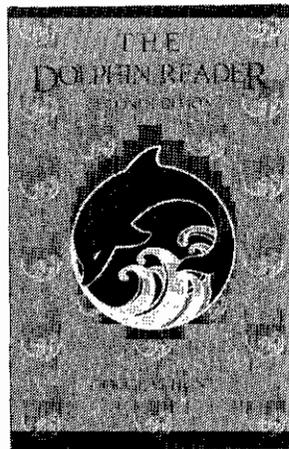


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## On Placing and Misplacing Students: Some Thoughts on Exemption

Beverly Lyon Clark and Roger D. Clark

We started out with a simple enough question: what's the best process for exempting students from an otherwise required first-year writing course, English 101? We ended up with an unsurprising answer: standardized tests can provide some limited guidance, in conjunction with samples of writing. But what we found along the way, the dust we kicked up, is perhaps more interesting and suggestive. First, though, our initial goal: how should we decide which students to exempt from English 101? Should we rely on standardized tests? Should we rely on writing samples?

That's assuming, of course, that exemption of able students is desirable. While it's true that a common experience may be useful to entering students, and that an introductory writing course can introduce them to academic discourse, some such purpose may already be served by Wheaton's first-year seminars. The seminars, discipline based but linked by a common theme, all require frequent student writing, and almost all of the instructors have special training in the teaching of writing by virtue of taking one or more summer writing seminars during the past decade. We may still feel that even able writers can benefit from English 101 as an introduction to academic discourse, but we do not feel that exemption is particularly harmful.

In addition, we are motivated by an issue of equity. Wheaton has a long history of commitment to granting advanced placement to students with high scores on AP exams, in English and other disciplines. Given that—and maybe we should question the practice, but so far we haven't—we want, out of a sense of fairness, to provide the possibility of exemption to able students who may not have had access to an AP course.

Perhaps too it makes a difference that Wheaton is a small liberal arts college. Most studies of assessment focus on the needs of large universities or state systems, such as CUNY or the University of Michigan or the California or Florida systems; and while writing program administrators at small colleges can certainly gain considerable insight by studying these findings, our needs and resources are somewhat different. Schools like Wheaton may sufficiently value teaching and writing throughout the curriculum to make it unnecessary to rely on a single course to introduce

students to academic discourse. Such a school may have the luxury of being able to attend to matters of equity in individual cases. Such a school may be able to establish a process that enables occasional exemptions without having to mount a labor-intensive, full-scale examination program. Or if you will, it may lack the resources—in terms of released time for the writing program administrator, never mind any support staff—to mount an exemptibility test for several hundred entering students. Nor does it make sense to establish elaborate programs that might require almost as many—or even more—students for pilot testing as would be involved in the ultimate placement test.<sup>1</sup> So we can perhaps be justified in taking more of a seat-of-the-pants approach, especially given the availability of individualized attention to redress any inequities.

Then the question becomes whether writing samples or standardized tests better serve the purposes of placement. In earlier issues of *WPA: Writing Program Administration*, Harvey S. Wiener has eloquently argued the former, while Barbara L. Gordon has urged the virtues of the latter.<sup>2</sup> We have used a two-stage process, involving both writing samples and standardized tests, to identify exemptible students, paradoxically saving ourselves work. This practice has been based upon the distinction between two decisions: an exemptibility decision, the decision to exempt a student from English 101, and a (prior) eligibility decision, the decision to permit a student to take our in-house exemption exam. In practice, we have used SAT results as the criterion for the eligibility decision, and evaluation of materials from various sources, including a timed writing sample, for the exemptibility decision. Our findings suggest that this process is reasonable, that standardized tests like the SAT can provide a little, even if only a little, guidance. And thus, especially given the face validity of writing samples and their apparent ability to overcome some of the biases in standardized tests against minority students (see White and Thomas), final exemptibility decisions require the examination of writing samples.<sup>3</sup>

Our practice has been to invite students who have not taken the AP English test but who have scored 600 or higher on the verbal aptitude section of the SAT to take our exemptibility exam. In 1988-89, of the 35 students invited, ten decided to try to place out; two then received exemption. The information that we considered in making our decisions included standardized test scores, high school record, Admissions ranking, samples of previous writing (provided by the students when they wrote their writing samples), and a timed writing sample (rated holistically by two or more readers).<sup>4</sup> Particularly important were the samples of previous writing, since the goal of first-year English courses is to enable students to write expository essays across the curriculum, in particular, essays that require grappling with the ideas or texts of others,

a difficult assignment to give on a timed writing sample. Thus the three faculty members who determined exemption found the previous writing samples the most important pieces of information, more important even than the timed placement essay, though doing a timed essay probably encouraged students to bring their own, not others', samples of writing.

