphasis was placed on developing ideas beyond a narrative purpose and refining the text to be clearly organized and stylistically effective.

In both ENG 95 and 96, students generally wrote rough drafts of three to five essays throughout the semester. At the end of the 16-week semester, students chose which two of their essays to revise further and wrote a reflective cover letter focusing on their writing strengths and weaknesses and identifying how they had grown as writers during the semester. The portfolios were anonymously assessed at a grading event that was attended by all of the instructors of ENG 95/96, with each portfolio being assessed by two readers without the reader knowing which course the student is in, with a third reader if there is a disagreement. Faculty attended two norming sessions each semester, regardless of how long they had been participating in the portfolio assessment. A course text co-written by members of the English department for use in all ENG 95 and ENG 96 classes, *The Student Guide to the Portfolio*, included many sample portfolios and extolled the virtues of revision occurring over many drafts. New instructors gained

a sense of the department's values from both the norming sessions and *The Student Guide*, and students read it to learn more about faculty expectations for their end-of-semester work.

While some elements of the portfolio assessment have changed since the restructuring in 2021, the department continues to use the same holistic rubric (as shown in Figure 6) for determining whether a portfolio passes the basic writing program standards.

Figure 6

Holistic Rubric from The Student Guide to the Portfolio

Basic Questions about Essay Quality

Purposeful Development: Does the writing have a sense of purpose? How well developed is the writing? (For instance, do the essays include plenty of examples, reasons, details, descriptions, anecdotes, and/or evidence?) Is the writer able to go beyond producing only a few short paragraphs?

The Writing Situation (Rhetorical Context): Does the writer demonstrate a good awareness of audience, of the topic, and of his or her stance/role toward the audience and topic?

Thought: Does the writing make the reader think? Has the writer gone beyond just stating the obvious? (Doing so might take the form of inferences, connections, analysis, logic, reason, persuasion, humor, analogies, mature outlook, etc.)

Figure 6 Continued

Order: Are the essays arranged for maximum effectiveness? Does the writing avoid seeming formulaic? How coherent is the writing—that is, does it hold together? How effective are the transitions?

Language: Are sentences generally clear? How correct are the mechanics? To what extent is there a real writing style (for instance: alternation of sentence lengths, use of rhythms, variety in sentence structure, etc.)?

Self-Assessment/Cover Letter: How aware is the writer of his/her own writing process? Of his/her strengths and weaknesses? How accurate and authentic is the writer when using terminology related to writing? (For instance: Is the writer merely echoing what others have said? Grabbing at frequently heard terms? Or does the writer reflect on his/her writing in a convincing way?) (p. 8 from the 11th edition, 2019)

While length of essays is not an explicit element of the assessment, readers have expectations that the essays will be *at least* two pages long with a cover letter of similar length in order to pass from basic writing to transfer-level coursework, with most essays that pass the portfolio assessment averaging two and a half to three and a half pages in length. These expectations are in place because transfer agreements for ENG 101 include specifications about length of essays. Students may pass from ENG 95 to ENG 96 with shorter essays, but they must be organized into paragraphs and have a rhetorical purpose. In addition to use of the rubric, when faculty decide

whether the student has passed their basic writing requirement, they consider whether the essay would receive a C or higher if submitted in ENG 101.

The portfolio system is not without its complications. The number of third reads varies from semester to semester. If faculty members strongly disagree with the ratings assigned to particular portfolios from their students, they have the ability to override the decision made during the holistic assessment. Overall, though, the assessment process is designed to provide students with feedback and assessment outside of their classroom experience so assessment does not become insular and particular to the instructor. All the while, the ability to use an override provides faculty with the agency to alter the final assessment if the portfolio rating was borderline and the instructor has evidence that the student may succeed in the transfer-level course. Both part-time and full-time faculty members use the over-ride option each semester.

Institutional research at MMCC shows that the students who take and pass the developmental coursework are performing the same as or better than students who were placed into ENG 101 directly, depending on the semester. In Table 1, the grades for ENG 101 for the fall 2018 and spring 2019 semesters reveal that, at MMCC, the majority of students in the course earn As. This is particularly true of the fall semester, where the grades are typically skewed by dual credit students from the local high schools attending in higher rates. In the fall 2018 semester, 737 students earned passing grades out of 1,025 for a pass rate of 71% in ENG 101. In the spring 2019 semester, 241 students earned passing grades out of 366 for a 65% pass rate. Passing grades are defined as a C or higher as a C is required for the course to be accepted for transfer to colleges and universities in the state.

At MMCC, the withdrawal rate for the writing classes is much higher than the failure rate. Although the grades displayed below are from ENG 101, this is true of ENG 95, ENG 96,

and ENG 102, as well. The high withdrawal rate is in part because students are able to withdraw from classes through the thirteenth week of a sixteen-week semester. At the time of this study, faculty were also able to process extremely late term withdrawals, so for instance, if I had a student in ENG 95 who attended through the fifteenth or sixteenth week of the semester who did not turn in a portfolio on the last day of class, I could opt to assign the student either a W or an F. As the institution did not have a clear policy in writing regarding withdrawals between weeks 13-16 of the semester, instructors used their discretion. The 21% and 22% withdrawal rates include students who withdrew at any point between the first and thirteenth week of the semester as well as students who were withdrawn by the instructor for lack of attendance and/or participation at any point during the semester.

Table 1

Grades in ENG 101 at MMCC

	A	B	C	D	F	W
Fall 2018	419	201	117	29	41	218
N=1025	40.8%	19.6%	11.4%	2.8%	4%	21.3%
Spring 2019	119	77	45	24	19	82
n=366	31.7%	21%	12.3%	6.6%	5.2%	22.4%

When the results are disaggregated for students who had previous developmental coursework, as they are in Table 2, the pass rate is 63% for fall 2018 for the students who took ENG 101 after prior developmental coursework (including reading courses) and passed it on

their first attempt (n=69 out of N=109). In spring 2019, the percentage of students with prior developmental coursework who passed ENG 101 on their first attempt was higher at 67% (n=79 out of N=118). Again, the difference in the demographics for each semester explains the difference in the pass rates. In fall semester, with a higher percentage of high-achieving high school students in the mix of students, the developmental pass rate is lower at 63% compared to the overall pass rate of 71% for ENG 101, but in the spring 2019, when students are entirely traditional college students, the pass rate for students with prior developmental experience (67%) is slightly higher than that of the students who were placed directly into transfer-level coursework (65%). The difference in the demographics of the courses may also explain the high withdrawal rate of students in the fall semester. Based on my experience teaching the ALP courses, many current and former developmental students are frequently unnerved by the ease with which the dual credit cohort of students is able to complete the assignments. The withdrawal rate is skewed by the dual credit students who may not withdraw from the college course without it impacting their high school credits. The spring semester withdrawal rate of 22.9% is almost identical to the overall rate of ENG 101 students at 22.4%. Of course, the former developmental students make up a higher percentage of the overall students in ENG 101 in the spring semester than in the fall semester (30% compared to 10%). Students who were previously enrolled in developmental coursework tend to pass or withdraw, with very few of them remaining in the course to earn a D and none remaining to earn an F at the end of the semester both semesters.

Table 2***Grades in ENG 101 for Students Who Had Prior Developmental ENG Coursework***

	A	B	C	D	F	W
fall 2018	15	26	28	N/A	N/A	40
n=109	13.8%	23.9%	25.7%			36.7%
spring 2019	32	35	12	12	N/A	27
n=118	27.1%	29.7%	10.2%	10.2%		22.9%

Further disaggregation reveals that the story is grimmer for students who were placed directly into ENG 101 without being prepared for the course. In the following data set in Table 3, all students with prior developmental requirements were removed, with the vast majority of these students placed into ENG 101 by placement test scores, as placement using alternate measures was not widely used at that time. In fall 2018, only 47% of the students who had taken a single ENG 101 class and not passed it in a prior semester took the course and passed it (n=41 out of total N=87). In spring 2019, 48.6% of the students who had taken and not passed an ENG 101 class before passed it this semester (n=53 out of total 109). When the data was disaggregated for students who had taken and not completed or passed 101 two or three times prior to the semester, all data was too small to report, except in the withdrawal category, suggesting that if students do not pass ENG 101 within two semesters (without taking developmental coursework), there is much less likelihood of the student passing it in subsequent semesters. In short, given the pass rates for students who have taken developmental coursework at MMCC, the program is considered successful.

Table 3*Grades in ENG 101 for Students Who Had a Single Prior ENG 101 Course*

	A	B	C	D	F	W
fall 2018	13	16	12	N/A	10	36
n=87	14.9%	18.4%	13.8%		11.5%	41.4%
spring 2019	20	16	17	N/A	12	44
n=109	18.3%	14.7%	15.6%		11%	40.4%

The faculty at MMCC have academic freedom to craft their own writing assignments in all levels of the writing courses as long as they fit within the confines of transfer institution articulation agreements for each. Faculty must also adhere to the overall course description and the course objectives, which have been crafted with the state transfer agreement in mind. The state transfer agreement for ENG 101 stipulates that students must write at least 5,000 words of formal, revised text in the class, with one of the papers being at least 1,250 words in length, and the majority of the overall grade coming from the grades on four revised texts. See Figure 7 for ENG 101's course description.

ENG 101 has a faster pace than basic writing coursework with more assignments of both reading and writing. For instance, in my ENG 96 and ENG 101 courses, students technically write the same number of major writing assignments, but in ENG 101, they have much more reading of greater length and difficulty to do as well as additional low-stakes metacognitive writing assignments. The work that students were doing across two classes (a developmental reading course and a basic writing class) gets combined in ENG 101 at half the credit hours.

Figure 7***Course Description for ENG 101***

English 101 is designed to help students write papers for a variety of general and specific audiences. Students will learn to recognize features that make writing effective, and learn different strategies writers use while prewriting, drafting, revising, and editing. Students will learn to read their own work more critically and to constructively criticize the work of others. The course also provides a brief introduction to the writing of source-supported papers and methods of documenting sources.

Institutional Concerns About Placement Tests

As stated earlier, the faculty at MMCC have a wide range of academic freedom. This is true of the institution as a whole, as MMCC is in a state that has a state coordinating board, not a board of regents. The state coordinating board makes recommendations for procedures like placement assessment, but the institutional leadership may choose a different course of action. Multiple measures placement assessment is, as of 2020, only a recommendation and not a mandate. The mandates generally happen as a result of legislation by the state senate. In 2020, the state senate passed a resolution to collect data about the current state of developmental education in community colleges in the state before making any further decisions about placement. The College Board's report for the state senate on the status of developmental education uses sources referred to in Ch. 2 as evidence for why the state community colleges should consider multiple measures placement assessment to reduce the inequitable placement across the state.

In 2018, when I sought sabbatical leave to study multiple measures, institutional leaders at MMCC had not committed to full multiple measures placement assessment use, but, as I mentioned earlier, MMCC did have a version of multiple measures in place because students who had reported their ACT or SAT scores could have been placed by those scores instead of taking ACCUPLACER. The English department at MMCC also had a head start on research into placement because one of the institutional leaders had asked for our input prior to the discontinuance of COMPASS.

I had been released from teaching one of my courses each semester in order to help create, administer, and study the results of a homegrown placement test at MMCC. I did this work with the writing program director, who also had release time in order to run the writing program and report to the department chair, who had a full course release for running the department. The writing program director had written the first draft of the Rhetorical Analysis Diagnostic Exam (RADE), and I assisted with revision. I then created further iterations of the exam with the writing program director assisting. The goal of RADE was to assess students' rhetorical awareness by having them read student-level essays and an advertisement and then answer multiple-choice questions about the choices that were made or could have been made. The test had limitations in that it was still a multiple-choice test and therefore an indirect measure of students' writing ability, but the English department supported the work because the placement test would send a clearer message to students about what the department values rather than missing an opportunity and promoting correctness as the most important aspect of writing as COMPASS did (Harrington, 2005; Hassel & Giordano, 2015; Klausman et al., 2016). Faculty were also concerned about the disparate impact that was being caused by COMPASS (and

ASSET before that), and were not confident that ACCUPLACER would improve the placement situation for students of color.

When I began drafting my dissertation prospectus and sabbatical application, I still had release time for pursuit of RADE as a placement method, but I wanted to see how it compared to use of high school grade point average and other measures for placement. I cast a wide net for which data points I wanted to collect, fully knowing that the data would be useful for the college as it worked toward placement reform, as long as the measures I was collecting worked with constraints at the college.

Constraints for the Multiple Measures Study

In determining the data points to collect about students for my multiple measures study, I had to consider current placement research and institutional constraints. Huot (1996) emphasized that site-based, locally relevant approaches are needed in assessment creation. O'Neill, Moore, & Huot (2009) stated, "those charged with administering an assessment should not simply adopt a test or assessment plan that someone else has developed but rather see the need for assessment as an opportunity both to explore assessment theory and practice and to conduct systematic inquiry into the validity of the results" (p. 44). They further cautioned that ignoring context "may undermine efforts to facilitate a useful assessment in the first place" (p. 60). The Two-Year College Association (TYCA) "White Paper on Placement Reform" recommended that all placement reform practices should be:

1. be grounded in disciplinary knowledge; 2. be developed by local faculty whose work is recognized and compensated by their institution; 3. be sensitive to effects on diverse student populations; 4. be assessed and validated locally; 5. be integrated into campus-

wide efforts to improve student success. (Klausman et al., 2016, p. 136)

As a teacher-scholar at a community college, I tried my best to work within this framework.

The primary constraint for placement reform at MMCC is cost. I have been told that when students challenged their ACCUPLACER writing scores, each retest in 2018 cost the institution \$5. I suspect the initial test (math, reading, and writing) is part of a package deal determined by how many students take it in an average year at our institution, but I do not know what the total cost of the test was. In 2016, the governor and the state legislature could not come to an agreement about the state budget, and higher education budgets (amongst many others) were not paid by the state government as negotiations wore on; the result was that MMCC was paid a scant 12% of the millions of dollars it had received the year before. Eventually, 26 administrative leaders and staff positions were eliminated at MMCC to redress the budget shortage. I knew that even if my research found a placement method to be successful, if it would increase rather than decrease the overall cost of placement, it would not (could not) be considered by the college's board of trustees with the then current state legislative climate and enrollment decline.

MMCC has always operated under the principle that costs to students should be kept as low as possible, so the institution has never been flush with personnel, which is another placement constraint. Because MMCC has never had enough academic advisors to meet with all students who enroll in the institution, placement methods that rely on counseling or advising cannot be considered. Over half the academic year, the academic advisors, who work in Enrollment Services, do not take appointments, and visits are designated as "walk-ins only," so students are unable to request appointments during all enrollment surges. Not all students can afford to wait in a line for several hours in order to be advised. Step six of the enrollment process

is to “Take a test and see an academic advisor,” but the reality is that many of our students take a placement test at the Testing Center, receive their placement path from Testing Center staff, and register online for courses, choosing the classes for which they qualify that fit their time schedules, all without communicating with an academic advisor. While some of our students do opt to meet with advisors, especially for initial enrollment, logistically, not everyone is able to take that step, and students are permitted to enroll without it since the system prevents them from enrolling in classes for which they are ineligible.

The logistical staffing constraint is one of the reasons I did not consider directed self-placement (DSP) for a possible placement reform for MMCC. The original design for DSP and one of the most effective ways to use it is where students meet with an advisor to consider their options (Caouette, 2019; Royer & Gilles, 1998; Royer & Gilles, 2003). Successful DSP placement procedures like University of Michigan’s not only require time with an academic advisor but also writing from the student in addition to responses to a questionnaire about their writing experiences, and this process is at a school that already has admissions standards (Gere et al., 2013).

Many institutions, including some community colleges, utilize guided self-placement (GSP), which is a variation of DSP where students self-supply their high school information and/or answer a questionnaire to receive a recommended path for placement, and then they may choose which course to take based on the information they receive. The English department at MMCC is skeptical about guided self-placement because of the number of placement test challenges that are already made each semester after students take ACCUPLACER. In an earlier departmental study at MMCC, I found that too many students are placed into non-transfer level courses; however, we have also experienced that it is not these students who are challenging their

placement scores. Instead, the students who tended to email or visit the department chair to discuss receiving a waiver to go to transfer-level coursework had scores well below the cut-off threshold and were unable to provide writing samples or other evidence that would qualify them for placement into first-year composition. In an online GSP system, which is the only method MMCC could currently afford to implement because of the personnel problem, students would be able to input whatever information they suspect will recommend the course level they desire or enter correct information but ignore the suggested placement to the detriment of their course success. The English department as a whole is against adoption of guided self-placement.

Furthermore, the problem of disparate impact created by the commercial placement test would not be alleviated by guided self-placement. In a dissertation about placement at a community college, Verbout (2016) found that when placement was a mere recommendation and not a requirement, White students were more likely to ignore the placement recommendation to their advantage while Hispanic and indigenous students selected the recommended developmental placement. Other researchers have found that guided self-placement provided upward mobility for all ethnicities, but White students still benefit the most (Ketai, 2012), especially in long-term success rates (Verbout, 2016), so the problem of overall disparate impact is not addressed.

Another constraint that prevented exploration of DSP and GSP is that in 2018 the Information Technology department at the college insisted upon one placement method for both math and English. This was to simplify how the student placement decision is entered into the student data system and the coding that dictates for which courses the students may register. The math department will not permit self-placement into math levels, and the English department respects their choice as being dictated by the needs of their discipline. At the time of this study,

and even now to some extent, the English department and I had limited agency given the number of stakeholders involved in the decision-making process about placement.

Any placement method at MMCC must be able to be used for all entering students regardless of their demographics and intersectional identities. One special demographic that must be accounted for is dual credit high school students. This is a program that allows high-achieving juniors and seniors in high school to take courses at the college in lieu of the high school and graduate with both a high school diploma and an associate's degree. These students need to be vetted via placement as sophomores in high school. Moreover, other student communities such as returning adults, international students, students who have been homeschooled, and students in alternative education programs need to be placed without access to traditional educational measurement data such as high school grade point averages commensurate with their peers. The lack of traditional junior and senior year of high school transcript data makes multiple measures assessment difficult for many of these student populations. All of these student groups may have skewed perceptions of writing classroom pedagogy and assessment, whether positive or negative. These perceptions of what writing courses may be may impact their placement choices with both DSP and GSP.

While some of these constraints also create limitations for multiple measures assessment, interested parties at the college were more willing to consider how to manage these limitations because they believed it would not be as burdensome of a cost to sustain for the institution when considering personnel needs. They believed multiple measures assessment would work for both math and English, be customized to fit our students because it is based on data analysis, and would satisfy state legislative recommendations for placement reform even though it carries a potential additional fiscal cost both for implementation and execution (Barnett et al., 2018). An

initial large-scale multiple measures placement study by CAPR found that multiple measures placement resulted in all student subgroups increasing their placement into transfer-level coursework, with Black and Latino students benefitting more than White students; however, students of color did not close the achievement gap in completion of the transfer-level English course, where they had to repeat the course with higher frequency than White students (Barnett et al., 2018). Based on the community college research studies I had access to in 2018, I pursued the multiple measures sabbatical study in order to determine whether multiple measures placement assessment at MMCC could potentially reduce the disparate impact at the college and place students more fairly than the reliance on only one placement test score.

CHAPTER IV

METHODOLOGY

The original goal of this multiple measures placement study was to help Midwest Metropolitan Community College make data-informed decisions about which measures to use in a multiple measures assessment system and determine the extent to which the measures should be used in conjunction with each other or as isolated variables. I chose to emulate the methodology of the research already being done by educational researchers and economists whose work was used as the basis for community colleges moving to multiple measures placement assessment, synthesizing those methods with the more humanist methods employed in the field of basic writing. The resulting multiple methods study combines analysis of quantitative multiple measures variables, qualitative interviews, and case study data. By including qualitative data, I was able to study the complicated and varied experiences of community college students that are not always reflected in traditional multiple measures research.

Overview

When my research began in 2018, MMCC was interested in shifting from placement tests to a multiple measures placement assessment procedure because they were feeling pressure from the state college board and legislature to create a more authentic multiple measures placement protocol. MMCC had always technically had a multiple measures system, as there was a provision for students to bypass the placement test by submitting SAT or ACT scores that are above the set threshold; this option was so little publicized that very few students exercised the option to use the exemption. The existence of the rule, though, meant that MMCC had a place

within their student data system to record standardized test scores for use in a multiple measures placement assessment. In other words, the option was there for MMCC to be able to implement a multiple measures placement system, even given their current financial constraints.

My exploration of a potentially expanded multiple measures placement assessment (MMA) served to examine the pragmatics of using data pulled from various sources and interpreting its meaning and application to the placement context. Before embarking on analysis, I assembled many pieces of information – self-reported and official hsGPA, grades in junior-level and senior-level English classes, high school rank/percentile, Daly Miller Inventory score and range, and Rhetorical Analysis Diagnostic Exam (a departmental assessment) score – in an Excel sheet to mirror the collection of multiple measures variables into a student data management system to be analyzed. With participants' permission, I also added information to this spreadsheet from the MMCC system: sex, age, race/ethnicity, and previous placement scores, so I could disaggregate the data when analyzing results. I sought and gained permission from the students in the study to track their progress at MMCC across two years of study, so each semester, I would collect the students' grades in their English classes, wherever they were in the sequence. Students' grades and persistence would be the main method for measuring the success of the multiple measures variables.

My initial plan was to synthesize the various pieces of collected data with students' end-of-semester grades for their writing courses, so I could enter the data into a statistics program (SPSS or Minitab) to determine which factors, or combination of factors, were most predictive of student success and whether any of those methods would address the disparate impact problem at the college. In doing so, I would be replicating the methodology of larger MMA studies that used historic student data in order to set cut scores for future multiple measures variables, boundaries,

and algorithms (Barnett et al., 2018; Cullinan et al., 2019; Barnett et al., 2020). The purpose of collecting so many pieces of data on each student was to observe and analyze which measures had the most predictive validity for success in college composition courses. The demographic data was collected so fairness could be measured as well, because even with some predictive validity, should use of the measures lack fairness, the placement method could continue to replicate the disparate impact of the discontinued placement test method.

In addition to collecting these quantitative variables to examine whether the multiple measures method would be appropriate for MMCC's student body, I also wished to honor the humanist methods of basic writing research while potentially discovering what it is I did not yet know about students and their educational paths. I planned to keep student voices and experiences foregrounded by collecting qualitative information about their writing experiences in high school. These interviews served an additional purpose of permitting my plan to adapt as needed. This was vital to me, as placement reform decisions at the local level were very much contingent on the state coordinating board's recommendations for placement and the state legislature's placement policies which were in flux at the time. Additionally, longitudinal research at a community college is always precarious because students who had joined the study could withdraw from the college at any time. At the onset of the study, I had no way of predicting how many students would participate in the study, so the qualitative portion of the study also allowed for supplemental data in case the student sample was not large enough for statistical significance in the quantitative data analysis.

The interview data yielded interesting new directions for the research, so rather than follow my initial plan of relying on statistical analysis to study correlations, I expanded the qualitative portion of the study and added follow-up interviews in order to examine the factors

that influence student success in composition classes. Both sets of interviews, once fully coded, provided overall data about the students who succeeded quickly, failed/withdrew, or had mixed results with their success (Geisler & Swarts, 2019; Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014; Richards, 2015; Saldaña, 2015).

Initial Multiple Measures Exploration

My initial investigation focused on which measures could be used for placement into either the transfer-level first-year composition class (ENG 101) or one of the two basic writing classes (ENG 95 or ENG 96). My research questions were predicated on the presumption that some of the collected variables, used either in isolation or in conjunction, would function as a more valid and fair placement method than the previous method of a solitary placement test score.

Figure 8

Research Questions for the 2018 Sabbatical Study

- Is there a threshold where students could be reasonably placed by one or two metrics?
That is, is a high school GPA over a certain level is a fair indicator of success for a significant majority of students of all demographics?
- Is there a similar lower threshold that could be used to indicate students below it would be reasonably and fairly placed into basic writing classes?

Figure 8 Continued

- What questions could be (should be) asked of students to determine their placement if they fall between these two thresholds? Which writing experiences from high school indicate best chances of college writing success?

