Directed Self-Placement in the University

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> When the institutions make classifications for us, we
> seem to lose some independence that we might conceiv-
> ably have otherwise had. This thought is one that we have
> every reason, as individuals, to resist. Living together, we
> take individual responsibility and lay it upon one another.
> We take responsibility for our deeds, but even more vol-
> untarily for our thoughts. Our social interaction consists
> very much in telling one another what right thinking is
> and passing blame on wrong thinking. This is indeed how
> we build the institutions, squeezing each other's ideas into
> a common shape so that we can prove rightness by sheer
> numbers of independent assent.
>
> —Mary Douglas (91)

In whatever form it takes, the placement of students in university compo-
sition courses is fundamentally an act of socialization.[1] As such, and as
Mary Douglas suggests, placement or classification, i.e., *being* placed or
classified, naturally breeds resistance among those who feel its effects.
On the one hand, placement itself is the most social of acts whereby indi-
viduals adjust to the values and judgment of the group with which they
identify or aspire to join, all in the interest of social harmony. On the
other hand, individuals also sacrifice some aspect of individual responsi-
bility or identity in making such accommodations, regardless of whether
their adjustments to social conditions are prompted by self-knowledge
and the desire to "fit in" or by the institution that has the power to
confer such group identity. Even as we are, in Kenneth Burke's words,
"goaded by the spirit of hierarchy" (*Language as Symbolic Action* 15)
that perpetuates and rationalizes social groups, we sacrifice allegiance

to self-determination, a value at odds with the normalizing function (or desire) of the institution.

In the broadest sense, placement is a fundamental and familiar process of socialization, a communal act of identification. We may have no choice but to act together, for as Burke writes in *A Rhetoric of Motives*, identity itself is contingent upon what he calls *consubstantiality*: "A doctrine of *consubstantiality*, either explicit or implicit, may be necessary to any way of life. For substance [i.e., *identity*], in the old philosophies, was an *act*; and a way of life is an *acting-together*; and in acting together, [people] have common sensations, concepts, images, ideas, attitudes that make them *consubstantial*" (21). While we might naturally resist *being* placed—*identified by the other*—we also find ourselves implicitly identified with the group by virtue of our active involvement in the social and ethical process of communicating and acting together. We choose and yet are chosen to act, from our first words to our last implicated in a give-and-take of identities. Our identifications—our shared substance or consubstantiality—are marked by the rhetorical power of naming and placement, by our answers to questions like "Who am I?" and "Who are you?" and "Who are we?"

I have invoked Douglas and Burke at this early stage because I believe that on the whole WPAs may have greatly underestimated the ethical and moral complexity of writing placement, even as we have worked so hard to show the value of ensuring that students take the course that will best help them become successful writers in the university and beyond. As Sharon Crowley argues in *Composition in the University*, we may have also underestimated the degree to which first-year composition itself functions culturally, and thus hegemonically, to preserve the status quo with regard to both institutional practice and politics, as well as attitudes toward literate practice (see especially "A Personal Essay on Freshman English" 228-49). Even if we had the time for such reverie, who would imagine that writing placement itself could carry with it such wide-ranging questions about identity, the role of the individual in society, or the function of institutions? After all, placement is but one concern of WPAs; our writing programs typically also involve questions of content or curriculum, pedagogy, instructor training, disciplinary status, and more, each of these a complex problem on its own. Nevertheless, the question of writing placement stands out as unique among these concerns. Although it shares with these other questions a tendency to involve social forces and practices beyond the writing program itself, we spend much of our time detailing how existing methods of writing placement might function better or more accurately (setting aside momentarily the ambiguity of "accurate"). We ask, for instance, whether an ACT score alone (or in combination with a placement test) provides the best way

to slot students in first-year composition courses, or whether placement itself is even necessary. We wonder if mainstreaming is the answer to the questions of logistical and economic feasibility as well as predictive validity that attend the politics of remediation. There are always alternatives. Whichever way we go, the ideological forces, or lines of power, that attend the more general concept of placement itself fade into the background as we grapple with the need to justify our means of placement, or even curriculum, with empirical evidence, expert opinion, and rational argument. We get caught up in solving the persistent problems of the moment and rarely have the time to ponder the bigger picture. There is always an urgency of the moment that makes it difficult to see the broader patterns of force, or even the imaginative possibilities, that contain our day-to-day adjustment to conditions.

While it is true that in the past decade composition scholars have paid increasing attention to the politics of writing instruction generally, we have yet to formulate a systematic approach to the question of how our disciplinary and pedagogical practices and the rhetoric we use to validate them function in the wider context of institutional practice and, thus, ideological contexts. Consider the fairly recent and well-publicized events surrounding the actions of the Board of Trustees for the City University of New York, who in May 1998 approved a resolution to refuse admission to senior status of all students who had not passed skills assessment tests in reading, writing, and math. In "Evaluating Writing Programs in Real Time: The Politics of Remediation," Barbara Gleason reports her discovery that "[t]he empirically verifiable account that we were striving for in this evaluation [of remediation efforts] was fatally compromised by the socio-political forces that had gathered around the issue of remediation" (582). We continue to underestimate how such forces of power regulate and forestall change, as well as how they compromise the forms of rhetoric we rely on to support change or rationalize our successes. As James E. Porter, Patricia Sullivan, Stuart Blythe, Jeffrey T. Grabill, and Libby Miles argue, we need to develop a methodology of institutional critique that would ground itself as "an unabashedly rhetorical practice mediating macro-level structures and micro-level actions rooted in particular space and time" (612). I won't be reiterating here the methodology for institutional critique that these authors propose, but I do hope to show how our efforts to introduce directed self-placement at my former university was from the start an "unabashedly" rhetorical enterprise and rooted in a context that while perhaps unique in its particularity will also be familiar to many WPAs.

Unfortunately, when I first approached the question of writing placement in my role as the WPA at Southern Illinois University Carbondale (SIUC), I, too, underestimated the degree to which placement itself (and

thus any changes I might instigate) functioned in the wider institutional context as the expression of power and a symptom of the institution's normalizing desire. And thus my discussion here will be sleight-of-hand, or what Burke would call "prophesying after the event," a phenomenon whereby we substitute logical priority for a temporal sequence (*Language* 85). In retrospect, it is now easy for me to see how a seemingly innocuous and initially well-supported change could ultimately expose the institutional forces that not only govern what is possible in writing program administration but also reveal the function of institutions as static patterns of value. All of which is to say that directed self-placement in the university raises more than just questions of validity, programmatic goals, and curricular integrity. In considering the merits of directed self-placement, we find ourselves cast into a net of conflicting values that force us to re-examine writing placement itself as an institutional practice, and placement generally as a fundamentally rhetorical and thus social act. Therein, I believe, is one of directed self-placement's unintended but delightful consequences. With the emergence of directed self-placement as an alternative means of placement, we will find ourselves revisiting fundamental questions about the role of composition in the university, the function of the university as an institution, and the cult of individuality that runs deep in American culture.

I intend in this essay, then, to articulate the ways that directed self-placement might function to reshape institutional contexts and conversations, what types and sources of resistance WPAs will likely face at the university and among students, strategies for understanding and (perhaps) overcoming such resistance, and finally, how directed self-placement itself can potentially and fundamentally affect every facet of a writing program. In the end, I believe, a writing program that successfully implements directed self-placement will find its effects showing up in instructor training, instructor-student relations, instructor and student attitudes, and, of course, student performance. The consequences of our placement methods run far deeper than we might initially presume.

