

Self-Placement at a Distance: Challenge and Opportunities

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Directed Self-Placement (DSP)—the practice of guiding students through a process of assessing their abilities in relation to the demands of first-year writing courses—is still an uncommon practice in higher education, but the idea of consulting students in the placement process, as opposed to using only holistically scored essays or portfolios, has permanently entered the conversation among WPAs. Since Royer and Gilles's initial article in 1998, research at several schools suggests that DSP is not only as good as previous placement regimes; it surpasses them, enabling students to succeed at comparable or higher rates and creating basic writing classrooms that students want to attend (Royer and Gilles *Principles*). At the same time, WPAs have felt motivated (or pressured) to take advantage of technological advances—from weblogs, to distance learning, to multiple literacies—as evidenced in several recent articles in *WPA: Writing Program Administration*. It is no surprise, then, that WPAs are beginning to create online versions of DSP due to the possible advantages offered by technology. However, as those who have tried to translate face-to-face courses into distance learning courses know, the medium powerfully affects the pedagogy (Brady). Although several schools have put DSP online, there appear to be no publications regarding their efforts. This article establishes a protocol for putting DSP online, based upon core principles of face-to-face DSP, and then presents data to evaluate the success of the placement program when those principles were implemented.

DEVELOPING PRINCIPLES OF DSP

In the late 1990s, Daniel J. Royer and Roger Gilles at Grand Valley State University developed their unorthodox alternative to test-based placement

processes. They recognized that (1) placement test scores were often poor indicators of how students actually do in their first writing class, (2) eighteen-year-old students deserved to have a say in their placement, and (3) students would be more motivated in their basic writing courses if they actually wanted to be there (Royer and Gilles "Attitude"). To this end, Royer and Gilles developed and evaluated a series of statements used to create profiles that fit a basic writing student or a "regular" first-year writing student. For example, the basic writer profile included statements like "Generally, I don't read when I don't have to" and "In high school, I did not do much writing," whereas the "regular" profile included statements like "My high school GPA placed me in the top third of my class" and "I consider myself a good reader and writer" (Blakesley, Harvey, and Reynolds 223–24). Students then created their own profiles and compared them with the descriptions for the different courses, reflected on their own motivations, and, if desired, had a conversation with a placement counselor before placing themselves in their first-year writing course. Some WPAs added another step: Students would write an essay in response to a brief reading and reflect on how they did (see Pinter and Sims). Finally, Bedore and Rossen-Knill created opportunities for dialogue beyond the initial DSP experience, for example after students had written a first-day diagnostic essay. Principles embedded in this quick narrative reveal five core principles behind DSP: (1) students evaluate their own abilities in relation to criteria provided by the school, (2) students receive information that contextualizes their self-assessment in relation to writing program requirements, (3) students perform actual reading and writing tasks from the first-year writing curriculum and reflect on their performance, (4) students enter into dialogue with those knowledgeable about first-year writing requirements, and (5) students are granted autonomy in the decision-making process.

PUTTING THE DSP PRINCIPLES ONLINE

The site of the online DSP trial was a mid-sized Catholic university within a large metropolitan area in the Northeast (hereafter called Northeastern Catholic University). With an average verbal SAT score of about 555, its fairly diverse student body (about 30% minority) is neither academically very weak nor very strong. As the director of English Department's Basic Skills Program for the past ten years, I have coordinated its methods for placing students into first-year writing classes. The English Department had long used a writing sample, holistically scored by its own faculty, to place its students into College English I classes or a variety of "basic skills" classes. More recently the basic skills choice was changed to a "jumbo" course, a

six-credit version of College English I, or College English Intensive, which gave students twice as much contact with the teacher and required more tutoring at the Writing Center. (One section was an ESL intensive course, but both jumbo courses will be referred to as College English Intensive for short.) Over a period of three years, the English Department first tried Accuplacer and then, because of policy differences with Accuplacer over offsite testing and because DSP seemed a proven idea by 2005, the Department piloted directed self-placement.

