Reflection. An Admitted Student is a Qualified Student: A Roadmap for Writing Placement in the Two-Year College

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Trends reported from the National Center for Education Statistics reveal the imperative for such work. As Table 1 demonstrates, 68% of students at two-year colleges in the US are enrolled in developmental courses; the highest proportion of those are Black, Hispanic, and students of all other races. At four-year colleges, the disparities continue, with Black and Hispanic students disproportionally placed in developmental courses. Table 2 provides graduation rates at two-year colleges at 150% of normal time. Overall, the rate is 29.4% for all students, with lower rates for students who are Black or two or more races. In four-year colleges, only 59.8% of students graduate in six years after entering undergraduate programs, with lower rates for Black and Hispanic students.

Table 1

Basic Skills Course Enrollment in 2003-2004 Beginning Postsecondary Institutions

Type of Institution	Total	White		Black		Hispanic		Asian		All other races	
	%	%	Avg. # courses	%	Avg. # courses	%	Avg. # courses	%	Avg. # courses	%	Avg. # courses
4-year	39.6	35.8	1.8	65.9	2.8	52.6	2.8	30.4	2.1	28.4	2.3
2-year	68.0	63.6	2.4	78.3	3.5	74.9	4.0	68.1	3.5	71.4	3.1

Note. Adapted from *Remedial Coursetaking at U.S. Public 2- and 4-Year Institutions: Scope, Experience, and Outcomes* (Table 2, p. 19), by X. Chen, 2016, U.S. Department of Education. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics.

Table 2

Graduation Rates by Institution and Race/Ethnicity

Type of Institution	Total	White	Black	Hispanic	Asian/ Pacific Islander	Two or More Races
4-Year (6 years after start)_	59.8	63.9	39.7	54.4	72.9	59.5
2-Year (150% of normal time)	29.4	29.4	23.7	33.8	35.4	25.9

Note. Cohort year 2010. Tables 326.10 and 326.20 reprinted from *Digest of Education Statistics 2017*, by T. D. Snyder, C. de Brey, and S. A. Dillow, 2019, National Center for Education Statistics, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education, pp. 562, 565.

As these alarming trends suggest and research from this special issue supports, traditional methods of placement testing disproportionally place diverse students, especially those enrolled at two-year colleges, into remedial courses. Too few persist through the developmental writing sequence, and too few succeed in subsequent course work. The teaching of writing at two-year colleges, thus, is done against the backdrop that few students who begin in developmental coursework succeed in the gateway course (see Nastal, 2019; also Bailey, Jaggars, & Jenkins, 2015). This narrative of failure makes the work of two-year college writing instructors especially complex “in helping students from diverse backgrounds develop the academic skills and social capital required to navigate the complex cultural system that is higher education” (Hassel et al., 2015; see also Hassel & Giordano, 2015). When those students do not graduate, students, colleagues, administrators, and parents are dissatisfied. Legislators go on to launch ill-informed legislative attacks.

In this often toxic environment, it is best to turn to the most comprehensive study of remediation that has been undertaken by the US Department of Education. Table 1 is taken from that 2016 study by Chen, and attention to it illustrates the need for innovation in writing placement. Drawn from the 2004/2009 Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study and its associated 2009 Postsecondary Education Transcript Study, Chen’s study establishes that the intensity of remediation is especially apparent at public two-year institutions. From there, the situation worsens. Strikingly, weakly prepared students identified in the data (25% at public two-year institutions) did not take any remedial courses, while strongly prepared students took one or more remedial courses (48% at public two-year institutions). Such findings demonstrate profound disjuncture between high school and college standards as well as inconsistent policies on remedial education across institutions and states. While failure to complete a gatekeeper course is

not evidence of misplacement for all students, there is substantial evidence that students who need support are not given it, and students who are ready to proceed to credit-bearing courses are unnecessarily held back in their progress toward retention and timely graduation.

Further, it is important in the current environment that we not conflate remedial courses in mathematics with remedial courses in English. It is commonly and mistakenly assumed that more students are enrolled in non-credit mathematics courses than in equivalent English courses—and that students fail when they are not able to complete their mathematics requirements. As Chen (2016) showed, 78% of students in two-year public institutions were enrolled in remedial English courses (Table 4, p. 26), while 55.2% of two-year students in these institutions were enrolled in remedial mathematics courses (Table 5, p. 27). Indeed, the overall enrollment in college-level math courses is not as high as that for college-level English courses: 54.3% of beginning public two-year college students took a college-level mathematics course, while 77.9% of those students took a college-level English course. It is important that patterns of remediation be disaggregated into both mathematics and English. The data compellingly show that over-remediation in English may be a more powerful barrier to retention and graduation than mathematics remediation.

