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Placement Is Everyone's Business: A Love Letter to Our SSP Coalition

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Abstract: In this introduction to the special issue, the co-editors offer the umbrella term "methods of student self-placement" (SSP) to refer to any placement mechanism that includes student choice so that we can further build theoretical apparatus, gather much-needed empirical data, and subsequently flesh out meaningful differences in approaches. They argue that just as SSP asks us to rethink the mission of first-year writing, it also asks us to rethink some of the divisions in writing studies because placement work is meaningful across the university. Ultimately, they conclude that SSP isn't an easy fix for systemic problems in higher education, but it is powerful in fully acknowledging the complexity of placement and students' diverse learning needs.

Keywords: assessment, placement, directed self-placement, guided self-placement, research, collaboration, equity, sustainability, writing program

"It made me feel bad because I scored so low on my ACT that I have to have a prescribed course. But at the same time, it was my fault, my own consequence for not putting enough effort into the ACT. At first, it did bring my confidence down like maybe I don't have the intelligence to get into a normal course. But I started to realize that these courses are here to help for the future not to bring you down."

This quote from a student placed by ACT score into a corequisite composition course underscores the exigency for this special issue and the theoretical impetus for methods of student self-placement (SSP). The timing of this student's quote is important for fully understanding its context: in an effort to support a full implementation of SSP, we surveyed students to ask them the impact of their placement by ACT.[1] Students shared their answers mid-late semester, after many of them had realized that composition courses are not intended as a "consequence" for bad behavior but are instead "here to help for the future[,] not to bring you down." Anyone who has taught a composition course is likely familiar with this kind of response and the fact that the first few weeks of class are often rife with indicators of students' lack of confidence—not just in their writing, but in themselves, as writing placement is often taken as representative of more than student writing ability; it's alternatively considered indicative of their potential at the university (Wexler, 2017), their moral and ethical aptitude (Antczak, 1989; Bergmann, 1998; Bloom, 1996), and their intelligence writ large (we would argue that this assumption is reflected in English curriculum broadly; see Moore, 2021). Thus, it's not surprising—though it is crushing—to see the grief and disappointment this student cycles through in just this 82-word response: initial denial of their positionality, acknowledgement of their sadness and frustration and guilt and shame, (incorrect) acceptance of their failures and (supposed) lack of ability, and, ultimately, their belief that composition is for their own good. The composition course is constituted as penalty, as discipline and punishment.

Although the student ultimately accepts the placement by ACT score, it's taken up as a take-your-medicine situation: *I'll take this course because my writing is sick and the course will make it better*. The underlying mission of first-year writing (FYW), in this construction, is to fill a lack in students, to make them "college ready," to give them their composition inoculation. We resist this mission for composition. We believe that all students come to the university ready in some respects and not in others, just as faculty may be ready for the first day of class but not the second. Instead, through the lens of SSP, we see FYW as responding to the abundance that students bring to our classrooms and our recognition of how ubiquitous writing is in all of our lives. Increasingly, the mission of composition is to invite students to be metacognitive about their rhetorical choices, to curate, filter, and give language to the choices they make in their abundant writing opportunities every day. Aligning placement and mission is central for many of the contributors to this special issue; for instance, Meghan Sweeney and Crystal Colombini use *cura personalis*, care for the whole person, to reflect on their respective placement mechanisms and the complex ways students explain their course choice; and Laura Decker and Brianne Taormina-Barrientos similarly revised their own placement tool to "better serve students from an asset perspective, provide them with more transparency and autonomy, and more fully embody our mission as an HSI." There is so much excellent reading ahead of you.

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1   A thorough consideration of student experience as a result of placement by standardized test scores into corequisite courses is forthcoming by Harlow Crandall and Elizabeth Williams.

