

Informed Self-Placement: Is a Choice Offered a Choice Received?

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If a student fails ENG 150 [the regular composition course], that student must recur to his or her own self-placement, not a writing sample or the inflated high-school transcript. Teachers are pleased when the placement responsibility lies with the student, for the relationship is thus cleaner, less muddled with the interference of test scores and with predictions for success or failure from everyone *except* the student. (Royer and Gilles 67)

Daniel Royer and Roger Gilles advocate a Directed Self-Placement (DSP) process whereby, after attending a talk given by a faculty member, students make their own choices about writing placement. This approach depends on the assumption that no one knows the students' strengths, weaknesses, and skill levels as well as the students themselves. Students make a choice and take the accompanying responsibility, and as the authors point out, "If they fail, they will, we hope, learn that a college education is a serious endeavor and that success often begins with a proper estimation of one's abilities" (70). We believe, along with Royer and Gilles, that students will be more successful if they feel more invested in their learning as a result of participating in their education choices, and we agree with David Blakesley that giving students choices "communicate[s] the positive message that we respect their judgment" (21). Our concern, as administrators of a writing program, however, is that we introduce students to decision-making that is well informed and that we not push them into making isolated choices. The phrase "directed self-placement" is dominated by terms that suggest authority and processes beyond a student's control; inserting the word "self" between the highly connotive "directed" and "placement" may leave all involved wondering whether the offered choice is an authentic choice. Rather than locate the

responsibility of selecting a first-year writing course primarily with faculty and staff or students, we advocate a dialogic model in which we (faculty, staff, *and* students) share responsibility. Therefore, we introduce the term “informed self-placement” (ISP) to reflect our practice and thinking around freshmen selecting first-year writing courses.

DSP, though attractive in the simplicity and fairness of its application, may not fully take into account the complexity inherent in the processes of choice and communication. We have come to recognize (along with Nicolay and Lewiecki-Wilson) that making a choice is a highly complex act, one that warrants further investigation. Lewiecki-Wilson describes placement as “a complex rhetorical act—as deliberative speech generating multiple ‘dialectic interactions’ and collective negotiations at many sites” (165). Nicolay, working from Brian Huot’s argument for always contextualizing writing assessment practices, also argues for thinking of context as a central concept of placement practices. Descriptions and theories of communication in the fields of language philosophy, linguistics, and cognitive science support this view of communication as complex. From these perspectives we understand that meaningful communication is not merely the making of an utterance in the presence of another; the full definition involves both the making of an utterance and the receiving of that utterance in the way it was meant to be understood (Grice, Austin, Searl). Furthermore, we understand from Sperber and Wilson that communication is far more complex than just coding and decoding and that language is essentially a matter of interpretation. Taking this one step further, Dascal recognizes that if communication is a process of interpretation, then miscommunication is a natural (and expected) part of communication. In terms of writing placement, then, we must ask ourselves if giving students a choice is equivalent to students receiving the choice as it was intended.

We must also ask ourselves if students are prepared to take full responsibility for their writing placement. David Blakesley explains that Southern Illinois University at Carbondale (SIUC) has basically adopted Royer and Gilles’ approach, and he argues that the model empowers students: “Directed self-placement is an act of restoration, not preservation, to the extent that it asks students to learn from the past to make decisions about their future” (29). Although this may sound ideal, we must also ask ourselves how the student—the incoming freshman—can make an informed decision about the future (college writing) based only on the past (high school writing). As Nicolay argues, the DSP process “actually disempowers students by asking them to make a judgment without the benefit of the expertise that their instructors possess” (43). Not only is it asking the student to do guesswork that he or she may not be qualified to do, but it also contradicts what

we hope to teach the student about academic work: that one should conduct contextually relevant research if one hopes to make an informed statement about an issue. Moreover, if we have learned anything from our assessment history, it is that we should assess direct measures of writing—that is, samples of writing—and not rely solely on indirect measures such as test scores or, in the case of DSP, students' perceptions of their writing.

Pinter and Sims' approach to DPS stands out in that they do ask students to make a decision based on a sample of writing completed in the college context and evaluated using college-level criteria. They work from the productive idea that "the placement *test* now became the placement *process*" (110). Still absent from their model, however, is critical dialogue with the writer about writing. As we teach our students in writing classes, discussion with readers about writing fosters awareness of one's own writing. Although Pinter and Sims have brought writing into the DSP process, they have not built in the expectation of dialogue about this writing to help students through the decision process. As they say, "Admittedly, many students cannot at this stage recognize their own organizational problems or lack of supporting detail or mechanical errors. But when encouraged to reread and reflect, students *may* become aware of some of their own writing problems, even if they do not yet know how to correct them" (111, our emphasis). One response to our concern that students receive adequate information in making choices may be that DSP programs, including this one, do in fact invite students to come speak with faculty to discuss their writing (Blakesley, Cornell and Newton). Our experience at the University of Rochester, however, is that incoming freshmen do not often find it easy to approach college faculty with questions. In fact, our recognition of this has led the Dean of Sophomores and the Dean of Freshmen to put forward the following goal for all freshmen students: By the end of the first year, freshmen should be able to approach a faculty member with a question or to discuss an area of interest. Given this circumstance, we fear that a broad invitation to incoming students will not actually lead to critical conversations about writing for those who need more input to make effective choices about writing placement.

