

Legislating First-Year Writing Placement: Implications for Pennsylvania and Across the Country

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As many states begin to phase in new assessments of Common Core State Standards, this study explores the complicated politics of alignment, entry-level pathways, and developmental education at the college level. Through a comparative analysis of state level policies in Florida, Wisconsin, and Idaho, the authors discuss implications for possible similar legislation in Pennsylvania. They argue writing program faculty may be able to leverage the implementations of such assessments by adopting the impending exams as an exigence for paying attention to legislative efforts to define “college ready,” building relationships with policymakers, creating system-wide first-year writing coherence, using effective rhetoric, and exploring multiple measures for placement processes.

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Decades of literacy research have demonstrated the dramatic effects assessments can have on teaching and learning in both secondary and higher education. Anticipating the consequences of this dynamic between teaching and assessment is especially complicated when considering how new assessments aligned with the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) may impact entry-level pathways into college. A CCSS assessment that purports to certify students as college-ready, however, may unintentionally undermine local, faculty-driven placement processes and endanger hard-fought resources for underprepared students, such as developmental courses. In our own state, the implementation of the Keystone Composition Exam—the first Pennsylvania Core aligned exam on writing for high school juniors—is fewer than two years away. As writing instructors at Indiana University of Pennsylvania, the second-largest school of the Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education (PASSHE), we wanted to understand the stakes and opportunities of our state system context amid national trends to standardize curricular pathways.

Our concerns about how this national trend might affect Pennsylvania are heightened given the broader context of major cuts in education funding, annual budget battles in state congress, and labor disputes that led to the first faculty strike in the history of the PASSHE. Through a comparative analysis of state-level shifts affecting entry-level pathways for college students in the Florida College System, University of Wisconsin System, and the public colleges and universities in Idaho, this article models what Cambridge (2011) called an “anticipatory knowledge awareness” about state-level policy issues that span secondary and tertiary levels of education (p. 142). Cambridge (2011) contended “tracking issues over time”—and, we add, across state and institutional contexts—“aids us in better judging whether a policy issue is stagnant, either dormant or stagnant in its inflexibility, or whether a policy issue is still malleable” (pp. 141-142). Given the impending implementation of the Pennsylvania Keystone Composition Exam, which is designed to assess writing proficiency at the end of high school and could be legislated as a marker of readiness for college-level writing (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2017), we concur with Cambridge's (2011) assertion, “Timeliness can mean ‘just in time’ but it can also mean ‘ahead of time’” (p. 142).

As a collaborative team of faculty who teach first-year writers and merge several areas of expertise—writing program administration, writing assessment and placement, composition and basic writing, and secondary education teacher training—we adopt McClure and Goldstein's (2012) approach for collective action (albeit on a smaller scale) to augment Cambridge's (2011) recommendations against politicking on a solely individual basis (pp. 139-146). Although aligning standards across educational contexts has been promoted as one of the most promising means of reducing remediation rates (U.S. Department of Education, 2006, p. 17; Complete College America [CCA], 2012, p. 7), we recognize there will continue to be a need to programmatically support vulnerable college students and politically defend alternative course pathways (such as our own credit-bearing developmental writing course). Ultimately, as a response to Cambridge's call to integrate policy into research, we illustrate the layers of contexts and the confluence of political pressures and reform rhetoric that influence, for both better and worse, the emerging realities of placement in public systems of higher education.

Legislative Policy in Higher Education: Three States Respond

Florida

The Florida College System offers a cautionary example of the politics of placement and the subsequent impacts on developmental education. Although the Pennsylvania state system does not include community colleges, as the Florida College System does, our own institution and others within PASSHE are essentially open-access, and our admissions criteria and student enrollment better match that of the Florida College System than its State University System.

In 2013, after reports of Florida's high remediation numbers, including those published by CCA (2012, p. 6), the Florida State Legislature passed the controversial Senate Bill 1720 (2013) despite opposition from stakeholders. The bill specifies that students

who entered 9th grade in Florida and graduated from a Florida high school, veterans, and/or active members of the armed services are not obligated to take college placement tests, nor are they required to take developmental courses, even if those courses are strongly recommended by a college advisor (Fl. Sen., 2013), essentially putting students in charge of their own entry-level course placement. legislated the presumed equality of a high school diploma and college readiness, a move that had the political support of CCA (Fain, 2013).