Before we leave this student and their words, however, we want to draw your attention to how the ACT score is offered as providing an incontrovertible Truth (in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's (2009) formulation, a single story) about a student. Not only does this student accept that supposed truth, but so too does the university. Perhaps the only thing worse than having no available data is having a pile of data that folks have misused and misread for so long that they can't stop believing it. By placing students by ACT score alone (and ACT is intended as an entrance exam rather than a placement exam), the university accepts and forwards this one number as indicative of student ability—despite decades of research demonstrating how standardized tests are more reflective of student identity markers than predictive of student success (Elliot et al., 2012; Inoue & Poe, 2012; Isaacs & Molloy, 2010). This academic paternalism, as Kelly Whitney and Carolyn Skinner describe it (this issue), is a pervasive "attitude" aligned with placement by standardized test scores alone that "[presumes] to know what [is] best for students." Of course, in the modern version of the university, it is necessary to identify tools that can place tens of thousands of students efficiently and fairly. Validity and reliability[2] are central to this issue's investigations by Meghan Sweeney and Crystal Colombini as well as Kathleen Kryger, Catrina Mitchum, and Aly Higgins. We aren't unsympathetic to the real needs in placement. We too have laughed, cried, and sweated through our own placement struggles. But we are not alone.

In this special issue, we collect the "sweaty" stories of SSP, in the tradition of Sara Ahmed's (2014) feminist invitation to distributed communities and as a response to the single (and wrong) stories that standardized tests, their attendant trappings, and the assumptions of academic paternalism have told us about our students for so long. We suggest SSP as an umbrella term, one that accounts for the various (and sometimes disparate) methods of placing students into courses that include student choice as part of the mechanism. Various iterations of guided self-placement (GSP), directed self-placement (DSP), and informed self-placement (ISP) fall under this umbrella, but certainly these approaches differ based on local constraints, and "[contending] with these ecological, often policy-related factors is as important as designing the [...] instrument" itself (Toth et al., this issue). In conversations we have had with colleagues across the country about self-placement, we have continually suspected that folks assume we are talking about the same things. Based on our work for the special issue, sometimes we are, but mostly we're not. Thus, we offer the term SSP so that as a coalition we can further build theoretical apparatus, gather much-needed empirical data, and subsequently flesh out meaningful differences in approaches. Some starting places for considering differences as well as the relative equity and fairness of our tools include the following questions:

What are the stakes of placement at my institution?

What information do students need to make an informed decision about placement?

What are the implications across the curriculum for the course placement?

Regardless of the differences across tools addressed in this special issue, all of our contributors cited Black Lives Matter (BLM) and the pandemic as exigencies for either SSP adoption or significant tool evolution. In the wake of George Floyd's death, BLM protests, and civil rights advocacy (Ashanti-Young, 2020; Baker-Bell, 2020), conversations about equity and inclusion came to the fore in educational settings (in some cases only temporarily). Simultaneously, the COVID

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2 Of course we're also indebted to recent, innovative work on validity and reliability, including the Assessing Writing 2019 special issue (Slomp & East, 2019) and the JWA 2016 special issue (Slomp, 2016). The considerations they raise are necessary for further development and assessment of SSP.

pandemic forced many schools to reckon (in some cases only temporarily) with the embodied experiences of our students, with their mental health (Liu et al., 2022) and with their often-unstable financial situations and internet connections. Further, though standardized tests have been deployed as college readiness assessments since 1901 (Clauser & Bunch, 2022), the combined forces of 2020 exposed the attendant discursive harms of standardized testing functioning as the primary driver of decisions in education (Blum, 2011). SSP seeks to address this long-term harm, though of course it doesn't cure the harm in and of itself. Instead, it primes us to ask better questions about who students are and what they need. It also demands that we ask questions of ourselves: How/do we serve our students? How does the way in which we serve them impact the stories they tell about themselves? How might we ask students about their needs more directly, rather than making assumptions based on their educational records?

With these questions at the fore, we attend to the local details and technicalities that don't (necessarily) generalize: the making of the tools, the narratives, the relationships, the honest accountings of our missteps. As we noted in our CFP, "so much of the transferable experiences, skills, and things to look out for in developing SSP remain hidden in the creators' sea of emails, accepted and rejected proposals, to-do lists, and leftover frustrations." We hope you notice that all of these manuscripts are co-authored and frequently credit the work of coalitions across the university—because SSP work is not work that can or should be done alone. Our contributor teams range from two to seven co-authors, including cross-institutional co-authors. They come from large public universities and small private colleges, selective and open-access institutions, wealthy and cash-strapped places. Many note the importance of collaboration in developing, iterating, and honing their tools, since "[the] incorporation of various stakeholder perspectives is one feature of DSP that makes agility necessary . . . [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" (Whitney & Skinner, this issue).

