DECOLONIZING WRITING PROGRAM ASSESSMENT: STUDENT CONTRIBUTIONS TO KNOWLEDGE ABOUT FIRST-YEAR WRITING PLACEMENT AT MICHIGAN STATE

By

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ABSTRACT

DECOLONIZING WRITING PROGRAM ASSESSMENT: STUDENT CONTRIBUTIONS TO KNOWLEDGE ABOUT FIRST-YEAR WRITING PLACEMENT AT MICHIGAN STATE

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Published scholarship in writing assessment has expressed a growing consensus around the value of locally-controlled assessment practices, as well as the relationship between writing assessment and social justice. At the same time, this scholarship has little representation of student perspective. This project responds to these disciplinary exigencies, as well as local interest in the first-year writing (FYW) placement process, and proceeds with a methodology of epistemic decolonization, informed both by writing assessment scholarship, as well as by indigenous and decolonial scholars. In this project, I ask two central research questions: (1) What did FYW students want to know about FYW placement? and (2) What were FYW students' experiences of placement? In response to the first question, I found that FYW students wanted to know about the technical operation of FYW placement, whether the placement process expresses biases, and whether students found their FYW courses helpful. In response to the second question, I was able to draw the following conclusions: (1) the current FYW placement model expresses biases toward specific racial and ethnic formations at Michigan State; (2) students' perceptions about their courses' helpfulness revealed a lack of distinction between Preparation for College Writing (PCW) and 100-level courses; (3) some interview participants found unique benefits associated with the ethnic and racial segregation that was a consequence of the placement process's biases. On the basis of these findings, I offer several recommendations for the FYW program at Michigan State, including alternatives to the current placement process. Additionally, I offer methodological considerations for writing assessment scholars.

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Curtis Mayfield, "A Prayer"

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KEY TO ABBREVIATIONS

Disciplinary concepts

DSP	Directed Self Placement, a placement model in which students place themselves into FYW courses on the basis of "direction" from a college or writing program
FYW	First Year Writing, a writing course that students typically take in their first year at many post-secondary educational institutions in the US.
TESOL	Teaching English to speakers of other languages, a field of study.
SLS	Second Language Studies, a field of study.

Examinations

ACT	This is actually not an acronym, but the real name of a popular test that contributes to many college admissions procedures, including MSU's.
IELTS	The International English Language Test System
MSUELT	The Michigan State English Language Test, administered by the ELC.
SAT	This is actually not an acronym, but the real name of a popular test that contributes to many college admissions procedures, including MSU's.
TOEFL	The Test of English as a Foreign Language

Institutional units, programs, and courses

MSU	Michigan State University
ATL	The department of American Thought and Language, which previously housed the FYW program as well as many faculty now working in WRAC.
CSTAT	The MSU Center for Statistical Training and Consulting (CSTAT)
ELC	The English Language Center, establishing in 1961 to support language education for degree and non-degree seeking students.

ESL	English as a Second Language, refers in this research to courses offered through the ELC.
FYW Program	The first-year writing program at Michigan State University.
PCW	A course in the FYW program at Michigan State that entails additional writing
PW	Professional writing, a program in WRAC.
WRAC	The department of Writing, Rhetoric, and American Cultures, which grew out of ATL and currently houses the FYW program.
100-level	FYW courses that fulfill Tier One writing credit

INTRODUCTION

This dissertation describes my efforts to build an assessment project grounded in students' questions and perspectives about first-year writing (FYW) at Michigan State University. At the same time, the study represents a philosophical contribution to the discipline of writing assessment in several ways: first, it is a contribution to the current discourse on the role of writing assessment in social justice. I contribute to these discussions by offering an approach to writing assessment informed by decolonial scholarship and practice. Second, it is a contribution to the current discourses on the value of locally-based writing assessments, adding a robust consideration of student perspectives to these discussions.

My interest in writing assessment began as I was pursuing my MA at Fresno State. During my time there, I worked with Asao Inoue. What I learned from Asao was that assessments are an expression of institutional power, and as such, are consonant with other expressions of institutional power in the United States, producing racist effects, sexist effects, exclusive effects.

At the time, I understood these effects through the theoretical lens of critical race theory, the same lens through which I understood my own whiteness. Critical race theory (CRT) was useful for understanding how, even at an institution where white students were outnumbered by students of color (California State University, 2011), the students in the school's honors college – invited on the basis of facially neutral, "merit-based" criteria – could still privilege white students from the area (Mendoza, 2010). It was not hard for me to see how legacies of overt racism and the pervasiveness of white privilege impacted writing instruction at Fresno State. In my master's thesis, I found that white students were prone to take fewer writing courses (Gomes, 2012) than their colleagues.

However, as I wrote my master's thesis, I began to see fissures in the explanatory power of CRT. I was particularly curious about the school's Asian racial formation: Was the racism that impacted international students from China the same as the racism that impacted the school's substantial population of Hmong students? Clearly not, since Hmong students took fewer FYW courses and paid less money toward tuition than their colleagues with Chinese citizenship. Were the particular inequalities these different ethnic groups faced born out of interaction with the same historical processes of inequality? If Fresno State were able to ameliorate inequalities distributed across different racial formations, what relationship would that bear to other justice-oriented projects? What would we build in its place, and why?

My gravitation toward decolonial scholarship was a theoretical shift necessitated by and made available upon my arrival to Michigan State. What made this shift necessary for me were the stark differences between how this school and Fresno State have constructed, cultivated, and responded to institutional diversity. At the same time, mentors at Michigan State including Malea Powell encouraged my colleagues and myself to consider deeply both the land and network of relations on and within which we would build our own scholarly contributions. I took these recommendations seriously, and committed myself to learning about Michigan State, and reconsidering the theoretical foundations of writing assessment work I had done thus far. More than just an expression of power, I also began to see writing assessment as a declaration of programmatic values, and through the work of scholars in the area of cultural rhetorics, I learned about possibilities and practices of re-anchoring the theoretical work of assessment.

In the process of learning about Michigan State, I began to grow curious about its history and practices of internationalization. Internationalization, here, refers to the practice of attempting to spread US post-secondary ideals abroad (through study abroad programs and

extension campuses, for example), and to recruit students with international citizenship. This is a project Michigan State has been involved with since the mid-20th century (Smuckler, 2003). At the same time, I began to understand this process within the context of Michigan State's own settler colonial history. This history helped me understand the pervasiveness and the vicissitudes of colonialism, and to see colonialism as a driving force in producing much of our contemporary inequalities. At the same time, I also became curious about the impacts that this had on literacy instruction, and began research, initially independent of this project, about the histories of the Department of Writing, Rhetoric and American Cultures (WRAC) the English Language Center (ELC).

I began this project in earnest in Fall 2014, when the First-Year Writing (FYW) director at the time, Julie Lindquist, asked if I would be willing to help the FYW program learn about and consider alternatives to the current placement model. I agreed that topically, the placement process at Michigan State was up my alley. However, I was concerned about the lack of accessible information I was able to find about the current placement model. I was particularly concerned about the possibility that the FYW program would make these changes, without ever consulting FYW students, or soliciting their feedback on the effectiveness of the current placement process. Therefore, I decided that a better project would attempt to understand the current consequences of placement for FYW students by actually talking to those students, rather than suggesting changes to placement without their input.

However, I do believe this orientation toward writing assessment research was made possible because of who I am within the institution of Michigan State. As a graduate student, I have had no formal responsibility to the Higher Learning Commission, accreditation processes, or the validation of FYW program assessment decisions. I have been able to examine the

placement process from an unusual position, a position where I am less inclined to justify programmatic decisions. This is not always the case for assessment researchers, whose research is often compelled by the need to explain and justify decisions to external audiences. In contrast, this research was all intrinsically-motivated, and its questions are all internal to participants in the FYW program. This particular facet of my institutional identity, I believe, has granted me a certain amount of latitude and flexibility, and the opportunity to reflect on the people to whom I want to hold myself most accountable. Located outside of the demands of external evaluation, I have had opportunities to conduct program assessment research in a way that, I believe, has allowed me to "delink" from the prevailing *validation* discourses of writing assessment, and pursue a methodology of *epistemic decolonization*.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was three-fold: first, I wanted to identify and produce responses to the questions that FYW students had about their placements. Second, I wanted to be able to offer the FYW program alternatives to its current placement process, grounded in student input and experience. Third, I sought to offer a model for writing program assessment research, grounded in decolonial scholarship, as an alternative to dominant, validation methodologies.

Research Questions

I began this research project with two central questions. These questions were:

1. What questions did students have about their writing placements? What did they want to know about the writing placement process?
2. What were students' experiences of the writing placement process, and the courses they were placed into?

From this initial inquiry, I worked with participants, who were all enrolled as students in the

FYW program, to articulate several, more refined questions. These questions were:

1. How does placement work? Why does placement work in the way that it does?
2. Was the placement process biased at all?
3. How helpful did students find their FYW course?
    a. Did students believe their courses fulfilled institutional learning goals? Was there a difference in how these goals were perceived by different student formations, or different enrollment levels?
    b. What specific features of their FYW courses did students find most helpful?

I describe the process and rationales for articulating these questions and naming them as the focus of analysis in Chapter 2.

Organization of the Dissertation

In Chapter One, I describe the theoretical exigency for this project, referring to projects in writing assessment scholarship that alternatively challenge and sustain the effects of colonialism. One significant barrier I see is the deep entrenchment of *validation* as the primary methodological orientation in writing assessment. I also describe local conditions necessitating a decolonial approach to writing program assessment, offering three examples of Michigan State's historical entanglement with colonial projects.

In Chapter Two, I describe the methodology underpinning this project, which I call a methodology of *epistemic decolonization*. This methodology expresses a critical approach to assessment that articulates epistemic desire carefully. In this case, I asked participants to help develop specific questions that guided my analysis. Thus, this methodology also centers participant perspectives, and expresses a commitment to careful and ethical representations of those participants. Finally, it aims to produce, with participants, assessment options that can

impact the current distribution of resources at Michigan State, and affect material decolonization. I go on to describe how I pursued these principles through both quantitative and qualitative research methods.

In Chapter Three, I take up two lines of questions that emerged from my dialogues with research participants: (1) a number of students wanted to know how placement worked at MSU; and (2) some wondered if there were biases in the placement process. I begin to answer these two questions in this chapter, describing the structural features of FYW placement while simultaneously tracing the histories of the institutional apparatuses responsible for placement at MSU. I go on to describe the evidence of structural bias I found within the placement model. The placement process affected survey participants differently according to the racial formations and ethnic origin. I argue that these differences are evidence of adverse impact in FYW placement.

In Chapter Four, I take up students' questions again, in the first of two chapters that pursues the question: did FYW students find their courses helpful? Chapter four elaborates a quantitative construct for describing students' experiences of helpfulness in their FYW courses. The model I offer, a "helpfulness score," showed that across different levels of the FYW program, students found their courses equally helpful, suggesting that the two courses are indistinct in terms of their outcomes.

In Chapter Five, I follow up on the same question: did FYW students find their courses helpful? Based on interviews I had with three FYW students, I elaborate the unique benefits of these courses which, surprisingly, included aspects of the racial and ethnic segregation that is a consequence of placement.

In Chapter Six, I offer specific recommendations for FYW administration, as well as two alternative models for placement into FYW courses at MSU. These alternative models promise

to alleviate some of the adverse impact of the current placement process, while maintaining the focus on ethnic and linguistic difference that some students considered beneficial to their learning in FYW courses. Additionally, I describe the contributions of epistemic decolonization as a methodology for writing assessment, alternative to *validation* methodologies.

