

## A Survey of College and University Writing Placement Practices<sup>1</sup>

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Any realistic view of writing placement practices must recognize the great strides made since the early 1970s. Twenty-five years ago, almost all assessment outside the classroom involved no writing at all. Before the 1970s, most writing assessment consisted of multiple-choice tests of grammar and usage, called "indirect writing assessment." An indirect writing assessment does not involve actual student writing and, therefore, only indirectly measures a student's ability to write. Indirect measures were used because direct writing evaluation procedures, in which actual student writing was read and assessed, could not ensure consistency in scoring by independent raters, termed "interrater reliability." To be widely accepted, procedures for evaluating student writing have necessarily had to focus on achieving rater agreement or reliability (Huot). This emphasis on reliability has generated some criticism (Broad; Faigley, Cherry, Jolliffe, and Skinner; Elbow; Gere; Odell and Cooper). Despite imperfections in the direct assessment of student writing, we have made tremendous strides in a relatively short period of time. In the less than thirty years since Godshalk, Swineford, and Coffman scored student writing at acceptable levels of reliability, we have seen the development of holistic, analytic, primary trait, and more recently portfolios for a range of assessment purposes.

While assessment procedures have undergone a series of rapid and progressive changes, the last twenty-five years have also seen an increased need for placement as schools opened their doors to a less traditional student population. This diverse population required more than just a single composition course or sequence; therefore, some method of placing these students into the various composition courses was needed. While it is generally known that many schools use some measure to place students in writing classes. I wished to discover how prevalent placement testing was and what forms it took at various institutions.

This article reports on an investigation into the types of writing placement that institutions are using, in addition to the kinds of writing courses they offer. I hope this work can provide the beginning of a much needed conversation on writing placement procedures. Before researchers, teachers, or administrators can draw any conclusions about the best way to place students, we need to know how institutions go about writing

placement and what kinds of results are achieved by their chosen methods. The results of this survey on writing placement will be an important resource for those institutions looking to change their present procedures, initiate new programs, or justify those already in place. Furthermore, it is imperative that we research our methods for writing placement and assessment if we wish to protect the gains we have made during the last two decades.

## The Survey

All two- and four-year colleges and universities on the MLA list of English Chairpersons were mailed a cover letter (Appendix A), a questionnaire (Appendix B), and a business reply envelope. Chairs were asked to fill out the one-page questionnaire or to forward it to someone knowledgeable enough to respond. The almost 2700 letters and surveys were mailed in September 1991, and 40% of the surveys were returned during the Fall and Spring Semesters of that school year. Survey results were entered in a computer-generated database program. Respondents' answers were tabulated, indexed, and cross-referenced according to the main categories of the questionnaire. In reporting the results of the survey, I will follow the format of the questionnaire, beginning with the demographic information. The figures in the tables are listed as percentages to provide easy comparisons between schools, methods, procedures, and levels of satisfaction. The actual number of responses to each question is provided in Appendix C. The first four tables show the results of the survey according to school size.

Table 1. Demographics

Enrollment	Survey	National Population
Under 1,000	21%	38%
1,000-5,000	40%	40%
5,000-10,000	18%	12%
10,000-20,000	12%	7%
Over 20,000	9%	3%
Institution Type		
Private	40%	56%
Public	60%	44%

## Demographics

According to the 1991 Digest of Education Statistics, the response sample is fairly representative of the make-up of colleges and universities across the country. Table 1 shows a comparison of the response sample with the overall population of colleges and universities.

Some of the main differences appear in the percentage of public and private schools and in the representation of schools with smaller student populations. It appears that private schools and those with smaller numbers of students are not fully represented in the response sample; however, differences between the response sample and the overall population might represent the increased use of placement testing in larger and public institutions.

## Method of Placement

Because of the strong relationship between the context of an individual college and university and its placement program, it is important to ascertain whether schools of different sizes offer substantially different composition curricula or employ different methods of placement. Table 2 offers a breakdown of the three most widely used placement methods according to institution size. A complete display of methods appears in Table 5. One of the most interesting observations available from Table 2 is that school size does not appear to determine the method for placing students.