Multiple perspectives and complex tools require assessment through multiple methods. Thus, our contributors effectively demonstrate the use of narrative as data, statistical analysis (Lisa Arnold, Holly Hassel, & Lei Jiang; Kelly A. Whitney & Carolyn Skinner), computer-mediated corpus analysis (Theresa Tinkle, Jason Godfrey, J. W. Hammond, & Andrew Moos), interviews and surveys (Kristine Johnson & Sara Vander Bie), usability testing (Kathleen Kryger, Catrina Mitchum, & Aly Higgins; Laura Decker & Brianne Taormina-Barrientos), open coding of large qualitative corpuses (Meghan Sweeney & Crystal Colombini), and disaggregated assessment of quantitative findings (Christie Toth, Jennifer Andrus, Nicole Clawson, Aubrey Fochs, Pietera Frasier, Nkenna Onwuzuruoha, & Samuel Rivera Aguilar). We purposely alternate between near and far glances at SSP in an effort to show SSP for what we have come to believe it is: an imperfect attempt to not further harm our students in their paths to the university.

Our own awareness of how SSP necessitates mixed methods and layered views paved the way for our iterations of SSP at two different universities—an HSI R1 in the west where 90% of students receive financial aid and a comprehensive PWI R2 in the midsouth with a large population of rural and first-generation students (86% receive some form of financial aid; 42% receive federal grants, including Pell). We are both white cisgender women who were working as writing program administrators prior to and during the COVID- and BLM-fueled SSP boom, and we hope the work represented in this special issue resonates with you as it did with us. Before we go further in introducing the eight articles that constitute this special issue, though, we want to take a moment

to address how our own sweaty work and subsequent collaborations led us to the conclusion that co-authoring is central to SSP sustainability, a result we wish for all who are doing the work.

Sweaty Stories

Erin: Technical Difficulties

On my first day as the new placement coordinator for the Writing Program, I was pulled into a new student orientation writing placement advising session. Hundreds of students and their parents waited in the sweltering Tucson heat outside a small room in the student union. Inside, four placement advisors talked with students about why they should be in English 101A, our supported writing course, or English 109H, our advanced course, or how their dual enrollment course should "get them out of" English, or that their AP score should place them in the honors course. The conversations felt to me like the students (or their parents) were trying to get out of (or into) something and just needed to provide enough proof to us in order to get what they wanted. By the end of the session, I could recite all of the Arizona community colleges where students were completing dual enrollment writing courses; I knew our placement equation (a combination of SAT/ACT + high school GPA) by heart; I knew which English exams and scores would place a student into the honors writing course. I did not, however, know much about our different writing courses. It's likely most of the students didn't either.

Over the next two years, I was plagued with a vague but undeniable sense that we were doing students a disservice by not giving them more information about our courses and all the pathways they might take through (or around) Foundations Writing. I was also increasingly frustrated by our lack of control over the placement website, where student information had to be uploaded manually from our SMS on a near-daily basis as we approached summer orientations, and where, if a student reported information that hadn't been uploaded, they were met with a 404 error accompanied by an image of a bunny with a pancake on its head ("Pancake Bunny").

Figure 1
Pancake Bunny

While I often tell—and laugh about—the story of the pancake bunny to illustrate the absurdity of our total lack of control over the real technicalities of placement at that time, this anecdote belies a sad truth about what happens when we don't think of students as human beings, as users who are deeply impacted by the design of our placement tools and methodologies (see Kryger et al., this issue). The placement website had been built and maintained by one IT staff member housed in the College of Humanities, which underscores how a mentality of scarcity can lead universities to foist enormous labor onto a few people (Schell, 2016). The pancake bunny might represent that single employee's frustration and cynicism, having to design a technical communication tool without any information about the end purpose or user experience.

It was that relationship between the placement mechanism and the user experience that initially sparked my interest in shifting our placement to SSP. I knew that we could not only design a welcoming interface and automate many of the processes being performed by one (incredibly overworked) staff member, but we could also have agile control over the questions we asked of students, to gather information we'd been craving for years (like how many of our incoming students were completing their writing courses through dual enrollment).