CHAPTER 1. WRITING PROGRAM ASSESSMENT AND DECOLONIAL OPTIONS

In the recent writing assessment literature, writing assessment scholars have begun to develop an agenda and body of scholarship with social justice aims (see Inoue & Poe, 2012; Poe & Inoue, forthcoming). This project represents a contribution to this body of scholarship, in its effort to theorize writing assessment methodology through a decolonial orientation. In this chapter, I describe the scholarly conversations and local histories that guided me toward decoloniality as a framework for writing program assessment research. I begin by reviewing literature that details salient aspects of coloniality – including its epistemic consequences – and how these are redressed in decolonial theory and methodology. Next, I turn to the field of writing assessment, and describe how current research echoes the aims of decolonial scholarship, but is limited by a prevailing methodology of *validation*. Finally, I several historical milestones at Michigan State that suggest a sustained relationship with the colonial projects of settlement, globalization, and rewesternization. Taken together, the disciplinary trends I describe, as well as the local conditions surrounding FYW placement at Michigan State, provide a context supporting a decolonial approach to writing program assessment.

Coloniality and Decoloniality

Decoloniality is an orientation that identifies colonialism as a source of contemporary forms of oppression, inaugurating and implicating other modes of oppression. Colonialism has entailed the material colonization of the land and peoples in the Americas, Africa, Asia and the South Pacific; however, it also entailed the development and propagation of epistemic and philosophical principles that supported colonial missions. In other words, colonialism attempts to control land and people, but it also asserts modes of economic production, categories of identity, cultural values, and epistemic regimes. Anibal Quijano (2007) has described epistemic

colonization as a "systematic repression" of "specific beliefs, ideas, images, symbols [and] knowledge that were not useful to global colonial domination" as well as a repression over the modes of epistemic production – including "images and systems of images, symbols...and instruments of formalized and objectivised expression" (p. 169) – by colonial actors and administrations.

Walter Mignolo offers many examples of epistemic repression through colonial administration in *The Darker Side of the Renaissance* (2003), describing specific examples of this epistemic colonization in the Americas under Spanish colonial rule. The concept of alphabetic literacy in the Americas presents one concrete example of the "coloniality of power." As Mignolo describes it, one important dimension of the Spanish colonial agenda during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries was a literacy program that involved alphabetizing and constructing grammars for Indigenous languages, and translating the Bible into these languages. The deeper rationale for this linguistic colonization stemmed from the belief that the Indigenous peoples of the Americas, if they were to be properly Christianized, needed a common language – Castilian – a written language which was both expressed through alphabetic signs, and explained through a formal system of grammar. Despite the existence of written forms of communication among Indigenous peoples of the Americas, these forms of communication did not involve letters. According to European linguistic philosophy, these non-alphabetic writing practices were hardly writing at all, nor were they regarded as especially amenable to biblical instruction. Thus, Mignolo describes one brand of epistemic colonization that:

> took the form, first, of the colonization of the voice and, second, of the appropriation of languages and cultures outside the realm of the Greco-Roman tradition. One of the consequences was the fading out of every writing system except the alphabetic (p. 66).

Underwritten by an administrative concern with religious colonization, as well as the

administrative assumption that alphabetic literacy was necessary to such a colonization, the narrative Mignolo offers maps closely onto Quijano's general description of colonialism's epistemic repression and domination. Additionally, this example shows how coloniality produces colonial knowledge, and artifacts of that knowledge – for example, ideas about the literacy practices of Indigenous peoples, and texts reflecting those ideas.

Mignolo (2011) has also helped exemplify the orientation central to epistemic colonization, demonstrating that a cornerstone of colonial thought was the production of a "zero point" epistemology, which, critically, conceals geographical and biographical configurations of knowledge and epistemic desire. This epistemic orientation posits an ability to see truth objectively, universally, and in a way "which paradoxically, is ungrounded, or grounded neither in historical location nor in bio-graphical configurations of the bodies" (p. 80). For Mignolo, this philosophy is exemplified by Descartes' *Cogito* – "I think, therefore I am" – which designated a "relentless search for 'truth'" (p. 101) in the most abstract and universal sense.

For me, the clearest representation of the epistemological "zero point" comes in Mignolo's (2003) examination of mapmaking, as he describes the shift toward geometric projections in the 16th century. In his analysis of this practice, Mignolo described the ways in which the geometric projections characteristic of modern Western mapmaking entailed a "double perspective":

> first, a dissociation between a center determined ethnically (Rome, Jerusalem, or China) and a center determined geometrically, which does not replace but complements the ethnic one; second, the assumption…that the locus of observation (geometric center) does not disrupt or interfere with the locus of enunciation (ethnic center). (p. 222)

In short, zero point epistemology presumes a kind of knowledge that exists without reference to subjectivity or context, and which denies the politics of epistemic production. Modern European

techniques in map-making, Mignolo has argued, represent just one facet of the colonization of space that was coextensive with the colonization of land, religious expansion, and the labor exploitation of the Indigenous peoples colonizers encountered.

Thus, within the context of colonization, Quijano has offered the concept of *el patrón colonial de poder* — the colonial matrix of power – as a framework for interpreting the modalities of colonial repression and domination. Translating Quijano, Mignolo (2011) has described the colonial matrix of power as containing "four interrelated domains: control of the economy, of authority, of gender and sexuality, and of knowledge and subjectivity" (p. 8). Specifically, Western modernism has unfolded in such a way that promotes:

1. economic models predicated on appropriation of lands and resources, and an economic orientation toward maximizing production for the purposes of trade (eg. capitalism);
2. administrative structures designed to govern over vast territories, though also allegedly grounded in Greek democracy;
3. ontological categories founded in notions of race, binary gender configurations, and heteronormative sexual arrangements;
4. knowledge as abstract and generalizable, without reference to context, and produced without motivation, except for the desire to aggregate more universal truths.

In contrast to coloniality, the project of decoloniality implies associations with material, social, and philosophical forms of decolonization. While the various projects of decolonization have and will involve a violent reordering of nations, communities and institutions founded on colonialism (see Fanon, for example), a broader conception of decoloniality also emphasizes the domains of theory, of knowledge, and of methodology, particularly since the end of the Cold War (p. 53).

Quijano and Mignolo have also written in particular detail about the necessity of the decolonization of knowledge, including epistemic desires and means by which knowledge is produced. Mignolo (2011), describes decoloniality as involving two epistemic aims, "the

analytic task of unveiling the logic of coloniality and the *prospective task* of contributing to build a world in which many worlds will coexist" (p. 54, emphasis mine). Engaging in these two tasks produces knowledge that both confronts and "delinks" from the colonial matrix of power (p. xxvii). Like Mignolo, Quijano has also emphasized the necessity of epistemic decolonization in forging a new world, and new global relationships (p. 177).

Mignolo (2011) writes that the decolonization of knowledge requires an epistemic inversion of colonial thinking. In contrast to Descartes' *Cogito*, Mignolo writes that decolonial thinking and practice recognize how local contexts contribute to epistemic desire. A different maxim is in order then: "I am where I think." Such an epistemic principle, for Mignolo, "legitimizes all ways of thinking and de-legitimizes the pretense of a singular and particular epistemology, geo-historical and bio-graphically located, to be universal" (p. 81). Further, decoloniality recognizes that within colonial and post-colonial contexts, knowledge is produced with reference to the colonial matrix of power, its assumption of gendered and racialized ontological categories, and its desire for administrative authority.

Thus, two important shifts in the production of knowledge involve what Mignolo calls the geo- and body-politics of knowledge. According to Mignolo, this entails grounding knowledge — and the desire for knowledge — in a specific locale, and in reference to the purposes and real people for whom that knowledge is useful. In contrast to colonial knowledges, developed for the purposes of "controlling and managing populations," decolonial knowledges serve the end of well-being, derived from an understanding of "local experiences and needs" (p. 143). At the heart of decolonial practice, then, is a mode of interpreting and producing knowledge, as contextual, locally-motivated, and locally-valuable. I will return to these specific principles later in this chapter, as I talk about the current state of writing assessment discourse. In

the following section, however, I discuss overlaps and responses to the colonial history of US post-secondary education.

Academic Coloniality and Decolonial Methodologies

Janice Gould (1992) has written that it "is obvious that there is not a university in this country that is not built on what was once native land" (p. 81). The early histories of older post-secondary institutions in the US like Harvard, the College of William and Mary, and Dartmouth are checkered by stories in which administrators exploited each of their peculiar colonial situations. These include stories about money laundering, exploiting at once colonial British patrons on the pretense of "civilizing" Indigenous Americans, while simultaneously colonizing land and graduating very few Indian students. Over time, this appropriation of land and resources has sustained a variety of economic projects for American colleges: for example, the transformation of post-secondary education into an engine for economic expansion during the mid-19th century (Geiger, 1999), and into a commodity unto itself in the late 20th and 21st centuries (Altbach & Knight, 2007).

With the expansion of globalization, international citizens have frequently been targeted as potential "consumers" of higher education, and even described as "resources" that can sustain American post-secondary education, and supporting local US economies. John Douglass, Richard Edelstein, and Cecile Hoareau (2011), for example, have called American post-secondary education America's "best export…because it is profitable and meets labor market and growth needs" (5). But not only this, because, the authors argue (in a passage that can hardly contain its own missionary zeal), US post-secondary education:

> also fulfills a diplomatic and cultural mission like no other form of trade. It diffuses the best of the US's values across the world, strengthens the US's image

> and international position, and creates personal relationships which are ever so important in stabilizing the world's global order (5).

From their settler colonial origins, some US post-secondary institutions are now concerned with funneling the human resources from other countries – particularly those thriving economically in Asia and Central and South America – to help sustain domestic economies and educational enterprises. Reports from UNESCO have also detailed how this movement – sometimes referred to as International Student Mobility – has been motivated by desires for profit (p. 16), and historically has been used (in the Philippines, for example) to prop up colonial regimes (Tayag, 2015).

In addition to the material colonization of the Americas, American post-secondary education also inherited administrative structures and intellectual legacies from European university models (Geiger, 1999; Thelin, 2011). Within this intellectual tradition, academic knowledge has frequently been grounded in imperialist frames for knowledge production (Tuhiwai Smith, 1999; Walter and Anderson, 2013). Again, consider Said's discussion of the discipline of Oriental Studies, whose emergence he illustrates as coextensive with "a good century of British utilitarian administration of and philosophy about the Eastern colonies" (p. 214). As Said explains, Oriental Studies, in the height and decline of British colonial rule, was as much a body of knowledge and scholarly practice grounded in a desire to administer over the East and produce British national policy, as it was in a sense of colonial curiosity (p. 276). While Oriental Studies originated among European colonial powers, the field also found footing in American post-secondary institutions. The colonial sensibilities baked into Oriental Studies have also been present for other disciplines, including history, sciences, and social sciences (Tuhiwai Smith, 1999), as well as in the fields of rhetoric and composition (Villanueva, 1997; Villanueva,

1999; Powell, 2012).

Decolonial Methodologies

The question of methodology — how and why academics produce research — emerges as a significant place for decolonial interventions. Decolonial research projects have thus offered a way to intervene in the traditions of academic colonialism, and point toward justice-oriented academic work. Academic projects concerned with decolonization have included efforts across disciplines, including Linda Tuhiwai Smith's (1999) work in illustrating the historically colonizing force of academic research, as well as her articulation of decolonial methodological principles. Others have looked closely at the contributions of Indigenous methodologies to academic production and research, elaborating for example some characteristics of Indigenous methodologies (Wilson, 2008), and by making efforts to engage in quantitative research toward the ends of Indigenous self-determination (Walter and Anderson, 2013; Coburn, 2015). Some scholars have mapped the landscape and limits of decolonial academic research (Andreotti, Stein, Ahenakew, & Hunt, 2015; Tuck and Wang, 2012). Other scholars have historicized the development of academic concepts and disciplines related to rhetoric and composition in light of colonialism (Powell, 2012; Haas, 2007). While some of these projects detail and pursue forms of material decolonization, they all also engage in forms of epistemic decolonization, which range from the content of knowledge produced, to the research processes that create academic knowledge, to the methodological desires that underpin those research processes.