Table 2: School Size and Method of Placement

Enrollment	Writing Sample	SAT or ACT	Writing Sample and SAT or ACT
Under 1,000	52%	46%	25%
1,000-5,000	47%	40%	22%
5,000-10,000	58%	43%	23%
10,000-20,000	57%	53%	32%
Over 20,000	54%	45%	26%

Although direct writing assessment is often criticized for being labor intensive, especially with large numbers of students, there doesn't appear to be a clear distinction between schools that enroll and must place large or small student populations. This uniformity among schools also dispels any notion that smaller institutions hold a lesser commitment to adequate placement procedures.

## Composition Curriculum and Options

To fully understand the value of placement procedures, we must know into what courses students are being placed. This connection between placement and curriculum is important if assessment techniques are to be sensitive to the needs of students and teachers at particular institutions. As apparent in Table 3, there appears to be considerable uniformity between the schools.

Table 3: School Size and Curriculum

Enrollment	Basic Writing	Composition I	Honors
Under 1,000	81%	91%	21%
1,000-5,000	77%	87%	30%
5,000-10,000	87%	92%	43%
10,000-20,000	87%	94%	62%
Over 20,000	77%	92%	52%

  

Enrollment	Composition II	Exemption	No Composition
Under 1,000	62%	26%	2%
1,000-5,000	59%	21%	5%
5,000-10,000	72%	35%	2%
10,000-20,000	71%	50%	5%
Over 20,000	67%	40%	1%

This uniformity indicates an interest and commitment throughout the schools in the survey to offer a range of composition courses to students of varying ability. Of course, this commitment to multiple levels of composition instruction necessitates a similar commitment to placement procedures.

One of the biggest differences between schools of various sizes evident in Table 3 comes in the percentage of honors courses being offered. The low number for small schools might reflect the difficulty of providing a wide range of composition curricula with very limited resources. There

appears to be some relationship between honors courses and providing an exemption option for students who take placement exams. For example, the two smallest school categories in the survey report the lowest number of honors courses and exemption options for students, while the two largest school categories report the highest percentages. These kinds of differences could reflect variation in student populations, or in the philosophy of the institution, or perhaps the limitations of schools with fewer resources.

## Satisfaction

Like the other categories, the most striking feature of the satisfaction category is the basic uniformity between schools of very different sizes, especially in the first two categories of very satisfied and satisfied with reservations. In looking at Table 4, however, we do note that larger schools seem to be dissatisfied at a greater rate than other schools in the survey.

Table 4: School Size and Satisfaction

Enrollment	Very Satisfied	Satisfied With Reservations	Not Satisfied
Under 1,000	30%	60%	6%
1,000-5,000	31%	57%	9%
5,000-10,000	34%	56%	8%
10,000-20,000	33%	53%	14%
Over 20,000	26%	55%	14%

## Method of Placement

One of the main goals of this survey was to ascertain what methods institutions use to place students into the various course options for first-year composition. Probably the most interesting finding in placement method has to do with the use of writing samples. As depicted in Table 5, nearly 51% of the respondents report using a writing sample as at least part of their placement method.

Table 5: Method of Placement

Method	Rate of Response
Writing Sample	51%
ACT or SAT	42%
High School Grades	12%
Test of Standard Written English	20%
Writing Sample and ACT or SAT	23%
Other	26%
No Procedures	3.5%

It is difficult to know how we should interpret the finding that half of the respondents use a writing sample to place students into composition courses. My initial reaction was one of surprise and dismay to learn that almost half of the respondents report using some indirect method for placing students in writing courses. I should also add that this number is probably conservative for the population as a whole. Quite possibly those institutions that spent time and effort in developing a writing sample for placement might be more apt to participate in a survey about writing placement than those schools that continue to use indirect writing evaluation for placement.

On the other hand, the use of a writing sample by over 50% of the respondents could be considered a positive finding. If we remember that direct assessment of student writing has been in use for less than 20 years and that it requires additional funding, cooperation, and support on administrative and departmental levels, 50% might even be a number to celebrate. It just might be that 50% reflects a heroic effort by faculty and administrators to place students into composition courses according to the best possible method, given the resources of individual institutions.

