

Basic Writing Placement with Holistically Scored Essays: Research Evidence

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A timed-essay exam has been defined as preferable if only one measure for placement into composition courses will be used, and if the only alternative is a multiple-choice test.

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ABSTRACT: Recently, the popularity of timed-essay exams has increased, becoming part of the Graduate Management Admissions Test (GMAT) in the late 1990s and now being incorporated into The College Board Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) in Spring of 2005 and ACT (American College Testing) test in Fall of 2004. This research evaluates the "value added" of an essay component, contrasting placement using ACT's multiple choice COMPASS (Computerized Placement Assessment Support System) writing test versus essays holistically scored by English faculty. Evidence suggests (a) that combining the timed-essay exam score with another score may improve accurate placement; (b) that the timed-essay exams, not multiple-choice tests, may be fairer for minority students; (c) and that a questionnaire creates an invaluable context when relating scores on placement tests to final grades in courses.

Since composition began as a field in the 1960s, academics who specialize in composition and literacy have described why composition instruction is inconsistent across the country in grades K through 12 and in higher education (Berlin, 1987; Bloom, Daiker, & White, 1996; Myers, 1996; Strickland & Strickland, 1993). This "writing on the wall" is larger now because of these headlines: "Writing in Schools Is Found Both Dismal and Neglected" in the April 26, 2003 *New York Times* (Lewin, 2003a); "Educators Demand Upgrade in Writing" in the May 13, 2003 *Washington Post* (Strauss); "2Rs Left in High School, Out of Choice or Fatigue, Many Teachers Have Abandoned the Term Paper, Leaving a Hole in College-Bound Students' Education" in the May 19, 2003 *LA Times* (Hayasaki).

Although the April, 2003 report from The National Commission on Writing in America's Schools and Colleges caused these headlines, perhaps composition professionals should have anticipated them because of other reports. Consider that, in 2000, the Education Commission of the States "released a report on improving teacher quality" and advocated for high schools and higher education to coordinate standards in subjects such as writing (Basinger, 2000). Consider too that, in 2001, the National Commission on the High-School Senior Year issued this finding: Only 44% of freshmen have completed college preparatory curriculum in high school that positions them to succeed in college (Kellogg, 2001).

Then, as 2003 approached, a 6-year national study directed by Stanford University was concluding which claimed: Many states have a "disconnect between the requirements for graduation from public high schools and the requirements for acceptance at state universities" (Rooney, 2003, p. 1). In the words of one participating educator, high school graduates "come and take our placement test and they're still in pre-college reading, writing, and math" (Rooney, p. 2).

Also in 2003, an 18-member commission, assembled by Pew Charitable Trusts and the Association of American Universities, sent every high school in the country a booklet of education standards—that includes standards for student writing—so that a "long overdue" link between "high-school and university standards" may be established (Potter, 2003, p. 1). According to an English teacher participating in the development of the standards, presently the "standardized tests...don't do an effective job of measuring whether a student is mastering the process of writing" (Hebel, 2001, p. 2). All these reports imply that, as a nation, instructors teach writing inconsistently if not poorly, but the reports also highlight the need and importance of accurate placement in college developmental English courses.

Recently, placement tests for basic writing or composition courses have typically been either of these multiple-choice exams: the SAT or ACT (Abraham, 1986; Bernstein, 2001; Carter, 1991; Wiener, 1989). Beginning in 1901, the SAT was a written exam(s), but, as the influence of psychometricians grew in 1926, the SAT became a multiple-choice test (Young, 2003, pp. 21-22). Between 1977 and 1996, moreover, the College Board offered a SAT II test with a timed-essay section besides offering the SAT I test as a multiple-choice test (Young, 2003, p. 22). The current popularity of timed-essay exams is demonstrated by several events. In 1994, the exam became a mandatory part of the Graduate Management Admissions Test (GMAT) (Bridgeman & McHale, 1998). The timed-essay exam will be a mandatory part of SAT I in 2005 (Hoover, 2002) and an optional part of the ACT test in 2004 (Young, 2002). These changes by the College Board and ACT, Inc. may be a response to pressure from Richard C. Atkinson, president of the University of California system, because that system has been the largest single consumer of SAT tests (Cavanagh, 2002; Hoover, 2002; Lewin,

2002b). It also may be related to proponents of direct writing assessment (Cooper, 1977; Greenberg, Wiener, & Donovan, 1986; Wolcott & Legg, 1998) who "have argued that multiple choice tests of writing ability are more reliable, but less valid, when compared to direct assessment procedures like holistic scoring [of timed essays]" (Williamson, 1994, p. 162).