Since 2014, the overall number of students in the Florida College System opting to take developmental education courses in both math and English has fallen from 21,000 students during 2014-2015, the first year of the bill's implementation, to 14,000 students (Dunkelberger, 2017). Although the bill was designed to expand student choice while reducing time to degree and the cost of remedial education, in certain situations, students lost choices that may have been critical to their overall persistence in college. Compressed course modalities, for example, which essentially require underprepared students to complete two consecutive writing courses within a single semester, received the most critique from students, faculty, and staff (Hu et al., 2015, 2016) and contradict a fundamental tenet of stretch composition research: "the notion that beginning writers, since they lack experience in writing, need more time to learn to work with and to develop appropriate writing strategies" (Glau, 1996, p. 80). Furthermore, because developmental education courses remain non-credit bearing, students often reported their decision simply came down to cost: How could they choose to pay for a course that does not contribute to their degree (Hu et al., 2016, pp. 13-15)? Hu et al. (2016) also found that, across campuses, students tended to overestimate their abilities in English and choose first-year writing courses even when multiple indicators, such as failing English repeatedly in the past, suggested they needed developmental writing (p. 16).

Citing the drop in enrollment, the most recent state budget cut developmental education by \$25 million. The cut was a significant blow to the Florida College System because it had been striving to create more individualized support for students, a task that requires both innovation and money (Smith, 2017). At a moment when administrators' perception of the reform's effectiveness has fallen dramatically (from 74% in 2015 to 39% in 2017), the slashes to developmental education are particularly worrisome, suggesting that state legislators equate a drop in enrollment in developmental courses (almost assured by S. 1720) with a drop in students' needs for multiple types of academic support (Hu et al., 2017, p. 19).

The case of Florida illustrates higher education institutions forced to react to dramatic legislation because lawmakers failed to involve staff, faculty, and administrators, a situation that led in some cases to active opposition to the law's implementation. As Brower, Bertrand Jones, Tandberg, Hu, and Park (2017) described, some employees in the Florida College System "[felt] powerless in the legislative process, lack[ed] inclusion and discretion over implementation plans within their organization, and question[ed] whether the legislation is good for society and their clients" (p. 22). In acknowledging Brower et al.'s (2017) conclusions, it is our goal to have a voice in legislative processes that affect placement and to author implementation plans that best respond to our students' needs and our institutional context. We turn to Wisconsin and Idaho as instructive examples of how we might achieve that result.

Wisconsin

We take up the University of Wisconsin system because, like Pennsylvania—the fourth lowest in the country in higher education state appropriations (State Higher Education Executive Officers Association, 2016, p. 33)—the magnitude of negligence in funding their public system of higher education is significant. Years of defunding public higher education coupled with recent drops in enrollment at the 13 System two-year colleges have caused the Board of Regents to call for major restructuring; in order to avoid closing low-enrolled campuses, those colleges will become regional campuses of nearby four-year institutions (Herzog, 2017). Although the structure is changing, the process and the exact effects remain to be determined; the UW-System president has predicted the process will be "lengthy and complicated" (para. 9) and has emphasized priorities are "how employees are paid and how campus finances and student services are merged and managed" (para. 9), implying by omission that perhaps curriculum will remain steady and in the hands of faculty (as cited in Herzog, 2017).

Many UW System schools stand poised to handle this restructuring because they have been implementing proactive methods to respond to many years of state pressure to standardize writing placement in order to reduce the number of students enrolled in developmental courses: They have closely paid attention to legislative efforts to define "college-ready" using benchmark scores and resisted attempts to apply them across an entire system; designed curricular innovations that could survive additional cuts to state-based funding of developmental education; and gathered programmatic data and shared it to enable faculty to rapidly respond to changing institutional contexts, such as the impacts of legislation, by tracking changes to completion rates within a semester or two of the budget cuts (University of Wisconsin, 2015).

