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It Takes a Campus:

Agility in the Development of Directed Self-Placement

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Abstract: Transitioning from a conventional placement model for first-year writing to a directed self-placement (DSP) model requires many stakeholders to shift their perspectives on students, assessment, and the nature of the work of writing program administrators (WPAs). This article recounts the communicative and administrative agility involved in launching DSP while simultaneously researching its effects on student success. It also foregrounds the shifts in numerous roles, including those of instructors, students, and advisors, and even our own roles as WPA-researchers, that have been prompted by the transition to DSP. In particular, this article explores the connections between those roles and academic paternalism, an attitude that presumes to know what is best for students, that doubts students' abilities to make good placement decisions, and that treats conventional placement outcomes as the measure against which DSP should be judged. Adherence to academic paternalism and its investment in "expert" assessment of student writing ability emerges as an obstacle to realizing the full potential of DSP to support equitable placement practices.

Keywords: directed self-placement, writing program administration, academic paternalism

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This is a story of agility, or the dexterity required of everyone involved in directed self-placement (DSP) as they navigate among research and administration, data and people, and ideas and procedures. In 2021, our writing program transitioned from conventional placement practices to DSP and simultaneously launched a two-year, IRB-approved (IRB Protocol #2021B0339), grant-supported study to track the effects of DSP on student success. Throughout this process, we found ourselves shifting roles (between administrators and researchers) at the same time as we sought to revise our relationship to placement (moving from gatekeepers to facilitators of students' decision-making). These role changes, as well as the processes of seeking and maintaining stakeholder buy-in and designing and revising the DSP instrument and processes, have required intellectual, pragmatic, and interpersonal agility. Just as we navigated these changes agilely (or at least tried to), others on campus, including students, writing program instructors, advisors, and administrators, demonstrated agility as well in order to adapt to a new placement philosophy and to the consequent changes to their roles in the process. In other words, the transition to DSP has required agility of everyone involved.

In postsecondary education, the term "agility" has recently emerged to characterize both the institution of and the individuals who work in higher education. Scholars of higher education administration explain agility as an institution's ability not only to respond to changing market forces but also to anticipate and welcome them as opportunities to thrive (Gillies, 2011).1 For individuals, including writing instructors and WPAs, agility is often invoked alongside characteristics like flexibility and adaptability, characteristics that are expected, for example, when moving from in-person to online teaching (Chen et al., 2021). For WPAs, Lang (2016) calls for agile project management "that encourages short, iterative cycles of planning, development, and critique" and "enables users to identify problems and pose solutions more quickly than traditional, linear development paradigms" (p. 100). In existing scholarship, then, agility is treated as both proactive efforts to anticipate and shape shifting circumstances and as reactive responses to identify and solve problems quickly and seamlessly. Our understanding of agility foregrounds the roles that people play as they simultaneously create, anticipate, and react to new circumstances. In a collaborative system like placement into first-year writing (FYW), changing key features of that system (such as by moving to DSP) also changes the roles played by the people involved. What we're calling for is awareness of those role shifts so that they can be approached intentionally, particularly by the WPAs and academic administrators who are likely to be leading efforts to launch student-centered placement processes.

As we have come to think of it, agility in the context of DSP refers to the reciprocal and relational process of navigating new roles that emerges in the context of adopting the practices of and the philosophy underlying DSP. In our story, agility develops as a characteristic not only of WPAs, but also of writing program instructors, campus academic advisors, and the students participating in DSP. Whereas conventional placement processes often rely on one or two metrics, such as standardized test scores, high school GPA, or placement test results, to determine a student's placement, DSP brings together many stakeholders' perspectives to develop a holistic view of students and to prioritize their agency and lived experiences (Klausman & Lynch, 2022).

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1 Of course, in higher education contexts, institutional agility is often achieved through contingent labor. In contrast to this application of agility, our use of the term to discuss the roles people play in developing and sustaining DSP in fact depends on some degree of job security for those involved.

The incorporation of various stakeholder perspectives is one feature of DSP that makes agility necessary, because attending to multiple perspectives can require and foster creative solutions to address different sets of needs and concerns, even when those concerns are at odds with one another. Consequently, stakeholders may need to reimagine their roles in the placement process and in relation to one another. For WPAs who collaborate with others inside and outside the writing program to launch and maintain DSP processes, agility also means adapting disciplinary values and research findings to the features and constraints of the local context. In our experience, role-agility was both a means of navigating uncertainty and a source of uncertainty itself, as we, instructors, advisors, and students sometimes took advantage of opportunities posed by new roles (we added "writing program researcher" to our previous role of "administrator"; students took on a more agential role in placement decisions) and sometimes grappled with the ambiguity of new roles (what does instructor or advisor expertise and experience count for in the context of DSP?). Given this uncertainty, agility involves ongoing reflection, self-questioning, and a willingness to readjust roles as circumstances change—necessary responses to uncertainty that also invite further uncertainty.

In what follows, we recount some of the twists and turns in our efforts to launch and sustain DSP as a placement practice for our campus. As of this writing, we are still collecting data on the effects of DSP on student success, and we plan to report on those findings in future publications. As we wrap up data collection, however, we wanted to share the story of the first few years of DSP from our perspective as WPA-researchers because we believe that our experiences will be helpful to WPAs, administrators, staff, and faculty engaged in or supportive of DSP. First, we describe our institutional context and explain why we decided to transition to DSP. Then, we discuss the process of persuading campus stakeholders to support us as we pursued this significant change in procedure. Next, we outline the process of designing our DSP instrument and detail some of the substantial revisions we've made in just the first two years based on early patterns that emerged in student placement and on insights provided by campus stakeholders. Throughout this discussion, we foreground the role-agility that was required as everyone involved adjusted to the new processes for DSP and the new philosophy underlying this approach to placement. Finally, we reflect on some unresolved issues in our DSP context, issues that we expect will require ongoing acts of administrative agility.