In general, typical means for placement into composition courses may range from scoring multiple-choice tests, to scoring timed-essay exams, to scoring portfolios. This study is primarily concerned with multiple-choice tests and timed-essay exams. However, this focus should not be interpreted as advocating for either the timed-essay exam or multiple-choice test as the best way to place freshmen into writing courses.

The main subject of this writing is to examine the usefulness and accuracy of multiple-choice tests and timed-essay exams for student placement. In general, empirical research, English professors, and national organizations suggest that holistically scored, timed essays are a practical and ethical way to place freshmen into composition courses as compared to placement by an editing (or grammar) test and/or a reading test (i.e., "old" ACT and SAT tests).

Placement Test Options

In the field of composition, a timed-essay exam has been defined as preferable if only one measure for placement into composition courses will be used, and if the only alternative is a multiple-choice test (Garrow, 1989; Hilgers, 1995; Jaskulek, 1986; Ravitch, 2002; White, 1995; Wolcott & Legg, 1998; Zinn 1988). Shedding light on this conclusion seems important because multiple-choice tests are still commonly used for placement into composition courses (Abraham, 1986; Carter, 1991; Lalicker, 2001; Wiener, 1989). As a group, research reports suggest three categories of inquiry: multiple-choice tests and predicting success in composition courses, implications of timed-essay exams for program development, and multiple indicators as preferential for placement.

Multiple-Choice Tests and Predicting Success in Composition Courses

Researchers have asked this question: Are these multiple-choice tests—ACT composite, ACT English and/or reading sections and ACT's ASSET (Assessment of Skills for Successful Entry and Transfer) tests and SAT composite, SAT verbal and/or reading sections, and SAT APS (Assessment Program and Services) and MAPS (Multiple Assessment and Placement Services) tests—effective placement tests for composition courses? Responses became tied to whether these tests may predict final course grades. Some studies suggest that a predictive relationship does not exist (Behrman, 2000; College of the Canyons Office of Institutional Development, 1993; Gabe, 1989;

Holderer, 1992; Isbell, 1988; Mathay, 1992; Meeker, 1990; Whitcomb, 2003; Wonnacott, 1989). Other studies present mixed findings or support the notion that a predictive relationship does exist (Armstrong, 1994; College of the Canyons Office of Institutional Development, 1994; Escott, 1980; Hodges, 1990).

Timed-Essay Exam Implications for Program Development

Timed essays carry their own set of issues, such as the reliability of essay scores, biases of essay prompts, and prescribed five-paragraph essay responses (Baron, 2003; Christenbury, 2002; Haviland & Clark, 1992; Hoover, 2002; Jaskulek, 1986; Miraglia, 1995; Taylor, 1990; White, 1994; Winters, 1979; Wolcott & Legg, 1998). Test anxiety and time limitations may also negatively affect the reliability of timed-essay exams (Zinn, 1988). Nevertheless, when English teachers score (or rate) timed essays, scores have been found to have a predictive relationship with final grades and to be more indicative of students' writing abilities

Accurate placement—grouping basic or developmental writers and teaching them academic writing skills—may be key for success.

compared to multiple-choice test scores from the same students (Cunningham, 1983; Garrow, 1989; Holderer, 1992; Mathay, 1992).

Using timed essays in a basic writing program, moreover, precipitates other benefits besides improved placement. Rating timed essays help English teachers to "internalize the established criteria for the scoring program" and explore "how the criteria can be applied to students' most recent writing efforts" (Wolcott & Legg, 1998, pp. 60-61). Timed essays may also be used as pre- and posttests to examine whether student writers' skills have improved (Cunningham, 1983; Drakulich, 1979; Kiefer, 1983; Mills, 2000; Resch, 1972; Schaumburg, 1975; Strugala, 1983; Sweigart, 1996; Wolcott, 1996). When assessing a writing program, timed-essay scores may be considered along with program questionnaires (Strugala, 1983) and/or students' portfolios (Wolcott, 1996).

