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Collaborative Writing Placement: Partnering with Students in the Placement Process

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Abstract: This paper discusses how the Writing Program at the University of California, Santa Barbara "flipped the script" on placement by implementing a model that emphasizes the importance of student voices. Our Collaborative Writing Placement (CWP) shares many similarities with directed self-placement (DSP) in that its instrument consists of survey questions and reflective writing opportunities (Aull, 2021; Gere et al., 2013). But it differs from DSP in that students work with writing faculty in choosing the first-year writing course that is the best fit for them. Through an examination of our initial data and the first two years of CWP's implementation, our paper discusses how CWP offers another avenue for promoting student agency and generating more equitable placement outcomes.

Keywords: collaborative, placement, writing, student self-placement

Introduction: The Rhetorical Situation of the CWP

In early March 2020, faculty and students at UC Santa Barbara (UCSB) were finishing up winter quarter classes, getting ready for final exams, planning for spring break, and going about their daily activities when an email arrived in our inboxes that would change our lives for the next few years: the quarter was finished. We were headed into quarantine.

For educators, the COVID-19 pandemic ushered in unprecedented obstacles for our teaching, research, and administrative duties. Along with uncertainties about our own health and safety and that of our students came deep concerns and even some measure of panic about how we were going to do our jobs effectively via online platforms. As the pandemic endured, we consistently came up against barriers that required us to think differently to carry out the many facets of our jobs as writing faculty. One of these challenging barriers was placement. At UCSB, we wondered how we would be able to assess and place students into our introductory writing courses now that it was no longer feasible for them to use the in-person UC systemwide exam that had been administered to incoming students for more than 30 years. The Analytical Writing Placement Exam (AWPE) was a timed exam that was administered at in-person testing centers across the state of California and packed university lecture halls; however, because of COVID-19, this scenario became untenable for the foreseeable future. Writing placement at the University of California in Spring 2020 required a new approach—and fast, as incoming students would need a placement when they started enrolling in courses. Taking an innovative and collaborative approach, the Writing Program at UCSB implemented a new placement model. Collaborative Writing Placement (CWP), designed with student self-placement (SSP) principles in mind, emphasizes the importance of student voices, student agency, and equity in the placement process. Like SSP, CWP utilizes survey questions and reflective writing, but it differs from SSP in that writing faculty ultimately determine the student's course placement using multiple measures while giving strong preference to the student's selection.

This paper outlines the CWP's origin story that emerged from the pandemic and from a collaborative effort among several of our sister UC campuses. In the first part, we lay out our local curriculum-based model and the multiple measures used in assessing student placement. Details of the design of the CWP survey are provided as well as where the CWP fits into the larger SSP framework. Then, in discussing the collaborative aspects of the CWP model, we highlight the combining of faculty expertise with students' own understanding of the curricular materials provided in the CWP survey. This discussion also takes into account the labor involved in the placement process. The article includes demographic data and analysis spanning the last four years of administering the CWP and tracking its effectiveness in placing students correctly. In addition to the quantitative data, we include student voices detailing their experience with the CWP and their subsequent placement. We also include a discussion of interviews with our faculty who teach our introductory and first year courses. Lastly, we posit what the future holds for the CWP.

The UC Placement Working Group: How the CWP Emerged

Before the panic over placement had gained too much steam, an email in March 2020 from Trish Serviss, Associate Professor in the University Writing Program at UC Davis, prompted a dynamic spring and summer of innovation and collaboration among colleagues at UC Davis, UC Santa Cruz, UC Irvine, and UC Santa Barbara. We dubbed our collaborative team the UC

Placement Working Group. Each campus was clear from the outset that placement processes should be developed, implemented, and assessed locally—that is, at the campus itself rather than at the systemwide UC level. The Writing Programs at each of our campuses are organized differently and have different Student Learning Outcomes (SLOs). Also, different courses at each of our UC campuses are used to satisfy the UC systemwide Entry Level Writing Requirement (ELWR). The older one-size-fits-all model of the timed AWPE, which had for several years been critiqued as pedagogically unsound and inequitable, came under further scrutiny. As noted in an April 15, 2019 memo to the University Committee on Preparatory Education (UCOPE) from a group of Vice Provosts and Deans of Undergraduate Education (VPDUEs):

> We are concerned about 1) the validity of the AWPE and the consequences of the exam for underrepresented and low-income students, and 2) the administrative structure that provides oversight of the exam…Best practices suggest that one-shot timed writing tests that place students into college courses have a 'weak' to 'moderate' ability to predict. High school grades are actually a much better predictor of success in a college writing class than tests like the AWPE. (University of California, 2019)

CWP provides an alternative to methods that place students in writing courses by solely using placement exams and test scores, which do not consistently reflect writing ability (Isaacs & Molloy, 2010). The VPDUEs' memo also spoke to the necessity of collaboration in anticipating and meeting the needs of a diverse student body: "As our undergraduate student population becomes increasingly diverse, so, too, do their educational needs. Serving those needs effectively requires new and different approaches, including writing placement and instruction" (University of California, 2019). Colleagues in the UC Placement Working Group were aware of these critiques and at UC Davis they had already begun designing alternative placement processes. Now, with the cancellation of the AWPE due to COVID-19, all four campuses were compelled to create and implement local placement models.[1]

Student self-placement mechanisms are varied because they are location specific. Different writing courses, curricula, and institutional support should determine the appropriate methods of SSP. Because of this variation, Andrew Moos and Kathryn Van Zanen (2019), in their overview of the directed self-placement scholarship, frame it this way, citing Royer and Gilles (2003): "Any placement method that both offers students information and advice about their placement options (that's the 'directed' part) and places the ultimate placement decision in the students' hand (that's the 'self-placement' part')" (p. 2). Collaborative Writing Placement does this, but "recast[s] placement as a conversation, an invitation and a calibration of sorts for students" (Estrem et al., 2018, p. 63). Fundamentally, the collaborative approach fits with our local context at UCSB as an institution that values faculty involvement in students' academic pathways.