The second most popular method for placement uses SAT and ACT scores, even though these tests were not designed to measure writing ability. Their use reflects the prevalence and importance of these two tests in post-secondary admission practices. Institutions may have less confidence in locally-produced measures, such as high school grades, than they have in instruments that draw upon a large population of high school seniors. Furthermore, the frequent use of the Test of Standard Written English (TSWE) illustrates the temptation to equate writing ability with the ability to use standard English correctly. One in five schools report using TSWE; and, as suggested by responses to the "other" category, there is reason to believe that tests in grammar and mechanics are even more widespread.

Twenty-six percent of the returned surveys indicate using some "other" method than those listed, and the preponderance of these procedures involve multiple-choice exams. The ASSET test, a grammar and mechanics multiple-choice exam marketed especially for placement, is the most popular "other" method, representing 24% of the "other" category and 6% of all those responding to the survey. Responses in the "other" category range from standardized measures, such as Asset or Nelson-Denny, to state-mandated exams such as TASP (Texas Academic Skills Program) or the New Jersey Basic Skills Test. Schools also report using system-developed or departmentally-developed exams. Only three measures—ASSET (6%), AP (2%) and TASP (1%)—account for a full percentage point or more of respondents in the survey.

The small number of schools that report no procedures is encouraging, although this number, like that for the use of a writing sample, would probably be less encouraging if we had a 100% return on the surveys. Also, note that one in four of the responding schools report using the multiple method of a writing sample and the ACT or SAT test. This rate for multiple means for placement indicates the importance that placement has for many of the schools in the survey.

Another way to view placement procedures is to look at individual courses. Are schools using particular methods to place students into certain courses? For example, are students being placed into basic writing courses largely on the basis of tests of grammar and usage (a practice condemned by a CCCC Committee on Teaching and its Evaluation in Composition)? Such a trend would say much about the attitude of schools and about the curriculum in those schools. To answer these kinds of questions and allay our fears, Table 6 on the next page furnishes information about which methods are used at institutions offering specific composition courses.

It is encouraging that writing samples are used for placement in all courses by over 50% of the institutions reporting. (These percentages total more than 100 because some schools use more than one measure.) There does not appear to be too much variation here, although there is some indication that schools might be using indirect methods like SAT and ACT to place students into honors or exempt them from composition altogether. No discernible relationship exists between indirect measures, which focus on surface correctness, and basic writing classes.

Table 6: Curriculum and Placement Method

Course	Writing Sample	SAT or ACT	Writing Sample and SAT or ACT
Basic Writing	57%	45%	26%
Composition I	53%	45%	25%
Composition II	54%	44%	26%
Honors	55%	55%	31%
Exempt	57%	53%	32%

  

Course	H. S. Grades	TSWE	SAT or ACT and TSWE
Basic Writing	13%	23%	11%
Composition I	12%	21%	10%
Composition II	13%	22%	11%
Honors	17%	22%	15%
Exempt	14%	19%	12%

placement decision, but this figure represents a huge gap in knowledge about conventional direct writing assessment procedures. Another response, which reveals a lack of understanding about placement procedures, shows that only 46% of those using a writing sample employ their own criteria when scoring essays. This means that over half of the respondents who use a writing sample employ scoring guidelines that do not reflect individual institutional or curricular concerns.

In a more positive light, 94% of schools that use a writing sample have at least some full-time, tenured faculty doing the scoring. It is important to see that scoring placement essays is not something done entirely by TAs and part-time instructors. As well, this involvement of full-time faculty indicates the importance given to placing students into the most appropriate composition courses.

### Administration

Although the survey asked respondents to note who was in charge of placement procedures only "if a writing sample is used," over 900 respondents checked the "Administration" category, nearly 400 more than those indicating writing sample use. The numbers in Table 8 for the status of the director represent the percentage of responses received for that series of questions. The percentages reporting whether the director is trained in composition or has publications on evaluation are based on the number of responses for writing sample use, since our interest is in knowing how faculty who run direct writing assessment programs are prepared to carry out this job.

