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DIRECTED SELF-PLACEMENT:
THE SHIFT FROM PLACEMENT TO PEDAGOGY

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Diane Brunner
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DIRECTED SELF-PLACEMENT:

THE SHIFT FROM PLACEMENT TO PEDAGOGY

By

Marcia Lee Ribble

A DISSERTATION

Submitted to
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ABSTRACT

DIRECTED SELF-PLACEMENT:

THE SHIFT FROM PLACEMENT TO PEDAGOGY

By

Marcia Lee Ribble

This study shows that, because there are significant differences between Basic Writing and First Year Composition students which cannot be measured by previous placement methods, those previous placement methods do not adequately place students into their initial college writing courses. Instead, Directed Self-Placement not only does a better job of placing students, but also changes our focus from correct placement to a better pedagogy, more responsive to the quite different writing abilities, performance histories, pragmatic concerns, and individual concerns our students have.

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Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to my grandchildren,
who will carry the torch of learning into the future.

Acknowledgements

There are many people to whom I owe a debt of gratitude for the help and encouragement they gave in support of this project. My committee, Diane Brunner, Sherry Thomas, Kitty Geissler, and Dean Rehberger, were driving forces who demanded, cajoled, comforted, and expected more of me than I knew I was capable of delivering. My diss buddy, Nancy Patterson, sat with me over many cups of coffee as we read each other's chapters and challenged one another to improve them. And my grown-up children—how wonderful you were as you helped with packing, with moving (twice in a year), and with unpacking and setting up my household twice, so I could keep on writing. What would I have done without you? There were also friends, Rosalie Riegle who first suggested that it was possible to be both a mom and a PhD at the baseball games our daughters were playing in; Ellen and Jim Scanlon whose friendship sustained me on the dark days when I thought I might never complete this project, Tom Caylor who always believed in me. My mom Alice Duffy Gase taught me to love the sound of words and my dad George John Gase never thought my being a girl was an excuse to not achieve. He told me the story of the talents and expected me to use mine. They're no longer here, but Uncle Bob said they're doing cartwheels in heaven. Finally my friends and colleagues at Saginaw Valley State University believed that a single mom with five kids and on welfare not only could, but would, make them proud. Who should be so lucky? I would also like to thank Dan Royer whose assistance made this possible.

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Chapter One Introduction

When students are given a choice of writing courses, and when the choice lies between a basic writing (BW) course and a first year composition (FYC) course, and when they must take the FYC course in addition to the BW course to satisfy university writing requirements, which course will they choose? And why will they choose that course? Given the option, one might think that students would all choose the FYC course, but in a growing number of schools across the country, administrators and researchers are discovering that, in the new course selection process known as Directed Self-Placement, many students are choosing the BW course. In this study, I will examine the reasons students make that choice along with the factors that influence their choice. The answers will help us better understand placement issues, particularly as they concern the group of students who select BW classes.

Basic Writing Programs

Basic writing was formalized in the early 1970s as a response to open enrollment originated in the CUNY system of colleges and universities in 1970 (Maher "Writing" 57). Having for years refused to admit students with non-standard backgrounds and abilities, CUNY, and, later, other colleges and universities, initially had no procedures in place to determine what to do with basic writing students once they were admitted. How should they be placed in classes? What kinds of classes would work for them? Could they succeed if placed with regular students? Or did they need classes that could accommodate their special needs? Many faculty members thought that placing basic writing students in classes where they would be brought up to the level of students with more impressive

writing abilities was the best solution. They initiated basic writing classes to meet that perceived need and assumed that education in the K-12 system would soon improve to the point that basic writing classes would no longer be needed (Maher "Writing" 57-61).

Thus, BW was intended only as a temporary "fix" that would allow these students who wrote in non-standard English to succeed in college. In the meantime, education at the lower levels (in primary and secondary schools) could be improved so that the next generation of college students would arrive with standard English writing skills. Gradually, BW took on a life of its own with placement mechanisms designed either to weed out basic writers or ensure that they take BW classes that would teach them the skills they were lacking, and BW became institutionalized.

The Remediation Approach

Beginning with the open enrollment policies of CUNY from 1970-1977 (Maher "Writing" 57-61), admission and placement of non-standard English users has usually required some form of formal or informal remediation. Students are admitted to college, but they are required to take basic writing classes or seek other kinds of help with their writing until it is considered to be consistent with college level expectations (Shor "Illegal" 101-103). The advantage of this approach is that students are at least admitted to college and have the opportunity to prove themselves. The disadvantages come with placement processes. College officials use a variety of devices to determine placement of students in their initial writing course. Unfortunately, all of these devices are problematic (Shor "Illegal" 103," "Our Apartheid" 91-104).

ACT

One tool used for determining placement is test scores from tests like the ACT, SAT, Compass, and Accuplacer. Generally the choice of tests is institution-specific, except in Kentucky, which has mandated a remediation approach throughout its public college and university system. All students planning to attend a Kentucky public college or university must take the ACT and any student with an ACT of 17 or below must be remediated. These students must take a basic writing course and pass it before they are allowed to register for the regular composition courses. [Exceptions are made at some community colleges which use COMPASS to test students for immediate placement at the time of enrollment (Kentucky Association for Developmental Education {KADE} Convention October 9-20, 2001).] Unfortunately, the ACT is not a test of writing. The ACT tests grammar, vocabulary, and reading, but it does not measure the ability to write. Thus, placement in basic writing classes based on ACT scores is a problem.

In addition, according to FairTest.com; White "Accuplacer;" Slaughter "Scapegoating;" Harley and Cannon "Failure;" and Shor "Our Apartheid," the ACT can't simply be replaced by another "better" test. Shor notes that the ACT and other similar tests are biased against minorities and those from the lower classes ("Our Apartheid"). These tests are also predictive of success in school only for the highest ranked students (Royer and Gilles "Directed;" Blakesley "Resisting"). In fact, Jena Burges claims that in studies done at Longwood College in Virginia (2000-2001), COMPASS was poorly predictive of student accomplishment in general. With N=493, they found $r = .109$ with a significance of .015 for correlations between COMPASS scores and overall FYC grades.

As a result they dropped remedial classes completely and found "no discernable drop in overall course grades for the regular course" (Personal e-mail 20 Sept. 2001). Edward White tells us that "the ACT and similar tests produce results that appear to be biased against minorities and those speaking variant dialects of standard English. No one is quite sure why this is so, despite sincere efforts on the part of testing firms to eliminate improper bias" (Personal e-mail October 19, 2001). Tongue in cheek, White has gone as far as stating that "The cheapest effective placement is to use parental income. If your parents make less than, say, $15,000 a year, you are a remedial writer; over, oh, $75,000 and you're exempt from comp altogether" ("Re: Accuplacer"); however, despite the fact that White was only teasing, Slaughter has actually found a correlation between parental income and student test scores ("Scapegoating").

Essays

Another popular placement tool is the timed essay. Generally, students write this essay during an orientation visit to campus. One problem with this tool is the way it is evaluated. Evaluation of placement essays has relied almost solely on surface errors in their assessment, simply because measuring errors gave relatively consistent and "objective" results, despite the fact that most in the field of composition have long argued that the presence of errors alone does not indicate a person's actual writing ability (Reynolds 46). Others have argued for holistic scoring and proponents of holistic grading have argued that such grading is essentially reliable. For instance, White argues, in "Apologia for the Timed Impromptu," that "a well-trained and experienced cadre of readers can score many thousands of student papers on a six point scale with about 95%

agreement on scores within one point" (40).

Unfortunately, not all schools have that "well-trained and experienced" group of readers and the reading of thousands of student papers is very expensive. In addition, student handwriting on placement essays can interfere with accurate assessment. The use of computers to write timed placement essays improves the legibility of the essays, but adds the problem of lack of familiarity with using computers to write. Students with computer experience have an obvious advantage over those students who do not usually compose on a typewriter or computer.

Timed placement essays are also a problem because drafts almost always contain a larger proportion of errors than revised and edited work. They also reward those students who can quickly write an organized five paragraph essay with a single thesis, three examples, and a conclusion. Some essay readers can spot dyslexia and ESL errors, but others can't, and, thus, some students may be misplaced. To spot dyslexia and ESL errors, readers need to be able to ignore surface errors and focus on content that may be much more sophisticated than is typical of basic writers to note that these are not typical basic writing students. Despite attempts to overcome the problems, impromptu timed essays have many problems. A better type of writing sample is the portfolio.

Portfolios

Portfolios have recently gained fairly widespread acceptance as a placement tool; however, this approach is very expensive due to the number of people and the time it takes to read a large number of portfolios. In addition, placing students using portfolios of high school writing may pose a problem if the writing assignments included were different from

one another, or if some high schools provided better portfolio mentoring programs than other high schools. Some schools, such as Grand Valley State University in Allendale, MI (Royer August 2000) and Lansing Community College in Lansing, MI (Pennington Fall 1999) use portfolio assessment, relying on portfolios to conduct placement testing after students have taken their FYC course. In a sense these are still placement tests, because students cannot be placed into the subsequent classes if they fail to pass these tests; however, they function in somewhat different ways than portfolios from students' high school classes.

Post-FYC portfolio testing makes sense, because, presumably, the students in a college portfolio testing program have had the same college curriculum with the same expectations and the same criteria for grading the portfolios. Using portfolios to test college writing also makes sense, because it follows the best practices and assumptions of contemporary writing pedagogy. It gives students time to think and develop their ideas prior to their being graded. It allows students to revise their ideas, deepening their understanding as they wrestle with the complexity of most issues rather than simply examining the surface level of those issues. And it gives them time after their ideas have gelled to edit their work. The teachers have been able to follow the development of portfolio papers and can assert that they are the students' own work. But most importantly, as Peter Elbow has suggested, portfolio testing is a more democratic process when it occurs in college rather than prior to college, because it allows students to show us what they are capable of writing if we open the gates to allow them to enter into college ("Forward").

Thus, it is not portfolios themselves which are problematic, but the time and manner of their use which makes them more or less equitable as assessment and evaluation devices. Testing done is high school is less reliable because it tests high school writing, not college writing. Testing done in college is more reliable because it tests college writing in a collegiate setting with collegiate expectations, demands, and requirements.

High School GPA and Class Ranking

Placement by high school GPA and class ranking is another method used and carries its own set of problems. Too often, GPA and class rankings are enormously variable, because they are determined by the type of school, its location, the number of students in the student body, and the kind of courses the students enrolled in. Thus, a GPA and class ranking from one school might be based on significantly different indicators than a similar GPA and class ranking from another school. Even GPAs and class rankings within a school can be significantly variant from one student to another.

Type of Remediation

Placement of basic writing students is, then, very difficult, whether it is done by testing, placement essay, portfolio, or high school GPA and class ranking. This set of problems is made even more difficult by the fact that there is little agreement about what will help students once they are admitted and placed into BW and FYC writing classes. In his article "A Basic Introduction to Basic Writing Program Structures," William Lalicker discusses the multiple options for teaching basic writing classes. These options include both pedagogical methods and organizational structures, as well as combinations thereof. They include the *current-traditional* pedagogy with an emphasis on grammar drills and

writing done at the paragraph level, the *stretch model* with its emphasis on the same writing tasks as the regular composition classes demand but with more time to do them, the *studio model* which places basic writing students into regular composition with additional studio (or writing center) support not attached to a particular course, the *intensive model* which adds several hours of intensive support to regular composition courses with students part of a unified classroom group, and the *mainstreaming model* which places all writers directly into the regular composition course.

The current-traditional model is the only model which focuses instruction on grammar and a skills and drills approach, often with a workbook as the text. The organizational structure models do not include a skills and drills based approach to the teaching of writing, but other than that their pedagogical approaches are quite varied. Those approaches include, but are not limited to, a literary analysis model in which students read and respond to literature, a rhetoric approach in which modes of writing are emphasized, and an inquiry-based approach in which students investigate and write about an issue. The BW course may be very similar to the FYC course or quite different from it. BW can be conceived of as an opportunity for expressivist creativity or scholarly research.

Whether or not any of these approaches works continues to be debated. Lynne Quitman Troyka, in "How We Have Failed the Basic Writing Enterprise," argues that we have not adequately researched basic writing or we have not published that research when it was done. Consequently, 'we' cannot adequately determine the value of BW coursework (113-123). Others claim success for these programs. Gleason, for example,

reports that, when basic writers were given the chance remediation offers, there was "only a 6% difference in graduation rates (computed over an eight year period) between those who completed remedial courses at a senior college (42.8%) and those who required no remedial courses (48.2%)" (581). We may need to recompute graduation rates with longer time spans if, as Sternglass has reported, BW students are more likely to have the kinds of problems (financial, emotional, etc.) which would make stopping out or taking fewer courses per term more prevalent. Sternglass arguess that, if BW students are given enough time, they can and often do complete their degree work.

In recent years, the debate has shifted from discussions of placement procedures and instructional models to a questioning of the entire concept of basic writing courses. Because the K-12 schools have not yet produced a generation of students prepared for college writing, some have begun to advocate abolishing remediation of any kind at the college level, so it is increasingly important for us to document the need for BW coursework, if we find that our research supports that need.

Revisiting Basic Writing

Those who take the stance that basic writing students should not be admitted to college at all or only to community colleges include William Bennett and Dinesh D'Souza, Mayor Rudy Guiliani, the CUNY Board of Trustees, and legislators in the states of Texas, Florida, Georgia, and California. These individuals and groups argue that basic writing classes do not belong in college and that remediation must occur before entrance into four-year colleges and universities can be granted, either in literacy programs or in community colleges. Placement, for this group, consists of setting a limit below which no

student will be admitted, on the assumption that students who score above this limit can be expected to write adequately for college. Thus, while the work to develop basic writing courses that are effective and to place students in them has continued, this work has been heavily influenced in the recent past by efforts by some government agencies and college administrators to outlaw basic writing courses and remove them from university curricula.

The issue of whether or not we should have courses in BW is debated within the field of composition as well as in political circles. In "The Tidy House," David Bartholomae talks about his first experience with basic writers, his awareness as he looked at their first papers that he was going to fail them all. And he did. From the outset Bartholomae was, therefore, aware that just allowing basic writing students into college was not the same as helping them to achieve success. Because he didn't like failing students, he worked to connect basic writing placement with a basic writing pedagogy which would result in student success rather than student failure, seeing them as intrinsically related. The program he developed with Anthony Petrosky at least seemed to improve student success rates and other basic writing teachers across the country who were unsatisfied with their rates of student success picked up the method and began to use it.

However, now, because basic writers can be identified (and rejected from universities), Bartholomae is re-examining his earlier thinking about placement, and is arguing that **mainstreaming**, i.e., placing all students into regular FYC classes, is necessary in order to curb administrators' protests that basic writers do not belong in

colleges and universities. From another perspective, Ira Shor, too, argues for mainstreaming when he asserts that students placed into BW are ghettoized ("Our Apartheid").

Changes in Pedagogy and Course Organization

Even though some have tried to remove basic writing courses from the curriculum altogether, most in the profession have continued to work to improve the instruction offered in courses into which BW students are placed, regardless of what kinds of courses they might happen to be. Institutions are attempting to take into account the particular needs of their student populations, as well as of their organizing structures, when they attempt to improve student outcomes.

The development of an intensive composition class at Quinnipiac University in Hamden, CT is one example. At Quinnipiac. the basic writing course used a skills and drills pedagogy employing a workbook that focused student attention on grammar and punctuation exercises. Faculty and students complained about the ineffectiveness of that kind of teaching. (Segall "Embracing") In response to these problems, faculty at Quinnipiac developed a parallel course to their standard ENG 101 course called ENG 101 Intensive. Both courses use the same textbook, and have relatively the same assignments. The only difference is that ENG 101 is a three-hour class, while ENG 101 Intensive is a five-hour class with the additional two hours used for intensive support for the basic writers. According to Mary Segall, the placement of students into intensively supported writing classes has been very successful, particularly in terms of retention. From a 13.4% rate of withdrawal from the college in 1991 (prior to implementation), the rate dropped to

2.7% in 1992 after implementation of the intensive course, and it dropped further to 1.5% by 1995. The success of the new pedagogy indicates that it was not placement that was the problem, but the pedagogy of the course into which students were placed. Students actually performed better when they were challenged by the ENG 101 assignments, but given support to meet the challenge. (Segall "Embracing")

Barbara Gleason and Mary Soliday have suggested that placement into mainstreamed courses is only effective if the course basic writers are placed in offers them the kind of support particular to their needs, while also challenging students who are not basic writers. At the City College of New York (CCNY) Gleason and Soliday were given a Funds for the Improvement of Post-Secondary Education (FIPSE) grant and used it to develop a mainstreamed course which placed basic writers into the regular composition classes. In the old system basic writers were placed into BW sequence and then into FYC. That has been replaced by a two-semester sequence all students take. A post-pilot evaluation using externally-read portfolios showed that students who would have been placed in remedial courses in the past could compete with students who would have received regular placement. (Soliday and Gleason 64)

Arizona State University's Stretch Program

Greg Glau's Stretch Program at Arizona State University (ASU) is another example of the new approach to BW courses. Students at ASU voluntarily select from either a regular one semester FYC course or a Stretch version of that same course which takes two semesters. Faculty and administrators at ASU believe that students will do better if they have more practice writing. The Stretch Program demonstrates that

"stretching" the FYC course over two semesters so basic writers have more time to read and write and faculty can more often intervene in the strategies students use results in greater success for basic writers. Greg Glau reports that the Stretch Program has resulted in significant increases in student success and retention, and that, in fact, students who have completed the Stretch Program score higher in the second semester composition course than students who take the regular first semester composition course. In ENG101, 91.83% of former Stretch students pass, compared with 86.88% of regular FYC students. In ENG102, regular FYC students pass at a rate of 82.52%, while Stretch students pass at a rate of 85.93% (Glau, "Stretch Program" website).

Connecting Pedagogy and Placement

In the past college administrators often assumed that if students failed out of the university it was the students' fault. They had been "accurately" placed and, therefore, were responsible for their own failure. Now that attitude is changing. Recently, more and more composition programs are looking at their placement practices as inadequate to explain student failure. There have been a number of attempts to increase student success and student retention, by developing placement processes that are directly linked to improved writing pedagogies. Ideally, such a tight match would exist between students and the classes they take that both success and retention rates would increase. One such attempt occurred when Soliday and Gleason and their colleagues created an assignment that made it possible for basic writing students from ethinic/dialect backgrounds that use non-standard forms of English to conduct research that compared their home language with their new academic language, focusing student attention on differences between the

way language is used in both places. One of the external portfolio readers commented that the best student writing was connected to that ethnographic research. She said that "The ethnography and research paper, for example, are light years 'better' than the literature analysis piece" (Soliday and Gleason 71). The first assignment using students' home language as the object of their research may have fit their needs better than the literature analysis piece. Directed self-placement is one more example of the attempt to improve student outcomes by making changes in both placement and pedagogy.