The pandemic provided what a UC Santa Cruz faculty member Amy Vidali termed the "kairotic moment" for each campus to develop placement models that suited local contexts and cultures. It gave us room to upend the status quo and envision new possibilities. Because the pandemic broke many molds when it came to the everyday functioning of our programs, those campuses that were dissatisfied with the AWPE took advantage of this temporary opening to break up and redesign entrenched systems that were no longer serving students or faculty alike.

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1 The AWPE was ultimately administered online, and the other five UC undergraduate campuses did not join the UC Placement Working Group in 2020, but did eventually develop their own placement programs when the AWPE was phased out in 2023-24.

The UC Placement Working Group started in early April 2020, meeting via Zoom on a weekly basis because we had to move quickly to launch our local placement programs in Summer 2020. These Zoom calls consisted of sharing updates on model creation, discussing what each campus team was/is doing, identifying our goals, and considering how our Working Group endeavors in changing our placement procedures would be perceived by other UC campuses and by UCOPE, the systemwide committee that determines policy for writing placement. Because we were working within an unprecedented moment, UCOPE asked each campus to come up with an alternative to the AWPE. This initially was deemed as a temporary measure, but given the concerns about the AWPE, members of the UC Placement Working Group aimed to make our new local placement models permanent replacements.

UC Davis's creation of a survey method served as the jumping off point for all of our programs to start thinking about how we could initiate a local curriculum-based model. UC Davis was building their survey using Qualtrics, with Trish Serviss, Dan Meltzer, and Jennifer Burke Reifman taking the lead on developing content and processes. Embedded in the survey was an introduction to UCD's Writing Program and the choices students had in terms of courses. Students were placed based on their survey score but could also challenge that placement by providing more materials, such as a writing sample. UC Irvine's Daniel Gross, Bradley Queen, and Allison Dzibua also took this survey approach. They came up with a layered system of placement, with a default placement primarily through readily available data, including SAT, ACT, TOEFL, and high school GPA, followed in some cases by faculty placement. Because of the various course paths students could take, UCI ultimately decided to remove the SSP portion but kept the other materials relative to the collaborative process; UCI also worked with several other models over the past three years, including their current portfolio system. UC Santa Cruz's team of Tanner WouldGo, Sarah Michaels, and Amy Vidali created an artifact-driven survey that included readings and assignments from their writing courses that introduce students directly to their program's curriculum. Their approach is an SSP model, in which students receive a recommended placement but ultimately decide for themselves.

At UCSB, we combined elements used at the other three campuses: like UCD, we included a survey that yielded a score; like UCSC, we had students respond to readings, assignments, and sample student papers from our introductory writing courses to provide a better sense of what to expect from the courses; and, like UCI, we used multiple measures to determine student placement. Scholarship has shown that "the closer the structure of the assessment instrument to the structure of what is being assessed, the more valid the assessment" (Peckham, 2006, p. 69). While our program drew inspiration from the SSP literature, it is different in the role that the Writing Program's faculty play in the process. They ultimately determine the course placement after carefully considering the students' input and giving strong preference to their selection.

Several strands in writing studies research on the topic of collaboration have developed over the past forty years, largely focused on students' collaborative learning and writing (e.g., Bruffee, 1984; Reither & Vipond, 1989; Trimbur, 1989) as well as on collaborative authorship in academia and the workplace (e.g., Bremner, 2010; Ede & Lunsford, 1992). This research primarily addresses writers working as peers, interacting over the production of a single document, jointly making decisions and negotiating meaning during the writing process. However, the process of writing placement is different because its goal is a single decision rather than a collaboratively produced document; in general, collaboration is not a lens through which writing placement has

been theorized. We conceptualize our approach in terms suggested by Wolfe (2010), who defines "layered collaboration" as when each team member serves a different role and works separately on tasks best suited to their expertise. Not all participants come to a collaboration with the same background, so a layered process ensures that each member makes a valuable contribution. With writing placement, faculty have both subject area knowledge and a deep understanding of their local program. Students, on the other hand, are most knowledgeable about their writing education. They have spent their whole lives in the education system—sitting in classes, completing assignments, and receiving feedback—and they can speak to how those experiences have shaped them as writers. A layered collaboration ensures that all stakeholders have a voice in placement decisions without discounting the unique expertise of individual members.

In essence, Collaborative Writing Placement offers another avenue for prompting students' agency and generating more equitable placement outcomes. The CWP approach combines multiple measures: students' reflections and placement preferences informed by their engagement with our curricular materials; students' score on our survey and their high school GPA; and faculty expertise in determining the appropriate first writing course for incoming first-year students. In this way, the CWP moves away from "assessment done *to* students" towards assessment *with* students, giving students "ownership over their writing future" (Aull, 2021, para. 3; as cited in Neal & Holt, 2003). By highlighting and privileging the concept of collaboration, the CWP introduces a new approach to the process of writing assessment.

What the CWP Is: The Nuts and Bolts

Collaborative Writing Placement, UCSB's iteration of local placement, shares many similarities with student self-placement in that its instrument consists of a survey and reflective writing opportunities (Aull, 2021; Gere et al., 2013). The self-placement aspect comes in the form of students' own evaluation of their writing abilities through their engagement with course materials from our two introductory writing courses; these materials include readings, assignments, current student writing examples, student-facing documents detailing course objectives and learning outcomes, and video testimonials. Similar to Write Class implemented at Boise University, CWP "begins to shape [students'] understanding of the college courses by aligning reading and writing practices with this new setting" (Estrem et al., 2018, p. 65). Students are asked to reflect on these materials and to explain, citing specific examples, how their previous reading and writing experiences have prepared them for working with college-sourced material. Students' four written reflections are constructed responses (Aull, 2021) that help us place students based on the curriculum of our courses. In their review of DSP practices and the corresponding scholarship, Moos and Van Zanen (2019) note that "DSP functions both as [a] placement mechanism and an 'opportunity to communicate' the local writing construct with incoming students" (p. 69). Our "construct" consists of our Entry Level Writing Requirement (ELWR) course, Writing 1: Approaches to University Writing, and our first-year writing (FYW) course, Writing 2: Academic Writing. Students have the choice of taking the sequence of Writing 1 and subsequently Writing 2 or placing directly into Writing 2. We use experiential approaches in the design of our survey as we are asking about students' writing experiences in the past and how they relate to or have prepared them for the materials they are engaging with in the survey. By encountering readings and assignments actually used in Writing 1 and Writing 2 courses as well as student writing samples from these courses, students taking the CWP get a sense of college-level writing and the content of

UCSB's writing courses. The CWP survey includes a balanced number of materials from Writing 1 and Writing 2 so that students can interact with both courses.