The University's position as a technology leader initially made it feasible to put DSP online. First, incoming students could be expected to feel comfortable working online. Second, I created the survey using software developed a few years ago by a University math professor, using the five DSP principles mentioned above. Based on principle #1, students responded to a battery of statements about frequency of reading of books, magazines and newspapers, about confidence in writing (out of which a composite confidence measure was created), about the number and types of essays written in high school, and about their verbal SAT score. (For the complete survey, go to <http://asset.tlhc.shu.edu/servlets/asset.AssetSurvey?surveyid=1898> and use any login.) Then students read various behavior/attitude profiles (depending on whether they had English as a first language or not) and chose the one that best matched their own self-assessment. Based on principle #3, students read a moderately challenging passage from the current anthology in use at Northeastern Catholic University—Robert Warshaw's "The Gangster as Tragic Hero"—and then responded to its central argument by writing a brief essay. After students wrote, they rated their confidence in being able to identify the central idea in the passage, to keep a consistent focus in their essay, to support their own idea with evidence from the text and their experience, and to write prose that was relatively free of errors. Based on principle #2, students clicked on a webpage that outlined the differences among the various courses they could select, including a sample "B" essay. Finally, they chose a first-year writing course. In all, I expected students would take about an hour to complete the survey.

Perhaps the biggest potential drawback to online DSP was the lack of a face-to-face conversation, thus making it difficult to abide by principle #4. One-on-one conversations should be part of the process, especially for less proficient readers; otherwise underlying concerns or questions might never be considered. When students came to Grand Valley State University for the DSP presentation, they were in a new environment, one that "told" them to take their decision seriously; and the person who could answer their possible question was not a scary anonymous professor but a friendly man who probably did not look so different from a high school teacher.

Without this environment, I decided to require a phone conversation when the students' choice did not match mine. This was tricky to do because as an authority figure I could be perceived as the omniscient professor—or as the father figure to be rebelled against. The phone conversation could unwittingly violate principle #5. Thus I had to endeavor both to be completely honest about what I saw as potential problems and to affirm that the students were ultimately in charge of the decision.

As for the administration of the DSP survey itself: 223 students were randomly selected from the incoming freshman class, a clear majority of whom had SAT scores below the 550 cutoff that the Department still uses to automatically place students into the regular College English I class. Once they finished the survey, I had access to it and read their responses, including their essay, which I scored on a 1–6 scale. If my reading of their survey corresponded with their reading, I simply placed them in their chosen course. However, if I thought their profile did not match the course profile, I wrote a partially personalized e-mail (see Appendix A), providing some feedback, explaining my thinking, and requesting a phone conversation. The conversation might begin with my asking the student if she had any thoughts about the e-mail she received from me. The response might be anything from “I didn’t think I had to take the survey that seriously” to “I think you’re right; I’m not that strong in English” to “I just think I’m ready for College English.” If her essay was particularly weak and she had admitted spending little time on it, I might request she write the essay over again. If she had spent a good amount of time and tried her best, and she received high grades in her high school English classes, I might ask her about the kinds of papers she wrote. I might ask her to think about how she works under conditions when she does not quickly succeed. In a typical conversation, a decision emerges in a way that seems neither coerced nor permissive. However, I may have to remind her that, no matter what I say, ultimately she makes the decision since she knows herself better than I do. Sometimes I encourage the student to go back to the website to look over the course description and sample B paper, to talk with her parents and e-mail me in the next day or two. Often, in such cases, it’s clear that the student is taking the placement process quite seriously. (See Appendix B for two recreated composite phone conversations.) At the end of the process of placing all the students, there were 220 students in the final database, that is, 220 students who successfully placed themselves. (The other three students did not enroll in a course.) The 220 students—109 female, 111 male—were scattered through the English sections so there is little likelihood that different teachers’ grading methods are responsible for differences between DSP students’ and other students’ scores.

Of course, the placement process took time. However, it did not take significantly more time or money than the traditional forms of testing. Placement took about 14 minutes per student, including reading the survey, making phone calls, keeping a database, and actually placing the students. This year the cost of placing the entire freshman class of about 1200 students (minus about 600 placed through verbal SAT scores of 550 and higher) will be \$4,500, divided among myself and two senior writing faculty who agreed to share the work. The Accuplacer regime cost about the same, but DSP gives the student far more information about the writing program and invites students into a different relationship with their educational choices.

ASSESSMENT METHODOLOGY: DEFINING AND MEASURING SUCCESS

How should students' success be measured in the courses in which they have placed themselves? DSP studies initially began by comparing the academic performance of students under new (DSP) and old placement systems, for example student GPA and pass rates (see Blakesley, and see Royer and Gilles "An Attitude"). Then came measures that included students' perception about whether they had chosen the right course for themselves (Bedore and Rossen-Knill; Blakesley) and students' perception that the course that they took was appropriate for them, addressed their concerns and skill needs, and would be useful in future classes (Bedore and Rossen-Knill).