In an environment of unwarranted attacks on community colleges, ill-informed legislative demands, and flat-earth wrong assumptions about patterns of remediation, it is worth quoting in detail the conclusion of Chen's (2016) report:

> Given the different outcomes experienced by remedial completers and noncompleters, further research is needed to identify the underlying obstacles that hinder remedial course completion. Understanding the major obstacles can help colleges and universities better identify struggling students, design strategies to help them overcome their hurdles, and make remedial programs more effective in retaining students and enabling them to progress to college-level curricula and beyond. (p. 57)

Provided with such evidence, we have sought over the last decade to bring awareness to issues of fairness and justice in writing assessment. Inspired by the work of Marilyn Sternglass, Mike Rose, and many other writing researchers as well as our own experiences teaching in community colleges, adult literacy programs, English as an additional language programs, four-year writing programs (as part-time lecturers, full-time lecturers, and tenure-stream faculty), and graduate programs filled with English language learners, our goal has been to ask critical questions of the systems of assessment imposed on our students. Such systems are often driven by pre-packaged, purchased tests used for placement that have little to do with either the institutional realities in which writing teachers work or the students we serve. For Mya, for example, that has meant researching the ways that placement testing—even locally developed models—may be poorly designed for culturally and linguistically diverse, first-generation students. She wrote her dissertation on the topic, and she has continued to do research on students' experiences with writing assessment in an attempt to identify unintended discrimination. Jessica's work on placement has been influenced by her experiences teaching students in open-access institutions, in basic writing classes, and in English language learning programs in the US and abroad. For Norbert, who grew up in apartheid New Orleans and began his career at Mercer County Community College in New Jersey, that questioning meant returning to first principles of education as the creation of opportunity structures for students—and identification of the inequalities that exist when those opportunities are systematically denied by structural bias.

These experiences have led us over the last decade to advance ideas, such as the use of disparate impact analysis for programmatic self-study (not merely legal claims); the need for ethical as well as technical perspectives on fairness; and the value of sociocultural research, with special attention to translingual, anti-racist, and queer scholarship in assessment (e.g., Elliot, 2016; Poe, Elliot, Cogan, & Nurudeen, 2014; Poe, Inoue, & Elliot, 2018). For this *JWA* special issue, we also draw on the tradition of thought associated with satyagraha ("insistence on truth") as formulated by Gandhi (1928, p. 74). Principles of standpoint, sacrifice, love, firmness, resistance, and consequence serve as ways to reconceptualize student agency and reexamine paternalistic assumptions underlying placement policies. Focus on agency is also informed by the capabilities approach of Nussbaum (2011). Her stance toward capability is especially appealing in terms of writing placement as she turns away from the cruelty of meritocratic approaches and emphasizes dignity and respect by proposing an alternative approach: "Those who need more help to get above the threshold get more help" (p. 24). Alert to such theories, we therefore ask, with Gandhi and Nussbaum, basic questions: *"What is each student able to do and able to be as a writer?" "What brings students most dignity?"* The answer to these questions should inform the road upon which students travel in their college-level writing careers. We understand that the road we seek to pave here is aspirational, that some institutions may never reach the endpoint, but the articles in this special issue demonstrate the value of an aspirational orientation toward placement testing and the teaching of writing. Aspiration drives us forward and, as is the case in this special issue, brings together coalitions of teachers and scholars to address inequality.

Principles of the Roadmap

An Admitted Student is a Qualified Student: A Roadmap for Writing Placement in the Two-Year College is based on two sources of evidence and five principles drawn from this special issue, TYCA positions, and our research on fairness.

The first source of evidence is the fact that US public two- and four-year institutions require an admissions application that demonstrates prior learning. In institutions classified as open admissions, a high school diploma or a state-issued high school equivalency credential is required. In most cases of admission, existing information can be accessed about student ability. In cases where no such data are available—for example, returning students who have been out of school for decades or refugee students for whom no records exists—there may be a limited use for pre-packaged tests but done so with two caveats: (1) that students be allowed to retake the test and (2) that students be permitted to submit other writing samples in support of prior learning. The goal must be to assess student writing for the purposes of accurate classroom context, not merely to gather a score. We, therefore, affirm TYCA's position and hold that this existing information should be used, when available, to support admitted students instead of information derived from high stakes placement tests—timed, pre-packaged assessments that are administered in a single sitting. Our main concern here is that pre-packaged placement tests fail to capture the writing construct in its cognitive, interpersonal, intrapersonal, and neurological domains (White, Elliot, & Peckham, 2015). In other words, such tests reduce writing to the narrowest of concepts—virtually meaningless for the purposes of assessing how a student will perform in college-level writing classes. In a similar fashion, while we acknowledge that some students may not have the writing capabilities of others, all deserve the dignity of credit-bearing coursework.