I began this essay from the top-down by first considering "the institution" as an entity, not an individual with motives of its own, but as the abstract set of principles around which social groups form. I next move to "the university" to consider the ways in which my university manifested itself as an institution, with stress upon the ways in which it conceives and expresses its mission as an educational institution and how this mission shapes the operative rhetorical dynamic (a dynamic that will sound familiar to many). In this context, I then examine the writing program itself to show how its institutional status as an agent of change impacted the move toward directed self-placement. Finally, and perhaps most important of all, I consider the stakeholders, those groups

of people who ultimately had vested interests in the writing program, including mid-level administrators, campus advisors, instructors, and, of course, the students themselves. How, finally, did the prospect and realization of directed self-placement affect them?

The essay by Erin Harvey, Erica J. Reynolds and the author in the forthcoming volume, *Directed Self-Placement: Principles and Practices* (2002), speaks more directly to programmatic details and issues of student performance than I intend to here. I want to note, however, that it is critical that we come to the table with empirical evidence and specific plans to support such a programmatic initiative as directed self-placement. But at the institutional level, such evidence usually doesn't carry the persuasive force that we and other WPAs might attach to it, and so I will focus more here on the rhetorical dynamic at the level of the bureaucracy and hope that I can provide other WPAs with a better understanding of what's involved when we say what we are doing (or wont to do) and why we are doing it. At the bureaucratic, institutional level, WPAs often find that empirical evidence, expert opinion, and (even) rational argument fail to produce good results. And yet I still believe that the rhetoric we use to reach disciplinary consensus can play a role in fostering institutional change, provided the institution will confer authority to those who proffer it and that the WPA can show it is warranted. In the end and to those who don't share our disciplinary history, discipline-specific knowledge functions ethically rather than logically, establishing the intellectual integrity of the WPA more than it might rationalize or justify specific programmatic change.

The University

In the strange world of university politics and procedures, the status quo has great momentum. One function of the university, of course, is to preserve the values of the institution which it represents. Momentum never ends, it just changes directions, more often ever so slightly than in great shifts. Consider the following representative anecdote, which has circulated widely on the Internet and that I have adapted for the sake of illustration:

> The US standard railroad gauge (width between the two rails) is 4 feet, 8.5 inches. Why was that gauge used? Because that's the way they built railroads in England, and the US railroads were built by English expatriates. Why did the English build them like that? Because the first rail lines were built by the same people who built the pre-railroad tramways, and that's the gauge they used. Why did they use that gauge then? Because the people

who built the tramways used the same jigs and tools that they used for building the wagons that used that wheel spacing. So why did the wagons have that particular odd wheel spacing? Well, if they tried to use any other spacing, the wagon wheels would break on some of the old, long distance roads in England because of the spacing of the wheel ruts.

Who built those old rutted roads? The first long distance roads in Europe (and England) were built by Imperial Rome for their legions. The roads have been used ever since. And the ruts in the roads? Roman war chariots first formed the initial ruts, which everyone else had to match for fear of destroying their wagon wheels. Since the chariots were made for (or by) Imperial Rome, they were all alike in the matter of wheel spacing. The United States standard railroad gauge of 4 feet, 8.5 inches derives from the original specification for an Imperial Roman war chariot. The Imperial Roman war chariots were made just wide enough to accommodate the rear-ends of two war horses.

As a complex system, a university naturally resists change, especially the more its tendrils reach into the tidy wilderness of cultural ideology. It is easiest for a university bureaucracy to lumber on, to continue to do things as they have always been done, its dormancy often shored up by nostalgia for a bogus past or for "economic necessities." But on occasion and (sometimes) at watershed moments, people begin to question the status quo either because old ways no longer seem to be working or because material conditions force (or allow) them to question it. The actors in such a drama at first tend to perceive their efforts as revolutionary, but functionally speaking, such efforts often merely provide the university and its constituents the opportunity to re-assert principles that have withstood such tests countless times.[2]

I see two ways of understanding how and why the university as an institution might resist directed self-placement conceptually, if not practically. To explain the first, I borrow again from Burke. His phrase "bureaucratization of the imaginative" names the phenomenon whereby amid a myriad of imaginative possibilities, we lean toward just one. The "imaginative" is a world of possibilities; bureaucratization, the carrying-out of but one them. As Burke sees it, the phrase itself names a fundamental process of history, or even dying, and is as "bungling as the situation it would characterize" (*Attitudes Toward History* 225). Unfortunately, the imaginative possibilities of the idea of a university

were reduced to few in number long before any of us arrived. One of those possibilities concerns the university's educational mission. In the most general sense, the university faces the rather schizophrenic task of preserving and disseminating collective knowledge even as it (ideally) prepares students to question that knowledge and perhaps reassemble it for future generations. Operatively speaking, the former possibility— reifying knowledge—usually takes precedence. In order to rationalize its existence, then, the university must identify students initially as outsiders, as the great unwashed or as empty, narrow-necked vessels, waiting to be cleansed or filled up with the wisdom of the academy. It is the lingering hegemony of this identification that rationalizes what Paulo Freire describes as the banking model of education in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (passim) and that trickles down to the earliest years of schooling. The status quo has been that the institution should make decisions for the students, even when students might be better served to learn to make those decisions for themselves.

By the time they reach the university, most students in the United States have grown accustomed to being identified as empty vessels, and so there is normally little resistance to the drudgery of college entrance exams, writing placement tests, or any of the other battery of tests that the institution uses to identify just how empty students might be. (Ironically, some resistance will likely show up among students when a university *doesn't* begin with the presumption that students cannot evaluate their own learning.) Much of this sorting goes on outside the immediate sphere of university faculty, having been bureaucratized as the means by which the university selects or accepts students into the system. It is normally a charge carried out by testing and placement offices, recruiting officers, and other people who set and administer admissions policy, a realm most faculty and perhaps even most WPAs either avoid or recognize as beyond their sphere of influence. Because it is also an expression of institutional ideology with deep roots in cultural presumptions about education, the means by which we place students at the university is very resistant to change. There are already complex mechanisms in place that make it work (well or not), and at a large university, there are also hundreds of people involved, each of whom has some stake in the process, even though there may be few opportunities for asserting it. An act as seemingly innocuous as changing the writing placement method to directed self-placement thus requires changing the culture of the institution and rediscovering the imaginative possibilities of higher education. We have to re-bureaucratize them so that we can live with ourselves.

The second reason why the university might resist directed self-placement results from the magnitude of the change and the number of people needed to make it work. At my former university, like many others, the normal avenue for implementing curricular change followed a fairly standard pattern. At first, a select few faculty devise strategies for improving courses or programs, build support for them by discussing their merits with other faculty and (sometimes) students, then garner support from a wider body of policy-making units, such as a faculty senate or council. Recommendations for change are passed to the people who grant the final seal of approval, such as academic deans or provosts, and then the new policy is enacted. When the change is largely content-based or curricular in nature, the process usually runs smoothly, with those not directly affected deferring to the authority and sovereignty of those who are. Problems only arise when changes in one area are likely to impact another.