### Procedures and Personnel

Table 7 offers a breakdown of the procedures used by institutions that report the use of a writing sample. (The percentages total above 100% because some schools responded to more than one category.)

Table 7: Writing Sample Procedures

Procedure	Rate of Response
Two Raters	77%
One Rater	29%
One Sample	54%
Two Samples	5%
4- or 6-Point Scale	36%
Non-Numeric Scale	19%
Rating Criteria by Institution	46%
Full-Time Tenured Raters	94%
Non-Tenured Raters	41%
Part-Time Raters	34%
TA Raters	11%

The number of schools that use a writing sample scored by only one rater is almost 30%. The use of one rater doesn't necessarily invalidate a

Table 8: Administration

Administered By	Rate of Response
Full Time Faculty	97%
Part Time Faculty	2.5%
Teaching Assistant	.5%
Composition Faculty	14%
Literature Faculty	10%
Testing Service	10%

It is encouraging to note that most schools that use a writing sample employ a full-time director; on the other hand, only 14% of those schools using a writing sample have a director with a terminal degree in composition or publications in writing assessment (answer 6e on the survey). This

points out both the dearth of training for those who administer placement programs and the shortage of composition specialists interested in assessment.

## Level of Satisfaction

In some ways, the category of satisfaction could be considered the most important in determining the adequacy of placement programs across the country. It is heartening to see that most of the respondents express at least a partial sense of satisfaction. As Table 9 displays, almost one-third are very satisfied with their programs, while only 10% are dissatisfied.

Table 9: Satisfaction

Level	Rate of Response
Very Satisfied	32%
Satisfied With Reservations	58%
Not Satisfied	10%

To get some idea of where this satisfaction and dissatisfaction might come from, Table 10 provides a breakdown of the level of satisfaction according to the methods that institutions use.

Table 10: Satisfaction and Placement Method

Method	Very Satisfied	Satisfied With Reservations	Not Satisfied
Writing Sample	35%	58%	5%
SAT or ACT	28%	60%	10%
H. S. Grades	29%	60%	7%
TSWE	30%	61%	8%
Writing Sample and SAT or ACT	35%	61%	4%
Writing Sample and H. S. Grades	35%	59%	2%
Writing Sample and TSWE	35%	60%	3%
SAT or ACT and TSWE	31%	59%	7%

These numbers, although only moderately different, support those of us who would advocate the use of a writing sample to place students in

first-year composition courses. The level of satisfaction is highest for those institutions using a writing sample. The biggest differences in satisfaction occur between those institutions who use SAT or ACT scores and those employing a writing sample.

## Discussion

Because this survey represents an initial study of placement procedures, the information and implications derived from it are tentative and exploratory. I would like to briefly review the different sections of the findings: Demographics, Curriculum, Procedures and Personnel, Administration, Placement Method, and Level of Satisfaction. I use these brief reviews not just to recap the findings of the survey but to reflect on what these findings might indicate about the present and future state of writing assessment for placement.

No matter what aspects of placement we discuss, effectiveness can only be understood within demographic and institutional boundaries. In a conventional testing sense, assessment procedures must accurately measure for whatever purposes the test is being used. In placement testing, the issue is whether or not the procedures can correctly predict how well a student will be suited for a particular course. If placement procedures accurately place the majority of students in the right courses, then the test can be said to have predictive validity. Beyond this narrow definition, to assess realistically how well a specific placement program works at a particular school, we need to consider a multitude of institutional characteristics, including but not limited to student population, philosophy and politics within the department, institutional mission and goals, and other factors too numerous to mention. In other words, a placement program that works well must have institutional validity to satisfy and complement the range of influences that determine successful composition instruction and administration at a particular institution.

The variety of composition offerings available at the many kinds of institutions represented in the survey reminds us of the importance of writing instruction and placement at the college level. Schools that need to offer their students several composition options (the resounding majority of the schools who responded) are also going to have to develop and maintain some procedure for ensuring their students are placed into the appropriate courses. This relationship between curriculum and placement indicates that assessment procedures must be connected locally to curricula, since there is no reason to believe that outside programs or experts can dictate the most appropriate criteria for placement at specific schools.