Accompanying the presence of existing information is a second source of evidence: Unwarranted remediation has a negative impact on students (see, for instance, Belfield & Crosta, 2012; Scott-Clayton, 2012). As shown in Table 1, many students take remedial courses—and many of those students do not persist. According to information gathered by the Community College Research Center, only 20% of students referred to math remediation—and 37% of those referred to reading remediation—complete a gatekeeper course in the relevant subject area within three years. Persistence is lowest for men, students of color, and part-time students. Sub-group analysis by Bailey, Jeong, and Cho (2010) revealed,

> Men, Black students, and those attending part-time or studying in a vocational area had lower odds of progressing through their developmental sequences. Black students had particularly low odds when they were referred to developmental math at two or three or more levels below college-level. The gender effect is strong throughout the entire sequence for both math and reading, but the negative effect of age applies mostly to reading. (p. 264)

These two sources of evidence—the first positive in reminding us that there are multiple sources of information available about student performance that do not involve test scores and the second negative in documenting the devastating impact of remedial practices—point to the failure of a single test score as an equitable mechanism for placement. Given the sources of prior learning evidence available about entering students, there is no need to continue to rely on a single test score from pre-packaged assessment. Student success can be achieved by many paths. TYCA (Hassel et al., 2015) has made this claim particularly clearly in their "White Paper on Developmental Education Reforms," which describes the six prominent models that colleges have been using for decades to accelerate students' progression through developmental sequences and to prepare them for college-level coursework: mainstreaming, studio courses, compression, integration or contextualization, stretch courses, and module courses (pp. 236-237). TYCA (Hassel et al., 2015) has also summarized additional supports institutions have implemented in the wake of legislative mandates, including bridge programs, accelerated learning models, and purchased supplemental learning materials (e.g., Pearson's MySkillsLab) (p. 231).

The sources of evidence along with research, such as that by Olga Rodriguez, Marisol Cuellar Mejia, and Hans Johnson (2018), give rise to the aphorism *an admitted student is a qualified student. An admitted student is a qualified student* is a capabilities approach with the imperative that students accepted into community colleges deserve the dignity of placement and curricular alignment that ensures their success. Given empirical evidence, we have a responsibility to reconceptualize dramatically what writing placement should be—and to create imaginatively a forward-looking vision for the principles that should guide assessment associated with placement decisions. That work begins with the Forum of this special issue combined with the five principles below. Visually, that work is illustrated in Figure 1, below.

When developmental writing classes and two-year college success rates can be defined along race/ethnicity and class lines, we must

- reimagine the meaning of "college readiness" in ways that advance student agency,
- reimagine placement as a means to expand access to educational opportunity while supporting students' individual goals, and
- reimagine the purposes, structures, language, and literacy ideologies of developmental support.

The work of writing placement reform must also be supported by scholarship

- that includes two-year college voices,
- that offers actionable directions regarding the allocation of resources, and
- that articulates a common vision among site-based communities of practice through a fairness-first framework.