My goal is simply to demonstrate the range of paths other scholars have taken in efforts to intervene in the colonial histories and practices of academic activity. This body of literature expresses particular attention to the purposes for research within the context of colonialism. Cautious of the ways in which research can serve colonial knowledges and administrative

desires, decolonial research is aimed toward acting on purposes that delink from the colonial matrix of power, and center on the perspectives of those most susceptible to colonial disenfranchisement and exploitation. And, attentive to the historically exploitative relationships of colonialism, decolonial research addresses the relationships between participants, and emphasizes accountability to participants. Through these practices, decoloniality ultimately works toward less exploitative and more socially-just academic environments.

Writing Assessment Theory and Decolonial Options

While I have focused on fleshing out important dimensions of decolonial thought and practice, and explaining the phenomena and value of decolonial methodologies in global academic research, I believe decolonial orientations have particular significance for writing assessment research. Scholarly dispositions in the field of writing assessment have been shifting in ways that point toward decoloniality as a stance toward writing assessment research. I argue that the central concept binding these shifting dispositions involves the widespread, disciplinary belief in *localism* – the idea that the best writing assessments are those that have been locally-developed, are locally-controlled, and are locally-sensitive (CCCC 2009). However, writing assessment methodologies remain entrenched in desires, presumptions of authority, and practices that pose a challenge to decolonial methodologies.

In this section, I detail three specific domains in which the philosophy of localism has played out in writing assessment scholarship. The first domain is that of *theory*, as writing assessment scholars have mounted the epistemic challenge of balancing the theoretical influence of educational measurement with a theoretical language grown more organically out of composition studies, or delinking from measurement discourses altogether. The second domain is that of *methods*, and has involved the epistemic and administrative challenge of developing

methods that enact local control. The third domain is that of *consequences*, and has focused on how writing assessments produce or combat inequality. Taken together, these aspects demonstrate a broader struggle for disciplinary and programmatic self-determination in the domains of epistemology and administration. While these movements suggest openings for decolonial interventions, I go on to argue that *validation*, as a prevailing methodological orientation in writing assessment, can occlude the coloniality intrinsic to the administration of a writing program. In light of these interpretation, I argue that current dispositions in writing assessment point toward an opening for, as well as limits to, decolonial interventions.

Theory: Self-determination in Writing Assessment Theory

In the domain of *theory*, scholars in rhetoric and composition studies have had a long and tumultuous relationship with the field of educational measurement. Even while theories of writing began to develop and change, the practice of evaluating writing was often left to those in the measurement community. Most recently, Behizadeh and Engelhard (2011) have illustrated how knowledge produced within the academic disciplines of writing had little impact on actual writing assessments until the 1990s, and that the reason for this change involved the emergence of writing assessment as a field (p. 203). The historical dissatisfaction of those in writing studies has also been evident in the 21st century, prompting some writing assessment scholars to advocate for new theoretical concepts to guide writing assessment work in an effort that might be interpreted as trying to "de-link" from the perceived hegemony of psychometric concepts, and educational measurement theory. In the domain of theory, writing assessment scholars value locally-controlled assessments, to the extent that those assessments are guided by scholars and administrators that "stay abreast of developments in the field" (CCCC 2009). In this sense, local control means being able to assert disciplinary knowledge at a local level.

Much of the struggle over disciplinary knowledge has involved the educational measurement community, and the legacies of psychometric concepts like *validity* and *reliability*. As a number of writing assessment scholars have noted, during much of the 20th century, developments in writing assessment were preoccupied with the psychometric concept of *reliability* (Huot, 2002; Elliot, 2005; Yancey, 1999). Both Huot (2002) and Elliot (2005) have retraced the history of reliability in detail, identifying the early 20th century as a critical moment in cementing this institutional preoccupation. In the mid-1990s, however, some attitudes among scholars began to change, as they challenged relationships between *reliability* and *validity* (Moss, 1994) and became critical that interests in *reliability* revealed deeper preoccupations with developing efficient writing assessments (Williamson, 1994).

Similarly, writing assessment scholars also began to challenge traditional definitions of *validity* as synonymous with accuracy, involving the question of whether an "assessment measures what it purports to measure" (Huot, 2002, p. 87). This notion of *validity* concentrates critical attention on the intrinsic value of assessment mechanisms and their relationships to self-evident domains of practice. However, more recently, writing assessment scholars have moved toward more robust and expansive theories of validity. I discuss the particular shape of this expansion in more detail later.

One of the most striking rejections of measurement theory has come from Patricia Lynne (2004), who has called for a "temporary separation" from the discourses of educational measurement, and for the field of writing assessment to develop its own language of theoretically significant concepts, such as "meaningfulness" and "ethics" (p. 117). Lynne has maintained that a turn to these terms in rhetoric and compositions would help the field develop more meaningful and valuable assessments that might have impacts beyond our field.

Similarly, Chris Gallagher (2011) has argued for the necessity of new metaphors in writing assessment. Specifically, Gallagher has identified the prevailing theory of power in writing assessment as the "stakeholder" theory of power (p. 458), which treats the multiple parties affected by writing assessments as interest groups whose desires and priorities need merely to be considered and negotiated, as though they exist on an even plane of power. However, Gallagher argues that the “stakeholder” theory of power denies the actual distributions of power in scenes of writing assessment, and minimizes the roles that those with expertise in rhetoric and composition have in controlling assessment processes. In contrast, Gallagher has argued that writing faculty and administrators need to assert new principles of power, which asserts the primacy of those located at the scene of assessments – faculty and students. According to this new principle, "being there matters" (463).

These arguments have not all gained wide acceptance in the field of writing assessment – William Condon (2011) and Patricia O'Neill, Cindy Moore, and Brian Huot (2009) have offered tempered responses to Lynne and Gallagher's advocacy for total theoretical control. However, these authors still reveal similar anxieties and desires — specifically, the desire to have the disciplinary expertise of scholars in rhetoric and writing taken seriously, and integrated into the practice of writing assessments. I interpret this particular trend as a movement to challenge the epistemic influence of the social sciences generally – and educational measurement more specifically – on the practice of writing assessments. The CCCC Position Statement on Writing Assessment (2009), which advocates for local assessment with input from those who "stay abreast of developments in the field" provides an indication of the officiality of this disposition, while simultaneously provide a qualification. While advocating for local assessments, the statement nevertheless centralizes the significance of disciplinary theory.

Methods: Instantiations of Local Control

In the domain of *methods,* writing assessment scholars have developed new methods in writing assessment that are designed to enact the *local control* of those programs. Dynamic Criteria Mapping (DCM) represents one method of developing local control over assessments and, significantly, has been gaining traction nationally as an effort to localize assessment (Hamp Lyons, 2014).

For many teachers and scholars, externally-developed rubrics represent a threat to locally-controlled assessments, as well as meaningful learning (White, Elliott, and Peckham, 2015; Wilson, 2006; Broad, 2003). Dynamic Criteria Mapping (DCM) is one effort to resist the influence of external rubrics, by creating articulations of the rhetorical gestures, features, and processes that teachers and administrators value within local contexts (Broad, 2003). Thus, according to Broad (2003), writing programs can make public "what we really value in students' writing" (p. 5). Broad offers a method of articulating “what we really value,” describing a process in which institutional actors — mostly teachers and administrators — observe and discuss a set of artifacts designed to offer a comprehensive description of a program's rhetorical interests. From these observations, local participants move inductively toward value statements about writing, principles that can inform specific writing outcomes, or moments of programmatic evaluation. Hence, in opposition to an externally-developed rubric, DCM maps hold the potential of allowing a program to assess work on the basis of its participants’ interests.

However, from my perspective, DCM efforts have been limited by two elements. First, a review of DCM literature has shown that cases of the process in action tend to result in exit-assessment rubrics (Stalions, 2009). While there is a potential for dynamic criteria maps to reveal a pluritopic landscape of writing values, inevitably, such rubrics reduce complex maps down to a

homogeneous set of criteria for an entire writing program.

Additionally, in practice, DCM processes sometimes lack input — or worse, erase the perspectives — of those who are not experts in rhetoric or composition studies, including some local participants. Tony Scott and Lil Brannon (2013) have shown how this erasure can happen with contingent faculty involved in DCM conversations. Similarly, a collection of DCM cases offered in *Organic Writing Assessment* (Broad et al, 2009) generally lacks concentrated attention to the input of students, for whom assessments often have the more direct and severe consequences, and who, in the context of American settler colonial institutions, may be frequently susceptible to colonial disenfranchisement. Similar to the CCCC (2009) statement, actual cases of DCM have tended to position rhetoric and composition scholars, and especially writing assessment scholars, as the center of local knowledge, and the arbiters of local value.

Consequences: Local Sensitivity to consequences

In the domain of *local consequences*, writing assessment scholars have emphasized the necessity of attending to, documenting, and acting on the consequences of writing assessments. Much of this scholarship has turned its attention to issues of social justice that writing assessment can attend to (see Poe and Inoue, 2016), as well as the racial consequences of writing assessments (see Inoue and Poe, 2012).

In this strand of writing assessment literature, scholars have advocated for methodological attention to race in writing program research (Kelly-Riley, 2011; Inoue, 2012a), and in establishing validity arguments (Inoue, 2009). Others have proposed specific heuristics for evaluating the racial impacts of writing program assessments (Poe, Elliot, Cogan, & Nurudeen, 2014). Still others have offered cases and critical accounts of assessment tools and processes (Inoue and Poe, 2012). These contributions represent efforts to identify and intervene in

processes that reproduce racist ideology, and racist material conditions.

In Inoue and Poe's (2012) collection *Race and Writing Assessment*, for example, several chapters critique ideologies of race present in assessment techniques. For example, several chapters in the collection are critical of assessment instruments that promote notions about the supremacy of Standard Written English. Included in these critiques are discussions of rubrics (Balester, 2012) and Criterion's Online Writing Evaluation (Herrington & Stanley, 2012). Additionally, Rachel Lewis Ketai offers a chapter critical of directed self-placement (DSP) models that embody what Eduardo Bonilla-Silva calls color-blind racism (Lewis Ketai, 2012, p. 148). These arguments challenge demonstrably-racist assumptions about the role of formal, alphabetic literacies in literate practice.

Additionally, several chapters in the collection document attempts to make material changes in writing programs. Kathleen Yancey's (2012) contribution describes how a revised admissions procedure at Oregon State University nearly doubled the population of Latinx students within 10 years. In Inoue's chapter, he describes how the programmatic implementation of grading contracts at Fresno State had positive effects for the school's historically disenfranchised racial formations. This was particularly true among those who identified membership in the Asian Pacific Islander racial formation, a group largely comprised of ethnically Hmong students (Inoue, 2012a). In both cases, the authors argue that their respective interventions in local programmatic assessment practices writing programs have had direct, positive consequences for different racial formations.