As stated in Chapter II, high school grade point average (hsGPA) is a key variable used in most multiple measures systems; in fact, some institutions use it as a primary placement variable, or a “multiple-single measures” assessment (Estrem, Shepherd, & Sturman, 2018), only consulting multiple measures if the hsGPA is not above the threshold set for placement into transfer-level coursework (Rutschow et al., 2019). The use of hsGPA as a linchpin in MMA is based on Scott-Clayton’s 2012 study that reported hsGPA being more predictive than placement exams (Scott-Clayton, 2012); however, the “more predictive” was in comparison to a test proven not be predictive for all populations and so it does not necessitate that hsGPA will be reliably predictive and valid for all student populations. In an effort to analyze the validity of hsGPA across several area high schools, I collected additional data from the transcript: the class rank and class percentiles. Using these in conjunction with the hsGPA allowed me to gauge the range of student GPAs according to class rankings at area high schools to determine whether hsGPAs were static across different schools or could signify different ability levels, depending on the school attended. Using these in conjunction with the hsGPA allowed me to gauge the range of student GPAs according to the class rankings at area high schools to determine whether hsGPAs were static across different schools or could signify different ability levels, depending on the

school attended. Although other scholars may have done something similar, the closest approach that I am aware of within major community college placement publication is Belfield and Crosta (2012), where the measures were determined to be of less use than hsGPA overall.

Measures assembled from high school transcripts are designed to assess overall high school scholastic performance and not directly pertain to the ability to succeed in a first-year composition course (Rutschow et al., 2019), so I also collected grades from junior and senior level high school English classes. Based on my twenty years of experience teaching diverse basic writing and first-year composition students at the community college, one of my hypotheses had always been that hsGPA would not necessarily reflect a student's overall ability to compose purposeful papers or to critically analyze texts, both core objectives in MMCC's English course sequence. MMCC's transfer agreement stipulates that at least one paper in ENG 101 will be a minimum of 1250 words long, so I was also looking for whether the high school transcript data would indicate whether students were prepared to write essays of particular lengths by the end of the semester. My hypothesis was that grades in the course subjects would be more predictive of success in English coursework than the overall high school grades, as they were closer to the assessment construct. Junior-level and senior-level grades were more plausible for relating to the students' current ability level and maturity than classes taken when the student was 14-15 years old, especially as those classes were likelier to assign papers beyond a page or two in length. This presented a potential placement problem for the future, though, as students in dual credit classes would need to be placed prior to taking junior-level and senior-level high school classes, but were the junior and senior English grades predictive, then use of accurate measures would be preferable to use of measures that were available for more students with less predictable validity.

When my study was being planned, MMCC did not yet have access to students' high school transcripts unless they had filed for financial aid, and even then, not all student transcripts were uploaded to the system in a way that was usable for a data study. For that reason, MMCC had planned to potentially use self-reported hsGPA as part of the multiple measures placement system, so I opted to collect self-reported hsGPA from students as well. I planned to ask students to submit their high school transcripts as a second part of data collection, so I could review the accuracy of student recollection of their hsGPA. Because I had no guarantee that I would be able to secure high school transcripts from all of the students in the study, I also asked students which high schools they attended and when they graduated, so I would have that information on record in case the college did not have the information on file.

At the time of the study, MMCC was pursuing use of a home-grown placement exam that was created and studied within the English department. The Rhetorical Analysis Diagnostic Exam (RADE)'s purpose was to better reflect the curricular construct for placement into writing courses at MMCC than commercial placement exams like COMPASS and ACCUPLACER. While the previous versions of the assessments in use at MMCC focused entirely on correctness and style, RADE is an assessment of many of the course objectives for ENG 95, ENG 96, and ENG 101. I had been tasked with studying RADE for reliability, validity, and fairness, and the predictive validity had been found to be higher for students in ENG 95 while being equally as predictive of success for students in ENG 96 and ENG 101 as the commercial placement exams had been. Because RADE would take students approximately 45 minutes to complete, I offered incentives for students in my study to take the assessment in the testing center at a day and time that was convenient to them. As with the other data collected for the study, I'd made a hypothesis that because this assessment measured different skills than what had been assessed in

the placement tests, combining the score from RADE with the other collected measures for my study would result in a higher predictive validity rate than the solitary placement test score.

I also sought a possible measure from an attitudinal survey as an additional potential measure because the more sophisticated multiple measures placement assessments involve use of tools that assess students' ability to persist in their college courses. I wished to replicate an already existent survey rather than crafting my own; because of austerity measures at the institution, I could not choose any tool that would involve an added cost, which eliminated the Learning and Study Strategies Inventory (LASSI). I also wanted a noncognitive element that more directly pertained to the writing construct. Several of my colleagues had been administering the Daly-Miller Inventory in their basic writing classes as a means to discuss writing anxiety. The Daly-Miller Inventory is an instrument where students indicate their comfort levels with particular writing tasks that can be tallied for a score at the end. It was a good fit for my needs: it was replicable, it divided responses into three levels of writing anxiety, and it was of a length and reading level that could be administered to students of all levels at the beginning of my focus group sessions (Daly & Miller, 1975a; Daly & Miller, 1975b). My tentative hypothesis was that using the Daly-Miller Inventory score with a hsGPA could be more predictive than use of hsGPA alone. This was in part based on classroom experience of needing to teach students in basic writing to have more confidence in the work they were producing, while first-year composition students did not need as much of that type of support (Ostman, 2013; Reid & Hancock, 2019).

The rest of the data that I collected for each student was housed in MMCC's database and was collected to study predictive validity and fairness. This includes demographic information (sex, race/ethnicity, age, etc.), all previous placement scores on record for the

student (including COMPASS, ACCUPLACER, SAT, ACT, and state test scores), and grades in English coursework for up to two years after the semester of the interview. By collecting student progress in the English courses, I would also learn who was still in attendance at the college and potentially who had transferred or withdrawn.

Data Collection Procedures

I recruited students in their first semester of classes at MMCC who were over 18 and enrolled in either of the first two levels of basic writing (ENG 95 and ENG 96), or the first semester of first-year composition (ENG 101) for the Fall 2018 semester. One of my goals was to have a study sample that represented MMCC's student body. I recruited students by appealing to colleagues at MMCC to announce or email information about the study to their ENG 95, 96, and 101 students. I also visited classes with colleagues' permission to make a personal plea for participation. Participants were given the following incentives to attend: a meal provided at each focus group session and a gift card to our campus bookstore or Starbucks if they opted to take RADE. All participation by students was voluntary.

Eighteen focus group sessions were scheduled on a variety of days and at a variety of times in a three-week span around midterm at two campuses during the Fall 2018 semester. For some sessions, students had pre-registered to let me know they were coming. At times, I wandered the halls announcing I had free food for anyone enrolled in an English class this semester who was willing to be asked questions about their high school writing experiences for an hour. I expanded the participation parameters to permit students who were not in their first semester and to students who were enrolled in developmental reading (ENG 91 and ENG 92) instead of developmental writing because the participation rate was lower than I wished and

other students were willing to participate. Thirty-four students volunteered to supply information about their high school writing experiences and permitted me to gather their placement scores, high school transcripts, and final course grades. Sessions ranged from only one student in attendance to up to four students at once. While the sample of 34 students may seem small, this was an excellent turn-out rate for a study at MMCC and the largest voluntary focus group sample held in the English department.

Students were welcomed to each session and provided with a meal for attending. The materials for the study were in a course management system (CMS) shell that I added students to while they ate. After explaining the purpose of the study, I asked participants to sign a printed copy of Old Dominion University's Informed Consent Form signed, copied and returned it to the students for their records. All participants voluntarily selected yes for each piece of information I wished to collect in the study and then signed the form. They also received an informational handout about participation in the second part of the study. In the meantime, in the course shell I created in the CMS, students answered questions about their self-reported hsGPA, which high school they attended and when they graduated. They then took the Daly-Miller Inventory. These scores were not immediately available to the participants, so the scores would not impact their answers to the focus group questions.

Students gave me permission to create an audio recording to be transcribed at a later date, and I took notes of answers as a back-up to the Tascam audio recording device I used. After the transcript was created, the recordings were deleted to protect student privacy. All students were assigned a pseudonym that honored the perceived gender and ethnic markers of their original names, unless the students indicated a specific pseudonym they wished to have used. I asked the

same eight questions in each session, sometimes adding follow-up questions for clarification as needed.

I had little control over how many students would attend each session, so I resolved to work with whatever size of group materialized. When only one student attended a session, the answers tended to be more matter-of-fact with less elaboration than when multiple students attended, but I also had sessions with an individual student that lasted as long as the group sessions. In the group sessions, responses given by other students often prompted students to recall experiences they would not have thought of previously. For some questions, particularly the one about hsGPA, I asked the students interviewed in groups to think to themselves before responding, and I made sure all students had an answer in mind before a single student responded in order to minimize groupthink behavior. The atmosphere of most of the interviews with multiple students was very chatty, with students taking bites of food while others responded. If students hesitated when responding at all, I indicated it in my notes and, later, the transcript. Many students indicated that they wanted to be helpful and they wished me well in my research project, which I had explained to them was to help create a potential new placement process and I was interested in making sure it would be fair and appropriate for future MMCC students.

At the end of the sessions, students were asked to consider submitting an unofficial copy of their high school transcript and taking the Rhetorical Analysis Diagnostic Exam at the testing center. This part of the study was later amended, as many students had transcripts on file with the college that I was able to access with their permission. Although students would receive a \$20 gift card to either Starbucks or Barnes & Noble for taking RADE, only 15 of the 34 students in the study completed this step. I entered the collected data for RADE into the spreadsheet, but I

did not pursue further use of it in the data study because of the small sample. For a full list of the various pieces of data I collected, see Figure 9.

Quantitative Data Management

All of the data for the study was initially housed in a CMS course reserved for this study, and I was the only person with access to it. The data was downloaded from the CMS into an Excel file and synchronized with demographic data (sex, age, race/ethnicity, previous placement scores) from MMCC's system (provided by the Outcomes Assessment Coordinator) and high school transcript information (provided by a dean's administrative assistant). I asked permission from students to retrieve their English course grades for up to two years, so at the end of the semester, course grades were collected from the system for me, and I added them to the spreadsheet.

In my original plan for the multiple measures, I was going to analyze the data using Minitab or SPSS to study the correlations or predictivity of the data with course success. After only recruiting 34 students for the study, I questioned this method of data analysis with such a small sample, especially since students were from a variety of course placements. As I transcribed the study interviews, it became clearer to me that the qualitative data was yielding more interesting findings, so I jettisoned doing correlational analysis of the variables and the student success rates, instead focusing on trends in the recorded variables and the students' retention and persistence rates in their college courses.

Figure 9***Data Sources, and Collection Date***

Study data	Retrieved from	Date
Daly-Miller Inventory scores	Students in the study	Oct. 2018
Self-reported hsGPA	Students in the study	Oct. 2018
High school name	Students in the study	Oct. 2018
Graduation date	Students in the study	Oct. 2018
Interview answers about high school writing experiences	Students in the study	Oct. 2018
Rhetorical Analysis Diagnostic Exam (RADE) score	Students in the study	Nov. 2018
Class rank	High school transcript	Nov. 2018
Class rank percentile	High school transcript	Nov. 2018
Grades in jr/sr level hs classes	High school transcript	Nov. 2018
Official hsGPA	High school transcript	Nov. 2018
Demographic info (age, race/ethnicity, sex, etc.)	MMCC system	Dec. 2018
Placement scores (any on record)	MMCC system	Dec. 2018
Grades in MMCC English courses	MMCC system	2018-2020
Follow-up interview responses		Nov. 2020-Apr. 2021

Study Participants

I sought to recruit participants from across several levels of writing courses at two campuses, hoping to have a study sample that represented MMCC's diverse student body. I wanted to have a group of students that was not unlike the overall population and then do a

deeper examination of the tensions that mere overviews of quantitative data blur. I needed a combination of students who placed directly into ENG 101 and students who placed into ENG 95 or ENG 96, and I recruited appropriately. Fifteen of the 34 students were currently in ENG 95 or ENG 96. Another two students had been in ENG 95 or ENG 96 prior to their ENG 101 course. Sixteen students were placed directly into ENG 101; one student took ENG 101 as a dual credit course in high school. From the resulting sample, I was able to observe interesting trends in the collected data, making the data valuable for institutional consideration. Figure 10 lists how much time elapsed since student participants graduated from high school. Like the college population, most of the students were recent graduates, but there were some returning adult students in the sample, as well as some students who enrolled with a short gap after graduating from high school.

Figure 10

Study Participants by Year of High School Graduation (N=34)

n=	Percentage	Time elapsed since graduation
21	62%	Graduated that year (2018)
4	12%	Graduated between 1-2 years
1	3%	Graduated between 2-10 years
2	6%	Graduated more than 20 years ago
6	18%	Did not have a graduation year on record (GED or information unavailable)

The demographics of the students who participated in the study are similar to the overall demographics of the college in terms of race/ethnicity, sex, representation of developmental writers, and local zip codes. While more Hispanic students participated in the study than the overall demographic rate on campus, they do represent a growing demographic at the college; 56% of the study participants were White, 26% Black, and 14% Hispanic – compared to 63%, 19%, 6% for the institution in Fall 2018 according to MMCC’s Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) survey data. More females participated than males (22 female; 12 male). More adult non-traditional students were represented in the sample than in MMCC’s overall population.

Conducting a study of community college students can be fraught with issues, especially if any longitudinal data is to be captured, as student retention is unpredictable at best. In Marilyn Sternglass’ longitudinal study of students at City College of the City University of New York, she began with 53 participants and ended with 9 students fully completing the study (1997, p. 64). In Tinberg and Nadeau’s 2010 study of community college writers, they had to contact 85 potential participants before twenty students agreed to attend the orientation for the longitudinal study, and in the end, sixteen students participated, not all of whom met the qualifications sought in the original plan for the study (pp. 27-30). I considered myself fortunate to have 34 participants in the original study, even if not all of those 34 students fit the parameters I originally intended. In keeping with community college student trends, some of these students only attended MMCC during the semester of the study, while others completed their studies to earn an associate degree and/or transfer to a four-year university within the time frame.

Qualitative Component of the First Part of the Study

O'Neill, Moore, & Huot (2009) suggested when researching assessment to look for the tensions and gather multiple indicators about students, including “knowledge of the individual particularities, or differences, that are harder to measure but which have a significant impact on classroom learning and achievement” (p. 65). They proposed the following questions:

- Who are the (basic, first-year, honors-level, etc.) writers in the program?
- What are their similarities? Their differences?
- How are they identified as basic, first-year, honors, etc. – and why?
- What are their attitudes about education, writing, particular writing courses and the program?
- How might student identities, experiences, and attitudes shape assessment? (p. 65)

In crafting my own list of questions to ask student participants, I focused on their high school experiences and whether students felt prepared by those experiences for their current writing courses. The questions, as shown in Figure 11, were designed to ease students in, from being asked about the assignments they remember to being asked to evaluate their own work ethic and whether their grades reflected the work they put into their writing assignments. The goal of the interview portion of data collection was to provide insight into students' writing habits and requirements prior to their college experiences while also exploring whether high school GPA is a fair placement measurement for community college students.

Figure 11*Interview Questions*

1. What kinds of English classes did you have in high school? Describe the paper assignments you were given.
2. Do you feel that your high school experiences prepared you for college? How so?
3. How hard did you work on papers in high school? Explain.
4. Did your grades match the effort you put into the papers?
5. Did anything get in the way of working on school assignments?
6. What would you say is a good GPA? How important was it to you to achieve that GPA?
7. Do you think you were placed fairly into English classes at [MMCC]?
8. How would you describe the purpose of your [MMCC] writing class to a friend?

The first five questions were asked in order to learn more about the students' high school writing experiences than what could be gleaned from their high school transcripts. One of my hypotheses was that the difference in rigor across area high schools would have an impact on the reliability and validity of hsGPAs as a measurement for placement, so I wanted to learn about students' grading experiences. I also expected to hear that students' lives as well as their values regarding grades would also have an impact on the grades they achieved. I questioned whether hsGPA is a fair measurement for students who did not consider attending college until after they graduated from high school – in some cases, long after they graduated from high school. The question about the purpose of their MMCC writing course was added in case the state or MMCC

chose to pursue directed self-placement, as one necessary step toward developing an intake questionnaire is collecting data about students' understanding of first-year writing offerings. The final question was not analyzed as part of the study.

Coding the Interviews

I transcribed the focus group interviews by listening to the audio recordings and typing what I heard. This careful listening gave me first impressions of the data before I began coding (Saldaña, 2015; Richards, 2015). Each of the 15 transcripts were then loaded into Atlas.ti.

In initial coding, I created a color for each of the eight questions with multiple codes within that color. The questions I asked resulted in the following types of answers: closed numerical answers, a values spectrum, and open-ended responses. For numerical responses, I entered codes given by students as I went through the first round of coding; for example, creating a code for both "5 paragraphs" and "3 pages" as responses to how long papers were expected to be. Value questions that received a range of responses were coded as magnitudes for not only the yes or the no but also the definiteness of the response (Saldaña, 2015): any response from the student that was emphatic was labeled as either a hard yes or a hard no, where a positive or negative response that was neutral was labeled a yes or a no. Responses that were mixed are coded as "yes and no." As I coded, if any statement by the student could potentially illustrate the student's transcript history or preparation for college-level writing, I coded it as "other" to see whether I needed to expand the already existing codes or possibly create more codes during the second round of coding.

Some of the codes I created emerged from what students mentioned during the focus group sessions without being a direct result of the questions I asked. For example, some students

mentioned receiving feedback from their instructors or opportunities for revision or peer review. Even though not all students remarked on these components, I coded them as potential attributes in the first round as I knew enough students had mentioned them to merit inclusion.

Richards (2015) uses the term node to refer to where the researcher puts data. My coding was done by question nodes with the color-coding corresponding to the question for the most part, but as the topics arose in answers to other questions, the colors and codes were located in other question responses, too. Much of my coding is descriptive in that it can be reduced to a quantitative element: students wrote papers of X length, they had Y types of assignments or classes, they were in college preparatory classes. The topic codes helped me single out the individual statements about a topic; for example, the question of whether anything interfered with their learning could be reduced to how many students reported having extra curriculars or being susceptible to procrastination, but these codes could also be explored more deeply to see what students said about moments in their learning experiences.

That leads to my analytical codes. These are the codes that emerged after I did the first round of coding and started to notice trends in the interviews. The primary analytical code that arose was that it appeared students answered differently based on whether they were in traditional classes or college preparatory classes. In a deeper, secondary level of coding, I was able to sort the responses based on which students answered that they were in college preparatory classes (or had it indicated on their high school transcripts) and then do the same for students who explained that they were in traditional classes. I also had several areas flagged as “other” in my initial round of coding that I then determined either needed to be subsumed in an already existing code or have a new code created that was not based on the original questions/themes I intended to code in isolation.

Rather than group the data analysis by individual codes, in Ch. 5, I have primarily organized the analysis by student performance level. As much of the data analysis pertained to high school grade point averages as a multiple measure variable, I grouped students by hsGPA categories. These were informed by the placement decisions MMCC had made two years after the initial data collection semester. As the state coordinating board recommended 3.0 and above as a placement threshold beyond which students generally succeeded in transfer-level coursework, I used 3.0 and up as one grouping. Because MMCC had decided in 2020 to use 2.5 as the hsGPA that would permit students to take transfer-level coursework, that became another threshold, so the second grouping for analysis was 2.5-2.99. Since relatively few students had hsGPAs below 2.5, the remaining students in the sample were in a group together of 2.499 and under. I also further analyzed student qualitative data by how the students performed in their college writing classes, examining whether there were noticeable correlations between students' college writing paths and what they had reported about their high school writing experiences using a cluster matrix (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014).

Extending the Study Through Narrative Inquiry

Due to both the nature of working on a dissertation while continuing to teach full-time at a community college and the onset of the pandemic, my original plan from 2018 evolved into a longitudinal study. Students' paths and progress at the institution were studied as planned in the agreed upon two-year time span, and then based on those findings, I determined it would be useful to reconnect with some of the students in the study to discover more of the stories behind their college transcripts. These interviews built on the previous qualitative data while going

deeper into the individual stories using narrative inquiry (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Gordon, McKibbin, Vasudevan, & Vinz, 2007).

After assembling the cluster matrices for analysis in Ch. 5, I wanted to use narrative inquiry to “convey the multiplicity of truths or perspectives” and “constellations of particular actions, persons, or material circumstances” (Journet, 2012, pp. 19 and 17) that are often flattened by statistical analysis in larger studies. In *Economic Inequality, Neoliberalism, and the American Community College*, community college professor Patrick Sullivan (2017) stipulated community college research needs to move away from quantitative research with its focus on “modal and normative experience” and toward including “concrete individualized histories. This qualitative data set dramatically illustrates the role that structural and social variables play in the lives of individual community college students. These narratives also allow us to glimpse contingencies hidden by statistics and raw numbers” (p. 137).

Narrative continues to be an important research methodology in what Nickoson referred to as “teacher research” (2012, p. 101), the form of research often engaged in by both community college and basic writing research communities, adding that teacher researchers are in “a position to effectively learn not only *about* our students but also – and crucially – *from* them. We will be in the position to understand how they write and why, how they learn, and what their educational and literate goals are” (Nickoson, 2012, p. 111). Practitioner knowledge and narratives about students have often been used to supplement philosophical inquiry and experimental research in *The Journal of Basic Writing* (Degenaro and White, 2000). Laura Gray-Rosendale’s (2006) retrospective discussion of how basic writers have been defined in *Journal of Basic Writing* showed that whether students were being defined by their context or being used to reform basic

writing theory or to craft a set of curricular practices, the stories and contexts of the students were an important element to the articles and the work of basic writing scholars.

Marilyn Sternglass's 1997 book-length longitudinal study, *Time to Know Them: A Longitudinal Study of Writing and Learning at the College Level*, is perhaps the best example of how student narratives have been used successfully to make an argument about the success of basic writing as a program. Sternglass interviewed 53 students at the City College of City University of New York beginning in Fall 1989 and reported on their success rates in January of 1996. She found that "By examining what happens to student writing *over time* it is possible to make the argument that even the weakest students benefit by appropriate instructional prodding to achieve the levels required for academic success" (1997, p. 289). Sternglass crafted this argument by including students' narratives, both in chapters where several students' stories are consolidated under one theme and in a chapter of separate case studies.

Inspired by Sternglass, Tinberg and Nadeau set out "to give voice to students who have yet to be heard: community college writers" as there had not yet been a single large-scale full-length study of community college writers (2010, p. 19). In their study, they collected survey data from students and faculty, then interviewed students about their writing experiences across their first semester of taking courses at the community college in order to glean more of their stories. They concluded,

The challenges that these students face on a daily basis is very much part of the story here. At no time did we forget the struggle that so many community college students endured to get to the college. At no time did we forget the struggle that so many endure to persist. (Tinberg & Nadeau, 2010, p. 35)

Student voices were included in their study that student struggles—as well as their successes—may be more apparent to the reader. I am invoking Sternglass’ and Tinberg and Nadeau’s case study methods for much the same reasons.

In seeking an IRB extension, I crafted research questions that would help me learn from the students and the stories they could tell (see Figure 12). In this way, my study would not only be about placement concerns but also about how to help the students once they had started coursework. With the IRB extension granted, in August 2020, I set out to contact the students who had participated in the study two years prior.

Figure 12

Research Questions for the Continuation of the Study

What can we learn from the students who were in the previous study about where this standardized quantitative analysis of readiness for FYC misses other qualities and experiences students have had that impact their success rates?

- A. What do MMCC writers’ histories tell us about the diversity of writing experiences prior to college admission and its influence on their preparedness for college-level writing?
- B. To what extent does awareness and use of writing as a process prior to attending college help students succeed in their coursework?

What can we learn from students about how their college writing experiences help them succeed in passing FYC?

Figure 12 Continued

What non-academic factors and experiences do they believe significantly affected their ability to succeed or not in their courses?

Which interventions (instructional or interpersonal) provide meaningful support for writers?

I sent multiple emails to the 34 participants. Because some of the students had given me a personal email address in order to send their Daly-Miller Inventory results to them, I had both the official school email addresses and the one they were likely to use when no longer at the institution, although this was not true of all of the students in the group. Seven students responded, and four scheduled an interview with me on Zoom. I asked them to bring an artifact from one of their writing classes with them to the interview. This could be any paper or piece of writing that represented their work in a writing class at MMCC. My purpose here was to anchor the questions on an object to make students more comfortable with the initial questions in the interview before asking questions that were of a more personal nature. I also wished to discern what students had learned in their college writing classes and to what extent they needed additional support in order to complete their writing classes, or whether any outside circumstances interfered with their ability to succeed.