Context

Our story takes place at a small regional campus of a major Midwestern research university. The campus is one of four regional campuses that serve the university's open-access mission, offering a pathway for any student in our state with a high school diploma or GED to access postsecondary education. The campus is small, with enrollments over the past two years ranging from 820-950, nearly all undergraduates, many of whom campus-change to the university's largest campus after a year or two. Among the 298 students in the Autumn 2022 incoming class, approximately 26% were what the university terms "minority," 44% were first-generation college students, and 36% were eligible for Pell grants. The average ACT score for new first-year students was 22 (Ohio State University, 2022).

On this campus, incoming students can enroll in one of three writing courses:

- English 1110.01, "First-Year English Composition," a three-credit course that satisfies the General Education "Writing and Information Literacy" foundation. Sections of this course are capped at 19 students.
- English 1110.03,2 "First-Year English Composition," a three-credit course that follows the same curriculum and meets the same GE foundation as English 1110.01 but that is partnered with an additional credit hour of classroom-based tutoring each week for four credit hours in total. Sections of this course are capped at 15 students.
- English 1109, "Intensive Writing and Reading," a four-credit course (though the credits do not count toward graduation in some programs). Students who take English 1109 follow it with English 1110.03 to extend the support they receive in English 1109. Sections of this course are capped at 15 students.

Prior to 2021, we used what we are calling "conventional" placement instruments of standardized test scores combined with timed essays. Following our state's remediation-free standards (Ohio Department of Higher Education, 2021), students with an English ACT score of 18 or above or a Writing and Language SAT score of 480 or above were placed directly into English 1110.01. Students with test scores below those thresholds or with no score on file wrote a timed essay that asked them to summarize and respond to a brief reading. Writing program faculty assessed the essays and placed students into one of the three writing courses listed above.

We had been interested in DSP for several years leading up to 2021 for various reasons. First, we were aware of research demonstrating that students belonging to many of the groups (historically underserved minority, socioeconomically disadvantaged, and first-generation college students) who constitute a substantial number of the campus's students are harmed by placement decisions based on standardized test scores and by writing assessments that consciously or unconsciously reflect readers' linguistic biases (Elliot et al., 2012). Second, we found that our placement practices were inconsistent with the writing curriculum. As Nastal, Poe, and Toth (2022) explain, "the traditional placement algorithm is a model in which the student has no agency beyond demonstration of skills that may not be relevant to the writing course. The assessment process has been stripped from institutional or community context, which are essential aspects of any communicative act" (p. 7). We also knew that our conventional placement model did not account for several factors that contribute to success in writing courses (such as student confidence, work ethic, willingness to seek assistance, and previous experience with writing). Finally, we had heard reports of students who did not understand why they had been placed where they were; in particular, some English 1109 students seemed alienated by their placement and were consequently not engaged in their classes (see Chernekoff, 2003, p. 130, who notes a similar concern).

Although these issues had been present for several years, an opportunity emerged in 2021 that made it an ideal time to revise our approach to placement. That spring, we came across a call for proposals for an internal grant to support research on student success. The grant would afford us time (in the form of course releases) to develop a new placement process and study its effects; it also gave us access to student records and funding for statistical analysis of the effects of DSP on student success. This access to data and funding would allow us to heed Gere et al.'s

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[2] Our university also offers English 1110.02 (First-Year English Composition with a focus on literary texts) and an honors version of English 1110.01 and 1110.02; however, only English 1110.01 and 1110.03 are offered on this campus.

(2010) call for institutions to "devote more attention to considering the validity of DSP in their local contexts" (p. 170). It was important to us to be able to track what happened to students following placement: how they did in their writing classes, their overall GPA, and whether they continued into their second year of college and beyond. Because of institutional protocols, such data were largely inaccessible to us in our WPA roles alone; we could systematically study the effects of placement (in any form) only after we were awarded the student success grant. Although our campus is part of a major research university, as WPAs we faced many of the challenges "in collecting, accessing, and analyzing high-quality data—particularly disaggregated data—regarding both longstanding placement practices and new initiatives" noted by the contributors to *Writing Placement in Two-Year Colleges* (Nastal et al., 2022, p. 22). This grant, which was funded, allowed us to do the important but sometimes unsupported work of systematically researching the effects of our administrative decisions. It also shifted how we and others perceived our roles facilitating placement: we were no longer "just" administrators doing campus service; because of the grant, we were also researchers contributing to disciplinary knowledge-making.

Agile Coalition Building: Presenting DSP to Campus Stakeholders

Once we had determined that our context was favorable for transitioning to DSP, we set out to explain our plans and to seek support from key campus personnel. First, we met with Writing Program faculty: four non-tenure-track lecturers, most of whom had been with the program for more than a decade. We knew that any changes in the students who made up their classes and any resulting revisions to their pedagogy would affect these teachers directly. We also needed their flexibility and goodwill because we weren't sure that the teaching schedule that we had proposed for the upcoming year would reflect the ways students would place themselves, so their course assignments were likely to change. Finally, we needed their assistance to implement DSP, both to help us draft the descriptions of each writing course and to meet with students who wanted a one-on-one consultation to inform their course selections.

