

Editor's Introduction

Special Issue: Student Self Placement

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The *Journal of Writing Assessment (JWA)* has embraced the idea of Special Issues (SI) as a way of bringing together outstanding scholarship around a pressing issue for writing assessment researchers. As guest editors for this SI on student self placement (SSP), Kate L. Pantelides (Middle Tennessee State University) and Erin Whittig (University of Arizona) have not disappointed. In fact, they have brought together an engaging collection of eight articles that trace the dynamic conversations around SSP which are occurring at colleges and universities across North America. This SI is, perhaps, the largest single sustained work on self-placement since Dan Royer and Roger Gilles's (2003) *Directed Self-Placement: Principles and Practices*. In Pantelides and Whittig's (2024) introductory essay, "Placement Is Everyone's Business: A Love Letter to Our SSP Coalition," they explain how SSP operates as an umbrella term for a variety of methods for placing students into college writing courses. They note that varieties of SSP can include guided self-placement (GSP), directed self-placement (DSP), and informed self-placement (ISP). All these techniques "include student choice as part of the mechanism." And while there are many fellow travelers under the SSP umbrella, Pantelides and Whittig acknowledge that the similarities in nomenclature may actually obscure the wide range of practices that fall under these terms. This SI teases out those differences at the same time it develops theoretical approaches for placement and reports on empirical studies from multiple institutions. These data-driven articles wrestle with questions of ethics and student agency as well as fairness, predictive validity, and social justice; they also develop a nomenclature,

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a more shared understanding, about SSP for the fields of writing assessment, writing program administration (WPA), and composition studies.

Pantelides and Whittig's introduction locates SSP in our broader historical moment (i.e., the renewed vigor of the #BLM movement in the aftermath of George Floyd's murder; greater attention to diversity, equity, and inclusion in educational settings; and the lingering effects of the COVID pandemic on students and their learning readiness). But they also have put together an SI that attends to the local details, engagements, and challenges that their contributors are thinking through. In the middle of their introduction, Pantelides and Whittig explain how they have come to believe that "SSP necessitates mixed methods and layered views." They provide accounts of their own experiences as WPAs and writing assessment researchers with SSP systems at their own universities. Their thoughtful, situated, and personal accounts of working with SSP systems are sharp and engaging—they are messy—in the ways that engaged qualitative research has to be when it is at its best.

Part of the brilliance of Pantelides and Whittig's introduction is that they do not end with only their own accounts. Instead, they take on the challenge of thinking through placement and assessment as everybody's business. They draw together the insights they have gained from editing this SI and articulate a philosophy, an approach, or perhaps an epistemology that will help shape how SSP systems develop across North America. Pantelides and Whittig argue for what I would call "a praxis of placement." In doing so, they argue that "accurate" is a dirty word. Their claim represents a challenge, especially given the history of writing assessment and writing placement as fields deeply informed by psychometrics. And, yet, it might be exactly where the field of writing assessment—particularly writing placement—is, or needs to be, at the moment.

A Complex Range of Approaches for Studying SSP

The research-based articles in this SI on SSP sit right there in the complexities of researching a new approach that challenges the status quo of writing placement methods. They show us how analyses of SSP systems can provide further insights into why students choose certain classes and how students persist, or not, in part based on those choices and in part based on the wider array of opportunities and challenges those students are encountering at college. These eight articles outline how research into SSP systems is allowing faculty to develop more complex metrics of measuring student success and turning to indicators that are far, far richer than single test scores or high school GPAs alone. If there is a common denominator in these articles it is that student self-analysis, reflection, and agency are vital within SSP.

The eight articles in *JWA 17.1* document the diverse ways of studying SSP. In "After Implementation: Assessing Student Self-Placement in College Writing Programs," Lisa Arnold, Holly Hassel, and Lei Jiang (2024) explore how to evaluate DSP systems after they are implemented. They rely on statistical analysis of DSP data from a regional public research university in the upper Midwest to develop a set of questions for programmatic assessment of SSP systems. Arnold and colleagues' heuristic provides a model that could be used by others to evaluate the effectiveness of SSP instruments and practices on their own campuses.

Arnold et al.'s work complements Theresa Tinkle, Jason Godfrey, J. W. Hammond, and Andrew Moos's (2024) computer-mediated corpus analysis of a data set containing more than 5,000 SSP pathways. Tinkle et al.'s analysis looks at students' short-answer survey responses, where the students write about their strengths as writers and what writing tasks they find most

challenging. Their ecological approach to programmatic assessment of an SSP system suggests that corpus data analysis can be used to better understand how students and institutions view academic writing—and the potential for success in academic writing contexts—differently. Like Arnold et al.'s heuristic, Tinkel et al. provide a model for better understanding how SSP systems are working. Their work emphasizes institutions' responsibility for not only implementing writing placement systems but also for assessing how those systems are working—and what they reveal about institutional and student understandings about academic writing.

Kristine Johnson and Sara Vander Bie's (2024) "Directed Self-Placement for Multilingual, Multicultural International Students" relies on interviews and surveys to help us better understand how DSP can work in a writing program that serves multilingual students. Their article offers advice on creating a DSP program for multilingual writers. Their work underscores the challenges faced when DSP, or really any SSP system, is used with writers from diverse national and educational backgrounds. Johnson and Vander Bie argue that ultimately, SSP can provide a more equitable and socially just writing placement system for international students than more traditional forms of test-driven placement.