Implicit in this process is an ideal of shared governance, which asserts that change be the result of compromise and discussion across all levels of administration and not just enacted from the top-down (e.g., by decree of a dean or some other academic officer). People generally recognize that real change needs to occur from the bottom-up, with all stakeholders involved from the beginning. As Barbara Gleason and her colleagues at CUNY learned, it is extremely difficult to involve all stakeholders in decision-making from the outset. Attempting to do so can actually paralyze the process of change. The WPA does, after all, need to make decisions that disciplinary knowledge and immediate contexts warrant. If writing programs were autonomous units, it wouldn't be so difficult to involve all stakeholders—students and teachers—in decision-making. But writing programs, for better or worse, serve the university also when they are charged with preparing students for the rigors of academic writing. And they serve the larger community as well, representing to many the last hope of ensuring a literate citizenry. (Whether or not WPAs see the writing program as "serving" in such a way is irrelevant except when changing that perception is the goal.) Involving all stakeholders in the decision-making process thus is a great challenge for the WPA, who must try to balance the demands of theory with the practical need for support from those outside who may not share the same disciplinary knowledge and who may imagine different goals for the writing program. It is a kairotic moment, with the WPA feeling the need to improve the program even as he or she needs to recognize that the circumstances, some of which may be beyond direct influence, significantly affect the rhetorical dynamic necessary to implement change. In such circumstances, and as Aristotle long ago reminded us, the truth alone may not be enough to persuade.

When arguing for the implementation of directed self-placement, I recognized from the outset that stakeholders needed to be involved, but I significantly underestimated the degree of that involvement, as well as the time it would take to foster it. My philosophy from the outset was that the status quo did have great momentum and that in order for directed self-placement to work as it should, it would need to become the status quo itself. I also believed that if the "official" constituencies supported it, we could make it work. As most WPAs know (or learn), however, even official acceptance is no guarantee of cooperation. The residual status quo can re-assert itself in beguiling and unanticipated ways.

Before I describe more specifically how my attempts to re-bureau-cratize the imaginative worked (or didn't), I should say that for the most part, directed self-placement has been a great success at the university and a model for other programs in the university to emulate. And yet, whatever its successes, it has a tenuous future because while it may "work" for the time being, it is a high-maintenance change. Additionally, the forces beyond the writing program that might question it may have been appeased, but they have not been silenced. There may be little hope that the residual, institutional ideology that "imposes universal subjectivity" (Crowley 9) on students has been extinguished.

The Writing Program in the University

To understand the material conditions that attended the introduction of directed self-placement at my university and thus that shaped the rheto-ric used to support the change, I need to tell you a little bit about the writing program itself.

In Fall 1998, we created the English 100/101 *Stretch* program, one modeled on the *Stretch* program at Arizona State University and described by Gregory Glau in ""The 'Stretch Program': Arizona State University's New Model of University-Level Basic Writing Instruction." English 100 (Basic Writing) would be the new, three-credit-hour course specially designed to prepare students to succeed in English 101 (Com-position I), 102 (Composition II), and other college-level writing courses. Students who placed themselves into English 100 became participants in the *Stretch* program, which allowed them to take English 100 and 101 with the same experienced instructor in consecutive semesters.

Directed self-placement became the new writing placement process. As we conceived it, directed self-placement asked students to select whether they wanted to begin the first-year composition sequence in English 100/101 *Stretch* or in English 101. Students were asked to review their preparation for college-level writing and the course descriptions before making their decision. A first-week diagnostic essay in all sec-

tions of English 100 and 101 acted as a check on this process and allowed the WPA to make further recommendations regarding placement. The brochure we used to distribute information about the process is included in Appendix 1.

SIUC's writing program was well-designed and overseen for many years by outstanding WPAs, so in many respects, implementing these changes at the program level was simply a matter of course. We still felt an enormous amount of pressure, warranted or not, to address what others perceived as substantial problems in the writing ability of the university's junior- and senior-level students. It didn't matter to those placing the blame on the writing program that no one had bothered to ask what we did or why we did it, or that half of our students took their writing courses elsewhere, or that no one had bothered to formally assess the writing of students who passed through our courses, not to mention the writing ability of those students who were reportedly not writing as well as they should be. It was the old and familiar pass-the-buck phenomenon re-asserting itself. At the time, everyone was in on the act, from the provost on down. Hence, the pressure.

Two versions of English 101 were offered prior to Fall 1998: English 101 Regular (ENGL 101), which included regularly admitted students and Special Admission (SA) students who had received high scores on a writing placement test; and English 101 Restricted (ENGL 101R), which included only SA students who had received low scores on a writing placement test. English 102 (ENGL 102) was the second course in the sequence. Both courses were required as part of the core curriculum's "Foundation Skills" sequence.

Prior to Fall 1998, placement in English 101 and English 101R was determined initially by ACT score. Students scoring 19 or below and who were admitted to the university through the Center for Basic Skills (SA students) were given a timed writing test, which was subsequently scored by tutors in the English Department's writing center over the summer. All students scoring higher than 19 on the ACT placed automatically into English 101. SA students who performed well on their written test were also placed into English 101. Those who did not were placed into English 101R.

There were several differences between English 101 and English 101R. The enrollment caps were 20 and 15, respectively. The courses used different primary rhetorics, with the English 101R course also specially designed to meet the needs of basic writers. More experienced teachers were assigned to teach English 101R. However, both English 101 and English 101R shared identical learning objectives. Students in both courses were encouraged to seek help from our writing centers.

In the 1980s and when the courses were originally conceived, English 101R included a tutorial component, which required English 101R students to meet with a tutorial group for at least one hour per week to get extra help with their writing. That component of English 101R was discontinued in Fall 1987 due to budget constraints and the development of the writing center. Subsequently, all students placed into English 101R were essentially mainstreamed, once the tutorial component was made voluntary rather than a principal component of the course. Whether a student took English 101 or English 101R, it was expected that he or she would be prepared for English 102 in one semester, regardless of the student's writing ability at the time of matriculation. The PR (Progress) grade could be used in English 101 or English 101R for students who attempted to do the coursework and who attended class regularly but who did not earn a C or better. It was rarely used, however

The initial impetus for change came as a result of campus-wide discussion led by the university's core curriculum director, Ann-Janine Morey, who had held "town meetings" in all the academic units on the question of what constituted "writing literacy." Those meetings generated all sorts of recommendations (and gripes) from faculty, many of whom were unfamiliar with our curriculum or our attempts to prepare our instructors. Nevertheless, these discussions led to a host of formal recommendations, two of which were that the English department needed to create a basic writing course and a better system of placement. (Many believed that too many students were passed through the courses without learning much.) These recommendations became mandates when they were supported by the university's faculty senate. And thus the WPA's charge was to see that they were addressed. While the discussions among the WPA and other administrators was sometimes heated, the process had worked as the principle of shared governance would dictate. The university, as a collective entity, had certainly asked for change, but it was unknown at that time how ready it actually was for change.

We began the process of addressing the two recommendations—create a basic writing course and a better placement system—with these observations:

- A significant number of underprepared students were expected to "catch-up" to better-prepared peers after one semester of writing instruction in English 101; these students included both those who had placed into English 101R and—it is important to note—students who, because they scored higher than 19 on the ACT, never were tested for writing ability prior to enrolling.
- The university had no placement mechanism for determining the preparation and potential for success of regularly admitted

students, who may have scored above 19 on the ACT but who nevertheless may have had poor writing skills. We believed that as many as 10-15% of our students fell into this category, based on our review of grade distribution and the hypothesis that the ACT alone did not directly measure writing ability, but only predicted success in writing courses at the high end, i.e., for students scoring above the 80th percentile. A significant number of students who needed extra help with their writing were being placed in a course that was too advanced to meet their needs. To some extent, these hypotheses were supported by the data that we had begun to collect:

- A significant number of students were failing English 101 one or more times, ultimately resulting in low semester-to-semester retention of students in required writing courses. Students who did poorly in English 101 would either drop out of the university or would postpone re-enrolling in a writing course, both of which were undesirable outcomes for the students and for the university.