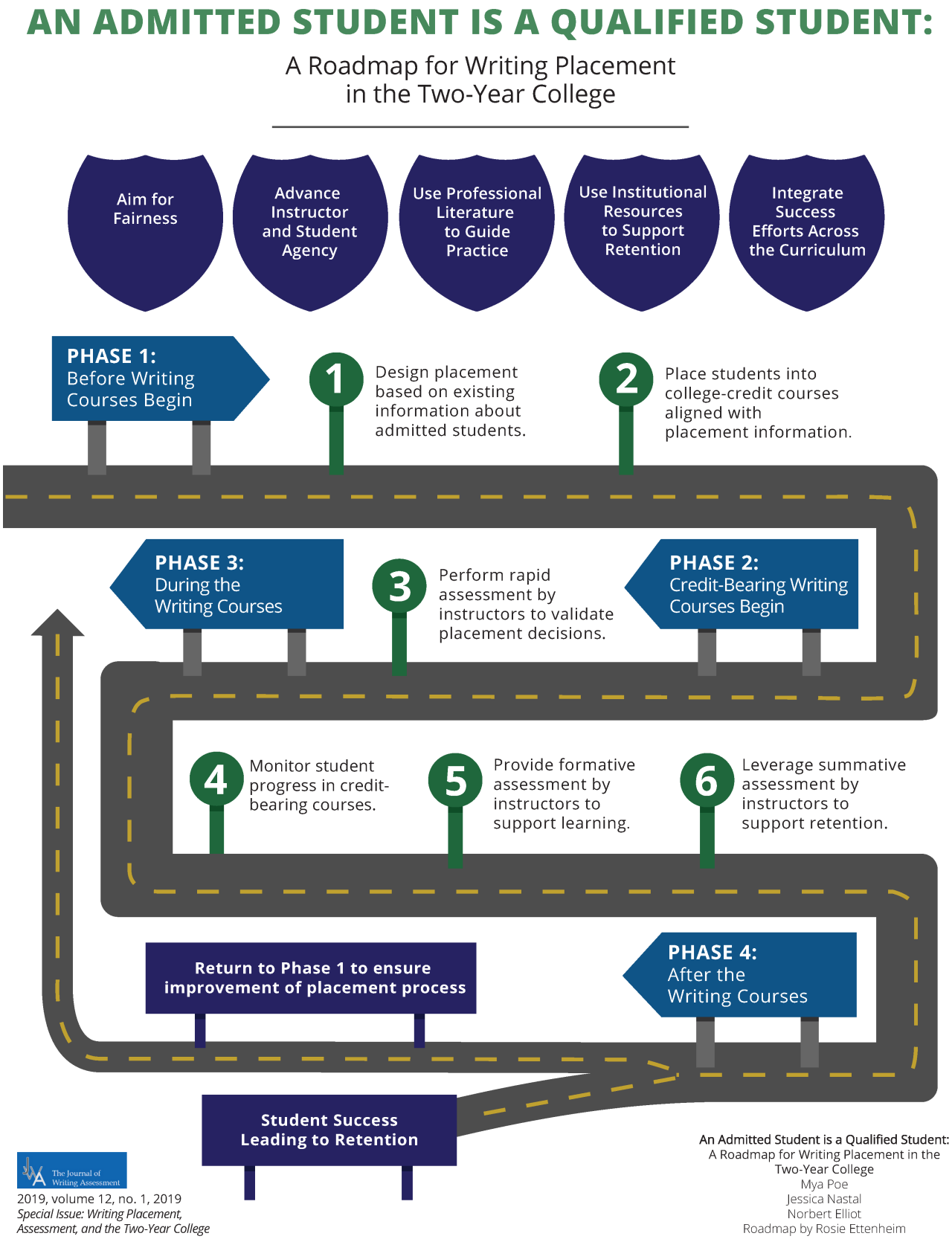

Figure 1. Roadmap: *An Admitted Student is a Qualified Student.*

We turn now to five principles shown in Figure 1 that we have developed over the last decade in our research on assessment:

Aim for Fairness

The function of writing placement is to create opportunities for student learning. These opportunities begin with fairness, understood as the first virtue of writing assessment. Fairness in writing assessment (in this case, the systems used to place a student into a writing course) is defined as the identification of opportunity structures created through maximum construct representation.

Constraint of the writing construct is to be tolerated only to the extent to which benefits are realized for the least advantaged (Elliot, 2016).

Advance Instructor and Student Agency

As is the case with human capability in general, writing capability is fluid and malleable. Rather than base instruction and assessment on narrowly-defined aspects of writing, such as knowledge of conventions and mode of discourse competency, instruction and assessment should be based on a much larger vision of what writing is and what writers can do. In drawing on a robust construct representation, teachers have more agency to develop assignments and formative assessments that help their students develop as writers (Bennett, 2011). In literacy studies research, the power of an expanded view of writing is a point echoed repeatedly to allow learners to draw on their cultural and linguistic resources in learning to write.

Use Professional Literature to Guide Practice

Rapidly expanding research in both writing studies and educational measurement illustrate the potential that arises from programmatic research. Present knowledge about best practices in teaching and assessing writing comes from four sources: meta-analytic studies (Graham & Perin, 2007), expert panel recommendations (Adler-Kassner & Wardle, 2015; Graham et al., 2016), consensus statements (O'Neill, Adler-Kassner, Fleischer, & Hall, 2012), and teacher-researchers, such as those published in this special issue who work with students every day. As our TYCA (2016) and Forum colleagues have made clear, it is essential to use this body of knowledge in planning innovative curriculum and formative assessment episodes (e.g., Miller, 2002) that advance student potential.