Nicolay takes a step toward incorporating direct examination of college writing and critical dialogue with students about writing into the placement process but includes little choice for students. At St. John Fisher College, she explains, the placement process is integrated into the first three weeks of the course, and assessment works through a classroom experience in which instructors evaluate student work to determine whether students should take the freshman writing course for four instead of three credits. Those taking the course for four credits have several meetings with peer tutors as well as

supplementary instructor conferences. Although this approach is rich in offering context-relevant information about student writers and their college writing, instructors, not students, make placement decisions.

Although our placement process at the University of Rochester is based on Cornell's, it resembles a synthesis of Royer and Gilles's and Nicolay's, providing—we hope—the commitment to student choice that underlies the former and the commitment to providing contextually rich and relevant information to students that informs the latter. We find that we can read student writing and enter into dialogue with students as long as we use outside identifiers to manage the number of students taking part in the placement process. We argue that ongoing assessment is essential to evaluating the success of the choices we offer—in determining the extent of the match between our intended message and the interpretations of students and in establishing whether the choices students make fit their needs given their history with writing and as writers. We have undertaken a continuing assessment of our placement process, leading, we believe, to a richer understanding of “choice” and “well-informed choice” than is currently offered by the literature. Finally, we demonstrate concrete ways in which assessment can help a program develop and, if necessary, revise how it conceives and achieves its commitment to student choice and student learning.

INSTITUTIONAL BACKGROUND

The University of Rochester (UR) is a research-extensive institution with a freshman class of approximately 950 students. The college is strongly committed to an interest-based curriculum in which student interests drive course selection. The primary writing requirement is the only requirement for all incoming freshmen, and we aim to draw students into interesting classes through a selection of diverse topics. The writing program emphasizes community responsibility and choice, where community responsibility means bringing in and listening to student voices as well as helping students make well-informed choices that work toward furthering success and interest in learning. Three years ago, when we formed our program, we opted for a version of Cornell's choice-based process. Since the mideighties, Cornell's John S. Knight Writing Program has invited incoming students with a verbal SAT below the national mean to take an on-site writing assessment. Trained readers review the resulting essays and, when appropriate, recommend students for a first-year writing workshop for less skilled writers. Writing Workshop Director Joe Martin or a staff member gives this recommendation to the student during an optional interview. If the student chooses not to attend the interview, the program sends a follow-up e-mail with the placement recommendation and another

invitation for a meeting. Students not recommended for the workshop are also invited to speak about their essays and learn about first-year seminars (Martin). Similarly, UR's writing advising system attempts to engage students in discussing their own writing abilities and processes with the aim of locating students at the center of their educational experience in a responsible way. During student-adviser meetings, advisers do not simply accept a student's statement; they enter into constructive dialogue with the student so that the student may make an informed course selection.

In rare cases, students are exempted from the primary writing requirement based on outstanding prefreshman writing, but normally the requirement is fulfilled by either RWC, Reasoning and Writing in the College, a theme-based freshman writing class, or RWC-Lab, an extended version of Reasoning and Writing in the College that provides more support to students who might have difficulty meeting the demands of college-level writing. RWC-Lab, a one-semester course, provides an extra hour of class time per week, enrolls ten students instead of fifteen, and meets in a computer classroom to enable more hands-on instructor attention during all stages of the writing process. Students who do not attain a C (the minimum grade to satisfy the primary writing requirement) are offered the opportunity to take a zero-credit spring-semester writing extension in which they work closely with writing center tutors to continue to improve their writing and fulfill the primary writing requirement. These students are given no grade for RWC-Lab until they complete the spring extension.¹

RWC and RWC-Lab instructors are graduate students from humanities, social sciences, and occasionally natural sciences who take a five-credit graduate-level course in writing pedagogy the semester before they begin teaching. Throughout the first year of teaching, instructors participate in a two-credit practicum, which they work closely with the writing program director, the writing program assistant director, the instructor training coordinator (a graduate student administrator with extensive experience in teaching writing), and other new instructors to address day-to-day teaching issues. RWC-Lab is typically taught by the most experienced instructors, since students in this course often face greater challenges in reaching writing competency and thus benefit from the pedagogical experience of more seasoned instructors.

UR has two choice-based placement processes: One involves a small group of incoming freshmen and is integrated into the classroom setting; the other, designed for the majority, is initiated by students' high school writing and an on-site writing exam. We have developed an integrated classroom process because some of our students take part in a three-week writing class during the summer before they matriculate as freshmen. These students are part of the Early Connection Opportunity (ECO) program offered by

the College's ECO and Higher Education Opportunity Program (HEOP) programs; they are typically less familiar with the college environment and workload and need more support to make a successful transition to college. The ECO writing classes resemble RWC-Lab rather than RWC. At the end of this course, each ECO student meets with his or her instructor and makes a choice about whether to take RWC or RWC-Lab; this dialogue is based on student and instructor perceptions of the student's performance in the three-week intensive writing course. While the student makes a decision at this point, he or she is not bound by it and may make a new decision without further consulting an instructor, writing consultant or even anyone at the writing program.