- While the mean GPA of students in English 101R and English 101 sections was very similar, SA students who had passed the English 101R course had a mean GPA in English 102 significantly lower than students who had passed the English 101 course.

Given what we knew and what we believed could happen, we designed the basic writing course and the new placement method, drawing heavily on the Arizona State *Stretch* model and upon the placement method outlined by Daniel J. Royer and Roger Gilles in their groundbreaking *CCC* article, "Directed Self-Placement: An Attitude of Orientation." We also relied on the qualitative observations of English 101 and English 101R instructors, data on the mean GPA of students as they moved through the first-year composition sequence, performance and retention data observed in other writing programs, and what we knew theoretically about the teaching and learning of writing.

Internally, we decided to adopt directed self-placement as the writing placement mechanism for two primary reasons:

1. Directed self-placement had been successfully implemented at at least one comparable university. Royer and Gilles had persuaded us. It didn't hurt our efforts later that directed self-placement seemed like a relatively inexpensive solution to the problem of writing placement. (Over the course of implementation, we found that rather than pay people to read placement essays, we paid them to talk to students, with the overall expense of

doing either roughly equivalent.) More importantly, however, it also communicated the positive message to students that we respected their judgment. We felt that if students chose to take the basic writing course, rather than be forced to take it, that the classroom dynamic would improve dramatically, an important factor in a course in which students' attitudes toward writing is so crucial to writing growth. Setting questions of accuracy and reliability aside for the time being, we felt that directed self-placement could not only positively transform the learning space of the basic writing class, but also that it would make placement a far less dismal affair than it normally is, for students, advisors, teachers, and administrators. At the point of contact between students and teachers, and students and advisors, as Royer and Gilles say, directed self-placement indeed felt right (61).

2. We suspected but were not certain that students could accurately gauge their writing ability. As Erica Reynolds demonstrates in her essay in the forthcoming volume, *Directed Self-Placement: Principles and Practices*, our suspicion turned out to hold some merit. Research has shown that student self-efficacy—task-specific confidence—positively correlates with writing ability.

Throughout this stage of the process and having received a general mandate, the planning was then merely a matter of reviewing the possibilities, weighing their merits, and formulating a strategy. There was no need at this point, or so we felt, to take the range of possibilities to stakeholders other than those who would implement the change in the program itself or those who would need to approve it as "official policy."

The tricky part in our implementation came next, when it was time to communicate the new policy to the secondary stakeholders. While we had agreed internally that directed self-placement and *Stretch* could work well together, we still had to rely on others outside the program (secondary stakeholders) to make it happen. That meant that the rhetorical dynamic would have to change. We would no longer be talking only amongst ourselves or with our students (both primary stakeholders), and thus could no longer rely on shared assumptions about how students learn to write. When you remove the bases for easy agreement, cooperation can quickly turn to competition and suspicion. So at the programmatic level, we knew from the outset that we needed to collect data to support and then to justify the changes we were proposing.

As much as baseline data (such as the mean GPA of students moving through the first-year composition sequence) and qualitative observations of English 101 instructors supported an initiative for change, and as promising as *Stretch* and directed self-placement were for improving

students' performance and retention at SIUC, concern among many over the extrapolation of results from other universities was understandable. We knew we would have to prove that directed self-placement could and (later) did work at SIUC. I have included some of our results in Appendix 2, "What Do We Know Now?"

The Stakeholders in the University

We first had to persuade higher-level administrators, such as our dean and the provost, that we could make directed self-placement work and that we would not be simply turning over to students the responsibility for making decisions that many presumed we were more qualified to make. Initially, people failed to appreciate the degree to which the "directed" part of directed self-placement played a role. To some, it seemed "counter-intuitive" that students would self-place accurately or honestly. At the time, we didn't have data to predict that they would. We distributed the articles by Glau in *WPA: Writing Program Administration* and a draft of Royer and Gilles's *CCC* article on directed self-placement to help us make the case, and those articles did have a positive influence, even though I now believe it was really the gesture of pointing to existing scholarship that was persuasive, not the substance of the articles themselves. At the administrative level, we actually spent very little time discussing these other models, and it seemed fairly clear to me that the people with whom I worked hadn't considered the evidence in the articles on *Stretch* and directed self-placement very closely. So while I had introduced existing scholarship to help make the case and to shape the discussion, that scholarship had more influence as a demonstration that I had done my homework and that directed self-placement and *Stretch* were not some hare-brained ideas I had invented. That approach seemed to work well to build credibility and ethos. Still, however, to appease the dean and provost, we suggested that we would provide a "safeguard" in the form of a diagnostic essay that would be administered to all students during the first week of either course (English 100—Basic Writing or 101—Composition I) and that students would be given a second-chance to select the proper course using their results for further guidance. The diagnostic essay thus functioned as a trump card that we played to make doubters realize essentially that they (and, of course, the students) had nothing to lose by going along with the experiment. That strategy also worked, and the diagnostic essay became an important rejoinder to charges from the administration or anyone else that the English department was abdicating its responsibility. However, the diagnostic essay functioned as an adjustment, one of those unintended by-products of the imaginative, a necessity of our invention given the need to persuade

others that the new program could work. Conducting a blind, multiple reading of 2,700 essays and distributing the results in two days was manageable, but barely, with the cost being its intrusiveness at the start of each semester and the implicit message to students that we might not trust their judgment as much as we say we do.

To ensure that our plan would be accepted, I also promised to provide the university administration with the hard data showing that we had indeed achieved what we predicted we would. Using data from the Arizona State model, I had said that we would see students who started with English 100 ultimately achieve higher GPAs in English 102 (Composition II) than did their peers who started with English 101. I promised that students would indeed choose English 100 in the first place, even though it meant they would have to take an additional three credit-hours in composition. (At the time, I estimated that 15-20% of the students would choose English 100.) I promised that we would see retention in writing courses from semester-to-semester increase as a result of the changes (something also predicted by the Arizona State model). In sum, I had committed to making the introduction of directed self-placement and the other changes to the program a safe-bet for the administration. Perhaps inadvertently, I had also committed myself and writing program staff to an undertaking in statistical compilation that would require enormous expenditures of time and resources. I didn't realize at the time that no one at the university had *ever* generated such statistics measuring individual student performance and retention across a range of courses, in spite of the obvious benefits of doing so.

Our situation was somewhat different than it was at Grand Valley State University, where it was possible for writing program representatives to meet directly with students during summer orientation programs. Our students enrolled in courses off-site, by phone, or in one-on-one meetings with campus advisors. Campus advising was decentralized, meaning that each college (e.g., Liberal Arts, Education, Science, etc.) was responsible for advising the students who had chosen to major in a field within the particular college. We had no presemester orientation program for newly admitted students. And thus our first task was to make sure that campus advisors were well informed about directed self-placement and that they in turn could help us ensure that their students were well informed when making their placement decisions.