Directed Self-Placement

Grand Valley State University (GVSU) began the inquiry into better placement procedures due to a doubling of enrollment in composition classes between 1985 and 1995 and eventually developed directed self-placement (Royer and Gilles, Royer 2001). In directed self-placement, rather than assuming that certain definable and measurable qualities exist in students which make them basic writers, Royer and Gilles have decided that students, themselves, should decide whether or not they need what a BW course offers. At GVSU, students do not have to be measured by ACT or SAT, by high school GPA or class rankings, or by timed essay test or portfolio. They simply choose from between two options: a BW class or a FYC class. Royer and Gilles believe that many students, with a variety of writing backgrounds, could profit from taking a BW course that would give them additional support as writers. They understand that the old placement tests gave useful information, but they extended their understanding to include people who might want a BW course due to other, equally valid, factors. Directed self-placement allows students to assess their own needs for a writing course and to select the course that

best meets those needs, regardless of their test scores. In addition, according to Royer and Gilles, the old placement methods, even when accurate in terms of a student's writing ability, may not have met very real needs a student might have, independent of writing ability (Directed self-placement homepage).

The GVSU Directed Self-Placement Program was developed in 1995 and implemented it in the summer of 1996. Word about directed self-placement was first spread in messages on the Writing Program Administrator's (WPA) listserv and then in conference presentations and, in September 1998, in the journal *College Composition and Communication.* Very rapidly, other schools began to implement directed self-placement. DePauw University began to use directed self-placement in 1996. In 1997, at Southern Illinois University, Carbondale (SIUC) WPA David Blakesley proposed replacing their old placement process with directed self-placement and it was first put into practice in the summer of 1998. Belmont University put directed self-placement into place in January 1998. Kutztown University initiated directed self-placement in the summer of 1999. In addition, several other universities have redesigned their placement processes in directions provided by directed self-placement, although they do not have a directed self-placement program as such. Those schools include Wellesley College, the University of Michigan, and Governor's State University. Noteworthy here is the fact that each school that has decided to implement directed self-placement has developed its own adapted form of directed self-placement. They also combined their version of directed self-placement with several different pedagogical approaches. That move has almost always meant that placement processes and changes in composition pedagogy occurred together at those

schools.

Research

Not much research has yet been done on directed self-placement programs. Erica Reynolds studied the program at SIUC for her master's thesis, focusing on gender issues, self-efficacy, and confidence in one's writing ability as it influences placement choices, and influences from other sources. She used a survey instrument that gave students a single question on which to check off whether they based their decisions on "writing background, advice from family, advice from a teacher, advice from an advisor, advice from peers, advice from a counselor, or other" (Reynolds 91). Her instrument constrained students' opportunities to respond, but allowed her to conclude that the majority of students based their decisions on writing background, while none of the other potential influences were, individually, as powerful as explanatory factors as writing background was for student decisions.

Dan Royer and Roger Gilles did a small qualitative study of their program along with doing some quantitative studies of student satisfaction with the program. Their study consisted of interviews with two students who selected courses that were contraindicated by their ACT scores. Even so, both students succeeded and were happy with their choices. Royer and Gilles also examined the question of whether grades remain about the same when students are self-placed versus mandated into placement and found that they did, although they initially dropped, but that may be because students who self-placed themselves into directed self-placement are truly struggling writers ("Directed Self-Placement" *CCC* 64).

Cynthia Cornell and Robert Newton have conducted research at DePauw but have reported only preliminary data at this point. They tell us that their data suggest that there isn't much difference in success for students who chose the basic writing course versus those who chose the FYC course, but that student satisfaction is higher than it was with university mandated placement and that directed self-placement "meets individual and personal needs that standard placement measures, including portfolios, are not designed to identify" ("Choosing").

Janice Chernekoff of Kutztown University is in the process of collecting data on her program ("Kutztown"). Michael Neal and Brian Huot at the University of Louiville are pilot testing their own version of directed self-placement and they raise the issue of the appropriate methodology for studying directed self-placement, along with the issue of what kinds of evidence of successful and accurate placement we need, but they didn't report their data ("Accommodating"). They report that preliminary data suggest that "students chose the higher placement and were most often successful in their chosen course (Neal and Huot "Accommodating"). Research done at Belmont University has been spotty and based on very small sample sizes, but offers suggestions for further research that could be done on directed self-placement (Sims and Pinter "Adapting").

Current Study

In response to the studies described above, I decided to use a methodology that I thought would give me greater numbers of answers than Royer and Gilles obtained by interviewing two students, and that would provide more detailed information than Reynolds was able to acquire with her survey question. My study was also designed to

allow students to tell me about those "individual and personal needs that standard placement measures, including portfolios, are not designed to identify" (Cornell and Newton "Choosing"). In my research, I used open-ended questions that allowed students to voice complex answers, rather than restricting their choices to preselected possible answers, which prevent students from replying as honestly or as fully to those questions as they can when their answers are not predetermined by available choices.

This study focuses on directed self-placement at GVSU. The two primary questions it asks are "What reasons do students give for selecting BW or FYC?" and "Who or what influences them in their choice-making process?" Their answers may help us to understand why students make the choices they make.

Ideally, a study of placement procedures would be a longitudinal study. Instead of providing a snapshot view of the decision-making of first year writing students, it would follow them through their college careers and focus on the complexities of students' lives as the context for their learning processes and choices. Unfortunately, such a study was not possible given my graduate student resources. Thus, this study cannot indicate whether placement or pedagogy is more important in determining student success and retention outcomes.

Another limitation of this study, and of all studies that have examined directed self-placement, is that I did not study the responses of teachers to directed self-placement, including whether they felt students who chose the BW class came into the subsequent FYC class well-prepared to do the work required to meet that class' goals and objectives and whether students who went directly into the FYC class were adequately prepared to

do the work in that class. Such work will have to be relegated to future projects.

Overview of Remaining Chapters

Chapter Two, "Review of Relevant Research," continues the discussion of directed self-placement by examining the schools that have implemented the program, with consideration of their own unique contextual needs as they adapted the program to their individual situations. In that chapter, I also detail prior research that has been done to test program effectiveness. In Chapter Three, "Design of the Study," I describe the student population studied at GVSU who are participants in the Directed Self-Placement Program and explain my research methods including data collection, the time line, instruments used, and analysis methods. In Chapter Four, "Findings and Analysis," I report the data collected and then analyzes that data. In Chapter Five, "Discussion and Implications," I compare what I learned from the study with what other researchers have learned in other studies of directed self-placement. I also include theoretical speculations on what the data I found imply about improving directed self-placement. Finally, I discuss implications for further research.

Chapter Two Review of Relevant Research

Because directed self-placement is a very recent phenomenon, emerging only five years ago, I will begin this chapter by placing directed self-placement into the historical context from which it originated, because many readers may still be unfamiliar with this new way of placing students into freshman composition courses. I will briefly review its history and then describe the four studies of directed self-placement that I found relevant to my work. Other studies I am aware of have been completed, but data from them is not yet available. I will mention them only as part of the historical context of directed self-placement.

Origination of Directed Self-Placement

Roger Gilles and Dan Royer developed and implemented the first Directed Self-Placement Program at Grand Valley State University in Allendale, MI in 1995 and 1996. Gilles and Royer's account of the process of developing directed self-placement as an institutional response to placement issues at GVSU was first given formal public discussion in an article for the 1998 *College Composition and Communication*, "Directed Self-Placement: An Attitude of Orientation."

Between 1985 and 1995, GVSU's incoming freshman class doubled in size from around 1500 students to 3000 students (Royer June 9, 2001), and that increase led to problems with placement. As the student population expanded, the prior placement process (ACT scores plus placement essay) began to overwhelm everyone associated with it. GVSU administrators' first response was to eliminate the placement essay.

At that point, they resorted to using ACT scores as a preliminary placement

method, relying on teachers to administer a placement essay during the first week of classes, score it, and then move students around into more appropriate classes if they had been misplaced by ACT scores alone. This procedure caused problems. Teachers and staff had to find new classes that would mesh with students' other scheduled classes, after many classes were already full. Neither the teachers nor the students liked that placement method. In fact, GVSU's BW students responded to a 1995 survey and indicated that only 38 % believed they had been properly placed. (Royer and Gilles "Directed" 5).

As they discussed what to try next, Royer and Gilles said

> our 'institutional analyst' evaluated the placement data and composition grades over the past several years. His conclusion was bleak: statistically speaking neither of our two placement devices bore much relationship to student success in composition classes.... Students on all levels of the ACT appeared to have about the same chance of getting a 'C' or better — statistically, they found that 80% of students, regardless of ACT score could pass SW with a C or better (Royer and Gilles "Directed" 6-7).

Of particular concern was the group of students who were failing FYC. One-fifth of the FYC students withdrew or failed, and ACT scores could not predict that outcome (Royer and Gilles "Directed" 6).

Responding to population pressures and statistics that showed little predictive validity for ACT and essay placement procedures, GVSU faculty and administrators next considered context-based criteria as is done at the University of Pittsburgh and Washington State University, and portfolio placement as it is done at Stanford; however, both of these

options were rejected because they didn't fit GVSU's needs. Then, a chance remark offered a possibility.

> At a meeting between upper-administration and writing-program administrators, the statistician remarked that, given all the time, effort, and money we put into placing students in composition courses, a random placement would make as much sense and that we might just as well let students place themselves" (Royer and Gilles "Directed" 7).

According to Royer and Gilles, everyone responded to that suggestion by "chuckling." Later they decided to seriously consider that possibility, even though the approach required a shift in "orientation" from a teacher-centered model to a student-centered model, from teachers telling students which course to take to students deciding for themselves which course best meets their needs. By the summer of 1996, Gilles and Royer were sending placement materials to new students prior to registration (Appendix B), giving a talk to all the incoming freshmen, and assisting with the registration process itself to help students make well-reasoned choices from between the non-credit BW class and the for-credit FYC course (Royer and Gilles "Directed" 7).

They wanted students to evaluate their levels of writing ability and use that knowledge to place themselves in the course most likely to help them succeed. The criteria Royer and Gilles believe will make students ready for FYC are "solid reading habits, writing confidence, familiarity with the mechanical aspects of writing, and experience with computers" ("Directed" 8). In addition, they said, "we added ACT scores and high school grades to our list primarily as a possible anchor for students not

used to assessing their abilities qualitatively" ("Directed" 8-9) even though those kinds of scores have predictive weaknesses. Over the next few years, Royer and Gilles developed the placement materials, tweaking them as they went along, and trying to make them as useful to students as they could, so that students could make an informed decision about which writing course to choose (Royer August 1, 2000).

The courses available to students are quite different from one another. Their FYC course focuses on argument and research that demands documentation, while in the BW course, students do personal writing, some research, and little documentation. In BW, students engage students in frequent, but shorter, writing assignments, work on mastering spelling, punctuation, and grammar, read essays and respond to them, and do some writing with citations; but, in general, little work on research papers. In FYC, students launch full-bore into research writing, and are expected to have skills for summarizing and analysis, experience with narrative, descriptive, and persuasive writing, and familiarity with the use of computers in writing and research. The final grade in FYC is based on portfolio grading done by teachers other than the student's teacher. Portfolios have three pieces of writing representing the student's work for the semester. The criteria for those papers include a single thesis, a challenging claim, and evidence of understanding the standard conventions of the field (GVSU pamphlet "Which Course Is Right For You." Appendix B). In both cases, students are given the option of switching courses the first week of classes, after they have done a writing sample and received teacher feedback about their suitability for the class they have chosen.

Royer and Gilles argue that assessment for placement at most universities is "not

yet deeply enough contextualized in the students' own personal and educational lives" ("Directed" 14). They base their thinking on John Dewey and his "democratic and pragmatist philosophy of education" ("Directed" 14). Royer and Gilles advocate use of inquiry into students' own lives, experiences, perceptions, needs, beliefs, and values (not just about students as writers, but also about the various other factors they are facing in their lives), to better develop a sense of which course will be more beneficial to them. As they state, "we want a placement procedure that focuses 'inward toward the needs of students, teachers, and programs, rather than outward toward standardized norms or generalizable criteria'" (Huot 555 in Royer and Gilles "Directed" 14). They go on to explain that

> a pragmatist theory of assessment situates placement with regard to each student's aims and dispositions. The power relations that are violated by taking away choices are not repaired by mainstreaming, which simply eliminates options, or by updating methods of administering and scoring placement essays, which continues to tell students that they are not ready to make their own decisions. (Royer and Gilles "Directed" 15).

Royer and Gilles further note that directed self-placement is not a panacea. "It does not address the problem of how to teach, how to bring students in from the margins, or how to deal with all of the politics of institutional change" ("Directed" 16). But they do believe that directed self-placement is a step toward validating the kind of research and the kind of power relationships between universities and their students which could make it possible for us to find answers to those other questions. They are not alone in this belief as the

movement of other institutions to adapt, adopt, and institute directed self-placement at their institutions signifies. Royer and Gilles' forthcoming book, *Directed Self-Placement: Principles and Practices* (Hampton 2002) will provide a considerable amount of additional information for those who wish to read studies faculty and administrations have undertaken to examine issues of retention, student attitudes toward the courses, measures of readiness and achievement, GPA, and enrollment statistics, as well as more qualitative reports of institutional responses to directed self-placement at several institutions.

Southern Illinois University, Carbondale

According to David Blakesley, Southern Illinois University Carbondale's (SIUC) WPA at the time, the problems they encountered at SIUC included the following: 1) the basic writing students weren't able to catch up to regular composition students in only one term and the administration was asking for more rigorous standards; 2) the only students tested were those who scored under 20 on the ACT, but some of the students who scored above 20 were not always competent writers. He noted that ACT only predicts success for students above the 80th percentile; 3) too many students were failing the regular composition course and those who didn't fail often just dropped out or didn't enroll in writing courses until they were near the end of their programs; 4) a discrepancy was noted in advanced composition between those students who had passed BW and the FYC course— although student mean GPAs in BW and FYC were "nearly identical," in English 102, "those students who had taken the English 101 Restricted courses had significantly lower GPAs than their peers who had passed English 101 Regular" (Blakesley 2 in Reynolds 9). (Reynolds 8-9) Directed self-placement with a Stretch component was the

solution proposed for these problems and the new program was named English 100/101 Stretch and directed self-placement was instituted as the placement method (Reynolds 10).

In 1997/98, under the guidance of WPA David Blakesley, Southern Illinois University, Carbondale (SIUC) became one of those universities that borrowed from GVSU and adapted directed self-placement to meet their own needs. SIUC has also adopted Arizona State University's Stretch Program. At Arizona State the Stretch Program stretches ENG 101 over two semesters (WAC 101 linked with ENG 101). Students repeat the same readings and same writing assignments in both sections, proceeding a bit more slowly in WAC 101 than they do in ENG 101 to give basic writing students a chance to catch up to students who are not placed in the Stretch Program by doing substantially more writing than the regular ENG 101 students ("ASU's Stretch Program" 1).

Students at SIUC are also given an optional alternative to directed self-placement which allows them to submit an essay to the director of the program for his analysis and placement recommendation. Students are given online placement materials that allow students to indicate the course of their choice prior to registration or at registration. At SIUC, the BW/FYC sequenced stretch course allows students to have the same instructor both terms. In addition, some students can take the BW course for credit. Writing in both classes focuses on argumentation and analysis, but the BW course adds work on students' reading and writing skills.

As Blakesley has argued, directed self-placement can function generatively, "as touchstone ideas that will likely shade or transform all that we do and teach in a writing

program" (Blakesley "Resisting" 2). Blakesley believes that because directed self-placement confers power on students, initiating for students a reflective stance toward their own writing, it is capable of acting as a "generating principle around which a curriculum and a philosophy of composition can be developed— and developed in ways that continually open doors to new possibilities rather than restricting us to one" (Blakesley "Resisting" 2). This possibility connects placement and pedagogy in ways similar to those described by Royer and Gilles when they said, "as long as we remain wed to placement practices that mask problems in our grading, curriculum, or pedagogy, we will commit the fallacy of misplaced attention to the instruments of placement when we should be looking at our programs, coursework, and classroom practice" ("Introduction" 4).

DePauw University

Like some of the other schools, a financial crisis drove DePauw's movement to directed self-placement. Unlike other schools, the change was initiated by the college's Dean. At first, he just rejected the writing of placement essays which cost too much to score and replaced them with using SATV or ACTE. However, when research indicated that DePauw students were no more likely to succeed than to fail when placed by those methods, an argument was made by the dean and some members of the English Department to simply drop the BW course and mainstream all students. That argument was countered by BW faculty who argued that some BW students needed the "highly effective developmental support" BW courses could offer ("The Case" 10). Over four years of research efforts, DePauw faculty "became even more skeptical of the ability of our original placement procedure, or anything like it, to identify students like those that the faculty had

reported to need a course preparatory to College Writing II [FYC] ("The Case" 14). Thus, the faculty at DePauw decided that "it would be unjust to place individuals at one level or another, based on any score or combination of scores" ("The Case" 25).

Cornell and Newton state that their later studies did suggest that those students who chose the BW course might be different from the other BW students "for dispositional and cultural reasons— traits of motivation, self-esteem, acculturation, and maturity" ("The Case" 33). In addition, those students who chose to take the BW course agreed overwhelmingly that they would choose that class again, that it helped prepare them for the next class and other college classes, that it was good preparation for the academic expectations, and that it should be an elective course. Only 3 individuals (2.3%) indicated that they thought the BW course should not be taught. ("The Case" 38).

After asking students open-ended questions about their choices, they found that the students who were unhappy with their choice of the BW class were "unclear about the nature of the course or motivated in the first place more by fear and uncertainty than by a clear sense of their own academic needs" ("The Case" 39-40). Those who responded negatively tended to feel that they had been pressured to take BW, while those who responded more positively felt that they had voluntarily chosen BW for their own personal reasons ("The Case" 40). The DePauw studies indicate that students are generally satisfied with their choices, but, more importantly, Cornell and Newton claim that though their data suggest that a basic writing class isn't needed, "our data suggest that providing students with a choice to take it meets individual and personal needs that standard placement measures, including portfolios, are not designed to identify" (Cornell and

Newton "Choosing" 4-5).