In hindsight, I made the decision to abandon our standardized test-based method partly due to, well, vibes. It felt wrong, but I didn't have much data to say why. This is in keeping with DSP's origins; Royer and Gilles (1998, 2003) based their decision to redesign placement on their personal experiences with orientation placement sessions. Although we think it's important to tirelessly assess our SSP tools, we still think that the felt sense Sondra Perl (1980) describes "[when] writers are given a topic," also applies here in that interactions with students, certainly including placement, "[call] forth images, words, ideas, and vague fuzzy feelings that are anchored in the writer's body. What is elicited, then, is not solely the product of a mind but of a mind alive in a living, sensing body" (p. 365). Misalignment of mission, values, best practices in the teaching of composition, and placement leaves us with bad vibes. It serves as an exigence.

Kate: SSP, Humbling and Joyful

I got my first up-close experience with methods of student self-placement as a new Assistant Professor and Associate WPA in 2013. Derek Mueller, my institution's WPA at the time, designed a self-placement mechanism, did all of the back-end work, and implemented the tool seamlessly and efficiently. I helped by saying, "yes, I agree," periodically. He made it look easy. Given that much of my scholarly and applied work at that time revolved around writing centers and discourse analytic work in the tradition of language in social interaction, the theoretical underpinnings of SSP made sense to me: *of course* students should have agency in decisions about their writing classes, *of course* we should be attentive to the asymmetrical nature of placement decisions, *of course* students know things about their own writing lives that we can't easily measure or access upon glancing their test scores and files.

So, when we had a problem with the placement system at my current university in 2018, I tried to implement a version of SSP. We iterated and iterated, working through different platforms; inviting different experts to consult on the tool; conducting usability testing, verification testing, and focus groups; and gathering extensive qualitative and quantitative data. Yet, years later, though we've expanded who takes the GSP (and we have some beautiful reports), we don't have full implementation. To be sure, we've made great strides, but wow—Derek made the "elegant solution" look easy (Royer & Gilles, 1998).

Certainly, some paths to SSP are easier than others, and my experience underscores so much that the robust SSP literature highlights, especially that tools and associated experiences are inherently local phenomena (Gallagher, 2014; Huot, 2003). What hasn't been quite as visible in the literature is what a large and diverse coalition is required to ensure successful, sustainable SSP adoption across a large public university. SSP may be a labor of love, but it should not be a cult of personality. Thus, one of the joys of my bumpy SSP road has been gathering this coalition and learning from various stakeholders—students, writing studies colleagues, linguists, math faculty, advisors, student success professionals, ITD staff, admin, skeptical English faculty—along the way. Much of this path has been humbling, as most useful paths are, but what was perhaps most simultaneously humbling and joyful was meeting Erin Whittig in 2020, at the time the Assistant Director of Assessment at the University of Arizona Writing Program.

Erin and her team had fully implemented their DSP for years by the time we met, and she was eager to spread the gospel. She met with me and my colleagues tirelessly, shared the many things she had learned, and undoubtedly shaved years off of our tool's development—we hope the concerted and explicit attention to tools in this special issue might do the same for others (see Decker & Taormina-Barrientos; Kryger, Mitchum, & Higgins; Toth et al.). At my university we were good at coalition-building and fully committed to open-access publishing and resource sharing. Erin's willingness to share her insight partnered well with our open-access orientation and feminist awareness of the labor of administrative collaboration. Further, neither of us are good at claiming or publicizing our expertise, so it has been good to function as cheerleaders for each other. Our own enjoyable collaboration led us to offer assistance to others working on SSP in the spirit of open access collaboration. Most people doing the work don't have time to learn something new, to write about it, to iterate extensively, to assess their work in the ways they would like. So many people were asked to lay the SSP track while the train was careening into their institutions. We see you; we know you're out there. This issue is for you.

We recognize that though SSP must be locally aware and SSP development is idiosyncratic, gathering detailed, technical stories about the group effort required, and the specific findings others have learned from their missteps, might similarly help others adopt and assess SSP. As we received the (excellent) initial round of proposals for this issue, as each special issue manuscript has come in, as each reviewer has taken their time to provide feedback, as the *JWA* editors, Matt Gomes, Lizbet Tinoco, and Carl Whithaus have patiently met with us, I have become ever more humbled and joyful. As Whitney and Skinner suggest (this issue), SSP does indeed take an "agile" "village," and given the attention in this issue to SSP mission, validity and reliability, mixed methods, collaboration, and explicit discussion of design, we are hopeful.