Figure 13***Individual Follow-up Interview Questions***

1. Tell me about the paper you are showing me: which class was it for? What was the assignment?
2. Please describe the writing process you used for this paper. How do you go about writing?
3. How was your process of writing this paper similar to or different from the process you used prior to your college writing experiences?
4. Tell me some of the thoughts you had while figuring out how you wanted to write this paper or what you wanted it to achieve.
5. Did you learn how to do these strategies or steps in that class [the one in Question 1] or a prior writing experience?
6. Of all the work you have done at [MMCC], why did you choose this paper to bring with you today?
7. Did COVID-19 interfere with your learning?
8. Did anything else interfere with your ability to write this paper (or other papers that semester)?
9. How confident were you when taking ENG 101 and 102 [or 95/96 if the student did not continue]? Explain.
10. Did you ever think about withdrawing from the class or worry you wouldn't pass? Or did you feel prepared? Explain.
11. Can you tell me about any support services you used when working on the paper? (like the [writing center], [early alert system] or an open lab, ask a friend, email the professor, etc). In what ways did your paper improve after receiving help?
12. Differentiated question:
 - For students with GPAs above 3.0: Do your grades in college roughly coincide with your grades in high school? Why or why not?
 - For students with GPAs between 2.5 and 3.0: Under [MMCC]'s new placement rules, you would have been placed into ENG 101 by your GPA instead of taking the placement test. Do you think you would have passed ENG 101 without taking ENG 95 or 96? Why or why not?
 - For students who are returning adults without a recent GPA to use:
(I don't think anyone with a lower GPA is still at the college taking courses, and I don't have a returning adult as a volunteer yet)
13. If time permits, end with a generic, "Anything else you would like to tell me about your success in college writing?"

As shown in Figure 13, questions 1-6 for the individual interviews focused on the writing process because the results from coding of the original interviews suggested that students who were more familiar with writing as a process and using rhetorical strategies were likely to be prepared for college-level writing assignments. I also wanted to see whether the students were able to articulate their writing decisions and what they had learned about writing while in college in order to determine whether there are experiences students should have before being placed into transfer-level coursework. Question 7 about COVID-19 was a necessity to see whether students' college experience was significantly impacted by the pandemic. It also served as a transition to ask more personal questions about their semesters at MMCC. Questions 8-11 focused on matters of persistence and retention. What were the students' experiences while taking classes? What obstacles did they experience? If they needed additional support, where did they receive it? Question 12 was asked because MMCC had, in between the two parts of the study, implemented a new placement procedure that uses hsGPA as the main placement variable for placing students into transfer-level coursework for both math and English. The final question was added to invite students to share additional information with me; it served as a graceful exit from the interview and gave me an opportunity to thank them for their participation. The follow-up interviews took place between November 2020 and January 2021.

When I interviewed the students individually, all of them indicated an interest in participating in another session where they would be interviewed as a group with the other students who had participated in the follow-up interviews. Prior to asking students to participate in the focus group setting, I had drafted multiple questions for the group that related to the assignments given in ENG 101 and ENG 102, as a way to synchronize with and continue the coding of themes from the first interview. I moved away from this research design for two

reasons: 1) only two of the four students in the follow-up had completed ENG 101 and ENG 102, and 2) all four students incidentally defined personal success in their interviews. My purpose in interviewing the students together was to seek out the commonalities and the shared experiences, where students would be more inclined to open up if they heard other students expressing similar ideas or shared topics. I discarded any questions that focused on the different class levels and assignments that could divide the students and shifted to the questions in Figure 14 in order to inquire about success instead, a topic that would also be a positive experience for those being interviewed.

Figure 14

Focus Group Questions

1. Before starting college, what was your expectation of what college would be like? (1b. Where did you get most of your ideas about what college would be like?)
2. What did you expect in your writing class(es)?
3. How do you define whether or not you have succeeded in a class? Or in college overall?
4. Tell me about how you feel about grades.
5. Last question: As you know I am working on placement research. How did you know that you were in the right writing class? Or what made you think that you could have done fine in a more challenging class? Or, if you needed more help, what made you feel that way?

The first question arose from one of the interviews with the students, as she explained why she did not have any idea of what to expect from her writing courses when coming to

college, and I wanted to hear more along these lines of inquiry from the other students.

Additionally, one of my hypotheses in the original group of interview questions was that students who were in traditional, non-college preparatory high school English classes do not expect for their college classes to be much different from their high school experiences, so I wanted to hear from students what their assumptions were about college writing courses and where those assumptions were formed. Another issue that I was deliberating on was how to best measure success of placement assessment, as grades are not always accurate measures of whether or not students have succeeded (Elliot et al., 2012), yet they are used as the primary measure to represent success in correlation studies. I asked questions 3 and 4 in order to observe how the students perceive their grades and whether they see them as accurate reflections of their learning or not. Since all of the students in the group reported a sense of accomplishment from their time in their English classes, I wanted to ask them for other potential ways to measure student success beyond grades.

Unfortunately, my plan for a focus group had to change. Although several of the students agreed upon a date for the focus group, their plans changed as the day approached. One student contacted me in advance, and I was able to interview her separately a week before the scheduled focus group. The morning of the focus group, one student was called into work. Another did not attend the interview or respond to additional contact. I interviewed the student in attendance and then contacted the remaining students and was able to reschedule with the student who had been called into work, so of the four students who were supposed to participate in the focus group, three participated individually and answered the questions I had designed to be answered in a group setting. These interviews took place in April 2021.

The student narratives serve as a counterstory to the types of studies discussed in Ch. 2 and are a vital part of this dissertation that focuses on community college students as the narratives explore both the complexity of the students' experiences as well as strongly suggest that placement assessment researchers need to redefine how success is measured for community college students.

CHAPTER V

ANALYSIS OF THE COLLECTED MULTIPLE MEASURES VARIABLES

In this chapter, I share the findings from the initial data collection in the study, explaining how my process changed from trying to assemble a potential multiple measures placement assessment protocol for MMCC to questioning whether high school grade point average is static enough of a signifier to serve as a main component of placement for community college writing courses. I begin with the more quantitative aspect of the multiple measures study. This portion will briefly examine the negative findings from the Daly-Miller Inventory before delving into what can be ascertained from the much more extensive analysis of the high school grade point average (hsGPA) data from this group of community college students.

The lengthy focus on hsGPA was motivated by an external factor, namely that in the time since my sabbatical semester for data collection in 2018, MMCC switched from reliance on placement exams to use of hsGPA as a variable for placing students in a multiple-singular measures style of placement. While the college continues to collect placement measures that can be considered multiple, the individual variable that results in the highest placement for each student is the variable used for placement. As of Fall 2020, students only take the placement test when all other potential variables have been exhausted without resulting in a transfer-level placement; hence, my analysis of the potential hsGPA thresholds and the results for actual MMCC students had opportune timing. As I was executing the more detailed analysis of the hsGPA data from my 2018 study, I was also reading and questioning the methods and limitations of the multiple measures study results summarized in Ch. 2, which meant that as I discovered issues within the multiple measures assessment (MMA) research, I was also examining a data set

that, through multiple methods, could elucidate why the larger MMA experiments yielded success for some student demographics and not for others.

After all of my 2018 MMCC data was collected and coded, I sorted the data and found that had MMA rules been applied to this sample of students, the rules would have either placed too few students in FYC or far too many. Instead, the qualitative data I'd collected in the form of interview responses provided a potential account for why the quantitative data alone is insufficient to place students at the community colleges. Neither the scores from placement exams nor the hsGPAs were as predictive of course success in transfer-level vs. developmental coursework as the interview answers about the types of courses students took in high school and the types and amount of papers written for those courses. The negative findings call into question the appropriateness of a one-size-fits-all multiple measures approach for this community college. Furthermore, the interview data revealed that the high school transcript data was not indicative of whether students had received multiple and varied writing assignments in high school, experiences that not only appear to have an impact on students' college preparation but also on their perception of what to expect from college-level writing courses.

Daly-Miller Inventory of Writing Apprehension: Not a Successful Measure for Placement

Many multiple measures assessments use a noncognitive measure to determine a student's motivation, attitudes, or emotions in an effort to gauge whether the student will be able to persist in coursework. The TYCA White Paper for Placement Reform recommends including noncognitive measures in a multiple measures placement assessment (Klausman et al., 2016), and I was seeking measures that had more direct construct representation, so I wanted a noncognitive measure for my study that would have at least some connection to writing

coursework. As stated in Ch. 4, I and several of my colleagues had been using the Daly-Miller Inventory of writing apprehension in our basic writing classes to informally discuss writing anxiety with our students, and the instrument was free to use both in my classes and for the purposes of the study, so I had greater hope of being able to use it more widely in an assessment protocol had it shown some correlations between writing apprehension levels and success rates in the classes.

The Daly-Miller Inventory was designed to assess a student's level of apprehension about writing for a variety of purposes and audiences (1975a); Daly and Miller were careful to explain that they were attempting to measure perceptions and predispositions that were not being captured in other writing assessments like the SAT (1975b). Daly and Miller (1975a) argued that students' attitudes toward writing have an influence on whether they attempt writing projects or even whether they take writing courses, and these perceptions or attitudes deserve to be considered alongside measurements of writing ability.

Scores for the Daly-Miller Inventory are divided into three ranges: 60-96, a middle range where students "may manifest signs of writing apprehension in performing certain writing tasks;" 97-130, a low level of writing apprehension, where at the extreme end, students may have a "troublesome" lack of apprehension and unwillingness to heed feedback; 26-59, a high level of writing apprehension, where students will be nervous and possibly fearful of their writing being evaluated and may avoid situations where writing is required. Daly and Miller had found a higher incidence rate of high writing apprehension in students taking basic writing classes and a higher incidence rate of students with low writing apprehension scores in advanced writing courses. I had hypothesized that students who had placement test scores or hsGPAs in ranges that suggested they might be able to succeed in transfer-level coursework who had failed classes

might have been impacted by their writing apprehension levels, but this did not turn out to be the case. The Daly-Miller Inventory scores were not useful for placement purposes at MMCC because they did not correlate to success rates.

Because of technical difficulties with the Daly-Miller Inventory in the first days of my study, only 16 students had Daly-Miller scores that could be used. The group of 16 students had a wide range of hsGPAs, races, ages, and course placements, so I do not think the small sample was skewed, only small. Two of the sixteen students had high writing anxiety, but both passed ENG 101 with an A. Four of the sixteen students had low writing anxiety; two of these students passed ENG 101 with an A, one passed ENG 101 with a B, and one passed ENG 92 (a pass/fail course). In the overall group of sixteen students, only two failed or withdrew from a course; both had writing anxiety that fell in the middle ideal range, a 74 and 84, respectively. These initial numbers suggest that the level of writing anxiety students believe they have does not correlate with their overall success in the course they are taking. It may have an impact on how they feel about the course or how they feel during the course, but the students' actual capability does not appear to be altered by their level of anxiety in this study. For this reason, the measure of a writing anxiety score was dropped from further study.

Quantitative Findings: A Shifting Mindset

At the onset of my study, I collected data from my local context under the presumption that some of the measures would be more predictive and fairer to students than the placement test scores because placement tests measure a narrow construct that is unrelated to MMCC's primary course objectives and the tests had been creating disparate impact for Black students. Prior to my data collection, the multiple measures studies that I had read were in early phases, so they

reported only initial results, which were that MMA was placing students into transfer-level courses in higher percentages than when schools relied on placement exams alone (Barnett et al., 2018; Cullinan et al., 2018). This was expected, as many multiple measures placement protocols use methods where if a student has a measure that suggests success, it is used directly as the multiple-singular measure for entry into transfer-level coursework, or the measures that suggest longitudinal data (like hsGPA) are given more weight than a single test taken on one day without any preparation.

Even in the initial reports, I began to notice a trend where positive multiple measures take-aways were promoted even though within the reports, there were indications that the placement method was not working well for all student demographics. For instance, in the New York study, 41.5% of the students were placed into transfer-level English coursework who would have previously placed into developmental classes (Barnett et al., 2018, p. 35), but the overall enrollment in and completion of college-level courses had less than a 5% difference between the program group and the control group (p. 39). Students of color were placed into transfer-level courses at higher rates than previously, but they were not passing in equal measure; 72.9% of Black students enrolled in transfer-level coursework for the program group, but only 42% passed the class (p. 45). The increased placement in transfer-level coursework was reported as a success, and yet the students who were paying for transfer-level courses and either withdrawing from them or failing them at higher rates were not given attention within the published report. This was of concern to me, as I knew from institutional research at MMCC that students who are misplaced into ENG 101 when unprepared for it often take ENG 101 only to fail or withdraw multiple times rather than opt to take a basic writing course; those failures also often put the students on academic probation, as the grade in ENG 101 impacts their overall

GPA while the grade in a basic writing course does not. I began to pay more attention to the failure and withdrawal rates in the studies, often needing to discern them for myself from the numbers published in charts.

In terms of the work I was doing with the student data I had collected, I had learned that a change in the documentation process at MMCC meant that some students' high school transcripts were now saved in the system, so I was able to request available high school transcripts for students in the study, as all had signed permission for me to view and use their transcript information as part of the study. My initial data analysis focused on the accuracy of self-reported hsGPA compared to the cumulative GPA on an official high school transcript. I then analyzed the GPA findings by hsGPA thresholds. Because of what I was observing in initial coding of the transcript data as well as in national MMA studies, I was particularly interested in the journeys of students who had not been in college preparatory classes and/or who had hsGPAs below a 3.0, as I was concerned that these students were frequently either removed from the large multiple measures study samples or relegated to lesser significance because they were not part of the multiple measures assessment success story. One of the prevailing issues in multiple measures research is that students need to be removed from the sample because of missing information. I endeavored to keep as many of the students of the study in the samples as possible, examining each piece of collected information for what it added to both individual stories and the overall narrative at MMCC.

High School Transcripts Not Standardized

I was concerned that the local high schools might have differences in rigor, so I collected a variety of information from the transcripts wherever possible: class rank, class percentile,

SAT/ACT scores, grades in junior and senior level English classes, whether students were in college preparatory or honors classes. What I found was that the lack of standardization across area high schools made this data collection difficult. Some of the schools had all of the information I sought for students in the study housed in a two-page transcript. At times, only the first page of the transcript was downloaded into the system, so the information was partial. In other circumstances, the schools either did not record some of the data I was trying to collect on the transcript, or the information was unavailable for that particular student. The frequent absence of SAT and ACT scores was especially surprising given the high percentage of recent graduates in the study who attended high schools where the SAT or the ACT was provided as a standardized test free of charge for them to take on campus during a school day.

What was particularly frustrating is that the names of the English courses were often not descriptive at all. Several area high schools have courses labeled “English 1” through “English 8” that do not indicate more than the overall discipline. Other courses were more clearly labeled as either writing or literature classes, but students reported a variety of experiences where some of the literature courses could require more writing from students than a course labeled writing on another student’s transcript. An expository writing course in sophomore year could require researched writing with an MLA-style works cited page, while a senior level writing course could have a lengthy “research project” that was primarily personal narrative or the research was limited to an annotated bibliography without a longer research paper being assigned. For these reasons, I did not utilize course names, grades in specific classes, class rank, or class percentile as variables that were examined on their own. Belfield and Crosta (2012) arrived at the same conclusion via different research methods. Like the Belfield and Crosta study, my study did not have transcripts for all students, nor did each transcript record the class rank and percentile. I

was, however, able to occasionally use the additional collected information for a more nuanced analysis of high school transcript data when comparing students who were otherwise similar. What I found in particular was that the high school English curriculum cannot be discerned from the transcript, and therefore the transcript data cannot be used as an accurate signifier of students' overall preparation for college writing courses.

High School GPA: Self-reported vs. Official Transcripts

Initial sorting of the high school grade point average data began with examining whether there were potentially troublesome differences between self-reported hsGPA and official hsGPA. Again, as I was working through the data analysis, some of my curiosity about this matter was driven by the move to use self-reported hsGPA as a main element of the new placement procedure at MMCC. While MMCC's home state recommended use of a 3.0 hsGPA or higher as the threshold for placement into transfer-level courses, the lower threshold of 2.5 was being used instead. Based on the research by Belfield and Crosta (2012), North Carolina had decided on 2.6 as the threshold (Goudas, 2017; North Carolina State Board, 2015). Other states in a multiple measures study varied from use of hsGPAs from 2.3 to 3.0 (Cullinan et al., 2019). Self-reported hsGPA has generally accepted as being accurate enough for use in a placement system (Cullinan et al., 2019; Sanchez & Buddin, 2016; Shaw & Mattern, 2009).

I first processed the data to standardize the reported and collected grade point averages, as some of the hsGPAs went to the tenths and others the hundredths, and some schools were on a five-point scale instead of a four-point scale. I then studied the hsGPAs separately to determine if there was a significant difference between self-reported and official high school grade point

averages and potential placements for students who had previously only been placed using placement test scores.

I had collected both self-reported and official hsGPA but was unable to gather both for all students in the sample. Thirteen of the students either did not have a high school transcript on record or had a transcript that did not list the cumulative hsGPA (38%; 13/34). In keeping with the studies about self-reported hsGPA, the majority of students self-reported their hsGPA accurately, with 7/21 students who had both types of GPA on record being entirely accurate (33%) and an additional nine students being within .2 points of their official GPA (9/21, 43%), so 76% of the students who had both types of GPA recorded were within .2 points of their official hsGPA. Of the five students who were off by .3 or more grade points, two students reported a hsGPA of .3 points higher, one student reported .5 higher, one student reported .9 higher, and one student reported .3 lower than the hsGPA recorded on the transcript. The students in the focus group had no reason to provide a higher self-reported hsGPA, as this information was only shared with me, and I was not in a position to change their placement. While some researchers may find the .2 points difference to be acceptable, in some cases, even a small discrepancy may create a different placement for the student, in possibly too easy or too difficult of a course, when hsGPAs are used as a highly weighted or single measure of a multiple-singular measures placement. Additionally, future research will be warranted when students become aware of the specific hsGPA threshold required for placement into transfer-level coursework at the institution.

GPA Thresholds for Placement

Before learning that MMCC had decided upon a 2.5 as the threshold, I analyzed my sample for how they would have placed had the CCRC recommended threshold of 2.6 been used. As stated earlier, some states like North Carolina, with a board of regents, had adopted 2.6 as the threshold across the entire state. In California, also a board of regents' state, the same GPA made students eligible for the Accelerated Learning Program (first-year composition with a support class). Because MMCC is in a state that has a coordinating board instead of a board of regents, they may select a different threshold than what is recommended by the state, as long as it is not higher than the recommendation, but should ideally do so as a data-informed decision.

If the self-reported GPAs from my study were to be used for placement in a system using the 2.6 GPA cut-off, then only three of the 31 students who supplied a self-reported hsGPA would have been placed into a developmental writing class, a mere 10% of the overall sample, much lower than the 25% offered as a placement threshold because it reduced the standard error rate of placement tests in one study (Sawyer, 1996, p. 280; Scott-Clayton, 2012, p. 8). If the placement system would instead require use of official hsGPA, again only three of the students would have been placed into developmental coursework, but not the exact same three students as with self-reported hsGPA. The number remains the same because two of the students who gave self-reported hsGPAs below 2.6 did not have transcripts on record, so they were not available to be in this second group. Two students moved over to the developmental side of the hsGPA threshold when their self-reported 2.8 hsGPA changed to 2.3 when the official transcript hsGPA was used. Again, whether self-reported hsGPA or official hsGPA were used would have resulted in a placement change for the individual students, something that was of little significance to the students in the study, as their placements were not going to be changed by the information they

gave me, but in a true multiple measures placement situation, this reported information would result in an extra semester of developmental coursework for some of the students or being placed into transfer-level coursework when potentially unprepared for the coursework for the students whose measures were on the other side of the threshold.

In some situations, community colleges choose to use an official hsGPA if it is available and then resort to self-reported hsGPA if the student cannot supply a high school transcript. If this convention were applied to the students in this study, then five of the 31 students who supplied a hsGPA of any kind would be placed into developmental coursework (5/31; 16%). Granted, the study is a small sample size and results may be skewed, but given the internal MMCC research regarding students who have been placed into ENG 101 who end up repeating the course with little success, it is fair to say that the placement level into transfer credit coursework would be too high if 2.6 were used as the threshold whether MMCC accepted self-reported hsGPA (28/31; 90%), official hsGPA (18/21; 86%), or the blended method of using self-reported hsGPA in the absence of official (27/31; 87%).

When the hsGPA threshold is moved higher to 3.0, the current recommended hsGPA for placement into transfer-level writing courses in MMCC's home state, the percentage of students in the study who would be placed into transfer-level coursework barely changes from the levels of placement when using only placement tests, depending on which metric is used. Eighteen of the students in the study were in at least one developmental English class in Fall 2018; two of the eighteen were co-enrolled in an ENG 96 class and an ENG 101 class with the same instructor as part of the Accelerated Learning Program (ALP). An additional two students were returning adults who had taken basic writing prior to enrolling in ENG 101 in the Fall 2018 semester. Even though eighteen students were in ENG 101 at the time of the study for a sample of 52% transfer-

level students, only fourteen of those students had placed directly into ENG 101 without any previous developmental requirements, so 41% (14/34) is the more accurate percentage when discussing transfer-level placement for the study sample. If the students in the study had been placed using only official hsGPA and using 3.0 as the cut-off boundary, then 52% of the students with a transcript on record would have placed into transfer-level coursework (n=11/21), but this is also a reduced sample, as only the students with transcripts on file were included. If using either self-reported hsGPA or the blended approach, 45% of the students would have placed into transfer-level coursework (n= 14/31). Once again, these would not have been the exact same cohort of students, as two students under-reported and two students over-estimated their hsGPA. Use of 2.6 as a threshold is too low for the MMCC demographics, but use of 3.0 only changes the entry rate into transfer-level coursework from 41% to 45%.

This is one of the major drawbacks to institutions using multiple-singular measures, as it effectively substitutes one problematic boundary for another, so students who exist on the edge of the threshold are forced into one category or the other without the benefit of the other, more multiple measures. A truer use of multiple measures would be to not only collect multiple measures but use at least two of them in conjunction with each other to form a more complete assessment of student ability (Estrem, Shepherd, & Sturman, 2018; Hassel & Giordano, 2011). While the hsGPA zone between 2.5 to 2.9 is a gray area for success, where some students may be able to succeed and others may need interventions, the zone at 3.0 and above does seem to indicate much stronger chances of success in transfer-level coursework. As will be discussed in the next section, the 3.0 threshold may be useful as a placement measure not because it signifies particular writing ability but because students within that zone tend to have experienced more of a variety of writing assignments than students below the threshold.

3.0 as a Measure for Students Who Were Already in ENG 101

As noted earlier, 3.0 is the current recommended hsGPA placement threshold in Midwest Metropolitan Community College's home state. All results indicate that the students in the MMCC study who had an official hsGPA of 3.0 or above from an American high school did very well in their transfer-level coursework. Eight students both tested into transfer-level coursework and had hsGPAs that would place them into transfer-level coursework as part of most multiple measures placement systems. All eight passed their ENG 101 classes, and the six students who enrolled in the next course in the sequence successfully completed it, too.

There was not a single uniting factor in the eight students' high school writing experiences, but there were some trends. Five of the students appear to have been in honors or college preparatory classes in high school. Five of the students directly mentioned having to write at least one paper of seven pages or longer. Most of the time the longer paper was also a research paper, but more students directly mentioned writing research papers (n=6) without necessarily requiring a length above three pages. One student, Nathan, was an outlier, as his final years of high school were spent in an alternative night school, where he mostly completed online worksheets that were fill-in-the-blank. He reported getting into trouble out of boredom in his earlier years of high school; it is entirely possible that he had the capability to have been in more challenging honors or college preparatory classes but was not permitted because of grades during his early years of high school. Nathan (Black male) and Miguel (Hispanic male) were the only students of color in this group of eight students, which means that this 3.0 threshold may continue to reinforce the problem of disparate impact for MMCC students.