The CWP process begins when we are provided with a list of incoming students who need a placement in a writing course. At UCSB, as at other UC campuses, many students already have a writing placement via SAT/ACT scores, a score in an Advanced Placement course, or a grade in a community college course or other equivalent course. In fact, at UCSB, approximately three-quarters of incoming first-year students have already satisfied ELWR and earned a placement in Writing 2. The remaining quarter—typically around 1000 students—are placed via the CWP. They are notified that they need to take the CWP by an email from the Placement Committee and they are given a link to the survey along with information and instructions. The survey is online and taken via Qualtrics (see supplemental materials). Students have 10-14 days to complete the survey and can take it in more than one sitting before submitting it. On average, the entire process takes about one hour.

The multiple choice online survey consists of four parts:
- Part 1: Students read and reflect on excerpts from assigned readings from Writing 1 and Writing 2
- Part II: Students read and reflect on writing assignments from each course
- Part III: Students read and reflect on sample student writing each course
- Part IV: Students read about the learning outcomes of each course from student facing documents and from videos in which students who have taken each course describe their experience.

At the end of the survey students are asked to choose which course they think is the best choice for them and to provide a written reflection explaining why. Overall, there are 22 multiple choice questions and four written reflections. We stress to students that the CWP is not an exam and is used expressly as a tool that will help determine the best writing course for the student so as to ensure their success in the course and other courses that they take at UCSB.

How We Score the CWP: How Collaborative Placement Happens

The scoring of the CWP is where the layered placement process begins for the faculty who are collaborating with our student CWP takers. In determining student placement, we consider two measures: their CWP survey score (out of 50) and their high school GPA (obtained from the Admissions Office). The Placement Committee, in consultation with Institutional Research, has determined certain combinations of high school GPA and survey score that place students automatically in Writing 1 or Writing 2. Students who score 43 or above on the CWP survey and have a 4.2 or above GPA automatically go into Writing 2. Students who score 40 or below on the CWP survey and have a 3.7 or below GPA automatically go into Writing 1. Approximately two-thirds (69%) of students are automatically placed in this way. The automatic placements help in identifying those CWP surveys that don't need to be read by Writing Program faculty; we focus faculty attention on edge cases and mismatches. For instance, if a student has a strong survey score and low high school GPA, or a low survey score and high GPA, that is when faculty expertise comes in and the collaborative portion of the instrument is exercised. In these cases where it is unclear which course best fits and benefits the student, faculty on the Placement Committee read the student's written reflections and their rationale for the course they chose. Based on this final assessment, faculty place students in the appropriate course.

Faculty members read the reflections of these edge cases based on a designed rubric. It is worth noting that all faculty who participate in the CWP have experience teaching both courses into which students can be placed; they apply their understanding of the curriculum and learning outcomes of these courses as they assess the students' reflections. In addition, the student's choice is also weighed heavily in determining which course they are placed into. Of the 1333 student surveys we have read since the summer of 2020, we have placed 77% of students in the course that they selected. Thus, we lean into students' choices and listen to their own voices with regards to their engagement and response to the curricular materials provided and their assessment of their experience and strengths as writers. In short, the layered collaboration occurs as faculty expertise and knowledge of the curriculum is combined with the student's own assessment of the materials provided in the CWP and their own abilities.

The CWP offers an additional opportunity for students to participate in their writing placement: if they disagree with the decision of the Placement Committee, students can opt to take the Placement Review. They submit a sample of what they think is their best writing and respond to several contextual questions about the writing sample. These materials are then reviewed by the Placement Committee, again with an eye for honoring students' choices. For example, if they choose Writing 2, we read their reflections and rationale for their choice with this in mind. In other words, faculty place the students, but their placement is guided by the students' reflections and the students' preferences. Of the 235 students who have taken the Placement Review, 83% of the students were placed in the course they requested. Thus, CWP sees "the moment of placement as one of reflection and projection, inviting the student into the college learning environment, and acknowledging faculty expertise" (Estrem et al., 2018, p. 66). Our goals are to inform students about Writing 1 and Writing 2 and the course learning outcomes; to learn about students' prior reading and writing experiences and about how they project those experiences into future writing situations; to discover which course they think would be the best fit for them; and to make the placement process more transparent by promoting self-efficacy, student agency, and equity. These responses also inform curriculum planning and course structure. As one faculty member on the Placement Committee member noted,

> I've noticed trends in responses that mention analysis they've practiced: if a response mentions analysis, it's most often introductory rhetorical and literary. I've brought these up in the first week of classes to value their experience and talk about their context and other analysis/contexts we'll engage over the quarter. The responses about their past experience have also helped me shape early-quarter discussions on academic writing.

Labor and Compensation

Writing placement, done well, is labor intensive. Our experience of developing, administering, assessing, and modifying the CWP has been demanding and rigorous. The initial development of the CWP, described above, was done under incredible pressure and time constraints due to the disruptions of the pandemic. We have subsequently had to secure approvals to continue this placement process via reports to administrators and committees. We have continued to collaborate, though at a slower pace, with our colleagues at UCD, UCI, and UCSC. As the other five UC undergraduate campuses have developed their own placement processes, we have consulted with them and shared our materials. As an aside, it is somewhat ironic that the systemwide AWPE actually seemed to increase divisions among the campuses, with some favoring the AWPE and

others strongly opposed, whereas the need to develop local placement programs has brought campuses together to share resources and expertise.