The Dirtiest Words in Placement

As our paths to SSP intersected and intertwined, we've heard many of the same words used by colleagues and stakeholders to describe placement and their feelings about placement. These words represent ideologies and an orientation towards students that we believe runs counter to best practices in SSP. We have come to characterize these as "dirty words."

At the top of our dirty words list is "should."

"This student should/n't be in this class."

"This student should speak English if they're going to be in this class."

"This student should only be in the advanced class if they 'love writing.'"

> "This student should've been in the advanced class; the supported class didn't challenge them enough."

These and many other shoulds are laden with obligations and consequences: they imply binary courses of action, right or wrong, where an incorrect decision (or indecision) leads to an incorrect outcome (and sometimes guilt or shame). If only they'd taken that class, then they would have done better; as if this one course is the only factor in the student's success or lack of success (predictive analytics forwards this message), when in fact, it is just one of many variables at play in any given semester. FYW students are often learning how to balance multiple obligations and expectations in the midst of a confounding initiation into multiple new discourses, conversations, ways of thinking, and ways of writing.

When we (as "experts"—advisors, teachers, writing program administrators, and scholars) characterize a student's placement in terms of shoulds, we set them up for one of two outcomes: they are right, or they are wrong. If they should have been in a different class, then the class they're in is wrong; in the context of SSP, the student made the wrong choice, either because our tool steered them incorrectly, or because they didn't assess themselves/the situation correctly. Either the test failed them, or they failed the test. Either way, there's failure.

But what happens when, instead, we think about opportunities to "fail sideways" as "assessment killjoys" Stephanie West-Puckett, Nicole Caswell, and William Banks (2023) suggest? What if we "resist notions of assessment that have been foisted upon us" (p. 29)? Or further, what happens when we simply replace the shoulds with wants, coulds, or whys?

> "Why is this student in this class?"
>
> "Why did this student want to take advanced writing?"
>
> "Could this multilingual student learn valuable things in my class? Could I?"
>
> "Could this motivated student help less motivated students in my class?"

Our students are deeply familiar with should-based thinking. We appreciate how SSP can disrupt this way of thinking and engage students in honestly reflecting about what they want, what they could do, and why. The contributors to this issue take up this realignment, considering what it means, for instance, that so many students selected supported courses in the wake of the pandemic. This certainly runs contrary to mainstream fears about SSP that students will always choose the "prestige" version of a class, if such a thing exists in composition. Did so many students select supported classes, regardless of their ACT score because they are feeling anxious? Because they want to be in smaller classes with more time to work on their writing? Because they're lonely? Because they have busy schedules and don't want the pressure associated with "advanced" classes? Yes, yes, yes, yes, and sometimes not at all. The whys, wants, and coulds are rich data that, if we take time to analyze, teach us much about how we might revise placement, curriculum, and mission.

And while we are wary of students deploying shoulds in relation to their course selection, we recognize that these can provide valuable reflective opportunities where they can re-examine and revise their expectations and conceptions of themselves as writers:

> "I should have taken the advanced course. I think I misunderstood the purpose of the supported course."

Within this student's misunderstanding, there is a rich conversation waiting to happen—what do they think the advanced course would have provided? What are their goals for their writing and how are these not being met in the supported course? By inquiring into our student's (mis)

conceptions of our courses, we may find ways to better communicate the purposes of these courses in our SSP tools.