Given the foundational role of self-efficacy in the development of DSP, it made sense to add other questions about students' perceptions: How much value do they ascribe to being able to choose for themselves, how motivated were they by being able to choose, how accurate a picture did they receive during the DSP process of the course that they eventually enrolled in? Since a premise of DSP is that students should be in charge of the decisions they make, it would be useful to determine the factors students use to decide their placement and compare those factors with the traditional cognitive factors (like verbal SAT or holistically scored essay) used in placement. Finally, since faculty belief in the process is important, there should be measures of the faculty's perspective on students' ability and motivation as well.

At mid-term, I administered an online survey to all writing faculty, asking them to evaluate the motivation, capacity, and projected course grade for each DSP student, as well as asking them to write their own comments. I received responses for 159 of the students. (See Appendix C for survey questions.) At the end of the term, I administered a survey to all directed self-placement students that asked both scaled-choice and open-ended

questions about how they felt about placing themselves and what factors were most important in their decision. In order to make it anonymous, I gave them a choice to include their name so that I could link the results with the other survey results. Seventy-five students gave their name, thus limiting the number of cases. (See Appendix D for survey questions.)

To collect other necessary data, I kept a database of all students who used DSP, including their SAT scores, initial placement, record of possible conversation, and final placement decision; I downloaded the DSP survey results from the summer; and I obtained all students' final course grades. I joined all the datasets together with the approval of our institution's IRB. Unfortunately, given the relatively low response rate for the open-ended questions, I was not able to do much useful qualitative analysis.

Online placement fosters the collection of all the data that WPAs normally wish to collect, both for program development and for original research, especially into how and why DSP works. Given recent calls to balance the qualitative and theoretical agenda in composition with a move back to quantitative research¹, online DSP provides an excellent opportunity to model a quantitative approach.

HOW STUDENTS PLACED THEMSELVES USING DSP

Of 220 students who placed themselves, 36 (or 16.4%) originally placed themselves into a College English Intensive course and 181 (83.6%) placed themselves into College English I. (Of the three students for whom there was no useful placement for this study, one belonged in a more intensive ESL course, and the other two appeared to enroll in a course without officially being placed.) I talked with 12 students who placed themselves in College English Intensive who I believed could succeed in College English I; as a result, 6 changed their placement. Of the 181 students who placed themselves into College English I originally, I communicated with 81 students (37.3%) whose placement I had some reason to challenge. As a result, an additional 22 students placed themselves in College English Intensive, to bring the total percentage of College English Intensive placements to 24%.²

The best way to measure the effect of DSP on placement is to look at the students who were not in the pilot program and were therefore placed using Accuplacer. Whereas 24% of DSP students placed themselves in College English Intensive, 32% were assigned using Accuplacer. This is a drop of 25%, slightly less than what Royer and Gilles experienced at Grand Valley State University ("Orientation" 61) when they shifted from a traditional placement system to DSP.

COMPARING THE ACADEMIC SUCCESS OF STUDENTS PLACED BY DSP AND BY TESTING

There were no differences in performance between all College English I students (students placed by DSP *and* those placed by testing) and College English I students placed by DSP alone, and no differences between all College English Intensive students and College English Intensive students placed by DSP alone. In particular, self-placement did not result in a larger number of students who failed or did poorly. These results are somewhat surprising given that DSP College English I students had an average verbal SAT score 53 points lower than all College English I students. On the other hand, DSP College English Intensive students had an average SAT score 23 points *higher* than all College English Intensive students.

Among students marginally qualified for College English I, confidence may play a more important role in their success than sheer verbal ability or experience. This finding arises from a comparison of three cohorts—College English Intensive students, Questioned College English I students, and Unquestioned College English I students. (“Questioned College English I” refers to those students whom I contacted because I questioned whether their placement was a good one.) As a group, the Questioned College English I students seem to have an *ability* profile that more closely matches the College English Intensive student (i.e., relatively low) but a *confidence* profile that more closely matches the College English I student (i.e. relatively high). On the one hand, this should hardly be surprising, since I tended to question those students with low survey essay scores and, to a lesser extent, low verbal SAT scores. Nevertheless, a close analysis suggests that confidence may be what makes the Questioned College English I student succeed on the level of “regular” College English I student despite significantly lower ability and/or less writing experience. See Table 1 for the relevant data and see Figures 1 and 2 to compare the relative effect of confidence and ability/experience across cohorts. The extended quantitative analysis that leads to this conclusion may be found at the addendum website (available at http://pirate.shu.edu/~jonesedm/addendum_to_wpa_article.htm; use any login).