Students with weaker writing skills may enroll in the regular course (RWC), but they will work very hard to fulfill the requirement. Should they choose this option, we encourage them to make use of the support offered by the graduate-run writing center, undergraduate writing fellows, or both. On the other hand, they may opt to enroll in RWC-Lab and take advantage of the additional support integrated into the course structure. We tell students that RWC-Lab and RWC share goals, requirements, and grading criteria. We believe—and our assessment project has supported—that RWC-Lab is structured in such a way that most students choosing this option fulfill the primary writing requirement in a single semester. Students may choose to discuss their choice with a faculty advisor after they have met with a writing consultant, which we hope prevents undue influence from the consultant.

We build in a checks-and-balances moment in the first week of every writing class (RWC and RWC-Lab) when each writing instructor assigns an in-class diagnostic writing assignment. Outliers are discussed with the writing placement coordinator or the director or assistant director of the writing program, who checks to determine whether the student has participated in the placement process. If the student has already had a discussion with a writing adviser about his or her options, the instructor might offer the student an opportunity to review the options for freshman writing courses. We do recognize that a repeated question implies that the questioner does not consider the first response to be sufficient (Labov and Fanshel 95). To compensate for this, we try to approach the second conversation in a very open way, so as not to pressure the student into changing a previous decision. In the handful of cases in which a student has been reapproached with information about RWC-Lab, most have stayed with their initial decision, and many have taken advantage of the support provided through the writing center and the writing fellows to complete the course. If a student's scores did not identify him or her as part of the placement process, or (more likely in our experience), if the student arrived late or chose not to participate in

placement, we recommend a meeting with a program director or the placement coordinator. As in the meetings during on-site placement, the focus is on entering into a dialogue; that is, asking the student to identify writing experience and goals, and giving the student information so that he or she may make an informed decision. In cases where a very strong writer is taking RWC-Lab, the instructor generally approaches the student with concerns that the course might progress in more detail than is really needed for that student; he or she may reconsider the decision to take RWC-Lab. These students are never asked to change classes but are simply provided with more information to help them make a choice.

ASSESSMENT METHODOLOGY

Our assessment is an ongoing project. This paper presents results from three assessment types: anonymous questionnaires completed by students who have already taken either RWC or RWC-Lab focus groups of a subset of those students, and a review of program materials. The anonymous questionnaires were designed to learn about student perceptions of choice and their level of satisfaction with their writing course in retrospect. With respect to choice, we focus on three research questions: (1) Did students who participated in the placement process feel they could choose freely between RWC and RWC-Lab? (2) What factors influenced their choice? (3) Did students rely on factors that could be reproduced in a mass communication scenario, or did their influences come out of one-on-one interactions? We assess the appropriateness of the course by asking questions in three areas: (1) What (if anything) did you get from the course that you needed? (2) What (if anything) did you get that you didn't need? (3) What (if anything) didn't you get that you needed? The focus groups allowed us to ask more in-depth questions about these research questions and to better understand our results where there was lack of agreement across the surveys. Through our review of program literature, we investigated the extent to which these materials reflect our commitment to students making informed choices.

We distributed the student questionnaire through resident advisers to all RWC-Lab students (about one hundred) and to a random selection of RWC students (about three hundred). We received sixteen completed surveys from RWC-Lab students, and sixty-three completed surveys from RWC students. To control for variation among instructors, subjects were selected only from classes taught by instructors who had been trained through the same pedagogy course (twenty-seven RWC instructors and five RWC-Lab instructors, with one instructor counted in both groups). See Appendix 2 for the complete survey. To better understand the survey results, we convened focus groups with students who had indicated on their surveys that

they would be willing to participate in follow-up discussions; although not statistically significant, the focus group responses allowed to add some student interpretations to the results. The focus groups were facilitated by staff members from the College Center for Academic Support (the advising division of the Dean's Office). A writing program instructor known to none of the students operated the video camera; she was present in part to clarify any questions the students or the focus group leader might have. We ran two focus groups, one with three RWC students and one with three RWC-Lab students. We asked these students for more information about specific classroom activities (especially peer review and self-assessment) as well as about their strategies for choice and their satisfaction with their class. See Appendix 3 for the complete list of focus group questions. In addition, we reviewed all written materials relating to writing placement, whether issued by our office or another administrative office on campus, for the three years we have been a program.

RESULTS

Making Choices. Through the survey we aimed to learn how students in the placement process approached the issue of choice. We asked them if they felt they could choose their writing course freely and how they had made their choice. In response to the question "Did you feel you could choose freely? Explain," we received fifteen "yes" responses and one "no," with the explanation: "There were only 2 [RWC-Lab] classes the time I took it. I would like to get into one of the classes yet it was full. I had to take the other one. Plus, I couldn't wait until spring to do writing." The sixteen students who responded had all chosen RWC-Lab; we therefore have no data about students who participated in the process but chose RWC.²

Students who felt they could choose freely were asked on what basis they made their decision. We provided seven possible choice criteria from among which they could choose and left an eighth option: "other (please specify)." Students could check as many choices as were applicable. We sought to understand which factors and how many different factors influenced their choice. Table 1 presents their responses.