Validation and Colonial Administration

None of the scholarly project I've described in the previous section name decolonization as an explicit aim, however, many do reflect a common desire to "delink" from the influence of

two hegemonic threats for writing assessment scholars: measurement theories and external evaluations. The growing concern with writing assessments' roles in reproducing or combatting injustice also suggests the value in learning from decolonial projects and scholarship. However, I also believe that one major hurdle to writing assessment scholars amenable to decoloniality is a current, deeply entrenched commitment to *validation* methodologies. In this section, I describe *validation* as the prevailing approach toward research in writing assessment, and as a methodology that expresses and frequently sustains colonial administrative authority.

Scholars and professionals concerned with the assessment of writing had been long preoccupied with *reliability* as the central concern in writing assessment. Perhaps one of the most striking accounts of this comes in Elliot's (2005) *On a Scale*, which narrates a history of writing assessment in the United States, beginning in the late 19th century. Elliot's narrative includes a strong focus on development of college entrance examinations, and the role of private testing services in supporting those developments. As Elliot's story illustrates – and as many writing assessment scholars know – the development of writing components on these tests has long been fraught, particularly because it has historically been difficult to elicit agreement about the quality of actual writing. Thus, indirect writing assessments – in the form of multiple choice examinations – formed the basis for assessments of students' writing abilities for a long time. Holistic scoring methods that allowed assessors to produce reliable evaluations were not developed until late into the 1960s.

As Huot (2002) has argued convincingly, the inherent difficulty of assessing writing reliably made reliability the central concern for much of writing assessment for much of the 20th century. Thus, Huot advocated for theoretical attention to validity in writing assessment, pointing to Lee Cronbach and Samuel Messick as exemplars whose work on consequential validity

demonstrated the complexity of validity, as a theoretical construct.

Since Huot's prediction that some of the biggest changes to writing assessment would occur as a consequence of the measurement community's "developing notions of validity" (p. 93), there has been much work in writing assessment that has concentrated its attention toward validity. A search I conducted of CompPile.org – a resource for searching publications in rhetoric and composition studies – turned up more than 100 articles, chapters, books, and other texts with the keyword "validity" that have been published since 2003. While many of these report the results of validity inquiries, others expand the theoretical language of *validity*, proposing, for example:

- defining validity to explicitly account for technological developments (Neal, 2011);
- proposing attention to racial consequences as a necessary part of validity inquiries (Inoue, 2009);
- asserting the need for ongoing assessment and thus, reconceiving of validity as an ongoing process of *validation* (O'Neill, Moore, and Huot, 2009);
- recommendations to expand validity heuristics in ways that are consistent with rhetorical theory (Inoue, 2007).

Relatively fewer pieces of published scholarship, with Lynne's 2004 text offering one central example, have challenged the disciplinary preoccupation with *validity*.

Instead, *validity* has taken the place of *reliability* as the central preoccupation of writing assessment scholars, one that ultimately subsumes theoretical contributions of those scholars concerned with social justice. Michael Kane's (2013) recent article reveals the vast scope validity inquiry assumes, defining *validation* as "an evaluation of the coherence and *completeness* of [an] interpretation/use argument and of the plausibility of its inferences and assumptions" (p. 1, emphasis mine). The interpretation/use argument (IUA) refers to the network of claims, inferences, and decisions supporting the ways that an entity (in this case, a writing program) uses a particular test (p. 10-14). In other words, *validation* procedures are a form of

institutional assessment – and under the ideal of local control, then this is a self-assessment – that considers and empirically demonstrates that the decisions a program makes on behalf of others are good, fair decisions. Perhaps it is no surprise, then – validation inquiries *validate.*

As an example of the enormity of *validation* methodologies in current writing assessment theory, consider Ed White, Norbert Elliot, and Irvin Peckham's (2015) recent book, *Very Like a Whale*, which offers an approach to writing program assessment. White, Elliot, and Peckham name their approach "Design for Assessment" (DFA), which is, at its heart, a recursive process of *validation*. DFA mobilizes all the most common aspects of validity arguments (consequences, aims, construct modeling, scoring, disaggregation, generalization, response processes, extrapolation, theory-based interpretation, cost effectiveness, sustainability) and promote models of writing program administration that continually produce validity arguments around these elements, and to self-correct based on the findings from this ongoing inquiry.

Drawing from the work discussed above, I define *validation* as a methodological orientation, which presupposes an epistemic regime that includes claims, supported by data, connected to scholarly theory, driven by institutional desire, frequently for the purposes of accreditation. *Validation* is an orientation that presupposes assessment researchers as expert interpreters, whose role is to holistically evaluate institutional arguments for assessments, and the goodness of those arguments *for others* at an institution. Hence, *validation* also presupposes value orientations, and is concerned more with institutional rationales for administrative decisions than it is with any particular set of consequences. Validation inquiries validate.

The point is that despite the field's (occasionally radical) calls to localism, the rhetorical activity of *validation* is fundamentally conservative in its orientation. *Validation* ultimately shores up authority in disciplinary expertise, in academic epistemic processes, in specific

methods of producing evidence, in the programmatic status quo. In the context of settler colonial post-secondary educational institutions, validation processes reflect colonial styles of administration.

David Spurr (1993) has fleshed out a rhetoric of colonial administrative practice, which I believe is useful in revealing some of the overlaps between writing program administration and colonial administrative styles. Rhetorical moves common to colonial administrations include surveillance – underpinned by an assumed authority to gather unlimited amounts of information – as well as appropriation – defined not merely as the appropriation of land for cultivation, and people for labor, but also the appropriation of will, depriving others of their self-determination. As a methodological orientation, *validation* positions writing program administrators or assessment specialists to survey a wide range of information, and to do so with the intent of making decisions for writing program participants. Additionally, as a facet of writing program administration, the power to decide for students how they should allocate their time, labor, and money reflects this appropriative dimension of colonial administrative power.

Spurr (1993) also names *classification* and *debasement* as two tropes of imperial administrations. While *classification* describes the practice of creating subject positions and sorting people into these categories, *debasement* occurs when imperial administrators then transfer responsibility onto individuals for deficits created according to colonial ontologies. Histories of Basic Writing and remediation in composition studies offer many versions of this story, as writing programs have historically produced "Basic Writers" and then made those students individually responsible for making up additional requirements. Within the context of this history, *validation* inquiries are bound to validate the institutional power that produces subject positions like the "Basic Writer." As the university transfers responsibility for their

deficits on to students, remediation is a specific form of *debasement*, and an expression of colonial administrative power.

Validation inquiries, however, are unlikely to challenge this power, but to seek evidence that *validates* that power. For example, a writing program might seek to show that a remedial placement is successful by investigating the relationship between an automated essay score and students' GPAs (see Ramineni, 2012). It is unsurprising that, in this context, such institutional structures might produce evidence of racist remediation patterns, like those Poe, Elliot, Cogan, and Nurudeen (2014) identify at Brick City University. Even with growing attention to the racist consequences of assessment (see also Kelly-Riley, 2011; Inoue, 2009), *validation* inquiries are unlikely to substantially challenge these patterns as long as they assume authority to validate remediation as a practice. Indeed, I maintain that writing assessment scholarship will have trouble pursuing an agenda of social justice, as long as scholars fail to challenge how common administrative and assessment practices in settler colonial universities, like *validation*, systematically shore up colonial authority. One peculiar way that this happens, I argue, is through excluding student perspective.

Consider Yancey's (2012) chapter in *Race and Writing Assessment*, for example, where she describes a university that assumes the benefit of increasing access to its Latinx communities, without apparently talking to members of those communities. Or, Diane Kelly-Riley's (2011) article, in which a question from a student about racial inequalities in assessment leads her to consider race in her validation of a junior-level portfolio assessment. In both cases the authors describe the benefits of administrative interventions for non-White students, while providing only limited representation of those students' perception of benefit.

Writing Program Assessment and Decolonial Options

As I have suggested previously, decoloniality offers an interpretive framework through which to see recent discussions in writing assessment about the value of *localism*. The development and assertion of writing assessment expertise and theory independent of educational measurement, for example, suggests a movement toward epistemic decolonization. The emphasis on theoretical localization demonstrates a reorientation around the geo- and body-politics of assessment, and a growing consensus around the value of programmatic self-determination. Additionally, many of the scholars who advocate for new writing assessment theories resist epistemic paradigms of measurement theory, which are thought to embody versions of the positivistic, "zero point" epistemologies Mignolo describes.

Similarly, methods of operationalizing "local control" represent attempts to intervene in the methods of producing knowledge, and in performing administrative work. Methods like DCM have emphasized collaboration among local participants, and contextually-situated articulations of literacy. These methods, then, suggest movements toward epistemic and administrative decolonization.

Finally, attention to local consequences, particularly the racial consequences of assessments, holds potential for ideological decolonization – including the critical task of understanding how assessment techniques reproduce colonial power – as well as material reorganization and productive task of redistributing resources and opportunities to those most susceptible to colonial disenfranchisement. Both of these directions are present in Inoue and Poe's recent collection.

While these trends all suggest a discursive environment amenable to decolonial methodologies, these trends are not without problems. In the struggle for theory, Gallagher

(2014) has pointed to evidence of a parochialism, and defensiveness about rhet-comp's disciplinary knowledge. While such a stance makes sense in the context of the field's history, Gallagher writes that these allegiances frequently keep writing assessment scholars from accepting the viewpoints of those who scholars do not consider exemplars of writing instruction or assessment.

As an exemplary set of cases representing how writing assessment scholars have operationalized "local-control," the DCM literature suggests a similar problem. Specifically, the construction of "local audiences" too-frequently elides the varied input from different program participants with different social standings (eg. tenure track and non-tenure track faculty; see Scott and Brannon, 2013) to produce a monolithic vision of program outcomes, and in some cases, ignores students as participants in a program at all.

Finally, the emerging literature concerned with writing assessment and its potential contributions to racial and social justice reveals a clear interest among writing assessment scholars in redressing some of the inequalities produced by colonialism, and yet, too-frequently, even these scholars proceed from a colonial administrative approach. This approach is one that assumes authority (Mignolo, 2011), appropriating both the responsibility for decision-making, and the criteria upon which good decisions might be made (Spurr, 1993) – in this case, involving students' educational futures. Indeed, as I argued, these projects have frequently been used to expand the scope of *validity* inquiries, rather than to challenge the colonial impulse of *validation* altogether.

While these scholarly projects all raise significant questions for writing assessment scholars and writing program administrators, there are clear limits in their movements toward decolonial educational futures. Writing assessment scholarship describes efforts that do some of

the work of decolonization – responding to colonial epistemologies, building locally-centered administrative practices, and striving for the redistribution of educational resources and opportunities – while simultaneously shoring up other colonial methodologies, epistemologies, and administrative moves.

In light of this, I believe there are theoretical openings for decoloniality, and that a decolonial approach to writing assessment offers a rigorous analytical framework for understanding how writing assessment research can both de-link from and/or reproduce coloniality, while simultaneously extending the disciplinary understanding of the range of rhetorical acts available to participants in a writing program.

However, as a stance toward writing assessment research, I also believe that the practices and consequences of a decolonial approach to writing program assessment will differ according to specific institutional contexts and histories. And with respect to this claim, I turn now to a description of my own institutional context, which also provided exigencies for a decolonial approach to writing program assessment.

Local Exigencies for Decolonial Research Orientations

While the previous sections have sketched out the disciplinary exigencies for decolonial research, there are also unique institutional histories and practices that point toward the particular value of decolonial research at Michigan State. In the following sections, I address several premises that ground my interrogation of Michigan State University's FYW program as a colonial apparatus. These local exigencies include not only the fact of colonization, but also clear and explicit historical entanglements between the school and the colonial interests (especially in the domains of economy and politics) of the United States government. Finally, I describe how current, institutional decision-making processes at Michigan State provide concrete examples of

colonial administrative practice.