Several UW campus writing programs have responded to the challenges of state politics by offering alternative first-year course pathways to support less prepared students. For instance, UW-Parkside's curriculum alignment efforts include meetings between college faculty and teachers in local high school districts in English and Math, "to ensure incoming college students are better prepared" (University of Wisconsin, 2015, p. 18), as well as intervention programs for underprepared students, for example in summer bridge programs at several campuses and added writing center tutorials as support for students who place into developmental writing (University of Wisconsin, 2015, pp. 18-22).

Other campuses have developed full-scale curriculum revisions to their developmental course offerings to build in protections from further funding cuts. For example, despite recent cuts of more than two dozen programs and a budget deficit of over \$2.5 million, writing programs at the University of Wisconsin-Superior (UWS) will remain unaffected (Hollingsworth, 2017; White-Farnham, personal communication, November 10, 2017) in part because of the proactive measures put into place by their writing program administrator (WPA). Basic writing faculty at UWS have explicitly cited the Florida legislature's decision to curtail first-year course placement as motivation for revising their own placement process and developmental writing program: "We are especially concerned that Wisconsin's legislature will follow Florida's 2013 example by ending mandatory placement in developmental courses, essentially leaving the choice up to students" (McCormick, McGrew, & White-Farnham, 2017, p. 277). They further explained, "This would curb the practice of admitting underprepared students and then enrolling them in non-credit courses, but the students and their challenges will remain" (McCormick et al., 2017, p. 277).

The UWS basic writing team took further proactive measures by revising their long-neglected developmental writing curriculum; implementing a four-year plan to modify their three-hour non-credit bearing basic writing course into a two-credit "co-enrollment/lab model of Basic Writing that accompanies the mainstream course" (McCormick et al., 2017, p. 277); and hiring two writing specialists to teach basic writing, offer professional development, and provide peer mentoring. With three years of pilot assessment data, they hope to argue to keep the two-credit lab for students who need it as a corequisite with their mainstream class, even if Wisconsin, like Florida, mandates that students can opt out of placement.

Idaho

We examine Idaho as an example of how WPAs and other stakeholders persistently responded as the State Board of Education (SBOE) sought to eliminate developmental education from the eight public colleges and universities. We see four important themes emerge from the way these colleges responded: (a) the way these stakeholders built relationships among themselves and with the SBOE, as well as their recognition of the need to compromise strategically; (b) their commitment to state-level coherence in first-year writing; (c) their consistent use of effective rhetoric to make persuasive arguments in support of ethical placement processes; and (d) their use of multiple measures and placement alternatives, which allowed them to collect data and tailor their placement processes to each institution while acknowledging the standardization called for by the state.

In 2007, after almost 10 years of following required SBOE guidelines for placement based on SAT and ACT scores, which they found to be an "inappropriate" and "questionable educational practice" (Estrem, Shepherd, & Duman, 2014, p. 95), English department chairs and WPAs from the eight Idaho public colleges and universities met with the SBOE to share concerns and try to instigate change. Beginning in 2007, WPAs and other stakeholders at state public colleges and universities combined to form the English Placement Task Force (EPTF), which established a relationship with the SBOE and proved their ethos as an expert and collective voice. This allowed them to pilot an "evidence-based placement model" that consisted of five principles: guided self-assessment, advising, additional student data, robust course information, and currently used standardized scores (Estrem et al., 2014, p. 98). Each institution developed placement measures appropriate to their student population so long as the pilot adhered to any four of the five principles (Estrem et al., 2014, p. 97).

Throughout the piloting, the EPTF provided updates to the SBOE and key stakeholders at their institutions, while continuing to respect the SBOE's requirement to use ACT/SAT scores as at least one measure in their pilot placement decisions (Estrem et al., 2014, p. 102). This allowed them to collaborate with the SBOE on two evidence-based recommendations: "1) implement the Idaho Placement Framework to encourage context-specific placement practices and 2) ensure that all college-level writing courses earn college credit, including English 90 [developmental writing]" (Estrem et al., 2014, p. 103). Northern Idaho College and Boise State University continued the pilots, but students had to opt in—they could either be placed by their ACT/SAT scores with cutoffs determined by the SBOE, or they could choose to be placed via the pilot program (Estrem et al., 2014, p. 103). Within two years, the task force wanted to discuss next steps with the SBOE, but conversations stalled as the SBOE turned its attention toward joining forces with CCA.