But is it reasonable to rely on SAT scores to make the eligibility decision? We performed statistical tests of correlation on data available for all students who had been exempted from 101 and also all students who took English 101 in the fall. In a first analysis we looked only at students who had taken English 101 in the fall (N=168). Our data for this test included *ex post facto* estimates of exemptibility by faculty members who had taught sections of English 101. We asked instructors of fall sections to indicate, the following semester, which of their students could have been exempted. In other words, we decided not to rely, as other researchers have, on correlating scores on standardized tests with those on holistically- or analytically-rated writing samples (e.g., Gordon, Gorrell, White and Thomas) or even with grades in first-year English courses (e.g., Fowler and Ross, Snowman et al.)—grades are, after all, likely to reflect effort and improvement as well as initial ability. Instead we decided to try to gauge exemptibility more directly, by tapping the judgments of instructors who had worked closely with students on their writing—in small classes limited to fifteen, instructors who were likely to know students' initial abilities on a variety of writing tasks. Now maybe it would have been more scientific if we'd asked instructors for their judgments early in the fall semester instead of after it had ended. *Ex post facto* estimates are likely to be colored by students' final achievements in the course. On the other hand, we know we learn more about students' abilities as a semester progresses; we can get a truer sense of their abilities after they've done a wide variety of assignments; and we may be saner about our judgments, possibly more objective, after we finish a course with them, once we're no longer swayed by the particulars of our interaction with them the day before.

In any case, all nine instructors responded. Thirteen students were identified as exemptible; 155 were not. Our dependent variable for this analysis was, then, "perceived exemptibles," and our research question was whether easily accessible data exist to predict which of the students who took 101 were exemptible by faculty standards. Such easily accessible data included the students' gender, math and verbal SAT scores, TSWE score, high school rank, high school GPA, score on the English Achievement Test, state of origin, type of high school (whether public or independent), and overall Admissions rating.<sup>5</sup> For this last, Admissions officers predict success at Wheaton, on a scale of 1.0 to 5.0, using high school records and, usually, an interview.

The results suggest that no easily accessible numerical data would have been enormously helpful in predicting which students would be perceived as exemptible from 101, but that, of these data, SAT verbal scores are as good as any. In general, the simple correlations<sup>6</sup> between students perceived as exemptible by faculty members and various background characteristics of students are small and ungeneralizable. Certainly, whether a student came from an independent or a public school (Pearson's  $r = .03$ ), high school rank ( $-.03$ ), how well s/he did on the math SAT ( $-.05$ ), whether s/he came from outside the New England region ( $.07$ ), high school GPA ( $.10$ ), Admissions rating ( $-.11$ ), scores on the TSWE ( $.11$ ), nay, even gender ( $-.12$ )—with females proving ever-so-slightly more exemptible than males—all fail to discriminate nearly well enough to be taken as serious predictors. Even the variables that are associated with exemptibility in a statistically significant fashion—SAT verbal score ( $r = .17$ ) and English achievement score ( $r = .13$ )—are correlated at fairly low levels.<sup>7</sup> (See Appendix.)

Our second analysis (also reported in the Appendix) combined those students who were perceived as exemptible with those who were actually exempted (two exempted via writing-sample examinations plus six via Advanced Placement exams) to create a new variable, "all exemptibles" (where "1" refers to all exemptibles [ $N=21$ ] and "0" to non-exemptibles [ $N=155$ ]). Our question here was whether the same background variables used in our first analysis might be more strongly associated with "all exemptibles" than with "perceived exemptibles." And, indeed, some of them were. Thus "all exemptibles" is moderately and significantly associated with SAT verbal score ( $r = .37$ ), with English achievement score ( $r = .22$ ), with Admissions rating ( $r = -.21$ ), with TSWE score ( $r = .21$ ), and with high school GPA ( $r = .17$ ).

