



The use of multiple measures for student placement in English, mathematics, and English as a Second Language (ESL) has been a required component of the placement process in the California community colleges since 1986. Multiple measures presumes that a student's likelihood of succeeding in a specific course can be determined more accurately by employing a variety of measures rather than using a single placement test or single measure, which research has shown to be an insufficient predictor of success. Often a combination of measures that assess academic readiness, student motivation, and non-academic factors provide a more complete predictor of success for the student. Measures may include indicators of academic readiness such as high school grade point average (GPA), specific course experiences, directed discussions between the student and a college representative to determine a student's motivation to succeed in a specific course or sequence, as well as indicators of non-academic factors (family commitments, living situations, etc.) that may impact academic success. In recent years, guided self-placement (GSP) has enabled additional measures to ensure a student is accurately placed into the appropriate course. The goal of GSP is not to challenge transfer-level placement but rather to help students integrate self-analysis with data and course expectations consistent with the goal of optimizing student investment, experience and resolve.

An effective GSP process provides information that helps a student perform a self-evaluation to determine the appropriate levels of course work that align with his or her personal educational goals and abilities. In the GSP process, a college provides a student with specific information on the targeted curriculum choices and sample assignments, projects, quizzes, exams, etc. for comparison to the student's self-perception of competency. None of these artifacts serve as an institutional evaluation, but rather provide details for the students to select a placement, get brush up work done before class, and consider the time commitment and expectations of courses and programs. The college then asks, often through a web-based questionnaire, about the student's academic history, future goals, and personal motivation. A robust GPS implementation provides a structured process that includes information and guidance to assist the student in making appropriate and accurate choices. The philosophy behind GSP focuses on providing students with



agency and choice, trusting that with the right guidance and information on programs and course options, most students will make appropriate placement choices (Royer & Gilles, 1998; 2003<sup>1</sup>).

In “Directed Self-Placement at ‘Democracy’s Open Door’: Writing Placement and Social Justice in Community Colleges,” Chris Toth examines promising evidence of self-placement implementation and increased success in courses coupled with student satisfaction in the self-placement process. Toth concludes that, “if well-implemented and validated, DSP (Directed Self-Placement) could offer a more socially just approach to writing placement in the nation’s diverse community colleges.” (Part 2, Chapter 4 page 151<sup>2</sup>)

At a minimum, GSP should include opportunity for students to:

1. conduct a self-evaluation of their academic readiness based on criteria provided by the college;
2. look at program requirements and course options to contextualize the pathway expectations;
3. review sample tasks and assignments exemplifying what students will learn in the courses;
4. consult with counseling or discipline faculty, as appropriate, regarding their self-evaluation, program requirements, and course options;
5. familiarize themselves with the support options available; and
6. decide which course is most suitable and applicable to their education goal.

CSU San Bernardino describes this process as compared to placement exams in the following way:

*“Placement exams place **assessment models** at the center of students’ educational experiences, by judging literacy practices and competencies in relation to a set of abstract*

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<sup>1</sup> Washington University <https://www.tacoma.uw.edu/university-writing-program/directed-self-placement-dsp-0>

<sup>2</sup> Poe, M., Inoue, A. B., & Elliot, N. (2018). *Writing Assessment, Social Justice, and the Advancement of Opportunity*. Perspectives on Writing. Fort Collins, Colorado: The WAC Clearinghouse and University Press of Colorado. Available at <https://wac.colostate.edu/books/perspectives/assessment/>



*criteria that students are usually unaware of. Self-placement models situate **students** at the center of their educational experiences by asking them to evaluate their literacy practices and competencies in relation to a reading and writing activity or some other reflective self-assessment process.”<sup>3</sup>*

Many universities and colleges have implemented GSP for English and, significantly, the implementation varies based on local research and practice. At CSU Sacramento and Northridge, the self-assessment is required, whereas at CSU San Bernardino and Fresno, self-placement is an alternative to the EPT (English Placement Test). At CSU Sonoma, all students are expected to do self-placement, but it is used in coordination with other multiple measures data. A noteworthy difference between GSP in the CSU system and the community colleges is that the CSU has entrance requirements while community colleges have no entrance requirements.

Other universities and colleges, such as Colorado State University, use a composite of multiple measures and testing to place students into coursework. Highline College, a community college in Washington provides students with a variety of pathways based on multiple measures including GSP<sup>4</sup>. Ozarks Technical Community College in Missouri uses GSP and then allows students to move to other courses early in the semester if the fit is not right. The college reports that only a small portion of the students move to new classes<sup>5</sup>.