In this meeting, we foregrounded the programmatic and administrative motivations for transitioning to DSP: our desire to move away from assessments that likely harmed some students and that didn't reflect our program's curriculum and teaching practices. Some instructors expressed hesitancy about the idea of DSP, observing that their education and years of experience teaching FYW authorized the placement decisions they made in our conventional placement process. We now realize that, just as the kinds of expertise we enacted as WPAs would shift as we launched DSP and our study, we were asking the writing program faculty to adopt new roles as well. Instead of assuming the role of expert reader in assessing student writing to determine which courses students seemed prepared for, instructors' roles in placement would transition into something more like guides as they met with students to discuss their options for FYW courses. In other words, our WPA-researcher role agility had a corollary in instructors' roles in placement and possibly in how they thought of themselves as teachers. In addition to discussing the programmatic motivations and implications for our transition to DSP, we also introduced our still-nascent research plans, in particular asking if the instructors would be interested in assisting with our study by assessing the student writing samples we planned to collect. This invitation marked another shift in the instructors' roles: although they are well-educated in writing studies scholarship, they had rarely been involved in programmatic research. By the end of this conversation, everyone seemed willing to participate in our new DSP process and concurrent study.

Our next stop was with campus leadership: the Dean (the campus's top administrator) and the Associate Dean (who is responsible for academic programming on campus). At this meeting, we shared our new placement plan and requested their support for our grant proposal because a funding match from the campus would improve our chances of being awarded the grant. We presented the transition to DSP, then, as both a programmatic change in line with the campus's mission of making higher education accessible to all students and a research opportunity consistent with our university's scholarly profile. The deans confirmed their support for both DSP and the grant proposal, in part because we were able to reassure them that the research accompanying the programmatic change would allow us to make data-informed revisions to our placement processes as needed. Our project's commitment to equity and inclusion as well as the agility afforded by our simultaneous roles as researchers and administrators, which would allow us to make informed decisions about continuing or canceling DSP, proved crucial to winning the deans' support.

As we negotiated with the deans about what the campus match might look like for our grant, the balancing act we would need to perform between our roles as WPAs and as researchers became evident. The conversation pivoted around the question of what work we would ordinarily do as WPAs (creating and administering a placement process) and what work was tied to our research (seeking IRB approval, visiting classes to recruit student-participants, collecting data each semester, communicating with the granting office, etc.). At first it was tempting to lump all the components together as our "DSP project" because both the new placement procedures and the analysis of them emerged at the same time and were interlinked, as we expected our research findings to affect future revisions of the placement instrument. However, distinguishing between our administrative and research roles allowed Carolyn to redesignate one of her two annual WPA course releases for the research project. It also allowed Kelly (who was not the named WPA at the time and so did not receive administrative release time, even though she was fully collaborating in developing both the placement instrument and our research plan) to receive three course releases over the course of the two-year grant period. These course releases for research were vital to our ability to study the effects of DSP. Without making the distinction between DSP as an administrative task and DSP as a subject for research, we would not have been able to claim the time we needed to study the effects of our new DSP process.

The third major group of stakeholders that we spoke with was the admissions and advising staff, who work together to facilitate new-student orientation, including placement and course registration. We received notification that our grant had been funded just the day before this meeting. Unlike the conversations with the instructors and the deans, where we were seeking support for a plan that we were still formulating, the purpose of the meeting with admissions and advising was to inform them of decisions about placement that had already been made. For DSP to work, procedurally and conceptually, we needed this group to understand the changes we were making to placement so they could incorporate conversations about students' placement decisions into academic advising and course selection (Blakesley, 2002; Isaacs & Molloy, 2010).

Our simultaneous roles as WPAs and researchers were prominent in this meeting. As administrators, we came into the conversation with our expertise in writing pedagogy and assessment and with the deans' support of our plan. At the same time, we respected the work that admissions and advising staff do and their distinct perspective on student needs, so we didn't want to seem too heavy-handed in announcing the change to our placement processes. It was also important to us to reassure them that DSP would not result in more work for them because writing program faculty would be the ones to advise students about the courses; in other words, it was not our plan to ask them to take on new roles. Furthermore, we were able to share the news about our grant, which boosted our ethos as researchers and put our plans for DSP in a different light: this wasn't just Carolyn and Kelly experimenting with a scheme that they had dreamed up; this was funded Research in which advisors would play an indirect role. The fact that our move to DSP occurred in the context of "official" research meant that we could adopt roles as researchers, which authorized our plans for DSP more strongly than if we had presented our plans from our administrative roles alone.

Agile DSP Design: Resisting Academic Paternalism in Placement

In what follows, we discuss the deliberations and decisions behind the design, launch, and redesign of DSP over the course of two years. We share our story to highlight the many factors that informed our instrument design, the relational nature of the roles played by various stakeholders in the course of evaluating and revising the instrument, and the tensions and conflicts these redesigns required us to address, which illuminate not only the demands for agility placed on us as WPA-researchers but also on nearly everyone affected by the new placement process.