Table 1. Comparison of Verbal Ability/Experience/Confidence/Course Grade by Cohort for DSP Students (*n* for College English Intensive = 46, *n* for Unquestioned College English Is = 104, *n* for Questioned College English Is = 45)

	Cohort			Significance*
	Unquestioned College English I Students	Questioned College English I Students	College English Intensive Course Students	
Course Grade	2.95 ^c	2.87	2.56 ^a	.043
Survey Essay Score	4.13 ^{b,c}	2.90 ^{a,c}	2.51 ^{a,b}	<.001
Verbal SAT Score	537 ^{b,c}	504 ^{a,c}	480 ^{a,b}	<.001
HS Composite Confidence Score	11.97 ^c	11.47 ^c	10.53 ^{a,b}	<.001
Warshow Composite Self-Assessment Score	16.02 ^{b,c}	14.55 ^a	13.57 ^a	<.001
Number of Books Read	4.45 ^{b,c}	3.71 ^a	3.82 ^a	.001
Number of Papers Written	7.39 ^{b,c}	6.22 ^a	6.09 ^a	.002

Superscripts designate the cohort(s) from which the given datum differs significantly, based upon Bonferroni or Dunnett's T3 statistical tests: a = Unquestioned College English I, b = Questioned College English I, c = College English Intensive course. * Significance refers to *p* value for the ANOVA, except in cases where variances were not homogeneous. In these cases, the Brown-Forsythe statistic is given.

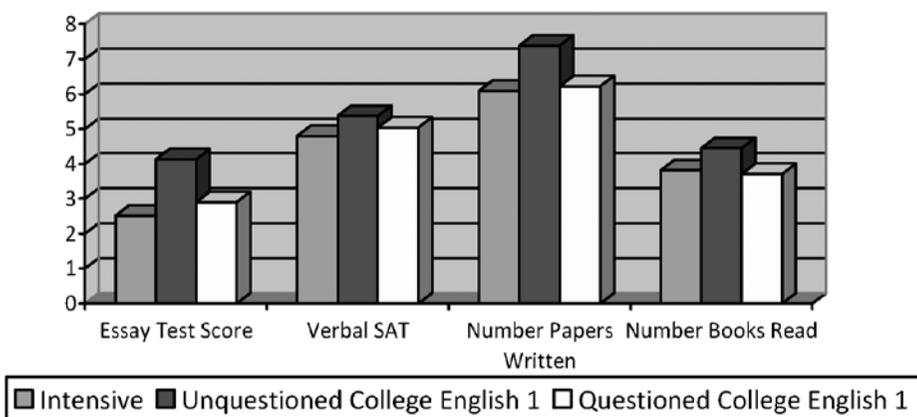


Fig. 1. Comparison of Verbal Ability/Experience by Cohort (*n* for Intensive Course = 46, *n* for Unquestioned College English 1s = 104, *n* for Questioned College English 1s = 45)

