

Proposal for New Writing Placement Test
English Department
9/17/13

Background

1. The current placement process for freshman writing at CCSU is based entirely on SAT or ACT scores: students with scores above the cutoff are placed in ENG 110, and those below it in ENG 099. A written placement test evaluated in-house is made available only to a small number of students—usually international students and veterans—who enter CCSU without test scores. National disciplinary norms, an overwhelming body of scholarly evidence, and our own experience all indicate that this is an ineffective system: the SAT and ACT are unreliable predictors of writing ability, and the result is far too many students either forced to take a class—ENG 099—for which they are overprepared or allowed to take a class—ENG 110—for which they are underprepared. Neither situation is conducive to student success or persistence.
2. Public Act 12-40, signed into law last year, mandates (*inter alia*) two things. First, that ConnSCU schools use “multiple measures” to place students in first-year writing classes: a single test score will no longer suffice. Second, that ConnSCU schools offer “embedded remediation” courses—courses that “embed” basic writing instruction within a credit-bearing first-year writing course—for students who do not need a full semester of remediation but are not prepared to succeed in a conventional freshman composition course. The English Department has consequently designed an “embedded remediation” first year writing course—ENG 105—which is currently making its way through the university’s curriculum approval process, with the expectation that it will be piloted in spring 2014 in order to comply with PA 12-40.
3. The inadequacy of our current placement system, the need to use multiple placement measures, and the increased complexity of our placement situation caused by the introduction of ENG 105 have led the English Department to redesign its placement process for first-year writing.

The Proposal

1. In place of the current single cut score to determine placement, we propose a two-stage process. The first would involve a more nuanced use of SAT/ACT scores. Students whose test scores fell below a specified “floor” score would be required to take ENG 099, and students whose scores were above a “ceiling” score would be placed into ENG 110. All students whose scores fell between the “floor” and “ceiling” would be required to take a written placement test. All students without SAT/ACT scores would also be required to take the written test.
2. The written placement test would be administered on-line, via Blackboard Learn, at a location of the student’s choice. (National data shows that on tests like this plagiarism and other cheating are not significant issues, largely because of the nature of the test and the method of its assessment.)
3. Students who confirm their intention to attend CCSU and whose SAT/ACT scores indicate the need for the written test will be informed of their need to take the test and sent instructions.

4. Students who log on to take the test would first see a set of instructions which would include the test procedure, grading standards and rubric. They would be able to review this material at any time during the test process. Once they read this material, they would have the option of continuing or logging out and returning at another time.
5. If they choose to continue—or when they log on again—they would be given a series of multiple-choice or short-answer (250 character limit) demographic and self-evaluative questions concerning their language skills and writing preparation. These questions will not be used in the placement process itself—and students will be so informed—but rather to help us assess and improve the process and gather data on our student population. After completing this section, students would be given the option of continuing or logging out and returning at another time.
6. If they choose to continue—or when they log on again—they would be given the test itself. Once students begin the test, they cannot stop the process: they will have two hours to complete and submit the test. This will of course be made clear to students several times before they begin.
7. The test will ask students to read a short (500-600 word) text and give them a prompt asking them to write an essay of their own responding to the text and relating it to their own thoughts and experiences. Students will be given one of several text/prompt combinations, distributed randomly. The test will help us to evaluate the skills at the core of our writing program: the ability to read, respond to, and appropriately utilize written arguments and to make a clear and persuasive argument of one's own at an appropriate level of discourse. Students will have two hours to read the text and conceptualize, write, and edit their essay.
8. In the event that legitimate technical or other difficulties arise that prevent students from successfully completing and submitting their essays, we will make available a backup test that students can take on campus in order to minimize further difficulties.
9. Once a student's essay is submitted, it will be evaluated by a trained member of the English Department faculty and a placement decision—ENG 099, ENG 105, or ENG 110—will be entered into Banner and the student will be informed.

It is our hope and expectation that this new procedure will result in more accurate placement in freshman writing classes, leading to reduced failure rates and reduced student frustration and underpreparedness for college-level writing, and thus to greater success in subsequent classes and greater persistence to timely graduation.