Multiple Indicators as Preferential for Placement

Even though a timed-essay score may be a single or primary criterion for placement, multiple criteria may improve not only placement but also assessing writing courses or programs. For instance, some placement tests can be more predictive of final grades in writing courses when com-

bined with the students' high school GPAs (Armstrong, 1994; Cunningham, 1983; Whitcomb, 2003). Also, timed-essay scores may be more predictive of course grades or more reliable as an accurate placement instrument when combined with some multiple-choice test scores (Cummings, 1991; Cunningham, 1983; Galbraith, 1986; Garrow, 1989; Isonio, 1994; Wolcott, 1996; Wolcott & Legg, 1998). Using more than one criterion for placement, moreover, may improve placing at-risk, first-generation, or minority students. Some studies have found that minority students have been disproportionately affected by placement done with multiple-choice tests (Belcher, 1993; College of the Canyons Office of Institutional Development, 1996; Garrow, 1989; Jones & Jackson, 1991; White, 1990). Also, accurate placement—grouping basic or developmental writers and teaching them academic writing skills—may be key for success: Studies show that these students graduate in greater numbers than students who are not required to be in basic writing programs or choose to ignore a recommendation to participate in such programs (Baker & Jolly, 1999; Boylan, 1999; Cunningham, 1983; Gleason, 2000; McGregor & Attinasi, 1996; White, 1994).

Method

Demographics

In the Spring of 2003, the Office of Institutional Research, and English faculty began an evaluation of the writing placement process at an open-admission, 4-year, urban, public college in the western United States that has an average enrollment of 24,000 students each year. An average of 710 students each fall semester and 565 each spring semester (1,275 total) enroll in basic writing courses as a result of the placement system based on multiple-choice tests. Approximately half the college-wide student body requires one or more developmental courses. Also, college wide, students are about 92% European American, 51% part-time, and 43% female.

A total of 431 students wrote a timed essay, of whom 358 (83%) remained in ENGH 0890 (lower-level basic writing) or 0990 (upper-level basic writing) and received a final grade. Of these 358 students, 289 (81%) completed the survey and 258 (72%) were enrolled as full-time students (12+ credit hours). The 289 survey takers displayed characteristics similar to the general student population regarding the distribution of sex, disability, ethnicity, and age characteristics. The small number of ENGH 0990 students who had taken ENGH 0890 previously were excluded from any statistical analyses to eliminate any confounding factors when analyzing tests scores as possibly predictive of final grades.

Regarding the college's placement system that created the ENGH 0890 and 0990 classes, a score of 19 or more on both the ACT English and reading sections exempted students altogether from

ENGH 0890 and ENGH 0990. Lower or absent ACT score(s) meant a student would complete two multiple-choice tests: ACT's COMPASS writing test (an editing or grammar test) and the Degrees of Reading Power test (DRP, a reading test). A 79 or lower score on the COMPASS and a 76 or lower score on the DRP defined placement for ENGH 0990. A 49 or lower score on the COMPASS and a 69 or lower score on the DRP defined placement for ENGH 0890.

Design

For the current study, 12 experienced English teachers holistically scored the 431 timed essays written by in-coming freshmen during the first week of classes. These students were in one of two developmental English courses: ENGH 0890, Fundamental English Skills and ENGH, 0990, College Preparatory Writing. The students addressed one of two prompts and were allowed 30 minutes to write an essay. One prompt asked students to write about reasons for attending college. The other asked for comparisons between living in a small town, big city, and/or rural area. More students addressed the former rather than the latter prompt. Exam instructions that all teachers read to students encouraged them to organize their essays by asking them to "plan...prewrite, write, and revise" essays, suggesting that they "may include an outline or prewriting" with their final copy, and encouraging them to "include examples and specifics" in that copy, too.