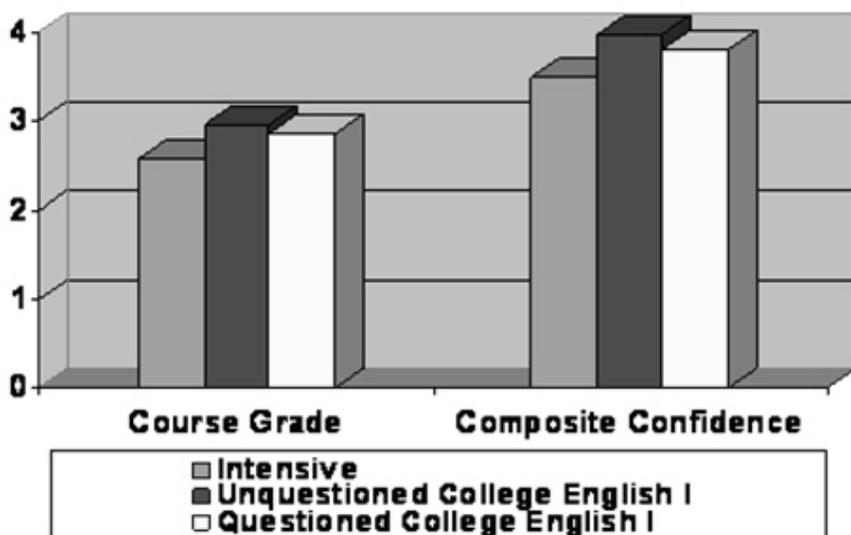


Fig. 2. Comparison of Confidence Levels and Course Grade by Cohort

Many faculty members at the University and elsewhere have voiced the assumption that less able students often do not know how weak they are, but in fact, students with below-mean SAT scores had slightly (though insignificantly) higher correlations between my scoring of their essay and their own self-rating of their essay ($r = .409, p < .001$) as compared with

students with above-mean verbal SAT scores ($r = .374, p < .001$). That is, weaker students' estimates of their performance on a reading and writing task aligned at least as well with one expert's opinion as stronger students' estimates did.

TEACHER ASSESSMENT OF STUDENTS AT MID-TERM

To minimize possible bias toward the DSP students, teachers were not apprised of which students placed themselves until midterm. The results from the faculty assessment survey showed that their projected grades for College English I and College English Intensive students lined up quite well with the placement measures of ability and self-confidence. Not surprisingly, at midterm faculty expected to grade Questioned College English I students somewhat lower than Unquestioned College English students but higher than College English Intensive students. However, by semester's end, Questioned College English I students had grades almost indistinguishable from Unquestioned College English I students. Finally, student attitude in basic writing classes is often less positive than in College English classrooms as many observers have noted (Rose). However, among directed self-placement students, motivation as assessed by faculty did *not* differ between College English I and College English Intensive students, which supports Royer and Gilles's conclusion ("An Attitude").

STUDENT ATTITUDES TOWARD DSP

Because the sample available for analysis from the survey on student assessment of DSP included only those students who chose to give me their names, it was likely to be somewhat skewed. In fact, the students who gave their names did have marginally higher grades in both the College English Intensive and College English I groups. Also, despite the overall DSP sample being gender-balanced, 43 women gave their names but only 30 men did. Otherwise the sample seemed representative of the larger population. Essay scores, verbal SAT scores, and self-confidence were about the same.

All students had a positive to very positive opinion of being able to place themselves into their first-year writing course. Students who placed themselves in a College English Intensive class were less apt than College English I students to agree that their placement was correct, giving an answer whose mean was between "agree mildly" and "agree." The students who placed themselves in a College English I class gave an answer whose mean was between "agree" and "agree strongly." On average, all students agreed only slightly that the placement process motivated them to work harder than they normally would.

Students who placed themselves in the basic writing alternative were more apt to view their placement in negative terms if they did poorly in the course. The moderate to strong correlations between course grade and a negative attitude toward DSP among College English Intensive students suggest that they were apparently particularly upset about their placement, however appropriate it may have been, if they did not do well in the course. All in all, though, the most important finding related to student attitudes toward placement is that they liked it; only 2 students actually had a negative overall opinion.

WHAT STUDENTS THINK IS IMPORTANT IN SUCCESSFUL PLACEMENT

Students who placed themselves into College English I instead of College English Intensive did not appear to do so arbitrarily. A whole slew of factors differentiated the two groups. Not only did students who placed themselves into College English I do better in the course than those who placed themselves in College English Intensive, but they had a stronger academic background, had more confidence in their writing abilities both in high school and in response to the survey placement reading-writing exercise, had higher verbal SAT scores, and scored higher on the reading-writing exercise. In other words, students generally made rational decisions about where to place themselves (or, to put it within a less positivist framework, made decisions that conformed to the values held by the writing program).

Students also identified the factors that went into making their decision through an end of term survey ($n = 70$). The following list indicates, in rank order, the importance of eight factors, based on a disagree-agree scale of 1 to 5. (Rank orders that are significantly different from the one above are marked with an asterisk.)