The students with transcripts on file (n=6) for the most part had As and Bs for their senior year English classes, with most having all As and Bs in English courses overall, with two

exceptions: Alexis and Nathan. Alexis earned all Bs in high school English with one C; her overall high school rank was high, though. Once again, Nathan was the true outlier of this grouping, as he received Ds and Fs his freshman year but then all As and Bs in English after that, and those As and Bs came from an alternative school. The students with transcripts that noted class rank (n= 5) were all in the upper 50% of their class with two of them in the upper 25%. The few SAT scores reported for this group (n= 4) ranged from 970 to 1200, with a median score in the 1000 range. Each of the students who answered, “What is a good GPA” (n= 4) responded with a 3.0 or above, with one student stipulating that 3.0 would be good for university admission and 2.5 would be good for community college attendance.

With the exception of Nathan, the students in this group reported that they wanted to put effort into their work and have that effort rewarded with high grades. Emma discussed how her grades reflected her strong work ethic. Miguel, Kaitlyn, Makayla, and Kaylie all said their grades in high school matched their effort, which prepared them for ENG 101, where they felt they were placed fairly. Kaylie added that it was especially important for her to earn a strong high school grade point average, as her parents entered the workforce straight out of high school and wanted a different future for her. Even Alexis, who was the only student of this group to have Bs and Cs in her junior and senior year English classes reported that she worked very hard on her assignments but said that the teachers would grade the work down if it was not done their way; she had experience writing a variety of papers and felt that her placement into ENG 101 was correct. The students who had both a hsGPA above 3.0 and placement test scores that qualified them for transfer-level placement, with the exception of Nathan who equivocated when answering the question, indicated that they felt prepared for college-level writing assignments by their high school writing experiences.

The Official High School GPA 3.0 Threshold When Students Did Not Have High Test Scores

In this section, I examine the data from students whose placement test scores did not qualify them for transfer-level coursework but would have had their placement changed if high school grade point average had been applied as a measure. Three students in the study would have moved out of developmental coursework into transfer-level coursework using their official hsGPA; two more would have been added with the blended approach of using self-reported hsGPA if official hsGPA was unavailable. The five students make an interesting case for multiple measures placement at community colleges. Their placement test scores were not their only indicators of a need for additional support in their writing coursework; meanwhile, their hsGPAs of 3.0 or above were not the only indication of potential success. Because of this unique blending of signs of potential and signs of concern, I propose that the students would have been well-placed in an ALP pairing of courses.

ALP courses allow students to co-enroll in a transfer-level writing course while completing a basic writing or reading requirement. In 2018, in the writing ALP, students co-enrolled in special sections of ENG 96 and ENG 101 where both courses were taught by the same instructor, with the separate assignments and curricula in ENG 96 assisting students to complete the coursework in ENG 101. The developmental reading ALP courses had separate instructors for ENG 92 and ENG 101 but were to ideally have overlap of themes for reading and writing assignments. In both types of ALP, students from the developmental class would be in a section of ENG 101 with students they knew from the other class. The goal of this program is to get students into transfer-level coursework more quickly, while the developmental course

provides the pace, curriculum, and guidance that the students need in order to pass the transfer-level course.

The five students in this group (students who had a hsGPA at 3.0 or above but test scores below the transfer-level threshold) had a combination of factors that made them difficult to place accurately. The first two students, Sofia and Ava, were international students who believed their high school experiences in their home countries prepared them for college-level writing; both Sofia and Ava were unable to place directly into ENG 101 because of their reading scores. Neither student had a complete transcript on file, but Sofia's high school had provided a single sheet of information that certified she had graduated high school with an overall B average. In Sofia's initial interview, she said she felt she could have succeeded in ENG 101. In follow-up interviews two years later, she had changed her mind and reflected on how the first developmental reading class granted her time to develop her vocabulary, as she had never attended classes taught in English before entering college. Sofia indicated that she enjoyed writing but sometimes lacked confidence. After passing ENG 91, she took the second reading class as an ALP class and passed ENG 101 with an A while passing the 92 class in the same semester. Sofia also succeeded in ENG 102 and was on track to graduate with her associate's degree when I last spoke to her in the spring 2021 semester.

Ava self-reported having the equivalent to an American 3.0 hsGPA and discussed how grades were very important in her country of origin because, while college was free there, strong grades were needed for entry due to competitive enrollment. Indeed, her high school experience sounded quite rigorous; she was accustomed to writing papers that were three to four pages single-spaced and said she usually put 20 hours of work into her papers. She also noted that there were days that she would stay home from high school in order to work on her writing

assignments without distraction. When Ava took the placement test at MMCC, she was initially only two points away from not needing to take developmental reading, but upon retesting, she was unfortunately 4 points away; she therefore placed into the second level of developmental reading. Ava complained that the reading class was a difficult, time-consuming class. Students were required to read entire novels and understand them at more than a comprehension level. She later passed both ENG 101 and 102 with an A. Had she taken ENG 92 as an ALP course, she likely would have been able to take and pass ENG 101 and ENG 102 a semester earlier. As it stood, she was eligible to do so based on her placement test scores but perhaps chose not to since she was participating in athletics at the college, and ALP requires enrolling in six hours of English in one semester. It is also possible that she could have passed ENG 101 and 102 without taking the ENG 92 class first. I did not have the opportunity to re-interview Ava or permission to examine her progress outside of the English department, but her comments about the length and extent of her writing requirements in her high school suggest she was better prepared for ENG 101 than most of the students in this grouping.

Unlike Sofia and Ava, Charlie experienced a mixture of successes and failures at the community college. His official hsGPA of 3.2 would generally be regarded as a sign that he could succeed in college. When asked, he said he felt that high school had prepared him for college-level writing. Having a high GPA wasn't "the most important thing" to him, and he elaborated that he generally tried to avoid failing yet didn't stress out about what his final grade would be beyond that. His high school writing assignments varied in length anywhere from one and a half pages to 5-10 pages in length; the longer assignments were written using the writing process with feedback given in advance through peer editing and teacher response. Again, all of these signs point to likely college writing success. When asked whether he felt he was placed

accurately, he said the placement test was not an appropriate measure of his ability, but he was not upset by his placement into ENG 96 because the work was easier than what he was being asked to do in high school. Charlie did not mention anything about having to take a course that does not carry transfer-level credit, so it is possible that he did not realize he was required to take a class as a prerequisite he might not need.

At the end of the semester, Charlie submitted a portfolio of his two best essays and a cover letter to be graded anonymously by basic writing instructors. The readers do not know if the student is in ENG 95, ENG 96, or ALP, and they rate the portfolio with the level of course they think the student needs next. One of his first two readers assessed his work as still being at ENG 96 level, so his portfolio went to a third reader, who said that his work was ready for ENG 101. He failed his first semester of ENG 101 but earned an A in the following semester. It is difficult to say how Charlie would have fared had he placed directly into ENG 101. Researchers from CCRC and CAPR would likely say that the basic writing class was detrimental to Charlie's experience as it taught him he did not have to write to his high school standards, or the pass/fail nature of the class meant he didn't try very hard to succeed. Basic writing proponents would question whether Charlie would try to take ENG 101 again had failing ENG 101 been his first experience with a college writing class. As he had specifically mentioned in his interview that his goal for his high school grades was to avoid failing, I was surprised by the F on his college transcript, especially given his official hsGPA of a 3.2. Very few Fs are assigned in ENG 101 at MMCC, representing a mere 5.2% of the grades given in the Spring 2019 semester when Charlie took ENG 101. If a student stops attending the course, most instructors assign a W for withdrawal. An F may sometimes represent a serious case of plagiarism, or it may mean he

stopped attending but needed the letter grade instead of a W for various reasons pertaining to academic or insurance eligibility.

While Charlie had reported positive writing experiences in high school, all of Hannah's experiences seemed to be negative, which appear to have left her with a lasting impression that she was unable to succeed in writing, yet she succeeded anyway! Hannah was placed into the second level of basic writing without any developmental reading requirements, so she was able to take the class co-enrolled with ENG 101 as an ALP course. Her self-reported hsGPA was a 3.0, but Hannah believed her grades in high school English courses to be inflated. Hannah was the rare student who complained that she wanted to have been placed in ENG 95 and that her high school teachers passed her along when her work was not strong enough. She said her high school English teacher assigned an A to her research paper even though the teacher had "straight out" told her "her paper sucked." Hannah's issue with writing was that she wrote too much, which is generally a problem that the professors in entry-level writing courses find easier to approach than a student who writes too little. Her basic writing portfolio was rated as proficient by two readers; she earned an A in ENG 101. The placement of an ALP course seems to have been accurate for her, as she was able to succeed in the paired classes in spite of initially believing she needed ENG 95. Had Hannah placed herself, she would have taken at least one semester longer to enter transfer-level coursework at MMCC; had she been placed by GPA alone, she would have likely entered as a transfer-level student but without the support of the ALP class, where she was likely given feedback on how to stay on topic and revise her initial drafts.

One-on-one attention was something that the last student of the group of five was accustomed to in her high school writing experiences. Tiffanie had an overall hsGPA of 3.4 with

a class rank in the upper 34%. According to Tiffanie's transcript, she was in traditional, non-honors English classes in high school, earning As and Bs; one section of her transcript was labeled as special education that had two learning strategies courses listed for her junior and senior year. This presents another issue for use of high school transcripts in college placement: many transcripts are designed to prevent a reader from discerning whether a student was in alternative classes or received services for an individualized education program (IEP) or 504 plan. The registrar from one area high school explained that at their high school, only an honors class should receive special designation and the designation would be in the title of the course, as in Honors Algebra. When I inquired about the presence of a study skills or learning strategies course being on a transcript for four years, the registrar indicated that it could mean anything from the student having an extra hour in their schedule to use of an IEP or 504 plan, but she said that at most of the local high schools, a learning strategies course would not be a special education class, nor would there be any designations on the transcript that indicated any tracking or any use of accommodations.

Tiffanie's high school transcript specifically labeled the section "special education," and Tiffanie also mentioned having an IEP during her interview with me and another student. She listed several medical and mental health conditions that could have each individually been reason for an IEP; additionally, she did not have an easy home life. Tiffanie's overall hsGPA of 3.4 would certainly be over the threshold to place her into transfer-level coursework if used in a multiple-singular measures system. If she were meeting with an academic advisor who had the time to delve into the transcript, the advisor might notice the two supplemental instruction courses the junior and senior year and be able to ask Tiffanie whether she felt she needed additional support in her college coursework. Based on her forthcoming nature during our

interview, I believe Tiffanie would have discussed many issues with an academic advisor, who might then explain we have several course offerings to choose from with varying levels of support.

When I asked whether Tiffanie felt high school prepared her for college-level writing, she was adamant with her “no” and added that she wasn’t able to start a paper on her own. She said once she got started, the ideas usually flowed from there, but “if no one would start it for me, then it would never get done.” Tiffanie explained that one of her teachers “physically wrote” the paper for her when she was in a support course where she received individual attention to enable her to begin writing the papers due in her junior and senior level English classes, papers that Tiffanie said earned Bs. Tiffanie had to write a 10- to 15-page research paper in one of those courses. She was ultimately successful in her English program coursework at MMCC, earning an A in ENG 101 as a stand-alone course after completing her developmental requirements and then a C in ENG 102. Without further information, it is difficult to discern whether Tiffanie needed the developmental coursework or could have succeeded in ENG 101 without taking it first.

I would advocate for ALP to be a practical, appropriate placement for the students in this grouping. Hannah and Tiffanie both directly stated that they did not feel prepared for college-level English courses; they seemed to welcome additional support. Their grades in the ENG 101 and 102 courses suggest that the support they received from either the reading or basic writing courses was sufficient to aid them in transfer-level coursework. In Sofia’s later interview about her path to graduation, she admitted that she needed at least one of the reading courses, although she might have been able to pass her classes without taking both of them. Being able to use the ENG 92 class to ask additional questions and receive guidance from the ALP instructor played a part in her success not only in the ENG 101 class but beyond. It is more difficult to discern an

apropos path for both Ava and Charlie, as they both expressed some confidence in their writing ability and had high school writing experiences that are generally indicators of potential success in ENG 101 and yet also indicated that the college courses were a struggle for them (Ava's difficulty with the ENG 92 homework, Charlie's F in ENG 101 and almost F in ENG 96). As someone who has taught all levels of basic writing and FYC including ALP at MMCC, I would feel most comfortable with the five students (who were not placed into FYC by placement test scores but would have by hsGPA) in an ALP environment for a few reasons: 1) The students complete their developmental requirements in the same semester that they earn transfer-level credit for ENG 101, 2) They could receive additional one-on-one in-class assistance to help them through any of their struggles while also benefiting from seeing the writing abilities of students placed directly into ENG 101, 3) Being in the ALP cohort would hopefully result in learning that it is appropriate to ask for support from any of the student services offered at the college.

The blend of qualitative and quantitative data from these five students suggests that the self-reported hsGPA of 3.0, while being a successful measure for some students at the community college, may not be an accurate representation of a student's writing ability if there are other reasons for concern and/or if the student was not in college preparatory English classes. Answers regarding the student's prior writing experiences were more informative of the student's holistic writing ability than additional information from the high school transcript in these cases, particularly questions about how prepared they felt for college-level writing assignments and the range of writing assignments they'd been given in high school. The information in this section is pertinent to potentially explaining why some students who have been placed by high school grade point average as a primary measure do not always succeed in their first semester of transfer-level English classes. It also suggests that even though the 3.0

hsGPA has been a fairly predictive measure of success for most students, it could be an even more predictive measure if used in conjunction with other information instead of as a multiple-singular measure, particularly when students earned 3.0 or higher hsGPAs without taking English courses that require multiple, varied essay assignments.

High School GPA: Below 2.5

While much research has been done regarding how students who have hsGPAs with a B average or above generally fare well in college coursework, not as much has been written about the students at the other end of the spectrum. Basic correlational logic suggests that students who passed their high school coursework with As and Bs would be likelier to pass college-level coursework than the students who earned Cs, Ds and/or Fs in high school. Belfield & Crosta's findings of a .6 point GPA unit difference between overall high school GPA and college GPA (2012, p. 17 and p. 39) have been used as justification for setting a placement threshold that would enable students to have a passing grade point average even though the .6 is an average and not a guarantee. Correlations between high school grades and college grades are stronger when the students have been in honors classes (Koretz et al., 2014), and hsGPA is more predictive for students who have graduated within a year or two than for students who have delayed enrollment (Hodara & Lewis, 2017). Further, in a study of students who attended four-year institutions, hsGPAs were more predictive of college success at the upper end of the threshold than at the lower (Allensworth & Clark, 2020). In my study, I examine what happens to the students who were not honors students earning high marks. What happens to the students who earned hsGPAs below the generally accepted thresholds for placement into transfer-level coursework, and what do their stories suggest about placement into community college writing courses?

The students in this grouping all had official or self-reported hsGPAs below 2.5 and generally expressed that they had never planned to attend a community college, let alone apply to a selective four-year university. All of the students in the study with hsGPAs below a 2.5 had at least one failing grade or course withdrawal on their MMCC record for English classes. Two of the five students who were in this group were later interviewed as an extension of my study, so more of Dylan and Camille's stories will be shown in Ch. 6. All five students stopped attending MMCC after the initial year of my study (2018-2019 academic year). The ethnicities of this group are a reversal of the ethnicities of the 3.0 grouping earlier in this chapter: four of the students are Black, with Dylan being the only White student.

Camille was at the higher end of the hsGPA for this grouping; she was in the second semester of her third attempt at attending MMCC when she was interviewed in Oct. 2018. She had started in 1991 and then taken an extensive break until 2012, which led to a shorter but still considerable break until 2018. Her high school transcript noted an official hsGPA of 2.3, but that GPA was from more than 20 years ago and was part of a hand-written transcript! Camille felt it was unfair that when she restarted at the college in 2018, her prior coursework in developmental English at MMCC was not considered and she had to retest, resulting in placement into ENG 91 and ENG 95, which she passed without problem. She was permitted to skip the second levels of basic writing and go directly to the transfer-level course. According to Camille, she would have passed ENG 101 had she had a different instructor, but she also continued to have the kinds of struggles in her life that had sidetracked her in her earlier studies. For Camille, success in the course was not dependent solely on her academic ability.

Lamar's hsGPA was just below Camille's at a 2.2, which placed him in the 25th percentile for class rank at his school. He had earned Cs and Ds in his high school English

classes, with one B. In the interview, he indicated that he found only one of his high school classes to be interesting, yet essays for this course were five-paragraph essays that the students had to write without any instruction or feedback; he earned a C in this class in high school. It should be noted that when the students who earned a 3.0 hsGPA or above were asked about essay length, they stipulated how many pages the paper had to be, not how many paragraphs. This suggests that the students like Lamar were being asked to write to more of a formula than the students who gave page lengths. When asked if high school prepared him for college-level writing, Lamar's answer was "no." Lamar also admitted during the interview his only concern regarding grade point average in high school was for sports eligibility, so sometimes he had someone else write his essays for him in order to keep his grades up. Lamar's placement scores were high enough that he was placed in the upper level developmental courses instead of needing to take ENG 95 and ENG 91. He finished ENG 96 but did not pass the portfolio (earned a Progress Repeat, which is a softer form of an F) and he withdrew from ENG 92.

Jasmine had a self-reported hsGPA of 2.1. She had graduated five years prior and had taken the placement tests during her senior year of high school. These scores had required her to take one semester of the second level of developmental reading. When she enrolled five years after graduating, she was not told she could retest, but she was able to take ENG 92 as part of an ALP combination with ENG 101. Jasmine reported that her high school writing experiences did not prepare her for college, since not much writing was assigned even in the courses that were labeled writing. She only remembered having to write two papers in all of high school, and both were five-paragraph essays. When I spoke to her midway through her first semester at MMCC, she said that college was much easier than she had expected and she wished she had attended earlier. Many of her responses suggested that she would be able to succeed in college: she was

more focused now than in high school, she felt the effort she put into college assignments was reflected in her grades, and her course schedule gave her time to do her coursework in between class days. She did say that the books that were assigned in ENG 92 were boring and she also believed that she should have been placed into a transfer-level course, even though she was already enrolled in the transfer-level ENG 101 class as part of ALP. Later that semester, Jasmine withdrew or was withdrawn from both courses. At MMCC, students must remain in ENG 92 through the thirteenth week of class in order to remain in the co-enrolled ENG 101 class. As stated earlier, the reading ALP does not always directly pertain to the ENG 101 writing assignments, so it is possible that Jasmine was struggling in both ENG 92 and ENG 101. While Jasmine sounded confident during our interview, she also had to overcome her lack of writing experience in high school, which was also five years ago at that point.

Dionte had an official hsGPA of 1.9. He took ENG 92 and ENG 96 in his first semester and passed both classes in fall 2018. In our interview, he reported that the classes were very easy, and he felt that high school had prepared him for the work he was doing in them. His grades for high school English varied: 2 As, 2 Bs, 2 Cs, and 2Ds with his senior year having a C- and D+. The senior year classes were both labeled “English IV.” His class rank percentile was a 33, and his SAT score was an 880. In his junior year of high school, in a class referred to on his transcript as “Cont themes in lit,” he recalled having to read a book— not multiple books: a book. In his senior year, he had to do a research paper and write a variety of types of papers, like narrative and persuasive, but each paper was around 2 pages in length. He was able to complete his work in both high school and college because he was given time in class to write. Dionte withdrew from or was withdrawn from ENG 101 in his second semester of college. Dionte’s case is interesting because in spite of needing to keep his grades up for participation in sports during

high school, his GPA was still quite low, dipping to a 1.2 his junior year. This suggests that he was not always able to complete his assignments or study for tests. He was able to succeed in the developmental courses, where the pace is generally slower and more class time is given for students to complete their work than in the transfer-level courses, but upon completion of those courses and entry into ENG 101 with the faster pace and higher expectations (and less in-class time for assignments), he did not complete the class and did not attempt to retake it.

Like Dionte, Dylan had a hsGPA below 2.0. Although her transcript was not on file, she self-reported a hsGPA of 1.7. In her follow-up interviews with me, she explained that she was more interested in the social aspect of high school than anything academic. In fact, she did not apply herself until she was taking college courses, and her ability to buckle down and use her afternoons to focus on schoolwork surprised her mother because this was a new activity for her. Dylan did not ultimately succeed in college. She had health concerns that prevented her from completing her first semester and then also withdrew from her second semester before moving out of state and discontinuing her college education. Both Dylan and Dionte's experiences suggest that students who have hsGPAs below 2.0 may need additional instruction and support in order to succeed in the long term at MMCC.

If A and B hsGPAs are used as evidence of preparedness for transfer-level coursework, then the opposite end of the spectrum needs more attention in placement research: C, D, and F hsGPAs could be a signal that the students may need more intervention and support to pass their classes, *even when they are in developmental classes*. Open admissions schools cannot afford to ignore the needs of this part of the student population. If the student could not maintain a 2.5 hsGPA and graduated from high school recently, then he or she may need instruction in student skills in order to keep up with the demands of college-level homework and the self-

accountability needed for college classes, even when placed in the slower-paced developmental classes. While basic writing courses are often considered pre-college and therefore easier classes for some students, for others, these courses may be the most writing they have been required to do in a semester. Many developmental education professors embed study skills into their courses, but this may need to be a more overt part of the developmental programmatic objectives. Basic writing teachers may need to partner with the tutoring center to make early interventions and additional tutoring available as a default element of the course, although not all students will require it. As seen with this group of students, they often have a false confidence in their abilities, as they perceive the work as easy even when they are not necessarily passing the class at the time. By the time the students who do need intervention are referred to student services, the student is often already on the path to withdraw or be withdrawn from the course. Because not all students with hsGPAs at a C grade level or below will need additional assistance, we should be careful not to add additional courses or time requirements to lengthen the developmental pipeline for this group.

What is under-recognized about community college students is how many of the students are unsure of their place at the college, unsure whether higher education is something they really want to achieve, both before and after enrolling. When some of the students start the enrollment process, they have not always already decided whether or not they will follow through to register and take courses. Jasmine stated that she wished she had started college sooner after graduating from high school, but then she also withdrew and did not return to the college. Lamar and Dylan both admitted to not keeping up with their high school work, which in some ways is an admission of culpability in not being prepared for college-level work, but both students also seemed to arrive at the college without any expectations or thoughts about what college would

require from them. Because of these observations, I asked students in the follow-up interviews about what they expected college to be like and what had formed those impressions. Further research is needed to understand the expectations or presumptions about college-level work from students who were not initially planning to attend college. These students cannot all be painted with the same brush as people who opted not to enroll after discovering they needed additional coursework before taking ENG 101; some of them had never fully opted in.

As seen in this section, some of the students sounded very confident about their chances of success when I spoke to them at midterm but then did not pass the class. Jasmine felt her classes were easier than expected, but she did not complete the two English courses she was taking the semester of the interview. Likewise, Dionte was self-assured while in ENG 96, stating that high school had definitely prepared him for college writing because some of the other students in the class would put sentences in their introduction like, “I’m about to write this,” so he felt equipped to pass the portfolio because, as he said, “Yeah, I know better [than to write a sentence like that].” Dylan also complained that her English classes were easy, but said that she was needing to complete homework for the first time. None of these students seemed to expect the semester or the assignments to grow more challenging.

Lamar was another student who seemed to be succeeding at midterm; he said he was writing all of his essays and he expected to pass. He submitted a portfolio, but the essays were not strong enough to pass the class. Lamar blamed high school English teachers for not really teaching him, saying, “They just tell you write a [*sic*] essay and you should know what the essay is, I guess. They don’t ever go over how they are going over it now.” He added that high school did not prepare him for critiquing the work so much. Lamar could see that his basic writing class

had a different curriculum and pedagogy from what he'd experienced in four years of high school.

What is also not discussed in multiple measures literature for students with high school grade point averages at a C level is how passing a developmental class can be something the student celebrates as a large success. Even though Lamar did not pass his ENG 96 class, he reached the stage where he submitted his essays as part of a portfolio, presumably and hopefully essays of his own writing and revising, and he had to overcome his high school framework where merely submitting an essay related to the topic was enough to earn a passing grade. Similarly, Dylan did not pass a single class at MMCC, but she discovered for the first time that she could apply herself when writing papers, and based on the papers she submitted to me as part of our later interview process, she went from submitting work that was heavily plagiarized to writing her own paragraphs. For some students, getting prepared for transfer-level coursework *should* take more than one semester, especially considering the course is trying to teach in sixteen weeks what was not achieved after K-12 completion. The pipeline cannot be successfully shortened for all students who enroll in community colleges, especially given how much some of them need to learn not only about reading and writing but about how to be students.