CWP is a year-round process. The survey is offered five times over the course of the year: twice in the summer for incoming students and once every quarter in fall, winter, and spring. The Placement Committee consists of about ten Writing Program faculty members and three co-chairs (the co-authors of this article). The co-chairs fill different roles—Communications Coordinator, Faculty Coordinator, and Data Coordinator—and each role has multiple tasks and regularly interacts with other campus units, including the Registrar's Office, Admissions, Orientation, the Educational Opportunity Program (EOP), and others.[2] Each co-chair receives one IWC (Instructional Workload Credit, or course release from their regular teaching load) along with a stipend for work conducted during the summer. The faculty members of the Placement Committee also receive a small stipend for reading placement surveys during the summer; their work during the academic year is counted as program service. Each survey is read by two committee members. If there is a split between these members as to whether the student should be placed in Writing 1 or Writing 2, a third reader is brought in to resolve the split and assign the final placement. The amount of reading is regulated by the automatic placements provided by the metrics of the survey score and GPA. Faculty and co-chairs also read the submissions to the Placement Review; 238 students have done the Placement Review since the CWP began in Summer 2020.

The source of funding to compensate faculty for this work is currently the Humanities and Fine Arts (HFA) academic division in which the Writing Program is housed. However, it is recognized that it is an unfair burden for HFA to pay for the writing placements of all students on campus, not simply the students in the division. Recently UCSB administrators have decided to implement a student fee to cover the costs of the CWP.

CWP and the Writing Assessment Landscape: Collaborative Local Placement

CWP joins the placement tableau consisting of DSP, Write Class, and Placement and Teaching Together (PTT) that utilizes SSP principles. PTT, as Emily Issacs and Catherine Keohane (2012) explain it, is a "curriculum based, expert-reader approach to placement" (p. 56). Like PTT, CWP aims to value both student and faculty knowledge and to use those in conjunction with each other in the placement process. One is not privileged over the other, but rather, they work in tandem for the best, most equitable outcome. The aim is to "'contextualize'" and "'embed' placement within our writing program" (Issacs & Keohane, 2012, p. 63, as cited in Nicolay, 2002, p. 42). PTT came about due to concerns that despite the benefits of DSP providing student agency in the placement process, this was happening at the expense of teachers' expertise and experience, erasing it in the process (Issacs & Keohane, 2012). The collaborative element of the CWP fuses student choice with instructor expertise as CWP's underlying principles of equity rest on student efficacy and student agency in the placement process. According to the scholarship, "students' ability to self-assess supports their writing efficacy—their ability to perceive their preparedness for college writing" (Aull, 2021, para. 1). Therefore, student voices are integral and salient to the scholarship as writing teachers and administrators continue to rethink the approach to placement practices on the local level. Local context is also a "crucial part of assessment" (Gere et al., 2013, p.

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2 California students qualify for the EOP program based on parent/guardian education level and family income.

606). This move to a locally informed model allows us to "solve specific assessment needs" (Huot, 1996, p. 552). As Brian Huot (1996) points out in regards to new assessment models, "instead, these new procedures recognize the importance of context, rhetoric, and other characteristics integral to a specific purpose and institution. The procedures are site-based, practical, and have been developed and controlled locally" (p. 552).

As a placement program that is local and collaborative, the CWP has changed the attitudes of students in our courses. Under the previous systemwide AWPE placement practice, students who would be attending the nine different UC undergraduate campuses took the same timed-writing exam in response to the same prompt. Students were graded and placed by writing faculty and graduate student TAs from all of the campuses. In short, there were no opportunities for incoming UC students to learn more about the writing courses at the campus they would be attending, and no opportunities for faculty and TAs at those campuses to learn more about their future students. In our experience at UCSB, some students who were placed in Writing 1 via the AWPE were confused, unhappy, or even angry about this outcome; essentially, they felt that they had "failed" the AWPE, and they came into Writing 1 wondering what they did wrong to end up there and with no idea of what to expect from the course. By contrast, nearly half of the students who have taken the CWP (2110 of 4309, 49%) actively chose to take Writing 1 after being informed about the content and goals of the course. Many of those students would likely have been placed in Writing 1 had they taken the AWPE, but the fact that they chose the course and identified it as the best fit for themselves means that they came to the course intentionally and likely with a much better attitude about what they could learn.

Another advantage of a local and collaborative placement program is that it can be responsive and flexible. For the CWP, we came to see our roles as faculty collaborators differently as we read students' reflections and looked at our data. In the first few offerings of the CWP, we automatically placed every student in Writing 1 who asked to be placed there, and we focused our attention more on gatekeeping—that is, reading the submissions of students who selected Writing 2 to see if they were "ready" for that course. We were influenced by the critique of DSP that suggested that many students would skip introductory courses if given the opportunity in order to save time and money (Toth, 2018; Toth & Aull, 2014). But early on, we noticed that more students were selecting Writing 1 than we had anticipated and that students who selected Writing 2 often provided strong rationales for their desire to start with that course. As a result, we shifted our practice and our perception of our roles from being gatekeepers to being facilitators, genuine collaborators whose task was to work with students to find the course that would support their success. We also adjusted our criteria for automatic placement so that we gave faculty more Writing 1 edge cases to review; that is, students who selected Writing 1 but could potentially be placed by faculty in Writing 2 instead.