A student's motivation to write his or her best may have been affected by his or her current enrollment in ENGH 0890 or ENGH 0990. The ENGH 0890 teachers read to their students, "If you do well on this essay, you may advance to ENGH 0990." After testing, 32 students were given that opportunity. All English teachers read this to all students, "How well or poorly you write may affect my teaching this class." Doing poorly on the timed-essay exam, students were told, may mean more grammar instruction. Doing well may mean more college-level instruction. To try to motivate individual writers, teachers also stated, "Your writing may affect how I teach you as an individual writer."

Procedures

The 12 English teachers scored the resulting 431 timed essays by using a rubric. The 6-point rubric was developed and pilot-tested during the previous semester when two teachers—with over 12 years of holistic-scoring experience between them—had asked 140 ENGH 0890 and 0990 students to write timed essays. The teachers applied the SAT II Scale to those essays and revised or adapted it to be more descriptive of their students' writing (see Wolcott & Legg, 1998; contact JDE for rubric). Anchor and range-finder essays were selected from among the 140 essays: An "anchor" essay represents the typical or average essay for all

essays receiving a particular score; whereas, a "range finder" essay represents the essays identified as in between two scores. Through training with anchors and range finders, English teachers learn to apply the rubric so that the two scores given any essay most often agree. In December 2002, English teachers completed a 3-hour training period, and, in January 2003, completed a 2 1/2-hour training period, immediately prior to scoring the 431 timed essays in this study.

Each essay was read and scored by two English raters/teachers. Regarding 97% of essays, the two scores were identical or within one ordinal of one another. When the two scores disagreed, a veteran rater resolved this "split." Raters did not score any essay as a six, perhaps because neither essay prompt solicited enough narrative or descriptive writing and both solicited more expository writing. During a large-scale assessment of timed essays, researchers Engelhard, Gordon, and Gabrielson (1992) "found that the mode of discourse was a significant factor in predicting writing quality [in timed essays]: narrative writing tasks

A student's motivation to write his or her best may have been affected by his or her current {course} enrollment.

received the highest scores, with descriptive tasks next and expository tasks last" (Wolcott & Legg, 1998, p. 15). Another explanation for why no student scored a six may be found related to this fact: All the students, prior to responding to either prompt, had been labeled as developmental or remedial by the placement system. This aspect may have affected the English teachers' rating the essays as well as the motivations or efforts of the students writing the essays.

Data Analysis

For the purpose of data analysis, the timed-essay scores created a standard against which these multiple-choice tests were measured. A score of 2.5 or more would have placed a student into ENGH 0990, and a score of 2.0 or less would have placed a student into ENGH 0890. Data analysis also included some items on a survey for the basic writing program. These items asked students about their completing assignments, their attending class, and their possibly seeking help at the Writing Center. Students were also asked if they had experienced a nonacademic adverse event that impeded their academic progress. And students were asked, too, if they had tried their best when writing the timed essay given when the semester began. Surveys were administered at semester's end.

Regression analysis was conducted to determine if the holistically scored essay was predictive

of grades in the course when controlling for lab use, class attendance, assignment completion, and external adverse events. If predictive, the analysis would provide support for the argument that the timed essay offered additional information on students' writing ability useful for placement above and beyond the standard use of multiple-choice tests currently used. Regarding data analysis, the regression analysis and its underlying assumptions followed established guidelines (Siegel, 1997). The regression analysis included normal probability plots for the residuals and incorporated scatter plots for each independent and dependent variable and for the standardized residuals. The dependent variable—grade point average (GPA)—was squared to achieve normality. No outliers of any concern affected the regression analysis. Independent variables, regarding the survey, were changed to dummy variables due to a lack of normality as follow. Infrequent Lab Use: 1= never or once, 0 = more frequent use; Class Attendance: 1 = all classes, 0 = less frequent attendance; Assignment Completion: 1 = all assignments, 0 = missing assignments; Effort on Timed Essay: 1 = best effort on survey, 0 = other level of effort; and; Adverse Event(s): 1= strongly agree or agree that outside experiences (personal, health, family, or financial difficulties) negatively affected academic progress, 0 = disagree or strongly disagree. Another dummy variable, credit hours (1 = 12+ credits before the English course, 0 = 11- credit hours), was added to the regression analysis to control for the effect of other course work on student performance.