Colonial Entanglements

While it is true that Michigan State is a public institution whose history bears some resemblance to more sweeping narratives about post-secondary education in the United States, it is also true that Michigan State has had unique intersections with the histories with the colonization of the Americas, and efforts to promote colonial politics and administration, economics, and knowledges.

I choose to begin this story at the end of the 18th century, with the Treaty of Paris, in which Great Britain ceded to the United States the claim to colonize what they regarded as the "Old Northwest Territory." Several years later, the United States would begin in earnest its efforts to colonize the land that would become the state of Michigan. The 1795 Greenville Treaty marked the beginning of a 50-year period in which the Anishinaabeg, through a variety of subsequent treaties, surrendered land to the expanding United States.

Almost immediately, the state of Michigan government set the precedent of using revenue from the sale of public lands for the purposes of building colleges and providing education to settlers (Widder, 2005). In the following decades, the University of Michigan, the State Normal School, and Michigan State University — as the Agricultural College of the State of Michigan — would all open their doors. In what follows, I detail several historical milestones demonstrating the entanglement of colonial and institutional interests at Michigan State. These examples demonstrate a history of sustained engagement with colonial projects: in the first instance, I describe how the Agricultural College of the State of Michigan contributed to the settling of Michigan as well as the articulation of post-secondary education as a flexible tool for promoting economic development; in the second instance, I describe how Michigan State University

positioned itself as a player in the political and economic development of the "Third World" and the containment of communism; and in the third instance, I illustrate Michigan State's current president has affirmed the global utility of land-grant principles, promoting the colonial project of rewesternization.

"Proprietors of the soil." Frequently, narratives about the purpose and consequences of the Morrill Act circulate around the idea that the Act was effective in rearticulating post-secondary education as a public good, and expanding access to a wider public (Association of Public and Land Grant Universities, 2012; Simon, 2009). By making post-secondary education available to the "industrial classes," of American colonists, there is certainly credence to the idea that the Morrill Act was a major milestone in the diversification of post-secondary education. However, it was also a milestone in the history of American colonialism.

To demonstrate this point, I find it instructive to consider arguments that the Morrill Act was perhaps more intentional, and more significant as a piece of US economic policy (Key, 1996). In opposition to the version of history in which "the federal government heard the cries for a broadening of higher education and responded with the Morrill Act," (p. 198) Key (1996) has argued for the importance of considering the political context surrounding the formation of land grant institutions. As Key has demonstrated, one of the central issues to understanding these origins of involved the political question of what to do with colonized lands in the Western Territory.

While the US Congress had agreed that the disposal of public lands should provide financial benefit to the US government, it continually grappled with the question of attempting to generate direct revenue (through land sales) or indirect sales (through land donation). As the middle of the 19th century approached, political sentiment had shifted toward granting land,

particularly when that land was being used toward the end of agricultural development (p. 209-214). One example of this general economic policy was the Homestead Act of 1862, which permitted settlement of public lands, provided settlers engaged in agricultural development of that land. According to Key, the Morrill Act passed several months later on the same premises: that agricultural production should be a central focus for economic development, and that with colleges focused on agricultural education, the economic benefits would outweigh the immediate value of the land (p. 215).

It may be true that one consequence of the Morrill Act was an initial diversification of post-secondary education in the US, however it was also an economic policy predicated on sustaining settler colonial land claims in at least several ways: prior to the passage of the Morrill Act, towns often sought to build colleges due to the perception that they lent economic stability to the communities in which they were built, by attracting people and the businesses needed to support a student population (Geiger, 1999). In this sense, colleges in the mid-19th century helped prop up settlements, by allowing settler communities to coalesce *as* communities. Simultaneously, by orienting land-grant educations around agricultural and mechanical arts, the Act proposed a solution to the question of how to use colonized land, as well as a strategy to promote capitalist production ideals and practices (aimed, as it was, at maximizing agricultural yields and subsequent revenues), and stimulate national consumption.

Frequently treated as an exemplar among land grant institutions, Michigan State actually opened (as the Agricultural College of the State of Michigan) in 1857, prior to the passage of the Morrill Act. Nevertheless, the college was, like other land-grant institutions would be, the beneficiary of a US economic policy designed to maximize revenue coming from "public lands." Specifically, the Agricultural College of the State of Michigan was funded — like the University

of Michigan and the State Normal School before it — by the sale of public lands (Widder, 2005, p. 22).

The college also found itself facing a similar set of social and economic pressures as other land-grant institutions. Keith Widder (2005) has characterized the historical moment that the Agricultural College of the State of Michigan opened as one in which the local communities in Lansing found themselves amidst a rapid expansion of capitalism. This expansion was, for example, marked by an uptick in census numbers, the construction of the capitol building, as well as a railroad connecting Lansing to Owosso, a growing sentiment among some local farmers about the necessity for agricultural reform, and a desire among some Michigan settlers for an alternative to a liberal education model. In light of these conditions, Widder writes that early leaders of college believed they could transform the area from "a farming community rooted in the past to one driven by scientific discovery and the pursuit of profits" (p. 17).

Interestingly, Widder has noted some early resistance to the college, as some local community members began to suspect that the university encouraged students to “turn their backs on farmers” (p. 10). Indeed, Widder confirms that while the school was certainly interested in agricultural sciences, it nevertheless imagined as its audience students who wanted a flexible education, and access to a range of agricultural and non-agricultural careers (p. 19). While this tension in mission has lead Widder to describe the Agricultural College as a “Trojan horse” (p. 12), the aims expressed by leaders in the walls of the new college were ultimately in line with the broad colonial economic goals that Justin Morrill was invoking in Congress.

If Michigan State is an exemplar of land-grant institutions in other ways, there is also evidence that despite whatever kairotic specificities may have existed for them, Justin Morrill, the US Congress, and the administration of the Agricultural College of the State of Michigan

imagined similar colonial visions for the kind of post-secondary education land-grant colleges could offer. Land grant colleges had an immediate utility in sustaining settled lands, contributing directly and indirectly to local and national economies; but they would also be flexible — requiring agricultural or mechanical specialization "without excluding other scientific and classical studies" in order to prepare its students for "the several pursuits and professions in life" (Morrill Act) — and in that flexibility find an indefinite capacity for contributing to economic development and reinvention.

"The world is our campus." One popularly documented instance of Michigan State's support for US international policy involves the Michigan State University Group (MSUG), a technical-assistance program that was designed to support the state of South Vietnam, and was part of a broader participation among US post-secondary education in the Cold War (Herring, 2008).

The MSUG emerged in the mid-20th century from an alignment of political and institutional interests, which circulated around the projects of containing communism domestically and abroad, and performing the "public service" of spreading US ideals about politics, economy, and knowledge (Ernst, 1998; Smuckler, 2003). At the national level, President Truman advocated for the Westernization of the "Third World," and the industrialization of global economies, articulating during his inaugural address a missionary vision for his Point IV program. Under Truman's administration, the US would seek to make "the benefits of our [US] scientific advances and industrial progress available for the improvement and growth of underdeveloped areas" (Truman, 1949). Simultaneously, MSU President John Hannah — who had served in an advisory capacity to Truman — was of the belief that the public university was inherently "an instrument of national policy" (Heineman, 1993, p. 40), and was eager to apply

the university's original land grant principles to help the US address global challenges. According to Jake Alster (2014), Hannah's interest in Vietnam ultimately derived in part from his "love of institution building, and anti-communistic stance" (p. 8). Finally, the creation of the MSUG was also predicated on the close relationship between then-assistant professor of Political Science, Wesley Fishel, and Ngo Dinh Diem, a former high ranking officer in the French colonial government of Cochinchina, and future president of South Vietnam (MSUG, 1962; Nicolas, 1966; Smuckler, 2003; Alster, 2014).

The MSUG was active in South Vietnam for the seven-year period between 1955 and 1962, and offered support in three phases which concentrated to various degrees on police support — including conducting training for using firearms, fingerprinting, and traffic administration — advising for the reorganization of governmental agencies, academic projects, and security. Ultimately, a deterioration of the relationship between Diem and the MSUG led to the end of the project, with Diem enacting few of the MSUG recommendations. After the collapse of the project, allegations surfaced about CIA involvement in the MSUG — even that the group itself was a cover for CIA operations (Nicolas, 1966). While John Hannah and Wesley Fishel initially denied these claims, one-time MSUG administrator Ralph Smuckler has confirmed CIA involvement, and "cover" for CIA operatives (Smuckler, 2003, p. 17-18).

While the MSUG involvement with the government of South Vietnam represented a move to support US international policy, it also indicated a new orientation toward the university's original land grant mission. MSU's official and unofficial responses to Truman's Point IV challenge were not limited to its involvement in Vietnam, but also included contemporaneous efforts to establish the University of the Ryukyus in Japan, to strengthen Ethiopian agricultural education, and to provide development and training at several Colombian

universities (Smuckler, 2003, p. 45). Not coincidentally, on campus, one response to the Point IV challenge was the development of the English Language Center (ELC), which I discuss further in Chapter 3.

In essence, as a land-grant institution, many faculty and administrators at Michigan State no longer imagined their commitments as to the American public, but also to a broader, global public. I suggest this new approach represented the adoption of a mission that was complicit in the broader, colonial aims of Truman's Point IV plan. President John Hannah expressed this new approach succinctly, when he was reported to have said, "the World is our campus" (Ernst, 1998, p. 6).

The World Grant Ideal. Smuckler (2003) has argued that Michigan State's agenda of internationalization (of which the MSUG is just one example) might have been simply a reflection of broader national trends, but that Michigan State also pursued this agenda with an unusual speed and aggressiveness. This early leadership in the internationalization of post-secondary education helped sustain momentum for international efforts "well into the 1990s" (p. 168), when Smuckler retired from the university. And still, these efforts continue today.

In *Embracing the World Grant Ideal* (2009), current Michigan State President Lou Anna Simon advocates for US post-secondary education to take a position of leadership, serving as "engines of societal growth and transformation" (p. 2), asserting that ideals associated with the Morrill Act make research-intensive land-grant universities, like Michigan State, especially poised to solve global problems, and produce citizens for a "world unconstrained by state, regional, and national boundaries" (p. 5). Simon articulates the World Grant Ideal as "a directional aspiration" to adapt the land grant principles of *quality*, *inclusiveness*, and *connectivity* to drive global problem-solving and development.

While Simon asserts that the "*World Grant Ideal* is not about dominance or status," (p. 15), there is little that is invitational about her vision for the future of land-grant institutions, or suggestive that other parts of the world have anything to contribute to the core principles of land-grant universities. Nor is there a sense of having been invited: the exigencies Simon identifies for a *World Grant Ideal* are far removed from any particular relationship or local circumstances; instead, those reasons include:

1. shifts toward multinational processes of production and distribution;
2. the necessity of flexible and creative worker-citizens to sustain current rates of change in labor and technology;
3. the capacity of the university to participate in creating "sustainable global prosperity" (p. 1).

In other words, Simon looks out at the world and sees rapidly changing global economies and problems with global consequences, and so articulates a vision of the university as a universally capable technology for enacting economic development and social transformation.

Thus, her vision has two main goals: (1) producing flexible workers, "capable of adapting to the changes in the processes and nature of work,"; and (2) producing, distributing and applying knowledge that drives economic development (p. 6).

In tandem with Simon's advocacy for the global applicability of land-grant principles, Michigan State has also "internationalized" its domestic campus. According to data furnished by the Office of International Student Services, students with international citizenship have more than doubled at Michigan State in the last decade. In 2005, the campus reported 3293 total international students, comprising 7.3% of the student body; in 2015, the campus reported 7568 international students, comprising 15.0% of the student body. Undergraduate students have made up the bulk of this increase, as the number of graduate students with international citizenship has dropped during this time (OISS 2015).