Over the four years of the CWP, for 283 students who chose Writing 1 (or 13%), faculty instead placed them in Writing 2. The combination of their survey score and relatively strong high school GPA identified these students as possibly likely to succeed in Writing 2, and after reading the students' reflections faculty made that determination. We have become increasingly attentive to the fact that some students may underestimate their abilities and their experience, may have come from lower-resourced schools where they weren't able to take AP or IB courses or may be first-generation students who are more uncertain about the demands of college-level writing. Indeed, the students taking the CWP are demographically different from those who do

Table 1

Demographic Profile of Students Who Took CWP vs. Those Who Did Not Take CWP (Fall 2020-Summer 2023)

Ethnicity	Took CWP			Not Placed (ELWR Not Satisfied)			Not Placed (ELWR Satisfied)		
	n	% down	% across	*n*	% down	% across	*n*	% down	% across
Native American	36	1	38	3	0	3	57	1	59
African American	224	7	39	54	3	9	291	3	51
Chicano/ Latino	1,119	37	34	311	18	9	2,059	21	58
Asian	757	23	19	146	9	4	3,112	32	78
White/Other	867	27	18	155	9	3	3,851	39	79
International	158	5	9	1,047	61	61	507	5	30
n	3,241	100	22	1,716	100	12	9,877	100	67

Note. Most students who are not placed by CWP but who have not satisfied ELWR are international students.

not (and who receive a Writing 2 placement via AP test, SAT/ACT, or community college course). Most notably, 30% of students taking the CWP are first-generation college students versus 14% first-generation students who don't take the CWP and place into Writing 2 via these other means. In terms of ethnicity, Table 1 shows that CWP takers are more likely to be African-American or Chicano/Latino and less likely to be Asian and White/other in comparison to students who don't take the CWP. (Note that students who don't take the CWP and don't have a placement via another means are predominantly international students and second-language speakers who are placed via a test given by UCSB's English for Multilingual Students program.) We want to help first-generation and URM students move forward if they seem ready and to offer our own vote of confidence, where appropriate.

We have also been able to use the CWP, specifically the Placement Review component, to help us address local factors. For the past several years, the introductory writing courses in UCSB's Writing Program have been highly impacted and fill up quickly. Students were having trouble signing up for these classes which created a backlog. As a result, some students who were placed in Writing 1 via the CWP were not able to enroll in the course for a year or more after they matriculated. We reached out to these students and offered them the Placement Review opportunity where they could demonstrate that the college courses they had taken provided them with the instruction and

practice that made them prepared for Writing 2. In this way, we were able to address the backlog and also realign the placement with students' current skills and circumstances.

Students benefit from collaborative placement, and we believe that faculty do as well. Faculty on the Placement Committee regularly teach Writing 1 and Writing 2, and as they read the reflections of those edge cases of students for whom they are deciding the placement, they gain a valuable perspective on the experiences, concerns, expectations, and goals of the next incoming cohort. It is difficult to quantify what faculty learn from this experience, but as one faculty member put it, "I've learned a lot from students who offer specific insights on what they have been reading and writing about in high school (or their IB/secondary school experience). This absolutely helps me reflect on and develop my curriculum for Writing 1 and 2."

As noted earlier, we offer the CWP twice during the summer and once per quarter. In the four years and 17 offerings of the CWP, we have been able to gather a remarkable dataset that represents the high school writing experiences and college writing expectations of our student body at UCSB over this period. We ask on the CWP survey if we can use the students' data for research purposes, and of the 4311 students who have taken the CWP thus far, 3547 (82%) have given us their consent. The data used here is from this consenting group. We are just beginning to use text analysis tools, including network visualization and AI analysis, to draw conclusions from the reflections written by students taking the CWP. Incorporating demographic data, we hope that these analyses can help us understand the concerns and needs of the students in our courses and adjust our pedagogy and curriculum accordingly.

Assessing the Effectiveness of the CWP

We have benefitted from the expertise of data analysts on campus to help us understand the impact of the CWP program. One approach to examine the effectiveness and appropriateness of our placements has been to look at the grades that students receive in the courses in which they are placed and in subsequent writing courses. One of the key findings, shown in Figure 1, is that

Figure 1

Average Grade in Our Writing Courses by CWP Placement (Fall 2020 - Fall 2022 combined)
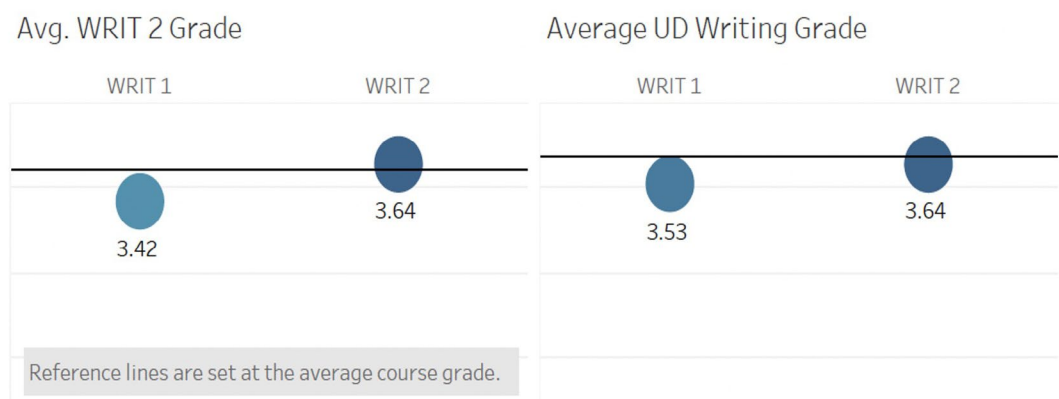
students who are placed in Writing 2 via the CWP earn close to the same grades in Writing 2 and in upper-division Writing Program courses as do students who are placed in Writing 2 via other methods (AP, SAT/ACT, community college course), and they earn higher grades than those who take Writing 2 after having been placed in and taken Writing 1. Unsurprisingly, students who are placed in Writing 1 via the CWP earn slightly lower than average grades both in Writing 2 and in subsequent upper-division Writing Program courses. The grades are all fairly high and the differences are not substantial, but they do reflect expectations and demonstrate that, at least as far as course grades are concerned, the CWP seems to be appropriately placing students.