T-tests were also applied to data and were used to search for any significant differences between all the students placed into ENGH 0890 and 0990 as well as differences among students in ENGH 0890 and among those in ENGH 0990. The level of significance was set at $p < .05$. When the Levene's test for equality of variances was significant, a nonparametric analog to the t -test formed the analysis.

Findings

Standardized Tests and Timed Essays

The following descriptive statistics present student placement in a matrix comparing placement using COMPASS writing scores only versus the scored essay. Substantial disagreement exists between these two tests (see Table 1, p. 6). With the timed essay as the standard for placement into ENGH 0890 and 0990, COMPASS only correctly places 62% of students. This "miss-placement" is greater in ENGH 0890. When Table 1 is recreated with only students who self-reported their "best effort" on the timed essay ($n = 62$), the percentage of students correctly placed by the current system is 65%, a small change from the original 62%.

Pearson correlations also support the assertion that the COMPASS, DRP, and timed essay are

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Table 1
Number of Students Placed in Courses by Instrument ($n = 290$)

Instrument	Course Placement			
	ENGH 0890	% of Total	ENGH 0990	% of Total
COMPASS writing test	117	40.3%	173	59.7%
Holistically scored essay	56	19.3%	234	80.7%
Both instruments in agreement	31	10.7%	148	51.0%
Incorrectly placed by COMPASS	86	29.7%	25	8.6%

Note: The holistically scored essay and faculty judgment formed the standard, so a timed essay score of 2.5 or more meant ENGH 0990 placement. Regarding COMPASS, a score of 79 or less meant ENGH 0990 placement and 49 or less meant ENGH 0890 placement.

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not measuring equivalent student aptitudes. The correlation between the timed-essay and COMPASS scores is .29 ($n = 271$). The correlation between timed-essay and DRP scores is .29 ($n = 255$), a moderately weak correlation. A moderate correlation exists between COMPASS and DRP scores $R = .49$ ($n = 361$); however, this correlation is between two tests that are indirect measures of student writing.

With the timed-essay score as a standard, researchers considered the students who took ENGH 0990 when their timed-essay score(s) indicated a ENGH 0890 placement. If a timed-essay score was a better placement instrument than the standardized test scores, researchers would expect that these ENGH 0990 students—who should have been placed into ENGH 0890 according to timed-essays scores—would have lower grades in ENGH 0990 as compared to their classmates who had timed-essays scores confirming their original placement into ENGH 0990. This proved to be the case. The incorrectly placed ENGH 0990 students had lower final grades when compared to the correctly placed ENGH 0990 students. The former group's average GPA was 2.2 (a "C" average, $n = 22$) and the latter group's average GPA was 2.8 (a "B-" average, $n = 117$).

Ironically, as the semester started and the English teachers offered 32 ENGH 0890 students opportunities to enroll in ENGH 0990 courses because of relatively high timed-essay scores, only 12 (38%) decided to make the change (and not have to pay for ENGH 0890, a 5-credit course). The average GPA of the 12 students who moved from ENGH 0890 to ENGH 0990 and who were also taking their first English course was 2.7 ($n = 12$) compared to a 2.8 GPA ($n = 117$) for the ENGH 0990 students who were accurately placed according to their timed-essay score (and COMPASS score). It is interesting that the "moved" students performed relatively well in ENGH 0990, even in light of the small sample size.

These results do not indicate the need to merely readjust the cut scores for placement using the multiple choice tests, as cut scores have been set to achieve an 80% probability of a "C" and a 60% probability of a "B" in the courses us-

ing standard logistic regression techniques and the information from the placement tests (Noble & Sawyer, 1997; Utah Valley State College Office of Institutional Research, 1997). The holistically scored essays provide additional information on students' writing ability not present in the multiple-choice placement tests.

Perception, Motivation, Ethnicity, and Survey

According to survey results, many students who completed either ENGH 0890 or 0990 did not believe that they were appropriately placed. Approximately 21% of ENGH 0890 students reported that they should have been placed in a higher level course, ENGH 0990 or ENGL 1010 (freshman composition). For 83% of them, their perceptions were supported by either a favorable essay or COMPASS score. Only .4% of the ENGH 0990 students believed that they should have been in the lower course, ENGH 0890; however, approximately 13% of ENGH 0990 students thought that they should have been placed into ENGL 1010. Approximately 21% of ENGH 0890 students and 16% of ENGH 0990 students had no opinion on their English placement.