According to Walter Mignolo (2011), "rewesternization" designates a colonial trajectory

in which the United States attempts to "save capitalism," reassert a position of global leadership, promote and produce "knowledge for development" (p. 36). I hear in Simon's *World Grant Ideal* echoes of this trajectory: her aims are primarily economic in nature; her vision of epistemic production is for the explicit purpose of development; her solution places all the world's problems within the purview of the American land-grant university.

Summary of this section. I have pointed to three milestones in the history of Michigan State University in relation to US national and international policy. In no way should this serve as a comprehensive history of the university; instead, my intent has been to describe moments that indicate a sustained engagement with the broad colonial projects of settlement, globalization, and rewesternization. By reframing Michigan State's land-grant legacy in terms of its contributions to economic policy, I have tried to demonstrate the significance of land-grant institutions in the project of settling colonized lands and promoting capitalist modes of production. By identifying the activities of the Michigan State University Group, I have tried to offer an example of the historical moment in which John Hannah and President Truman redefined the audience for Michigan State's research and education, enacting a form of globalization by declaring "the World [as] our campus." Finally, by detailing the aims of Simon's World Grant Ideal, I have tried to exemplify the current historical moment, where MSU imagines itself as poised to participate in the project of rewesternization, by imagining land-grant principles as a flexible, universally-applicable methodology for global problem-solving and economic development.

This history of engagement with colonial projects is significant to me and to this project for two principal reasons: (1) for assessment scholars with social justice agendas, this history highlights the need for active, decolonial practice at an institution where colonialism is not

"thing of the past," but is an active, continual project; (2) this history sketches out with some specificity, the particular colonial projects that bear on Michigan State's current institutional environment, where diversification has meant the active recruitment of students with international citizenship.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have identified disciplinary and local exigencies that lead me to value an approach to writing program assessment informed by decoloniality. Disciplinary exigencies include trends toward new epistemic and administrative regimes, and toward redressing some of the consequences of colonialism, including ideologically oppressive assessment artifacts, and the racial inequalities produced by writing programs. Additionally, local exigencies included Michigan State's historical entanglement with various colonial projects, and current demonstration of colonial rhetoric in administrative practice.

In the following chapter, I describe in more specific detail the methodological commitments and principles underpinning this research. I also describe how these methods manifested through archival, statistical, and interview research methods.

CHAPTER 2. EPISTEMIC DECOLONIZATION AND RESEARCH METHODS

In the previous chapter, I outlined the exigencies that have lead me toward a decolonial approach to writing program assessment research. As part of that argument, I identified disciplinary openings for decolonial interventions, arguing that, while the field has mobilized around the value of localism and has made efforts to redress historical inequities and colonial consequences, it has also centralized validation as the primary rhetorical act. White, Elliott, and Peckham's (2015) recent text on writing program assessment, serves as one comprehensive, and recent example of this tendency. I also described validation as a fundamentally conservative rhetorical gesture, defined (as it is) in such a way that shores up disciplinary and administrative authority, with an ultimate aim of validating the institution and its decisions. Rhetorically, validation arguments position assessment experts and WPAs in a particular position of authority, asking them to justify institutional decisions on the basis of disciplinary knowledge and empirical evidence (see White, Elliott, and Peckham, p. 151).

While validation is one kind of methodology, I argue that there are also many purposes for research in this world, and hence, other reasons for WPAs and writing assessment experts to engage with their curricula and local participants. In this chapter, I describe my efforts to make epistemic decolonization the primary rhetorical aim of FYW placement research. As Mignolo (2011) and Quijano (2007) have written, such research involves both the deconstruction of colonial epistemologies and subsequent reconstruction of local epistemologies. As I have taken part in this research, six methodological concepts have emerged as important for the placement research project:

(1) articulating epistemic desire;
(2) centering participant perspectives;
(3) scaffolding decolonial critique;

(4) engaging in ethical representation;
(5) redefining accountability; and
(6) aiming at material decolonization.

After describing these theoretical concepts, I describe the methods I used in the process, which involved historical and archival research, interviews, synthesis of open-ended survey responses, and quantitative analysis of survey data.

Methodological Principles

In the following section, I outline six central methodological principles that have guided my research into FYW placement, and contributed to the broader methodological aim of *epistemic decolonization*. Any specific method that contributed to this research was likely grounded in at least one or more of these principles, and so a thorough mapping between these principles and my methods is beyond the scope of this particular section (though I describe this in more detail during the methods portion of this chapter). In each case, however, I've offered one specific example from this research of the bearing each methodological principle had on specific research decisions.

Articulating epistemic desire and epistemic contributions

As Mignolo (2011) writes, a critical problem of the rhetoric of coloniality involved the presumption of a "zero point" epistemology, an allegedly neutral place from which scientists, philosophers, administrators, and academics (among others) could produce universal, generalizable knowledge. Similarly, Tuhiwai Smith (1999) and Walter and Anderson (2013) have identified how colonial thinking has frequently oriented academic institutions toward indigenous peoples – as objects to be understood through colonial frames. A central problem for all of these scholars is a colonial stance toward academic research, a stance in which researchers deny the local and political origins of knowledge, while simultaneously producing knowledge that shores

up colonial authority.

For example, Walter and Andersen identify a wide range of Canadian and Australian research projects that bolster government policies intended to " 'close the (socioeconomic) gap' between Aboriginal and non-Indigenous populations" by helping those populations "catch up" with non-Indigenous peoples. One consequence of this research is the propagation of deficit-based understandings of Indigenous peoples, and the claims of non-Indigenous peoples to lands they've colonized (p. 22). This kind of research also helps illuminate the problem of epistemic desire. In the cases Walter and Andersen offer, the exigencies of the research are predicated on several tacit assumptions, including the imagined permanency of colonial occupation, and a political agenda that seeks to assimilate Indigenous peoples into colonial socioeconomic structures.

In contrast to this epistemic orientation, decoloniality involves recognition of the particular colonial contexts that impinge on knowledge production. Therefore, in this project, I made overt efforts to highlight moments that disclosed the personal, political, and local origins of the research. Where possible, I have also tried to pivot epistemic desire in such a way that it reflected genuine questions participants had about FYW placement.

I will offer detailed descriptions of moments where I have tried to articulate and pivot epistemic desire further in this chapter, but for the moment, I'll provide just one example. When I submitted this project for IRB approval, I described the research project in the following way: This project solicits students' responses to their placements into MSU's first year writing program. The project will seek to generate information about students' desires for writing instruction, understanding of the placement process, and satisfaction with the courses they have been placed into. The project will include surveys with a large group of students as well as

interviews with students who have been placed into particular classes at MSU via different pathways. The findings from this research will help MSU's first year writing program make decisions regarding if and how the program should revise its placement procedures.

The passages I've emphasized highlight two features: the initial research question, and the epistemic contributions of the research. The initial research question, "what are students' responses to their placement?" is intentionally broad because students' epistemic desires have not yet informed the project. The epistemic contributions of the research are oriented around institutional interest (it "will help MSU's first year writing program make decisions").

However, during the process of conducting research, I engaged with student feedback to rearticulate the primary analytical foci of this project around questions they had about placement. Simultaneously, I have tried to subordinate the element of institutional interest, and instead have emphasized participant interest, in an effort to produce findings that will be able to contribute to students' understandings of placement, and the writing program at Michigan State. Subsequently, I refocused this project around three main areas that some students (and in some cases, many students), had about placement: (1) the technical operation of placement, as a process; (2) the presence of bias in the placement model; (3) students' perceptions of helpfulness in their FYW classes.

Even this process, however, has been fraught: aware that students' contributions to this research will have more immediate benefits for me than it will for students, I have struggled with logistical questions about making the contributions from this research available to a broader public of FYW students. I am also aware of the economic transformation that students' stories undergo when they enter into academic research – the process by which their perspectives become data, the process by which the answers to their questions become findings, and by which

all of these together can furnish the raw materials for academic researchers.

Therefore, I have become keenly aware of the necessity for decolonial writing program assessment projects to carefully articulate who wants to know what information, and why I have pursued particular questions, and not others. At the same time, I have also become aware of a need to describe the epistemic contributions of my own research, and to counterbalance personal benefits I receive from this research with epistemic contributions that research participants described as valuable.

Centering participant perspectives

I understand the issue of perspective as linked to the issue of epistemic desire in that both involve highlighting the self-determination of research participants. Participant perspective is also a thread that runs through both writing assessment scholarship, as well as the work of decolonial and Indigenous scholars. As I described in the previous chapter, current writing assessment scholars place a high premium on the value of *localism*, in opposition to external control. For me, this is exemplified by Chris Gallagher's (2011) proclamation that in matters of writing assessment, “being there matters” (p. 463), and that writing assessment should highlight teacher and student agency. Similarly, Indigenous scholars have been critical of how colonial academic work has ignored the perspectives of Indigenous or colonially-disenfranchised groups (Tuhiwai Smith, 1999; Walter & Andersen, 2013). Walter and Andersen (2013) describe, for example, the historical problem of Canadian census data, which rely on a method of demographic production that inadequately and incorrectly identified Indigenous communities. The act of epistemic production represented by Canadian census procedures is one of many examples in which a colonial institution misrepresents research participants by recognizing and imposing colonial ontological categories.

In the process of conducting and representing research, I have made careful efforts to center participant perspectives in the generation, interpretation, and representation of data. My hope is that the premise of this project – identifying and responding to students' questions about placement – illuminates this methodological principle. However, Walter and Andersen's example regarding census data was instructive for my own quantitative design, and speaks to an important question I encountered during this work: to what extent would I be able to represent student perspective through quantitative design?

As I designed the survey that I distributed to students, I wanted to be able to collect information related to particular, predictable colonial formations: race, gender, citizenship status, and (possibly) placement level. However, I have also wanted to be careful about how I have used this information to identify the human participants in this survey, and what kinds of ontological claims I am making on the basis of their responses. For example, when I asked participants to identify racially, I asked the question: "What race or races do you identify with in the US?" Participants were able to select from the racial categories Michigan State acknowledges, or choose not to identify at all. I made this decision in a specific effort to scaffold race in this research as a colonial signifier, rather than as a category of participants' identities. While some participants may attach deep significance to their racial identifications, I did not investigate the extent to which participants accept racial identifications as part of their identities. Therefore, I have used demographic data to speak to structural formations, not to make claims about their character. The language I used to detail findings from this research reveals this orientation. For example, I favor the claim:

> *survey participants who identified with the Hispanic/Latinx racial formation were less likely to express high opinions of course helpfulness*

as opposed to the claim:

Hispanic/Latinx students found their courses less helpful.

Despite the directness of the latter statement, I believe the qualifications I've offered in the former do a better, more careful job of representing participant perspectives.

Articulating the object of analysis, and engaging in ethical representation

Walter and Andersen (2013) detail the significance that the issue of ethical representation has had for Indigenous peoples and as a point of scholarship. Their motivation is particular – Walter and Andersen want to offer quantitative methodologies that are accountable to Indigenous peoples and perspectives to complement the body of literature offering Indigenous qualitative research methods. While a substantial amount of quantitative work has reproduced narratives about Indigenous deficits, the authors argue for an outline possibilities of decolonizing quantitative methods for the purposes of represent Indigenous peoples ethically. And, like these authors, I also confronted the question of how to represent participant responses ethically in my own quantitative methods.