Use Institutional Resources to Support Retention

Integrate Success Efforts Across the Curriculum

The final principle, and the most aspirational, broadens the concept of success to include all areas of student services, including advisement, health services, services for undocumented students, support for veterans, and technological support. Mental health, in particular, is a significant issue on college campuses and one that is integral to student success (Kadison, & DiGeronimo, 2004). As explained by Kitzrow (2003) in her review of the changing mental health needs of college students, "It is important for administrators, faculty, and staff to understand the profound impact that mental health problems can have on all aspects of campus life, and to treat mental health issues as an institutional responsibility and priority" (p. 176). From the board of trustees to the student senate, each organizational unit should be seen as contributing to integrated success efforts.

As all aspects of campus are realigned to advance student capability, the question "What is each student able to do and able to be as a writer?" is expanded to "What is each student able to do and able to be, and how may those capabilities be advanced through coordinated efforts?" "What brings students most dignity?"

The Roadmap

In *Phase 2: Credit-Bearing Writing Courses Begin*, teachers support alignment decisions through rapid assessment **(3)**. The goal of rapid assessment is to validate placement decisions, ensuring students have been placed in the correct course. If students have been placed incorrectly, they are directed to the appropriate course—a method that has historically been used in some EAL and developmental writing courses precisely because faculty understand the repercussions for under-placed students. If, for example, intensive work is needed, the student may be invited to enroll in a smaller class or receive extra support from the writing center (see Hassel et al., 2015, p. 234). Moreover, rapid assessment, like guided self-placement, gets students writing on the first day of class and introduces them to the concept of college-level writing. For instructors, rapid assessment provides the flexibility to change easily. For example, one semester instructors might ask for an instant draft of an essay to see how their students understand the concepts of genre, style, and organization. If this task is too cumbersome or does not align with the course calendar, it is easy enough to change rapid assessment to a letter of introduction. Unlike purchased placement tests, such in-class writing provides samples of student writing completed *in situ* of the educational context in which learning occurs.

This process invites teachers to participate in curriculum and placement design and encourages teachers to work together to articulate the goals for their own courses as well as the goals for each of the courses offered through the English department or writing program. As such, it can be used as a professional development opportunity—for example, as a way for writing and language teachers to come together to discuss the ways that ESL and writing courses support each other. For part-time instructors shuttling across multiple campuses, rapid assessment becomes a moment to stop and hold in focus the identities of students at this one institution—to take a look at their writing before the semester workload becomes overwhelming and exhaustion leads to numbness (Sullivan, 2013).

Validating placement decisions continues through *Phase 3: During the Writing Courses*. Throughout the course, student progress is monitored to ensure that the placement decision, which was supported by the instructor's rapid assessment, continues to be the best decision for the student **(4)**. Monitoring student progress from afar, however, is inadequate. Without teacher input, assessment simply becomes a bookkeeping exercise. Thus, as part of gathering information about student progress, teachers provide formative assessment such that the classroom becomes a place where assessment and learning work together to support student writing **(5)**. Comments on student papers, peer feedback, and any number of other formative measures together provide a more nuanced portrait of student progress. And, summative assessment measures provided by instructors offer opportunities to support retention **(6)**. Failing assignment grades, for example, can be used as a means to identify students who need additional support while the formative assessment evidence gathered can be used to determine how to support those students; similarly, they can be used to identify areas of the curriculum where instructors need more support. While present throughout the process, assessment for learning is most apparent in Phase 3.

Placement decisions continue in *Phase 4: After the Writing Courses*. After writing courses are complete, summative data can be used to document student success through retention or other means chosen by the college (e.g., successful transfer rates). Crucially, at this point, the evidence must point to improved placement processes. There are several ways to improve placement processes, including conducting disparate impact analysis to determine if there are unintended effects of placement on certain groups, such as English language learners, returning students, or students with disabilities (Poe & Cogan, 2016). Other means to improve placement processes include refining the multiple measures gathered about admitted students, revising rapid assessment, and providing professional development opportunities for teachers to research and share formative assessment practices.

Other Roads, New Maps

Drawing on the research in this special issue, TYCA positions, and our research on fairness, *An Admitted Student is a Qualified Student: A Roadmap for Writing Placement in the Two-Year College* (Figure 1) is a dramatic reconceptualization of college placement practices—one that humanizes placement assessment by marshalling resources toward student success. The question is not whether some students need additional support for their writing; rather, the question is whether we are using approaches to identify the writing capabilities of each student in a way that dignifies individual learning. In this process, fairness can never be achieved if it remains only a theoretical ideal and not subjected to practical application. We must demand that *an admitted student is a qualified student*.

Author note

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