It appears, then, that some standardized tests, notably the SAT verbal, are decent, though by no means perfect, predictors of exemptibility at Wheaton. This result suggests that screening students initially on the basis of SAT scores (i.e., to determine eligibility) is not unreasonable (nor, perhaps, would it be unreasonable to use such standardized test scores to make fine discriminations among students after one has assessed their writing more directly). There remained the possibility that some combination of tests, including the SAT verbal and other tests shown to have statistically significant zero-order associations with exemptibility, might improve upon the use of the SAT verbal alone. We examined this possibility through multiple regression analyses (not reported here), analyses that indicated that SAT verbal scores were, among all accessible data, the only scores to retain a statistically significant association with exemptibility (however this was defined) when all other variables were controlled. Apparently, whatever quality is usefully measured by, say, the English achievement test is also measured by the

SAT verbal, so there is no need to augment SAT verbal information with English achievement test information in making our eligibility decisions.

Still, we could modify our approach to enlarge the pool of eligible students, if we wanted to miss fewer students who could achieve exemptibility. One way is to include students who have scored 550 or higher on the SAT and are rated 1.0—the highest rating—by Admissions. Although none of the five students who would thereby have been added to our list of invitees took 101 in the fall—and thus we don't know if any might have been deemed exemptible—this measure would provide a relatively easy way of mitigating our reliance on standardized tests for the initial cut. Furthermore, if the students rated 1.0 seem especially able to survive the trauma of failing to be exempted—as we suggest below, we would be unlikely to harm students added in this fashion.

We also plan to add to the pool by asking Admissions to flag students who seem to be particularly good writers. Perhaps too we might consider "loosening up" our standards—or, rather, taking more risks—when we make exemptibility decisions. For, as we discuss below, we might possibly have harmed some of the students who took the placement test but whom we decided not to exempt.

Now for some of the dust we kicked up along the way.

One of the dangers of our reliance on perceived exemptibility is that 101 instructors might have wildly divergent ideas of what makes a student exemptible. Yet additional analysis affords some reassurance that department members have comparable standards, at least in terms of deciding exemptibility. It's true that the first sweep, the simple test of correlation, suggested that, say, Teacher C had unusually lax ( $r = .24$ ) and Teacher E unusually stringent ( $r = -.14$ ) standards when suggesting students who were exemptible (suggesting, respectively, that 4 out of 14 students were exemptible, and 0 out of 30). In fact, the association between perceiving exemptibility and the faculty members who did the perceiving is reasonably strong (Cramer's  $V$  is .32 out of a possible 1.00) and generalizable ( $p < .05$ ).

Yet it may be that different faculty members draw systematically different mixes of students. Sure enough, Teacher C attracts students who have SAT verbal scores that are significantly higher ( $r = .13$ ) than those taught by other members of the department, and Teacher E attracts students with slightly lower SAT verbals ( $r = -.08$ ) than her colleagues, thereby reinforcing our felt sense that strong writers are likely to elect a course entitled "Writing About Poetry," while weaker writers may elect courses that do not focus on literary topics. Further, multivariate analyses (not reported here) involving instructor, scores on the SAT verbal, and those on the English achievement test suggest that,

with these scores controlled, no instructor of English 101 perceives students as significantly more or less exemptible than his/her colleagues.

Thus one surprising result—surprising given the wealth of literature devoted to the importance of concerted efforts to achieve interrater reliability in judging writing—is the degree to which members of a small-college English department can agree on standards without much direct effort. It may help that the department has had little turnover: most of the instructors have been teaching at Wheaton for at least ten years. Still, none of the eight students who “failed” the exemptibility test (five of whom went on to take 101 in the fall) was listed by an instructor as deserving exemption. And once other variables are controlled, no instructor’s ratings of exemptibility are out of line with those of other instructors.

Here ends the part of our essay devoted to the relatively systematic test of propositions, more or less deduced from the literature on placing students. And here follow the last motes of dust—ideas that arise from close scrutiny of a small sample and whose validity will, in a scientific sense, rest on future systematic efforts.

We must admit that we didn’t start out thinking from a student’s perspective: we weren’t concerned about the effect of exemptibility testing on a student’s well-being. But that’s where some of the motes have led us—or, rather, pondering the motes has led us to ask a few questions, has jolted us into realizing how limited our institutional concerns, and our ostensible interest in students, can be.

