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Editor's Introduction

Placement and its Discontents or The Long Winding Road Toward Change

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“Bittersweet.” That’s the word that is on my mind as I begin this Editor’s Introduction for issue 18.1 of the *Journal of Writing Assessment* (JWA). “Bittersweet” is on my mind, because this will be my last issue as JWA Editor. It has been an absolute blast working on JWA for the last ten years! I’ve had the opportunity to work with a tremendous set of colleagues on the editorial team, an excellent group of reviewers, and, of course, a remarkable collection of faculty and graduate student authors. I will certainly miss the work.

This final Editor’s Introduction allows me the opportunity to not only discuss the six outstanding articles in this issue but also to look back over the developments in writing assessment that have occurred over the last decade (2015-2025)—it has been an amazing time that has seen us move from discussions of how implementation of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) impacted students’ college readiness to discussions of labor-based grading contracts and student self-placement (SSP) to our current moment of wrestling with how Generative AI (GenAI) technologies are impacting writing and writing assessment. Another major shift in the field over the last decade has been the renewed attention to the importance of fairness along with reliability and validity as central to the enterprise of writing assessment; this change has played not only in theoretical and psychometric realms but also in the pragmatics of college-level placements and in the increased interest in grading contracts and ungrading. The works submitted to JWA over the

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last decade have reflected these issues and more. And, I hope, they have helped advance our field's understanding of how writing assessment impacts students' lives.

This issue begins with "Using Completion Rubrics to Grade Engagement in Online Spaces" by Sallie Koenig, Catrina Mitchum, and Rochelle Rodrigo (2025). Their study explores the effects of completion rubrics on student learning and agency in online asynchronous courses. They analyze survey responses from three courses in Fall 2021 and consider labor, invisible labor, and the relationship among time, assessment, and learning. Koenig, Mitchum, and Rodrigo draw on students' reflective writing and suggest that completion rubrics helped students make informed decisions about time management and prioritize their learning needs. These findings highlight the need to consider classroom contexts when designing equitable assessment systems to support student agency and inclusivity. Koenig, Mitchum, and Rodrigo's article underscores the ways in which pieces in *JWA* have emphasized the impacts of writing assessment and grading systems on students' lives. Their work argues for careful consideration of contexts when engaged in writing assessment work.

The next article in *JWA* 18.1, "The Trouble With 'Ungrading': Toward Disciplinary Specificity in Alternative Writing Assessment" by Maggie Fernandes, Emily Brier, and Megan McIntyre (2025), calls for disciplinary discussions on alternative writing assessments that prioritize antiracism, Black linguistic justice, and anti-ableist pedagogies. Fernandes, Brier, and McIntyre argue that such conversations can lead to more equitable assessment practices. They emphasize the importance of including the perspectives of faculty and graduate students who frequently teach first-year composition (FYC). By situating their article in relation to the "Where We Are" conversations that Matt Davis and Kara Taczak (2023) facilitated in their *Composition Studies* special issue on ungrading as well as the special issue of *Pedagogy* edited by Ellen C. Carillo (2024), Fernandes, Brier, and McIntyre carry forward how the field of writing studies is wrestling with calls to embrace ungrading. In fact, Fernandes, Brier, and McIntyre emphasize the ways in which disciplinary knowledge within writing studies provides guidance about how to build particular assessment practices that acknowledge differences and encourage learning. They write, "alternative assessment approaches allow us to more concretely and specifically consider concerns about linguistic variation and justice versus the lack of specificity we see in non-disciplinary conversations about ungrading." For Fernandes, Brier, and McIntyre, the goals of ungrading may be laudable, but classroom practices that are vague or remove best practices from within writing studies in favor of a more laissez-faire approach to teaching, learning, and assessment fall short. This piece challenges ungrading in ways that are sure to provoke discussion. It also, I want to point out, suggests particular alternatives that do not re-establish the status quo but rather push for transformative approaches to teaching and learning.

The remaining four articles in *JWA* 18.1 comprise a special section. They continue the work begun in *JWA* 17.1 focused on student self-placement (SSP). Their work also resonates with articles such as Jennifer Burke Reifman, Stacy Wittstock, Tricia Serviss, Beth Pearsall, and Dan Melzer's (2025) "Constructivist Writing Placement: Repositioning Agency for More Equitable Placement through Collaborative Writing Placement Practices"; Daniel Gross's (2024) "Construct Validity and the Demise of the Analytical Writing Placement Examination (AWPE) at the University of California: A Tale of Social Mobility"; and Sarah Hirsch, Kenny Smith, and Madeleine Sorapure's (2024) "Collaborative Writing Placement (CWP): Partnering with Students in the Placement Process." These research articles on placement highlight the ways in which the field of writing

studies and writing assessment continue to wrestle with placement and particularly with the legacy of Dan Royer and Roger Gilles (1998) "Directed Self-Placement: An Attitude of Orientation."