In their more fully developed chapter, Cornell and Newton note that "the more data we collect, the clearer it becomes that **mandatory placement of such students** [BW] **in our first course is not justified. For that reason, directed self placement has become for us not an accommodation but a matter of principle"** (Emphasis Cornell and Newton "The Case" 1). They add that "we cannot show that 'at risk' students who take basic writing are more likely to persist to graduation from the university than 'at risk' students who avoid the first course" ("The Case" 2), however they do know now that some students want to be able to choose between a BW course and a regular FYC course.
As the faculty at DePauw moved through these studies to directed self-placement, they also linked their changes of placement processes to changes in their writing curriculum. They changed the names of their courses as they changed the curriculum to reflect their growing awareness that students placed into a BW course needed the same kinds of course work that students in FYC had until both courses engaged students in the "'intellectual conversation and inquiry that we associate with a liberal arts education'" (Soliday 95 in Cornell and Newton "The Case" 7).

But that wasn't the end of it. As DePauw's research continued, and faculty discovered that students were capable of much higher levels of college writing than they had previously thought, they began to understand that "it may be that they could always have done this, and that, earlier, we underestimated their [these students'] ability to rise to the level of our expectations" ("The Case" 41). Cornell and Newton also suggest that some students who would not have been identified as needing the BW course might want

to choose to take that course for personal reasons, and they further suggest that the curriculum be further revised to completely remove any connection to basic writing, and change the BW course designation, numbering, and content. They note that the courses could then be taken simultaneously or sequentially in any order that would be useful to the students and contribute to students' educations. As in the case with SIUC, it makes sense that changes in placement procedure would lead almost inevitably to changes in pedagogy, because those changes of placement tend to be accompanied by discoveries about students that change faculty perceptions, assumptions, and philosophical perspectives and hence provoke those pedagogical changes.

Kutztown University

Janice Chernekoff describes the process of bringing directed self-placement to Kutztown University in 1999. At her university, she says that everyone agreed that the old system of placement was "ineffective and inefficient." Chernekoff noted that a reader for the Subject A2 exams for the UC San Diego and for the Ed Testing Service said that it is "'impossible, even with regular 'norming' sessions to grade essays (especially illegibly written ones) objectively and fairly'" (Chernekoff "Introducing" 7). Directed self-placement was the choice to replace unfairly graded essay exams. The first semester it was used the pass rate for FYC "was 90%, down just 3% from the previous fall semesters" ("Inroducing" 19). At the same time 95% of the students believed they had chosen the right course, and most of the other students believed a harder course would have been a better choice ("Introducing" 22). The change in placement procedures also led the faculty to revise the courses because they were too different from one professor to another

("Introducing" 23). At Kutztown, the choices available to students were expanded to include Honors English, so students can now freely choose from among basic writing, regular composition, and honors English (Chernekoff "Kutztown" 5).

In addition, faculty began to recognize the role of a good writing center in making it possible for developmental writers to succeed. They came to understand that students need to use the writing center, but also that writing centers can't hire just anybody to work with developmental students. Those who work with developmental students must be trained ("Introducing" 26-7).

Wellesley College

Wellesley College has long had only one writing course, Writing 125, that all students must take. However, as Winifred J. Wood describes, many instantiations exist of that one writing course. At Wellesley College, student choice has always been a part of the course selection process. But Wood notes that faculty at Wellesley, too, were influenced by the Directed Self-Placement Program at GVSU. Wood says that "this year we made a concerted effort, during first-year advising, to inform students of the nature of academic writing at Wellesley and the differences between the various courses they might take; we also offered them guidelines to help them assess for themselves whether they are 'underprepared'" (Wood "Directed" 6-7).

Students have a variety of choices of sections of Writing 125 with many different emphases in those sections, because "courses are topic-based and taught by faculty from a variety of disciplines" ("Directed" 6). According to Wood, the courses also vary in the amount of writing required, whether or not they offer special help for writers, and whether

or not they are paired with a content course in one of the disciplines and emphasize disciplinary conventions {"Directed" 6). Students were given guidelines for determining whether or not they were adequately prepared for college writing ("Directed" 7). Wood also says that "students could seek personal advice from deans and peer mentors as well as from writing program faculty" ("Directed" 7).

Greater amounts of information about the variety of courses offered under the heading "Writing 125," along with more astute awareness of their own status and preparedness for college writing tasks, helps students to make much more informed decisions about which section of Writing 125 would be of most benefit to them. In addition, the students began to inform the faculty and advising staff about students' responses to college tasks and courses, further increasing the ability of faculty and staff to write accurate and useful placement materials ("Directed" 7).

University of Michigan

Currently, Phyllis Frus, of the University of Michigan (U of M), reports that they are modeling their directed self-placement process on the program at GVSU, but unlike most of the others who have written about their campus' decision, Frus responds from a writing center perspective. For the U of M, directed self-placement means a "multi-level system for directing and guiding students to make intelligent choices about first-year writing courses" (Frus "Guiding" 7) done by the assessment and examinations staff during summer orientation sessions. This system is necessary because even with very high placement scores, the U of M still has students who are poorly prepared for college writing (Frus "Directed" 2).

Frus notes that with directed self-placement, none of the students failed the writing class they chose, but that the underprepared students who took the Practicum and then the FYC course averaged a B, while those who were underprepared and took only FYC averaged a C+ ("Directed" 7). Thus, the Practicum plays a real and effective role in improving student writing performance at the U of M, but that doesn't seem to be enough to totally resolve the problem for some writers. Despite fairly successful placement efforts, she says, "faculty continue to insist many undergraduates cannot write clearly, sustain a complex argument, and support it convincingly," indicators that placement is not the problem ("Directed" 12). Frus argues that training writing center workers and teachers in the classroom is one method for improving student writing. Another method the U of M uses is to place tutors into the writing classroom which increased "frequent feedback to drafts of their [students'] essays and at various stages of their individual and group projects" ("Directed" 13). "We lack any way of influencing curriculum or instituting exit criteria for those [writing] courses; these are factors that would seem to affect the success of a Directed Self-Placement program," Frus acknowledges, while she also claims that writing centers are a useful adjunct to undergraduate writing assignments ("Directed" 3). The U of M experience may be important to us as more and more of these studies are suggesting that placement is not the reason some students have had and sometimes continue to have trouble with their writing, even after taking BW courses.

Governors State University

According to Eric Martin, Governors State University (GSU) is in a very different kind of position than the other schools studied, because it has no first or second year

students. GSU acts as an upper level school for students fed from regional community colleges. Demographically, the GSU students have an average age of 34; the majority hold full or part-time jobs, attend school part time, head their households; and the student population is also 70% female, 33% minority. Martin notes that although these students have satisfied writing requirements at their local colleges, they remain "unprepared for writing assignments in upper-division courses despite the best efforts of our community college colleagues" (Martin "Directed" 8). Many schools which accept underprepared students from community colleges are not as sensitive and blame the community colleges for not teaching the students what they need to know. While this is obviously true in some instances, the experience at the U of M suggests that even at the best of schools, and even with the best of teachers, some students are not learning to write well enough to satisfy some college professors in upper division courses.

In the past, students who failed a writing test for incoming students were placed into a grammar course. Not surprisingly, after taking that course half of the students failed the test again. Now a new WAC board is developing a course which all students are required to take that will shift the focus from grammar and style to writing, research, and technology which all students will be required to take. In addition, the ENGL 301 course is being retrofitted to focus on writing in the disciplines, with sections focused on various disciplines and their specific writing requirements, as well as composition as a whole, i.e., composition independent of course content. Incoming students will be allowed to choose whichever course they believe, given their prior writing experiences, will help them the most. The despised proficiency exam would no longer exist in this planned programmatic

shift. (Martin "Directed" 9) Obviously, various colleges and universities are in all sorts of stages in terms of developing and implementing directed self-placement, and in most cases these changes are profound ones that demand major changes in how students and the courses they take are viewed.

Belmont University

Belmont University, a small university located in Nashville, TN, has also recently modified its placement program. Because their placement practices did not reflect their teaching philosophy, Belmont switched to directed self-placement. "While our classrooms encourage participatory, empowered learning and dialogic exchange, our placement instrument suggested that students acquiesce to the experts' judgments and that faculty control students' education" (Sims and Pinter "Directed" 1). The faculty at Belmont felt that directed self-placement better reflects learning pedagogies which emphasize self-aware, self-reflexive inquiry (Sims and Pinter "Directed" 1).

Like many others, Sims and Pinter first heard about directed self-placement from discussions on the WPA listserv (Cf. A post to the WPA listserv located at the D S-P Home Page on directed self-placement @ <http://www.gvsu.edu/royerd/dsp/EJR.htm>). They also heard about directed self-placement from Dan Royer and Roger Gilles at CCCCs in 1998. Belmont's faculty took the placement materials developed by GVSU and put their own spin on them, due to the different conditions at Belmont. After raising their admission standards, they found that fewer students needed writing assistance, making their former placement efforts and four hour basic writing course a large effort for a small return (Sims and Pinter 2).

Belmont was not alone in this process. Many colleges today are raising admissions standards as the number of students they can serve reaches its limits and this tends to reduce the number of basic writing students. Directed self-placement should not be confused with open admissions, and it's important to realize here that directed self-placement is not incompatible with restricted admissions policies in which the ACT or other score for admission is raised; directed self-placement only refers to the method by which students are subsequently placed into particular first year writing classes. However, as we noted at the U of M, even very high admissions standards don't entirely eliminate students who need help with their writing.

Responding to these changes, Belmont dropped the basic writing course, adding a companion course taken with the regular composition course that helps students with their regular composition class assignments. As faculty voted to drop ENG 090, they added ENG 103 concurrent with ENG 101. ENG 103 is "a Writing Center-based, writing instructor facilitated, small group, workshop course" (Sims and Pinter 3). Belmont's staff replaced time in placement formerly allocated for placement testing with time for group advice about how to best select courses which fit individual students' needs. (Sims and Pinter 3). What the faculty and administrators discovered from this change was that it gave them the "flexibility to accommodate students' individual needs and situations" (Sims and Pinter 6).

Because a small group, workshop method was chosen, a lockstep pedagogy which helped some students, while not working for others, or actually hindering the progress of some students was no longer necessary. Despite the changes and the higher SAT scores,

72 of 300 incoming first year students chose to add ENG 103 to their ENG 101 course. Sims and Pinter tell us that ENG 103 became so popular that students subsequently lobbied for it to be added to the second semester English course, to second year literature classes (7), and then to content courses in other disciplines (8). Directed self-placement itself was later added to computer courses to allow students to enter those courses at their own levels of proficiency (Sims and Pinter 8).

In summary, many colleges and universities are adapting directed self-placement to meet their own particular institutional needs, and, as a result, have made various claims about their programs. However, at this point, these claims are largely unproven because so little research has been done on directed self-placement. Nonetheless, the research which has been done does suggest that directed self-placement may provide an important service by directing attention away from placement issues to issues of curricular decisions about pedagogy and the role of writing centers in helping to improve student success and student retention.

In their second chapter, "The Pragmatist Foundations of Directed Self-Placement," Royer and Gilles argue that at the heart of their work is the question of which methods "lead to better grades and better retention rates" (1). They ask how placement methods should connect with curriculum; what self directed self-placement permits or constructs; and what are the personal and educational consequences of our placement methods, identifying these questions as critical ones for future researchers to address (2). They further argue that it is "difficult to justify any assessment method that does not include authentic writing situations, process materials, writer reflections, multiple samples in

multiple genres, clearly articulated performance expectations rooted in particular contexts, and so on" (2). They remind us that sometimes "we forget that our main work is not about placement, as such, but about developing curricula that positively affect our students' lives" (2). Ultimately, they note, the question we need to ask is whether or not our students are getting courses that will make it possible for them to succeed in college (5). "The only two variables, then," Royer and Gilles state, "are the students and the curriculum" (5).

Claims Made by These Institutions About Directed Self-Placement

The following are claims made by institutions adopting directed self-placement:

- Students are more satisfied with placement when it is their own choice.
- Students who place themselves become more involved with their educations, more directive and assertive, more inquiry based.
- Students use the questions about being ready for the course they select to become more introspective about themselves as writers.
- Students who select their own courses are more successful than students who are involuntarily placed.
- Universities which institute directed self-placement open themselves up to the possibilities of other kinds of change.
- Finally, the entire question of who students are is pried away from reliance on testing measures like the ACT and opened to much more individual definitions. As Dan Royer has noted, people who believe they can "divine" who students are through such devices are only fooling themselves (June 9, 2001).

Prior Research on Directed Self-Placement.

Because directed self-placement is such a new program, and because the amount of time needed to develop a new program leaves little time for studying the program, little has been done to examine the outcomes of directed self-placement, either qualitatively or quantitatively.

Erica Reynolds' Study of Directed Self-Placement at Southern Illinois University, Carbondale

Erica Reynolds did one of the first formal studies of a directed self-placement program, writing about that program and the results of the research on that program for her Master's Degree thesis, *The Role of Self-Efficacy in Directed Self-Placement: An Analysis of Confidence, Apprehension, and Gender Components.* Reynolds argues that "the research on writing self-efficacy and writing apprehension, and the data generated at SIUC, shows strong support for the idea that students can accurately assess their own writing skills and make appropriate Directed Self-Placement decisions" (iii).

Reynolds begins her work with the research question "Can students really make the **right** choice, in terms of writing composition placement, on their own?" (emphasis added, 3). She then cites studies which she uses to argue that self-efficacy "is a strong predictor of actual ability" (3). Her second question is "What leads students to make a decision one way or the other?" (3) Her answer to that question is that self-efficacy is used by students to determine if their current writing ability as determined by performance is sufficient to pass whichever course they choose. And, because she has already linked self-efficacy to writing performance, she argues that students' self-efficacy scores would guarantee

"correct" placement in terms of writing ability. She based her thinking in part on studies done by Johnson and Pajares and their claim that "what people do is often predicted by their beliefs about their capabilities rather than by measures of what they are actually capable of accomplishing" (313 in Reynolds "The Role" 1), thus distinguishing between ability/performance versus ability/potential. So later, when she claims that "Clearly, the research shows a strong correlation between students' confidence about their abilities to write and their actual writing ability" ("The Role" 13), she is referring to ability/performance, not ability in potential. She also cites a study by McCarthy, Meier, and Rinderer who note that in Bandura's work with self-efficacy, "evaluations about one's abilities (efficacy expectations) develop as individuals attempt a behavior and receive feedback about the quality of their performance" (466 in Reynold "The Role" 14).

Her next research question is "Do apprehension, confidence, self-efficacy, or all three, in relation to writing, play a role in a student's placement decision?" (4). In this section, Reynolds says that the hope is that students read the placement materials, reflect on them, and use that information to choose a course. She notes that it is possible that family and peer pressure can influence students' decisions, but considers those things uncontrollable external variables (4). Reynolds explains that evaluative feedback about students' writing is the source of not only self-efficacy, but also confidence about their writing ability and writing apprehension. She uses the language of correlation studies to suggest that these three factors are mutually present but that apprehension is often in an inverse relationship to self-efficacy and confidence in one's writing, and she indicates that previous research has shown that "students who feel highly apprehensive report having

experienced previous failures in terms of writing while students with low apprehension report having experienced success" (4).

That question and her subsequent research questions, "Are some categories of students, for instance males or females, more capable than others of accurately assessing their own skills?" (5); "What if students see themselves as poor readers and writers, and are actually very capable?" (6); and "What if students have an unfounded low opinion of their writing due to general lack of self-confidence or an inflated opinion of their writing due to high self-confidence?" (7), are ones I did not study directly so I am not examining those questions. However, they do suggest that Reynolds is not completely confident that writing ability alone is responsible for students' choices.

Reynolds defines self-efficacy (a concept which comes from work done by Albert Bandura) as: "the individual's personal confidence in the ability to successfully perform tasks at a given level" (15-16) and Reynolds states that "confidence in one's ability to write well and actual writing ability have been shown to possess a high degree of correlation" (17). She notes in her review of the literature that self-efficacy has been studied in relation to undergraduate student writing, but not in relation to directed self-placement (17).

Prior studies reported by Reynolds had, as she noted, serious methodological weaknesses. The first set of studies were graded for writing ability solely on surface level correctness. And even the second set, primarily studies performed by Daly and his colleagues, relied on T-analysis. These studies were able to analyze the writer's level of sophistication but unable to even begin to measure the relevance, thoughtfulness, or even the logic of the writer's ideas (34-48). Reynolds acknowledges all of these problems in

previous attempts to assess the quality of student writing and argues that we don't have good quantitative methods of analysis that would allow us to match student performance directly to measures of self-efficacy. However, she argues, directed self-placement allows students to base their decisions to take BW or FYC on "their own knowledge of their individual strengths and weaknesses" ("The Role" 23), and, further, that "the majority of students surveyed reported that they indeed considered their writing background more than any other factor in their placement decisions including advice from advisors, parents, or peers" ("The Role" 24). Because her study is the first study of directed self-placement, the field needs many more studies before it can provide any conclusive answers to our research questions. However, each study can be expected to add to the data accumulating about directed self-placement.

Reynolds' conclusions are based on a survey administered to 2,025 English 100 and English 101 students, by David Blakesley, Director of Writing Studies at SIUC. After eliminating students who answered the third question by acknowledging that they had not been aware of directed self-placement, the final N = 973 or 48.05% of freshman students who were aware of the directed self-placement process. The survey is reproduced in Appendix D. Survey statements were designed to evaluate the success of directed self-placement (Reynolds 62) by asking 4) Which course did you place yourself in? 5) How did you learn about Directed Self-Placement? 6) Did the information help you to make an informed decision? 7) How much do you value your right to determine your own placement in a writing course? 8) How confident are you that you have made the right decision with regard to placement? 9) In making your placement decision, which of the

following did you consider?, and 10) On the back of this sheet, please add any comments you would like to make about Directed Self-Placement (Reynolds 91).

Confidence about placement decisions was high with 518 students (53.29%) very confident, 426 students (43.83%) somewhat confident, and 28 students (2.88%) not very confident (Reynolds 64). So Reynolds concluded that students were confident about their decisions. Of English 100 students, 90 students (43.06%) were very confident about their decision, 108 students (51.67%) were somewhat confident, and 11 students (5.26%) were not very confident. Of English 101 students 56.09% were very confident, 41.68% were somewhat confident, and only 2.23% of students were not very confident (65-66). Thus, the basic writing students were slightly less confident about their decisions than the FYC students were, although both groups of students provided evidence that the vast majority of students felt confident about their choices.