We started by wondering why so few of the invited students tried to place out: only 10 out of 35. Anonymous responses to a questionnaire suggest that students who chose not to take the test did so largely for what we consider legitimate reasons: wanting to work on their writing (most common reason) and wanting to take a particular section of English 101, to write about a particular topic (third most common). Though of course, students may have given only what they figured ought to have been their reasons. In any case, the second most frequently cited response was that the student had forgotten to bring samples of previous writing to school. Only one student “figured that I probably wouldn’t succeed in placing out of English 101 anyway.”

We were particularly concerned to find out not just why invited students in general chose not to try but why those invited students who probably would have placed out of 101, those whom instructors subsequently said could have been exempted, chose not to. Of the 13 students whom instructors identified as exemptible, 5 had been invited to take the exemption test but had chosen not to. Still, the two of these who responded to the questionnaire discussed above gave legitimate reasons

for their choice: both indicated their interest in the topic of the 101 section in which they were enrolled, and both rated as most important their desire to work on their writing (and those were their only reasons). Perhaps, paradoxically, the students who don’t need an introduction to academic discourse are the ones who know they probably do.

In any case, in perusing the data on the students who chose not to take the placement test, and in comparing it to that on those who did, we were struck by something else. We might have expected students whom we had only narrowly decided not to exempt to earn, say, a B+ or better in 101. But some of these students did surprisingly poorly.

All together, there were five students about whom we had been indecisive, five borderline exemptions: we ended up exempting one and not the other four. Two of the students whom we decided not to exempt seemed to be unaffected by the decision. They had both been rated 1.0 by Admissions, on a scale where 1.0 indicates the strongest candidates and 5.0 the weakest. Unfazed by our decision, the two proceeded to earn, respectively, A and A- in 101, and 4.0 and 3.59 overall.

Our decisions about the other three students, however, seemed almost to influence their performance. The one whom we decided to exempt had been rated 4.0 by Admissions; in other words, he was a high risk, essentially expected to perform in the bottom 14% of the entering class. His high school English grades ranged from A to D: we hypothesized that he could do well when he wanted to, when he was challenged and interested. Sure enough, after being exempted from 101 he proceeded to earn a B+ in a sophomore-level English course. But the other two, neither of them exempted, yet both rated more highly by Admissions, tended to perform less well than expected their first semester, especially in English 101—as if the test had somehow influenced them. One, who had been rated 2.5 by Admissions, earned a B-; the other, whom Admissions had rated a 3.0, squeaked by in English 101 with a C- and ended up on academic probation.

There’s not, of course, enough information here for generalizing, only for raising tantalizing questions. Is it possible that we do some students a disservice when we invite them to take such a test and then, after they take it, decide not to exempt them? Is it possible that students who have high test scores and whose writing can be quite good, but whose performance is unstable, can be strongly affected by exemption results: either encouraged if they place out or destabilized if they fail to? Such a possibility is an important one for any administrator concerned about retention—and about the welfare of students—to explore further. It may be especially important for administrators at small schools that pride themselves on the individualized support they offer students. And

maybe it's time, furthermore, for writing program administrators to attend to students' perspectives in matters of placement and competency and exemption; in the dozens of articles and books discussing such testing, rarely—beyond an anecdote or two on coping with student complaints—is the effect on students addressed.

## Notes

We would like to express our gratitude to Susan Clark and Kathleen Vogt, whose ideas and practices have informed our work on this study.

<sup>1</sup>In his illuminating discussion of how to go about testing writing, Edward M. White suggests a bottom limit that can nonetheless seem dauntingly large: "50 to 100 students will often suffice" (66).

<sup>2</sup>See also Troyka (30). But see Greenberg's review of a recent publication by the CEEB, where she notes the finding that "non-essay assessments are roughly equivalent to single-essay assessments with two readings"—undoubtedly "a blow to the authors," for "the College Board and ETS have always touted the superior criterion-related validity of multiple-choice tests" (479).

<sup>3</sup>Donna Gorrell also reports research that suggests using both for placement, in particular, a preliminary essay and ACT English score.