Version 1: Piloting DSP

In early spring 2021, we began building our DSP instrument so it would be ready to launch for the summer placement season. We designed our version of DSP starting from the premise that all placement processes should reflect the local context's writing practices (CCCC, 2022; Estrem et al., 2018; Gere et al., 2010; Gere et al., 2013; Moos & Van Zanen, 2019; Toth & Aull, 2014; Zanders & Wilson, 2019). We built our instrument in the learning management system Canvas because it was already part of students' orientation process. We used the quiz option in Canvas to design four surveys in what would become Version 1 of our DSP instrument. These four parts remained the same in later versions of the instrument:

- Part 1: Reading Survey. Reading is an integral part of writing development (CCCC, 2021), and each FYW course assigns different types of, and offers different levels of support for, reading. In Likert-scale and open-ended questions, students reflect on their reading habits, experiences, attitudes, challenges, and goals.
- Part 2: Writing Survey. In this survey, students consider their writing habits, experiences, attitudes, challenges, and goals. They also reflect on a piece of writing (academic or otherwise) that they are most proud of and why and describe their process for writing this piece.[3] Students answer Likert-scale questions about comfort and experience with different writing process tasks, such as developing ideas, presenting an argument, and using information to support their ideas. As we designed these questions, we were mindful that others' (sexist, racist, classist, ableist) assessments of the students' writing might cast a shadow on their own assessments (Ketai, 2012; Schendel & O'Neill, 1999).

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[3] Our DSP instrument mostly reflects what Jones (2008) identifies as the "five core principles behind DSP" with one exception: rather than have students produce a piece of writing and "reflect on their performance" (the third core principle), we ask students to reflect on a piece of writing they produced in the past that they are proud of (p. 58). Of course, this approach comes with its own affordances and limitations: students have more agency, and perhaps motivation, in talking about what they want to talk about, but depending on how much time has passed, students might not recall the details of their process. Similarly, critical self-evaluation of one's own writing is a learned skill (Schendel & O'Neill, 1999), so we prioritize reflection on their writing process and on why they feel the way they do about the selected piece of writing.

Therefore, we were intentional about phrasing questions to focus on students' own perspectives rather than what others thought about their writing (e.g., "What piece of writing are you most proud of, regardless of what teachers or others thought of it? Why are you proud of it?").

- Part 3: Student Success Skills Survey. As we know well, academic success skills play an important role in any class, including (or especially) in writing classes (Aull, 2021). Because our courses offer different levels of academic success support, we decided that academic success skills ought to be a factor in students' course selection. In this survey, students reflect on their academic success skills and answer Likert-scale questions on time management, asking for help, staying on task, and comfort with using new technologies.
- Part 4: Composition Course Selection Survey. In this final survey, students learn about the three composition courses offered on campus. We crafted these descriptions with input from the instructors who teach these courses and aligned them with the reflections students complete in the previous three surveys. That is, each course description summarizes the reading and writing tasks and student success skills that would be necessary to succeed in the class. After reading about the three courses, students select the course they think is the best fit for them and, in open text, explain why.

The final two questions ask how confident students feel about their decision and if they would like to talk to a writing program representative (an instructor or WPA) about their decision. We then provide a link they can follow to sign up for a Zoom meeting to talk through their selection.4

In summer 2021, we launched our pilot DSP instrument. During the pilot, only students who would have otherwise completed the conventional placement essay (that is, students whose standardized test scores were below established thresholds) were placed via DSP. Students with standardized test scores above those thresholds were automatically placed into English 1110.01, just as they were in our conventional placement model. During those first few months, it was exciting to see students making placement decisions, and it was a relief to see that our instrument and the technology that supported it all seemed to be working. We were, however, surprised that few students took advantage of the opportunity to meet with a representative of the writing program for one-on-one conversations about the writing course that would be the best fit for them. We were worried that students were perhaps not taking their decision seriously or were intimidated by the prospect of speaking with someone. "Surely they can't all be making good decisions without input from us," we thought. Our reaction reflected both uncertainty about students' approach to DSP and our own doubts that we had given students enough information to make their own decisions: if they met with someone from the writing program, we believed that they and we could be more confident in their decisions. At the time, we thought our worries reflected our deep commitment to students' success—"We worry because we care!"—and while this was partly true, we later understood that academic paternalism was also at play.

"Academic paternalism" is a phrase that has been used to identify a variety of behaviors that restrict or undermine the ability of someone to act autonomously in an academic setting. The phrase is frequently deployed without definition to negatively characterize a wide range of

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4 Due to logistical constraints in the summer orientation and course enrollment process, we cannot speak with students collectively or individually at orientation sessions; consequently, we decided that written materials (our DSP instrument) and videoconference sessions would be our best options for communicating with students about placement.

behaviors, including certain relationships among faculty, instances in which academic experts withhold knowledge from or enact policies without input from those they study or claim to serve, and institutional initiatives such as diversity training and content warnings on class readings. In our experience launching DSP, we identified (in ourselves and others) an attitude that presumed to know what was best for students, that doubted students' ability to make good placement decisions, and that treated conventional placement outcomes (specifically, the proportion of students placing into the developmental writing course) as the baseline against which DSP should be judged. This attitude was frequently well-meaning and driven by a common commitment to student success; however, it was embedded in institutional gatekeeping practices that are so familiar that it can be difficult to see them, let alone to challenge them.