As one tactical use of statistics, Walter and Andersen demonstrate that quantitative methods can "provide insights into settler colonizing peoples and institutions" (p. 82). Spurr (1993) has noted the prevalence of a panoptic, surveilling gaze in colonial administrative discourse; Walter and Andersen (2013), however, suggest that quantitative methods can also flip this gaze, that researchers can use findings from quantitative research to speak not to the nature of individuals within a colonial institution, but to the nature of the institution. In this spirit, I have used quantitative methods to provide insight into the nature of Michigan State as an institution, not into research participants. What this means is that in this research, quantitative findings work toward the aims of structural description, and structural critique.

For example, I intentionally interpret disparities in placements as characteristic of

Michigan State (the institution). Some people might interpret the differences in placement numbers differently: they might, for example, assert that some racial groups are more or less prepared for college writing than others (and hence need extra preparation). However, the latter interpretation reproduces the colonial tropes of deficit (Walter and Andersen, 2013) and debasement (Spurr, 1993) – suggesting that some individuals exist below the standards of the institution – and dehumanizes participants. Ethical representation has thus been an important part of generating quantitative data, as well as analyzing and representing that data.

As a principle in this research, I summarize ethical representation as containing two dimensions:

1. Identifying stories participants wanted told, or wanted to tell about themselves (eg. stories about bias and helpfulness).
2. Not telling stories about students that participants did not tell themselves, or that do not have obvious benefit for students (eg. stories about deficit).

Scaffolding decolonial analysis

As I identified in the previous chapter, decolonial scholarship involves the related projects of deconstructing colonial knowledge, and reconstructing locally-oriented, locally-beneficial knowledge (Mignolo, 2011; Quijano, 2007). For me, the analytical project of decoloniality meant that I needed to anticipate the possible existence of certain kinds of predictable colonial experiences and formations. Scaffolding decolonial critique, for me, has meant anticipating possibilities for a variety of colonial consequences, including effects and experiences that the institution distributes differently to different colonial formations.

For example, in the survey component of this research, I made the decision to ask to students to identify with one or more "racial formations." Researchers in writing assessment have begun advocating for specific, methodological attention to race in order to produce more equitable educational experiences for students (Inoue, 2012a; Kelly-Riley, 2011). Oriented in a

similar way, I anticipated institutionally-specific racial formations as one predictable consequence of the coloniality of power. This hunch was grounded in a large body of literature articulating race as a colonial concept (Quijano, 2007; Guillaumin, 2002), that materializes in locally-specific ways (Omi and Winant, 1994), as an essential aspect of modern state apparatuses (Goldberg, 2002). Therefore, I made a conscientious effort to consider colonial ontological categories (race, gender, citizenship), and the effects of placement on students assigned various colonial subject positions. By asking survey participants in this research to identify race, gender, and citizenship, for example, my aim was to scaffold possibilities for decolonial analysis.

Redefining accountability

In writing assessment discourse, discussions about "accountability" have been both pervasive and highly contested. White, Elliott, and Peckham (2015) have advocated for accountability as a consideration in writing program assessment practice, arguing that attention to accountability "allows instructors and administrators to present their curricular aims to key stakeholders, identify challenges of meeting these aims, and establish plans for the program's future" (p. 169). However, others have challenged the accountability framework, critiquing and describing alternatives to "accountability" (Gallagher, 2007). Adler-Kassner and Harrington (2010) have argued that "accountability" frameworks emphasize institutional accountability to employers – "since employers will ensure the economic futures of the students populating our classrooms" (p. 85) – compelling writing programs to engage in what I have been calling a rhetoric of vali*dation*, putting them in the position of "proving—gathering evidence that can attest to an institution's work, not that of a student" (p. 80). Thus, in writing assessment discourse, *accountability* is a fraught term, that typically signifies institutional culpability for satisfying the demands of external "stakeholders" or audiences.

Delinked from the rhetoric of *validation*, accountability can signify different concepts. In this research, my sense of "accountability" has been influenced not just by writing assessment discourse, but by Indigenous scholarship as well. Scholar Shawn Wilson (2008), for example, has described "relational accountability" as a central axiological and methodological consideration for indigenous researchers. According to Wilson, relational accountability means:

> … fulfilling a role and obligations in the research relationship — that is, being accountable to your relations…[T]he knowledge that the researcher interprets must be respectful of and help to build the relationships that have been established throughout the process of finding information (p. 77).

Thus, for me, accountability has not meant a responsibility to external "stakeholders" but directly to participants in the placement project research.

One of the primary ways in which I've tried to act on the principle of relational accountability played out in the domain of epistemic production. As I mention earlier, my goal was to produce research that was more reflective of participants' epistemic desires than the desires of the FYW program. Shifting the central analytical frames to represent participants' epistemic desire has been one of the ways in which I've attempted to highlight my sense accountability to participants, rather than Michigan State, or the FYW program as institutional apparatuses.

Aiming at material decolonization

In the end, as Tuck and Yang (2012) have emphasized, decoloniality also requires a commitment to material decolonization, and to Indigenous repatriation of land. Ultimately, this implies the insecurity of the futurity of settler-colonial post-secondary institutions. One task for writing program assessment practitioners, then, is to identify local possibilities for redistributing university resources, and for developing infrastructures designed to serve the needs of those most susceptible to material disenfranchisement via colonialism.

In this project, I ultimately elaborate alternatives to a placement model that, I have found, distributes educational experiences and opportunities differently. While I consider my primary accountability to the participants in this research, some of those participants have been writing program administrators. One aim of this research is to offer back to the FYW program placement models that provide for greater self-determination on students' parts. These recommendations will be grounded in students' perceptions of the course's consequences for their own educational experiences, and will possibly work toward reimagining the placement process in such a way that

A second outcome of this research is a repertoire of the assessment methods and instruments I have used to try to center human, rather than administrative, interest. My hope here is to contribute to a department protocol for program assessment that systematically decenters administrative interest as the locus of epistemic desire.

Methods

In the course of this research project, I used a range of research methods. These methods included (1) historical inquiry and archival research; (2) interviews; and (3) statistical methods.

Historical inquiry and archival research

I began historical research into the institutional history of Michigan State long before I began any IRB-approved inquiries into students' perspectives, and I continue to engage in historical research. Throughout this project, I have made great efforts to locate this research within larger narratives, not just about writing assessment, but about the function of post-secondary education in the United States; about Michigan State and the state of Michigan; about the writing program on this campus, and about the institutional neighbors that impact the landscape of the program. This research has taken the form of:

- conversations with faculty inside and outside the FYW program (Lindquist, 2012; Noverr, 2012; Julier, 2012; Swenson, 2012; Lindquist, 2014; Meier, 2015)
- reading through archived documents produced by the Department of American Thought and Language
- reading published historical surveys of Michigan State (Widder, 2005; Thomas, 2008),
- and of the Michigan State writing program more specifically (Fero, 2006)
- historical accounts and critiques of post-secondary education in the United States (Wright, 1988; Thelin, 2011; Geiger, 1999; Key, 1996; Altbach & Knight, 2007; Altbach, 2003)
- primary institutional documents related to Michigan State's interest in *internationalization* (Simon, 2009; MSUG, 1962)
- secondary historical accounts of that interest (Smuckler, 2003; Alster, 2014; Nicolas, 1966)
- and thorough review of institutional documents related to the formation and administration of the English Language Center

I do not proclaim expertise in historiographical methods. However, I have found that historical description has been a necessary component of my placement research.

Historical and archival research has been especially valuable in acting on the methodological principle of *scaffolding decolonial analysis*. By engaging in historical inquiry, I have developed a much richer understanding of the historical and institutional contexts in which the current placement system operates, as well the personal interests that have shaped the placement process. For example, the current authority that the English Language Center (ELC) has to affect FYW placements emerged out of its own history – like the Michigan State University Group's involvement in South Vietnam, the ELC was an institutional response to Truman's Point IV challenge – and struggle for authority. The history of the ELC is a history of how Michigan State has made specific decisions related to the administration of international students. Historical inquiry has thus provided perspective in identifying geographical, biographical, and political roots of a facially neutral assessment practice like placement.

Interviews

I used interviews in this research for several purposes. While the survey of FYW students

provided a sense of the big picture of the FYW program, I felt that in order to get a more nuanced sense of students' experiences and their questions, I would need to actually talk to students in the program. The specific functions of interviews in this research, then, were (1) to produce student questions about the FYW placement model, and hone the analytical focus of this research; as well as (2) to generate several unique narratives of course experiences in relation to the structure of placement. In this sense, the method of interviewing allowed me to act on the methodological principles I identified previously, *articulating epistemic desire and epistemic contributions*, and *centering student perspectives*.

Recruitment and Participants. While I treated each story as unique, I did seek to interview students from across the FYW program. Therefore, to recruit students for participation in this research, I asked FYW and PCW instructors for some time to recruit students directly. I recruited directly from a range of courses, including PCW both as well as themed courses from FYW. Ultimately, three students agreed to participate in the interviews. While I sought out all students enrolled in FYW courses, the three students who agreed to participate in the interviews for this research all had significant educational experiences outside of the United States, and two had international citizenship.

Elle. When I met Elle in Spring 2014, she was enrolled in PCW after having taken courses at the English Language Center (ELC).

Prior to coming to Michigan State, Elle had graduated from high school in Seattle, Washington. While Elle had spent several years at her high school in Seattle, she didn't learn about the requirements that many post-secondary institutions in the US had for student with international citizenship. Elle is a citizen of China, and learned late in high school that her international citizenship would mean that she would need to complete additional requirements to

apply to colleges in the United States. For instance, Elle learned that she would need to take the TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) and submit her scores to colleges in the US, in addition to her SAT scores. Ultimately, Elle did not believe she had enough time to prepare for this test, and when she received her scores, found that she had scored lower than she had hoped. She was not accepted into any of the universities she had wanted to attend, and after graduation, returned to China, where she continued to study for the TOEFL, and retook the test until she received acceptable scores. Finally, after taking the TOEFL on seven (7) different occasions, Michigan State accepted Elle as a student.

When Elle arrived at Michigan State, however, her TOEFL scores were sufficiently low that she would need to take additional courses through the ELC. At the end of these courses, Elle's grades on several exit, timed-writing essays made her eligible for evaluation by the FYW program. Additionally, readers from the FYW program decided on the basis of these essays that Elle would be eligible to take mainstream (100-level) FYW courses. However, when Elle attempted to enroll in 100-level courses, she found that all the sections that matched her schedule were full. As a result, Elle had a conversation with the Assistant Director of the FYW program, and consequently decided she could also benefit from PCW. Ultimately, Elle enrolled in PCW.

Youssof. Youssof was also enrolled in PCW in Spring 2014, which his first writing course at Michigan State. Youssof had come to Michigan State from Saudi Arabia, where he had completed all of his previous education. Prior to applying to Michigan State, Youssof had enrolled in a college preparation program, which had included a course devoted to writing for the IELTS (International English Language Testing System). While Youssof had found the course periodically challenging, Youssof ultimately did sufficiently well on the IELTS to be admitted to Michigan State with regular admission status, meaning he would not need to take any courses at

the ELC.

While Youssof had dedicated considerable energy to preparing for the IELTS, he had not taken either the ACT or the SAT (and in fact, was the only of the participants I interviewed who had not taken this test). So, while Youssof was eligible to pass out of ELC courses, his lack of ACT or SAT scores meant that he was ineligible for a 100-level FYW course. Youssof was ultimately placed into PCW because he had not taken either of these tests, or submitted scores on these tests to the Office of Admissions.