Student	Self Assessment	High School	Standardized Scores	Placement	Writing Advisor	Faculty Advisor
A	✓					
B	✓					
C	✓					
D	✓					
E	✓		✓			
F	✓		✓			
G	✓		✓			
H	✓		✓	✓	✓	
I	✓		✓	✓	✓	
J	✓		✓	✓	✓	
K	✓			✓	✓	✓
L				✓	✓	✓
M				✓	✓	
N					✓	✓
O					✓	
Totals (of 15)	11	0	6	6	8	3
Percentage	73%	0	40%	40%	53%	20%

Table 1: Factors Influencing Choice for RWC-Lab Students (n=15)

As the results in Table 1 show, four students relied on self-assessment alone, and three students relied only on self-assessment and their standardized scores, and so would presumably have been equally well-served by the DSP approach. Others, though, combined their self-assessment with information from other sources, including their standardized scores, being asked to participate in the placement process, and their individual meetings with a writing consultant. We presume the eleven students who identified self-assessment as a factor, whether alone or in combination with other influences, see themselves as part of the process, as taking part in the community responsibility of placement.

We do have to consider the four students who did not use self-assessment in making their placement decision, almost one-third of our small sample. Did they rely entirely on one factor, or did they get multiple opinions? Did they ask friends or parents? We went to our focus group with these question and learned that while students often use more than one perspective in

making well-informed choices about placement, sometimes circumstances beyond our control have a major effect on placement choices. Two of the students in the RWC-Lab focus groups listed several factors influencing their placement decision, and explained that they had weighed their options carefully based on written information from the course descriptions and freshman handbook and on verbal conversations with a writing consultant and other students who had taken each course. The other student explained that she selected an RWC class after meeting with a writing adviser, but by the time she registered, her first choice was full. She then went to her faculty adviser, who happened to be the director of the writing program, and asked for advice. After this meeting, she changed her mind and chose an RWC-Lab class that fit her schedule.

Overall, the assessment results for students' making choices suggest that we have met our goal to offer both choices and adequate information to students whose standardized scores suggest they might benefit from a highly supported writing experience. Most of these students feel capable of assessing their own writing, although most also consider the information we provide in making placement decisions. Nevertheless, a few students do not identify self-assessment as a factor in their decision, so we must be willing to provide outside information to help them make a choice.

Effectiveness of Choice. To assess student satisfaction with writing courses, we asked: "Do you feel that you were in the appropriate course? Why or why not?" We provide their responses in Table 2.

Response	RWC n=61	RWC-Lab n=14
Yes	49	12
No	10	1
Unresponsive	2	1
No Response	2	2

Table 2: Responses to: "Do you feel that you were in the appropriate course?"³

While most RWC-Lab students indicated they had taken the appropriate course, a large number of RWC students responded negatively. As it turned out, although we meant for "appropriate" to refer to level, not all students received the question as we intended. The majority of students, whose scores qualified them neither for exemption nor for participation in placement, were offered choices around course topic, not level, and they interpreted the question to fit their experiences. The forty-nine affirmative responses provided a broad range of reasons students thought the course was appropriate (see Appendix 4 for full results). About an equal number of the comments referred to the level of the course (17) and to the interest of the class topic

(19). A number of RWC students who thought they had taken the appropriate course commented on their enjoyment of the class, the writing, the readings, and the instructor.

Of the ten RWC students who thought the course was not appropriate, one noted that RWC-Lab would have better served his or her needs: "I thought I should be in the [RWC-Lab] because I don't think that my writing is that strong and I would have liked the extra help." This student's demographic information showed that he or she had not participated in the placement process because standardized scores did not fall beneath our cut-off. We responded by inviting all students with concerns about writing—not only those who scored below the national average on standardized tests—to participate in the placement process. On the other hand, four of the "no" responses wrote that the course was below their writing level, which raised some interesting questions for us. We had begun the assessment project to investigate whether or not students were freely choosing between RWC and RWC-Lab, and the extent to which the chosen course fulfilled their writing needs. We focused on students whose writing was furthest from meeting the primary writing requirement upon matriculation. Although we were pleased with the preliminary results on these students, we now faced another group of students—our most proficient writers—to whom we had offered no choice. What choice could we offer them?

We brought this question to our RWC focus group. We asked, "If you could have taken an alternative to [RWC], would you have, and what would that class have looked like?" The RWC focus group included a student who felt she should have been exempted from the course and been allowed to take a course of her own choosing instead of RWC. Because the focus groups, like the surveys, were anonymous, we could not verify whether this particular student had applied, or was even eligible to apply, for exemption. She said that she enjoyed the class but did not feel, even in retrospect, that she had needed it. Interestingly, one other member of the focus group, though generally satisfied with the course, responded to his peer by saying that he, too, may not have needed the course: "I think maybe for science and engineering students, they should have to take it. But for, uh, I'm a history major and I do a lot of writing, and I don't really need a class on writing." These results suggest that students want more choices, perhaps in part because our college curriculum encourages them to own their education, perhaps because freedom is contagious and easily transfers from one context to the next. For example, while the RWC focus group students accepted the usefulness of peer review as a concept, one suggested—and the others agreed—that peer review would be more meaningful if they could choose rather than

be required to do it, and if they could choose their own peer reviewer. This confirms that we need to rethink choice (or lack of choice) at the site of our strongest writers.