This aspect of the implementation turned out to be the most difficult to manage for several reasons. As we spread the responsibility for ensuring that students were well-informed about their choices, we also created opportunities for people to assert their influence on those choices. Ideally, students would carefully consider the options we presented them, perhaps with parents, teachers, and guidance counselors, then make

their choice. We prepared brochures for students to review, established a website with more information, and invited them to contact me or a placement coordinator if they were uncertain.[3] Logistically, simply getting this information to the students proved to be difficult. (On our first pre-semester survey, only about half of the students said they had heard of directed self-placement.) To make sure that campus advisors—who would be the lead contacts with students—were well informed, I and the placement coordinators met with each advising unit multiple times, speaking to more than 100 advisors in all about the change. Most were very enthusiastic. And yet, over time, we saw that we had also created the opportunity for people to intervene by assuming perhaps too much of the "directing" in the space we had created when we asserted that we were not advocating self-placement, but *directed* self-placement. This tendency, I believe, proved to be the biggest challenge to overcome, in large part due to the material conditions that prevented our direct contact with students and the ideological insistence that allowing students to choose was "counter-intuitive." It is an issue over which the stakeholders themselves still felt conflicted, even if directed self-placement itself had become "official policy."

In principle, it would seem most efficient for the WPA to be the chief overseer of the writing program and thus responsible for formulating and enacting policy, standards, or guidelines, with stakeholders involved only to the extent that they would support and learn to implement such directives effectively. Of course, everyone knows that good teaching and good administration are not merely matters of formulating and enacting policy, of being efficient. With the healthy state of scholarship in writing program administration, it is fairly easy to design programs and curricula with sound rationale and theoretical support. It is much more challenging to make a program work as intended. Stakeholders need to feel a sense of ownership and that comes only with their active involvement at the conceptualization stage, when the future is a tangled wilderness of possibilities. And so we're better off sacrificing efficiency in the early going, on the promise that our programs in the long run will be much better because of our efforts to involve stakeholders at every stage. As I mentioned earlier, there are more stakeholders on the periphery of a writing program than one might imagine initially. There are the teachers and students, of course. But aside from them, who are they? And what do they think? What motivates them to have a stake in the first place?

At SIUC, advisors were the ones charged with making sure students take the right courses and thus make good progress in their degree programs. Advisors function as the interpreters of academic policy and thus play an important role in ensuring that it works as it should. They are

also often the first point of human contact a new student has with the university. For these reasons, I knew that I would need to appeal to them for help, since the dynamic of directed self-placement would work best when their contact with students went well.

Initially, the advisors were highly skeptical of the initiative, not so much because they disagreed with directed self-placement in principle, but because it would change the nature of their interaction with students. As I saw it, I was simply asking them to distribute information to students and then to advise them when the students had questions. Previously, however, placement was predetermined before they would ever see a student. So directed self-placement upset a mechanism that functioned daily to make their work with students run more smoothly. In the past, placement was merely a matter of reading the student's transcript on a computer screen.

My first meeting with the group of chief academic advisors came nine months before the Fall 1998 semester, which would mark the time when the policy would be fully implemented. They were a tough bunch and in the end proved to be more concerned about ensuring success for students than any of the other constituencies I met with, with the exception of our instructors. We discussed—argued in fact—what students should be learning in our courses, whether our instructors were well trained, whether it was a wise idea to focus the courses themselves on process and rhetoric rather than grammar, and so on. They also recognized fairly early that I had not fully anticipated how complex a problem was posed by the need to prepare students for their first advising appointment. They knew that it would be very difficult to allow students to move back and forth between English 100 and 101 during the first two weeks of the semester, when both the advisors and students were already overburdened with managing schedules. By the time we had finished debating the mechanism itself, I had promised them I would make their work as easy as possible. That meant that I and writing program staff would manage all student movement during the first two weeks of the semester, that I would provide them with all the information they needed to keep their records straight, and that we would generally do everything possible to make their task simply one of informing students about directed self-placement and answering questions as they arose. By the end of this first meeting and in the days that followed, it seemed I had garnered their support.

I learned later that one reason I had "persuaded" them was that I had simply met with them in the first place. Because directed self-placement reached well beyond the writing program itself, it was absolutely necessary for me to meet with them. Nevertheless, our campus advisors are

normally left out of the loop, with little say in the formulation of curricular policy. Although much of the policy had been formed already, the advisors felt in this case as if their stake was being measured and appreciated. For the next two years, as directed self-placement took hold, the campus advising units, with one notable exception, proved to be the initiative's most vocal proponents.

Unfortunately, we had significant problems garnering the support of the university's Center for Basic Skills, the advising and support unit responsible for ensuring that at-risk students made the adjustment to academic life successfully. These Special Admission students, comprising approximately 20% of the incoming class, were the ones who had previously been tested for writing ability and slotted either in the English 101 or 101-Restricted course depending upon their performance, the writing test itself complementing whatever indications of ability their ACT scores provided. They were also the students we believed had been short-changed under the previous two-tiered system, with clear statistical evidence that their first course was not preparing them to do well in English 102. Early in the process of implementing directed self-placement, we discovered that *all* Special Admissions students had been automatically placed into English 101 and were not given the choice of starting with English 100 in the new *Stretch* sequence. That came as a great surprise to us because several meetings with the unit's director and chief academic advisor led us to believe that they supported the plan. As we did with the other advising units, we had periodically checked with them to ask if they needed our assistance. We were assured that everything was going smoothly. In fact, it wasn't going at all. There had been apparent agreement with the plan, but it was disingenuous. All 450 Special Admission students were placed in English 101, a statistically unlikely result and one that that program's director tried to sell as legitimate in the early going. I knew that many of these students would likely have chosen English 100 had they been given the choice, so I had planned the course offerings based upon my projections. But because these students had been placed (rather than placing themselves) as was eventually admitted, all of our scheduling of courses and instructors would have to be revised because enrollment in English 100 was not meeting our projections.

Suffice it to say there was substantial discussion of our alternatives. When things don't go according to plan in an academic bureaucracy, the war of words can be very fierce, even if on the grand scheme of things the issue may seem rather trivial. Push came to shove, with even our provost issuing an executive order that the Center for Basic Skills cooperate with the dictates of directed self-placement. That order went unheeded, of course, in part because the unit was not perceived as an academic one

and the director himself reported to the chancellor, who was one step higher up in the administrative hierarchy. (At the time, we had only an interim chancellor who was in the midst of leaving office.) I chose to contact all Special Admission students directly to let them know of their opportunity to choose their course. Forty-percent of the students who responded to our letter chose to move to English 100 (and thus, to drop the English 101 course into which they had been placed). We had averted the crisis in the short term. By the start of the first semester of directed self-placement and *Stretch*, 275 students, or approximately 12% of the incoming class, had chosen to take English 100, including 90 Special Admission students.

The rhetorical dynamic that ultimately resulted in this breakdown was clear from the beginning, but no one noticed it. One way of avoiding action is to argue details, with the resulting particularity of the argument distracting attention from the urgency of moving forward, even when there's a fairly widely accepted mandate to do so. Even if one misunderstands the details, simply questioning them works to obstruct the intended action. It is a tactic that those skilled in deliberative rhetoric know well. At the outset, the director of the Center for Basic Skills had said, "Just because [directed self-placement] worked at Grand Valley State, that doesn't mean it's going to work here." We spent little time discussing how the previous system hurt the students or how the new one would benefit them. Whenever I would try to begin that discussion, a new detail would be introduced, so that there was never resolution or agreement on any individual point. This sort of exchange went on for more than a year, well past the time when directed self-placement had been accepted by the rest of the campus community as a matter of policy. Eventually, the new status quo exerted enough pressure to make directed self-placement work, but in patchwork form.