This important relationship between curriculum and placement is not evident in the responses to the area of Placement and Procedures. More than half of the schools in the survey (54%) employ writing criteria developed outside of the institution when scoring student writing samples. This figure coupled with a 30% rate of using only one rater per paper produces an odd mixture of relying upon outside rating criteria and rejecting the conventional standard of employing two raters for each paper. Perhaps the answer to these inconsistencies in the reported procedures can be found in the Area of Administration section, where only 14% of the respondents reported that their placement program was directed by an individual with publications in assessment or a terminal degree in rhetoric and composition.

Effective writing placement requires informed leadership, giving institutions local control of rating criteria while at the same time employing testing procedures that will survive scrutiny by outside testing and accreditation agencies. A good example of such a program already exists at one institution, described by William L. Smith, wherein scoring guidelines and numerical ratings have been abandoned for procedures that depend on the knowledge of teachers concerning their students and courses. These procedures, when measured against conventional assessment practices, have been found more accurate and more cost-efficient. Clearly, these types of programs can only be developed when institutions have well-trained and qualified individuals in charge of writing placement programs.

The obvious room for improvement in the areas of Procedures and Personnel and Administration provides some perspective for discussing the two important areas of Placement Method and Satisfaction. Earlier, I suggested that a 50% rate for writing sample use might be a positive trend, considering the extra effort and expense of using a writing sample and the relatively short period of time the direct assessment of writing has been in use. Additionally, such a rate of writing sample use is even more remarkable, considering the need for more expert direction in writing placement. The level of satisfaction for writing placement procedures might be viewed in a similar light, considering that the solid majority of respondents (58%) are satisfied (with reservations), although the level of dissatisfaction (10%) for SAT or ACT is double that for those respondents using a writing sample (5%). This difference in satisfaction is especially striking because these are the two most popular forms of writing placement. Possibly, the results can be taken to mean that placement procedures are in a state of change in which writing sample use, the most popular single form of placement, is beginning to be employed instead of more traditional forms that do not include student writing.

## Summary

We can be encouraged by the firmly established use of writing samples for placement and by the higher levels of satisfaction for these practices. On the other hand, there is still much to be gained in advocating an increased use of writing samples for placement. There is also much we still need to know about writing evaluation in general and placement in particular. If we are, indeed, in a state of flux, with the direct assessment of writing replacing conventional indirect methods, only further research into placement will confirm and chart this movement. Consequently, it is alarming to note the dearth of research and theory in writing assessment and the lack of qualified personnel who direct writing placement programs.<sup>2</sup> Clearly, this research informs us that universities and colleges across the country, regardless of their size and mission, are providing students with options in composition. This commitment to a variety of courses demands that we have a similar commitment and interest in adequate programs for placement.

## Notes

1. Research for this survey funded by grants from the National Council of Writing Program Administrators (WPA) and the College of Arts & Science at the University of Louisville.
2. For example, a 1992 ERIC search on writing placement yielded 18 entries, most of which either mentioned that a placement test was administered or reported on the development of a particular method for a specific institution.

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## Appendix A

September 15, 1991

Dear Chairperson of the English Department,

Enclosed with this brief note is a one-page survey concerning your writing placement procedures. As you are well aware, placement is an important concern to those of us in English departments across the country. We are interested in how your incoming students are placed into freshmen composition courses and in the courses offered by your department. We appreciate your time and effort in completing the survey and would be glad to provide you with a copy of the results if you so indicate in the space provided on the survey. Rest assured that your institutional affiliation will not be revealed. If you are unable to answer any of the questions, please

forward to the person most qualified to reply. We wish to thank you in advance for your help in obtaining this valuable information. This letter remains unsigned so that we might use the bulk mailing postage rate.