Reynolds concluded that students did not consider advice from outside SIUC's materials, because of the responses given on her survey to question 9), "In making your placement decision, which of the following did you consider? (Check all that apply.)" (Reynolds 91). She noted that "77.80 % did not consider advice from a teacher, 88.18% did not consider advice from an counselor, 66.91% did not consider advice from a advisor, 69.17% did not consider advice from a family member, and 89.83% did not consider advice from a peer" (Reynolds 65). She also reported that 75.41% or 741 students reported that they "did consider their own writing background" when deciding between 100 and 101 (Reynolds 65), and that they had not considered those other sources of information about their writing as much as they considered their own writing background which followed the

directions given on the SIUC placement materials.

Reynolds concluded, therefore, that students did place themselves on the basis of writing ability, and that they were not significantly influenced by anything other than the SIUC materials.

Ellen Sims and Robbie Pinter Report the Assessment of Directed Self-Placement at Belmont.

Sims and Pinter reported the results of three small studies. Each of the studies indicated agreement with the idea that directed self-placement was a satisfactory way to enroll for composition classes.

Study One: Survey on Student Attitudes Toward Directed Self-Placement

For the first study, 169 students volunteered to fill out the questionnaire. These students were given a Likert-scaled statement: "I found the English Department's Directed Self-Placement process helpful in making my decision about the first English course I should take at Belmont." The majority agreed with that statement and the students told them that 25 strongly agreed that it had helped, 58 agreed, 26 disagreed, 9 strongly disagreed, and 51 didn't answer the question. If percentages are computed, with the 51 who didn't answer removed from the N, 70% of the students agreed or strongly agreed that directed self-placement did help them with their choice-making (Sims and Pinter "Directed" 7).

Study Two: A Teacher's Survey.

A teacher gave a small survey (5 Likert-scaled statements) to her class of 12 students. Students were asked to respond to statements indicating their response to

directed self-placement. The results of this small study were that almost all of the students agreed that directed self-placement was useful to them, 11 of the 12 students ("Sims and Pinter "Adapting" 6-7).

Study Three: Informal Organizational Statistics.

In the third study, Belmont collected data on directed self-placement. Placement officials found that enrollment in the support class rose from 3-5 students in the old basic writing course to 77 students in the new support course (ENG 103). Enrollments continue to be high even though the support sections are entirely optional because directed self-placement allowed students to choose sections of FYC with or without the support class. As students passed through the system, and word spread about how helpful the new class was, students in 102 began to demand support for that class, and they even realized how useful it would be in their second year literature class and asked for a support class for that course as well. In addition, students who would never have been placed in a basic writing class are finding it useful to take the support classes, even though they are optional, to receive extra help with their assignments. As a result, university administrators have concluded that the faculty, staff and students' response to directed self-placement has been very positive and has increased the amount of support students both within and outside the target group receive for their writing. (Sims and Pinter "Adopting" 7)

Cynthia Cornell and Robert Newton Report a Study of Directed Self-Placement at De Pauw University

De Pauw collected "(1) quantitative measures of readiness and achievement; (2) relative measures of students' attitudes toward the writing courses they selected; and (3)

measures of students' persistence in the college." They report that "Although one could conclude from our data that offering basic writing at a school like De Pauw is unnecessary, our data suggest that providing students with a choice to take it meets individual and personal needs that standard placement measures, including portfolios, are not designed to identify" (Cornell and Newton "Choosing" 4-5). This study offers important evidence that some students have needs quantifiable measures fail to capture.

In addition, the following studies, taken together, are the most rigorous indictment of standard placement measures I've ever seen.

Preliminary Study One

Despite being quite selective, and despite rising admissions scores on the SATV and ACTE, DePauw had from 100 to 120 "at risk" students each year during the period of this study from 1993 to 1999 ("The Case" 3-4). "At risk" students have SATVs of as low as 320 or ACTEs as low as 11("The Case" 4). In 1993-94 the study was begun by mainstreaming the 30 students who would have been placed in the BW class. At the same time, 28 of the students in the regular FYC course who had passed a placement exam were placed into the advanced W (writing intensive) course ("The Case" 11-12). In 1993-94, BW students were placed instead in FYC and students who would normally have been placed in FYC were tested. The BW students' mean grade in FYC was 2.64 and the FYC students' mean grade was 2.83. Both grades translated to a B- and were not considered to have a statistically significant difference ("The Case" 13). So it didn't matter whether the BW students (as a group) were in BW or FYC.

Preliminary Study Two

Because some students scored below the means for both groups, the faculty at DePauw identified 20 students who would probably have done better with a BW course first. And, after utilizing many procedures they discovered that, rather than being lumped together at the lower end of the scales used, they were all over the place. Using students' EPIX scores (a measure of writing sample grading), they found their 20 students scattered in a group of 332 students (half the entering class). Using SATV/ACTE scores the 20 were spread through a group of the lowest 246 scores. Then high school rank was tried as another way to try and sort out the 20 students who had needed more help. And with high school rank the students were in spotty locations all over a group of 555 students in a class that contained only 641 entering students. With a writing sample score the 20 "needy" students were found in a group of 405 students. Those large groups were the smallest groups that could be found that would contain all 20 students who had needed, based on course outcomes, more help than they received. Looking at their former placement procedures, researchers found that only 5 students would have been identified using the EPIX, six using the SATV, and high school rank would only have sorted out 3 of the 20. ("The Case" 13-15)

Preliminary Study Three

For this study, the researchers took students and divided them on the basis of SATV scores into three groups— high with SATVs from 670-690, middle with SATVs from 660-670, and low with SATVs from 630-640. Then they compared their W course grades. No statistically significant differences existed between the three groups. The high group's mean was 3.33, the middle group's mean was 3.34, and the low group's mean was

3.18. So it didn't matter which score they had on the SATV. ("The Case" 15-16)

Preliminary Study Four

This highly interesting study took a group of students in the same SATV centiles from 630-650, divided the group in half and placed one half (Group A) in College Writing II (the FYC course) and the other half (Group B) in the W course. Those who were in Group A took the College Writing II course first, and then took the W course, averaging 2.93 in the W course, while those in Group B went straight into the W course and averaged 3.55. The researchers said, "we noted with considerable interest that, without having taken College Writing II, these students with verbal SATs from 630-650 [Group B] had outperformed, in the W course, their peers [Group A] who had taken College Writing II and equaled the performance of an automatically exempted group with SATV scores 40-60 points higher [a third group, Group C]" ("The Case" 16-17). Thus, the researchers noted a sort of Pygmalion effect, through which students whose SATV scores would normally have placed them into FYC, but who were actually placed into the W course, scored as well as students whose higher SATV scores would have exempted them from FYC and placed them directly into the W course, as well as showing that they scored significantly higher than their peers who had scored in the same centile on the SATV and who had taken both FYC and the W course.

Findings from the First Four Studies

The preliminary studies "showed that lower ranking students could succeed in College Writing II without taking the preparatory College Writing I. And it showed that upper-middle ranking students could succeed in the W course without taking College

Writing II" ("The Case" 18). The decision, with that kind of knowledge acting as their inspiration, was to try using directed self-placement and allowing students who were considered "at risk" to select which writing course they felt would most benefit them. At this point, in 1995, the faculty at DePauw hadn't yet heard about the similar experiment taking place at Grand Valley State University. In their first letter to students who scored below 530 on the SATV or ACTEs of 22 and below, they recommended that students take College English I. In 1996, the letter was changed to emphasize student choices between College English I and College English II. Meeting with Royer and Gilles at CCCCs in spring 1998, caused a further restructuring of the letter, and an adoption of a similar questionnaire asking students to assess their previous writing experience. ("The Case" 18-20)

Profiles of College Writing I and College Writing II Students at DePauw

After the implementation of directed self-placement at DePauw, researchers there followed the 435 "at risk" students, collecting data on readiness, achievement, and persistence from 1995 to 1998. In addition to the readiness scores and high school centile, researchers collected data on race, gender, and college generation (which they used as an approximation of class) and they correlated those scores with choices of College Writing I (BW) and College Writing II (FYC), to construct profiles of students in those two groups. ("The Case" 22)

Cornell and Newton note that there is a significant difference along almost all factors measured (ACTC, ACTE, ACTM, HSCN, SATV, SATM) between the BW and FYC groups; however, the most important data is found within each group. The range of

scores within groups is roughly equivalent for each group, for instance, SATV scores for BW students ranged from 320-550; for the FYC students, from 330-580...., while ACTEs for BW students ranged from 11 to 26; for FYC students they ranged from 14 to 28" ("The Case" 23). Cornell and Newton assert that their statistics show that although there are differences between the two groups, when examining what any individual might do in terms of choosing a course there are absolutely no reliable predictors. "We hypothesize that the self-placement choices reflect additional factors, such as 'self-efficacy' ('people's judgments of their capabilities to organize and execute courses of action required to attain designated types of performances') [Bandura, 1986, 391], writing apprehension, or some other as yet unidentified factor" ("The Case" 24). Some other factors that appeared to influence student choices were gender, race, generation in America. Women and Europeans more often chose FYC; men were equally likely to choose either course; and first generation Americans and African Americans "were much more likely" to choose BW ("The Case" 24). When researchers took those groups and examined their readiness scores, they discovered that there were so many inconsistencies that they "point to the importance of other factors than readiness scores in our students' choices" ("The Case" 25).

Additional Findings:

- Statistically the "at risk" group who avoided the 'preparatory' course achieved at a higher level than those who chose it ("The Case" 27).
- If the WI (BW) cohort had been only women, their achievement scores would have suggested that choosing WI (BW) does help the less ready make up the gap

between them and the slightly more ready cohort ("The Case" 32).

- African Americans and women tend "to perform at a higher level than their 'readiness' scores might indicate" ("The Case" 32).
- Factors such as "dispositional and cultural reasons — traits of motivation, concentration, self-esteem, acculturation, and maturity" are likely to "influence their choice, their performance within that choice, and their persistence" ("The Case" 33-35).
- Underprepared students "in our small classes and with the help of our writing center, can quite quickly develop writing strategies that they have not previously been exposed to. It may be that they could always have done this, and that, earlier, we underestimated their ability to rise to the level of our expectations" ("The Case" 41).
- We are convinced that standardized tests do not tell us which individuals need or do not need College Writing I (BW).

Ultimately, Cornell and Newton would like to offer two beginning courses that are "distinctly different in content and could be taken simultaneously or in whatever order was convenient or [of] interest to the student" ("The Case" 43).

Dan Royer and Roger Gilles Assess Directed Self-Placement

Reynolds' asserts that students can place themselves "correctly" using awareness of their writing ability as measured by self-efficacy. Cornell and Newton add to her claim their insight that many factors in addition to writing ability affect students' placement decisions and their ultimate success or failure in college. Royer and Gilles argue that

there is no way to know who is and who is not a basic writing student, except for the student's choice of the basic writing course (Royer June 9, 2001; Gilles June 10, 2001. In each case, these researchers have rejected the prior assumptions that placement scores were a valid predictor of students' potential for achievement in college.

These researchers have come to believe that they do not know which writing class will best fit a student's needs, and that the only true judge of which courses are best for students is the students themselves. Each of them has selected a form of directed self-placement because it alone allows students to assess independently all the factors contributing to a good personal and individual decision and then make a reasoned decision based on facts which may be known to only the student. In addition, they note that directed self-placement feels right, works, and pleases everyone involved. To illustrate the fact that directed self-placement pleases students while giving them options they might not have at other schools where placement is determined by the college rather than the students, Royer and Gilles interviewed two students, Kristen and Jacob.

Each of these students placed themselves into classes which were contraindicated by their ACT scores and high school GPAs. Kristen who selected BW had a 3.68 GPA, ACT of 19, and a rank in the top 12% of her high school class. Jacob who selected FYC had a 3.16 GPA, ACT of 15, and ranked at 46% of his high school class. Kristen was interviewed while she was a student in FYC, after having passed BW, while Jacob was interviewed after he completed FYC (Royer and Gilles "Directed" 12). Royer and Gilles' study is able to look more closely at the personal factors Reynolds, as well as Cornell and Newton, insist are more responsible for students decisions than their placement scores on

any standardized measures or procedures.

Despite her achievement in high school, Kristen talked about being unsure that she was prepared for college level writing. "'I was just starting college and I didn't know what to expect. I figured that English 098 would get me back into the writing mode. I'd been out of school all summer'" (Royer and Gilles "Directed" 12). Kristen's decision was independently made during orientation, although her parents later voiced approval for her choice. She passed BW with a B+ and said that students wrote about topics they found interesting, that she benefitted from going to a tutor once a week, and especially that she learned that "'You must deal with many drafts before a final draft. You have to make enough time to get everything done'" (Royer and Gilles "Directed" 12-13). Thus, despite her apparent misplacement, Kristen acquired what she believed she most needed from the basic writing course, an introduction to writing in college. For Kristen the BW class helped her to learn the ground rules and adjust to the demands of writing in college.

Despite his ACT score of 15, and his rank in his class, Jacob had taken an advanced composition course in high school and after registering for SW, he called his high school teacher who confirmed that he'd made the right choice. His parents didn't agree with his choice and he says, "'My parents wanted me to take 098 because they didn't want me to screw up my first semester. But I wanted to take 150 to show them I wouldn't screw up'" (Royer and Gilles 12 of 17). Jacob used the making of that decision to push himself to take the work of SW more seriously. "'In high school you're just taking classes, but in college you've got money involved,'" he noted (Royer and Gilles 12 of 17). In addition, like Kristen, he found that he had learned more about writing. "'My final paper was a

work of art compared to my high-school papers'" (Royer and Gilles 12 of 17). Jacob's grade in SW was a "C" which demonstrates that determination can lead to success regardless of one's previous levels of attainment.

Royer and Gilles found that directed self-placement meets students' needs and fulfills many of their expectations for a selection process that, if it didn't improve things, certainly didn't harm them either. Directed self-placement is also far less expensive to the college than reading and scoring individual student essays from several thousand students. To further assess the directed self-placement process, Royer and Gilles surveyed students in the writing courses. In that assessment, 97% of the students in BW said they believed their choice was the right one for them, and 88% of the FYC students felt they had selected the right course for them. In their 1995 study, students reported satisfaction of only 38% with the class they had been placed in, prior to directed self-placement (Royer and Gilles "Directed" 17) . In addition, Royer emphasizes that the failure rate for students has not gone up in the FYC course, so if students who would normally have been placed in BW choose that class, they are succeeding at a rate equivalent to that of all other students in the course (June 9, 2001).

In Chapter Three, I respond to Reynolds, Cornell and Newton, and Royer and Gilles with my own study. Unable to replicate the extraordinary longitudinal study done by Cornell and Newton, I was nonetheless intrigued by their findings which make enormous sense given the broad range of students most teachers talk about in their writing classes. In my study, I use a survey with open-ended questions, to plow a methodological middle ground between the limited response survey used by Reynolds and the in-depth interviews

done by Royer and Gilles. Their studies produced an apparent dichotomy, with the suggestion in Reynolds' study that writing ability matters in determining correct placement, and with the suggestion in Royer and Gilles' study of Kristen and Jacob that writing ability really isn't very important to ultimate student success. Cornell and Newton add to this interesting mix a suggestion from their data that there are also, besides writing ability and purely pragmatic choices articulated by Reynolds, and by Royer and Gilles, personal and individual reasons for students wanting to take one course rather than the other. Traces of those personal, individual needs are demonstrated by Kristen's wish to ease into the transition from high school to college, despite her good grades and high placement scores. Traces of those needs also exist in Jacob's desire to prove to his parents and to himself that he can take on the challenge of the harder class and succeed in passing it.

In my study, I will be looking for the kind of results all three studies suggested might make important contributions to students' decision making processes: writing ability, pragmatic concerns, and personal and individual needs. I used open-ended questions, so students were able to tell me a great deal more than Reynolds' students were, because her questions limited their possible answers. In addition, I was able to obtain information from many more students than Royer and Gilles' interviews with only two students, Kristen and Jacob.

Chapter Three Design of the Study

Directed self-placement was first designed and implemented by Roger Gilles and Dan Royer at GVSU in 1995 and 1996. Their Directed Self-Placement Program was the first of its kind in the country, and filled a gap between directed placement (school officials deciding for students which classes they belonged in), and self-placement (students deciding for themselves which courses to take). Directed self-placement was designed to give students the necessary information to make a well- reasoned choice, while acknowledging them as adults capable of understanding their own needs (Royer August 1, 2000; June 13, 2001). In this study of their program, I am examining two primary issues: 1) the reasons students gave for choosing either the BW class or the FYC class, and 2) the influences the students named as important to their decision-making.

Students begin the process of enrollment in classes as soon as they have been accepted for college. At that point, Royer and Gilles send them placement information materials designed to inform them about their options so they can make a reasoned and informed decision about whether to choose the basic writing class or the regular first year composition class.

Royer and Gilles created placement materials which include a letter and pamphlet (Appendix B) to go to all students who had been accepted in GVSU's entering freshman class. The letter welcomes students to GVSU and tells them to read the enclosed pamphlet that will give them the information they need to make decisions about which freshman writing course to take, ENG098 Writing with a Purpose — the basic writing course (BW) or ENG150 Strategies in Writing — the first year composition (FYC)

course. It also encourages students to consult parents, high school teachers, and high school counselors as the students make their decisions. The pamphlet includes: (1) descriptions of the BW and FYC course options students can choose from, (2) a list of experiences students choosing FYC need to have for success in the course, (3) statements about the underlying philosophy of the directed self-placement system, (4) a description of the writing portfolio for FYC, which is required to pass that required course, (5) a diagram, which shows how BW and FYC fit into the broader sequence of writing requirements for the university, (6) a summary of what to expect on the first day of classes, (7) a statement about what to do if students are still unsure about which course to take, along with the phone number of the Director of Composition who can be contacted if students want more information. (See Appendix B for this pamphlet.)

During the summer of 1996 Royer and Gilles met with every group of students going through orientation, and Royer still continues to attend most orientation sessions today. They explained directed self-placement to the students again, even though they had sent those students a pre-orientation letter and pamphlet describing the program and the two courses, BW and FYC.

Population: The primary population of GVSU's 3000 yearly incoming freshmen are white, traditional students, aged from 17 to 19, most of whom graduated from high school the previous spring. Many of them are first-generation college students from working class families. (Royer August 1, 2000; June 13, 2001)

Sampling Information: I used a typical convenience sample. Dan Royer at GVSU selected the classes from among those whose teachers were willing to administer the

survey during class time, approximately half of the way through the term. Collecting data at this time would give students an opportunity to have determined how useful the class they were taking was to them personally, to have matched choice to outcome, even though I didn't ask them to discuss that issue. Sixty-four BW students and 85 FYC student participated, for a total N of 149. These numbers are not representative of the way students are actually proportioned between the classes with approximately 80% of the students in FYC and 20% of the students in BW. This was not a problem for the study, because I was not trying to establish, proportionately, how students respond to directed self-placement, but was going to do more qualitative work. I was interested in the kinds of reasons students gave for the choices they made and the kinds of influences they named as important to their decisions.