I am often asked what "reason" was given for this lack of cooperation, but there remain no clear-cut answers. Certainly, none were ever offered. I believe now that we were witness to the enactment of an ideology that said students were unable to make good judgments about their writing readiness *because* they weren't good writers. They needed to be led with a firm hand by those who were able to judge them, even if those judgments were unsupported by research and by the record of actual student performance. It is an ideology that transcends our particular circumstances and that Freire so carefully describes in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. These Special Admission students, so the argument went, were being saved from themselves and the power would stay firmly in the hands of the ones presuming to save them. The power to place these students, tenuous and unjustified though it might have been, was likely

the only form of power that the Center for Basic Skills could wield, or that its director believed existed. The system, which ensured the stability of the power wielded over these students, would not be sacrificed. So there were no reasons, just subterfuge, denial, indirection, inattention, and simple dishonesty. In the end, some of the students would pay the price of failure, in spite of the best efforts of our instructors. Others would succeed.

We saw in some other cases that a few advisors insisted on making choices for the students because, perhaps, that's simply how it always had been done. But there is also the possibility that some students would rather not make a decision about their placement, feeling it to be too risky a decision. Our surveys of student attitudes, however, showed that students overwhelmingly valued their right to choose their writing course (see the Blakesley, Harvey, and Reynolds chapter in *Directed Self-Placement: Principles and Practices*), so it's more likely that where there was ambiguity, some people seized the opportunity to force choice in a particular direction.

Most advising units took to directed self-placement eagerly. Another of our at-risk populations—students deemed "pre-major"—enrolled in English 100 at about a 25% rate, well above the rate for other students. Pre-major advisors had been the most enthusiastic about the change in placement procedures and had worked the hardest to make sure their students were well informed. By the second year, we discovered that these students had also made the biggest turnaround in terms of their performance throughout the composition sequence, with their overall GPA in the courses higher than all other groups, while in past years, it had been well below. See Appendix 2 for a snapshot of our results. (See Blakesley, Harvey, and Reynolds for even more specific details on these gains.)

As an exercise in consensus building, our implementation of directed self-placement had unintended by-products that served the writing program well. Our campus advisors, because they had a prominent role in placement, knew what we did in our courses and why we did it. They were able to see that their efforts made a difference. It is important for a writing program to have allies beyond its borders, as WPAs know. In the next two years, the usual complaints from faculty and the administration about students who can't write diminished substantially, so that we were left to make improvements to the program without always feeling the need to defend ourselves or the integrity of our curriculum. Perhaps, ironically, those of us who fought on behalf of directed self-placement found ourselves cast into a net somewhat like the one we lay for students when we place them by any means. We felt the ways that the institution asserted its hierarchical system of ordering as we debated the legislative

function of academic policy. But we also emerged from the process with a new spirit of cooperation, a feeling among many that we each had a stake, that we had changed the status quo, if slightly, and that its momentum could be influenced in directions that we chose, not ones chosen for us by necessity or conveniences of the past.

Instructors in the writing program became much more involved in the placement process. No longer did students magically appear in their courses, with the knowledge of how they got there a mystery to the students and the instructors. The instructors play a vital role in disseminating information about directed self-placement in the first two weeks of the semester. Each has to be a spokesperson capable of answering questions for the students. When they read diagnostic essays by students written in other classes, instructors must base their reading not merely on the evidence in front of them but on their conception of the composition sequence, the differences between English 100 and 101, and the goals of the program. Instructors of English 100 had the opportunity to rethink their approach to teaching writing on the knowledge that they would have their students for a full year rather than merely a fifteen-week semester. Sequencing of assignments suddenly became more a matter of scripting writing growth than it did of simply squeezing six (or however many) essay assignments into the calendar. As I see it, these were each positive results and directly attributable to directed self-placement and the *Stretch* model.

For these reasons, I see directed self-placement as a superior method of placement to the standard way writing placement used to operate on our campus, with students forced on the sly to simply accept the decree of administrators long ago who determined that an ACT score would be a good way to sift students by writing ability. That original act, even as it tidily reinforced the university's position as the guarded gateway to higher learning, also placed many students in great peril from the start by virtue of naming them using standards no one quite understood, appreciated, or even, when put to the test, trusted very much. As directed self-placement takes hold, I believe we will also see dramatic changes in the culture of the classroom, if not just the academic culture that supports it. The simple act of providing students some stake in exercising personal agency in such an explicit way can begin the process of achieving that more noble goal of higher education: to prepare a citizenry to write its own future by deliberating on its past. Directed self-placement is an act of restoration, not preservation, to the extent that it asks students to learn from the past to make decisions about their future. I think it will be very exciting and interesting to see whether the institution can withstand relinquishing to its subjects at least some of its power to name and place.

Notes

[1] An early draft of this essay was presented as a paper at the Conference on College Composition and Communication in Minneapolis, MN, on April 16, 2000.

The author would like to acknowledge some of the people who graciously contributed time and resources to this project as it developed at SIUC: Placement Coordinators Laura Ciancanelli, Todd Deam, Erin Harvey, Stacy Nicklow, Erica Reynolds, and Kristin Tracy; Dr. Gordon White, who provided all the statistical reports; University Core Curriculum Director Ann-Janine Morey; academic advisors Virginia Rinella, Richard Oakey, and Wanda Oakey; Department Chairs John Howell, Jerry Nelms, and Kevin Dettmar; then-Provost and Chancellor John Jackson and Dean Rob Jensen; my WPA colleague Lisa McClure; and above all, Donna Vance, for her all-around diligent and expert help on behalf of directed self-placement at the university. Beyond our boundaries, there were Dan Royer and Roger Gilles, both of whom were extremely generous with their advice and feedback at every stage of the long process of change.

[2] I should note here that whether directed self-placement precipitated any sort of revolution at my university remains to be seen.

[3] The role of placement coordinators was played by graduate teaching assistants in English. The result of negotiations with the English department's chair and the dean, these new, part-time positions were created to help the WPA implement these changes in the writing program and oversee their development.

[4] Those interested in reading the full report, "Directed Self-Placement and the English 100/101 Stretch Program at Southern Illinois University Carbondale: A Report on Student Performance, Retention, and Satisfaction" can request a copy from the author by writing to him at blakesle@purdue.edu or c/o the Department of English, Purdue University, West Lafayette, IN 47907.

[5] Because directed self-placement is an indirect measure of writing apprehension, and because people tend to associate apprehension with lack of confidence, some believe that women will be more likely to place themselves in a basic writing course than men, on the premise that cultural biases predispose women to be less confident about their abilities than men. In her MA thesis, "The Role of Self-Efficacy in Directed Self-Placement: An Analysis of Confidence, Apprehension, and Gender Components," (SIUC, July 1999), Erica Reynolds cites a wealth of research on this issue. For instance, in their study of writing apprehension, John Daly and Michael Miller found that "males were significantly higher in writing apprehension than females" (255; "Further Studies on Writing Apprehension: SAT Scores, Success Expectations, Willingness to Take Advanced Courses, and Sex Differences," *Research in the Teaching of English* 9 (1975): 250-56). Our enrollment results from Fall 1998 support Daly and Miller's finding, and add validity to the premise that directed self-

placement is at least an indirect measurement of writing apprehension, which correlates with actual writing ability.