The 2.5-2.9 Range Is Less Clear

One element of placement assessment that both educational economists and writing scholars can agree upon is that students at the border of college readiness pose the greatest challenge for creating a fair and accurate placement procedure. Studies of multiple measures variables as well as placement tests show that the ends of the spectrum are easier to place with accuracy than the blurry borderline (Belfield & Crosta, 2012; Koretz et al., 2014; Scott-Clayton,

2012). In some ways, students at that borderline share certain characteristics; for example, in a qualitative study of two-year students in Wisconsin, Hassel and Giordano learned that students “who straddle the basic/developmental writing and college-level writing borderland struggle to translate instruction into rhetorical adaptability” (2009, p. 26). In the following section, eleven students had either an official or self-reported hsGPA between 2.5 to 2.9. Their high school grades were either a combination of highs and lows or were average grades throughout. Their college transcripts most often reflected the combination of highs and lows, as the students in this grouping tended to have a mixture of passing and failing grades. In many ways, though, I found that this group of students was the most heterogeneous of the hsGPA groupings.

When the students in the 2.5-2.9 hsGPA range were asked about their high school assignments, their responses varied within each question. As stated earlier, I asked students how long their assignments were for their English classes without stipulating whether I was referring to paragraphs or pages. Three students reported writing five-paragraph essays, one student wrote papers of one to two pages, two students wrote two-page papers, three students wrote three-page papers, two students wrote three to five-page papers, one student had a five-page paper, and two students from the same school reported very specific paragraph totals: thirteen and seventeen paragraphs. If this data is streamlined to pages, six students wrote papers that were one to two-pages, six students wrote papers in the three to five-page range, and two students wrote a paper of around seven to ten pages. Only two of the students had to write a research paper with a third student writing an annotated bibliography. Only two of the eleven students reported being in a college preparatory or enriched class. Two of the students said they were in a class they would label “lower.”

Very few of the students indicated that they wrote papers as part of a writing process: two students mentioned doing revision of their work and three mentioned peer review. Only two students indicated that they received any feedback from their teacher on their writing, and an additional student mentioned that she could seek feedback before submitting a paper as an extra credit activity. This information was more in keeping with the types of responses I received about the writing process from the students who had earned below a 2.5 hsGPA than it was with the group of students who had earned a 3.0 and above.

The question of “What is a good GPA?” was met with a greater range than what was provided by the other groups. One student said a 2.0-3.0, two students said a 2.5-3.5, four students indicated a 2.7, one a 2.9, two a 3.0, and one a 3.5. Some of the students indicated it was important to earn a good hsGPA (n=4) with one student specifying it was important for college. Three students specifically stated that they did not feel the need to maintain their own hsGPA at as high of a level of what they had said was a good GPA, with one of them indicating that it was important for others to get a good GPA but not so much for themselves. At least two students said that high school GPA was of little importance to them. These responses differ significantly from the students who earned above a 3.0 in high school, where students were much more likely to value higher GPAs and strive to attain them. Unlike the students in the 3.0 and above hsGPA range, the students in the 2.5-2.9 hsGPA range did not seem to have the same level of intrinsic or extrinsic pressure to maintain grades at a particular level. The students were aware, though, that the students who were expected to go to college or who were in honors courses were “supposed to” earn hsGPAs above a particular threshold even as they did not personally feel that need themselves, with some exceptions, of course. The use of hsGPA as a measure in a placement system may be unfair to students in this grouping, as they were never seeking to maintain a

particular GPA. Because students were not necessarily trying to achieve a hsGPA above a particular threshold, the threshold may not represent their ability level. The American Educational Research Association et al. (2014) explain that assessment scores should not be used outside of their intended purposes. I argue that for these students the hsGPA did not have an intended purpose of proving their college readiness because they were not planning on attending a competitive college and they did not think of themselves as the type of student who needed to maintain a higher hsGPA.

Of the eleven students, only four said that high school prepared them for college-level writing, five said high school did not prepare them, and one student said high school both prepared and did not prepare them for college, with another student indicating that high school and college-level writing were two different things that could not be compared in that way. The prepared vs. unprepared students did not split nicely on a hsGPA boundary threshold, nor did they fall neatly on assignment types or assignment lengths.

Most students had a mixture of successes and failures in their college English classes. While I do not personally regard a withdrawal as a failure, for the purpose of this data analysis, a withdrawal is not successful completion of the course, so it is regarded at the same level as a failing grade. Only three of the eleven students in the 2.5-2.9 hsGPA range passed all of the English classes they enrolled in. Four students enrolled in and passed ENG 102.

Both Isabella and Devyn had a self-reported hsGPA of 3.0, an official hsGPA of 2.8, and a class rank percentile of 37, and they graduated from the same high school. Both students described their high school writing assignments as prescriptive: Isabella had a paper that was supposed to be 13-paragraphs long and Devyn had a 17-paragraph research paper requirement; another assignment was a 5-paragraph compare/contrast essay. Isabella earned Bs and Cs in all

of her English classes, including one B and one C in her senior year in classes named “English 4.” She did receive some feedback from her teachers prior to submitting her essays, but she did not feel that these assignments prepared her for college-level writing. When asked if she was placed fairly, Isabella said she definitely felt she was in the right class level (ENG 96 and ENG 91). She failed ENG 91 the first semester, but later earned an A in both ENG 101 and ENG 102, suggesting that she succeeded once she received assistance, but her interview responses suggest she would not have had the confidence to do so on her own without the support of the reading and basic writing classes in her first semester at MMCC. Devyn had literature classes both semesters of sophomore and junior year and then took creative writing and a communications class her senior year. Devyn thought that her high school prepared her because in comparing herself to other students in her ENG 96 class, she felt that she was more rhetorically aware than her fellow students who wrote “really bad” and put “things in there that I was taught to never put in there,” like beginning a paper with “Hello.” Devyn passed her ENG 96 class but failed her ENG 91 class. When she later took ENG 101 as part of an ENG 92 ALP, she passed with an A. While Devyn had the confidence Isabella lacked, she, too, did not initially succeed in ENG 91, even after earning an A, two Bs, and a C in her two years of high school literature coursework.

The five students with a 2.7 hsGPA had very different ways of speaking about writing. Kyle discussed coming from a very strict school with high expectations, but he said he had a lot of support in learning how to write. He received feedback from his teachers; he knew what work was expected of him and was able to anticipate how much effort to give the assignments in order to succeed, which he did, earning As in his senior year English classes, which was a big improvement from the Ds he had in freshman year and the Cs he had sophomore year. He was in a reading class at the time of the interview and said that college level teachers expect students to

be accountable for their work; he added, “Here, you’re on your own and you have to prepare yourself to do it on your own without having help all the time like high school.” Kyle passed ENG 101 in a later semester, but it certainly sounds like he could have passed it his first semester with the help of an ALP support class or even in a stand-alone class because he’d had more writing experiences and helpful feedback in high school than the other students. Kyle’s path also reveals that hsGPAs do not necessarily carry the same weight and meaning at each of the local schools. A 2.7 at one school might be more sufficient for higher placement than at another.

Both Jay and Renee reported that most of their high school English classes focused on reading with less emphasis placed on writing. When they had to write papers in their first three years of high school, the essays were about the reading they had done for class and were only a few paragraphs to two pages long. When Jay had to write a paper that was not based on a reading assignment, the topics were given to her as was the expected format for the paper. Both students indicated that their senior years of high school gave them more agency. Jay had to write an annotated bibliography with 8-10 sources on it but also reported not writing a paper for high school that was longer than three pages, and she was in courses labeled “enriched.” Renee, who was in traditional classes, felt more freedom in her senior year writing class when she could choose her own research topic; that research paper was five pages in length. Jay acknowledged that she “slacked” in high school but felt her grades should have been higher because the teachers graded based on whether the writing had been submitted on time and according to the rubric. She felt she was placed correctly into ENG 101. Renee was more hesitant about her placement, saying she had never really thought about it; she was also reticent on whether high school had prepared her for college, eventually stating that her senior year had. In our later interviews, she revealed that she didn’t really know what to expect from college writing classes.

Jay and Renee each passed their ENG 101 class but withdrew from or failed one semester of ENG 102.

Allison took five semesters of developmental English at MMCC before qualifying for ENG 101. The ENG 91/92/95/96 path is supposed to take two semesters in a row of taking six credit hours of developmental reading and writing. While Allison did register for two classes at a time for some semesters, she did not pass all of the classes. She passed the two reading classes but failed or received a Progress Repeat in ENG 95/96 three times. Allison admitted that her classes in high school primarily focused on vocabulary and that she knew she would be placed into ENG 95 because “there’s some problems I have with my writing abilities.” Allison’s high school transcript had markers that would usually signify an ability to succeed: she earned As in her English classes, and she had an overall GPA of 2.7 with a class rank percentile of 44. Her classes were only identified as Eng 7/Eng 8 on her transcript, but it may be possible that she was in a remedial class in high school, based on the way she responded to the interview questions, the way she performed in ENG 95/96, and some subtle signs on her transcript. She earned a D in her first semester of English 1-2 and then an A in the second semester, but this semester and many that followed had a T1 in the course name. In all four years, she had either a “Learning Strategies” or “LS/Lunch” course listed as electives. Her grades in English varied from a D and an A in freshman year to a C and a B in sophomore year to a B and an F in junior year with a B in summer school and then an A in her senior year. Had Allison been placed into English coursework by her transcript, she would have been placed into ENG 101, or perhaps an ENG 101 ALP pairing. I had Allison as a student in two classes a year or two after she participated in the study, and I can confirm that she would not have been able to succeed in ENG 101 at that time, even had she been in an ALP course. At the time of the interview, in fall 2018, she was in her

second year at MMCC and her first time failing ENG 96. Allison had taken ENG 95 twice, passing it the second time, and she seemed to recognize she needed the help of the developmental classes without being discouraged about taking them.

Joseph and Mateo both graduated from the same high school with a reported 2.6 GPA but had different experiences in college. Joseph had many responses in his interview that indicated he would likely do well in transfer-level writing courses. His hsGPA of 2.6 was self-reported; he explained that he was in “normal” English classes, “not honors,” which he explained focused on rhetoric and composition, where he had to write a minimum length of three pages and often had to do peer revision as part of the process. In at least one of his writing classes, he had to write papers that were closer to five pages in length. Joseph reported working hard on his papers and that he felt prepared for college-level writing assignments; he earned a B in ENG 101 his first semester and did not take ENG 102 in the two years that followed (it is not required for all degree programs).

Mateo had an official hsGPA of 2.6. When asked about his writing assignments in high school, he said his papers were usually around two pages in length. For his junior year, he had to learn about a career and present the information. As a senior, he had to write about a past experience and how that experience had changed him. While Mateo also reported doing peer review as part of a writing process, his assignments did not sound as rigorous as the papers described by Joseph. Mateo’s grades were 2 Bs, 3 Cs, and 3 Ds in his high school English classes and his class rank percentile was almost in the lowest quartile at 27. Mateo felt he was misplaced because it was very easy to earn an A+ in his developmental English courses in college, but he also said he was sure his writing still had problems with it and “a higher up English teacher” would have commented on all of his sentence fragments and the like if they’d read his current

work. He passed the ENG 92 class but earned an F in the ENG 96 class. At MMCC, this usually signifies that the student persisted in the class through the end of the thirteenth week but did not have a passing grade so he was not permitted to submit a portfolio for the end-of-the-semester assessment; had he persisted and been able to submit a portfolio that did not pass, he would have been assigned a grade of Progress Repeat. This is different from the student who received an F in ENG 101, as the PR and/or F in a developmental course does not impact the overall GPA in the same way as an F in a transfer-level course. The F or PR signal course completion even if the course was not successfully completed, and the developmental courses do not count against a student's cumulative GPA. In Mateo's case, the F in ENG 96 and P in ENG 92 would have made him eligible to retry ENG 96 as a stand-alone class or in an ALP pairing with ENG 101.

Hunter, with a self-reported hsGPA of 2.7 and an official hsGPA of 2.5 at a high school that was out of state, passed his ALP writing class and ENG 101 with an A and then earned a C in ENG 102 the next semester. Hunter said his papers in high school were all five-paragraph essays and that he was able to complete them in 30-minute homework sessions with revision in between. He explained this meant freewriting until he reached the page length and then rereading what he had written and revising it; he did not define what he meant by revision, but when he talked about receiving a "good grade" on his work, he emphasized the only comments were about minor errors like the wrong word was used or he had not capitalized all of the i's in a sentence. This suggests neither he nor the teacher were focused on larger, more global concerns. He also took an ACT prep class where his teacher said everything they learned in high school about writing was incorrect and then taught him some "grammar basics." He was surprised he placed high enough to take the ALP course; he thought he would have been placed in a stand-

alone developmental class, especially since he said he'd always put writing assignments last in high school because, in his own words, he wasn't very good at them.

In one particular group interview, the three students had an interesting conversation about whether grades and other information on the transcript really signify a student's capabilities. Renee and Joseph both had hsGPAs in the 2.5-2.99 range, but Connor had not supplied a self-reported hsGPA and did not have a high school transcript on file. Renee explained that at her school, students were encouraged to earn high grades and maintain a higher hsGPA, but students who have complicated home lives often have grades that suffer for it and then they're placed into "lower classes," so even if the student is really smart, their home life "affects everything else," including grades and then the students' course options. Connor agreed with Renee but then explained that his parents wanted him to have "the highest GPA or whatever like that," but it was really up to him to do something about it, and at that time he "didn't really care" and "didn't take school that seriously until I got older, like after I got in the Air Force, that's when I actually started to [realize] school is actually important." Joseph said that he was like Connor in not caring in high school what his GPA was, but he did "put forth effort." All three students earned a B in ENG 101 their first semester taking the course and generally felt that passing grades were good enough. Both Connor and Renee indicated that somewhere between a 2.0 to a 3.0 was sufficient. Connor also questioned whether grades really represent what a student knows, although in his case he was questioning whether other students had earned their grades or gotten them through cheating. Their conversation begs the question of whether grades can be used as static measures of ability when the students earning the grades regard them very differently from one another.

In a basic decision-rule multiple-singular measure style of placement assessment, these students would all likely be placed into ENG 101, even though it is clear some of these students benefited from being placed into developmental English and would in fact have faced significant barriers to passing ENG 101. For other students, though, passing ENG 101 was not an issue. The high school transcript data did not clearly predict which students in this blurry borderline would need basic writing and which would not.

Students Who Failed Classes

All of the seven students who failed a course during the Fall 2018 semester were placed in developmental coursework, and all but two of them thought their placement was fair when interviewed at midterm. Mateo was one of the students who thought he could have been placed into ENG 101 because he was getting an A+ “easily” in ENG 96, yet he later failed the 96 class. The F on his transcript likely signifies that he did not submit a portfolio at the end of the semester. In the same semester, Mateo passed his ENG 92 class, so he may have been speaking more about the reading class than the writing class. His high school writing experiences were mostly limited to papers around two pages on topics like a past experience that changed him. He described the grading as “brutal” in high school, but finished high school with an overall GPA of 2.6.

Devyn was also in ENG 96 and said that she was placed unfairly because she is “bad at taking standardized tests.” At the time of our interview, she was confident about her chances of passing the portfolio, but the emphasis was not on her own writing strengths but rather the comparison to other students who had more to learn than her. Mateo and Devyn present a case of what I have seen time and time again in ENG 96: students get overly confident for a variety of

reasons and then often submit minimal revision of their work, especially as they know they have time to revise their essays at the end of the semester for the portfolio. Some of them are able to complete the revision at that time, but many others encounter life situations that prevent them from having the time and energy to complete the semester fully, or they think there is too much work to do and that trying at that late stage of the semester would be fruitless. Devyn had attended a very prescriptive high school English program, while Mateo's school could best be described as rigorous. Both students' previous educational experiences could have given them the impression at the end of the semester that no matter what they did, they were not going to pass, so why bother trying in those final three weeks.

Like Devyn, Isabella failed her reading class, ENG 91, and also passed her writing course that semester. Isabella attended the same prescriptivist high school as Devyn, and one of her high school writing projects had to be thirteen paragraphs long. She said that in some ways, her high school English experiences were harder than her two college English classes, but at the same time she believed that high school did not prepare her for college-level work, so her placement into developmental coursework was fair. She did not define the ways in which the high school courses were harder, but I had experience working in that particular high school, and in the past, the teachers had strict rules about how many sentences needed to be in a paragraph, and how many "to be" verbs could be used, and I have been asked questions along those veins by first-year composition students who continue to come to MMCC from that school. The teaching at MMCC is rhetorically-based and not prescriptive. After passing ENG 96 in fall 2018 and passing ENG 91 the next semester, Isabella was able to take an ENG 92/101 ALP course in her third semester. She passed all of her English classes after the initial failing grade in ENG 91, passing ENG 101 with an A and ENG 102 with a B.

Some of the students in ENG 96 took ENG 95 first, where they gained the perspective that passing the portfolio is easy because the threshold for passing ENG 95 to ENG 96 has fewer expectations than the bar to pass to ENG 101. Michael was one of these students. He had passed ENG 95 and was in his second semester of taking ENG 96 at the time of the interview. In high school, his longest papers were five-paragraph essays. He attended a high school where he noticed that as long as he turned a paper in, it would get a good grade, even if it was too short or written very hastily. Michael explained that his grades were very low in his first years of high school and he had been told that he would need to bring his GPA up in order to graduate, which he did. When he entered MMCC in ENG 95, he completed his essays and revised them enough to pass the portfolio but then earned a PR his first semester of ENG 96 and then failed the second semester. The F could mean that he had not kept his grade up high enough to submit a portfolio or that he did not turn in a portfolio.

Like Michael, Allison was in ENG 96 and had taken ENG 95 before it. She received an F her first semester of ENG 95 and then passed the second semester. She was in her first try of ENG 96 in fall 2018 when she earned an F. Her second try of ENG 96 was a Progress Repeat. When asked about her placement, Allison said she knew she was going to be placed into ENG 95. As mentioned earlier, Allison was likely in what her high school would label special education or remedial classes; she explained that she mostly worked on vocabulary and did not do much actual writing in high school. While keeping her grades at a C or above was important to her because she had privileges taken away if she earned less than a C, the work she had to do in high school lacked critical thinking, and she was ultimately not prepared for college-level writing tasks. After taking ENG 96 several times, she passed it in 2020 when the standards for the portfolio were lessened during the pandemic. I was her instructor that semester, and I could

see that her writing had grown but also believed she was going to continue to struggle in ENG 101. Allison is a prime example of how shortening the pipeline for some students will equate to pushing them out of higher education. In the two semesters she had with me, Allison applied herself to coursework but tended to learn very incrementally.

Dylan received an F in ENG 95 after not submitting a portfolio and was withdrawn from her reading class. In a follow-up interview with me, she explained that her physical disability meant she was experiencing health issues at the end of the semester. She did not want to quit, but she also could not attend classes because she was not well enough to do so. Her experience with the Disability and Access Center was such that she was unlikely to reach out to them for assistance with finishing the semester; she reported only receiving an offer to order books in larger print for her, which she would have had to pay for on her own, and which would not mitigate the attendance issues caused by her physical disability. Dylan admitted that she did not have a history of any successes in school. The longest paper she had ever written was two and a half pages long; as she had shared that paper with me during our follow-up interviews, I know it to be an almost entirely plagiarized research report about her type of disability. She knew high school had not prepared her for college, yet she also said she was bored in her classes and the work was too easy. More of her story will be told in the next chapter.

Abigail failed one class and withdrew from another. Abigail reported that she enjoyed writing and would write short stories and books on her own for fun, but she did not like high school writing and did not feel that her high school classes had prepared her for college because of the inordinate amount of “hand-holding” where assignments had to “be done a certain way.” Like Jay, she could only choose topics from a list provided for her and then felt she had to teach herself from there. Her high school English classes were labeled CP 1, CP 2, etc. When I asked

her what that stood for, she did not know. One student asked if it was “composition something,” and Abigail responded “maybe,” but when I asked if it could be college prep, she said, “College prep— that’s what it was.” When asked about how long her assignments were for her writing classes, she responded with information about the length of speeches she had to give and said some were longer and some were one to three minutes. Abigail did not have a transcript on file, so I do not know what grades she earned in her high school English courses. When asked if anything got in the way of her schoolwork, she said both work and her ADHD did, with the latter interfering when she had too much going on, making her feel like her mind got “overworked.” Abigail was in an ENG 92 and ENG 101 ALP course that she said she was “fairly content with” when asked about her placement. Although I did not realize it at the time, she often spoke of her college English classes in past tense, which may have been an indication that she had already stopped attending the ENG 101 portion of ALP. She later failed a stand-alone ENG 92 class.

The stories of these students who failed is not the story of failing students, and that is something largely missing from community college narratives. Often, as with Cullinan and Biedzio (2021), the presumption is that students fail developmental coursework because of the stigma of being in a course that does not carry transfer credit. My experience is largely that not all students realize the courses they are in do not count toward graduation; they simply know they have been told they need to take and pass the class before they can take ENG 101. Whether the students think they need the course often stems from their own experiences with high school English classes and their expectations for college-level work, and those perceptions are anchored in their very individualized experiences. Devyn, Isabella, and Abigail had all reported being told to adhere to strict parameters in their high school writing assignments, while Mateo had put effort into his papers and not been rewarded with high grades, and Michael earned high grades

just for turning a paper in. In each of these instances, students had to learn to change their high school habits or expectations. Some had to learn how to do coursework outside of class, while others had to unlearn what was previously taught to them in very prescriptivist high school classrooms. Neither of these qualities can be ascertained from any of the measures collected in the current multiple measures placement assessment protocol, but they are important components of these students' stories.

Students Who Withdrew Or Were Withdrawn from Classes

As with the cases of the students who had failing grades during the study semester, some of the students who withdrew from a writing course were in more than one English course and were able to pass the other course. The two students who withdrew (or were withdrawn) from a class and failed another were already mentioned in the previous section— Abigail and Dylan— so they will not also be covered here.

Lamar withdrew from ENG 92 and received a Progress Repeat in ENG 96. Although a PR is technically not a passing grade, I am including it in the passing category because he attended the course through the end of the semester and participated in the work of the class enough that he was able to turn in a portfolio, which he did. This shows completion of the course even though the portfolio readers determined the work was not of high enough quality for Lamar to succeed in ENG 101. Lamar's previous writing experience entirely consisted of writing five-paragraph essays with no peer review and no feedback from the teacher. He also admitted that sometimes he had someone else write his essay, so he could keep his grades up enough to play sports. He did not think that high school prepared him for college-level writing, but at the same time he felt he should be placed into ENG 101. Lamar is not an outlier in this regard. Some

students come to community colleges with low expectations for the amount of work and learning required to pass classes; this is often an under-recognized potential reason for why many students withdraw from the courses and/or the college.

Tameka is a student who quickly noticed that college would require more effort than in her high school writing experiences. She was in an ENG 92/ENG 101 ALP, where she passed the reading class but withdrew from the ENG 101 class. She mentioned that most of her writing assignments in high school were two pages long, but she had one research paper that had to be three to four pages long. When asked whether high school had prepared her for college writing, she said no because she could write shorter paragraphs in high school but the expectations were higher in college. She admitted she'd had some trouble "applying herself" in high school. She'd earned Cs in her senior year English classes and graduated with an overall GPA of 2.8; she had wanted her grades to be higher, but "it was what it was." After passing the ENG 92 class at MMCC, Tameka was able to take ENG 101 as a stand-alone course, where she earned a D. This shows completion of the course but a D does not earn transfer-level credit. That was her last English class at MMCC.

Tameka reminded me of another student in the study, Sydney. In 2013, she had taken and passed an ENG 96 class four years after graduating from high school. She was very open about not liking high school at all and wanting to graduate and leave it behind as soon as possible. Sydney had a gap between taking ENG 96 and then taking ENG 101 in 2015, a course she either withdrew or was withdrawn from. She returned in 2018 and happened to take ENG 101 with the same instructor she'd had for the ENG 96 class five years prior. Her teacher had remembered her and also remarked that her work was at a further point than some of the students who were fresh out of high school and taking a college writing class for the first time because Sydney was

applying what she'd learned in ENG 96. Tameka reminds me of Sydney because Sydney acknowledged in the interview that had she been where she is now when she had taken ENG 101 the first time, she would have kept going instead of stopping at that stage. She said she was now in a place in her life where she was ready to engage with the work and see it through. Sydney earned an A in her ENG 101 class in fall 2018.