Part One: Observation of Orientation: I observed orientation twice, once in the company of Dan Royer and once by myself. The first time, with Dan Royer, I stayed for the speech given to students about directed self-placement and spent time after that talking to Dan Royer, and to the teacher who gave the speech, about directed self-placement. The second time, I stayed after the speech, for lunch, and then to observe the actual process of enrollment.

During each orientation meeting (conducted Monday through Thursday most of the summer), a group of 50 students comes into a small auditorium where they are welcomed and given a folder full of orientation information. After the welcome speech, the students are introduced to a speaker from the Writing Department. That speaker explains directed self-placement to the students, referring them to materials in their

folders. Students then go to lunch where they have opportunities to ask questions as well as get to know one another. After lunch, students are taken to a large computer laboratory where they will actually enroll in their classes for fall term.

Part Two: Survey of Student Choices

The Survey Instrument: The survey instrument was a three-page document. The first page was a letter of introduction to the students. That was particularly important, because I would not be there to collect the data in person. In it I told the students that I was a graduate student at Michigan State University, that the data I was collecting was going to be part of my doctoral dissertation, that the study they were going to respond to would give scholars more information about how students make decisions regarding which writing course to take. I wanted students to take the study seriously and respond to the questions thoughtfully, even though their teachers might not give them very much time to answer the questions in. (Appendix A)

The second page was a standard human subjects statement and permission form allowing me to use the information they provided in my study. It again discussed the purpose of my study, along with giving them information about how their identities would be protected, and who to contact if they had any questions. (Appendix A)

The third page was the actual survey instrument. The survey utilized open-ended questions to solicit information from the students. In it I noted that "Up until recently, researchers often proclaimed that they knew why students did what they did, but very few of them ever asked students what their actual reasons were." Then I simply told students that their identities would be protected and that they were free to say what they actually

thought about the reasons for their choices between the BW and FYC courses, asking them to be as honest as they could. On the survey instrument, there are spaces between the questions to give students room to answer the questions. The following are the questions:

1. Which course did you choose? ENG 098 or ENG 150 (as your first choice)?

2. Why did you decide to take ENG 098 or ENG 150?

3. Which people outside yourself influenced, or tried to influence, the choice you made? How did they try to influence you?

4. Did any non-person influences (like finances, time constraints, jobs, family obligations, or times classes were available) affect your decision?

5. If you are willing to participate in more in-depth interviews please put your e-mail address at the bottom of this page.

(Appendix A)

Analysis: Each of the earlier studies naturally had limitations. Reynolds started with over 2000 respondents and then limited her N to around 1000 students. She also used a survey with one check off type question that limited students' ability to respond by giving them only the options she had predetermined. [The following was the only question pertinent to my study. A copy of her survey is located in Appendix D.]

9. In making your placement decision, which of the following did you consider? Check all that apply.

__ my writing background	__ advice from advisor
__ advice from family	__ advice from peers
__ advice from a teacher	__ advice from a counselor
__ other_____	

(Reynolds 91)

As a result of using a check-off question, the information she was able to obtain from her survey was focused very tightly by the type of question asked. Reynolds was investigating the question of whether students used their perceptions of their writing ability to make their decisions, seeking to correlate their perceptions of writing background with class choice to see if her theories linking self-efficacy to students' perceptions of writing ability would be supported. She also wanted to know whether or not students were influenced by anything other than the formal orientation materials. Her study gave us useful information, but I wanted to see what the range of possible reasons for selecting BW or FYC might be, rather than linking the answers to specific theoretical assumptions.

Royer and Gilles interviewed only two students (Royer and Gilles "Directed"). The results of their study offered important insights, because their interviewees were able to talk about their personal needs, desires, challenges, and decisions. But this method, too, limited the kind of claims they could make. Two people are interesting, but not enough to offer suggestions about how groups of students respond to directed self-placement.

Cornell and Newton ("Choosing") used a variety of methods, and they were able to make very important claims, but their methods were longitudinal and statistical, using large groups of students and doing institutional research. However, although I have not replicated their methods, their finding have informed my thinking about the issues surrounding directed self-placement. They discovered that there were some numerically significant distinctions between the students who chose BW and those who chose FYC,

but couldn't explain any details about those differences. They also found that even though most BW students who choose FYC succeed, others still benefit from taking BW and gaining that extra support for their writing; however, they learned that it would be impossible to find those students who would benefit from extra help using any kind of placement method, and decided that those students might have personal reasons for their needs which are not reflected at all in traditional placement methods.

I decided on a relatively small number of participants (149), because I wanted to use open-ended survey questions and to represent all the students I sampled. I chose open-ended questions so students could give me more personal answers than either the Reynolds or Cornell and Newton studies made possible. I did not want to lose the insights which can be generated from listening to what individuals tell us, nor to ignore the fact that groups of students may actually differ from one another in significant ways. My sample size of 149 is just about as large as one can go in this direction without becoming so encumbered with details that the ability to analyze the data individually is lost. With more individual data, I could extend Reynolds' and Cornell and Newton's research in the directions Royer and Gilles' work pointed, towards a very complex model that satisfies students' placement needs by allowing them to listen to a broad scope of personal needs including perceived writing ability; influences from parents, peers, teachers and counselors; and other complex psycho-social-economic needs from outside the immediate confines of the writing classroom.

In Chapter Four, I will present my findings and analyze those findings. The results will be divided into two parts, the first will focus on my observations of orientation and

the second on my analysis of the survey results. My survey data will be analyzed twice, once using averaging, and then, again, using non-numerical analysis and focusing on individual students and their statements about directed self-placement and about the influences on their decisions.

Chapter Four Findings and Analysis

Introduction

In studying the directed self-placement process at GVSU, I first attended two orientation sessions, giving me the opportunity to observe the process by which students are reminded about directed self-placement information they received in the mail, given information about course selection, and subsequently helped to actually register for their classes. I later surveyed students to ask them why they had chosen their particular class and what had influenced them in making that decision. I based my research on three studies done by Erica Reynolds, Dan Royer and Roger Gilles, and Cynthia Cornell and Robert Newton, hoping to extend the knowledge gained in their studies.

Their conclusions suggest that directed self-placement works and that students select themselves into basic writing accurately, because they select classes that fit their ability levels, that students who deliberately choose to take a course not indicated by their writing ability usually succeed, and that they are satisfied with their choices. In addition, the research of Cornell and Newton suggested that there are differences between students who chose the BW course and the FYC course, but they did not report details about those differences. I hoped with my research to increase the amount of detailed insight into the process of the choices students made, so I asked students why they chose the classes they chose using open-ended survey questions. I also asked students if anyone or anything had influenced their choices, again using open-ended questions. By studying the students by class choice as well as by reasons for those choices and influences on those choices, I hoped to be able to find differences between the groups, as well as differences between the

individuals in the groups.

In this chapter I will first present the data from my study and then analyze that data. In the first section of results, I will detail information about the participants in my study. Second, I will report my observations of orientation. Third, I will report results from my survey. Finally, I will analyze the observation and survey data from my study.

Observation of Orientation

GVSU conducts 60 orientation meetings with groups of 50 students attending each orientation meeting (a total of 3,000 new freshmen each fall). I attended two of those orientation meetings. I arrived in time to hear the talk given about directed self-placement and about the reading and writing components of a bachelor's degree at GVSU on both August 1st 2000 and on August 7th 2000. During the talk at the first orientation, I sat with Dan Royer and was able to ask questions if I didn't understand something. I was also able to stay after the meeting with students to talk to both Royer and the writing faculty presenter.

August 1st Orientation

Initially, a person who was from another department welcomed the students and told them that a professor who teaches writing would speak to them and explain the sequence of writing (and reading) courses which some or all students must take. That person then introduced the Writing Faculty Professor who would present the information.

The presenter indicated to the students that in their folders there either would or would not be a bright red piece of paper on which they would be told if they were to be required to take a reading course. The teacher explained that those students who had

scored below a certain point on the ACT would take that required course. [Royer later informed me that students were required to take a reading course, if they scored below 19 on the ACT, and that it was only offered Fall Semester.] The presenter did a good job of suggesting that the reading course would substantially improve not only students' reading skills, but also their ability to take notes in classes, study for exams, and read and understand exam questions for both essay and multiple choice exams.

She later told students to "pull out the yellow card" (Cf. Orientation materials are located in Appendix B). She told the students that GVSU's experience with directed self-placement had shown that "students make as good a decision as we'd make" about placing them and that they would make good choices. She indicated that they should read the course descriptions, and think about whether they had a lot of experience writing or if there were things they needed to work on still before embarking on a course which would demand a lot of research writing. [She told me, in my conversation with her after the meeting, that she had watched the students go down the list checking off the criteria they believed they fit.]

First she described the freshman writing courses, including Writing with a Purpose (BW), Strategies for Writing (FYC), and then she described a junior level writing assessment test/class (English 305) they could test out of. She followed those descriptions by talking about the two writing intensive courses they had to take (one in their major and another in a non-major content course which requires at least 3000 words of writing in addition to the normal course demands). After giving them that information, she told students they would be breaking out into small groups to talk about their choices

of courses, then have lunch. At lunch they would break into small groups to talk about their choices of classes with their peers, eat lunch, and have time to talk with her about registering for classes. After lunch, students were to go upstairs to the computer lab to enroll for their classes, and she would again be available to them for any questions they might have about which class to choose. She finished by reminding students that they were required to pass all required composition classes with no less than a "C." After the students broke into small groups, I stood with the presenter and with Dan Royer while they discussed the orientation meeting, which both agreed had gone quite well. The students had been attentive, had seemed to understand the directions they received, and had seemed eager to go to lunch and to enroll for their Fall 2000 classes.

August 8, 2000 Orientation

A week later I went back to orientation and rather than sitting in the back as I had the first time, I sat down in front with the students, tape-recording the presentation to the students and making more detailed notes about what I was observing. After telling students about the reading course, this day's presenter went on to talk about the differences between the two writing courses, to suggest that students look at the pamphlet and mark the kinds of writing experiences they had in high school to see if they were ready for FYC or if they could use another semester of writing experience before getting into FYC and ought to take the BW class. Talking about BW, she emphasized the friendliness of instructors, the extra help available for students in BW, the ease of making the transition into college writing with an interim course prior to taking FYC. She then discussed the difficulty of FYC, the required "C" grade to pass the class, the longer papers

dealing with research topics, the need to have computer experience in composing and revising papers.

I listened for, but didn't hear any suggestions about how BW was going to better prepare students for FYC. The description of BW in the pamphlet the students were given emphasized "Mastering the conventions of standard written English— spelling, grammar, punctuation, and usage," writing "to reach specific audiences," and writing "often to develop comfort and fluency."

I discovered that some of my impressions about the post-presentation activities were not entirely accurate, because I stayed for lunch and observed enrollment after lunch as well. I had not done that the first time I attended. From what I had been told, I had expected writing faculty to be present to help students by answering their questions about directed self-placement and the two composition classes students needed to choose between. There were a number of faculty present, but they were from departments all over the campus, at lunch and again at enrollment, each of whom shepherded one of the small groups of students (somewhere around ten students apiece).

I sat with the writing department faculty who presented that day and could listen in on the conversations students had not only with her, but also with other faculty from other departments. The conversations were about many topics, only a few of which had anything to do with writing. Students discussed which high schools they had come from, whether they had friends in common from those schools, their majors, whether or not they were working and going to school (most were), what they had done or were doing that summer, and their long term goals. Students stayed pretty much within their own groups

and did not come over to our table to ask the writing faculty member about the choices of writing courses they were considering.

Most of the students said they had already made up their minds about which courses they intended to enroll in. But the most important topic to them was whether they would be able to enroll in the course of their choice and at a time and location which would work with their other schedules. They had already been told that most of the Strategies for Writing sections on campus were full, except for those off the main campus. Several of the students who lived in other cities were quite happy about that, most were not. The full classes meant that students could only enroll in Writing for a Purpose, the no credit basic writing course, if they wanted a writing course for Fall Semester.

At the first orientation I attended with Dan Royer, I had asked him what they would do if more students wanted a basic writing course or the regular composition course than they had scheduled and he had replied that they just switch the teachers from one course to the other and open new sections, but that was not happening. No new sections of FYC were going to be opened and students had only two choices, take the BW class or take no writing class fall semester. Perhaps new sections of the regular FYC course would be opened later and I just was not there when that happened, but my sense of the situation was that GVSU had saved orientation for those students who had relatively low ACT scores until the latter part of the orientation process when most of the FYC sections would be full so they could encourage those students to take BW.

As students enrolled for classes there were only three or four writing faculty present (most had arrived just in time to help with enrollment) and the rest of the faculty

were from other departments. In addition, they were joined by a large number of trained peer consultants who were there to help students enroll in classes. I counted as many as three assistants helping one student make his or her choices and deal with the computer technology, because students were enrolling via computers. On average, though, there was one helper for every two students.

I had expected enrollment assistants to focus their concerns on helping students select courses which were right for the students, but instead of asking the kinds of questions which were in the pamphlets, helpers asked questions such as, "Are you a morning person?" "Are you an evening person?" "Are you doing OK?" The last question almost inevitably resulted in loud groans and an anguished "NO!" as students struggled to find open sections to enroll in or to reboot computers that had crashed. The options to select the FYC course were extremely limited compared to what students would have encountered at the beginning of the summer. Student helpers advised students that if they had any questions at all about being ready for FYC that they should not hesitate to take BW for which there were open and available sections. Otherwise they could wait until winter semester to take FYC. I noted that some students who were planning to take FYC enrolled in BW. They were less concerned at that point about being in the BW course than they were about finding 12 hours of course work to sign up for so they could be full-time students and qualify for Pell grants and other financial aid.

Most of the students did not appear to be having problems, or if they were they were not vocal about it. With only a few exceptions, by the time I left, the vast majority of students had successfully enrolled in their classes and had left. Those students who

had been having problems up to that time were mainly having problems not related to their choices of writing courses—things like using the computers, not having the proper access codes, problems with filling their schedules or having trouble with times classes were scheduled. With the exception of one student, most students had either enrolled in BW or had decided to wait until Winter Semester to take FYC. So it appeared that students quite successfully completed the enrollment process with relatively little intervention except for help with technical questions about using the computers or having difficulty locating unfilled sections of the courses they desired.

Analysis of Orientation and Enrollment:

For the most part, orientation and enrollment at GVSU seemed to provide students with the support they needed, both intellectual and technical, to reasonably assess their likelihood of success in the class of their choice. I observed only one student who was having any significant trouble with figuring out where she would best be placed. The rest of the students seemed able, despite being in a context where many other kinds of stressors were present, to effectively decide which course to take and to enroll in that course or decide to wait until winter semester to enroll in a course not available to them then. The presenters of information about directed self-placement, and about the choices of courses available to students, did a good job of articulating the differences between the classes and of helping students to think about the course which would suit them best. The presenters stressed several times their confidence that the students were fully capable of making good decisions, and most students had already made their decision either prior to coming to orientation or during that presentation. That probably accounted for the fact

that at lunch they were more interested in finding out about one another and at enrollment could focus on simply making the computers function accurately and putting their schedules together.

Although I didn't directly question students later about their satisfaction with directed self-placement and their choice to enroll in the course they felt best suited their needs (scholarly or pragmatic), in the survey only a few students mentioned any kind of displeasure with their chosen courses. The vast majority seemed quite pleased with the course they had chosen whether it was BW or FYC.

Participants

The total number of BW students who participated is 64 (30 males and 32 females). The group of FYC students who participated totaled 85 (22 males and 54 females). The total N is 149, about 5% of the total number of entering freshmen.

N=149	BW	FYC
Females	32	54
Males	30	22
Total	64	85

Table 4.1. Gender by BW and FYC Students.

As I indicated previously, Erica Reynolds found a gender difference between the number of students enrolling in BW and those enrolling in FYC. A similar difference prevails here, with substantially more females than males enrolling in FYC; however, because my data were not based on the entire entering class of Fall 2001, but only on a small subset of the 3,000 entering first year students, I would hesitate to make any claims regarding gender and its influences on class choice.

It should be noted that many of the percentages listed are independent of each other, because students had open-ended questions and could indicate several answers apiece, so they should not be expected to total 100 %. In addition, it should be noted that not all students registered an answer in all categories, so their answers cannot be construed to speak for all students; however, all percentages were computed using the total N = the number of answers from the group.

Reasons from Survey Data for Choosing BW and FYC

When I asked why students had chosen their writing course, they gave a number of reasons. Some of those reasons were based on their perceptions of their writing ability, but those weren't the only reasons students gave for their choices. Four categories emerged from the students' answers. Those categories are 1) perceived writing ability, 2) writing performance, 3) pragmatic concerns, 4) individual concerns. It is within these sub-categories; however, that a more detailed picture of differences between BW and FYC writers is revealed in Tables 4.2 through 4.5 below. For example, students in both groups did use their assessment of their *writing abilities* to make a decision, but their comments about their writing abilities were very different. Most of those who chose BW claimed they lacked writing experience and writing skills, needed help, or were learning disabled. FYC students, on the other hand, claimed that they were experienced writers, had strong skills, looked forward to the challenges of FYC, and enjoyed writing. Writing ability was a powerful indicator of student choice, with it influencing 100.7% of choice for BW students, and 100.0 percent of choice for FYC students. Remember that the percentages will total more than 100 percent because students often gave multiple reasons for their

choices.

As could be expected, the category of *writing performance* also showed differences between the BW and FYC students. I scored performance as a composite of both performance indicators and test scores. The BW students saw themselves as weak performers in high school and they reported having low test scores, while the FYC students saw themselves as strong performers with high test scores. Writing performance accounted for 19.5% of the BW students' choices, and 18.8% of the FYC students' choices.

Students' scores also indicated differences in terms of *pragmatic concerns*. The BW students wanted an easier class, were told to take BW, or chose the course because it fit into their schedules. In comparison, the FYC students recognized that the BW course doesn't carry credit, costs too much, takes additional time, and they have to take FYC even if they pass BW. These issues drove course choices for 37.5% of the BW students and 85.8% of the FYC students, in itself a difference. The FYC students were far more influenced by pragmatic concerns than the BW students were.