1. The ability to do well in college (4.32)
2. Writing ability (4.21)
3. Concern about doing well in a new situation (3.84)*
4. Reading ability (3.51)*
5. Concern that course fully counts toward graduation (College English I students only) (3.36)
6. The advice of parents (2.94)*
7. Their conversation with me (2.61)*
8. Influence of friends (1.99)*

Note that “the ability to do well in college” and “concern about doing well in a new situation” rank about as high as writing ability—and higher than reading ability or concern about graduation credits—as factors that the students paid attention to. This suggests that self-belief factors, even

those not directly related to first-year writing itself, are important in students' decision-making and should be included on DSP surveys. The ability to remain in control of one's goals in new and challenging circumstances suggests the relevance of another social learning theory construct (besides self-efficacy), namely locus of control (see Rotter), which has to do with the extent to which individuals feel that their own actions determine future outcomes. As a result, it may be important to include statements such as the following that can be agreed or disagreed with: "I sometimes feel that there is nothing I can do to improve my situation" or "I would never allow social activities to affect my studies."

RETHINKING THE "SUCCESS" IN SUCCESSFUL PLACEMENT

If students believe that their writing ability and their placement in a new learning environment (college) will have a strong influence on their success, what factors does the data show actually predict success in their first writing course? Despite the finding that confidence may play an important role in student performance, it is remarkable how little correlation there was among *any* of the survey factors and course grades. Only the verbal SAT score correlated significantly (but very weakly) with course grade (.139, $p = .049$). However, other schools have had the same experience (Lewiecki-Wilson, Sommers, and Tassoni; Royer and Gilles "An Attitude").

It is strange that students' level of confidence in their ability to complete high school writing assignments and their assessment of their writing and reading skills in high school did not correlate with course grades, since they did correlate modestly with several measures of writing aptitude or confidence such as the verbal SAT score, the survey essay test score, and their own assessment of how they did on the essay placement test.³ However, in this particular study, there were no factors that predicted success, either for any of the cohorts or for the sample as a whole. The lack of correlation does not mean that DSP was unsuccessful, however. After all, students succeeded at the same rate as other students, instructors did not seem to think that the DSP students stood out in a negative way, and the students themselves appreciated being involved in the decision-making.

It appears that the very *process* of students having to make a decision results in success, either as traditionally defined through GPA and pass rates or as defined through student attitudes and beliefs. If WPAs cannot find the significant correlates of cognitive or self-belief factors with end-of-semester course grades, then we have a new research question: Are there, in fact, pre-college student characteristics or habits that do correlate significantly with academic achievement, or, if not, what aspects of their first-year

experience—and first-year writing class in particular—transforms the student so as to reduce the impact of pre-existing traits?

CHALLENGES TO THE UNIVERSITY'S ONLINE DSP SURVEY

In creating the DSP survey, I was mostly concerned with clarity in a fairly narrow, non-web-based sense. For example, last year I assumed that students would not spend much time writing an essay because that would make the survey too long. However, creating a more meaningful context for the writing might have solved the problem. At a two-year open-admissions college, Lewiecki-Wilson, Sommers, and Tassoni set up a more compelling assignment, a unified series of writing processes leading to a final draft of a self-reflective piece (171). In our survey, the essay appeared in the relatively barren context of a series of multiple-choice questions.

In addition, communicating clearly and compellingly via the web must engage students interactively to effect the dialogue principle. Although the phone conversation is a partial solution to the problem posed by the online interface, the website itself must be made more attractive, more welcoming. It must communicate *as a website*; that is, it must not just be a virtual repository of the various handouts used at an on-campus DSP session. Images, graphic design, photos of faculty and students, links—all these can communicate the ethos of our writing program and provide interactive possibilities. The lessons from distance learning and from web designers need to be incorporated when DSP is put online.

IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH AND CONCLUSION

It will be important to do research at other types of institutions, in other types of writing programs, and with other types of students in order to understand more deeply when and how DSP—or online DSP—works. Also, more appropriate factors still need to be identified to help students place themselves. Finally, so that our research may develop cumulative force, the research data should be aggregable and capable of being used in meta-analyses, as Chris Anson argued in his plenary address to the Council of Writing Program Administrators in 2006. To this end I have included the means and standard deviations of all DSP survey data for both men and women (see Appendix E). Because of the ease of data collection that the online survey provides, it makes research more possible—both for purposes of program evaluation and for raising and exploring more wide-ranging questions. Not only did the surveys validate the impressions I had of the success of DSP; they answered instructors' concerns about possible misplacement.