Despite speculation about CCA's motivations, the EPTF effectively argued against standardized tests as placement measures by shifting their language so that it strategically framed their interests as reducing remediation, thus conceptually in sync with CCA and the SBOE. They then used data to demonstrate that standardized tests tend to place students in remedial courses (Estrem et al., 2014, p. 105). As part of Complete College Idaho (CCI), whose goal is 60% postsecondary completion rate for students by 2020 (Idaho State Board of Education, n.d.), the SBOE wanted to "transform remediation" (Estrem et al., 2014, p. 105)—by essentially eliminating developmental coursework at the postsecondary level. Here, in stark difference to Florida program directors and writing faculty, whose only recourse was to react to legislation put into place without their input, and to Wisconsin faculty who had to combine proactive and reactive methods in response to budget cuts, the EPTF's proactive relationship-building with the SBOE and its Chief Academic Officer proved beneficial; they were contacted for input in developing CCI and therefore had a say in how the transformation of writing placement and coursework took place.

Since 2014, public institutions in Idaho have provided for-credit options for underprepared students (Idaho State Board of Education, 2013). As the state legislature mandated the elimination of non-credit bearing remedial courses from public postsecondary institutions in Idaho (Idaho State Board of Education, 2015), WPAs noted “expectations for first-year writing courses have a great deal of coherency around the state and are supported by a strong and active network [of] first-year writing programs at two- and four-year institutions” (First-Year Writing Across Idaho, n.d.). After more than 15 years of compromise and relationship-building coupled with an evidence-based professional ethos, the EPTF convinced the SBOE to support underprepared students in their transition from high school to college, despite the elimination of courses like basic writing.

Anticipating Legislation in Higher Education in Pennsylvania and Nationally

Florida, Wisconsin, and Idaho suggest issues of placement, alignment, and first-year curricula are policy pressure points related to economics throughout the country. In Pennsylvania, creating a legislative environment where stakeholders are involved in conversations about higher education, in contrast to Florida prior to Senate Bill 1720 (2013), will require determined proactive measures on the part of faculty, staff, and administrators in higher education. Although it is highly unlikely Pennsylvania would pass a bill similar to Florida’s Senate Bill 1720 given the state’s somewhat reluctant approach to treat standardized assessments as graduation requirements, the current state climate does suggest that some kind of legislative action designed to reduce costs and believed to increase the total number of degrees granted is not out of the question.

For example, the most recent Commonwealth of Pennsylvania Board of Education (2016) Annual Report referenced progress toward the 2005 Master Plan for Higher Education (p. 12), which is explicit about cost-cutting methods for remedial education, including separating funding for remedial coursework in order to evaluate the costs (Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, 2005, p. 22), which is similar to funding models for remedial education in Wisconsin and Florida; the changes to the UW System structure are unclear about whether that funding model will change. While our state system is, admittedly, different than the UW System, we note the importance of the Wisconsin restructuring plan—four-year schools will be combined with local two-year schools—as possibly relevant to Pennsylvania and our own institutional context. Although PASSHE does not control Pennsylvania community colleges—they are supported regionally by taxes and local school districts—the 2005 Commonwealth Master Plan for Higher Education also recommended “efforts be made to ensure, to the greatest extent possible, that the lowest cost-effective methods be identified for different populations. This might include, as appropriate, moving all publicly-funded remediation to community colleges” (Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, 2005, p. 22). In some ways, this would result in the opposite situation as in Wisconsin by bulking up offerings and potentially enrollment at the community colleges. This would mean that universities like ours would no longer offer courses such as Basic Writing, even if we admitted students who might need it.