Finally, although this last category of students' answers, *individual concerns*, accounts for the smallest amount of variance between students, it is nonetheless important because it demonstrates the ability of directed self-placement to address concerns that would be invalid in determining placement. The BW students in this category knew they were already strong writers when they chose to take the course, and several students elected to take BW after already successfully passing FYC for review after being out of school for a period of time. The FYC students liked the course description, found the

pamphlet confusing, and decided that the course required fewer papers. Here the numbers show that individual concerns affect BW students more than FYC students, with 12.5% of the BW students influenced by these concerns, and 4.5% of the FYC students influenced by them.

Below is a table which shows how the students responded to the question of why those chose BW or FYC. As Reynolds previously indicated, students' perceptions of writing ability do play a role in their choices, but as my data show, they also use many other criteria for their selection of courses, as Cornell and Newton, along with Royer and Gilles suggested they would. Thus, we can perceive course selection, not as an either/or proposition driven by perceived writing ability or lack thereof, but as a quite complex and individual decision, with multiple factors playing a role in determining outcomes, factors which are, or at least can be, different for BW and FYC students.

BW		FYC	
Lack of Skills	49.2 %	Strong Skills	18.8 %
Need Help with Writing	35.9 %	Want Writing Challenge	25.9 %
Lack Writing Experience	14.0 %	Experienced Writers	48.2 %
Learning Disabled	1.6 %	Enjoy Writing	7.1 %

Table. 4.2. BW and FYC Differences in Perceived Writing Ability.

As you can see from the table above, one of the most interesting aspects of this finding is that as student experiences with writing increase, their confidence in their ability to write increases, and their sense of themselves as having strong writing skills also increases. In comparison, those students without much experience in writing perceive of themselves as lacking writing skills and needing help with their writing. What this study

does not tell us is whether or not the BW students' perceived lack of writing skills leads them to take classes in high school that require less writing or whether it is the lack of writing that leads them to perceive a lack of skills.

We can see the same kind of differences if we look at students' perceptions of their writing performances. The BW students note that their performances are weak (10.9 %) and their test scores low (8.6 %), while the FYC students compare their performances to the criteria on GVSU's placement materials and believe their performances are more than adequate (16.5 %), their test scores high enough to warrant being in FYC (2.3 %).

BW		FYC	
Weak Performance	10.9%	Strong Performance	16.5%
Low Test Scores	8.6%	High Test Scores	2.3%

Table 4.3. Student Perceptions of Writing Performance.

One interesting set of questions this finding raises is why the FYC students were so disinterested in their test scores, while so few BW students were concerned about their low test scores. In both cases, it appears that students were more aware of and took into greater account their actual writing performances in class writing tasks than they were of their ACT scores, even though most students had taken the ACT and were aware of their test scores. It's possible that the focus on writing ability in placement materials has affected this set of survey responses. Performance accounts for 19.5% of BW students' choices, and 18.8% of FYC students' choices.

Differences between BW and FYC students exist in terms of the types of pragmatic concerns these students have, as can be seen in the table below.

BW		FYC	
Want Easy Class	17.2 %	BW No Credit	57.6 %
Told to Take BW	17.2 %	BW Costs Too Much	15.3 %
Time	3.1 %	Time	3.5 %
		FYC Required	9.4 %

Table 4.4. Differences in Pragmatic Concerns for BW and FYC Students.

For the BW students their pragmatic concerns focused on their desire for an easier transition to college, doing what they were told to do, and the convenience of the times classes were available. The only concern they shared with the FYC students was times classes are available. Other than that, the FYC students primary concerns focused on the costs of their educations. Most of the FYC students would not even consider BW because of the costs (time and money) they associated with taking the class. The class doesn't gain college credit and they are still required to take FYC, so they would have to pay for two classes instead of one, a concern that seems a great deal less bothersome to the BW students. Pragmatic concerns influence FYC students much more than they influence BW students. This study isn't able to say why that is so, but it may reflect FYC students' desires to complete college and get into the job market rapidly and successfully, because the category items suggest that this may be the case. That may make pragmatic concerns an important category for retention specialists to investigate further, even though it has appeared to be irrelevant in prior placement studies, most of which only considered writing ability when determining placement.

We see a reflection of the findings of Royer and Gilles that some non-BW students would enjoy taking the BW class in the individual concerns category shown in Table 4.5

below.

BW		FYC	
Strong Writer	9.4%	Liked Course Descriptions	2.3%
I Want a Review	3.1%	Pamphlet Was Confusing	1.1%
		FYC Has Fewer Papers	1.1%

Table 4.5. Differences in Individual Concerns for BW and FYC Students.

Here several BW students indicate that they are strong writers (9.4 %) and others that they were taking the class as a review after successfully completing FYC (3.1 %). While the FYC students took the class for the following individual reasons: because the course description appealed to them (2.3 %), because the pamphlet was confusing to them (1.1 %) and because "English 150 has fewer papers than ENG 098 and I hate writing papers" (1.1 %). More BW students have declared that they have individual concerns than FYC students, and their concerns seem more substantive than the concerns voiced by the FYC students.

BW and FYC Students Report Influences (Survey Data)

My third question asked students to tell me who or what had influenced their decisions to take BW or FYC. Most of the students in both BW and FYC were influenced in making their decisions about which course to take. These results are in contradiction to Reynolds' claim that the students were not influenced. A complete listing of students' responses is available in Appendix C. Following is a table which compares whether BW and FYC students were influenced or not influenced, as well as how being male or female changed whether or not they were influenced.

N = 149		Influenced		Not Influenced	
		Male	Female	Male	Female
BW	(64 Students)	55.2 %	61.3 %	44.8 %	38.7 %
FYC	(85 Students)	59.1 %	70.4 %	40.9 %	29.6 %

Table 4.6. BW and FYC Students Reports of Influence vs Non-Influence.

The data in this study demonstrate that whether students are male or female, and whether they are in BW or FYC, the majority of students in both classes report that they were influenced in making their decisions. The female students reported more influences than the males did in both BW and FYC. The difference that appears to be significant between females who reported being influenced in BW vs those in FYC is likely however, to be a result of the greater number of females in that course and not due to any difference between those female students. Taken together, 63.8 % of the 149 students surveyed said they had been influenced in some way, a much larger percentage than the 36.2 % who said they were not influenced. But were BW and FYC students influenced in similar ways or are there differences in how they were influenced and by whom?

Again when we get into the details, there are differences between the BW students and the FYC students. They differ in terms of the types of advice they received, the people they went to for advice, and the consistency of the advice they received. Each group of students received advice from GVSU (placement materials, faculty at orientation, peer helpers at orientation), family, friends, peers, and high school teachers/advisors. I simplified the categories into GVSU, Family, and Advisors. The type of advice received from these three groups was usually framed as expectations that students should take or not take one of the two classes, BW or FYC.

As can be seen in the following table, the advice BW students received is usually consistent with their course choice, as 80% of advice pointed toward their taking BW, and only 20% suggesting that they take FYC. However, although the advice received from

BW Students N = 49	Take BW	Take FYC
Family 55.1 %	17	10
GVSU 36.7 %	18	0
Advisors 8.2 %	4	0

Table 4.7. BW Students Receive Advice (Rank Ordered by Percent).

family is inconsistent, it accounts for the majority of advice received by BW students. Out of a total of 49 pieces of advice received by BW students, 27 pieces came from family (55.1%). The students received 36.7 % of the advice from GVSU and only 8.2 % of the advice from advisors. Obviously, BW students do not always listen to the advice from family, friends, and peers, because, although 20 % of the advice the students received suggested that they should take FYC instead of BW, those students receiving that advice nonetheless enrolled in a BW class, following the recommendations of GVSU and their high school advisors. BW students, while able to defy family advice to take FYC, were less able to resist the authority of GVSU and their high school advisors. We can hear that in their choice of words to describe their impressions of advice they received from these sources. Several students said that "the GVSU pamphlet scared me into taking 098," and others indicated that they took BW because GVSU or their advisor from high school recommended that they take it; thus, even if they were unsure about which course they should take, and even when their families had argued that they should take FYC, this group of students were more likely to listen to the authorities' suggestions about where

they might belong. This correlates well with previous information from this group which suggests that these students have lower perceived writing ability and lower perceived writing performance, different pragmatic concerns and different individual concerns than FYC students.

In addition, we can observe that the amount of advice students in BW received from family is significantly different than that received from GVSU, and that received from advisors is significantly different than that received from either family or GVSU. Similar findings occurred with the FYC students. If we count the total number of attempts to influence the FYC students there were 95 of them, 47 from family (49.5 %), 25 from GVSU (26.3 %), and 23 from advisors (24.2 %). In the table below it becomes easy to see how different the advice received by BW and FYC students was.

	BW Students	FYC Students
Family	55.1 %	49.5 %
GVSU	36.7 %	26.3 %
Advisors	8.2 %	24.2 %

Table 4.8. BW vs FYC Students: Advice from Family, GVSU, and Advisors.

We can see from Table 4.8 that BW students receive a great deal of their advice from their families, less from GVSU, and a great deal less from high school advisors. In comparison, while FYC students still receive most of their advice from their families, the advice they receive from their high school advisors is nearly equivalent to that which they receive from GVSU. For FYC students, families lose 5.6 % of the influence, GVSU loses 10.4 % of the influence, and advisors gain 16 % more influence than those groups had for the BW students. For whatever reasons, BW students do not seek advice from their

high school advisors to anywhere near the degree to which advice is sought by FYC students from advisors in high school.

As you can see in Appendix C, and below in a table of advice received by FYC students there were a number of different kinds of advice given to FYC students, but, in general, student choices were more consistent with the advice they received than was true of BW students. The BW student choices were consistent with advice they received only

FYC Students N = 95	Take FYC	Take BW
Family 49.5 %	46	1
GVSU 26.3 %	21	4
Advisors 24.2 %	22	1

Table 4.9. FYC Students Receive Advice (Rank Ordered by Percent).

80% of the time, whereas the vast majority of advice received by FYC students (94%) supported their course choice, whether it was from family, GVSU, or high school advisors.

Additionally, students in both BW and FYC received quite positive advice. These

Students	BW Students	FYC Students
Take BW	39	6
Don't Take BW		24
Take FYC	10	65
Don't Take FYC		

Table 4.10. Comparison of Advice Received by BW vs FYC Students.

students received the majority of advice supporting the decisions they made, or actually believing they could do better than their choices indicated in the case of the BW students. Even when they received advice in opposition to their choices, students seemed able to

perceive that advice positively. The BW students received advice that suggested that their families often think they are even smarter than their choice indicated, while the FYC students seemed quite proud of themselves when they ignored advice to take BW and chose the FYC course instead and they saw that choice as evidence of their strength as students..

Analysis of Differences Between BW and FYC Students

The BW students and FYC students both reported their choices of course in response to the first question. The only difference noticeable here was just the fact of choosing different courses when given the choice to do so. But as soon as I began to read the students' responses to question two, the differences began to pop up.

The BW students reported a lack of skills, of experience, the need for more help with their writing, a wish for an easier class, an awareness that in part they took the class because someone else told them to; and, in general, their visions of themselves as writers, as students, and even as adults able to make their own decisions were less mature than the visions FYC students had of themselves. These students seem far less sure about what it is a college student needs to do in a writing class and whether or not they are capable of doing that. There were exceptions—students who knew exactly what they were doing when they enrolled in BW—but they were the minority. The majority expressed their reasons for taking BW in terms, not of what they could do, but in terms of lack. Their expressions in terms of lack may be a factor of the type of questions they answered about themselves as writers in the GVSU placement materials. These materials are reproduced in Appendix B.

The placement questions were designed to flag students who had done little writing, who had trouble with grammar, punctuation, and spelling, who were poor readers or who disliked reading, who were unfamiliar with using computers to write, revise, and edit their writing, or who lacked confidence in their writing. It was clear from reading the placement materials that those students who fit into this group of students, due to what they believed they couldn't do or hadn't done, were already perceived by the college to be in an inferior position, a lesser space, among those students who hadn't fit in high school, who hadn't done what students should have done to enter college. There were almost no answers they could give which would allow the BW students to feel good about themselves and prepared for writing in college.

In contrast, the FYC students were able to answer "yes" to most of the placement questions they were asked. Their ACT scores were higher; their experiences with writing allowed them to say that they had written several essays a year; they either liked to read or felt comfortable with reading; they weren't asked about problems with grammar, spelling, or punctuation; and they were more likely to have used computers in writing, revising and editing their papers. As a result, the FYC students evidenced a stronger sense of their ability to utilize the available information they had to make a reasoned decision about which course to take. The FYC students also received positive reinforcement because the information they had to base their decisions on were obviously the preferred answers the university sought. This increased FYC students' self-confidence and allowed the FYC students to handle and deal with advice which was considerably more complex than that received by BW students. They also were able to deal with various groups offering

advice more selectively, ignoring them when that seemed like a reasonable thing to do, seeking advice from them when appropriate, and in those ways they demonstrated a quite mature approach to the decision-making required of them as they entered the world of college writing courses.

The students' responses to the second question about the reasons for their choices was a good predictor of the kinds of responses the BW and FYC students would then report about the influences they'd received from others. The lack of confidence in their ability to perform writing at the college level affected how BW students responded to their families, to the GVSU placement materials, and to their high school advisors. They were, for the most part, simply obedient to what they may have seen as a command that they take BW when it was only suggested as an advised choice. And they obeyed, even when family suggested that they could handle FYC. We can hear their lack of confidence in their belief that "GVSU said that ENG 150 is too hard for freshmen;" that a "GVSU prof said to take 098, that 150 is too hard." It appears that they saw this advice as a command rather than indicating a choice they had, a choice that was clear to almost all the FYC students.

Even though faculty at orientation worked very hard to create a picture of BW as a friendly place where BW students were going to be supported and helped to succeed, the BW students lack of trust is likely to affect their interaction with their professor in their BW class. At risk students are most likely to succeed if they are willing to seek help with their writing from their professor, from the writing center, from other students. But students who do not trust those sources to actually help them may be particularly reluctant

to seek the help they need. If there are differences of race and class between professor and student, in addition to the normal differences between professor and student (the difference between expert and novice, for instance), it may be even more difficult for students to trust their professors and other supportive folks who would be glad to give help if it were asked for.

In addition, their reluctance to seek advice from high school advisors indicates that many BW students enter college with a previously difficult relationship with teachers and advisors that created a lack of trust that isn't simply based on their newness to college, but based on a long history of school encounters that have left students with an overall negative impression about educators in general. All of us have heard those horror stories about high school faculty who have thought it their sworn duty to tell their students that they do not believe those students have the remotest potential to succeed in high school, in college, or in life itself. Some students have also come from life circumstances where the greatest probability for students their ages is that they would end up dead or in jail or prison. Others come from circumstances of enormous poverty and the likelihood that they will end up in that poverty themselves, no matter how hard they might work in school. Clearly, this is not the case for all of our students, but it is the case for enough of them that we may need to take this into greater consideration when we are designing BW curriculum.

For many of our students, the advice from their families to take FYC may be what allows them to face BW, and take the risk that they might fail. Even though they ignore that advice, it may provide these students with the family support and belief in their

abilities to succeed that the students need to overcome their fears and their lack of trust in the system of education they will encounter in college. The BW course may thus be a mechanism which lowers the degree of risk for some BW students who find there a place of safety in which they can grow as writers and as people as they gradually learn to trust that folks in college do not want to hurt them or make them fail. For other students who perceive the BW course as an indicator of their lack of ability to write well enough to ever succeed at a regular FYC course being placed in BW may actually harm them, ultimately proving to them that they were right and failure is the only likely outcome of their attempt to succeed in college. These emotional responses to BW and to identification as a basic writer may be directly connected to prior writing performances, or they may be independent of them. But only a hint of these emotional effects on student outcomes and student retention can be obtained from a quantitative inquiry into influences on students' choices. It is only when they are free to make more extended statements about those influences that students can include the emotional impact of the decisions they are making.

Detailed Reports of Student Statements About People Who Influenced Them

When we merely examine students' statements using averaging techniques we lost a tremendous amount of important information that the emotional responses of BW students only hint at. In the actual statements students have made on their surveys, much of the decision-making process comes alive and we can hear the emotional responses students, families, GVSU, and advisors have to BW and FYC. For both courses, the most emotional responses come from family, friends, and peers. The words the students used help us to visualize the process by which influence is applied to the decisions they

have made, to their responses to that advice, and the intensity of emotion roused by the decision making process. Listen to just a few of the words that I've culled from their statements which are available in their entirety in Figures 4.1 and 4.2. in Appendix C: "they urged me," "college is tuff," "more pressures for grades," "tried to talk me out of it," "thought I should have," "scared me," "eased transition," "I could get behind," "it's more challenging," "I refused to do that," "go for the hard course," "I hate English," "waste of time and money, no credit, doesn't count," "GVSU is ONLY out for my $ and nothing else," "mom said I can do it."

In these statements one can hear not just ability as a determining factor, but a whole gamut of emotions and personality differences in response to the process of choosing a course: determination— "it's more challenging," trust— "mom said I can do it," fear — "scared me," distrust— "GVSU is ONLY out for my $ and nothing else," competitive spirit— "more pressure for judgment," independent judgment— "I refused to do that," hatred— "I hate English," concern— "I could get behind." The information in this section indicates that the process of course selection is not based solely on one's writing ability, but is far more complex than that, both within the student and with the numerous kinds of, and sometimes competing, advice students must attempt to coordinate as they go through orientation and commit a choice through enrolling in a writing class. So, although students do, as Reynolds suggests, use their writing ability to determine which course to choose for fall term in their first year at college, that information is amplified, contrasted, shaped, and contested, even contradicted both from within the person and from influences outside the person. It is, simply, not that simple.

Analysis of Directed Self-Placement Decision Making

Writing Ability and Performance as Predictors of Student Choices

In her research, Reynolds stated that students would make their determination of composition course choices between BW and FYC based on their actual writing ability. Royer and Gilles stated that students would base decisions on more pragmatic concerns which might ignore writing ability. Cornell and Newton argue that students do about as well regardless of course choice; however, choice still matters because students have personal, individual needs that cannot be measured by any of the testing processes we have. My study supports all of those conclusions, but goes significantly beyond them by showing that all of those previously identified factors are operating simultaneously, interactively, and mutually influencing the process by which students choose between BW and FYC. My study also shows that an underlayment of emotion also affects how students make their decisions; that BW students vary significantly from FYC students in how and why they make their decisions, relying on different information, different influences, and suggesting that these groups of students respond to the choice process from a very different emotional/intellectual basis.

A substantial number of BW and FYC students did base their choices on writing ability; however my study adds to our understanding of how students arrive at their conclusions about their writing ability. This is the first place where it became obvious to me that BW and FYC students base their thinking about their writing on different premises about writing. The model the BW students primarily used is a negative model of lack. These students surveyed their prior experiences as the GVSU placement materials

suggested they should and with rare exceptions they saw themselves as lacking everything one might need to be a good writer. They lacked experience with writing, computer ability, the conventions of academic writing, experience with reading. Basing their conclusions on GVSU materials they believed they were incapable of writing adequately and would need help with their writing.