Critiquing "Well Informed." While we actively educated those in the placement process about RWC and RWC-Lab, we informed those not invited to participate through a web site and with hard copy information distributed to all freshmen. Based on our assessment results, we feel confident that those who participate in placement are well informed; however, several RWC students not involved in placement demonstrated a lack of understanding about the RWC-Lab course. The lack of understanding manifested itself in two forms: lack of information about the course (as one student put it, "to this day I still don't know the difference between [RWC] and [RWC-Lab]"), and misinformation (for example, thinking the course provides a more advanced writing experience). These results raise some important questions for us: Do students not involved in placement need to know about RWC-Lab (after all, it is unlikely to suit their writing needs)? Is our assumption that it will not suit their needs too simplistic? Could there be an unquantifiable effect of RWC students' misinformation on RWC-Lab students' perception of their course and themselves as writers? Are we the source of the misinformation? Ultimately, we determined to review publications originating from our office and across the college to learn how effectively we communicate the difference between RWC and RWC-Lab and inform students about the placement process.

Program Material Review. When the current director of the writing program arrived at UR, the college offered writing classes that differed in terms of both topic and level. In general, after being placed at a particular level, students typically chose a writing course based on its meeting time. Course descriptions were available in the English department office and on a separate web site, but such information did not easily reach incoming freshmen. By Fall 2000, detailed and linked course descriptions were in place, and the college's course description catalogue directed students to the web site to get details about the unique content offered in each section of RWC and RWC-Lab. Course descriptions were also available at the Academic Open House, during which students register for classes, and were given to each faculty adviser in hard copy format. We have maintained this level of information availability, and the *Official Bulletin: Undergraduate Studies 2001–2003* (published every other year) now includes the statement: "We encourage students to choose sections that interest them, whether this interest grows out of a desire to learn more about a favorite subject or to try something new."

We have given much thought to the language that would best describe RWC-Lab, and consequently, the language has evolved with our increasing awareness of students' responses to it. We discovered that our use of terms like "enhanced" and "intensive" to describe the course conflicted with the terms used in some high schools to describe enrichment courses. We now describe RWC-Lab as "an extended version of RWC, which offers more support in helping students make the transition to college-level writing." We discovered that our concern about inadvertently stigmatizing RWC-Lab and its students led to confusion about the course.

We have also revised the writing program orientation form for incoming freshmen, again in response to our assessment results and to anecdotal evidence about confusion. We have changed "You need to submit a portfolio" (2000) to "Please submit a portfolio", perhaps an insignificant difference to most students given the inherent power structure of the university. However, a small number of students do not respond at all, and more students have contacted us since this change to ask if they may choose not to participate in the placement process. We always answer "yes," since the choice is in fact theirs, adding only that we hope they will make well-informed choices and that participating in the placement process will provide them with information. More significant, the new form communicates a great deal of information about both the courses and the placement process and refers students to sources of additional information; the old form, developed in the first year of our new program, requested information about high school writing and course performance while offering little. With respect to language about choice, the old form stated that experienced composition instructors would review students' portfolios and on-site writing tests "before meeting with you to discuss your placement into a first-year writing course." The new form states instead that the experienced composition instructors "will provide you with feedback that will help you choose the most appropriate course for you." In addition, while the old contact was the orientation office, the new one is the writing program office. This means that students with questions get answers from the people most knowledgeable about the program.

Reaching beyond Our Own Institutional Context. Our writing program's move to informed self-placement (ISP) resulted in significant changes around the college, including changes in language for numerous documents published by the registrar's office and the College Center for Academic Support. It also entailed discussions with admissions staff, academic support advisers and faculty advisers. In our case, ISP has been warmly received by administration, because it reflects our institutional commitment to helping students make informed choices. UR does not have distributional requirements, and we ask our students to wait until the latter part of their soph-

omore year to declare their majors. Ultimately, this requires students to grapple with tremendous freedom in making course selections, selections we inform them about, but take great pains to avoid directing them into. We recognize, however, that UR is unusual in this respect. With respect to other institutions, we should consider how ISP or DSP might be best presented to administrators. We assume that institutions with general education course requirements believe that institutional expertise, rather than the student, should direct student placement. In fact, Royer and Gilles offer WPAs in these institutional contexts excellent arguments for DSP, citing increased efficiency and decreased resource commitments as major factors for gaining administrative support.

Because ISP is more resource-intensive, different arguments must be made. In our case, we implemented ISP quite easily, as we were in the process of building a new program in a way that would better support the college's curricular goals. We grew from a single placement reader who read a brief writing sample from all incoming freshmen (approximately 950) to a team of eight graduate students who collectively read the writing of a much smaller group of freshmen (approximately 150-200) and advise a subset of these writers (approximately 100). This change has involved reallocating existing resources, as well as identifying new ones. (Please feel free to contact our program for more detail.)