Because we wanted to be certain that students understood the placement options available to them, we worked with the writing program instructors to develop a process to allow students to confirm their placement decisions in the first week of classes. After completing a series of activities and participating in a whole-class conversation that reviews the FYW curriculum and the three course options available to students (essentially replicating much of the information provided in the individual videoconference sessions that few students requested), students complete a short survey in which they confirm their placement or request to be moved to a different course. Even with the additional information provided by instructors and a week's experience in the class they initially selected, very few students have requested to change courses, suggesting to us that we should trust our placement process and students' placement decisions.[5]

Indeed, preliminary analysis of our data showed that students who completed DSP in the pilot performed just as well (if not better) in their FYW courses as students who had placed via conventional methods in previous years. Specifically, grade distributions and withdrawal rates were mostly equivalent between students who placed via DSP and those who placed via conventional methods. Although the data were incomplete, we were hopeful that our DSP process was effectively facilitating students' placement and was doing so in an equitable way.

Version 2: Expanding DSP and Facing Academic Paternalism

With the pilot showing promising results, in summer 2022, we expanded DSP so that all incoming students, regardless of their standardized test scores, placed via DSP.[6] Soon after we expanded DSP, we saw some surprising patterns in students' placement selections. Specifically, nearly half of students chose English 1109, which was unexpected because with our conventional placement process, only around one-fifth of students were placed into English 1109. We were unsure what was driving the popularity of English 1109, so we met with the campus academic advisors to hear their perspective on why we were seeing such strong interest. Advisors have unique insight on students' perception of placement processes because they meet with incoming students after students complete their placement tasks. Based on those interactions, advisors suggested that students didn't fully understand the differences among the courses as they worked through the

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[5] Of course, students might also elect to stay in the course that they initially chose because they are reluctant to revise their course schedule, especially as new first-year students. Our full study includes a survey taken about two-thirds of the way through the semester that measures the degree to which students feel engaged in and challenged by their writing courses. These data should give us more information about how satisfied students are with their placement decisions.

[6] All incoming students complete the DSP instrument with the exception of high school students who take college courses through our state's dual enrollment program. Of the three FYW courses we offer, English 1110.01 is the only course this program permits students to take, so there is no meaningful choice to offer them. Dual enrollment students, therefore, do not participate in DSP, and their eligibility is determined outside of the FYW program.

DSP instrument. Advisors also expressed concern about the number of students with high test scores who had selected English 1109.

We pushed back on the conclusion that students didn't understand the course descriptions for two reasons. First, we reviewed students' explanations for their choices and found them to be thoughtful considerations of their options, their own experiences, and their individual needs. For instance, many of them spoke to the specific course descriptions that resonated with them; to their anxieties as first-generation college students; to their doubts about whether they'd be able to juggle school, work, and family commitments; to their confidence in their reading and writing abilities; and to other reasonable, thoughtful justifications. In short, students did, in fact, seem to understand the differences among the courses given what we had presented to them.

Second, and more importantly, one of the reasons we moved from conventional placement practices to DSP was to resist the academic paternalism that drives the belief that faculty and staff know what is best for students even with only a few paragraphs of student writing or standardized test scores in hand. Although academic paternalism might be expected in conventional placement practices, discourses of academic paternalism also circulate in DSP contexts through claims, which we heard from campus colleagues, that students are unable to make informed decisions because they don't know the curriculum or themselves well enough. Furthermore, when students *did* try to get more insight and information, in meetings with advisors, by talking through their options with parents, or in finding other ways to make more informed decisions, campus stakeholders cast doubt on students' abilities to make decisions and questioned the validity of their selections. In other words, seeking additional information and perspectives, which DSP invites and even encourages, became evidence that students were incapable of making informed decisions on their own, not evidence that students were taking great care in making careful, thoughtful, informed decisions.

With all this in mind, we were concerned that academic paternalism was driving our and the advisors' doubts about students' ability to make thoughtful placement decisions. As WPAs, we wanted students to be in the writing courses that were the best fits for them, and we did not want to use the numbers of students who had historically placed (via the conventional process) into each course as the baseline against which DSP-derived enrollment patterns would be compared. Even as we sought to resist the assumption that conventional placement yielded "accurate" placement, the large number of students selecting English 1109 compared to historical trends gave us pause, because we were concerned about the costs—financial and in terms of students' progress toward graduation—of taking that course, especially if those students could succeed in English 1110.01 or 1110.03. In navigating these competing commitments, we sought to identify the source of many students' preference for English 1109. In other words, we asked, "are students making 'bad' decisions, or are they interpreting the information that we have provided in ways that we didn't anticipate?" In the end, we agreed that the instrument, not students' decision-making practices, was the issue: the course descriptions that we provided to students made English 1109 seem appropriate to students who would be well served by English 1110.01 or 1110.03. Students likely did not see English 1109 as preparatory to "first-year" college writing courses, and they may not have fully understood the implications of taking English 1109 on their academic progress because our instrument didn't clearly explain these points. This distinction between students' decision-making ability and the information on which they based their decisions aligns with the spirit of DSP: avoiding academic paternalism in placement requires ongoing reflection, analysis, and engagement with the instrument to consider how it, not students, is what is flawed.