Jasmine also returned to school after a break. She had taken the placement test five years prior when she had graduated from high school and felt, rightly, that it was unfair that she was placed using a test score that didn't necessarily reflect where she was today. In hindsight, she wished she had gone straight to college after high school instead of waiting. When I interviewed her at midterm, she sounded excited about school, even mentioning that college was easier than she had expected it to be. She recognized that high school had not prepared her for college, as she had only written two papers in high school and they were both five-paragraph essays. She had attended three different high schools, and the one for her junior and senior year did not assign homework. Jasmine is the only student with a W for two English classes in the semester, having withdrawn or been withdrawn from her ENG 92/101 ALP. It is my speculation that when the courses were at a comfortable level for her, she felt capable of tackling the work, but once the work ramped up, likely around midterm, she did not have prior student behaviors to rely on to keep her on track. Like with any community college student, it is also possible that other life issues interfered with her persistence in coursework.

Jay was an unusual case as she did not fit my original criteria for the study, but I permitted her to participate in it anyway after seeing that I was not going to get a large sample size. She was the lone student who was in ENG 102 during fall 2018. Jay's story was that she began high school in classes designated as enriched, where she stayed through the end of junior

year. She took dual credit classes offered at her high school but did not earn credit for the English course(s) she had taken because there was a rule that her overall hsGPA needed to be above a certain threshold in order to be a dual credit student. When she came to MMCC, she was placed into ENG 101, where she earned a C. She felt she had been placed fairly.

Even though both her interview and her high school transcript indicate she was in classes that could have potentially counted for college credit, when asked about her writing experiences in high school, she said she mostly wrote five-paragraph essays and her longest paper was three pages. She mentioned her research experience was to write an annotated bibliography with 8-10 sources on it and then a position paper, which I am assuming was a three-page paper because just after mentioning it she referred to “another three-page paper.” She did not feel that high school had prepared her for college level writing, referring to what another student, Abigail, had said about the large amount of hand-holding that took place in the classes. Jay elaborated and explained that the many rules for the papers hurt her grade, telling me about one time that her paper earned a C because it did not rigidly stick to the outline. When she showed her paper to her aunt, who is a college English professor, her aunt said the paper should have earned an A. When Jay was interviewed at midterm, she gave no indication that she was struggling in the ENG 102 class. She referred to some of the assignments in the class in a way that they sounded manageable. I did not have further contact with her, so I cannot say for sure why she withdrew from the ENG 102 class.

Camille, on the other hand, was a student I was able to interview further. She did not fit the original criteria of my study, as I was looking for students in their first semester, and she was well beyond her first semester, having given community college a try on two other occasions, with significant gaps in between. Camille’s reasons for withdrawing in fall 2018 were multiple.

She was beginning to feel that the instructor thought she was being argumentative and difficult, partially because Camille was a returning adult student and kept asking for clarification. Camille also had a combination of good and bad fortune: her son had been requiring more of her attention and causing her to miss class, and then she received a promotion at work, which meant she no longer absolutely needed to attend school in order to meet some of her career goals. While her job was not related to her declared path of study, she was happy with it now that she had received the promotion.

The students who withdrew or were withdrawn from courses cannot be categorized as withdrawing for one particular reason. One of the main problems with longitudinal research about community college students is that many do stop attending without any explanation. Because they are no longer at the college, finding a way to contact them to discover why the student left is often next to impossible. Additionally, students will not always be able to identify one reason for leaving when they often have a combination of factors contributing to their decision. That decision may not even be theirs, entirely, as a nondecision about continuing their coursework often forces an instructor to make that determination late in the semester. Although policy differs from instructor to instructor, many in the English department at MMCC during the time frame of the study would assign a W at the end of the semester if the student stopped attending or did not submit their final project of the semester, as the option existed on the final rosters, and the instructors believed a W to be less harsh than assigning an F, considering the student had stopped attending. All of the students in the study who had a W in the Fall 2018 semester had completed at least half of the semester before withdrawing or being withdrawn from the class(es).

Because students had at least eight weeks of experience with their writing classes, I hypothesize that the students had enough time for their perceptions of college to change. These were students who, whatever they thought of the placement they'd been given, attempted to navigate the class in some way before ceasing their attendance. Many of the authors cited in Chapter II speculate that students choose not to enroll in college at all when they learn that they will be in non-transfer level coursework (Adams et al., 2009; Bailey, Jeong, & Cho, 2010; Bailey & Cho, 2010). Bailey and Cho write that "Many students are discouraged when they find out that they are not eligible for college-level courses. This may explain the high 'no-show' rates among those referred to remediation" (2010, p. 48). What I found was the opposite: many of the students in my study did not necessarily recognize that the basic writing and reading classes did not count as credit. This tracks with what has been observed by other basic writing researchers. In recent *Journal of Basic Writing* articles, students who were placed into basic writing classes did not know that the class was pre-college and that the class would not count as credits toward graduation (Bruno, 2020; Molloy, Fonville, & Salam, 2020). The students had decided to attend college, learned they needed to take these particular classes, enrolled in the classes, and that was the current step they were on.

Many of the students placed into developmental coursework in this study were focused on the short term instead of long term goals. They were in the business of thinking about what they would face that week, not how the courses would follow one after the other until eventually they all amassed to a complete degree. Many had not entirely thought through what it would mean to attend college, how much work would be required, how their coursework would fit into a life that already had other demands like work or family commitments or other complications. They did not as a whole seem to expect that their life would change from high school

expectations to college. This aligns with Tinberg and Nadeau's findings from a survey of community college students, where "34 percent believed the writing they would do in college would be similar to what they'd done in high school. These figures suggest students may not anticipate any difference between high school and college writing – or any elevation in challenge" (2010, p. 60). I'd argue this is especially true for the students whose stories have been told in the sections about failures and withdrawals, as they tended to be focused on whether the assignment before them was something they could manage or not, which may also account for why the noncompletion rate was higher amongst students placed developmentally than the groups of students who had placed into ENG 101.

The students who were in the 3.0 and higher hsGPA range were especially more likely to have been concerned about the level of work and what would be expected of them by college professors. Again, this is in keeping with Tinberg and Nadeau's findings, too:

Fifty-eight percent thought their high school writing instruction had prepared them to write papers in college. This feeling of readiness was dependent on whether they'd done work in groups ($N = 710$, $p < .001$), written research papers ($N = 824$, $p < .001$), and used classmates' feedback to revise drafts ($N = 768$, $p < .001$) while in high school. There were also strong correlations among involvement in these activities and students' feeling confident about their writing skills. (2010, p. 60).

For the students in the MMCC study who earned a 3.0 or above, their feelings of readiness also appeared to correlate to activities that added to their rhetorical dexterity, including having been assigned a variety of paper assignment types, a variety of paper assignment lengths, and being given time to draft and revise their work. The corollary for students who did not have these varied experiences is that they felt less prepared for college-level writing. Tinberg and Nadeau

found that only 28% of the students at Bristol Community College thought of themselves as strong writers, “suggesting they may have had some less-than-affirming experiences with writing in the past” (2020, p. 59). The students in Tinberg and Nadeau’s study reported more varied high school writing experiences than the students in my study:

60 percent had experience with peer review and about 73 percent had to revise papers using teacher feedback. It would seem reasonable for students to expect to have to engage in similar practices in college. Finally, most students, 79 percent, had written a paper using research while in high school. (Timberg & Nadeau, 2010, p. 61)

The students in my study did not have anywhere near the same level of writing experience with research, as only about half of the students in the 2.5-2.9 range had experience with research and/or receiving feedback on their writing before it was submitted for a grade.

What I have found is that As and Bs in a general junior/senior level English course may qualify a student from one school to be prepared for ENG 101 while the same grades do not qualify a student who appears similar on paper to be prepared for college-level writing assignments if they matriculated from a different area high school, possibly because of a difference in grading or a difference in curriculum. Additionally, the transcripts from the area high schools are not yet standardized, so information like overall GPA may not be calculated the same from school to school, nor even provided. Class rank is another measure that may differ from school to school, with some giving more weight to honors classes and less weight to special education classes, while other schools weigh them all equally. Overall, my findings in the multiple measures study are that hsGPA is not a static, neutral measurement that may be used across all levels without context or nuance for accurate placement into transfer-level coursework.

CHAPTER VI

STUDENT SUCCESS NARRATIVES

In the previous chapter, I discovered that for some community college students, their high school transcripts do not provide a nuanced perspective of their high school writing learning experiences. The high school component is only one half of a multiple measures validity correlation study, though. Because the high school transcript data is not always a complete observation of a student's abilities, I began to wonder about the other half of the data study: the college transcript. My hypothesis was that if quantitative transcript data is potentially insufficient to signify writing success on the high school transcript, then college grades might also be insufficient for measuring whether or not placement is successful.

I had permission to collect and study the study participants' college grades in English classes, but after coding the initial interviews, I sought an IRB extension to re-interview students to learn more about their college writing experiences. I emailed all of the study participants to see whether they would be willing to do follow-up interviews. Four of the students who responded gave interviews: their stories reveal that, like with the high school transcript, the college grade transcript does not tell the whole story of a student's learning. I planned two follow-up interviews with each student. For the initial follow-up interviews, I asked students to send me a paper that represents their college writing ability. I did not specify a particular class, as the students who responded were from a variety of levels of writing courses. Although I did not ask for the paper to be from one of their writing classes, all of the artifacts submitted were from a type of writing class. The purpose of the first follow-up interview was to focus on what students did to complete a writing assignment: what was their writing process, how did they

determine their message, audience, purpose, and did anything interfere with their ability to complete the assignment. The questions were meant to help me uncover more about the lived experiences of students' writing processes. I also hoped to learn more about why some students are retained while others withdraw from writing courses.

The next step of my follow-up study was originally designed to be a focus group setting with all four of the students meeting with me at the same time via video conferencing. These plans shifted to another round of individual interviews, as trying to find a single time for all of the students to meet with me via video conference proved prohibitive. My questions for the students focused on their expectations for college and their definitions of success, as both themes emerged from the first follow-up interviews. While I had hoped to bring the students together so their answers could be confirmed or questioned by fellow students, the conversations I had with students were informative.

The qualitative interviews once again provided additional insight into the problem of determining a fair and accurate placement system for community college students, but this time the issue raised was how to measure success. Renee, Sofia, Camille, and Dylan all had hardships or difficulties in their time at MMCC but they look at their studies with both fondness and discomfort. In this chapter, I will focus on how each student's narrative brings to light how their individual experiences were not necessarily visible in the high school or college transcript data and what these stories can tell us regarding placement decisions at community colleges.

Renee: Peaks and Valleys

Background information for Renee: Renee is an example of a student who has highs and lows even in the same course area and with the same instructor. Her ability to succeed in the class has to do with her comfort with the course material, something that is difficult to predict from a multiple measures perspective. Her English grades appear to be As and Bs or Fs, with little in between.

Over the course of three interviews, Renee, who is White and traditionally college-aged, revealed that she either did well in her English courses or failed them; there was not a whole lot in between, but, thankfully, the failures did not discourage her from trying again in a new class. She also discussed issues with both anxiety and memory problems. I did not ask and she did not share whether these were documented disabilities, but she did not appear to be registered with the Disability and Access Center, and it is not that uncommon for students at MMCC to have some level of anxiety disorder without receiving services from the college. She indicated that the anxiety would come and go, depending on her level of comfort with the coursework. It sometimes prevented her from asking for help when help was needed, but whether or not she would be able to seek (or even need) assistance was not something she could predict from semester to semester and seemed to vary depending on her comfort with both the familiarity of the coursework and the approachability of the instructor.

In the first interview in fall 2018, Renee was in a group of three students, and she was often the last student to answer the question that was asked, allowing others to respond before her. When asked in the initial focus group if she was placed accurately, she responded in a much higher pitch than her other answers and said, “Yeah, probably. I don’t know. I’ve never thought about that.” Although she sounded uncomfortable with the topic, she continued to add that the

placement test was more accurate for her than other tests she had taken in high school. She lumped state assessments and national tests like the SATs together, likely because students in her state take both types of tests at the high school on days when class is dismissed for this purpose. Renee explained the tests “were either too advanced for my level to understand or they were just the stupidest questions.” The other students in the interview agreed that they preferred ACCUPLACER to the state assessments and/or the SAT or ACT. Renee then added that she “pretty much bombed” her SATs. Her SAT scores were not on record with the school, but it is possible that they may have been below the threshold for placement into first-year composition, but her ACCUPLACER scores were high enough to place into transfer-level coursework.

In her first interview, Renee struggled to give definitive answers because her first years of high school were much more formulaic than her senior year, and her ability to succeed in the classes varied, too. To some extent, that trend followed her to college. She expressed dissatisfaction with high school writing assignments that were “just reading things and then writing about them,” adding that having to do so made her “go blank.” In her follow-up interview, she explained that being “given specific ways of how to structure an essay” made her “despise writing.” It wasn’t until her senior year of high school that she had two teachers who allowed her more freedom that she began to enjoy writing.

Her grades reflected this positive change in perception. Renee was one of the students without a high school transcript on file at the time of the study, but in our individual interview, she discussed some of her high school grades. When she was asked about what hsGPA she would consider good, she gave a vague “somewhere in between a 2.0 and a 3” as a response, but when the initial interview group was told that MMCC was considering use of hsGPA for placement, a fellow student said he did not think it was a good idea, and Renee added she

thought she would have been placed into a basic writing class had that been the case. Her self-reported overall hsGPA was a 2.7. Because her transcript was not on file, I do not know for certain if her C average GPA was the result of a majority of her grades being around a C, but her explanation of her English class grade history was that she averaged a “medium B or a C because that’s the kind of student I was for the most part.” Her grades improved to As in her senior year, when she engaged more with the course curricula.

When talking about her first years of high school English, Renee seemed less concerned with grades earned in the classes and more focused on how the prescriptive nature of the classes made her hate writing. In her junior year, she failed a journalism class. Her explanation was she did not know what the class would be when she selected it or she would have chosen a different class. While she did not offer an explanation beyond that, she repeatedly discussed both disliking writing assignments that were about something she’d been assigned to read and also talked about her social anxiety; either one could have been a contributing factor to her lack of success in the journalism class. Because of this failed class and the state requirement to have four years of English, in her senior year, she had to take two English classes, so she selected a creative writing class because even though she still disliked writing, she figured they would be reading in that class, too, and she enjoyed reading. The creative writing class was a very positive writing experience for her, where she learned in the first week to “throw out the rules” and just freewrite, which was a great benefit for her, as what she disliked the most was the rigidity of following set rules and structures for what she thought was supposed to be her own self-expression. Her other senior year English teacher was much less prescriptive than the teachers in her previous English classes, giving the students only “the basics” of what she wanted in an assignment and allowing them much more freedom to interpret and apply those requirements within the paper. In the

course where Renee was assigned a “term paper,” Renee was able to choose her topic and said that because she had known this paper was required, she’d been reading books about the topic ahead of time “because that’s how badly I wanted [to learn about the topic]” and “actually got the highest grade in my class.” Renee reported receiving As and Bs in her senior year of English, but more importantly, she learned to enjoy writing and felt much more confident in her ability to do so.

When in our first interview, I asked her whether high school had prepared her for college, and she was unable to answer definitively, both because some of her classes had not while others had helped her to grow as a writer and because she was unsure of how she would do in college writing classes. Some of what she’d learned in her earlier high school writing experiences she later felt she had to actively work against; the formulaic structures that were once required in her early years of high school were only used as a way to get started on a draft if she was entirely without ideas of her own, but she said by the time she revised the college paper through to the final draft, there wouldn’t be any evidence that those strategies were used— they wouldn’t be visible in what she submitted. This rhetorical flexibility is in keeping with the WPA Framework for Success and evidence that her transfer-level placement was accurate and fair for her, even as she was unsure.

Renee may have also struggled to answer the question of whether or not high school prepared her for college-level writing assignments because she had not experienced enough of college to determine her own level of preparedness. Her mother had graduated from college when Renee was between three to five years old, so while she was not a first-generation college student, her family did not have a long history of expectations of attending college directly after high school. As the oldest child, Renee didn’t have any siblings who could show her what to

expect from attending school as a full-time traditional college student. She also said her only sense of what college would be like was from what she has seen in tv shows and movies. The confidence in her writing ability that she gained during her senior year did not transfer to college. She said she was “terrified” of ENG 101 because she did not have anyone who could tell her what college writing was like.

Anxiety was a continuing theme in her interviews. The anxiety tended to emerge with unfamiliar tasks. In ENG 101, because her professor assigned more creative writing assignments, assignments possibly reminiscent of her senior year creative writing class that she liked, she enjoyed what she was writing and engaged with the tasks. She took the same professor the following semester but struggled in ENG 102. ENG 102 emphasizes writing with research, for which she said she “wasn’t prepared for that at all” even though she had successfully written at least one research project in high school. She struggled from the first assignment, where she felt there was less freedom of choice. The professor asked the students to research a subculture of their own choosing, something that sounds like it affords freedom, but because Renee did not understand or feel comfortable with the concept of subcultures, her anxiety re-emerged. She was referred to MMCC’s early alert system and met with a writing tutor one time. The tutoring helped her to submit an assignment for that paper, but Renee still did not feel like she knew what she was doing, nor did she ask for more assistance throughout the rest of the semester, even though she had a whole semester of experience with the instructor before hitting a stumbling block. Although she contemplated withdrawing from the course, she completed it, ultimately earning an F. Despite this, she was glad she stayed in the course because some of the work she did in the class helped her to feel more comfortable the next time she took ENG 102.

In her second ENG 102 class, because of transportation issues, she arrived to each class very early. The ease of being able to ask questions of her new professor before class helped her to also be more comfortable emailing questions to the professor when she had them outside of class days. Renee recounted emailing her “*so* many times.” This professor also taught ENG 102 differently from the first instructor, scaffolding the assignment by having students choose a topic related to a book they were reading: “And that made it significantly easier, just the way that she explained it,” even though Renee had complained about assignments based on books when in high school. The instructor also dismissed class in order to have the entire class sign up for individual writing conferences about the second paper, where students were given more freedom to explore a topic of their choosing, and Renee “found that extremely nice and helpful.”

For Renee, whether or not she successfully completed a class could not be determined by her previous high school transcripts. She’d come to college, expecting the rigidity of her first years of high school and been surprised to find the academic freedom she enjoyed in her senior year instead. This helped her to flourish and start to really enjoy writing, so much so that she has continued to write short stories and poetry that she has submitted for publication in her spare time. At the same time, the F on her college transcript for ENG 102 indicates coursework was not all smooth sailing for her. Because she retook and passed the class with an A, she is a retention success story.

When asked to define how she knew whether or not she was succeeding in college overall, she said, “You’re trying your best and you’re actually learning, you’re not just going through the motions.” This was after telling me of a specific circumstance in her ENG 101 class. The professor had assigned a variety of essay prompts for students to write from; she had chosen one and written “an entire essay on it. And I was very pleased with it.” She then changed her

mind about submitting it, even though she knew it fit really well with the assignment parameters. She realized it was on a subject that she had already written about for the class; she added, “So last minute, I decided to send in a different essay, and it did good, but it didn’t do as well as the other one probably would have, though. But I still was happy about it because I felt like it was the right thing to do.” This desire to challenge herself to try something new could not be measured via her high school transcript or her placement test scores, but it is a primary element in how she defines success for herself and is likely a contributing factor to her ultimate success in the writing program, even if she did have the one speed bump in her path.

Dylan: Had Not Planned to Attend College

Background information for Dylan: Dylan shows that some community college students need time and assistance to develop the critical thinking skills needed for transfer-level coursework. She had a self-reported hsGPA of 1.7 and discussed how high school coursework was not important to her. Dylan withdrew from college, but she also revealed that her overall purpose in attending was not to obtain a degree.

One of the often-unacknowledged realities of community college placement is that we admit students whose past educational experiences have not been particularly positive or successful. An open admissions school is open to everyone. Of course, as the oft-cited graduation statistics reveal, not everyone succeeds, but each community college professor has a story of a student who had everything working against her but prevailed to transfer or graduate. Dylan’s story is still unwritten, but for now, she is not one of the college graduation success stories. That doesn’t mean she has not personally succeeded in her goals, though.

At many times during the first interview for the study, Dylan's answers felt contradictory or difficult to decipher. Dylan, who is White and traditionally college-aged, was interviewed with a fellow developmental reading student who tended to answer first on most questions with Dylan then following up with her own response, weighing in on whether her experience differed or was the same. I got the impression that Dylan wasn't necessarily trying to mislead me with her responses, but that she was saying the things she wished to believe about her experiences. She would declare her classes to be too easy for her but then didn't examine whether or not she was successful with the assignments. Throughout all three interviews, she talked about the ease of the assignments and how she was not challenged; she also casually mentioned not trying anything new or pushing herself in her writing, sticking to topics and strategies she had used before for high school.

Dylan said at multiple points that high school did not prepare her for college. In the first interview, she explained, "There were some things that I had to do today [in a college class] that I feel like I didn't know and I should have already known them, but my high school never taught me how to do those things." The vagueness of what "things" she was asked to do is emblematic of much of her responses, rarely going below the surface to the exact what and whys. In her first interview, while she blamed high school for not preparing her, she also admitted that she always chose the social above the academic but spoke about her hsGPA as if she had really been trying to succeed. She did not accept any responsibility for her lack of preparation and 1.7 hsGPA. She is representative of many of the students who place into the ENG 91 and ENG 95 who think that doing better than some of the other students in the basic writing class or writing better than they did in high school means that they are doing well.

Regarding her work in high school, she said she was a “big procrastinator” and would only start the writing assignments, the longest of which was 2 ½ pages double spaced:

the day before it was due or the day of, and I didn’t feel like I had to work very hard at it though. Just because whatever the essay was about I would always figure out a way to be passionate about that and give my opinion and if I’m passionate about the subject then I can just go on and on forever and ever.

She did not discuss rhetorical strategies in her writing assignments in any of the interviews, always staying at the topic level when asked about the assignment, as in “my paper about Tinder” or the paper about corporal punishment.

Prior to her second interview, I asked Dylan to submit an artifact of her college writing ability. She provided two essays: a two-page personal narrative about meeting her boyfriend on Tinder written for her basic writing class, and a two-page report she had written in high school about her physical disability. The latter was riddled with plagiarism as it was patched together from various online fact sheets with only two sentences that were entirely original to her writing. Dylan submitted these pieces because she was pleased with them. She did not think of the plagiarized report as plagiarism, in spite of the fact that she’d copied and pasted 95% of it without use of quotation marks. She had the websites listed at the end of the report, so an attempt was made to give credit to the sources. Dylan did not seem to realize that I would be much more interested in reading a paper about her disability written in her own wording and from her perspective instead of culled from online sources. I did not ask her about that paper, instead focusing on the paper she had written while at MMCC.

I pressed her with multiple questions, worded different ways, to learn what her goals were with the paper. I initially asked her to tell me about the paper and she responded by talking

about the relationship she had with her boyfriend that semester. Dylan selected this topic because she knew she needed to write about a personal experience, and “that was the biggest personal experience that I had at the time, so I was like ‘I’m gonna..’ And it was all new and exciting, so it was like, ‘I’m going to write about this.’” She was unable to describe the writing process she used for the paper, other than to say she wrote things down as she thought of them and she used first person. She added sentences and paragraphs to the paper as the semester and the relationship progressed, but did not speak about revision, thesis/purpose, audience, or organization. It should be noted that students in ENG 95 are taught to write essays and to revise them for both purpose and audience, so these were terms she should have been taught early in the semester.

Dylan was writing writer-based prose, even noting, “I kind of ended up using that piece as more or less as my journal. It was really nice to share all of my frustration and my happiness and everything with someone else.” When I asked, “Can you tell me some of the thoughts you had while you were figuring out what you wanted to write in it and what you wanted to achieve in the paper?,” she changed the subject back to topic choice and said she’d considered a different topic. Dylan did not appear to understand what I meant by wanting the paper to achieve a purpose. When I asked, “Did you learn any strategies when writing the paper, any writing strategies?,” she responded, “Not any that I didn’t already know.”

The paper itself was a chronological telling of her relationship. The introduction was about how she met her boyfriend. The first body paragraph was about her physical disability, and Dylan again used quotes from the high school research report rather than write about her condition in her own words. She briefly reflected on elements of how the relationship developed before proceeding to give details of the first date; this is all in the first body paragraph of a paper that had already been submitted for feedback several times. The second paragraph had

chronological details of attending the movie together. The final paragraph was a retelling of the thoughts Dylan had after the date and the conversation she had with a friend before talking to the boyfriend on Snapchat. She ended the concluding paragraph with Snapchat's definition of Snapchat, in quotation marks with a url in parentheses for citation.