There may well be several challenges for WPAs at other institutions who want to switch from traditional placement to ISP. In large institutions, it may be difficult to find the necessary resources to manage our placement model, and we understand that Royer and Gilles may offer the best option in such contexts. On the other hand, a version of Nicolay's classroom-based placement model that builds in well-informed choice for students might be both possible and effective in such contexts. Such a placement system reduces time and resource issues to a writing center staffing problem, which should ideally be addressed for these students in any case. Institutions that offer summer programs for incoming freshmen with weaker writing skills might adopt our summer ECO model of ISP, in which students make placement decisions after meeting with their writing instructor. Alternatively, large institutions might (following Cornell), redistribute resources to provide increased attention to those at risk through an ISP model and depend on DSP to reach the remaining population. For institutions in which incoming freshmen register online over the summer, online reading and advising may offer the flexibility as well as a student-friendly venue for ISP.

PROGRAM RESPONSES TO ASSESSMENT RESULTS

We have learned that just as miscommunication is a natural part of communication, making mistakes is a natural part of making choices. Given this, a reasonable argument against choice-based placement might be that students will make the wrong choice. We would contend, however, that mistakes will happen in any placement process; just as it is true that when we place students without student input (or even with it) we will make mistakes, we recognize that students will also make mistakes. Recognizing the potential for wrong choices, we have increased our efforts to continue to provide students with information, even after a choice has been made. For example, we now send a letter to all students who do not successfully complete the primary writing requirement in their first year—whether they have participated in the placement process or not—and invite them to come and speak to us if they would like to learn more about RWC-Lab. A number of students have now completed RWC-Lab after having failed to complete RWC one or more times.

Although we began by assessing how a subset of students selected their writing courses, we ended up finding that our strongest writers might also benefit from increased choice. Initially, our exemption process invited students with high scores (verbal SAT of 750 or over, writing AP of 4 or 5) to submit a portfolio of writing for assessment by the placement coordinator, but also allowed students with any score to apply. We then reviewed portfolios with respect to our exemption criteria and informed students about our decision. Since learning that some students in RWC feel underchallenged, we have significantly changed this process. We now extend an invitation to apply for exemption to all students regardless of scores. Our petition for exemption form now reads: “If you think that you are a proficient college writer—as opposed to an outstanding high school writer—we invite you to apply for exemption.” In addition, we now provide a new alternative to exemption and RWC or RWC-Lab: We allow students whose writing is close to exemption level to substitute a course with significant writing for RWC. The success of this response to student input is still an open question, since this year’s freshmen are the first to be offered this choice.

Our results have also affected our instructor-training process. Each semester we ask instructors to identify students in their classes who should have been exempted from the primary writing requirement. Instructors rarely identify such students, yet our assessment results tell us that some students in RWC feel underchallenged. This suggests that instructor and student perceptions about students’ levels of writing do not always match. Clearly, instructors need to be aware of this when planning syllabi and classroom activities. The Director of the writing program has written to all

instructors to urge them to remember the needs of the strongest writers. In addition to offering specific strategies for engaging more advanced students, she even encourages instructors to go as far as creating quasi-independent studies if that is what is needed for the students to feel challenged. We also invite students who do not feel adequately challenged to come to our office and create individualized strategies for maximizing their learning. Interestingly, we have encouraged this practice for years among students who find the course too challenging. Whether students need extra support or extra challenges, ultimately we must, as Ann Berthoff suggests, “begin where they are.” Our assessment has helped us to clarify our philosophy and to understand the contexts within which students at all levels are making choices.

CONCLUSIONS

The question that initiated our assessment was whether or not we could responsibly leave writing placement decisions to students, recognizing first, that students might lack the necessary information to make this choice or might simply make a mistake and also that giving a choice, particularly within the complex rhetorical context of a college, does not necessarily mean that the choice is received as intended. So far, our assessment results show that we provide a great deal of information to the students in our target group, and that they receive this information and do feel free to choose between RWC and RWC-Lab. Results also indicate that most students judge their choices to be worthwhile and the resulting course experience to be appropriate to their level. Moreover, students seem to be making their own choices and not ours, as evidenced by students choosing courses that differ from those suggested by the exam or portfolio reader’s assessment.

The success of ISP along with some of our communication failures lead us to feel strongly that informing students of their writing choices should involve more than mass communication of college standards of writing. Even one-on-one dialogue is most productive when it starts with the student’s writing and writing experiences rather than with abstract measures such as standardized test scores or generalities about college expectations. Individual conversations with a writing consultant lead to well-informed students and a well-informed program staff. We have found that we can easily manage the resources both to read student writing and to create a space for dialogue as long as we use outside criteria (such as standardized test scores) in combination with self-selection to identify a manageable group of students.