We agreed that revising our instrument, even though we were in the middle of the summer 2022 placement season, would serve students best. We considered students' explanations for why they chose their courses and the feedback from the advisors to make a few changes to the instrument in what became Version 2. First, we reversed the order of classes so that English 1110.01 and English 1110.03 were listed before English 1109. We realized, based on students' explanations of their selections, that reading the English 1109 description first possibly produced an anchoring bias in students' minds: the English 1109 description created positive initial impressions that students then used to disidentify with the two that followed. Second, we removed each course's "branding" language. In Version 1, we experimented with branding courses to distinguish among them and to capture what makes each course unique. Based on their explanations, students were intrigued by the "Finding and Developing Your Academic Voice" brand of English 1109 and less so by the "Joining a Community of Academic Writers" (English 1110.03) and "Exploring Academic Writing" (English 1110.01) brands. Third, to help students more fully "see" themselves in the courses, we added a final summary to each description that framed the course in terms of characteristics of students, not just characteristics of the course. For instance, the summary for English 1110.01 was revised to explain that that course might be a good fit for students who can generally produce a first draft of sufficient length, are comfortable with deep revision and asking for help when they need it, usually understand the main ideas and reasoning in nonfiction texts, and have a strong high school GPA and/or standardized test scores, which we qualify by explaining that these are not always the best measures of students' abilities but might be factors students want to consider.

In making these changes, we sought to provide students with more information and to present it in ways that reinforced our commitment to encouraging holistic self-assessment. Our references to high school grades and standardized test scores in the course descriptions are intended to be read alongside of the other information about the courses and the students' self-reflection. In short, students could decide to what extent the various factors mattered to them given their own academic and personal circumstances.

The decision to refer to standardized test scores in the course descriptions is one we continue to struggle with. Like many administrators who transition to DSP, we were initially committed to removing standardized test scores as a factor in placement. We had also hoped that through DSP we might avoid "tracking" historically underserved students out of composition courses that they could succeed in (Henson & Hern, 2019; Tinkle et al., 2022; Toth, 2018). When we saw so many students selecting English 1109 in the first two months of using DSP, however, we wondered if these two purposes for implementing DSP had come into conflict. We wondered if, contrary to our assumptions on launching DSP, standardized test scores might actually be used to steer students *out* of developmental writing courses. After we implemented Version 2, the number of students selecting English 1109 declined significantly (in Version 1, nearly half of students had selected English 1109; in Version 2, fewer than 20% did). Although these revisions had the desired effect, we still worry that we have disparaged English 1109 and the students who place themselves into that course by associating it with lower test scores. We're also aware that incorporating standardized test scores, even as one of several factors that students might consider in making their placement decisions, implicitly validates them as measures of writing ability. Furthermore, we don't know how students perceive the reference to test scores in the context of the other information that we provide and the reflection that they engage in. Do they see scores, as we intend for them to, as one factor among many that might inform their decisions? Or are their decisions based substantially on their standardized test scores? Future research into DSP might investigate how students perceive and negotiate among the various elements presented to them.

Version 3: Making Unexpected Compromises and Individualizing the Instrument

In late summer 2022, only a few months after launching Version 2, we again revisited the instrument. We learned that advisors were encouraging some students—those with relatively high standardized test scores—to change their English 1109 placements to English 1110.01 or 1110.03. When we heard about this, we were conflicted. If, in the course of their advising meeting, students realized that they would be better served in a different course, then we wanted them to change their placement. But we were concerned that this would turn into a slippery slope back to our previous conventional placement process—that standardized test scores, not the many factors that our DSP instrument encourages students to consider, might be used as a single factor in placement.

We also learned that advisors had been encouraging students to change their placement selections to accommodate some majors' highly structured schedules for course offerings. For students in these programs, taking English 1109 risked delaying progress toward their degrees. Advisors encouraged some students in these majors, especially those with relatively high standardized test scores, to revise their English 1109 placement and to take either English 1110.01 or 1110.03 instead. We agreed that it was appropriate for students to change their placement selections with information on course schedules and time to graduation. To alert students to this possibility, we added a brief discussion of scheduling constraints to the course descriptions' lists of factors students might consider in making their selection. After all, one of our guiding principles for implementing DSP had been to account for the many aspects of students' lives, not just to rely on the single measure of a one-off writing performance.

Still, the news that advisors were encouraging some students to change their placement selections came as a surprise, because in more than a decade of conventional placement, advisors had almost never asked us to reconsider placement decisions, and very few students themselves had asked for a reassessment. In fact, when we asked what would have happened if a student in one of the time-constricted programs had been placed in English 1109 via conventional means, the advisors confirmed that that student would have been scheduled for English 1109, no questions asked. With hindsight, we can see how this episode foregrounded the conflict between the principles underlying DSP and the broader institutional context, which depends on expert assessment as a gatekeeping mechanism. These judgments are intended to identify students' "true scores," the evaluations that those in what White (1990) calls the "measurement community" recognize as accurate assessments of students (p. 192). Under conventional placement, our expertise as WPAs had frequently been exerted (and respected) as judges because our conventional placement model generated "true scores"; in fact, in this system, we had assigned numerical scores to students' timed essays to indicate their placement. Such scoring practices maintained the pretense of objective measurement, as "a way of achieving a vision of truth . . . free from social values or subjective judgment or disagreement," by expert gatekeepers and were, therefore, never questioned (White, 1990, p. 192).

DSP subverts these so-called objective measurements by positioning students as experts; by considering factors beyond a single, acontextual, assessable writing product; and by structuring placement as a process and a conversation rather than a top-down decision. A placement instrument like DSP that works outside the confines of quantifiable measurements by expert gatekeepers becomes doubtable, partially because it relies on a different understanding of WPA expertise. Under conventional placement, our expertise was recognized in part because it produced scores that adhered to institutional values of quantifiable measurements. As the developers of a DSP process, however, we applied our expertise to crafting an instrument that allowed students to make their own informed judgments, contrary to the expert-as-gatekeeper perspective. This shift in where our expertise was located left a bit of a vacuum around placement decision-making for some of our stakeholders who hadn't yet embraced the philosophy underlying DSP.