Dylan's process to writing the paper was not that unusual for a first paper written in ENG 95. Students arrive in the class thinking the goal is to put words on the page, without really considering the impact of those words on an outside reader. They tend to rely on simplistic, chronological paper structures or otherwise formulaic arguments at first until challenged not to. I could see areas in the draft where the instructor or a peer had likely pushed Dylan to reflect on the circumstances or to further explain a topic she had mentioned superficially. Some of these attempts were successful, like the sentence of reflection in the first paragraph, but others were not, such as quoting from Snapchat to explain what Snapchat is.

The lack of critical awareness extends beyond the writing situation. At one point, Dylan told me she would have graduated by the time she talked to me in spring 2021 had she not moved out of state. She began classes in Fall 2018 and did not pass ENG 95. She had taken the ENG 91 over two semesters and withdrawn from it both times. In her first year of community college, she did not pass a single English class, and yet she seemed to believe that she would have been on track to graduate in 2-3 years. Another example is in our first interview, she said that keeping her hsGPA up was important to her because it was important to her grandfather. She had indicated that she thought a 2.0 was a good GPA, so I asked how important it was for her to get a 2.0 or above and she said,

Well, I didn't achieve it, but I'm not upset that I didn't achieve it. It was more important to me because my grandpa thought it was so important, so I would try and work even

harder because of him so even if I was sick, I would figure out a way and email all of my teachers and get my homework from it and get them all done in advance.

That may have been true at times, but Dylan also said she put writing off high school papers until the day before or day the paper was due. Over the course of the three interviews, Dylan said that she thought she could have been placed into a higher writing class because she was bored and not challenged enough, but she also said there were things they were doing in class that she didn't know and probably should have known before coming to college. She expected college to be harder, requiring longer writing assignments with greater frequency than in high school, but she also continued to write on the same topics she had written about in high school.

In one of the follow-up interviews, Dylan talked about how when she was diagnosed with her disease, she was essentially told she would not live to attend college. She saw little point in doing well in high school, as she was more concerned about making friends and being social. When she later found that her life expectancy was going better than predicted, she decided to enroll in community college: "Once I started getting into college and I realized that I was nowhere near the end of my life, I decided to change my attitude. And I flipped it all the way around." It was difficult for her to focus on schoolwork since she did not have much experience with focusing on homework, but she said her newfound ability to come home, make a snack, and then get started on homework surprised her mom. Dylan would have a study night with her sisters to work on one of her classes (likely the developmental reading class she was in) and then work with her mom the next night on her writing assignments.

When I asked if she had thought about withdrawing from any of her courses, she admitted that she had been encouraged by her mother to withdraw when she experienced some health problems, but she was "stubborn" and did not want her disease to win. I asked Dylan if the

paper about the relationship was one she submitted to the portfolio, and she could not recall, nor did she seem to know what the portfolio was. The portfolio process is generally something the basic writing instructors at MMCC build into the course and refer to throughout the semester. Dylan did not seem to realize that the paper she had written about Tinder that relied on a simple chronological structure and had significant audience awareness issues and insufficient citation would not be considered passing work. She did say that she did not pass the class; what she left implied without acknowledging is that she did not complete the course, and her instructor assigned a W.

Dylan's goal was not necessarily to earn an associate's degree. Attending college was her immediate goal. Although she did not pass an English class in her two semesters at the college, she did not regret attending the community college. In fact, she ended our final interview by discussing how she was very proud of what she was able to do, especially as she had never planned to attend college.

Camille: Adult Learner Who Had Life Circumstances That Interfered

Background information for Camille: Camille was someone who tried to do her best in high school but had both life circumstances and high school quality issues that left her unprepared for college. Even after returning to school a second time, she did not finish her degree. She did not finish ENG 101, either, but it is clear that she learned much in her time in the English classes and has a drive for lifelong learning.

Camille was one of my most enthusiastic interviewees in October 2018. Most of my interviews took 45-60 minutes when I had three or four students in the session. Hers was an individual interview of similar length, in part because she was very excited to be in an ENG 101

class. She was proud of the paper she was writing at the time but also discussed the difficulty of attending college as an older student. In both interviews, she discussed how what is taught in high school and junior high today is much different from what was taught when she was in school, and that she was simply not as prepared as the students who had graduated from high school more recently.

My first questions were about high school. Camille, who is Black, had graduated high school in the early 1990s. When I asked what kinds of classes and assignments she had in high school, Camille said, “Just regular, like grammar, and I think my senior year I had an English composition one,” but when asked what kinds of papers she had to write in high school, she replied, “I didn’t.” While we both laughed about this, she was adamant that she did not write any papers in high school. She remembered being assigned one book to read between the two high schools she attended. The next question of whether high school prepared her for college was met with a resounding “no” and more laughter. While she did not recall learning anything regarding writing in her high school English classes, she did believe grades to be important. Camille explained that she was raised in the foster care system and viewed either scholarships or the military as her only ways to go to college, so maintaining a 3.0 GPA or above was very important to her in high school.

She had started at MMCC so long ago that the developmental classes she had taken in her first year at the college had undergone a name and number change, and her placement test was two or three placement test iterations ago. She remembered being placed in a reading class. According to her class history, she began at MMCC the year after graduating high school and passed what was at the time ENG 001, a developmental reading class. She then took an extended break from school, not returning until decades later, when she took and withdrew from the

second level of developmental writing classes and then took and failed it the next semester. That led to another gap of around five years. When she returned, she was placed into ENG 91, the renamed and numbered developmental reading class, which she passed, and then the next semester, she passed ENG 95, with something called a proficiency rating, which means that she was able to bypass the second level of basic writing. While Camille thought she was placed fairly the first time, she said that it was less fair to place her back into ENG 91 and ENG 95 when she returned, explaining that “if you’ve done something, you should be going forward, not backwards.” The reason for this step backwards was the class that she passed her very first time in college was no longer considered relevant in the system, since it had been a non-transfer-level course from some twenty years prior, so she had to retake the placement tests, which had also changed.

During Camille’s first time in college, she found a job, and that took precedence over her learning at that time. When she returned twenty years later, she experienced “a hardship” and was, in her words, “disciplined for not having all of my academics right.” Based on what I know of MMCC’s system, I presume this means she was put on academic probation and needed to complete a course and/or bring her GPA up to a certain level in order to continue to receive financial aid and continue in classes. She said she was an example of not giving up. When her ENG 101 teacher told her “sometimes there’s just the right time,” Camille responded:

there’s never the right time; you just have to jump in. There’s always going to be something that’s going to happen. Somebody’s always going to die, someone’s going to get sick, some things are just going to happen to you and either you can let it make you stay down or you can say ok.

In fact, one of the papers she submitted for her successful basic writing portfolio was about how she had many distractions as a single parent returning to school, but she kept persevering.

At the time of our first interview in Oct. 2018, she was 10 classes away from having her associate's degree, and she really wanted to have it before she turned 50: "I want *more*, but that's the goal I set for myself." Camille was still having issues with passing all of her classes, but at this time, she was determined to learn what she needed in order to someday become a pharmacy technician. She talked about how she could have been passed along by one of her math teachers, but she said she knows she really needs to know the math, especially since it is like a:

building block: you can't know this and you don't know that, so you gotta know how that builds up to that, so I said, 'See you again in the fall,' [to my math teacher] and he laughed at me, but if that's what I gotta do, that's what I gotta do.

Everything she said in that first interview indicated that she had a growth mindset and was prepared to persevere.

She admitted that even though she was excited about taking ENG 101, she was struggling with the class. At that time, Camille said there was nothing wrong with the teacher; it was "the mechanics" of the course that she was struggling with. She explained, "Some people get it just like this [she snapped her fingers]. And some people are like, 'Ok, I need you to explain it a little more to me.'" She added that some of the teachers need to understand that some students are going to "require more attention than you can give" and maybe they should suggest another teacher who is "more relatable." In our second interview, I asked if she had used the writing center at all, and she had one student tutor she liked who had a schedule that worked with hers, but then that student left and Camille also had a new job and new issues with her child, so she was trying to reach out to her former developmental reading teacher for assistance instead.

Her ENG 101 class had dual credit students in it, which meant they were taking college classes while in high school to count as credit for both, and also meant that as a returning adult student, Camille was taking ENG 101 with students as young as 16. When Camille didn't understand things in class, she said she had no problems asking a 17-year-old fellow student because "she's fresh, fresh meaning that she's still right in class and she's getting whatever they're giving to them. They didn't do this stuff when I was in high school!" While Camille did not define "this stuff" further, she did speak to how even her own son, a fourth grader, was being assigned more writing and research than she had been exposed to in high school, noting that he had been assigned to write a paragraph about biomes and she had him working at the computer on it, something she presumably did not have experiences with in high school because of when she had graduated.

In spite of her difficulties with managing the ENG 101 class, already at midterm, she was able to talk about rhetoric and what it meant and how to strategize as a writer. When asked what ENG 101 was about, she quickly rattled off how there were many different types of assignments and different approaches:

You have to know, what is it? Strategies? The different rhetorical strategies. You gotta know that. Gotta be ready to write a paper. Gotta be able to know the body of the structure, how the paper flows, how it affects your audience. Who *is* your audience, who you're talking to? What message are you trying to convey and what you're trying to get out there. Must know what your thesis is and that the thesis is the whole point of the argument or whatever you're trying to talk about.

She also understood the importance of transfer and discussed how what she learned about child soldiers in a psychology class also applied in her ethics class. She recognized that all of the

learning would “help you out later in life because you’ve been introduced to something and for whatever reason, you still retain it, and you are able to utilize it and put it in something.”

Even though I could see how much she was growing as a student, Camille admitted to still struggling with self-confidence as a writer. She said that when people look at her work, they can always see that she has ideas, but she’s “scared of my work being critiqued because I don’t like failure. And I don’t like to look like a failure, you know. It kind of shows that education level you have, which I’m not proud of.” She envied that her son was already getting a better start than she had had. She understood the importance of getting an education because “you begin to see things on a different perspective. You begin to see things that you didn’t know that they were there.”

When I interviewed Camille the first time, I would have described her as facing some challenges but also having determination. I was surprised to see that she had withdrawn from that ENG 101 course and stopped taking English courses altogether. When she attended the follow-up interview, she shared that during the 2018 semester, she experienced a few negative issues and one positive change to her circumstances that led to her no longer attending the college. She had parenting struggles: her son was acting out as a result of being bullied at school, which led to having to switch his school, something she had to do more than once during that particular semester. She had also received a promotion at work which changed her financial situation favorably, while also allowing her to stay at a workplace that was satisfying. What she discussed the most, though, was an issue with the teacher that made her feel unwelcome in the class.

In both interviews, she discussed the difficulty of attending college as an adult student and that some professors are better suited to teaching adult students than others. In the second interview, she mentioned that she was not trying to challenge her ENG 101 teacher; she just

needed some things explained in a different way, and she was asking questions in order to understand, always emphasizing that it was because she is older and learns differently from the students who had fresh learning experiences. Camille was careful to emphasize that this is not a pattern with all teachers and was not something she experienced in the beginning of class, but at one point, she felt she had “rubbed her [teacher] the wrong way,” and from that time forward, Camille lacked confidence in doing anything in the class.

What Camille did not openly acknowledge is that the paper she was most proud of writing and that she brought with her to the interview as her artifact was an indictment of the treatment she felt she was receiving as an adult learner by the teacher who would be grading that argumentative paper. In describing the paper, she indicated it was supposed to be both a causal argument and a personal narrative. Camille was very proud of her paper, saying it was the “best paper” she’d ever written. She was making an argument that adult students need something different from traditional students and that teachers should be more understanding. She explained:

I’ve been trying to go back to school for a little over ten years now and it’s always been something that kind of becomes challenging for me. Y’know some of the professors when you’re older, if you don’t quite understand what they’re saying, they get upset with you or thinking that you’re trying to take over their classroom, but really you’re just trying to get a *[sic]* understanding of what it is they’re saying.

When she described the process of writing the paper, she said that while other papers were more of a struggle to organize, this paper came to her more easily. She did not explicitly acknowledge that the teacher who was causing her frustrations and creating a lack of confidence for her was the audience for the paper, but she did say:

I wanted this paper to kind of give everyone a perspective, whoever might have read it other than myself... to take in consideration that sometimes you appreciate the little smallest things, so those teachers that give you like that extra boost sometimes we don't say thank you or we don't appreciate them enough. Then those other teachers who become so difficult that they need to be – not a whole lot understanding – but *just* a little bit more understanding because everyone comes from different walks, and you shouldn't have to, you know, challenge those walks. Just saying that no one's trying to challenge you or your profession. [...] A lot of the people who are coming to college are not always the most – fastest learners, I'll say that.

Camille's confidence in writing dropped as a few things happened simultaneously: her attendance faltered as she dealt with the schooling issues for her son, Camille felt the teacher's attitude toward her changed with the teacher reacting to Camille challenging her, although that was not Camille's stated intention, and Camille began to miss submitting assignments. Her instructor had a conversation with her that it would be best if she withdrew from the class because if she did not, she would fail the course.

Camille's original goal of becoming a pharmacy technician was not met, but she had since weighed the cost of attending college (both financially and interpersonally) and had found a job that was fulfilling and met her needs, so she no longer needed to finish her degree before turning 50. Additionally, other less perceptible goals or milestones were reached. She had learned about what she valued as a student and gained skills that will lead to lifelong learning. She expressed pride in where she is today, saying the rhetorical strategies she acquired at MMCC are used in her daily life, where she has to think about her audience and refine her writing when doing on-the-job tasks. She's now in a better position to help her son with his homework and

with navigating the choice of whether or not he should attend college someday. Camille's three attempts at completing coursework are recorded as failures when observed only at the transcript level, but in asking her about her progress through the writing program, I found she valued almost every step along the way, with the exception of her placement upon returning to school the second time. Like Dylan, Camille did not have to finish a particular class to have gained something important from it.

Sofia: Accelerated Learning Program Success Story

Background information for Sofia: Sofia took ALP after being in a stand-alone developmental reading class for one semester. She is a good example of a student who benefitted from her time in developmental coursework and was not significantly delayed in meeting her goals.

Sofia attended high school in Mexico, where she was a diligent student but did not have any experience learning in English. She is traditionally college-aged and Hispanic. In her first interview with me, she indicated that she thought she probably could have started in a higher class, but in a later interview, with hindsight, she said she was glad to have the ENG 91 reading course first because she was not at a point with her vocabulary to be able to take and pass ENG 101 her first semester. She speaks English very well but appears to be nervous about her English skills still today. Of the four interviewees, she was the most deliberate in her responses. She was also the most successful in terms of college course completion. Sofia not only passed both ENG 101 and ENG 102 but retained knowledge she'd learned in both classes. In November 2020, she was getting ready to start an internship and planned to graduate in Spring 2021.

In Sofia's first interview in October 2018, she talked about how writing was a positive experience for her in high school, where she would "love to do those good jobs [*sic*] at writing," got started on writing projects without procrastinating, and received positive feedback from her teachers. She would give fellow students ideas of how to get started with their papers. Her reading and writing teachers in Mexico assigned books and lengthy writing assignments about the books, where answering several questions would add up to 20 pages of responses, responses that were sometimes hand-written and at other times completed on the computer. Students received grammatical error correction feedback on this work. When asked if high school prepared her for college, Sofia replied, "I think so" and added that in her reading and writing classes, she had learned "a lot of grammar," which shows that at the time of the interview, that's what Sofia thought would be of importance in her college-level writing classes. Sofia also reported having to do at least one paper with special research formatting, which she described as "really difficult." She felt she was doing really well in her developmental reading class and could have possibly been placed higher.

When I asked what a good high school GPA would be, she asked what was the highest; after I explained that 4.0 was an A, 3.0 a B and 2.0 a C, she said that a 3.0 would be a good hsGPA, and that it was important to earn a 3.0 "sometimes, most of the times." She explained that she usually had Bs but would be happy when she earned an A, as it was difficult to do so and did not happen "often" or "every time." Overall, I gained the impression that she tried to do her best in high school, taking classwork seriously and wanting to do well both for herself and because she liked it when others were happy with the work she had done.

There was another student in that first interview session with Sofia. The two had a good back and forth dynamic, with Sofia answering first at times and the other student answering first

others. At one point, I asked if anything had gotten in the way of schoolwork in high school, and the other student discussed her family troubles and revealed several of her health and learning disability diagnoses. When that student had finished, Sofia responded:

Yeah – same as [her]: family problems, I think we all have them. It's a pretty tough life when no one helps you out or no one is with you if you want to go to school... because no one wanted me to go to school. They accepted it that I am here because now I am 18, but... They won't help me. And I am practically by myself [...] and I just feel lonely. That's how it is. And I guess all this stuff on my mind has kept me from learning more because I'm always thinking about things, just thinking about life – what's going to happen tomorrow, what will I do, thinking about that makes it harder. I guess that's the main thing: not having anyone to support you.

Sofia mentioned loneliness in a subsequent interview as well. When asked about the difference between high school and college, she said high school is “fun and it's different from college because you have to do everything on your own and it's more about you trying to figure out how to do things and you're kind of lonely.” She elaborated that in her high school, she was used to “being around the same people throughout those three or four years,” but in college, she wished that she had made more friends. The lack of close personal support for persevering in college was a detriment she was able to overcome, but it had an impact on how she felt about her success.

The personal connections seemed to make a big difference for Sofia. She described her ENG 92 and ENG 101 classes as some of her favorite classes in all of college. While she attributed this in part to the fact that the subject matter overlapped with her interest in psychology, the ALP classes are designed to create a community of learners, with a portion of

the students who were in her ENG 101 class attending ENG 92 with her. When she took ENG 91 in her first semester of college, she said she felt like she didn't belong "at the beginning because sometimes I didn't understand, and that was very embarrassing. Sometimes they would ask me something, and I felt like I was dumb because I didn't understand." She was able to push past these feelings in part because she connected with her instructor and would have conversations with her after class where the instructor would encourage her, which built her confidence. Sofia said:

That really motivated me, so when you're motivated, you really like what you're doing and you do it feeling like you are achieving something, so I think that having someone who really supports you while you're there and looks at you kind of struggling but also tells you that, you know, it's ok to struggle.

She had this same instructor for both of the developmental reading classes, the latter of which was paired with an ENG 101 class for additional support.

Sofia indicated that attending college in America was life-changing for her and there was much that she had to adapt to. While the other students in class with her had graduated from high school in America, she felt like they were "in the same place as me." She recognized that they were all struggling in some regard, but they were also all in the learning process together. She missed some of this camaraderie when the college shifted to remote instruction because of the pandemic. She said that it was harder to stay motivated when she was not attending classes on campus.

Sofia had not tried using the tutoring center during the pandemic, even though it had online support services, but when she had been on campus and had spare time in her schedule, she would go to the writing center to do schoolwork in order to stay focused on the task at hand.

Like Camille observed, the timing did not always work out for Sofia, as during her first semesters, the center would close soon after she was able to get there after class, but she did report that working on schoolwork at the center was effective when she was able to do so. Being able to stay after class to ask questions of her instructor in ENG 102 was another way that personal connections helped her to persevere and grow as a student.

Sofia was able to look back at her time at MMCC and observe her progress; with hindsight, she recognized the “lack of skills” she had when beginning, but also noticed that the repeated practice of writing papers in ENG 101 and 102 helped her to improve. She was grateful for her time in developmental reading because it helped her to build her vocabulary: “Three years ago, I didn’t know as much English as I know now. And I’m still struggling with it, I’ll admit it, but it’s been easier to tackle classes ever since.” She added that because she did not speak English in Mexico, “writing was going to be hard for me for sure.” Although she was in developmental reading classes without any developmental writing classes, the students had to write summaries of what they were reading, so it helped her to prepare for the writing classes, too.

Because of ALP, she only had one semester of stand-alone developmental reading. She described herself as “pretty confident!” in ENG 101 (which was co-enrolled with ENG 92), and said it was her favorite because it delved into psychology, and also ENG 102, where she had the choice to write a paper about the environment. The artifact she brought to the second interview was brainstorming for her 14-page ENG 102 research paper and then she eventually supplied the longer paper as well. ENG 102 was her first experience with freewriting as a prewriting technique, and Sofia was really impressed with it, as well as the teacher’s approach to allowing her to explore what she knew about a topic before researching it. She was able to hone her own

opinions and build argumentative support for them with the research instead of merely summarizing what she had read while researching. She described moving from a process where she would type what she'd found on websites to carefully selecting which pieces of information to use to suit her overall purpose while also choosing when to write the information in her own words and when to directly quote it, all while juggling citations as well. At the end of the project, she had to turn the long paper into a speech to give to her classmates and she was proud that she felt she'd convinced them of the importance of her argument.

Each time I interviewed Sofia, I saw her as succeeding in her coursework at the college. In thinking about her writing classes, she was able to recognize the great strides she had taken, but, like other students in this study, she continued to struggle with confidence overall. While she never thought about withdrawing from ENG 101 or 102, she did struggle in other classes and contemplated withdrawing from them. When I asked her how she defined whether she had succeeded in a class, she said that when working on a project if she understood what she was doing, she felt successful: "If I completed that assignment or project and I didn't quite know what I was doing, I felt like I didn't quite succeed. And sometimes, well most of the time, it's not the instructor's fault [...]. Sometimes it's *me* not asking questions because of just fear or shyness." When asked to define success in college overall, her attention turned to grades:

It's funny because I am not the best student. I didn't get the best grades. [...] Even with the low grades, I think [pause] I got through this, so that's success for me. Obviously, I would have loved to have As, at least Bs in all my classes – that wasn't the point.

Because like, I had a lot of things going on. The language barrier. I suffer from depression and anxiety and so that really, that really pulled me down. So overall, I feel

like I did succeed because I am really close to graduating, so I'm about to accomplish one of those goals I had for myself.”

She went on to say that just like she wished she could have made more friends at the college, she also would have liked to have better overall grades. When prompted, she revealed she had been taking four classes a semester while also working “if not full time, almost full time.” While balancing school and work, she was also struggling with depression and she had one semester where she moved out of her aunt and uncle’s house to live on her own. In order to complete her studies in three years, she took classes over the summer as well, so she maintained this lifestyle for three years without much of any break from it.

Sofia would like to eventually attend a four-year school, but she said further education is “on pause” for the moment. Instead, she’s thinking about taking a three-month course to become a court interpreter. If she does eventually transfer to a university, she hopes to be an English major “because I really like to write” or possibly attend law school. Sofia’s placement helped her to acclimate to American college expectations and contributed to her overall success at MMCC. The connections she forged with her instructors seemed to replace some of the support network she was lacking at home. Although her college experience was not always easy and she did not always feel confident in the work she was doing, she persevered to complete her degree.

Reflection

When performing correlation studies to ascertain predictive validity of placement measures, researchers can lose sight of the students as people. With community college students in particular, the students are often people with potentially complicated lives and educational histories. What is also often neglected, especially in studies that denigrate basic writing, is that

students are capable of progressing and learning the subject area even when a passing grade is not earned in the class. When the definition of success is checking boxes along the way to a degree, then yes, some of these students are failures. Likewise, researchers concerned with return on investment for taxpayer dollars will not find what they are looking for in terms of results. Sadly, those researchers would likely see students like Dylan as an unlikely return on investment. Likewise, Camille's story would probably be reduced to a single mother who had possibly incurred student loan debt in order to attend classes without earning a diploma. This perspective misses the gains: no matter Dylan's life expectancy, she and her parents will know she tried. Camille has a job she would likely not have secured had it not been for what she had learned across the several developmental English classes and the partial semester of first-year composition.

Missing as well is any acknowledgement that some of the community college students are attending in spite of any number of distractions or hardships. Obviously, Camille's story was not a straight path, with her dropping out of college and remaining away for over twenty years and then withdrawing again. She was from an economically disadvantaged background and appeared to have had several deaths in the family while she was in college; what she had always wanted was a way out of her current economic level, but that also meant taking breaks from school when she found work that helped her meet her financial goals or when family needed her. If her success meant further struggles for her child, then she was going to place her child's needs first every time, as she did when she had to miss school in order to resolve her son's issues with bullying. Whether or not to remain in college is not an uncomplicated decision for these students.