Should tends to reify the notion that our FYW courses are "leveled," either in terms of difficulty, student ability, or (at worst) intelligence, which leads to declarations of students as being underplaced, overplaced, or misplaced. Although we know this discourse comes from wanting students to be in the "right" place and "appropriately" challenged, we must insist that *students are not keys* who only fit in one lock, who only fit in one door. Keys are objects that are important, but we lose all of the time; we only care about them because of their instrumental purpose to let us in and out. We spend hours of our lives running around looking for our misplaced keys. But students can fit in multiple places, and we need to be more careful with them than our household items. As Arnold et al. (this issue) note, some "shy away from terms like 'accuracy' or 'accurate placement' because of the complex and subjective alignments of students' academic background, literacy skills, and motivation with course options. What is accurate for one student may not be 'accurate' in the way a program is designed or defined." Thus "accurate" in the context of placement is a dirty word. "Accurate" doesn't necessarily tell us about the complex "[ecology]" (Toth et al., this issue) in which the student circulated. When a student is "misplaced" that means that they didn't do well in the class, but resulting DWF rates usually don't tell us about a student's writing "ability." Instead, they can indicate that students are caring for dependents, have had mental health crises, or, most often, that their finances have changed (Mueller, 2021). Effective SSP tools provide further insight into why/not students choose certain classes and why/not they may persist. SSP suggests additional indicators, more complex metrics of measuring student success, including student self-analyses. Even when students only choose between two classes, agency fundamentally changes the placement process. As Tanita Saenkhum (2016) theorizes in the context of multilingual writers, "when conditions for agency are optimal, individuals have the capacity to negotiate, choose to accept or deny, self-assess, question, and plan" (p. 109). In the long term, adopting SSP can destigmatize the climate of writing support.

Assessment Is Everyone's Business

It is so much easier to just use standardized tests to make placement decisions. Tests are the elegant solution that SSP was once assumed to be. Instead, SSP is rhetorically demanding. It requires those of us involved in placement to talk to people across campus, to talk to students, to talk to faculty, to talk to parents, to recognize all of the many different reasons that students might/not select a certain class, might/not be successful. It demands that we use/develop technical skills, design effective tools, test those tools, assess those tools. It demonstrates that, whether or not we like it,

assessment = placement = writing program administrative work = technical communication = assessment

Assessment is everyone's business. Just as SSP asks us to rethink the mission of FYW, we suggest it also asks us to rethink some of the divisions in writing studies. We would go as far as to suggest that it invites an acknowledgement of big tent writing studies because this work matters to all of us, we're all complicit in the implications of placement, and all of us should strive to have evidence-based opinions about placement by knowing our universities better. Further, those of us who are good departmental citizens realize that we are all WPAs/placement coordinators-in-waiting, or we could be. Thus, we need to talk details, logistics, and mismatches between theory and practice.

We need to be honest with each other in ways that perhaps don't feel familiar or savvy (or safe—let's work to make it safer for each other—it will be sweaty). Many of us are so used to trying to garner uptake for potentially unpopular writing studies initiatives that support best practices but require investments that run counter to most public universities' financial priorities—smaller class sizes, lower teaching loads, higher pay—that it feels weird to be forthright about difficulties and problems. We sometimes forget to simply be honest with each other—to admit the difficulty of SSP and, as feminist rhetor Abigail Long (2023) has so beautifully put it, show the "seamfulness" of our work, the undersides of the disciplinary fabrics we sew together.

We have been in a kairotic moment for SSP since the shift to remote education in Spring 2020 and the simultaneous antiracist awakening (and subsequent backlash) in higher ed, and we have excellent disciplinary literature to show for it (Aparna, 2022; Aull, 2021; Brathwaite et al., 2022; Coleman, 2022; Guida Mesina, 2023; Horton, 2022; Johnson, 2022; Klausman & Lynch, 2022; Melito et al., 2022; Messer et al., 2022; Morton, 2022; Nastal et al., 2022; Snyder et al., 2022), but some universities who adopted test-optional policies during the pandemic have returned to requiring tests. Faculty who were committed to SSP have recognized the messiness and difficulty of what perhaps only seems like an "elegant solution." Others have recognized that SSP alone can't fix the problems of inequity that characterize academia (Burke Reifman, 2024; Kosiewicz & Ngo, 2019; Tinkle et al., 2022). As anti-DEI efforts increase, the backdrop for SSP further evolves. Now more than ever, we need our SSP coalition. We need more: more awareness of possible pitfalls, more mixed-methods and longitudinal approaches to examining SSP, more cross-institutional comparisons, and more stabilizing language to allow us to talk about what constitutes SSP (and also what it does not).

Conclusions/Future Thinking/The Spirit of SSP

In the *spirit* of SSP (with the preface that the following flowchart is not SSP), we close with some requests for information and attendant recommendations for how you might read through this special issue. We offer this flowchart to try to customize your reading experience, recognizing that, like all students in our writing classes, all readers will come to this special issue with different experiences, needs, expectations, and goals. Thus, we try to offer some guidance about starting places (see Figure 2).