Despite the 2005 Master Plan’s mention of cutting developmental education, there is no evidence in Pennsylvania that the need for remediation has decreased. In fact, PASSHE’s (2014) Strategic Plan 2020 explicitly recognized not all students come to college with the skills they need to succeed, acknowledging the system’s challenge of adapting “to an ever-changing student population” (p. 2), specifically students with “academic support needs” (p. 2). Furthermore, it names “provid[ing] appropriate developmental education opportunities for students—traditional and nontraditional—to promote the success of all students admitted” (PASSHE, 2014, p. 9) as a specific aim. Clearly, the state’s goal-setting documents are at odds, one acknowledging the need for various kinds of supports for Pennsylvania’s higher education students and another dismissing that need altogether. When we place Pennsylvania’s contrasting aspirational documents within the context of a statewide and systemwide budget crisis, a search for a new system Chancellor, and calls for a “historic restructuring” (Shackner, 2017, para. 6) of the state system, extreme actions like those that occurred in Florida seem far more possible in Pennsylvania now than they did in 2005. It is this insecure fiscal climate, in fact, that has led our own administration recently to call for a more streamlined placement process in an attempt to place more students into our first-year composition course rather than basic writing. Ultimately, these various documents and bills illustrate that Pennsylvania is at a crossroads in its approach to maximizing access to higher education and to assessing secondary education, providing us with a critical moment to prepare for and, we hope, retain control over local writing assessments.

Lessons Learned and Strategies for Engaging State-Level Placement Politics

Adapting strategies from other states is complicated by differences in student demographics and structures of statewide systems of higher education (including institution-type and hierarchical relationships between two-year and four-year systems). Idaho, for example, has a more homogenous student population in terms of ethnic and linguistic diversity and a less complex state system of higher education given the small number of two-year and four-year institutions. Florida, on the other hand, has a significantly more diverse student population (58% of students in the Florida College System are minority students) and a more complex statewide system of higher education (Florida Department of Education, 2017). With over 800,000 students enrolled in seven different types of associate, certificate, and bachelor’s degree programs, the sheer size of the Florida College System suggests that cohesion among programs, as achieved in Idaho, might not be practical and could come with costs that outweigh its political advantages (Florida Department of Education, 2017). In fact, researchers have discussed local control of Senate Bill 1720 as one of the bill’s positive features, “allow[ing] institutions to innovate and create solutions that worked with their institutional context to meet the needs of particular student populations on their campus” (Hu et al., 2016, p. 2).

We see Pennsylvania (and many other states, including Wisconsin) falling somewhere in between the demographic and structural extremes of Idaho and Florida. The PASSHE system is explicitly designed to offer accessible education to the future Pennsylvania workforce, but it is not considered as elite as the other four-year state-related institutions within the Commonwealth System of Higher Education (e.g., Penn State and University of Pittsburgh), given differences in the undergraduate student profile. In its accessibility, PASSHE is more akin to the California State System, which occupies a middle ground between the research-oriented University of California System and the open-access Community College System.

As a mid-complex state—one not as homogenous as Idaho but perhaps not as diverse or large as Florida—we see much to be learned from the cases of Wisconsin and Idaho in the ways they have used both proactive and reactive processes to support student success in placement, assessment, and in early-college literacy curriculum. In particular, five of their strategies are most useful to our own situation and potentially valuable to other higher education contexts: (a) paying attention to legislative efforts to define “college ready,” (b) building relationships with policymakers and committing to compromise, (c) creating system-wide first-year writing coherence, (d) using effective rhetoric, and (e) exploring multiple measures for placement processes.

Closely pay attention to legislative efforts to define “college-ready.” All three of these state narratives underscore the importance of attending to legislative efforts to define what it means to be a college-ready writer. In our research for this article, we have learned of multiple ways recent legislation and proposed legislation in Pennsylvania have altered graduation requirements for secondary students and placement procedures at state institutions. For example, Pennsylvania recently created multiple pathways for career and technical students to graduate from high school. There is also momentum to legislate CLEP agreements with standardized assessments, as the Senate is currently considering PA Senate Bill 634, which would mandate equivalency between AP exam scores of 3 and English 101 at state or state-affiliated institutions of higher education (PA. Gen. Assemb., 2017). Although this proposed legislation does not change our own school’s placement procedures (we already accept a score of 3), it would alter placement procedures at other state institutions.

As we anticipate more movement in relation to placement over the next several years, we recognize how the EPTF’s successful advocacy in Idaho would not be possible without WPAs’ close attention to their state’s politics. As Estrem et al. (2014) pointed out, “Placement is assessment” (p. 92), and “assessment is political” (p. 92), a connection that should drive administrative work and our research. Our own research has revealed the complexity of maintaining this awareness in a state where policy changes can originate from multiple, rarely cohesive sites—for example, state representatives, our Board of Governors, the PASSHE, the Governor, or the State Board of Education—where public and government sentiment towards standardization is inconsistent and where budgetary crises are affecting education at every level.