Regarding other survey results, approximately 34% of ENGH 0890 students and 46% of ENGH 0990 students have self-reported giving their best effort on the timed essay. Motivation (or self-confidence) appears to be higher among ENGH 0990 students, perhaps because they were already in ENGH 0990 when taking the timed-essay exam. In contrast, in spite of the timed essay representing a real opportunity to move into ENGH 0990, ENGH 0890 students

may have been disheartened by their having been placed into ENGH 0890 by the DRP and COMPASS or ACT tests.

Table 2, through a regression analysis, displays the effects of several variables on student GPA in ENGH 0890 and ENGH 0990, including student essay scores. As indicated by the standardized regression coefficients, the most influential variable on students' final grades is the completion of assignments. Only 42% of ENGH 0890 students and only 53% of ENGH 0990 students have reported completing all of their assignments. A large decline in grades for these courses is found among the students who report completing less than all assignments. This finding may suggest that many basic writers need help with their time-management skills, educational values, or academic habits. The second most influential variable on course grade is having adverse events—personal, health, family, or financial difficulties—outside of class that negatively affect academic progress (see Table 2).

These factors are followed by students' scores on timed essays and their frequency of visiting the Writing Center. The significance of timed-essay scores may be interpreted as more evidence supporting their use for placement purposes. Using the Writing Center may be interpreted as some basic writers realizing their own needs for instructional assistance to improve their writing skills and their grades. About 47% of ENGH 0890 students and 69% of ENGH 0990 students report attending the Writing Center two or more times that semester.

Class attendance is not statistically significant when considered in conjunction with the other variables in the model: 97% of ENGH 0890 students and 96% of ENGH 0990 students report attending almost every class meeting. In addition, effort on the timed essay and completing 12+ credit hours prior to ENGH 0890 or ENGH 0990 are not statistically significant predictors.

Disparate impact is assessed using *t*-tests comparing performance on the essay test and multiple-

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Table 2
Regression Equation Predicting Academic Success

Predictor Variables	Regression Coefficients	Standard Error	Standardized Coefficients	T-Statistic	Significance Level
Infrequent lab use	-1.355	.664	-.148	-2.040	.043
Class attendance	.168	.720	.017	.233	.816
Assignment completion	3.434	.705	.389	4.871	.000
Effort	.342	.694	.038	.493	.623
Adverse events	-2.128	.628	-.241	-3.387	.001
Credit hours	-.09702	.654	-.011	-.148	.882
Holistic score (timed essay)	1.003	.480	.149	2.091	.038
Constant	6.239	1.591		3.922	.000

Note. timed-essay scores for ENGH 0890 students ranged from 1 to 4 and for ENGH 0990 students, from 1 to 5.

choice tests (see Table 3). *T*-tests show no significant differences among student subpopulations regarding the holistically scored, timed essay. However, minority students have significantly lower scores on both the COMPASS writing test and DRP reading test when compared with nonminority (or white) students. The timed-essay exam may have less of a disparate impact on minority students because that exam, unlike the multiple-choice COMPASS and DRP tests, provides students with an opportunity to produce and use their own written language. In comparison, an underlying assumption of a multiple-choice test is that students

completion, effort, adverse events, and credit hours taken during the term.

This study suggests that accurate placement may improve with a timed-essay score. To be clear, if only a single means of placement could be selected, and one had to choose between a reading test, an editing test, or a timed essay, a timed essay seems preferable. But, as findings also demonstrate, a timed-essay score may be used as a primary means for placement and a reading test score as a supplemental consideration so that combining the measures further improves accurate placement.