In summary, online placement appears to be feasible, saving time and space without eliminating the human interaction that makes DSP possible. The online environment must preserve what Royer and Gilles see as essential: the direction provided by DSP “only works to [students’] advantage so long as there is association, connection, and dependence with established members of the community” (*Principles* 61). With grounded guidance, students will generally place themselves in ways with which both they and faculty seem happy. Evidence from the DSP survey administered during the summer, as well as the survey to assess students’ opinions of DSP toward the end of the fall semester, suggests that confidence in one’s ability to overcome obstacles either in writing or in college plays an important factor in where students place themselves. Students who place themselves in College English I, even those whose academic weaknesses might normally have placed them in College English Intensive, succeed at rates close to those who may traditionally appear to be more qualified. In the future, ways to establish community in order to enhance agency—while administering DSP online—can certainly be theorized more deeply, and alternative ways of solving the distance problem can be evaluated.

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NOTES

1. In the opening article in this issue of *WPA: Writing Program Administration*, Chris Anson asks “how writing program administrators and members of the composition community might respond to allegations—even unfounded or politicized ones—that current instructional approaches are wrongheaded and ineffective” (11). He proposes “that instead of fighting belief with belief, conviction with conviction, theory with theory, we must revive and reenergize the significant research agenda that helped to create the field of composition and its curricular manifestations in writing program administration” (32). And he makes this argument not only as a defensive strategy; rather, he believes that we need to move back to “questions about how people most effectively learn and what we can best do to facilitate that learning” (17) and to move toward what Rich Haswell calls “RAD research”: research that is replicable, aggregable, and data-supported” (Anson 21).

2. When I was first placing students, if students did not respond to my request for a conversation with them, I placed them in their chosen course after a few weeks. There were 12 such students, who averaged a 2.58 in the course they chose (1 withdrew). Later, I was more insistent that a conversation take place.

Nevertheless, some students simply did not respond. As a department we have since decided that if students do not participate fully in the directed self-placement process, then we are not bound to abide by their placement decision and can, instead, use our own judgment. Clearly, the consequences of this decision must be investigated in the future.

3. The lack of correlation may be due to restricted variability in some of the predictors, partly because mainly students with lower than median verbal SAT scores were chosen and partly because often only half of the Likert-scale choices were actually used. (For example, virtually no student chose less than 3 out of 5 on the measures of confidence in writing.)

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APPENDIX A: SAMPLE E-MAIL TO STUDENT REGARDING PLACEMENT

Dear _____,

Thanks for completing the directed self-placement survey recently. You placed yourself in College English I, which I can understand given the answers you gave in some parts of your survey. However, given the brevity of the sample essay you wrote and your relative lack of confidence in responding to the reading, I think your profile MAY match the student who would take College English I and the Reading & Writing Workshop. The decision about placement is ultimately yours. However, before you make your final decision, I would like to talk with you briefly about this important choice. **YOU WILL NOT BE PLACED UNTIL WE HAVE THIS CONVERSATION.**

Please give me a call at 973-XXX-YYYY (preferred) or e-mail me at this address to let me know when it would be best to call you and what phone number(s) I should use.

Thanks,

Prof. Jones

APPENDIX B: TWO COMPOSITE PHONE CONVERSATIONS

The following dialogue is a composite of many conversations I've had with students, all recreated from memory, since I had neither the resources nor permission to tape record them. Before the conversation begins, I pull up my record of the student's decision-making process that includes any comments I may already have made, and I open up their DSP survey. The conversation includes information from the 2006 survey, which is somewhat different from the survey used in this (2005) study.

CONVERSATION #1

Ed: Hi, Mary. I'm calling about your English placement. Thanks for calling me in response to the e-mail I sent you.

Mary: Sure.

Ed: I noticed in your survey that you've received high Bs or As on your high school English papers and you felt moderately confident about your high school writing. Then, about the essay you wrote in response to the excerpt on gangster films, you seemed to have a mixture of feelings. It's true the essay didn't seem to focus very much on the author's ideas but just on your own thoughts about gangster movies.

Mary: Well, I was a bit rushed when I wrote the essay. I had a lot going on at the end of the school year.

Ed: So you don't think this represents how well you can write?

Mary: No, definitely not. I was in an AP class and I always did well.

Ed: Have you written essays in response to nonfiction texts, where you had to identify the author's main idea and cite it and develop your own response?

Mary: We had a few essays like that, yes.