In last year's *JWA* 17.1, Kate L. Pantelides and Erin Whittig (2024) introduced us to a collection of articles that reported on placement systems where student choice was centered. The articles in their special issue reported on empirical studies at a range of institutions and helped the field better define how different SSP function. Their introduction, "Placement Is Everyone's Business: A Love Letter to Our SSP Coalition," was particularly compelling because of the work it did to help show the range of approaches that fit under the umbrella of SSP. They also reminded us of some of the core values of SSP across different systems. They wrote that SSP

primes us to ask better questions about who students are and what they need. It also demands that we ask questions of ourselves: How/do we serve our students? How does the way in which we serve them impact the stories they tell about themselves? How might we ask students about their needs more directly, rather than making assumptions based on their educational records? With these questions at the fore, we attend to the local details and technicalities that don't (necessarily) generalize: the making of the tools, the narratives, the relationships, the honest accountings of our missteps. (p. 4)

In *JWA* 18.1, Pantelides and Whittig (2025) introduce the special section with a piece titled, "Collaboratively Building Our SSP Scholarship (Because Placement Is Still Everyone's Business)." However, in 2025, Pantelides and Whittig are much more cautious about the potential of SSP. They acknowledge that they fear a turning away from SSP and the return to single measure standardized tests for placement at many institutions. It remains to be seen how SSP continues to play out, but Pantelides and Whittig may be right.

It may be that SSP had its widest reach in 2024 and that more colleges and universities will be returning to traditional placement systems over the next half decade. It may also be that SSP systems remain in place and that increased interest in them only grows. Whatever the case, the last four articles in *JWA* 18.1, including Pantelides and Whittig's synthesis of last and this year's pieces, document the ongoing work around SSP. In fact, it is particularly fitting that they include an article from Grand Valley State University (Stolley, Mulally, & Hulst, 2025) that offers a 30-year retrospective on how directed self-placement (DSP) has developed and changed over time. Stolley, Mulally, and Hulst's article draws on interviews with Dan Royer and Roger Gilles and not only situates the current placement system at Grand Valley State in relationship to Royer and Gilles's (1998) early work but also locates the larger trends around SSP in relationship to Royer and Gilles' groundbreaking approach to placing students in college writing courses. This historical contextual work is vital as we wonder about the future of SSP.

While there is indeed reason to worry about whether SSP will continue to expand or if that approach will diminish, Genie Giaimo and Kristina Reardon's (2025) article demonstrates one way in which a SSP system may help develop a writing ecology that reaches across different writing courses at a small liberal arts college. Giaimo and Reardon highlight how DSP data informs course placement and creates individualized student support beyond FYC-equivalent courses. They advocate for expanding placement models to include asset-based, extracurricular support and provide practical guidance for applying DSP in broader educational contexts. Their "Beyond Writing Placement: Implementing Wraparound Self-Placement at Small Liberal Arts Colleges (SLACs) and Beyond" encourages a careful and contextual approach to thinking about student agency and placement.

Finally, *JWA* 18.1 as well as Pantelides and Whittig's special section ends with Jessica Nastal and Kris Messer's (2025) "Afterword: Finding the Right Note in Writing Placement." Nastal and Messer reflect on the 2024 SSP special issue and 2025 special section. They note how the authors of the articles explore diverse methods of SSP and consider this approach to writing placement across a range of institutions and from perspectives that consider initial design work to large-scale revisions of existing SSP systems. There is a historical take here that reaches back to Royer and Gilles's (1998) foundational work, but also attention to the ways in which SSP have multiplied into different strands and have been adapted differently across institutions. Nastal and Messer acknowledge the ways in which these articles provide valuable guidance for those seeking to reform placement practices at their own institutions. Nastal and Messer's reflections address both theoretical considerations and practical challenges that have been covered in the eleven different articles that have looked into SSP.

I often end my *JWA* Editor's Introductions by pointing out that the issue is not the ending of a conversation about a particular issue in writing assessment. That may be true in this case as well, but this issue is the end of my own decade-long tenure as *JWA* Editor. It has been exhilarating and exhausting at the same time. I am delighted to be leaving *JWA* in excellent hands. Mathew Gomes, Lizbett Tinoco, and Stacy Wittstock will be stepping up to be editors for *JWA*. They, along with Madeline Crozier Sutton, Stephen McElroy, and Christopher Blankenship, have been keeping *JWA* running for a long time. All six of them are outstanding editors, and I look forward to seeing what the next decade of *JWA* holds under their guidance.

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