Perceptions of our expertise were perhaps also complicated by our presentation of DSP as a research opportunity. The fact that we are researching DSP might have highlighted its deviation from the "commonsense" conventional approach to placement, making it appear to campus stakeholders more akin to an experiment that might fail or that is open to feedback and revision. At the same time, however, advisors repeatedly expressed concerns about "messing up" our study by altering students' placement. These comments suggest a way that our WPA-researcher roles might have complicated their roles as advisors, requiring adjustments and agility that complemented the changes that they perceived in our roles as WPA-researchers. The advisors wanted to support our study, but they also needed to enroll students in classes that accommodated their schedules and led to an "on time" graduation. As in the conversation with writing program faculty discussed above, the tensions that the advisors likely felt in this context demonstrate the ways that institutional roles are always in relation to, and sometimes at odds with, other roles: our roles as WPA-researchers (not just the WPAs-as-administrators that the advisors had previously interacted with) affected and even brought conflict between their roles as advisors and as supportive colleagues at a research institution.

And, of course, our DSP instrument *was* and *is* open for revision, and as curious researchers and as program administrators who want to help students succeed, we value the perspectives and expertise of our campus colleagues. After much deliberation about what to do with standardized test scores and scheduling considerations, in November 2022, we redesigned our instrument in what became Version 3 (and, as of this writing, the current version) in Qualtrics to take advantage of the platform's branching capabilities. In Versions 1 and 2 in Canvas, all students saw the same questions and the same information about the campus's course offerings. In Qualtrics, we could branch questions based on students' responses to create a slightly more individualized experience for students. In this version, all students complete the same reflective questions regarding reading, writing, and academic success skills. However, the content presented in the Composition Course Selection portion, which includes the course descriptions, now depends on students' self-reported standardized test scores. Students who report an English ACT score of 18 or above or a Writing and Language SAT score of 480 or above are presented with the course descriptions for only English 1110.01 and 1110.03. Students who report scores below those thresholds or who don't have scores are provided with course descriptions for all three courses. In short, standardized scores now determine which courses students read about and choose from in the placement instrument.

In essence, this revision formalizes the role of test scores in the DSP instrument, extending the role that they played in Version 2 as one factor among many that students might consider into a filter built into the structure of the DSP instrument. Like in Version 2, test scores are used in Version 3 to steer students away from English 1109 (since Version 3 was implemented, selection of English 1109 dropped another 10%). The students being diverted from English 1109, however, are those with relatively high standardized test scores, so the equity potential of this aspect of our placement instrument is inequitably distributed. Of course, students with lower standardized test scores have the option to choose any of the three FYW courses that we offer. Likewise, students who, based on their test scores, selected between only English 1110.01 and 1110.03 during the summer placement process still have the option to change to English 1109 through the first-week process, in which all students learn (or re-learn) about all FYW course options. Ultimately, even though our placement process steers high-scoring students out of English 1109, any student with any test score has the opportunity to enroll in any version of FYW.

And yet, by using standardized test scores to determine which students see which courses in the placement instrument, we confront the uncertain boundaries between master/apprentice relationships and academic paternalism (Callahan, 1988). Is deciding for students which courses they see a way for us to provide expert guidance (the "directed" in "directed self-placement")? Or is it simply a form of paternalism, a way of "saving students from themselves" by helping them avoid the personal, financial, and academic costs of enrolling in English 1109? Our instrument nudges some students away from English 1109. In doing so, have we reinstated the privileges reflected by high test scores? Ultimately, the question of using standardized test scores to steer students out of developmental writing courses confronts the question of what it means to provide equitable direction in DSP (Aull, 2021; Inoue, 2015; Ketai, 2012; Klausman & Lynch, 2022; Tinkle et al., 2022).

We see our decision to invoke standardized test scores in our DSP instrument in both Versions 2 and 3 as an imperfect solution to the challenge of developing equitable placement practices in a context awash in inequitable assessments of students' writing and academic abilities. Students have absorbed the academic gatekeeping and assessment structure, just as many faculty and academic staff have, so even though DSP attempts to challenge that structure, it is inescapably embedded in it. Ironically, standardized test scores may be working, at least for some students, as a counter to their doubts about themselves as writers, giving them the confidence to select English 1110.01 or 1110.03 (of course, this is a hypothesis that we hope our data will help us test). For students, for us as WPA-researchers, and for advisors, the role conflicts we have noted in the process of administering DSP may be the logical result of working within the contradiction of promoting student choice and self-assessment in a context thoroughly grounded in (inequitable) external assessments, including not only standardized tests but also previous judgments of students' writing by others in positions of authority (such as teachers or employers). Because we are working in an academic context—a context rich in judgments and measurements of students and their capabilities—even as we try to open space for students to determine for themselves what would be best for them, we can't wholly escape those external judgments. In the current context, there is no perfect answer.

Agility, then, can also involve making compromises. For instance, if we succeeded in reducing the number of score-centered conversations between students and advisors, it might have been simply because students' placements aligned with their test scores in ways that were familiar to advisors; in other words, the more our DSP process relies on the measures that we used in our conventional process, the easier it is for others to accept. To assess the effects of our compromise around test scores, especially once our colleagues on campus have grown more familiar with DSP and its underlying philosophy, we plan to use data from our study as well as other information to investigate the relationships among standardized test scores, placement decisions, engagement in students' selected FYW course, and academic success. What we learn through these assessments will likely call for further agility, as we revise the instrument, processes, and relationships involved in DSP.