One surprising finding in the grading data has to do with *when* students take the CWP. We define a "late CWP taker" as a student who needs to take the CWP to receive a writing placement but does not do so by the end of the Fall quarter of their first year. This means that they have been contacted by the Placement Committee and enrolled in the CWP survey website at least twice since matriculating: once or twice during the summer in association with their Orientation session, and once at the beginning of the Fall quarter. As Figure 2 shows, late takers earn notably lower grades in both Writing 2 and in subsequent upper-division Writing Program courses than do students who take the CWP on time. For late-taking students who are ultimately placed in Writing 1, the disparities are even higher.

While we don't know the reasons for these grade disparities, we can hypothesize that the late takers would have benefitted from taking a writing course, especially Writing 1, earlier in their time at the university. Moreover, this is important information for us because it indicates that we need to do more outreach to the late-taking group to encourage them to take the CWP on-time and, if they don't, to follow up with advising and resources that can help them be more successful in their writing (and perhaps other) courses after they do receive a placement.

Looking at demographic data from the CWP can also help us refine the program and work to ensure that our placement practices are equitable. As noted previously, there are demographic differences between the roughly one-quarter of incoming first-year students at UCSB who take the CWP and the other three-quarters who are placed in Writing 2 via test scores (AP, SAT/ACT) or community college courses. Figure 3 shows that students taking the CWP who are first-generation, URM, or EOP self-select Writing 1 in higher proportions than CWP students who are not in those demographic groups.

These differences reflect the broader inequalities in education in California and elsewhere. Although California has the fifth largest economy in the world and is the wealthiest state in the nation, it has been under-investing in K-12 education for decades (Hahnel 2020), and California's achievement gap—perhaps better defined as an opportunity gap (Milner, 2021)—persists (Cano & Hong, 2020). Of course, the CWP on its own cannot affect this large social problem, but we can be aware of how it impacts students' preparation and their assessment of their own college-level writing skills. In addition to adjusting our criteria so that faculty readers look at edge cases where students who select Writing 1 might be successful in Writing 2, we can also review data to see if students from different demographic groups are assessed differently in the CWP. For instance, Figure 4 shows the demographics of students who have been "up-placed" (that is, they selected Writing 1 but were placed by our criteria or by faculty readers in Writing 2), while Figure 5 shows the demographics of students who have been "down-placed" (that is, they selected Writing 2 but were placed by our criteria or by faculty readers in Writing 1).

Figure 2

Average Grade in Our Writing Courses by Students Taking the CWP On-Time or Late (Fall 2020 - Fall 2022 combined)
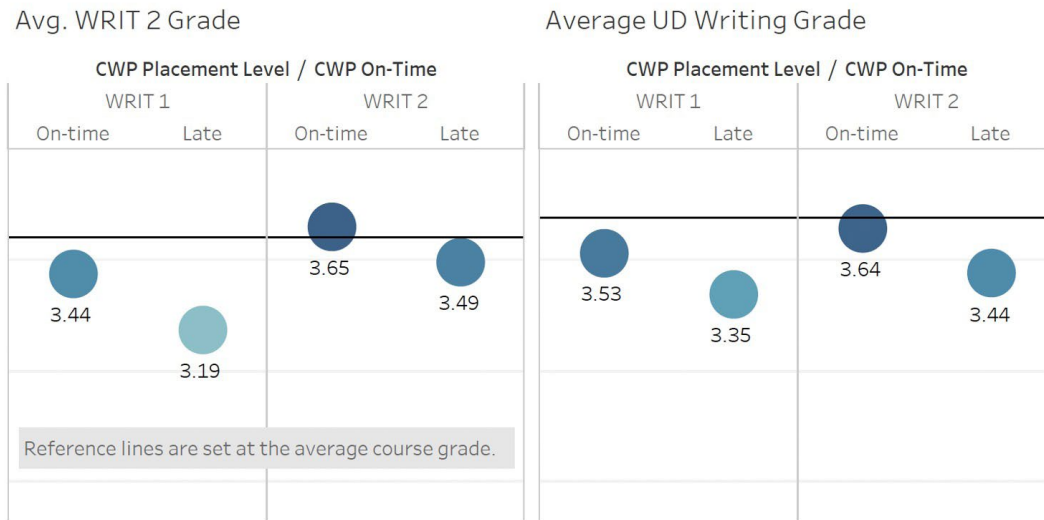
Avg. WRIT 2 Grade

CWP Placement Level / CWP On-Time

WRIT 1		WRIT 2	
On-time	Late	On-time	Late
3.44	3.19	3.65	3.49

Reference lines are set at the average course grade.

Average UD Writing Grade

CWP Placement Level / CWP On-Time

WRIT 1		WRIT 2	
On-time	Late	On-time	Late
3.53	3.35	3.64	3.44

Figure 3

Selection of Writing 1 or Writing 2 by CWP Students in Demographic Groups (Fall 2020-Summer 2023)

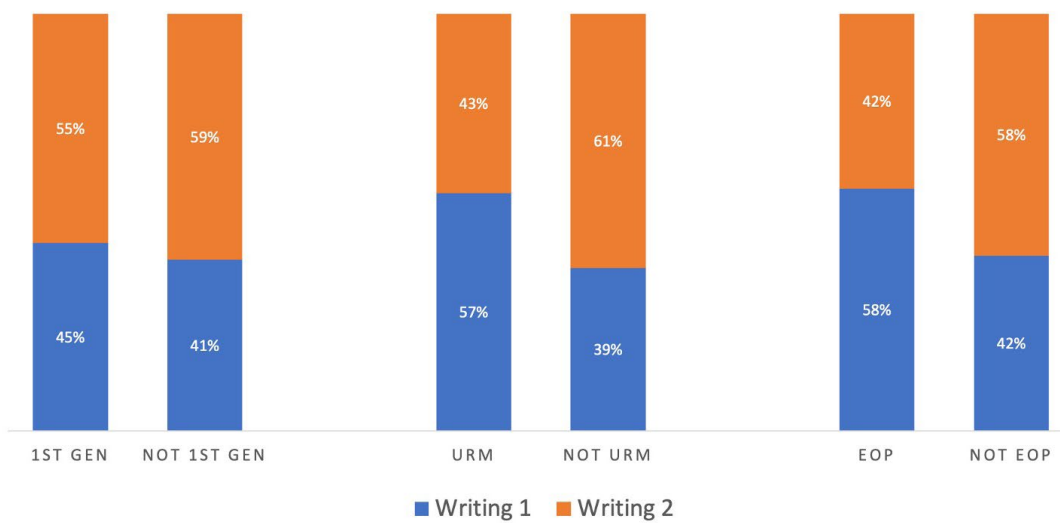|	1ST GEN	NOT 1ST GEN	URM	NOT URM	EOP	NOT EOP
Writing 2	55%	59%	43%	61%	42%	58%
Writing 1	45%	41%	57%	39%	58%	42%