Usability: Tech Comm, UX, and Centering Students' Experiences

While Johnson and Vander Bie use interviews and surveys to help us better understand how DSP can work for multilingual, international students, Kathleen Kryger, Catrina Mitchum, and Aly Higgins (2024) turn to usability testing in their article, "Localizing Directed Self-Placement: UX Stories and Methods." Instead of approaching SSP from a primarily writing assessment perspective, Kryger et al. ask what the development and analysis of a placement system would look like if we viewed it as a technical communication endeavor. Their article draws on a range of examples to show how user experience (UX) design can help WPAs address to shape SSP systems where accessibility, usability, and student agency are at the center of a university's or college's writing placement.

Laura Decker and Brianne Taormina-Barrientos (2024) also underscore the value of usability testing when developing SSP. In "Multilingual Student Autonomy in Directed-Self-Placement," Decker and Taormina-Barrientos foreground usability testing in their department's development and use of Qualtrics to provide students with feedback in a DSP for first-year writing (FYW). Like Johnson and Vander Bie, Decker and Taormina-Barrientos focus on how SSP can work most effectively for multilingual students. Their engagement with Cavazos and Karaman's (2021) Translingual Disposition Questionnaire underscores how SSP may move away from deficit-based models of viewing multilingual writers. In "It Takes a Campus," Kelly A. Whitney and Carolyn Skinner (2024) document the communicative and administrative agility required when moving from conventional placement to a DSP model for FYW. They critique "academic paternalism," an attitude that argues for conventional placement methods, values "expert" assessment of student writing ability, and assumes that administrators know better than students.

Data-Driven Studies of Writing Placement Systems

An important theme across the articles in this SI on SSP is the data-driven reform of FYW placement procedures. This data is not limited to statistical analysis and quantitative data. Meghan A. Sweeney and Crystal Colombini (2024) demonstrate how large qualitative corpuses can be

analyzed using a grounded theory approach and yield findings that are based on students' own approaches to taking part in a DSP system. Sweeney and Colombini find that students at their institutions use four rhetorical moves when they describe taking part in DSP: proliferating, riffing, importing, and qualifying. Sweeney and Colombini's qualitative, grounded theory study suggests that while WPAs and writing assessment researchers may see DSP as primarily valuing *choice*, *guidance*, and *justice*, the students who are taking part in these placement practices understand the process differently. Sweeney and Colombini's attention to student experiences echoes Tinkle et al.'s analysis of more than 5,000 student responses in a SSP survey. Tinkle et al.'s computer-mediated corpus analysis and Sweeney and Colombini's grounded theory approach to two large qualitative corpora both emphasize ways in which educational researchers are studying SSP and attempting to map student experience to evaluate the effectiveness of these placement processes.

In "Informing Self-Placement," Christie Toth, Jennifer Andrus, Nicole Clawson, Aubrey Fochs, Pietera Fraser, Nkenna Onwuzuruoha, and Samuel Rivera Aguilar (2024) describe the development, assessment, and revision of an informed self-placement (ISP) process. Their article is fascinating in that it uses a narrative to describe how the ISP was implemented but also weaves individual reflections on the ISP around that narrative. Based on disaggregated assessment of quantitative data, Toth et al. find that the ISP has reduced but not fully eliminated racial equity gaps in their FYW placement system while maintaining both enrollments and academic performance levels. One of the special facets of Toth et al. is the ways in which it recalls themes from *JWA* 12.1. That Special Issue focused on two-year college writing placement; Diane Kelly-Riley and I (2019) noted that "the ways in which two-year colleges assess student writing and use that assessment to place students into writing courses has important pedagogical, disciplinary, political, social, and, even, ethical implications." In their "Introduction: Writing Assessment, Placement, and the Two-Year College," Toth et al. (2019) had argued that "two-year colleges and the faculty who teach in them have long been underrepresented in writing studies scholarship"; their *JWA* SI attended to placement and opened spaces for two-year college faculty to contribute to the emerging scholarly analyses of writing placement systems. Toth et al.'s new article also opens up spaces for multiple stakeholders to join the conversation around self-placement processes. Having researchers such as Toth et al. (2019, 2024) and Pantelides and Whittig (2024) focus on placement highlights *JWA*'s commitment to attending to teachers as researchers and to listening to student voices about how writing assessment impacts their college experiences.

Futures: SSP, Another *JWA* SI, and Opportunities to Reach Out to *JWA* Editors

As a group, these eight articles and Pantelides and Whittig's introduction both document the current state of SSP across North America and advance the conversation within the field. These works are important not only for writing assessment researchers but also for WPAs considering developing and/or assessing how well their own SSP systems are working. Further, Pantelides and Whittig's introduction brings together vital conversations from the fields of composition studies, writing assessment, and WPA. This *JWA* SI on SSP examines placement methods that share the belief that students can—and should—make decisions about the courses they take. There is a focus on not only student agency in the abstract but also on the messy questions of what that student agency looks like when put into practice.

SSP challenges the status quo of writing placement. We are delighted that Pantelides and Whittig's introduction and these eight articles help document how the fields of composition

studies, writing assessment, and WPA research are moving forward. In fact, because of the need to continue this conversation, *JWA* will release a second SI focused on SSP in 2025 or 2026.

As we move out of the pandemic, the number of submissions to the journal is increasing, and we will probably be publishing one regular issue and one SI per year going forward. We encourage researchers and teachers to submit articles for the regular issues or for our SI as the Calls for Papers (CFPs) are released. Submissions to our regular issues may occur at any time during the year. We welcome queries about potential articles at [journalofwritingassessment\[at\]gmail\[dot\]com](mailto:journalofwritingassessment@gmail.com).

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