Sincerely,

## Appendix B

### Survey On Writing Placement

1. **Circle the letters which best describe your institution.** (a) Public (b) Private (c) Grants BA only (d) BA & MA (e) Terminal Degree (f) under 1,000 students (g) 1,000-5,000 (h) (5,000-10,000 (i) 10,000-20,000 (j) Over 20,000
2. **Circle the letters which best describe the composition options required of incoming students at your institution.** (a) Basic Writing for Underprepared Students (b) Composition I (c) Composition II (d) Honors Composition (e) Exemption (f) No Composition Requirement (g) Other (indicate)
3. **Circle the letters which explain how students are placed into various composition courses.** (a) Writing Sample (b) SAT or ACT Verbal Scores (c) H.S. Grades (d) Test of Standard Written English (e) Other (indicate) (f) A Combination (indicate) (g) No procedures
4. **If a writing sample is used, please circle the letters which best describe the procedures you use for judging student writing.** (a) Holistic Scoring (b) Analytic Scoring (# of traits) (c) Primary Trait (# of traits) (d) Other (indicate) (e) Two raters score each essay (f) One rater (g) One sample (h) Two samples (i) 4 point scale (j) 6 point scale (k) Nonnumeric scale (l) rating criteria developed by institution (m) Outside rating criteria used (indicate)
5. **If a writing sample is used, please circle the letters which best describe the raters who score student writing.** (a) Full-time tenure-track who teach composition (b) TA's (c) Full-time non-tenure-track who teach composition (d) Part-Timers (e) Others who rate essays (indicate) (f) All raters teach composition (g) Raters input on scoring criteria

6. **If a writing sample is used, please circle the letters which best describe the person in charge of placement.** (a) Full-time tenure-track who teaches composition (b) TA (c) Full-time non-tenure-track who teaches composition (d) Part-Timer (e) Terminal Degree in rhetoric and composition or publications on evaluation (f) Tenure-track literature faculty (g) Testing Service (h) other
7. **How satisfied are you and your institution with current placement procedures?** (a) Very satisfied (b) satisfied with reservations (c) not satisfied
8. **How are your placement practices reviewed?** (a) Second writing sample done in class (b) Survey of teacher satisfaction (c) Combination (d) Other
9. **Please provide me with any comments I might need to understand the state of writing placement at your institution.** (use back of sheet)

Furnish your name and address if you wish a copy of the results.

## Appendix C

### Responses to Questionnaire

2,695 Surveys Sent 1,099 Returned

#### Demographics

621 Public Institutions  
 416 Private Institutions

Enrollment under 1,000	210	21%
1,000 to 5,000 Enrollment	398	40%
5,000 to 10,000 Enrollment	174	18%
10,000 to 20,000 Enrollment	120	12%
Over 20,000 Enrollment	88	9%

#### Curriculum

Basic Writing	875	80%
Composition I	975	89%
Composition II	696	63%
Honors Composition	395	36%
Exemption Option	318	29%
No Composition Courses	39	3.5%

#### Placement Method

Writing Sample	558	51%
SAT or Act Scores	466	42%
High School Grades	134	12%
Test of Standard Written English (TSWE)	223	20%
No Procedures	45	3.5%
Writing Sample and SAT or Act Scores	258	23%

#### Procedures and Personnel

Two Raters	434	77%*
One Rater	164	29%
One Sample	304	54%
Two Samples	27	5%
Four- or Six-Point Grading Scale	203	36%
Non-numeric Grading Scale	108	19%
Grading Criteria by Institution	256	46%
Full-Time Tenured Raters	527	94%
TA Raters	61	11%
Non-Tenured Raters	223	41%
Part-Time Raters	188	34%

#### Administration

Full-Time Tenured Director	490	53%**
TA Director	5	.5%
Non-Tenured Full-Time Director	223	24%
Part-Time Director	19	2%
Composition Faculty Director	79	14%
Literature Faculty Director	54	10%
Testing Service	58	10%

#### Level of Satisfaction

Very Satisfied	338	32%
Satisfied With Reservations	614	58%
Not Satisfied	108	10%

\* Percentages based upon number of respondents reporting writing sample use.

\*\* Percentages based upon number of respondents to Administration Category.