In comparison, the model of writing used by the FYC students allowed them to see themselves as more than adequate writers. They could look at their test scores on the ACT, their high school grades, their many mostly positive experiences as writers, the affirmations of their high school teachers and advisors, their good grades in high school, their ability to seek challenging writing assignments, and the fact that they matched most of GVSU's criteria on their pamphlet, and after reviewing all these items they could conclude that they were well matched to the writing tasks they would face in college. The model the FYC students were exposed to and based their thinking about their writing ability on was, therefore, a positive model.

From seeing these differences one might then conclude that the FYC students have enormous advantages over the BW students. Although this might be true, in general, the fact is that both BW and FYC students fail their courses. We could see that in Cornell and Newton's longitudinal study of BW and FYC students, particularly their finding that "at risk" students are actually spread throughout the entire student body instead of being isolated at the lower end of the BW spectrum. Those students "at risk" need help with their writing no matter how well they have performed on indicators like tests and prior performance. The old way of thinking about student placement would have led to the

automatic assumption that some glitch in the placement testing had allowed some poorly performing students to slide through undetected. But the directed self-placement model suggests that students throughout the student body, regardless of their writing ability, may need extra help with their writing to succeed in college writing classes.

The BW students may need help with envisioning themselves as capable writers. They may need help with their emotional responses to writing and reading assignments. The FYC students may be OK with the actual writing, until they encounter a teacher with a highly developed critical sense who gives almost no A's, only a few B's, and a great many C's, D's, and F's. At that point their self-confidence may disappear and they may disappear along with it, no longer coming to class, no longer finishing assignments, and therefore failing by attrition. Other FYC students with tons of self-confidence, and lots of writing ability, may do well for the first few weeks until they begin to get homesick, or until they join a fraternity or sorority and start partying, or until their homework in other classes begins to bury them in stress.

Cornell and Newton's finding that writing ability alone isn't enough to guarantee student success in their writing classes helps us to note that many factors contribute to student success and to student failure, whether students are BW students or FYC students. The factors that help one student succeed may actually push another student to fail, so the probability is that, the more we study our BW and FYC students, the more we are likely to discover just how much success or failure are based, not on writing ability, but on emotional competence, maturity, and other non-writing-skill issues that are personal and different between students within BW and within FYC as well as between

BW and FYC.

Pragmatic Concerns as a Predictor of Student Choices

Students' pragmatic concerns were also obvious and strong predictors of decision making in both BW and FYC students, although, again, there were substantive differences between the two groups of students. Each group reflected quite different kinds of pragmatic concerns. BW students wanted a course that fit their schedules, met their desire for an easier course, and followed advice about the course GVSU believed they should take, hesitant to even consider defying what they often saw as a directive to take BW, although it was actually only a suggestion and some students did ignore that suggestion and take FYC.

FYC students were considerably more independent in their decision making and saw challenges as something positive; whereas, the BW students were more easily intimidated by the same types of challenges. FYC students refused even to consider BW because it didn't meet their pragmatic needs. It took an extra term, cost more financially, didn't count toward graduation, and the students couldn't see any real advantages they would accrue from taking BW. FYC met their practical needs to minimize time, costs, and get their degrees completed as rapidly as possible.

Individual and Personal Needs as Predictors of Student Choices

Trust and other emotional issues played distinctly different roles for BW and FYC students. BW students were affected by a combination of lack of trust in their own abilities and fear of failure as they made their decisions. At the same time, FYC students tended to trust in their own writing ability and in their ability to make a good decisions for

themselves using the information they had about the courses they could choose from. Trust also played a large role in determining what use students from both groups made of the influences who tried to steer them toward certain options and away from other options. Again, how BW and FYC students responded to those who tried to influence them was substantially different.

In addition, there were other personal and individual needs students from both groups used to make their decisions. Some students were carrying a heavy course load and wanted a writing class that was easier. Some students took into consideration the times they were working and sought a writing class that fit into their work schedules. Some students were parents and needed to take into consideration their children's needs. Being able to attend to the needs of all the important parts of one's life can play a powerful role in determining how successful our students will be. Dissatisfaction with one's learning will occur if students cannot take time off from classes to nurse a sick child, attend a mandatory meeting at work, or otherwise fulfill their adult obligations.

Of course, at times, there is an overlap between personal and pragmatic needs. It is a personal issue to be learning disabled, but it is simultaneously pragmatic to find a teacher who has expertise in teaching learning disabled students, for example. This overlapping of scholarly, pragmatic, and personal needs is the prime source of the complexity that students encounter when they are selecting between BW and FYC, and a good choice can smooth the way for satisfaction with one's school life.

Influences on Decision Making

When it came to examining influences on student course choices, important

similarities as well as important differences exist between BW and FYC students. Both groups of students seek advice and recall advice from their families significantly more than from any other source, including the advice given in GVSU's placement materials and by high school advisors. However, the BW students conform to the advice given by GVSU and, for the most part, do not seek advice from high school advisors, while the FYC students occasionally defy the advice from GVSU, and seek and listen seriously to advice from their high school advisors. Trust and self-confidence play a role in determining these outcomes. The BW students tend to lack trust in their own judgment, in the judgments of their families, trust the judgment of GVSU even when they resent it, and do not trust their high school advisors. In contrast, the FYC students trust their own judgment even when it contradicts that of professionals advising them, trust their families, trust their high school advisors, and demonstrate a lack of trust in GVSU stemming from a, largely mistaken, belief that students do not need BW and that GVSU only wants students to take that course to make more money. This perception appears to be fostered by family members and high school teachers and advisors who tell students that BW is a waste of time and money.

Overall Impression of Directed Self-Placement

Directed self-placement at this time appears to be the only placement method which is able to allow for the **complex locus of needs** (academic, pragmatic, and personal) that intersect, not in a placement test, but in the individual. Directed self-placement at GVSU was well-conceived and is being run effectively. The personal choice of writing courses that it fosters makes it possible for students to attend to the full complex locus of

needs they have for an academic course that fits their needs as writers in an academic setting, that fits their pragmatic needs for a class that fits into their schedules and the demands of other parts of their lives, and that fits more personal and individual needs particular to each student. Directed self-placement allows students to be treated like the adult decision makers they are rather than like children being told what to do, while it is also able to respond sensitively to the emotional undertones of students' individual and personal needs in ways that were completely ignored by prior placement methods.

Although there could still be improvements made, directed self-placement is nonetheless a placement program that is far superior to the placement testing system it replaces. Directed self-placement gains its superiority through its attentiveness to the notion of students as individuals, not as identical categorized clones who think, act, and respond to stimuli alike. If the pedagogies provoked in response to directed self-placement live up to their promise as well, if they, too, do a better job of responding to the individualized needs of student writers of all kinds, the balance between students who succeed in writing classes and those who fail may be tipped in a far more positive direction.

Chapter Five Discussion and Implications

Discussion

In Chapters One and Two it became more and more clear that when we stop focusing on placement, and begin to focus on pedagogy, we are doing ourselves and our students a favor, because we are discovering that placement plays only a small role in determining student success and student retention. This study continues to add to the body of information that supports the claims made by other researchers who have determined that students are the best source of decisions regarding which writing course is best for them. In my study, it is also the case that students are the best source of their own decision making, because they make those decisions based on a complex set of factors that placement testing doesn't begin to address, the complex locus of needs that intersect only in the individual: academic needs, pragmatic needs, and personal needs.

The details available in my study answer important questions raised by previous studies. Reynolds found that most students do use writing ability when making their decisions, but if this is the case why didn't using placement testing place students adequately? Royer and Gilles found that some students actually chose placements that are contraindicated by writing ability, but is this true for many students or only a small number of them? Cornell and Newton found that students have personal and individual needs students that can't be indicated by the use of placement testing, but their research wasn't able to answer the question, which personal and individual needs?

Because I used methods different from those employed in previous studies, my

results differed from the results of those studies, primarily in terms of the range of results and details which had previously only been articulated in the Royer and Gilles study, but now are available from many more students. My study discovered that there are (at least) three components of the decision making process: 1) students' prior writing experiences as articulated in the placement materials; 2) students' and their families' pragmatic concerns such as costs and whether or not a course counts for credit; and 3) students' and their families' personal and individual needs such as work schedules, family needs, and desires to ease into college level writing. My study found that all three components are at work in combination with one another and somewhat different from student to student. In addition, I discovered that the rationales given by students in the basic writing course differ enormously from those given by the students in the regular first year composition class, as do the influences on their decisions.

Taken together, these results suggest that giving students the choice of classes is very important because the traditional placement methods are incapable of sorting out students in the same way they would sort themselves. Actual writing ability seems to be less important than how students think about their writing ability. Pragmatic concerns push one group of students to take it easy and the other to rush forward. And the personal and individual needs can be met only by following what the student feels is the right course of action. It is possible that success is more likely for students who sort out where they belong and follow that determination regardless of any objective measurement of writing ability, than it would be for students who just do what they are told and take a course which does not meet their academic, pragmatic, or personal needs.

Survey Aspects of Study

My study of directed self-placement responded primarily to three studies already done which examined directed self-placement. My findings extend the conclusions reached in those earlier studies, adding dimensions that enrich our understanding of the rationales students use for making decisions about whether to take BW or FYC.

Writing Ability as a Determinant of Choice

My study asked students why they selected their writing course with an open-ended question which allowed them to respond with any reasons they had. They replied that they had used their writing ability to determine which course to take. My analysis of students' reasons found that writing ability is not a simple factor; however, but a complex factor which consists of both perceived ability and performance, each of which are also complex factors which are different for BW students than they are for FYC students.

My open-ended questions elicited a response that indicated the majority of students in both BW and FYC groups responded that they had been influenced by others, and also by considerations such as the costs (time and money) of taking the BW course, the fact that the BW course was a no-credit class, their desire to ease into college, the challenges the FYC class presented, the fact that their baseball coach said to take the BW course, the time the class they chose was available, and the number of papers they would have to write. In addition, my study demonstrated that the BW and FYC students gave substantially different answers to the question of who and what influenced them. Both groups were most heavily influenced by family and friends, but the BW students were more influenced by GVSU's placement materials and personnel than the FYC students,

and the FYC students were more influenced by their high school teachers and advisors than the BW students. These results are shown in graphs in the previous chapter and in even more detail in Appendix B.

As we have seen above, both BW and FYC students had multiple reasons to take, or not to take, the courses available to them. Some of their reasons were based on ability, and some were based on more pragmatic concerns and personal, quite individual needs. This supports the studies done by Royer and Gilles, and also by Cornell and Newton, that suggested that American pragmatism (Royer and Gilles "D-S-P: An Attitude" 14) and complex individual and personal needs (Cornell and Newton "Choosing" 11; "The Case" 1-44) were additional underlying motivators pushing student choices. The reasons students gave for their choices, the fact of multiple kinds of influences, led to the conclusion that if it was practical to make one choice rather than the other, that is what students did. That allowed a variety of their needs rather than just writing ability to determine their choices.

Reynolds also studied gender influences on placement and found that females placed themselves in the FYC course at a ratio of 2:1 over males. I, too, found a disproportionate number of females to males in the FYC course. In the BW course the ratio of males to females was approximately 1:1, while in the FYC class the ratio was 2.5:1 with the females being the larger number of students. However, Reynolds surveyed a large student population to arrive at her conclusions, while I only used a small sample of the 3000 students (N=149), and do not feel confident that my figures are a true and valid representation of the total student population in BW and FYC at GVSU. So it would

probably be a mistake to take my figures and use them to support Reynolds' findings.

Belmont University found that students are satisfied with directed self-placement, that students perceive the placement information as helpful, but their most significant discovery was that when writing support classes specifically connected to writing and to other content classes are offered, and when they are not identified as "basic writing" courses, they become extremely popular, not only for BW students taking FYC, but also for 2nd term composition, sophomore literature, and advanced discipline content courses (Sims and Pinter "Adapting" 6-7). I did not base my study on Sims' and Pinter's specific claims, although they are compelling, because GVSU does not have that kind of course offering; however, my findings that students and their families often refuse to consider the BW course because it is not for credit and thus perceived as imposing an unreasonable cost in time and money, would suggest that if GVSU were to offer writing support classes available to all students which were for credit and not directly linked to basic writing, there may be a significant number of students throughout the institution who would be interested in taking that course or those courses.

In Sims and Pinter's discussion of the outcomes of those classes their popularity suggests that the students are benefitting from taking them with improved writing, and improved grades as well. This would also tend to reflect Cornell and Newton's findings that students who need additional support are not located in specific groups based on ACT or SAT scores, but throughout the college population from those students scoring at the lower end of those tests to those students scoring at the higher end— a finding also present at schools such as the U of M whose students still need writing assistance even

though they have very high average ACT and SAT scores.

Qualitative Aspects of Study

My observations of the placement process conducted at orientation found that the process seems to work quite well for the majority of students. Further investigation of the degree to which students at the end of the enrollment process face reduced options to take FYC may improve student satisfaction with the process, but of course that must be balanced against the needs of the institution and the limitations of available teachers.

The most interesting and useful information I acquired during my observations came from informal conversations with several writing teachers. I found them to be very interested in directed self-placement from a pedagogical perspective, and they had important insights which were not the purview of this study but which could reasonably form the basis for another study. In addition to concerns about the linkage between placement and pedagogy, they were also interested in the link with their Writing Center and its practices which they felt were excellent and very supportive of the basic writing students and of themselves as teachers. We do need to document success when and where we find it.

Speculative Theory

Speculating about what might make the program work better, I would cite the influence of family members and friends, and suggest that some of their concerns be addressed in the placement materials sent to students, especially the fact that BW is a no-credit class. For students in both BW and FYC, the pressure to take FYC to get credit and save money is intense according to the study results, and while some students were

able to resist that pressure and take WP, others who needed that course probably avoided it due to the lack of credit and additional expenses. The orientation materials should also include the fact that students can take BW and have it paid for by Pell grants, even though it is a non-credit class. Cost for some students was also a time factor and they avoided BW because it didn't contribute toward their progress toward their degrees, costing them time, but not rewarding that time with college credit. Again, both students and parents voiced significant concerns about cost as a factor in their decisions about which course to take.

The orientation materials should also be reviewed and rewritten to accomplish three additional goals:

1) The description of the BW course needs to identify specific ways by which the course prepares students for Strategies in Writing, the FYC course. When students and their parents are already concerned about costs, the lack of those specific preparations may allow some people to conclude that it really is a do-nothing course that only is there to allow GVSU to make more money, as one of the students said, and many others inferred.

2) The emphasis on the mastery of the rules of spelling, grammar, punctuation, and usage in the "Which Course Should I Take?" list and the description of BW needs to be reduced and perhaps replaced by a statement about learning to manage and reduce errors in general using the Writing Center, spell check, grammar check, and other kinds of tools available to students. Revising those descriptions is especially important for ESL, learning disabled, and non-standard English speakers whose persistent problems with English often

cannot be eradicated, but they can be managed successfully to meet most of the kinds of writing situations those students will encounter in college and afterwards. Far too many of the BW students identified themselves as poor writers because they make surface errors when we know that all writers make errors, something the BW students quite obviously are not learning in high school. The way that section is written exacerbates students' lack of knowledge about what constitutes "good writing." But it also sets the BW students up for a loss of confidence, a further deterioration of trust in academia that is already low, because it often gives students absolutely nothing good to say about themselves as writers, and I know this is not the intention of the BW faculty at GVSU.

3) Increased attention needs to be paid in the description of BW to the development of critical thinking skills, analytical skills, and other truly foundational writing skills, such as using the library to conduct research, learning computer writing and research skills, determining which sources of information are scholarly and which are only popular— all those skills of discrimination and evaluative judgement that make it possible for students to use their own knowledge bases and to test and challenge their knowledge, as well as the "facts" and inferences claimed to be truth by others. Here, too, it needs to be emphasized that most BW students come to college with quite a considerable background in writing, even when they haven't done much of it on a formal basis, and that it is possible to build upon this foundation of existing skills.

Improving the placement materials could shift the weight of student choices toward FYC, but it could also make the BW course a much more attractive and less threatening option for students. I think it's worth the effort to pilot those changes to see

what would happen. It is clear from study results that BW students really need the option of a basic writing class, regardless of their ACT scores, for a variety of reasons. For students who are hesitant and afraid of going to college, BW provides a safe place to transition between high school and college. For students who need to learn to use the computer, library, and other college resources, BW offers them the opportunity to do so without the attendant grade concerns of FYC. For students who have heavy schedules at work or in sports, or demanding family obligations, WP gives them a little bit easier, and very critical to success, first semester. The results showed that even students who have already passed FYC will come back and take BW if they have been out of college for a while and want a refresher course. One student indicated that she took BW because she wanted the option of doing more writing because she loved to write. As Belmont's experience demonstrated, not only students in the lower quarter of the ACTs desire additional help with their writing. They found that students already beyond BW would gladly enroll in a writing support class.

Michigan State University's Fund for the Improvement of Post Secondary Education (FIPSE) pilot project with graduate students in the sciences showed that students right through the PhD often need help with aspects of writing which may be unfamiliar to them. In my experience working with graduate students in NSC 840 (Writing in the Sciences), whether I was working with native speakers of English or ESL students pursuing MA and PhD degrees in the natural sciences, almost invariably the help they needed the most was help with articulating what they already knew. We spent almost no time at all on surface errors, because those surface errors were nearly always

just indicators that the students weren't quite ready to talk about their studies with any degree of confidence.

A Writing TA in those classes, working with a professor who was an expert in content, I learned to ask questions, not about the surface errors, but about the ideas the students were trying to retrieve from their hands-on experimentation and translate into words. As our students' ability to articulate their thoughts on paper improved, their surface errors almost always were minimized to the point where they were not intrusive, or they disappeared entirely.

Mary Ann Sherby noted in her recent doctoral dissertation, "Through such participation [in learning the conventions of their discipline] over a period of time, they [students] acquire not only new skills and abilities, but they begin to identify with members of that discipline and to incorporate its discourse conventions and the viewpoints implied by them into their own identities" (Ch 1, p.2). Sherby's work and the work of the FIPSE project made it clear that writing support is necessary for students throughout the course of their educations, not just for first-year students. This attitude could help GVSU to revise their BW information to reflect that basic writing is not a course for people who "can't write," but a supportive writing environment for students who need or want it for many good reasons— including that they are taking very challenging courses which will push their writing skills beyond what they were previously able to handle.