<sup>4</sup>In other words, we looked at more than one sample of writing, as researchers have urged (see, e.g., Gordon 36). And looking at assignments for which students did not suffer time constraints allowed us to overcome some of the disjunction between teaching writing as a process and testing writing as a product (see, e.g., Camp and Belanoff, Elbow and Belanoff, Wolcott).

<sup>5</sup>Although a number of studies have also examined ACT scores (Fowler and Ross, Gorrell, Snowman et al.), only 9 of the 168 students in our study had reported such scores.

<sup>6</sup>A number of the variables, including perceived exemptibility, are dichotomous, "dummy" variables, treated as interval-scale variables because one category (e.g., "perceived as exemptible") represents the presence of a trait, whereas the other (e.g., "perceived as unexemptible") represents the absence of a trait. Other dummy variables are the kind of school a student came from (independent or not), region (outside of New England or not), gender (male or not), teacher (e.g., Teacher A or not).

<sup>7</sup>Further, it is not surprising that the verbal SAT and the achievement test are better predictors of exemptibility than TSWE. As James Hoetker points out, achievement tests are designed to "make accurate distinctions among the better student writers" (377); and the College Board itself notes that "the TSWE is not intended to distinguish among students whose command of standard written English is considerably better than average"—and hence scores that might be between 60 and 80 are simply listed as 60+ (ATP Guide 18).

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## Appendix

### Zero-Order Correlations Between Exemptibles as Perceived by Faculty and All Exemptibles, Individual Teachers and Other Background Characteristics

	Perceived Exemptibles	All Exemptibles <sup>a</sup>
SAT Verbal	.17**	.37***
English Achievement	.13*	.22**
Gender	-.12	.09
Admissions Office Rating	-.11	-.21**
TSWE	.11	.21**
High School GPA	.10	.17**
Non-New England/New England (Region)	.07	-.08
SAT Math	-.05	.05
Independent/Public High School	.03	.01
High School Percentile Ranking	-.03	-.04

Notes: \* indicates statistical significance at the .05 level; \*\*, at the .01 level; \*\*\* at the .001 level.

<sup>a</sup> A dummy variable where "1" refers to students who have been exempted or perceived as exemptible by a faculty member and "0" refers to students who have not been exempted nor perceived as exemptible by a faculty member.



## Hiring Across the Curriculum

Rebecca Moore Howard, David J. Hess, and Margaret Flanders Darby

In 1983 Winifred Bryan Horner began her introduction to *Composition and Literature: Bridging the Gap* with a position statement:

This book comes out of a deep concern about the widening gulf between research and teaching in literature and research and teaching in composition. Such a separation represents a fracturing of the language discipline that is detrimental to work in both areas, as unproductive as it is unwarranted. (1)

Two years later Maxine Hairston examined the same rift in her Chair's address to the Conference on College Composition and Communication. Instead of endorsing Horner's proposal to build bridges between composition and literature, however, Hairston took the opposite tack:

I think that as rhetoricians and writing teachers we will come of age and become autonomous professionals with a discipline of our own only if we can make a psychological break with the literary critics who today dominate the profession of English studies. (273)

Myron Tuman's survey of the situation, published in 1986, gave the battle to the separatists: "Clearly, the historical compromise between composition and literary study that has for some one hundred years defined college English departments is in the process of unraveling. . ." (340).

Tuman's prediction, however, is far from being accomplished. On the contrary, the defense of the literature/composition connection has, if anything, accelerated. In the same year as the publication of Tuman's essay, Leslie E. Moore and Linda H. Peterson advanced "a legitimate rationale for linking writing instruction to the English curriculum" (467). And at the 1989 NTNW Conference on Writing Assessment, when Edward M. White, Harvey S. Wiener, and Michael C. Flanigan were asked where writing programs should be housed, all replied, "the English department."

The debate is still a lively one. Catherine Pastore Blair and Louise Z. Smith have focused it on ownership of writing-across-the-curriculum programs. Smith argues in favor of the literature/WAC union: "faculty in

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High School GPA	.10	.17**
Non-New England/New England (Region)	.07	-.08
SAT Math	-.05	.05
Independent/Public High School	.03	.01
High School Percentile Ranking	-.03	-.04

Notes: \* indicates statistical significance at the .05 level; \*\*, at the .01 level; \*\*\* at the .001 level.

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