Awareness of the political landscape in this context is even more critical, however, as the urgency of state budgets and the dividing goals among political bodies suggest that legislation and policy change is both probable and unpredictable, which may be the case in many states. Therefore, awareness of policy and politics should be a guiding principle for stakeholders in any institution of higher education with concerns about student preparedness and educational access.

Attempt coherence in first-year writing at the state level. We learned from Idaho that statewide coherence can be a strategy for retaining localism. Whether in smaller, more homogenous systems or in larger complex systems, programs can develop coherence—and thus be prepared to sustain their programs against financial and political pressure—by using best practices in the field as defined by national organizations and by reporting program developments, as well as placement and assessment outcomes to administration and policy-makers. Although Idaho’s level of coherence around placement may not be possible in a system as large as Pennsylvania’s serving disparate student populations, we could attempt coherence in other ways, for instance, by trying to align course outcomes and programmatic goals regionally with postsecondary schools closest to us that serve similar student populations, or at our own institution by aligning the writing curriculum more closely with Council of Writing Program Administrators outcomes (CWPA, 2014) and those of other national organizations. This would allow us to defend courses by arguing their coherence with best practices.

We also see ways to create more coherence in developmental and first-year writing. First, by creating official affiliates of the CWPA or a stakeholder task force of sorts, as they did in Idaho, our own state system writing programs could become more credible as a collective voice at the state-level table. Such a group could prepare a placement white paper—the EPTF did in Idaho—to present to state legislators, academic advisory councils of the PASSHE system, and the State Board of Education, to which all institutions of public education in the state report, including PASSHE and the Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE), the state’s governing body of K-12 education.

Although system-wide coherence around first-year writing may not be possible or practical given the demographic differences between our various institutions in Pennsylvania, it makes sense to have conversations about coherence between local, often feeder high schools, and our first-year writing program, as many universities in Wisconsin have done (University of Wisconsin, 2014). A 2016 report by the PDE emphasizes local control and suggests it would be willing to consider contextualized assessments at the high school level, developed and perhaps scored by local educators (p. 8), which could provide a ripe opportunity for collaboration between the state system and secondary school districts. Our own university has established connections with local

schools through its office of teacher education; this is a potential way to start conversations about writing pathways that are mutually beneficial to all of our programs and students. While not all universities may have the benefit of these built-in relationships, they can still aspire to coherence.

Build relationships and compromise. Both Wisconsin and Idaho highlight the effectiveness of collaboration, self-sponsored coalition-building, and compromise. We recognize that forming a working network with other state system WPAs and with our high school counterparts (particularly those working in the districts that very often feed into our university) would provide us a more defined sense of placement concerns across our state on both the secondary and postsecondary levels, a stronger voice in legislative conversation, and a better chance at applying the PDE's recent acknowledgement of local assessments to the postsecondary conversation. As we look ahead to the rollout of the Keystone Composition exam and further articulation agreements, we feel prepared to examine and revise our own placement procedures. Legislative compromise could be one viable exigence for this process.

We are concerned, however, that the controlling body of the PASSHE—a 20-member Board of Governors whose membership includes a mix of state legislators and government officials; university presidents, trustees, and students; a handful of governor-appointed “civilians”; and the State Secretary of Education (Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education, n.d.), who serves as the Chief Executive Officer of the State Board of Education and the head of the PDE—lacks faculty representation. This is the most important table in discussions about public higher education in Pennsylvania, and faculty notably are not sitting at it.

Other state systems facing a similar lack of representation could identify ways to use data and evidence-based practices to forge relationships between other institutions and the state: for example, publicizing online data from placement processes and assessments in order to easily illustrate effects of budget cuts and communicate with a broad audience the way schools in Wisconsin did, and/or by sharing data with policy-makers, like they did in Idaho, could help create a culture of transparency that could lead to trust and compromise.