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Appendix 1—Contents of the Directed Self-Placement Brochure

Directed Self- Placement and English Composition at SIUC

To succeed at SIUC, you will have to make many informed and mature decisions about which major to pursue, which courses to take, and how to manage and prioritize responsibilities. At SIUC, we believe that you can and should begin exercising your judgment early. Directed Self-Placement (DS-P, for short) allows you to decide whether to begin the English Composition sequence in the English 100/101 Stretch Program or in English 101. We want you to reflect upon your preparation for college-level writing, to consult with teachers, advisors, and family members, and then to choose the right course. (You will also write a diagnostic essay the first week of class and be asked to reconsider your original placement if the results warrant that recommendation.) Finally, all students are required to participate in Directed Self-Placement and should take responsibility for making this important decision. Before you meet with your advisor to register for courses, carefully review this guide. Past results show that students who are well informed also earn higher grades in whichever option they choose. So please consider this information carefully!

Option 1— English 100/101 *Stretch*

The Stretch Program is carefully designed to ensure that students develop the writing skills they will need to successfully complete the English Composition requirement and excel at the University. In the Stretch Program, students take English 100 and 101 in consecutive semesters with the same instructor. Both instructors and students thus have time to address specific writing needs at a pace and in a sequence that helps students excel. Students who choose English 100/101 *Stretch* improve their chances for success in English 101 and 102. English 100, 101, and 102 are each offered for three credit-hours. Depending upon your major, English 100 may count for elective credit for degree requirements. English 101 and 102 satisfy the Core Curriculum requirement in the Foundation Skills area.

In English 100, you will practice the forms of writing that will be expected of you in English 101, such as argumentation and analysis. You also will learn the writing and reading skills that help you gain confidence in your ability to communicate your ideas clearly. You will usually write about subjects familiar to you. If one or more of these characteristics describe you, consider enrolling in English 100:

❑ Generally, I don't read when I don't have to.

- ❑ In high school, I did not do much writing.
- ❑ My high school GPA was about average.
- ❑ I'm unsure about the rules of writing.
- ❑ I've used computers, but not often for writing and revising.
- ❑ My ACT score was below 20.
- ❑ I don't think of myself as a strong writer.
- ❑ I have been advised to take English 100 following a diagnostic writing.

Option 2— English 101

Generally speaking, you are well prepared for English 101 if you have done quite a bit of reading and writing in high school. English 101 instructors will assume that you can summarize and analyze published material from magazines, newspapers, books, and scholarly journals. They will also assume that you have written a variety of essays in a variety of forms, including persuasive and analytical writing. If most of the following statements describe you, you should take English 101 first:

- ❑ I enjoy reading newspapers, magazines, and books.
- ❑ In high school, I wrote several essays per year.
- ❑ My high school GPA placed me in the top third of my class.
- ❑ I have used computers for drafting and revising essays.
- ❑ My ACT score was above 20.
- ❑ I consider myself a good reader and writer.

Further Course Information

You can find out more about these courses on the World Wide Web at out our Directed Self-Placement Home Page:

http://www.siu.edu.departments/english/writing/wstudies.html

See the reverse side for some Frequently Asked Questions . . .

[Page 2 of brochure starts here]

Frequently Asked Questions: Directed Self-Placement and English 100/ 101 Stretch

Q. Why would a student choose to begin with English 100?

A. When a student chooses English 100, he or she automatically becomes a part of the *Stretch Program*, which allows students to work with the same experienced instructor in both English 100 and 101. Having the same instructor and peers for two semesters ensures a sense of continuity in writing development, increases confidence, and improves chances for success in English 101 and 102. Students in Stretch Programs generally earn higher grades in more advanced writing courses.

Q. Does English 100 count as a credit toward graduation?

A. In nearly all cases, yes. Students receive 3 hours of course credit for English 100. English 100 does not substitute for Core requirements, but these 3 hours may be applied toward the degree if the student's major allows for elective credit. Students should check with their advisors to determine whether English 100 will fulfill degree requirements in their major.

Q. How do students in English 100 ensure that they have the same instructor for English 101?

A. Students will be told which section of English 101 to register for and a spot will be reserved for them in that section until the 13th week of the semester. (The English 101 course will be offered at the same time on the same days as their English 100 course.) Students who would like a different instructor for English 101 will just register for a different section.

Q. What if the Diagnostic Essay shows that the student should move from English 100 to 101 or from 101 to 100?

A. The Director will advise these students that they should consider moving but will not require them to move. Students will be told which sections will be open to them if they would like to move, and they will be asked to see Donna Vance in Faner 2390 to get a closed-class card for the appropriate section if they do. Students who do not move from English 101 to 100 after advised that doing so would be in their best interest will be given instructions for setting up appointments with Writing Center tutors.

Q. If a student fails English 101, can he or she re- start with English 100?

A. Yes. The student will just select English 100 when registering for the next semester's courses.

Q. If a student receives a PR in English 101, can he or she re-start with English 100?

A. Yes. The student would enroll in English 100 the next semester and then take English 101 the semester after that. The student has one academic year to make up a PR grade before it turns to an F, so if the student completes the English 100-101 sequence satisfactorily within the year immediately following, the PR grade would not turn into an F automatically.

Q. How can students and advisors learn more about the Stretch Program, the English Composition courses, and Directed Self-Placement?

A. The English Department site on the World Wide Web includes useful information on these topics:

   http://www.siu.edu.departments/english/writing/wstudies.html

If would like to meet with a Placement Coordinator to discuss your placement in English 100 or 101, please contact Dr. David Blakesley or Ms. Donna Vance by phone at (618) 453-6811 or by email at dblake@siu.edu. The Writing Studies office is open Monday - Friday from 8:00 a. m. until 4:00 p.m.

Appendix 2—What Do We Know Now?

Since its inception, we fine-tuned the directed self-placement process, doing everything possible to keep students informed and to make sure that those who weren't initially could still exercise their choice at the start of each semester. We were diligent in preparing statistical reports, some quite lengthy, detailing precisely what the results show, some of which I summarize here. These reports were distributed widely to all constituencies so that everyone would know the results of their efforts.

Moving to directed self-placement and the *Stretch* model has led to positive and measurable results. Even as the quality and rigor of the courses has improved, so too have student performance and retention. Instructor morale in the basic writing course, English 100, is substantially higher than it was among teachers of English 101R prior to Fall 1998.

We have to-date collected performance, placement, enrollment, or survey data on over 7,000 students, including baseline data with which to compare new data as it emerges.[4] The results of such change were as imagined: students who self-selected the *Stretch* program ultimately outperformed their peers in the next two courses in the sequence. They highly valued our asking them for their input. Retention from semester-to-semester in writing courses improved immediately.

Here are the most important conclusions we can draw now that the data on these changes has been collected and analyzed. (See Table 1.):

1. Under the old sequence of courses, regularly admitted students tended to do better as they progressed, while Special Admission students tended to do worse. For the sizeable population of Special Admission students in English 101 Restricted sections in Fall 1996 and 1997, we saw the mean GPA drop markedly in English 102, nearly three-quarters of a grade-point lower than regularly admitted students.

2. On the premise that it is important for students to do well in their first writing course, it is encouraging to find that students who take English 100 have a substantially higher pass rate (9% higher) in their first course than do their peers in English 101.