The unexpected result of our assessment is that we need to be more aware of the interaction between information and choice. We have learned that choices will be based on whatever information students have, right or

wrong. If ISP is to be successful—that is, if students are ultimately to make their own choices based on accurate information—then our energy must go toward ensuring that the choices we offer are received as intended, and that information is readily available and consistent across the college. We recognize, however, that history works against us at this point, and that out-of-date information is disseminated regularly by many (with no ill intent). Previous notions of more traditional placement might be accepted and promoted by upperclassmen and faculty who are unaware of recent changes. Again, to address this, we must communicate as clearly and consistently as possible and be ever watchful for miscommunications. Over time—four years time, we expect—the freedom to choose a writing course will likely seem a matter of fact.

Ultimately, our assessment results indicate that students embrace the principle underlying ISP. Freedom and choice are contagious. Students outside our target group now rightly ask about their choices. Our assessment results have led us, most notably, to extend choices to our entire incoming class while committing to review the writing of the preselected group and any other student who chooses to join that group. Any incoming student can now choose to take RWC or RWC-Lab, or even to apply for exemption. Ultimately, our assessment results have helped us clarify our thinking around issues of student choice and information, and have led us to apply our principles more effectively to all students in our writing program.

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Appendix 1. Guidelines for Advising Students on Writing Placement

1. Your job as an adviser (as opposed to a teacher) is to inform students about their writing skills and about their options for RWC, as well as to suggest the best option for them.
 - Your discussion of their writing should focus first on argument (how well they develop and substantiate an analytical thesis), second on fluency issues (usage and style).
 - Your discussion of course options should make the following clear:
 - a. RWC and RWC-Lab both satisfy the primary writing requirement if the student receives a C or better.
 - b. If the student receives less than a C in RWC, the student must retake the course. However, if the student has worked hard in RWC-Lab but does not receive a C or better, he or she will have the option of completing the requirement by taking an extension of the course in the spring semester. This will be a noncredit workshop in which the student can continue to improve writing skills, to a level which meets the primary writing requirement by the end of the spring semester.
 - c. RWC-Lab has a smaller number of students per teacher (10 to 1 instead of 15 to 1).
 - d. RWC-Lab is held in a computer classroom and has one extra class session per week to afford greater support during the writing process.
2. Please familiarize students with the general course description and the unique section descriptions for RWC and RWC-Lab. It would be best if you guided them through the writing program pages, which may be found at www.rochester.edu/College/Writing.
3. Create an opportunity for students to express their feelings and observations about their writing and about which course option would be best.
4. Listen to the student's choice and help it work for the student. If, for example, a borderline student wants to take RWC, respect that decision and suggest the writing center as a support for that student.

Appendix 2. Writing Assessment Survey

1. Which writing class did you take? (Please circle one)
 RWC RWC-LAB
2. During what term did you take writing?
 Fall 2000 Spring 2001 Fall 2001
3. Were you given a choice between RWC and RWC-Lab?
 Yes No
4. If you answered yes to question 3, please identify the factors that helped you make your choice. Circle all that apply:
 - a. Your assessment of yourself as a writer
 - b. Feedback from your high school instructor
 - c. Your standardized test scores (SAT, ACT, TOEFL, etc.)
 - d. Being asked to participate in UR's placement process
 - e. Advice from the writing consultant you met with at the college writing center
 - f. Advice from your faculty adviser
 - g. Other (please be specific)
5. Did you feel you could choose freely?
 Yes No
6. If you answered yes to question 5, please skip to question 7. If you answer no to question 5, please explain what prevented you from choosing freely.
7. Do you feel that you were in the appropriate course? Why or why not?
8. What aspect(s) of your writing were you most worried about when you started RWC?
9. Did the class adequately address those concerns? How?
10. How successfully did your writing class focus on satisfying your needs regarding the following skills:

	NOT AT ALL			SUCCESSFULLY	
Reading critically	1	2	3	4	5
Thinking creatively	1	2	3	4	5
Developing a topic	1	2	3	4	5
Formulating a thesis	1	2	3	4	5
Composing an argument	1	2	3	4	5
Engaging counterargument	1	2	3	4	5
Organizing ideas	1	2	3	4	5
Drafting	1	2	3	4	5
Peer reviewing	1	2	3	4	5
Assessing and improving your own work	1	2	3	4	5
Revising	1	2	3	4	5
Editing for correctness and style	1	2	3	4	5
Writing to audience	1	2	3	4	5
Researching	1	2	3	4	5
Using sources effectively	1	2	3	4	5