The benefits of more accurate placement can be substantial. First, accurate placement and successful completion of

basic writing programs have been linked to improved student retention (Baker & Jolly, 1999; Boylan, 1999; Cunningham, 1983; Glau, 1996; Kiefer, 1983; McGregor & Attinasi, 1996; White, 1995). Second, the timed-essay exam shows less of a disparate impact on minority students as compared to placement with the multiple-choice tests. Third, improved placement may lead to more effective

pedagogy (i.e., outcome assessment) but also solicited policy decisions. One such decision was deciding the cut-off scores relevant to timed essays for ENGH 0890 and ENGH 0990. To explain, the faculty in the Basic Composition Department identified the cut-off score, and their decision was informed by their research, by institutional research into matriculation from ENGH 0890 to 0990, and by their curricular goals and experiences as writing teachers. Consequently, with an improved stratification of basic writers, a low cut-off score would concentrate only the weakest basic writers into fewer ENGH 0890 sections, and a majority of basic writers would only have to complete ENGH 0990 prior to Freshman Composition. Knowing that the weakest basic writers need more instruction and one-on-one help, the teachers hoped that perhaps administrators outside of the Basic Composition Department would at least recognize the need for a smaller class size for ENGH 0890 if not also for ENGH 0990.

Considering this study—in which timed-essay scores, final course grades, and questionnaire results were linked—the English teachers now have the opportunity to identify specific basic writers needing help prior to their earning a low final grade. The English teachers may want to monitor each basic writer’s progress, identify those not completing assignments, and intervene not only as teachers but also as advisors. Teachers, too, may want to require some students to use the Writing Center in addition to encouraging all students to go. Also, teachers may want to identify the basic writers who are experiencing nonacademic adverse events that affect academic progress and refer them to the appropriate offices. To facilitate this interventionist philosophy, however, the English teachers would need more one-on-one contact with students. Do the teachers have the time? Class size may discourage that level of involvement because administration has admitted 26 students in a section of ENGH 0890 or ENGH 0990 as a goal. Because of the labor-intensive nature of teaching writing, the National Council of English Teachers (NCTE) suggests, “No more than 20 students should be permitted in any writing class” and “remedial or developmental sections should be limited to a maximum of 15 students” (National Council of Teachers of English, 1987, p. 7).

Considering that some policy decisions are impossible for the Basic Composition Department to make alone, hopefully the college administration will take advantage of the current and forthcoming research findings for course placement. The English and Literature Department needs to be involved, too. That Department decides student placement into an entry-level writing course, ENGL 1010, and is currently using the multiple-choice reading and editing tests for placement. Because of ongoing discussions, however, the English and Literature Department may support a new place-

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Table 3 Disparate Impact of COMPASS and DRP Tests Versus Timed-Essay Exams						
Student Subpopulations	Average Scores					
	Holistic score	<i>n</i>	COMPASS score	<i>n</i>	DRP score	<i>n</i>
Full time	2.8	186	54	245	78	230
Part time	2.8	89	54	140	78	132
Minority	2.8	35	48*	56	73*	55
Nonminority	2.8	237	55*	329	79*	307
Female	2.9	115	54	161	75*	148
Male	2.8	157	55	224	81*	214
Disabled	2.6	20	46	24	74	24
Nondisabled	2.9	252	55	361	79	338
Traditional	2.8	51	55	81	80	81
Nontraditional	2.9	221	54	304	78	281

Note. Significant difference is defined as $p < .05$.

should know a standardized or ideal English language, one that exists unaffected by genre conventions, subject matter, or discourse communities.

Implications

Considering that national reports indicate generally poor composition instruction across the country at the high school level (Basinger, 2000; Kellogg, 2001; Potter, 2003; Rooney, 2003; Strauss, 2003), accurate placement into composition courses at college seems critical. This research indicates that an essay exam is valuable for placement purposes. In the judgement of experienced English faculty members, many students are currently misplaced into writing courses by reliance solely on multiple-choice tests. Descriptive statistics show that students, who should be placed in ENGH 0990 versus ENGH 0890 (according to the holistic essay), perform well when advanced to the higher level course. Students, who should have been placed in the ENGH 0890 versus ENGH 0990 (again using the essay score), earn substantially lower grades in the more advanced course. The holistic score also significantly contributes to the prediction of grades in writing courses when controlling for lab use, class attendance, assignment

tive pedagogy because an English teacher, rather than attempting to address the needs of basic writers whose skills range from very underprepared to prepared for college writing, may focus on teaching a class of students who have similar abilities and needs as writers. A fourth way that placement by timed essay may be effectively linked to a basic writing program would be for the English teachers to have the placement timed-essay function as a pretest, too. They could later ask basic writers to write a second timed essay, a posttest, to end a course (Drakulich, 1979; Glassman, 1983; Mills, 2000; Resch, 1972; Schaumburg, 1975; Strugala, 1983). Pre- and posttest scores could then be compared, considered, and discussed prior to making curricular modifications. Finally, such practices may make placement and assessment easier to explain to students, motivate students more, and create new benefits for students like a long-term commitment to writing improvement. Reading and rating the timed-essays can also become a process for the development of basic writing faculty. In short, use of a timed-essay in the basic composition program has the potential to increase the sharing of educational goals with students as well as among faculty.