■ Writing 1 ■ Writing 2

Figure 4

Up-placement from Writing 1 to Writing 2 of Students from Different Demographic Groups (Fall 2020-Summer 2023) (n=234)
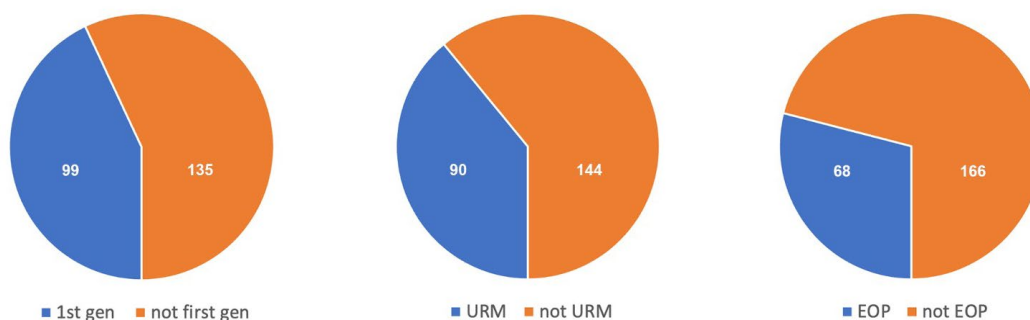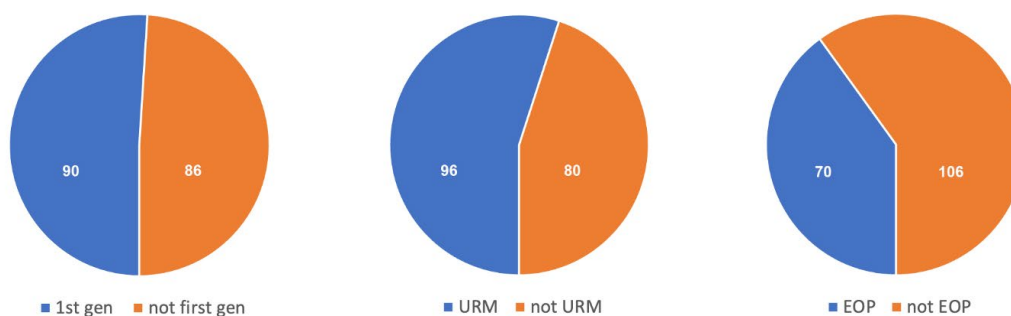

Figure 5

Down-Placement from Writing 2 to Writing 1 of Students from Different Demographic Groups (Fall 2020-Summer 2023) (n=176)

It is evident from these comparisons that students from the more privileged groups (not first gen, not URM, not EOP) represent a greater proportion of those who are up-placed; the proportions are somewhat more even for students who are down-placed, and in fact substantially more non-EOP students than EOP students are down-placed. Of course, some of these placements are done automatically, based on survey score and high school GPA, while in the other cases faculty don't know the ethnicity or economic status of the students whose surveys they read. Nevertheless, this data suggests that we should do better at informing these perhaps less-prepared students about their options so that their initial selection is more aligned with the curriculum of the courses. We should also work with faculty readers on understanding where biases may be influencing their determinations as they read students' responses and decide on placements in edge cases.

In addition to examining quantitative data regarding students' selections, placements, and subsequent grades, the Placement Committee gathered qualitative data from students who took

the CWP to learn more about their experience and what they thought about the program. We collected seven interviews in February 2022 with students who chose Writing 1 as their preferred placement, were placed in that course, and completed it in their first term. The interviews lasted about 15-30 minutes and followed a semi-structured approach, which allowed interviewers to ask follow-up questions and to interject at various points. The interview protocol was designed to examine three issues. First, we wanted to learn more about students' previous high school experiences. Most importantly, we examined the CWP itself and what factors went into the students' responses. Finally, we looked at the students' Writing 1 experiences and whether they thought they were placed in the right course.

Most students were satisfied with their placement: generally speaking, they felt that the CWP helped introduce them to the expectations of college-level assignments and steered them into the right course. Some wondered whether it offered an accurate assessment of their abilities, either because they didn't take it seriously or didn't remember what happened during high school. As one student memorably put it, "for my junior year I was in person and taking AP classes, and then I was online my senior year . . . so it was hard to reflect on that because we were going through unprecedented times." However, when asked to reflect on high school, students had no trouble recalling details about their writing experiences. They talked about engaging in classroom debates, participating in the academic decathlon, and producing various academic and workplace documents. One mentioned a senior seminar project about African-American Vernacular English (AAVE), an essay that pulled from both scholarly and popular sources. Another discussed his film and mythology classes, which was the first time where he felt pressured to deepen his analysis. One talked about a narrative assignment where she wrote about her love for cats. The interviews revealed that students had encountered a diverse array of writing challenges and seemed well prepared for college-level assignments.

Because the interviews were with students who had already taken Writing 1, they also had a number of observations about what they perceived as different about college courses. Many similarities existed in terms of the pedagogy, with almost all students mentioning that their high school classes featured classroom discussions, peer revision workshops, and difficult readings. When they mentioned differences between the environments, they often referred to the greater openness of college instructors. One student mentioned that college allowed her more freedom "to write how we want. We're not limited to writing in a certain way." Another talked about a high school teacher who prohibited beginning any sentence with "so," which he promptly violated in his Writing 1 course as a silent act of rebellion. Their responses also suggested that their high schools focused more on studying literature. Otherwise, considerable continuity existed between their high school and college writing courses, and no obvious gaps in their education emerged that indicated they weren't adequately prepared for a college-level course.