Although we know this in writing studies, the articles in this issue foreground a commonplace that we rarely see such clear evidence for: Language is powerful. The way you phrase your SSP questions impacts the way students place themselves. The way we talk about writing and classes in our SSP tools impacts the classes students select as well as the ways students feel about their composition courses and themselves upon entrance. Students tell stories about themselves that are really stories people have told them about who they are, what they're good at, what they're bad at throughout their educational experiences. Throughout the special issue we see faculty continually making changes to placement because they are forced to confront disconnects between values and practice, between theoretical beliefs about students and "traditional" expectations of who students are. Each article in the issue helps illustrate how complex our students are, and the many, varied reasons they have for coming to university, for taking the classes they do, and what success means for them or doesn't. SSP doesn't necessarily make everything more complicated, it just doesn't pretend that placement is simple.

Figure 2

Special Issue Reading Recommendations
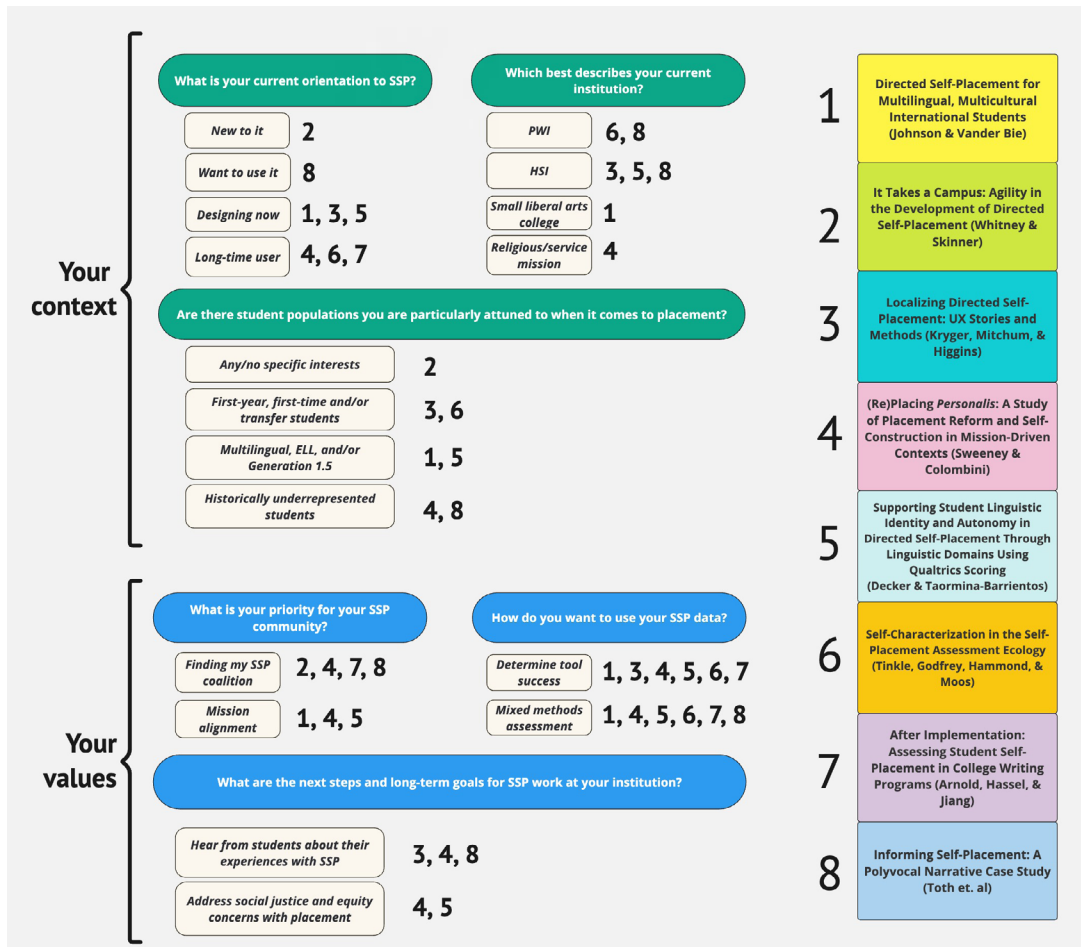
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