11. Were there skills you encountered in your writing class that you felt you didn't need work on? If so, please describe fully.
12. What questions or concerns about writing did you have, if any, that weren't adequately addressed in your RWC class? Please describe fully.
13. How helpful do you think what you have learned will be to you in the future?
NOT AT ALL 1 2 3 4 5 VERY HELPFUL
14. Where do you expect to use the writing skills developed in RWC? Please circle as many as applicable.
A. In courses in your major
B. In courses in your cluster
C. In courses outside your major
D. In future research projects (including senior thesis)
E. In applications (i.e., for internships, graduate or medical school, scholarships, etc.)
F. In your profession
15. How often did you use the College writing center at Rush Rhees during your writing class?
Never 1-2 times 3-5 times 6-10 times more than 10 times
16. How often have you used the writing center since the writing class?
Never 1-2 times 3-5 times 6-10 times more than 10 times
17. For what purpose(s) have you used the writing center? Please circle all that apply.
a. Class assignments
b. Applications (i.e., scholarships, internships, jobs, etc.)
c. Skill building
d. Other (please be specific)
18. How often did you use the Writing Fellows at Lovejoy during your writing class?
Never 1-2 times 3-5 times 6-10 times more than 10 times
19. How often have you used the Writing Fellows since the writing class?
Never 1-2 times 3-5 times 6-10 times more than 10 times
20. For what purpose(s) have you used the Fellows? Please circle all that apply.
a. Class assignments
b. Applications (i.e., scholarships, internships, jobs, etc.)
c. Skill building
d. Other (please be specific)
- 21a. Have you taken one or more classes that involved writing since RWC? If so, please list these classes.

21b. How useful were skills developed in RWC to writing assignments in future classes?

	NOT AT ALL		VERY HELPFUL		
Reading critically	1	2	3	4	5
Thinking creatively	1	2	3	4	5
Developing a topic	1	2	3	4	5
Formulating a thesis	1	2	3	4	5
Composing an argument	1	2	3	4	5
Engaging counterargument	1	2	3	4	5
Organizing ideas	1	2	3	4	5
Drafting	1	2	3	4	5
Peer reviewing	1	2	3	4	5
Assessing and improving your own work	1	2	3	4	5
Revising	1	2	3	4	5
Editing for correctness and style	1	2	3	4	5
Writing to audience	1	2	3	4	5
Researching	1	2	3	4	5
Using sources effectively	1	2	3	4	5

22. How often did you work in a computer classroom in your RWC class?

Usually Occasionally Never

23. If you did work in a computer classroom, please answer questions 23 and 24. If you never worked in a computer classroom, please skip to question 25. Describe the advantages and disadvantages of working in a computer classroom.

24. How useful was it to work in a computer classroom?

NOT AT ALL 1 2 3 4 5 VERY HELPFUL

25. How often did you do in-class writing?

LESS THAN ONCE PER MONTH LESS THAN ONCE PER MONTH ONCE PER CLASS MORE THAN ONCE PER WEEK

26. How useful was in-class writing in developing your writing skills.

NOT AT ALL 1 2 3 4 5 VERY HELPFUL

27. How often did you have one-on-one meetings with your instructor outside the classroom?

Never 1-2 times 3-5 times 6-10 times more than 10 times

28. Please comment on the usefulness of one-on-one meetings with your instructor in developing your writing skills.

Appendix 3. Focus Group Questions

1. What did you do in RWC that was most helpful to you as a writer?
2. We'd like to know a bit about your writing before you took RWC.
 - Were there situations before you came to UR in which you were required to revise your writing based on feedback? (If yes, who gave you the feedback? In what ways did you find it useful or not useful?)
 - Were there situations before you came to UR in which you voluntarily sought out feedback from others to improve your writing? (If yes, who gave you the feedback? In what ways did you find it useful or not useful?)
3. The survey results showed that people had different opinions about peer review and self-assessment in the classroom.
 - Can you give us your opinion about peer review? How much peer review did you do in your class? What did you find was useful or not useful? Did you wish there were more or less or a different kind? Why?
 - Can you give us your opinion about self-assessment? How much self-assessment did you do in your class? Did you find it useful? Did you wish there were more or less or a different kind? Why? Have you done self-assessment since the course?
4. We got mixed results about how useful you think peer review and self-assessment will be to you in the future, so we'd like to learn more about this.
 - Have you shown your work to your peers since RWC? In what contexts? Why or why not?
5. So, you get instructor feedback, peer feedback and self-assessment. How do they differ? How are they the same? Which do you rely on most when/if you're revising your writing? Why?

For RWC Only

6. If you could have taken an alternative to RWC, would you have? What would that class look like?

For RWC-LAB Only

6. Many of you said you felt you had a choice about whether to take RWC or RWC-Lab, although a few of you said you didn't. We want to understand the process you went through in making your decision about which class to take. Can you tell us how you decided?

Appendix 4. Full Results for 49 Responses by RWC Students Regarding Appropriateness of Course.

Response	# of Respondents (n=45)
Student Liked Topic	19
Course Was at Appropriate Level	17
Generally Positive Comment	7
Course Provided Enough Support	4
Student Pleased with Performance	3
Student Didn't Know there was a Different Level	2
The Course was Required	1
Student's Writing Improved	1
Unresponsive	1

The coding of responses was done by the two researchers and an undergraduate student assistant at the writing program.

¹ This extension is modeled after the University of Minnesota's Program in Composition and Communication under the direction of Chris Anson (1990).

² This may result from a misunderstanding of the question, since about 15 per cent of the freshman class takes part in placement, and only 5 per cent– 7per cent take RWC-Lab. Students may not have associated the on-site test and portfolio request with "the placement process".

³ The Unresponsive category includes students whose responses did not address the question and students who provided contradictory information; i.e., by saying "yes, but I felt I should have been exempt."