In their discussions of why they chose to be placed in Writing 1, students generally saw it as a way to ease the college transition. One expressed wanting to start at "ground zero" before working up to other courses. Another imagined it as a "stepping stone" and described herself as the kind of person who doesn't skip steps. All the students mentioned some lack of confidence, often due to the perceived inadequacies of their education. The AP regime weighed heavily on students, with many worrying about not having taken more advanced courses. One student explained that his high school was extremely competitive, with his personal circle taking multiple AP classes. He chose not to take AP English, so he always felt like his writing skills were behind his peers. Another

student worried about being a "slow writer" that was never pushed by his teachers: "The types of assignments that I was writing weren't developing my skills. It was just repeating what the book said or what the teacher had said or what I found online." As a whole, students weren't certain what to expect from college and therefore were nervous about moving into what they perceived as a more advanced course.

The interviews, therefore, raise questions about what is being measured with a SSP survey, which often asks students to select their own course and reflect on their experiences. A lack of confidence doesn't necessarily indicate a weakness in writing ability. As experienced writers have noted on multiple occasions, being unconfident is perhaps even a sign that one has spent enough time writing to realize that it is a difficult task that doesn't come naturally to most people. Writing, to put it bluntly, is hard work. As Bartholomae (2005) explains in "Writing Against the Grain," "writing still, often, makes me unhappy, makes me sick, makes me do things—like smoke, for instance—that disgust me" (p. 193). Many students, indeed, were quite thoughtful about their writing skills, showing the kind of metacognition that we expect from advanced students. The perceived deficiencies in their skills often arose because their education deviated from what they saw as the "typical" student, perhaps because they attended homeschool or didn't take AP courses. When coupled with the fact that many interviewees were underrepresented minorities—due to race, gender, or sexual orientation—some concerns arise about how well a SSP survey alone would align with our social justice goals.

For that reason, we left the interviews feeling more comfortable about the collaborative aspect of the placement process. The limitation of imagining ourselves as "gatekeepers" is that it flattens the diversity of student experiences, reducing it entirely to whether they are "prepared" for a particular course. Our goal is not to stand in the way of what students want from their writing education. We're working alongside students to determine the best place for them to start their journey through the writing curriculum. Certainly, that sometimes means having faculty read through the responses of students who placed themselves in Writing 2 to determine whether their confidence matches their actual abilities. After all, we don't want students to become overwhelmed by the expectations of their first college-level writing course. However, we also need to sometimes read through the responses of a student who chose Writing 1; perhaps they have underestimated their skills and might be best suited for a more difficult challenge. By looking at the edge cases, our hope is that we will catch some of the students who feel unconfident due to overinflated expectations of the college environment.

The one clear conclusion that emerged from the interviews is that students were overwhelmingly happy with their writing courses. They all expressed taking something valuable away from the experience. One student said that Writing 1 was "definitely a good intro to college writing because the professor was super sweet, super kind, and talked a lot about what the further college expectations would be at UCSB." The student described the course as an excellent "bridge between high school to college, so I definitely think it was a good choice." Another said that it "was just a good course," mainly because of how her professor "deliberately taught the class with open discussions. I think that's what helped me understand everything and just become more open-minded when writing my different assignments." One student had nothing but praise for the way her professor held regular conferences and allowed her to discuss "any struggle with your writing, any imposter syndrome you feel, anything that might affect the way you write or your thoughts of

academic writing." If the determining factor of a placement program's success is the satisfaction of the students, the interviews indicate we are on the right track.

Conclusions and Next Steps

As a placement program, the CWP is always a work in progress. Due to its collaborative nature, the program can flexibly adapt to the changing landscape of our local contexts. We are always looking at ways in which the CWP can best serve our diverse student population in setting them up for academic success in our courses and throughout their tenure at UCSB. Based on data and student feedback, we anticipate making a number of changes to the survey. We have noticed that students tend to offer the lengthiest reflections on the initial questions, which currently revolve around sample readings from our courses. So, we are considering moving the sample assignments first in order to gather more information about students' writing background. Another change we have already implemented is a more hands-on approach in incorporating EOP programs like the Summer Transitional Enrichment Program (STEP) into the CWP process, providing material for STEP coordinators to send to incoming STEP participants about taking the CWP ahead of time so as to already have their placement set before attending the summer residential program.

In addition, we continue collaboration with our UC Placement Working Group partners. In Spring 2023, we met to discuss how the implementations of our new placement programs were going now four years into the process; we discussed the changes we've made and the challenges we've encountered and mitigated. Each of the initial four campuses has tinkered with their placement methods as real-world application points to necessary modifications. The collaborative process of implementing new placement models has also resulted in collaborative scholarship such as conference presentations and publications. In addition, other UC campuses are currently moving toward a DSP/SSP-inspired placement model, which is a promising sign for the future of the approach.

The impact of the CWP approach has been overwhelmingly positive for both faculty and students. In providing more transparency and incorporating students directly in the placement process, CWP enables students to exercise their agency in determining an impactful part of their academic future. An important goal for us is that our students have a positive experience and not leave the placement process feeling "deficient" because they were placed in a particular course. On that score, the CWP seems to be a step in the right direction. As one student put it, "Writing 1 was the best choice that I could have made. It completely changed my perspective on writing courses . . . it definitely [made] a positive impact on my writing ability and the way I feel about writing." The collaborative process also informs faculty about the types of writing experiences our students have had and the expectations and concerns our students are bringing with them to our introductory courses. We are encouraged that our Writing Program colleagues feel engaged and enriched by their participation in the placement process, especially given how tedious this process has been in UC's recent past. This collaborative, multilateral engagement is ultimately the value of the CWP as students, faculty, and systems across campus work together to create a sustainable placement process from which all participants benefit.

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