Each of the four students had contemplated withdrawing from at least one class. For Renee, she chose to remain in class and take the failing grade for ENG 102 instead of

withdrawing because she thought she could still learn something from the course, and she did. She went from an F in ENG 102 one semester to an A the next. She's currently on a break from college while navigating the pandemic, but her transcripts do not show that she's still actively writing in her spare time, submitting short stories for publication. Her high school transcript had at least one failing grade on it for English and at least one A, the same as her college transcript. Where does one place a Renee? Which grade carries more merit? How does one balance her anxiety with her ability to produce strong work when she is comfortably challenged by the assignment? I think back to the high-pitched squeak her voice became when asked whether or not she was placed fairly as she responded that she didn't really know how to answer that question. Renee's experiences are such that a border shifted this way or that in any placement system could mean the difference between a placement for her. She did not ultimately need basic writing in order to succeed in ENG 101 and ENG 102, so her 2.7 self-reported cumulative hsGPA plus positive, rhetorically challenging, and lengthier writing assignments in her senior year helped her through ENG 101, even as her anxiety took a toll in the first semester of ENG 102.

Even Sofia, who by all transcript accounts is a success story, had moments where she considered withdrawing from her non-English courses. What could not be seen in her college transcripts was the workload she was balancing between her four classes a semester and her job. Her family life couldn't be known, nor could her depression. For every Sofia who persists under these circumstances, there is *at least* one other student at the community college who does not. The data from this chapter is in keeping with longitudinal studies of students in basic writing and at community colleges (Sternglass, 1997; Tinberg & Nadeau, 2010).

The problem persists of how to measure success at community colleges. Because of the transient nature of students' relationships with the college, attempting to contact students after they have stopped attending classes is incredibly difficult. Rather than try to assess individual students' learning experiences at the college, institutions may need to pursue more robust programmatic assessments where qualitative data is collected from within the writing courses about the learning being achieved during the semester. One common theme in both the initial interviews with the focus groups and the more in-depth narratives is that students do not always know what to expect from their college learning experiences, so they also do not know for sure whether their placements are appropriate until later in the semester. The fewer writing experiences students have, the less prepared they seem to be to answer that question, as they do not have any expectation that college will require more from them than high school did. This presents a problem for directed self-placement for some community college students, too.

The interview responses from the four students in this chapter show that the writing courses at MMCC have value to students beyond what Cullinan and Biedzio call "gatekeeping." For Camille and Dylan, basic writing courses were very much needed classes that were not responsible for waylaying their potential graduation. Renee, Camille, and Sofia were all able to discuss writing strategies they learned and transferred to other applications in their lives. Based on the data in this chapter, in addition to needing to reconsider how success is defined in placement assessment, placement assessment reform also needs to consider disciplinary expertise and community college missions.

CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSION

While writing this dissertation part-time and working and parenting full-time, I gained an even deeper community college ethos. The fact is, my plan did not involve taking three years to draft a dissertation. Like the students in Chapter VI, there were times I doubted I would finish, and I questioned the cost of successfully defending, a cost that could at times be measured financially but was more often measured in time that I did or did not have to give. The further I got into the process, particularly as I tried to maintain the difficult balance of teaching, living, and researching during a pandemic, the more I empathized with my community college students, particularly the students against whom the odds were stacked, the students who had received messages that they did not necessarily belong, but were determined to persist anyway. The path is not supposed to take this long, but sometimes it does. Students are not supposed to be balancing two full-time jobs, but sometimes they are. Students aren't supposed to wait so long to return to school, but sometimes they do.

It is for these reasons, and so many more, that a community college lens is important to any research of community colleges. Idealized standards should not be imposed on community college students. Placement procedures should not be reverse engineered from data about the students already likeliest to pass transfer-level courses. The time has come to focus placement research on the students who often live at the margins of academia, the students who are vulnerable to failing in so many ways. Much of placement research has been focused on avoiding or ignoring those very same students, as if pushing them to the side as inconveniences would

somehow compel them to fit the mold of the traditional student. A community college lens will refute presumptions made about those students by people who have never known these students.

How Does Placement Reform Shift if a Community College Lens is Applied?

According to Christie Toth (2018), “it is not enough to simply shift the gaze of disciplinary knowledge-making to these settings. If we are to produce scholarship that is relevant and actionable for two-year college colleagues, we must attend to their distinctive rhetorical contexts” (In Banks et al., p. 397). Hassel and Giordano (2011) advocated for actively including community college faculty members in that research, as they are the teacher-scholars with the most direct experience with the students. The direct experience means seeing the greater narrative of which the data is a part but not a whole. It also means seeing the numerical data as real, live students with individual narratives instead of as faceless statistics. Most importantly, it means believing that students can succeed if given a chance.

A community college lens means wanting that chance to be fair and student-centered. Community college research cannot succeed if it is not student-centered. That is not to ignore the many constraints of working in a community college; it is to work within and around those constraints in pursuit of fairness for all students. In discussing the unique challenges of writing program administration at a two-year college, Jeffrey Klausman (2008) wrote:

Since for many, a college education is something “other” to their lives and their families’ lives—seen as “not for them” because they “are not smart enough” or because they “messed up” their first time, or as “beyond them” because they are young and inexperienced—a WPA must forge a writing program that always keeps the current students’ tenuous position at the margins in mind; we cannot assume, as colleagues with

a more uniform student body may be able to, that our students form any kind of bloc.

What we must do is help students write their way into belonging from whatever position relative to the academy they now hold. (p. 246)

Good community college researchers will endeavor to assess and reassess the many positions community college students arrive to the institution with. A community college lens can never presume to know what is best for most students, as there is no “most,” and what has been traditionally valued for “the most” often upholds the very societal structures that have kept the gates closed for marginalized students.

The community college placement reform lens is a natural extension of the fourth wave of writing assessment and its focus on fairness. Norbert Elliot’s golden rule of fairness is: “Fairness in writing assessment is defined as the identification of opportunity structures created through maximum construct representation. Constraint of the writing construct is to be tolerated only to the extent to which benefits are realized for the least advantaged” (2016, §1.3). To shift to a community college perspective for placement reform will mean first identifying the many groups of students who could be labeled the “least advantaged” by the practice, which also means prioritizing the students who need support before and during their transfer-level courses over the students who have already been placed into transfer-level courses and succeeding there. Those students will continue to be likely to succeed, just as the least advantaged will continue to be most likely to fail without interventions discovered via research.

This research must also move beyond placement to cover the wider academic lives of the students. Harrington (2005) made a similar declaration: “If we focus less on the method of assessment and more on how the placement assessment functions in the academic lives of our students, we will engage key questions about the interpretive decisions placement ultimately

rests on” (p. 12). Student literacy has always been much greater than what may be measured on a placement test, but it is also greater than what is shown in high school transcripts; as community college students have lives that extend far beyond their high school writing experiences, so too must the research extend into how those literate experiences impact their readiness.

Huot remarked in 1996 that “writing assessment has remained a contextless activity emphasizing standardization and an ideal version of writing” (p. 561) when “For the last two or three decades writing pedagogy has moved toward process-oriented and context-specific approaches that focus on students' individual cognitive energies and their socially positioned identities as members of culturally bound groups” (p. 561). Placement reform needs to synchronize with writing assessment reform and, crucially, it needs to move from being in the shadow of educational measurement to a more visible place where disciplinary expertise can be honored. We need to unite methods and theories from across writing assessment, RCWS, basic writing, community college scholarship, educational measurement, disability studies, developmental education, and many more research areas that have been siloed, like the research emerging from Hispanic serving institutions and historically Black colleges and universities.

The Research Undertaken in This Study Represents a Beginning

When designing the study for this dissertation, my plan was to examine multiple measures variables for use in placement at my institution, operating from the presumption that multiple measures assessment would be a fairer method of placement for students at the community college than the previous method of a solitary placement test, but I was concerned that MMA, like a placement test, is an indirect measure of students' writing ability. What I found is that the range of experiences in high school English classes and how those experiences are

represented, or more accurately *not* represented, on high school transcripts makes use of those variables more complicated for placement assessment at open admissions schools because the variables represent different qualities, particularly for students who did not necessarily intend to attend college. A one-size-fits-all approach to use of high school transcript data will result in uneven success for the students who were already most difficult to place, as has been shown in recent multiple measures studies (Barnett et al., 2020; Cullinan & Biedzio, 2021).

I discovered that because the methodology for assessment of multiple measures placement has placed the upper thresholds of students at the forefront of its analysis, other student demographics at the community colleges have been neglected in the analysis to the detriment of their fair placement. The implicit message in much of multiple measures research is “Most students will be able to pass the transfer-level class if they meet one or more of these cut-off thresholds.” Cullinan and Biedzio wrote of their multi-state multiple measures study that their sample was of students who placed into transfer-level classes and enrolled in them, and then admitted, “The underlying assumption of this analysis is that the relationship between the predictors and the outcomes would be the same for students going into developmental courses, but this is a strong assumption, which may not be true” (2021, p. 30). My findings represent a small portion of what is available to be learned when that assumption is interrogated.

Construct Validity Should Be Prioritized Over Predictive Validity

One of the key problems with placement tests was the lack of construct validity, and that problem persists with multiple measures placement as it is currently in use at MMCC and other institutions. The use of multiple-singular measures reduces the representation of the student’s writing ability to whatever is measured by that one variable. Multiple measures proponents argue

that high school grade point averages are an appropriate measure as they represent students' ability to persist in coursework over a span of four years (Belfield & Crosta, 2012; Scott-Clayton, 2012), and students who have graduated from high school should be able to succeed in college courses (Martorell & McFarlin, 2011).

First, several presumptions are being made about the curricular construct in both high schools and community colleges. Not all students graduate from high school prepared for college-level writing instruction. While some high school students have been taught the foundations of writing a sustained, researched argument, others have been instructed to follow a formula and write a five-paragraph essay from a list of approved topics, with a wide range of students in between. Researchers outside of RCWS may believe that students who have graduated from high school with the ability to respond to an essay test prompt with a formulaic response should be able to succeed in college, but the Council of Writing Program Administrators Outcomes Statement makes it clear that students are expected to be able to do much more than that by the "end of first-year composition":

- Learn and use key rhetorical concepts through analyzing and composing a variety of texts
- Gain experience reading and composing in several genres to understand how genre conventions shape and are shaped by readers' and writers' practices and purposes
- Develop facility in responding to a variety of situations and contexts calling for purposeful shifts in voice, tone, level of formality, design, medium, and/or structure
- Understand and use a variety of technologies to address a range of audiences

- Match the capacities of different environments (e.g., print and electronic) to varying rhetorical situations.

These outcomes are multiple, and students who have graduated from high school with little variety in their writing experiences and very little rhetorical awareness are struggling to be able to meet all of them by the end of one semester, especially in comparison to students who have been exposed to some of the outcomes in their high school English classes. The students in my study revealed that the fewer writing experiences they had in high school and/or the more formulaic those experiences, the less likely they were to succeed in first-year composition.

This returns us to presumptions about coursework. Most of the multiple measures research presumes a remedial view of developmental education, where students are being retaught what was learned in high school or practicing small steps before proceeding to college work. As recently as 2011, in *The Review of Economics and Statistics*, Martorell and McFarlin reported that the “most common method [of college remediation] is the so-called skills-and-drills approach” (p. 437), thereby erasing over fifty years of basic writing scholarship. Students in basic writing courses at MMCC, and in many other programs designed and assessed by composition scholars, are responding to college-level writing assignments and are being assessed using portfolio assessment methods that respect the construct representation of the first-year composition course. Specific, and preferably localized, disciplinary expertise should be included when crafting construct validation arguments for placement, which are distinct and separate from the statistically-based predictive validity arguments (Huot, 1996; Hassel & Giordano, 2011; Kane, 1992; Messick, 1989).

High School Grade Point Averages are Too Unstable to be Used Uncritically as a Measure for All Students

A key finding in my multiple measures study is that the qualitative responses to questions about student preparedness for college-level writing assignments and the types of assignments students did in high school were more predictive of student success than hsGPA alone, particularly for students who were not in college preparatory classes or who had indicated that high school classes did not prepare them for college-level writing.

Not all of the findings were negative. The eight students in the study who were already placed into ENG 101 by their test scores who also had a hsGPA of 3.0 or above all passed ENG 101 the first time they took the course and passed ENG 102 if they had signed up to take it. The correlation may not be connected to their hsGPAs as much as to their experiences in high school English classes. Most of the students were in college preparatory classes that had lengthier writing requirements and more varied writing assignments than what was reported by other groups. Additionally, most of these students reported that grades were important to them and that they had strong work ethics that were rewarded with high grades. All indications are that students who have both a hsGPA of 3.0 or above and a single test score above the placement threshold will be likely to succeed in transfer-level writing courses, but that is likely because the students in these zones had writing experiences that corresponded to the writing construct and the hsGPAs acted as a proxy for those broader experiences, with the placement test scores as a further side effect of the same experiences.

Grades were found to be lacking standardization and reliability across the area high schools as pertains to the writing construct. Students who earned an overall hsGPA of 2.7 at one high school were more prepared for college-level writing coursework than students who earned

an overall 2.7 hsGPA at another area high school. Additionally, students who earned the same hsGPA could have vastly different coursework assigned, with some students being asked to write a variety of lengths of papers, and others only being assigned short prescriptive papers. The high school grade point average does not carry one static meaning across GPA levels, and this is especially so for the 2.5-2.9 hsGPA range, which was an unstable metric and a problem for validity and fairness. The instability of the hsGPA as a measure is reflected in the multiple measures study results where students were placed into transfer-level coursework in higher percentages than in prior methods but did not pass the classes in equal measure (Barnett et al, 2020; Cullinan & Biedzio, 2021). Placing students on the merit of a hsGPA that does not represent a history of writing success will most likely be detrimental to their overall success at the college.

Qualitative Methods are Needed to Understand the Context of Community College Data

My findings were possible through qualitative research, through asking students about their experiences in both high school and college writing courses. When only quantitative methods are used, the data tends to be flattened into large units of students in theory instead of students in reality. Outliers are removed or become invisible; linear norms get valued above the students who do not quite fit. In a community college environment, there are more students who “do not quite fit” present than at selective universities. Because our students are frequently multiply marginalized, if we allow the data to continue to be flattened, we will neglect the very students who need the most attention and assistance in order to restore fairness to the placement process. Research methods and methodologies are not neutral choices; community college research would benefit from multiple methods practices, in order to see more of the kaleidoscope

of student demographics instead of having student groups reduced to fewer slivers of representation. How multiple measures assessment validity is itself assessed is an important element in determining whether MMA is a fair and accurate placement method for community college students, and the preeminence given to both quantitative assessment methods and to students who are already likely to succeed in transfer-level courses has moved the reform away from the students who need it the most.

The Definition of Success Needs to Broaden for Community College Demographics

Success at a community college tends to be measured by completion, whether completion of courses or completion of graduation requirements. The low completion rates for students who place in developmental education are what prompted educational economists to push for placement reform (CCRC, 2014). Students are encouraged to select a degree program when they enroll, but that does not mean that all students intend to graduate or transfer (Sullivan, 2008; Sullivan, 2017). Some students begin the placement process to ascertain whether or not they can or should enroll in college courses; some students are not fully committed to a few years in a row of pursuing a college education. Most researchers extend the graduation period to six years instead of four in order to assist community colleges in having fairer graduation comparison numbers, but this is a false comparison when not all students enroll with definite plans to graduate.

While community colleges are prepared to help students use their time at the institution to transfer to a four-year university or secure employment that helps them accomplish their goals, community colleges also serve the community by providing an opportunity for lifelong learning

that is not defined by a solitary endpoint. For instance, Moraine Valley Community College has as its mission:

to educate the whole person in a learning-centered environment, recognizing our responsibilities to one another, to our community, and to the world we share. We value excellence in teaching, learning and service as we maintain sensitivity to our role in a global, multicultural community. We are committed to innovation and continuous improvement and dedicated to providing accessible, affordable, and diverse learning opportunities and environments.

MVCC stresses what they can provide for their students, not an ideal vision of the monolithic students they hope to produce. Likewise, City College of New York's mission is that their college "advances knowledge and critical thinking, and fosters research, creativity, and innovation across academic, artistic, and professional disciplines. [...] CCNY produces citizens who make an impact on the cultural, social, and economic vitality of New York, the nation, and the world." The impact of community colleges extends well beyond whether or not students graduate, as shown in the interview responses, particularly in Ch. 6. Students did not regret their attendance at MMCC even when they did not finish. They each felt they had learned something about their coursework and themselves. While this cannot be extrapolated to all community college students, it still serves as an important reminder that students' goals are as varied as their educational experiences, and these experiences align with the mission of the college, which is not being assessed or honored by making graduation the primary data point through which success is measured.

The same logic applies to use of college course grades as a success metric. Many students are balancing additional responsibilities or coping with setbacks during their coursework, which

means that students' grades often reflect qualities other than their abilities. The grade earned in a FYC cannot be directly correlated with students' writing abilities (Elliot et al., 2012). I propose that assessment of placement reform strategies should also involve programmatic assessment instead of only relying on correlations between student placement level and course grades. When course objectives are assessed for accreditation purposes, they could be synthesized and correlated with the placement data for a more nuanced study of students' placement success that also honors construct validity.

Limitations of the Study and Suggestions for Future Research

This study was designed to be of use to my home institution in shaping the future of its placement procedure in order to benefit its students. Some of the key limitations arise out of the specificity of the research and its inability to be extrapolated to all community colleges. The findings regarding specific high school grade point average data should be used for what they are: data from within a small sample of a medium-sized primarily White Midwestern community college. The data is also limited by the two-year window for obtaining course grades for the students in the study, as the students may still continue to take courses at MMCC beyond that timeframe.

The primary limitation, though, is the intense focus on hsGPA as a placement variable that was born of MMCC's decision partway through my study to switch to use of a 2.5 self-reported hsGPA as a primary placement measure. For that reason, much of the analysis focused not only on hsGPA as a placement variable, but also on the 2.5 as a potential threshold. While the data did tend to divide on that threshold, other researchers may wish to set a different threshold for analysis of community college hsGPA. To a lesser extent, MMCC's state

coordinating board's recommendation of a 3.0 hsGPA as the threshold for transfer-level placement was a reinforcing factor for setting the other boundary for analysis at 3.0, but other community college researchers may wish to explore the thresholds that make the most sense to their contexts if attempting to replicate the study.

Furthermore, future research should move beyond the emphasis on high school writing experiences to include students' overall literacies, as 1) not all community college students have graduated from high school and/or graduated recently enough for those experiences to be of immediate relevance to their placement, and 2) students have literate experiences beyond the classroom setting that may have a significant impact on their college readiness. As more community colleges move to an integrated reading/writing approach to developmental education, so should the placement research.

Additionally, future research should be extended to be inclusive of as many subpopulations of students as possible. While this study featured a random convenience sampling, I was fortunate to have students volunteer for the study who were fairly representative of MMCC's overall demographics, with minor exceptions. Still, this sample is not a complete representation of all of the types of students who fall into the umbrella category of "least advantaged" for whom placement reform matters most. Based on my experience, I would advocate for future research to incorporate single parents, veterans, students who were homeschooled, dual credit students, returning adult students, and students with disabilities of all kinds, but especially autistic students as a rising student subpopulation. Efforts should be made to replicate the racial and ethnic diversity of the students being researched, with data being disaggregated to ensure fairness.

As stated earlier, future research also needs to be inclusive of community college teacher-scholars, as the expertise they bring to the interpretation of the data is invaluable. In their article about “Reclaiming Placement Reform,” Estrem, Shepherd, and Sturman (2018), wrote, “By redefining what the placement moment is, who gets to participate, and how it is experienced, we can move toward more progressive models in our field” (p. 63). Future research may also wish to consider ways to involve students as change agents within the research, especially if and when data collection extends beyond mere placement reform to consider curricular reform or potential support mechanisms to help the least advantaged students persist through their writing course sequences. Ideally the research will be performed by a whole team of stakeholders, as students will likely need support from many entities at the college including but not limited to financial aid, social work, the tutoring center, academic advising, and job placement or transfer offices, and more.

I would like to close with where my research began: the students. By flipping the paradigm of placement reform research from being focused on the students who are likeliest to succeed to the students who are least advantaged, I hope to undo some of the negativity inherent in the narratives of students who begin in developmental coursework or who do not complete their college degrees.

Cassandra, almost 60-year-old Black woman, taking classes as a work requirement: “My desire is to finish. I just don’t know what year that’s going to be. [laughs] I can’t take more than one class at a time. I’m just taking one class at a time, and maybe one day I’ll take two.”

Charlie, traditionally college-aged White male placed into basic writing even though he thought he could have probably taken ENG 101: “You’re just trying to be a better writer

so that you can get into 101 and then when you get into 101, it's not like a shock to your system in 101." The teacher "actually helps you through everything. She doesn't expect that you will do it all on your own."

Nathan, Black male, traditionally college-aged: "There's just so much responsibility now, like you just can't compare the two [high school and college] ...you can't... If I was in high school and future me was telling high school me, 'Ok., see now, you're going to end up having to do blank and blank and blank,' I wouldn't have known what future me was talking about."

Camille, Black woman, returning to school after gaps: "I feel that some people are missing out [regarding school] because it's not about financial aid. It's about taking you to a whole new walk of life. You begin to see things on a different perspective. You begin to see things that you didn't know that they were there."

Sofia, developmental student, Hispanic, MMCC graduate: "I have gotten far. Sometimes I do not appreciate myself. I don't value what I do sometimes, just because I wish I could do more, but sometimes it's all you can do and all you can do is great."

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APPENDIX

PARTICIPANTS BY HIGH SCHOOL GPA

GPA SELF-REPORTED OR OFFICIAL	ENGLISH COURSES AT MMCC
1.7 SR Dylan	White female 95F; 91W; 91W
1.9 O Dionte	Black male 92P, 96P; 101W
2.1 SR Jasmine	Black female 92ALP W, 101W
2.2 O Lamar	Black male 92W, 96PR
2.3 O Camille	Black female '91 91P; '12 96W; '13 96F; S'18 91P/95P; F '18 101W
2.5 O Hunter	White male 96 ALP P/ 101 A; 102 C
2.5 SR Madison	White female 101B; 102C
2.6 SR Joseph	White male 101B
2.6 O Mateo	Hispanic male 92P/96F
2.7 SR Abigail	White female 92 ALP F/ 101 W; 92 P
2.7 O Allison	White female 91P/95F; 92P/95P prior; 96F F '18; 96PR; 96P
2.7 O Jay	White female 101C; 102W F '18
2.7 O Kyle	Hispanic male 92P; 101A; 102C
2.7 SR Renee	White female 101 B; 102 F; 102 B
2.8 O Devyn	White female 91F/ 96P; 92 ALP P/101 A
2.8 O Isabella	White female 91F/96P; 91P; 92 ALP P/101A; 102 A
2.8 SR Tameka	Black female 92 ALP P/ 101 W; 101 D
3.0 SR Hannah	White female 96P,101A; 102C
3.0 SR Michael	Black male 91P, 95F; 92P; 95P, 96 PR; 96F, 96P
3.0 O Nathan	Black male 101A
3.0 O* Sofia	Hispanic female 91P; 92 ALP P/101B; 102C
3.1 O Charlie	White male 96P; 101F; 101A
3.2 O Miguel	Hispanic male 101A; 102B
3.3 O Makayla	White female 101A; 102A
3.4 O Kaitlyn	White female 101A; 102B
3.4 O Tiffanie	White female 91P; 92P; 101A; 102C
3.4 O Travis	White male 101A
3.5 O Kaylie	White female 101A; 102A
3.6 O Alexis	White female 101A; 102A
3.8 O Emma	White female 101A; 102A
N/A Cassandra	Black female 101A
N/A Sydney	White female 96P prior; 101W prior; 101A
N/A Connor	Hispanic male 101B
N/A Ava	Black female 92P

*international GPA

Bold= semester of the study

VITA

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Education

PhD in English Rhetoric, Writing, and Discourse Studies	Old Dominion University Dec. 2022
Masters of Arts in Literature American and English literature	Southern Illinois University, Edwardsville May 2002
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Professor of English	2020-present
Associate Professor of English	2014 -2020
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Adjunct Instructor	2002-2006

Publications

“Am I a WPA: Embracing the Multiverse of WPA Labor in Community College Contexts.”
 With Casey Reid. *WPA: Writing Program Administration*, 43.3 (Summer 2020).

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*Pseudonym given to the institution in the dissertation