Implications for Future Research

In thinking about future research on directed self-placement, the results of my study seem to indicate that methodology does make a difference and that richer data sets

are possible when the collection method is more focused on qualitative measures than on quantitative ones, although both give useful information. Interviewing might be one way to increase the amount of information as well as its quality, but interviewing is very time consuming and expensive, and doesn't always elicit the data the interviewee has. Another option to consider which could result in richer data sets with less time, money, and other expenses would be to ask students to compose narratives about the process of placing themselves into either basic writing or FYC courses. Researchers who use narrative need to be aware that all narrative accounts are to some degree fictitious, simply because there is a process of selection of and elimination of details that skews the accuracy of the accounts. However, because those accounts are based on actual events, whether they happened to the writer or to someone the writer knows or has heard about, they still provide us with excellent information. Narration can move a story a few degrees away from direct connection with the writer and this sometimes allows writers to tell truths they would never tell face-to-face in an interview situation.

In direct self-placement program evaluation, students could give the program directors much more information about the relationship of outside influences, about the students' responses to the placement materials sent to them, about how they make their decisions (Do they make them as soon as they receive the placement materials or wait until they are in the auditorium listening to the presentations?) and about the connection between their placement and their success in learning with the pedagogies in place. If they fail, do they fail because the placement was incorrect, because the course wasn't well taught, because they were working two jobs and couldn't get their homework done,

because they lived in Jenison and it was winter term and they were pounded with tons of lake effect snow and couldn't make it to class, because they were smitten by someone who disappointed them, because the emphasis on spelling, grammar, punctuation, and usage conflicted with their learning disability. If they succeed, why do they succeed? What is the teacher doing that works? How has placement made success possible for them? Which assignments did they have that they liked, that they learned from, that they despised, or that frustrated them but they loved the assignment and think everybody should have that assignment? In narratives, students not only can talk about what is but also about how things are connected to one another, about why they do what they do, and they can reveal in interesting, funny, tragic, and profound ways how complex they are, as well as how who they are and the contexts of their lives affects their learning processes.

Because I gave the students I surveyed carte blanche to tell me instead of forcing them into what I believed they were, or should be, I learned about factors influencing their decision making processes that I would not have learned if I had employed quantitative measures. Many of our students are border crossers, living hybrid lives like so many before them, as they cross from blue collar families to the academic and professional worlds their parents were not privileged to aspire to, or aspired to, but were unable to achieve. Years ago (1955), in an article titled "Teaching All the Children of All the People," published in *College English*, Alfred Grommon talked about teaching students from backgrounds unlike those of most academics, kids from the working class, and he said we really don't know them, but to teach them, we need to find out who they are (348-355). The only way to find out who they are is to ask them. Both postcolonial

studies (Bhabha, Spivak, Trihn, for example) and Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's rhizome metaphor suggest that our students are more complex, more individual, than we might assume if we didn't ask them who they are and what they want and need from their educations. This study was able to elicit data which suggests how complex our students might actually be, but it is only a baby step toward the goal of serving our students' needs better and affirming the possibility of their success to them, to ourselves, and to the communities we live in and serve through improved placement and teaching practices.

Directed Self-Placement Programs fulfill their promise to result in better placement practices, but they also lead us to an understanding of how essential pedagogy is in creating courses that are responsive to our students' needs. This study strongly suggests that the students who chose the BW course are substantively different in many ways from those students who chose FYC. These substantive differences occur without regard to students' ACT scores, their high school GPAs, and other standard measurements, across them rather than in discreet categories those measurements could contain. The data from this study makes it obvious that there is no one-size-fits-all writing course for first year students, but that, instead, different students have quite different needs that can only be met by different writing courses. Perhaps later, in even better studies, we may find that even two courses, a BW course and a FYC course are not adequately individualized instruction for students whose need for help with their writing takes many shapes and forms challenging for any one writing teacher to address.

We have long known on an intuitive level that we are trying to teach many classes at one time with groups of adult learners who may be at nearly as many different places in

their abilities to write as there are learners in the class, who have very different writing problems, very different needs as writers. We have the student who can think just fine, but cannot format his papers, and another who can format a paper beautifully, but it is nearly empty of any meaningful content. We have the student who can't spell. And another who inserts capital letters randomly through her paper. Not to mention the student who uses colloquial language persistently and the ESL student who omits articles or puts them where they don't belong. But those are the little problems we have to deal with as writing teachers. The big problems include the woman student falling asleep at her desk who has just come from sitting up all night with a sick child. A missing student has been called home in the middle of the week because dad had a heart attack and the student is needed on the family farm. There is the immature student who hasn't quite got the knack yet for getting herself out of bed and into class on time, the student who is experimenting with alcohol and has come into class hung over almost every day all of the first semester, the student who is being harassed by a former boyfriend or girlfriend. Another student can barely read a newspaper at the fourth grade level, let alone read a psychology text.

When we thought placement actually worked to put almost all similar students together in classes, it was difficult to explain why our experiences as teachers didn't follow that model. We were teaching the same way for all the students in class, so why were they responding so differently to us? We also became aware that our students weren't the same in two classes with the same teacher and the same curriculum, as well as varying within each class.

Our growing awareness of student differences in our writing classes may continue to affect our writing curricula, as we stop trying to treat a class as a similar body learning the same lessons, at the same pace, with the same kinds of problems. We may need to learn to teach writing using a workshop style of instruction in which each student can be responded to as a unique person with unique gifts as a writer as well as unique issues to learn to control. But regardless of how we ultimately learn to respond to our "at risk" writers, one thing is certain. Directed self-placement is changing writing pedagogy as much as it is changing writing placement.

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APPENDIX A

INVITATION LETTER AND COPY OF SURVEY INSTRUMENT

GRAND VALLEY
STATE UNIVERSITY

1 CAMPUS DRIVE • ALLENDALE, MICHIGAN 49401-9403 • 616/895-6611

June 2, 2000

To Marcia Ribble from Dan Royer

I want express again my eagerness to do whatever I can here at Grand Valley to support you in this research project you are planning. Directed Self-Placement introduces a fascinating opportunity to investigate students sense of self-efficacy as well as other questions you have raised.

In that you simply want to talk with students and ask them about some of their educational experiences (as opposed to shocking them with electrodes or something), permission to conduct research here should be approved rather quickly. I don't anticipate any problems in this regard. We all will be eager to hear what students have to say about directed self-placement and their experience as they move through our four-year writing program.

I will be available throughout the summer to show you are campus, explain how orientation works, and let you observe some of our student orientation sessions.

Orientation for new students will be ongoing from now until August 10 (Monday through Thursday from 10:00 a.m. to 2:30 p.m.). Each session works with about fifty students.

Let me know when you'd like to come for a visit.

Sincerely,

Dan Royer
Assistant Professor of English

Survey of Reasons for Selecting ENG 098 or ENG 150 in GVSU's Directed Self-Placement Program

Up until very recently, researchers often proclaimed that they knew why students did what they did, but very few of them ever asked students what their actual reasons were. This study is an opportunity for students to participate in telling academic professionals why they have chosen between two courses, ENG 098 and ENG 150.

In answering the following questions, there are no "right" answers. Nor do answers have to be consistent— you can have competing reasons for the choices you make. Please be as honest as you can with your answers since they will help me, and others as well, to design better placement procedures that take into account your real thoughts, feelings, desires, and needs. Remember that your identity will be protected and not revealed in any written report, so you can freely reveal your thoughts about directed self-placement and your reasons for choosing ENG 098 or ENG 150. You can use the back side of this paper if you run out of room for your answers.

1. Which course did you choose? ENG 098 or ENG 150 (as your first choice)

2. Why did you decide to take ENG 098 or ENG 150?

3. Which people outside yourself influenced, or tried to influence, the choice you made? How did they try to influence you?

4. Did any non-person influences (like finances, or time constraints, jobs, family obligations, or times classes were available) affect your decision?

5. If you are willing to participate in more in-depth interviews please put your e-mail address at the bottom of this page.

Thank you for your participation in this study of directed self-placement.

APPENDIX B

GVSU ORIENTATION MATERIALS

GVSU Orientation Materials

Description of English 098 Writing with a Purpose

In ENG098, you will focus on writing in specific ways to reach specific audiences. You will write often in order to develop comfort and fluency as a writer. You will work on mastering the conventions of standard written English— spelling, grammar, punctuation, and usage.

In ENG 098, you will read essays written by professionals and by other students. In a typical class, you will write five or six short essays— about two to three pages each. You may cite some of the essays you have read or people you have interviewed, but generally you will not write research-based essays. Indeed, the purpose of ENG098 is to give you the confidence, organization, and command necessary to write the research-based essays demanded in ENG150 and beyond. (GVSU Pamphlet)

Description of English 150 Stategies in Writing

English 150 is a four-credit class focusing on academic writing, with a special emphasis on research-based writing. Instructors assume that students can summarize and analyze a variety of published material. They also assume that students have experience with narrative, descriptive, and persuasive writing. Students typically write five four-to-six page essays, at least two of which involve research. Students must earn a "C" or better in ENG 150 to satisfy the freshman writing requirement.

Half of all ENG 150 class meetings take place in a computer classroom. Each computer is connected to the library, the Internet, and electronic mail. ENG 150 instructors assume that students have a basic familiarity with computers and word processors. (GVSU Pamphlet)

Description of the Writing Portfolio

A portfolio is simply a collection of work. Many professionals use portfolios to show other people what they are capable of producing. In ENG 150, the majority of your final grade will be based on a portfolio of three finished pieces of writing that will represent your capabilities as a writer by the end of the term. You will choose the three essays from your semester's work. Each portfolio is read and evaluated by at least two ENG 150 teachers. As faculty members, they represent the academic audience for which you'll be writing in college. Because you need to create papers that capture and hold the attention of college educated readers, that present focused and supported ideas that challenge the intellect of such readers, and that conform to the general conventions of academic writing, we feel that basing final grades on the judgment of more than one reader is the most reliable way to evaluate student performance. You will get more details about this grading system on the first day of class. (GVSU Pamphlet)

Abilities Students Need to Demonstrate at End of SW

*read and discuss challenging material
*summarize and analyze what you've read
*conduct library research
*participate in writing workshops and conferences
*establish and maintain a single focus or thesis
*develop ideas with details, examples
*use transitions and other devices to guide readers
*cite and integrate ideas and information
*use style, tone, & sentence structure for strategic effect
*format and edit your writing (GVSU {Pamphlet)

List of Statements to Guide Which Course Students Should Take

Yes No I read newspapers and magazines regularly.
Yes No I read books for my own enjoyment.
Yes No I wrote several essays per year in high school.
Yes No I've used computers to write and revise essays.
Yes No My GPA was in the top 1/3 of my senior class.
Yes No My ACT-English score was above 21.
Yes No I consider myself a good reader and writer.
Yes No I am comfortable with the rules of grammar and punctuation.

Generally speaking, you are well-prepared for ENG150 if you have done quite a bit of reading and writing in high school. ENG 098, on the other hand, will help you to build confidence, giving you an opportunity to brush up on your basic writing skills and get prepared to do well in ENG 150.

If you answered "Yes" to many of the statements above, you are probably ready for ENG 150, if you don't think you are ready or for any reason wish to gain more practice at your basic writing skills, you should enroll in ENG 098.

Many students are ready to jump right in to ENG 150. If this is the case, you may take ENG 150 in either the Fall or the Winter semester. If you choose to begin with ENG 098, we suggest that you take it in the Fall semester and go ahead and enroll for ENG 150 for the Winter. (GVSU Pamphlet)

APPENDIX C

FIGURES 4.1 AND 4.2: INFLUENCES ON STUDENT DECISIONS

Figures 4.1. Influences on Basic Writing Students.

Students Advised to take BW (ENG 098) by people in the following groups
Families
my mom told me about ENG098
my mom and dad knew I didn't know how to write a good paper
parents and family wanted to know why I wanted to take 098
Mom and Dad urged me to take 098
parents told me it would get me ready for ENG150
parents, sibs, and relatives said college is tuff and taking easier courses would help me make the transition
father agreed that I should take 098
parents said take the class you're most confident in
my father said take 098 first
my parents said to go with 098
my parents thought 098 would be good
my parents tried to show me what to take
Friends and peers
a friend said to take 098
friends said 098 helped them
upperclassmen said they took it and it helped
friends said in 150 there's more pressure for grades
former and current students told me you can get more help in 098
GVSU
GVSU told me to
GVSU said ENG150 is too hard for freshmen
GVSU staff said ENG 150 was a hard class
GVSU recommended that I take 098
career counselor at GVSU — said to take 098 based on ACT scores
Prof who spoke at orientation (I qualified for 150)
Prof said that 150 isn't open so take 098
GVSU checklist
GVSU pamphlet scared me into taking 098
GVSU said taking 098 would ease transition to college
GVSU said to take the class you're most confident about
GVSU said to take 098
my GVSU baseball coach said to take 098— I don't know why
GVSU suggested 098
GVSU scared me into it
GVSU prof said to take 098, that 150 is too hard
GVSU said it would help
I got a little card at registration

High School Advisors
teachers in high school didn't always give me As
an advisor in high school told me that if I went into 150 I could get behind
counselor told me that 098 would get me ready for 150
counselor said that taking easier courses would help with transition to high school

BW Students Advised to Take FYC (ENG150)
Families
my mom told me to take 150
my parents said 098 is a waste of time
my parents tried to talk me out of taking 098
Mother thought I should have taken 150
my dad wanted me to take ENG150
my mom told me I could handle 150
Friends
friends said to take 150
friends said not to take 098— would be a waist (sic) of time
friends tried to urge me to take 150
some friends said I shouldn't need 098

Figure 4.2. First Year Writing Students' Influences

FYC Students advised to take FYC (ENG 150).

Families
Take FYC
parents support 150
parents said to take 150
parents read pamphlet and said to take 150
self—placed in 098, I chose ENG150 because it's more challenging
self— parents said to take 098— I refused to do that
my parents said 150 would be beneficial for me
my mother wanted me to choose a challenging course
Mom said to take the harder course
my parents said I have the capacity for 150
my parents told me to go for the challenging class
my parents said 150 is right for me
my parents said to take 150
my mom said 098 is too easy, to take 150
my mother said ENG150 is right for me
my parents said to choose the challenging course
mom said to take 150
self— I hate English so I'll take as little as possible
my brother said to take 150
self— I want to get the requirement done
Don't Take BW
my brother said not to take 098— no credit and it costs too much
parents said 098 a waste of money
parents said 098 is a waste of time
my mom said 098 is a waste of time and doesn't count
brother-in-law said 098 is a waste of time
parents said don't take 098— no credit
my family said you don't get credit for 098
my parents said 098 has no credit
mom said there's nothing new to learn in 098
my brother-in-law told me ENG098 is a large waste of time
my mom said 098 is a waste of time and money and GVSU is ONLY out for my $ and nothing else
self—finances said don't take 098— no credit
Friends
Take FYC
a friend said 150 isn't difficult
my friend said to make sure 150 is right for me

my friend said I am smart enough for 150
my friend said she knew I could do 150
my friend said I could pass 150, and time and finances against 150, too
friend said to take 150
my friends said to go for the hard course
friends said take 150
my friend said to take 150
Don't Take BW
friends said 098 waste of money
GVSU students tell me 098 is a waste of money
graduated friends said 098 is too easy and no credit
my friends said there's no credit for 098
my peers said you won't get credit for 098
friends said 098 is a waste of time and if I fail 150 I can take it over
GVSU
pamphlet
pamphlet helped me decide to take 150
pamphlet said to take 150
pamphlet suggested 150 for me
pamphlet said 150 tougher course
the booklet in the mail
pamphlet said to take 150, met requirements for it
pamphlet said I can do it
used pamphlet to choose
guidelines said to take 150
orientation
faculty advisor helped me to choose classes
my advisor said it's a required course
GVSU orientation said take 150
academic advisor said 150 is required
orientation said 098 doesn't count for graduation
people at orientation said to take 150
used orientation to choose 150
student helpers said to take 150
student helpers
student helper said 150 not as hard as they say
student helper said 150 is relatively easy
other
automatic placement

High School Teachers/Advisors
Take FYC
my teachers supported 150
English teacher said to take 150
high school teacher said, based on my papers, English 150 is OK for me
guidance teacher said I'm qualified
English teacher said I'm ready for 150
school counselors told me to take it
my senior English teachers said take 150
my advisor said it's a required course
lit teacher said to take writing
high school counselor chose 150 for me
my English teacher said 150 is right for me
my high school teacher said to take 150
teacher said to take 150
my lit teacher said take 150
my Eng teacher said to take 150
high school teacher said to take 150
Don't Take BW
anybody in class could pass 098
my guidance counselor said it's a waste of time to take 098
my high school advisor said don't take 098
my high school teacher said not to take 098
098 is a waste of time and you receive no credit for it
my high school teacher said 098 is a waste of time and money

Students told to take BW who refused and took FYC
Family
parents said 098 is right for me
GVSU
GVSU advisor tried to get me to take ENG098
GVSU said to take 098
placed in 098 by GVSU
GVSU tried to influence me toward 098
(It's unclear here whether people actually told them to take BW or whether they simply inferred that was the case.)
High School Advisors
teacher said 098 right for me

APPENDIX D

ERICA REYNOLDS' SURVEY INSTRUMENT

Student Survey: Directed Self-Placement

1. If known, please identify your 4-digit college code_____.
   If you do not know your college code, please identify your major by Department or check "Pre-Major":

   _____ Major _____ Pre-Major

2. Sex _____ Female _____ Male

3. Were you made aware of Directed Self-Placement? ___ Yes ___ No
   (If your answer is "no," please proceed to #10.)

4. Which course did you place yourself in?
   _____ English 100/101 _____ English 101

5. How did you learn about Directed Self-Placement?
   _____ Handout from an Advising Office _____ In person from an Advisor
   _____ Letter from Director Writing Studies _____ Other--please identify source
   _____

6. Did the information provided help you to make an informed decision?
   _____ Yes _____ No _____ Somewhat

7. How much do you value your right to determine your own placement in a writing course?
   _____ Highly _____ Moderately _____ Slightly _____ Not at all

8. How confident are you that you have made the right decision with regard to placement?
   _____ Very Confident _____ Somewhat Confident _____ Not Very Confident

9. In making your placement decision, which of the following did you consider? (Check all that apply.)
   _____ My writing background _____ Advice from advisor
   _____ Advice from family _____ Advice from peers
   _____ Advice from a teacher _____ Advice from a counselor
   _____ Other _____

10. On the back of this sheet, please add any comments you would like to make about Directed Self-Placement.

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