Use effective rhetoric and create a strong ethos. If we've learned anything about ways to prevent our state system from dictating placement procedures or leaving those of us—as experts in composition, assessment, first-year writing, and basic writing—out of those conversations, it is that part of relationship-building that includes using effective rhetoric and creating an ethos that allows legislators and policy-makers to trust us. The best example of this is how WPAs at Boise State used data about high school standardized tests (e.g., ACCUPLACER)—the same tests the state wanted to use to place students out of remedial courses—to show that these tests “have been demonstrated to misplace students, will force students into remedial coursework and will make the other proposed reforms of little effect” (Estrem et al., 2014, p. 105). Rather than completely dismiss the state's desire to use standardization, they effectively wielded the rhetoric of the state (e.g., the phrase “transform remediation”) to signal interest in working within the state's framework, yet also further their own agenda of localism and support for underprepared students (Estrem et al., 2014, p. 105).

At our institution, we are also piloting initiatives to support students in our developmental writing courses, including a one-credit studio course and enhanced placement procedures. Many writing programs situated within similarly complex state institutions wishing to retain those supports—and the courses themselves—would benefit from matching their programmatic goals with the goals of their state systems in strategically rhetorical ways. For example, in performing research for this article, we have uncovered multiple documents related to Pennsylvania higher education legislation, including plans written by the state system and the PDE, that we might not have known about until those plans were in place and our programs were on the chopping block. Our awareness now allows us to match our language with theirs toward persuasive ends, much like they did in Idaho.

Consider the use of multiple measures assessment processes. Our institution's writing placement involves a traditional timed-writing exam that most students take at New Student Orientation or portfolio submission prior to orientation (some students are exempted from placement by SAT, ACT, and/or AP exam scores, or acceptance to the Honors College). Although our writing program has worked diligently to protect this locally-designed and controlled placement mechanism, models like Idaho and Wisconsin's dynamic placement processes with alternatives, both appeasing the states' mandates to use standardized test scores, and Wisconsin's adoption of multiple measures at their two-year colleges have encouraged us to seek out more information about students' academic experiences and preparation, such as high school GPA and transcripts, to use when placing students into either Basic Writing or Composition I.

Use of Keystone Exam scores for placement is not yet a reality in Pennsylvania (and may not become a reality given the state's shifting stance towards standardized tests and keen interest in having a variety of alternative assessments). However, broadening our placement practices leaves the door open for using Keystone Exam scores as one measure among several others. This is a more proactive method of acknowledging the potential information that can be yielded from such assessments while contextualizing that assessment within a multifaceted placement process tailored to our particular student population, as national organizations are calling for (see, for instance, the NCTE Two-Year College Association White Paper on Placement Reform, 2016). Institutions in other states could similarly explore ways that new CCSS-aligned assessment might yield data that could be included as part of a

multiple measure placement decision.

Conclusions

The cases of Florida, Wisconsin, and Idaho suggest that a forward-looking stance is necessary for any public institution of higher education in a state where education policy or funding is volatile. With our university in fiscal crisis and our state only now beginning to reinvest in secondary and higher education after years of gross negligence (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2016), we consider preparing ourselves through research into statewide and PASSHE policy as well as self-study of our writing program, assessment, and placement processes as necessary anticipatory steps. Two recent changes at our own university—pressure from administration to increase enrollment by having fewer students take placement tests, and the restructuring of our regional support campus—have made us particularly cognizant of ways to use programmatic and institutional data (placement, enrollment, and assessment) to reflect on our processes and our courses, to have in place “anticipatory” actions should we lose the current systems that we know support our students well, and, as Estrem et al. (2014) said, to prepare ourselves for a seat at the state policy table.

Given national attention on standardization, developmental education, and postsecondary attrition, it is imperative for stakeholders at state institutions to use what they can learn from colleagues in other states to protect their programs, their courses, and, most importantly, their students. For state systems in a mid-range of complexity like the PASSHE (somewhat ethnically, linguistically, and socio-economically diverse; designed to maximize access to a college degree; and situated within a complex broader state system of higher education), we see the most significant challenge and opportunity of our anticipatory stance being how to balance efforts to create coherence and thus political power and the local flexibility to respond to the demographic and institutional shifts in our own context. This multi-state review suggests that balancing both approaches is crucial to creating effective placement procedures within a responsive policy environment.

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