For most students, guided self-placement into English is a straightforward process since the student needs only to determine the appropriate course in one sequence of courses. English as a Second Language (ESL) provides more complexity based upon the course choices, the student’s facility with language acquisition and the student’s educational goal. However, placement into mathematics courses is complicated by the various options from which a student must select. English and English as Second Language (ESL) placements are not as closely dependent on the choice of a major as mathematics. Selection of the wrong mathematics course for a specific major can be an impactful error, costing the student time and effort. Placement into mathematics courses is further

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<sup>3</sup> Welcome to Directed Self-Placement (DSP) at CSUSB (website) <https://cal.csusb.edu/directed-self-placement>

<sup>4</sup> Highline College <https://placeandtest.highline.edu/placement/>

<sup>5</sup> Ozarks Technical Community College <https://academics.otc.edu/placement/>



confounded by additional factors such as students who may have been out of school for a prolonged time, students who do not need a transfer course to complete a program of study, students looking for only specific job skills development, or students who were not successful in high school and are unsure of their mathematics skills. Regardless, some colleges are providing students the opportunity to self-place into mathematics courses. Effective GSP for mathematics should clearly communicate with current and prospective students college-level mathematics expectations aligned with specific majors and education goals; a clarification that is key to student progression and completion.

Anecdotally, most colleges report little change to their success rates after implementing GSP, which means that it has not hurt students overall and may have provided a better match for coursework. Some colleges reported a high percentage of students of color enrolled in higher-level courses, but most colleges have not reported disaggregated data evaluating the process.

### **Evaluating Guided Self-Placement**

With any operational change, there is a need to develop a plan for data collection and assessment for further research and validation of effectiveness.<sup>6</sup> That research should include student success in the self-placed courses (pass rates), student perception regarding appropriateness of the course to build skills needed for future classes (process feedback), the value students ascribe to making the choice for themselves (self-efficacy), and faculty evaluation of the process and assessment on the consequences of teaching and learning writing (Jones, 2008<sup>7</sup>; Royer and Giles, 1998<sup>8</sup>). Consistent with all educational practices in California, data should be disaggregated to identify disproportionate impact. Students cannot be stripped of their right to choose, but we should be vigilant to provide information that allows students to feel confident in selecting the highest level of coursework aligned with his or her life commitments, grit, motivation and educational goals.

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<sup>6</sup> The AB 705 implementation guidelines require that innovative practices be validated for effectiveness within two years of implementation.

<sup>7</sup> Jones, E, WPA: Writing Program Administration Volume 32, Number 1, Fall 2008 © Council of Writing

<sup>8</sup> Royer & Gilles, R. CCC 50.1/September 1998 Copyright 1998 by the National Council of Teachers of English <http://faculty.gvsu.edu/royerd/dsp/CO0501Directed.pdf>



## Conclusion

While AB 705 focuses on course-level student work, GSP attempts to have a broader view, considering bigger choices and a longer commitment to pathway and completion beyond the initial mathematics, English or ESL course. GSP has a goal to advance student agency and commitment. GSP has the opportunity to connect scaffolded skills that will adequately prepare students for their educational path, including sequential courses (such as the Calculus series) and courses that build on basic writing and quantitative reasoning as prerequisites. Ideally, these course placement considerations should link to high school counselors and teachers so that curriculum expectations and alignment are transparent and students have adequate time and input to consider and commit to a path.

The community college student population is not homogenous in preparation, goals, skills, or resources for college<sup>9</sup>. “Community colleges enroll a diverse group of students, with various reasons for going to college, and have larger percentages of nontraditional, low income, and minority students than 4-year colleges and universities”<sup>10</sup>. Used appropriately, multiple measures, including GSP, may be used to establish a process that serves the wide range of needs among diverse student populations, placing them courses that optimize success. Learning to read, write, and do mathematics are skills that provide the foundation for academic and career success. GSP facilitates student choice and acknowledges that students are often in the best position to evaluate their own abilities and life circumstances.

## Additional Resources to Review:

- ▶ Colorado State University self-placement website <https://composition.colostate.edu/students/placement/dspsurvey/>  
Composite placement table <https://composition.colostate.edu/students/placementprocedurestable/>

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<sup>9</sup> Ferenstein, G.F., Hershbein, B.J. *How Much does HS Matter? HS classes and Subsequent College Performance* (2013). [https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=2264820](https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2264820)

<sup>10</sup> Provasnik, S., and Planty, M. (2008). *Community Colleges: Special Supplement to The Condition of Education 2008* (NCES 2008-033). National Center for Education Statistics, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education. Washington, DC <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2008/2008033.pdf>



- ▶ CSU Sacramento <https://www.csus.edu/writing/directedselfplacement/>  
CSU Fresno <http://www.fresnostate.edu/artshum/english/firstyear/firstyear-directed.html#DSPHS>  
Self-Assessment as a Programmatic Center: The First Year Writing Program and its Assessment at California State University, Fresno by Asao. B. Inoue <http://compositionforum.com/issue/20/calstate-fresno.php>
- ▶ CSU Northridge <https://www.csun.edu/undergraduate-studies/academic-first-year-experiences/news/what-directed-self-placement-dsp>
- ▶ CSUSB Resources <https://cal.csusb.edu/directed-self-placement/dsp-resources>  
Overview for Advisors, Tips for talking to students, Selection Chart, FAQs
- ▶ Case Western Reserve University <http://sages.case.edu/sages-directed-self-placement-faqs/#2>
- ▶ Cal State to End Placement Exams Smit (June 2017) Inside Higher Ed <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2017/06/13/california-state-university-looks-end-placement-exams>