In the current study, accurate placement not only affected the effectiveness of curriculum and

WHAT WORKS:

Research-Based Best Practices in Developmental Education

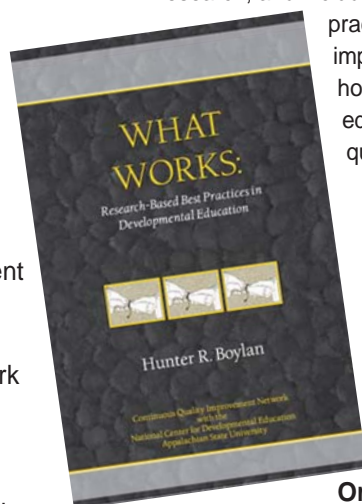
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This book combines results from the recent “Best Practices in Developmental Education” benchmarking study by the Continuous Quality Improvement Network and the American Productivity & Quality Center with findings from a decade of research by the National Center for Developmental Education to create a guide to the best models and techniques available for the professional developmental educator.

The text describes each best practice in detail, along with its supporting research, and includes an example of a college or university applying that practice. Following every example is a list of tips for implementation. The contents focus on research regarding how to design, implement, and evaluate developmental education and learning assistance programs and address questions such as:

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ment system. Still, whereas English teachers and researchers may see the interests of students and the college converging regarding the need for better placement into all entry-level writing courses, administrators may focus on the current standardized placement tests as cost-effective. Students, in turn, may focus on paying for an "extra" writing course(s), with either ENGH 0890 and/or 0990 both possibly being prerequisites for freshman composition because of the placement system. Or students may focus on enrolling in a course, freshman composition, when a basic writing course is needed as the first writing course in college. Seemingly, if the administration is not an agent for change, the existing problematic situation may continue and the chance for meaningful policy changes may pass.

Future Research Considerations

Because this study does not offer clear support for using only standardized tests or only a holistically scored essay for placement, broad research, not just replication, seems to be needed. Besides replicating the current research with larger numbers of students, the college may support and study placement into ENGH 0890 and 0990 (and ENGL 1010) by using timed-essay exams alone or by combining a timed-essay exam score with a DRP score. Motivational issues, for instance, may be better addressed by asking selected in-coming freshmen to participate in a pilot study, in which placement into ENGH 0890, ENGH 0990, or ENGL 1010 is determined by a timed-essay exam only. These students may also be allowed more than 30 minutes to write their essay to lessen some test anxiety and increase the essay exam's validity.

Fortunately, in September 2003, college researchers have already begun to involve greater numbers of students in placement research by scoring timed essays written by approximately 300 students enrolled in ENGH 0890, ENGH 0990, and ENGL 1010. The timed essays will be scored by English faculty as well as scored electronically by ACT's e-Write program. Besides replicating prior research—correlating DRP, COMPASS, and timed-essay scores—researchers will be in a better position to suggest how placement by timed-essay may be implemented accurately and fairly.

The study reported herein reaches conclusions supported by previously cited longitudinal studies, some involving all incoming freshmen or all students in composition courses. So, rather than research more into a question that has been affirmatively answered, "Are timed-essay exams preferable to multiple-choice tests if only one, affordable measure is going to be used for placement?", researchers should explore and test how to implement a fairer placement system based on a holistically scored essay as the primary means for placement. The authors' new efforts have involved more

administrative stakeholders on campus so that the political will to improve composition placement may exist at their institution. Colleagues across various geographic locations and institutions hopefully will contribute to another level of research on these issues—how best to implement placement by a holistically timed essay, possibly in combination with another secondary means of placement—so that basic writers may be better identified and taught.

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