Ed: I could give you the opportunity to revise the essay to show what you can do. That way, we could both be clearer about your writing ability. Do you think that would be helpful?

Mary: Actually, I feel pretty clear about it. I think I can do OK in the regular College English course.

Comment: Many phone conversations go in this general direction. That is, they confirm the student's sense that she really is ready for College English I, and I don't suggest more strongly that they revise their essay. There isn't enough reason for me to doubt that she will do well in contrast with her strong sense of self-efficacy.

CONVERSATION #2

Ed: Hi, John. I'm calling about your English placement. Did you get my e-mail?

John: Oh, yes. I got it a while ago. Sorry I didn't respond.

Ed: I wanted to go over your survey with you and review your decision.

John: All right.

Ed: It looks like you see yourself as neither a strong nor a weak reader and writer, you generally get Bs on your English papers, and you felt moderately confident about the essay you wrote on the survey. Did you spend about 30 minutes on the essay, would you say?

John: Probably about that.

Ed: OK. Here's my concern. I see that you have a 440 verbal SAT, and in your essay you had a hard time capturing Warshow's main idea about gangster films and—I'll admit—it was hard for me to follow your point sometimes. If I were to place you, as we used to do, I'd have

placed you in the College English Intensive course. My hunch is that you'll be struggling to get the B that you wrote that you wanted to get. Did you have a chance to look at the course descriptions and the sample "B" essay? The thing is, though, that I don't know what your priorities are or how you work if you don't immediately do well in a course. The College English Intensive course would give you more time; you'd be able to start homework assignments in class, go over the readings in more depth, ask more questions, and get more tutoring help. On the other hand, three of the six credits wouldn't count towards graduation. You'd have to think of that as an investment in reading and writing. That might be good for you, but the credit issue might be important to you.

John: Do I have to make up my mind right now?

Ed: No. I'd suggest you look at the website with your parents and think through your priorities and what would be best for you.

John: So I could e-mail you with my decision?

Ed: Sure. That would be fine.

Comment: Although some of this may seem rather prescriptive, my experience is that it conveys to the student that this really is his choice. Students are not always bowled over by my expertise, but they do appear to listen to it. The issue of money and the anticipation of unsure success resonate with them. Often students like John decide that they don't want to put too much pressure on themselves and, as a result, choose College English Intensive. Probably just as often they choose College English I.

APPENDIX C: FACULTY ASSESSMENT OF DSP (GO TO <[HTTP://PIRATE.SHU.EDU/~JONESEDM/ADDENDUM_TO_WPA_ARTICLE.HTM](http://pirate.shu.edu/~jonesedm/addendum_to_wpa_article.htm)>)

Appendix D: Student Assessment of DSP (go to <http://pirate.shu.edu/~jonesedm/addendum_to_wpa_article.htm>)

 APPENDIX E: MEANS AND STANDARD DEVIATIONS
 FOR ONLINE DSP SURVEY DATA

Variable	All Students (<i>n</i> = 220)		Men (<i>n</i> = 111)		Women (<i>n</i> = 109)	
	Mean	Stand. Dev.	Mean	Stand. Dev.	Mean	Stand. Dev.
Course grade	2.85	.892	2.67	.952	3.03	.794
Books read/yr.	4.08	1.24	3.9	1.29	4.26	1.17
Newspapers read/ wk.	1.98	1.46	2.34	1.63	1.60	1.17
Magazines read/ wk.	1.60	1.10	1.47	1.03	1.74	1.17
Number of papers/yr.	6.81	2.43	6.83	2.31	6.79	2.55
HS teachers' assessment of skills	3.68	.668	3.60	.704	3.76	.622
Your assessment of skills	3.59	.638	3.60	.664	3.58	.613
Ability to complete writing assignment	4.18	.696	4.24	.677	4.11	.712
Composite confidence score	11.45	1.65	11.45	1.72	11.45	1.60
Confidence in identifying main idea	3.71	.815	3.77	.831	3.65	.798
Confidence in having clear focus	3.52	.830	3.50	.796	3.54	.866
Confidence in providing evidence	3.85	.848	3.86	.883	3.85	.815
Confidence in writing without errors	3.92	.801	3.90	.820	3.94	.785
Composite essay confidence score	15.00	2.63	15.03	2.62	14.98	2.65
Essay score	3.44	1.04	3.48	1.03	3.39	1.06
Verbal SAT score	516	46.3	512	41.5	520	50.6