3. The promise that students who begin with English 100 will catch-up to their peers by the end of the composition sequence has been realized.

a. The pass rate in English 102 (91.4%) for regularly admitted students who begin with English 100 is 3.5% higher than it is for students who began the sequence with English 101 (87.9%).

b. Special Admission students who began with English 100 have a 6% higher pass rate in English 101 than do those who began with English 101. They have a 1% higher pass rate in English 102.

c. The Fall 1998 group of Special Admission students, whether they began with English 100 or 101, had a higher pass rate than the same population in previous years. The Fall 1998 group had an overall pass rate of 83.6% in English 102, a 3.2% increase over the Fall 1996 group (80.4%) and 4.6% increase over the Fall 1997 group (79.0%).

4. The Fall 1998 Special Admission students (both the English 100 and 101 groups) had a mean GPA of 2.44 as a group in English 102, which is .12 higher than it was for the 1996 English 101 Restricted group of students (2.32) and .32 higher than it was for the 1997 group of English 101R students (2.12). Special Admission students are no longer falling further behind regularly admitted students as they complete the sequence of courses (see #1 above).

5. Evidence that directed self-placement and the Stretch program have had a positive effect on student retention is already starting to show, with the pass rates of at-risk students (both regularly admitted and Special Admission students) improving over previous years, even though the courses themselves now have more challenging student learning objectives.

6. 582 students took English 100 in the course's first two years, representing approximately 11% of the students who chose between English 100 or 101.

7. Initially, only about half of the students in English 100 and 101 say they heard about directed self-placement prior to enrolling for the course. Those who did chose English 100 at about a 21% rate. We expect that students will become better informed as directed self-placement becomes the norm.

8. 93% of the students who knew about directed self-placement

highly or moderately valued their right to choose which course to take.

9. At the end of the semester in English 100, 84% of the students believed they chose the correct course. In English 101, 97% of the students felt they chose the correct course. (See Charts 1 and 2.)

10. Males choose English 100 at a 3.6% higher rate than do females.[5]

11. Students in English 101 who do not accept the recommendation of the Director to consider moving to English 100 following the diagnostic essay have a failure rate in English 101 higher than 50%.

12. By multiple measures of performance, the diagnostic essay verifies the validity of directed self-placement as a writing placement method.

Chart 1 shows how the students felt by the end of English 100. At that time, 84% of the students in English 100 reported that they had chosen their course correctly. That is a high percentage given the likelihood that students who do exceptionally well in the course might feel that they would have done equally well in English 101. Even so, an overwhelming majority believes the right choice was made.

Chart 1. Did Students Make the Right Choice in English 100?

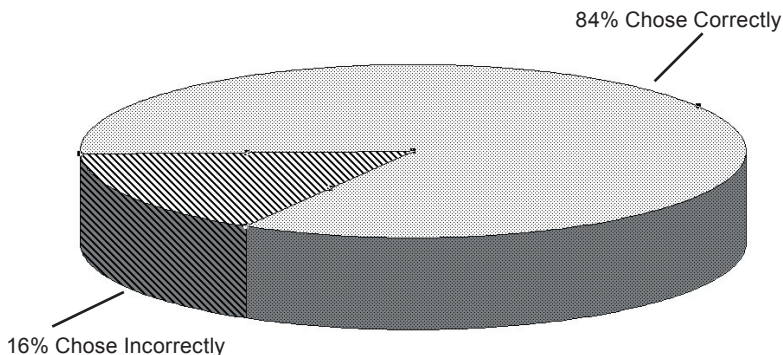84% Chose Correctly

16% Chose Incorrectly

Chart 2 shows the results for students in English 101. By the end of the course, 97% of the students felt they made the right choice. Whether that high a percentage actually did choose correctly is a matter for debate. About 20% of the students do not pass the course, so one wonders

whether those students did indeed make the correct choice. It would be useful to study this response more thoroughly with some follow-up questions because one consequence of directed self-placement should be a feeling of greater responsibility on the student's part for the outcomes of his or her education. It would be ideal if students came to believe that grades in courses were "earned" and not simply "received.

Chart 2. Did Students Make the Right Choice in English 101?
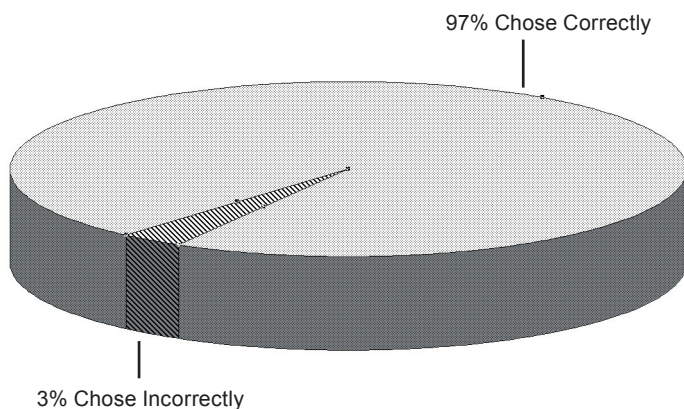

97% Chose Correctly

3% Chose Incorrectly

Table 1 summarizes GPA data for students across the composition sequence in the two years immediately preceding the change and the results collected as of Spring 2000. A detailed analysis of this data would be beyond the scope of this essay, so it is provided here simply to suggest the basis for the more detailed internal reports we generated.

Table 1. Tracking Student Performance in ENGL 100, 101, and 102 (Students admitted Fall 1996 through Fall 1998+)

Course/Semester/Year/ Group	# of Students	Mean GPA ENGL 100	Pass Rate ENGL 100	Mean GPA ENGL 101	Pass Rate ENGL 101	Mean GPA ENGL 102	Pass Rate ENGL 102
ENGL 101—Fall 1996 (Regularly Admitted)	1828			2.69	78.0%	2.92	85.9%
ENGL 101—Fall 1996 (Special Admission)	258			2.33	75.2%	2.27	77.5%
ENGL 101R—Fall 1996 (Special Admission)	213			2.58	80.8%	2.32	83.9%
All Special Admission Students in ENGL 101—Fall 1996 (Regular or Restricted)	471				77.7%		80.4%
ENGL 101—Fall 1997 (Regularly Admitted)	1734			2.73	79.8%	2.86	87.5%
ENGL 101R—Fall 1997 (Regularly Admitted)	63			2.47	77.8%	2.53	88.1%
ENGL 101—Fall 1997 (Special Admission)	104			2.5	77.9%	2.66	86.4%
ENGL 101R—Fall 1997 (Special Admission)	341			2.48	77.7%	2.12	76.7%
All Special Admission Students in ENGL 101 and ENGL 101R—Fall 1997	445				77.8%		79.0%
ENGL 100—Fall 1998 (Regularly Admitted)	71	3.1	88.7%	2.64	76.9%	2.94	91.4%
ENGL 100—Fall 1998 (Pre-Major)	124	2.9	88.7%	2.38	71.6%	2.82	88.9%
ENGL 100—Fall 1998 (Special Admission)	77	2.85	79.2%	2.46	76.7%	2.44	84.4%
ENGL 101—Fall 1998 (Regularly Admitted)	1360			2.72	78.9%	2.95	87.9%
ENGL 101—Fall 1998 (Pre-Major)	367			2.70	76.3%	2.91	87.7%
ENGL 101—Fall 1998 (Special Admission)	390			2.29	70.8%	2.44	83.6%
All Special Admission Students in 1998 Group	450			2.35	71.6%	2.44	83.6%