Even though we suspect that our decision to incorporate test scores into our placement process reinforces historical biases, we also perceive the decision that eventually led to our reconsideration of test scores—requiring *all* students to complete DSP—as a step toward equity. By putting all students in the role of "person who needs to complete placement," rather than assigning that role only to those with relatively low standardized test scores, we resist institutional customs that give so-called underperforming students additional labor and that surveil some students and not others. Under the deficit model at work in some academic institutions, students with relatively low standardized test scores are often put on academic paths that create more labor for them and that demand more of their time: more placement tests (like our conventional placement process), more "remedial" courses, and more required touchpoints with campus staff (such as tutoring and student services). By requiring all students to complete DSP and by making the more time-intensive courses an option for everyone, we have asked students to take agency in determining their roles in FYW (as people who want additional time and support in FYW or not), and, consequently, we hope, we have redefined institutional labor practices for students more equitably.

As we decided how to respond to the competing priorities involved in placement, we found ourselves agilely (and sometimes clumsily) navigating among different roles. At different times we adopted paternalistic attitudes toward students, insisted on students' agency, asserted the disciplinary authority that underlay the decisions we made in designing our placement process, and acknowledged that local conditions might differ from those on which previous research had been based. Our commitment to DSP did not automatically change us: we had been accustomed to playing a particular role in placement, and learning to accept our new role required some time and reflection. Because agile role-shifting is relational, however, reconsidering our own WPA roles could not occur in isolation; as our roles shifted in the context of DSP, so did the roles of other stakeholders. In some cases, others' adherence to paternalistic roles complicated our role revisions and prompted us to adopt roles compatible with theirs or, alternatively, to try to shift their thinking about placement and their roles in it. The relational, interconnected nature of institutional roles means that adopting DSP is not simply a matter of launching a new placement tool; it also involves re-visioning the roles of the various stakeholders involved.

Intersecting Role Agility

Of course, our DSP story isn't complete. As we analyze our data, as we see how students respond to the placement instrument, and as our context changes, we will be called upon to react to and to proactively address new issues with agility. For instance, our rollout of DSP coincided with the COVID pandemic, and many of the students who participated in the first few years of DSP experienced interruptions in their high school education. We suspect that those disruptions might have influenced students' placement decisions, as some students might have felt that they didn't get all the writing instruction and practice that they otherwise would have, or they might simply have felt disconnected from education. It's possible that this history at least partially drove many students' selection of English 1109. As pandemic-related educational disruptions move further into the background for incoming students, how might we need to react agilely to other changes in (or experiences had by) the student population? And how might we respond to what we learn through our study about the effects of DSP on student success, especially if those effects differ across student groups?7

Our DSP story has been significantly affected by our decision to study the effects of DSP on student success in our new placement program's first two years. We were fortunate to have a research-grant opportunity coincide with our plans to launch DSP, not only because the funding supported our research but also because others' knowledge of our intentions to analyze the results of DSP helped them see the work of placement, which they might have previously understood exclusively as an administrative task, in a different light. In some cases, merging our roles as WPAs and researchers enhanced our ethos and gave us access to people and resources that enriched not only our study but also the administrative implementation of DSP. We also had the benefit of data collected in real time to inform (and justify) our decisions to revise our DSP instrument or to resist calls to change our process. In fact, one interpretation of our story of agility might focus on the limitations attached to faculty "teaching" and "service" roles in contrast to the affordances of occupying a role as a "researcher." Instead of perceiving our position as WPA-researchers as an advantage, we might ask why it took a grant and the promise of publishable research for us to gain easy access to institutional data and help analyzing and interpreting it.

Our story also demonstrates the interconnectedness of roles within a system—in this case, our campus. We view our decisions to revise thoughtfully according to local, sometimes competing, needs and conditions, rather than to insist on an exclusively discipline-informed perspective as a kind of agility, one that negotiated between our roles as writing studies professionals and as members of a local campus community. We have also seen how our adoption of WPA-researcher roles affected the roles of the instructors in our program, who demonstrated their own role agility as they gave up the evaluator/judge roles that they occupied in our conventional placement model and adopted roles as guides to students and contributors to our research. The instructors' role-shift extended into the classroom, as the principles underlying DSP (linguistic justice, student agency, collaboration) made their way into pedagogy. Our WPA-researcher roles also resulted in some friction with dominant institutional values around evaluating students and making decisions for/with them. Releasing the academic paternalism (our own and others') evident in the perception that students were not selecting the "right" courses because they were not placing themselves into the courses that we would have placed them in required adopting new roles relative to students and to our university.

Our story of WPA agility, then, is really a story of the agility of many people, including instructors, advisors, and students. Contrary to Royer and Gilles's (1998) assertion of DSP's "simplicity" (p. 61), our story demonstrates that DSP demands much from many people, even those not directly involved in developing and administering the instrument. These efforts toward role agility, however, are worthwhile in order to make higher education more equitable and just.

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7 Toth (2018) identifies the lack of disaggregated data as a problem across much existing DSP research. Tinkle et al. (2022) find that, in their DSP process, women and under-represented minority students are disproportionately recommended for and enroll in pre-FYW courses. In our larger study, we hope to investigate how DSP affects academic success in different student populations.

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