Kenneth. Kenneth, a zoology major, had been enrolled in a WRA 110 course in Spring 2014. This was his first FYW course, and first writing course at Michigan State. Prior to coming to Michigan State, Kenneth had completed all his previous education in Singapore, including a post-secondary program in video game design. When he attempted to apply at Michigan State, Kenneth was told that he would need to submit English language proficiency test scores, which could include scores on the TOEFL or the IELTS. Kenneth was a bit perplexed by this requirement – all of his prior education had been conducted in English, albeit British English. However, after some discussion, Michigan State learned that Kenneth had been born in the United States, and had US citizenship. Consequently, the university ultimately decided that these test scores would not be necessary.

After his placement into a 100-level FYW course, Kenneth had met with his adviser, and had a conversation about which course to take. Kenneth had previously studied game design, and considered himself a "designer at heart," but had decided to study zoology at Michigan State. His adviser had insisted that WRA 110, "Science and Technology," would provide a better foundation for scientific writing than some of the other themed FYW courses. Kenneth trusted this advice, and decided to enroll into WRA 110.

Interview Methods. I had two, semi-structured interviews with each participant in this portion of the research. The purpose of the first interview was to learn about students' previous experiences with literacy-related courses, as the subjects of sorting into such courses, and about their expectations and desires for the courses they had been sorted into.

During the first interview, I asked participants to (1) describe experiences of learning and evaluation in prior writing courses, and (2) to articulate and compare their expectations of their FYW courses to their experiences of those courses.

A critical moment occurred between the first and second interview for each participant. At the end of the of the first interview, I asked students to do two things: identify a piece of writing – reflective of their experiences in the FYW program – that they would be willing to share with me in our followup interview; and articulate questions they had about placement, including questions they had for the program, as well as for other students. In some cases, I was able to answer participants' questions on the spot; in other cases, these questions shifted the focus of my analysis, and nudged the locus of epistemic desire away from FYW administration. This move in particular helped me articulate epistemic desires and contributions in this research.

The purpose of the second interview was to follow up on students' initial descriptions of their placements, to talk about their placements in relation to their learning and writing, and to discuss their satisfaction with their placements. During this interview, I asked students (1) to review with me my understanding of their previous responses; (2) to respond to their colleagues' questions about placements; (3) to identify relationships between the writing they had produced in their classes, and what they found helpful or not helpful about their writing courses; and (4) to discuss their perceptions about the appropriateness of their placements, particularly in relation to alternative placement models, like directed self-placement (DSP). The second interview helped

me act on the principles of *accountability to program participants* and *ethical representation* by helping ensure I would not misrepresent their perspectives. Additionally, these second interviews gave me an opportunity to respond to participants' previous questions, either with my own responses, or by relaying responses from other members of the FYW program, and other students. This helped me act on the principle of *articulating epistemic desire and epistemic contributions*.

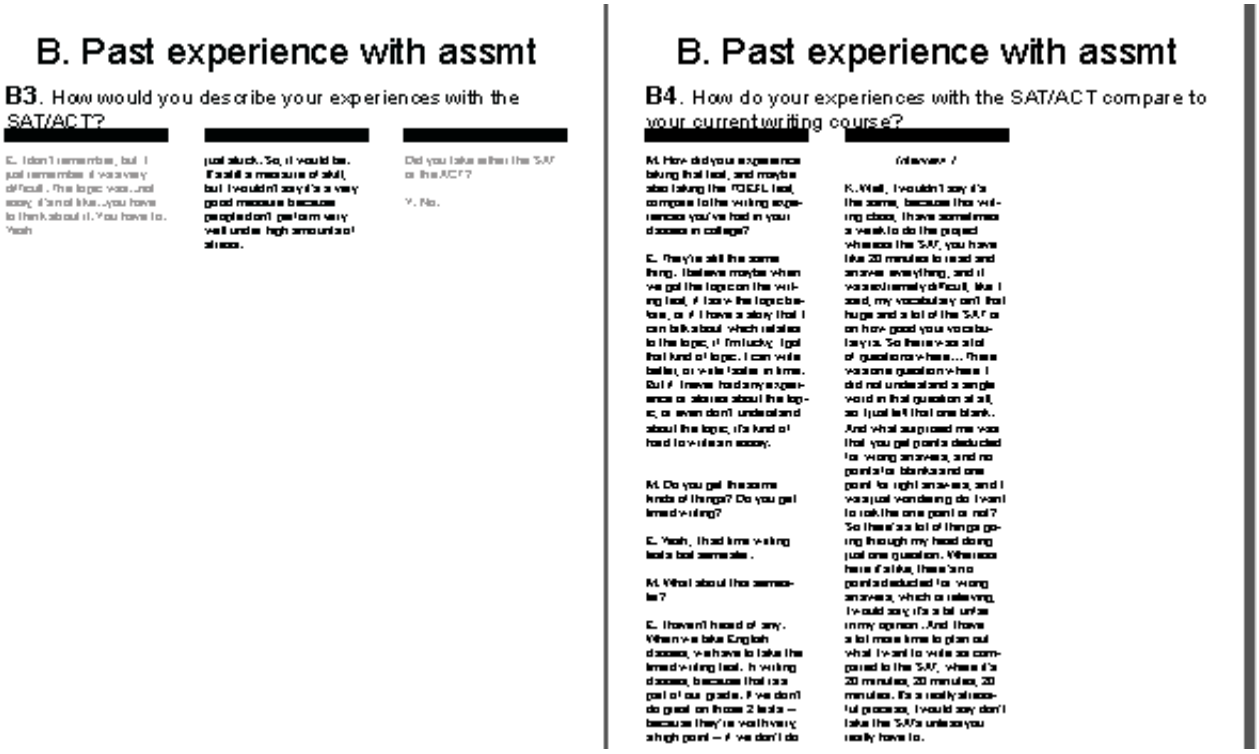
Coding interview responses. I developed a coding scheme out of the interview questions I asked. Prior to transcribing the interviews, I grouped similar questions into 10 categories, and gave each question a code consisting of a letter and a number (e.g., B4). As I coded each interview, I tagged the questions I asked, or the direction of the conversation, with one of these codes. After reviewing and transcribing each of the interviews, I eliminated questions from the protocol that were either redundant, or were not asked in the interviews.

Once the interviews were transcribed and coded, I laid out participants' responses synoptically according to its alphanumeric code, so I would be able to see how each participant responded to the same questions simultaneously (see below). Once I'd completed the synoptic display for each coded interview question, I collapsed each question grouping into one of the following five groups:

(1) Background experiences, perception of self, and desires for writing
(2) Experiences of helpfulness
(3) Placement knowledge, experience, and perceptions
(4) Participants' questions about placements and experiences
(5) Experiences with timed writing on English language proficiency tests (TOEFL & IELTS) and standardized admissions tests (SAT and ACT)

This descriptive coding technique was an intentional effort to highlight participants' responses to specific questions (eg. "How helpful did you find your course? What was helpful about your course?"), while maintaining the contexts in which those conversations actually occurred. This

move highlights the principle of ethical representation; I applied minimal levels of additional analysis beyond the issues that were explicitly on the table during my conversations with student participants.



B. Past experience with assmt

B3. How would you describe your experiences with the SAT/ACT?

[redacted]

E.. I don't remember, but I just remember it was very difficult. The logic was...not scary, it's not like...you have to think about it. You have to. Yeah

[redacted]

just stuck. So, it would be. It's still a measure of skill, but I wouldn't say it's a very good measure because people don't perform very well under high amounts of stress.

[redacted]

Did you take either the SAT or the ACT?

Y. No.

B. Past experience with assmt

B4. How do your experiences with the SAT/ACT compare to your current writing course?

[redacted]

M. How did you experience taking that test, and maybe also taking the TOEFL test, compare to the writing experiences you've had in your classes in college?

E.. They're all the same thing. I believe maybe when we get the topic on the writing test, if I saw the topic before, or if I have a story that I can talk about which relates to the topic, if I'm lucky, I got that kind of topic. I can write better, or write faster in time. But if I never had any experience or stories about the topic, or even don't understand about the topic, it's kind of hard to write an essay.

M. Do you get the same kinds of things? Do you get timed writing?

E.. Yeah, I had time writing tests but semester.

M. What about this semester?

E.. I haven't heard of any. When we take English classes, we have to take the timed writing test. In writing classes, because that is a part of our grade. If we don't do good on those 2 tests -- because they're worth very, a high point -- if we don't do

[redacted]

(Interview 7

R. Well, I wouldn't say it's the same, because like writing class, I have sometimes a week to do the project whereas the SAT, you have like 20 minutes to read and answer everything, and it was extremely difficult, like I said, my vocabulary isn't that huge and a lot of the SAT is on how good your vocabulary is. So there was a lot of questions where... There was one question where I did not understand a single word in that question at all, so I just left that one blank. And what surprised me was that you get points deducted for wrong answers, and no points for blanks and one point for right answers, and I was just wondering do I want to risk the one point or not? So there's a lot of things going through my head doing just one question. Whereas here it's like, there's no points deducted for wrong answers, which is relieving, I would say, it's a bit unfair in my opinion. And I have a lot more time to plan out what I want to write as compared to the SAT, where it's 20 minutes, 20 minutes, 20 minutes. It's a really stressful process, I would say don't take the SATs unless you really have to.

Figure 1. Sample page from interview synopsis

Survey. Scholars with agendas of decolonization have historically been wary of quantitative methods, particularly because quantitative research – often undertaken by colonial states – has been destructively reductive for indigenous and marginalized communities. However, as Walter and Andersen (2013) have argued, quantitative methods are not necessarily responsible for creating damaging research for these communities — rather, the quantitative methodologies that have underpinned much of this research has been at fault. Thus, despite the damage that quantitative research has wrought, Walter and Andersen affirm that there lies the potential for quantitative practices to provide insights into (and that are beneficial to) Indigenous communities and colonially-susceptible groups, as well as insights into settler colonial institutions (p. 82). In contrast to colonial quantitative research, the quantitative methodology

Walter and Andersen advocate for (1) refuses to take a “deficit” perspective toward research participants, (2) treats colonial apparatuses and institutions, rather than colonized subjects, as the objects of research, (3) attends to the perspectives of participants susceptible to colonialism, and (4) renders research findings useful for the communities that participate in the research.

Following these guidelines, I decided that a survey would be consistent with my aims for this research, given a certain orientation toward research participants: (1) quantitative findings would need to resist a deficit approach (in other words, I would need to assume that students were reliable reporters of their own experiences); (2) quantitative findings should speak back to the structure of placement, rather than further objectify students; (3) quantitative data should attend to students' perspectives; and (4) the findings from research should show some value for research participants. Therefore, I administered surveys to generate data and produce narratives about the structure of placement. Producing these “big picture” narratives would also allow me to locate interview participants' individual accounts within a landscape of structural patterns. The structural patterns I sought information about involved the following five items:

(1) demographic data about participants at different levels of the FYW program;
(2) participants' beliefs about how they were placed into FYW courses at MSU;
(3) participants' experiences of institutional, program, and transfer-related learning outcomes in their courses;
(4) participants' satisfaction with their placements and with their courses;
(5) participants' perceptions of the appropriateness of their placements.

Additionally, I included open-ended questions on the survey to help me refine my analytic focus, and decide which quantitative stories FYW students might want to know about. Along with what I learned from interview participants, survey participants' open-ended responses helped me make informed decisions about what data I should try to represent, and how I should try to represent that data. For example, the prevalence of students' questions about how placement works helped convince me that I needed to produce a simple, visual representation of the placement process.

Similarly, students' stated concerns with bias in the placement model and course helpfulness compelled me to focus my research around these two concepts, and to seek out specific ways the quantitative data I had produced could begin to answer their specific questions. This was one example of the considering epistemic desire and epistemic contributions.

When I administered the survey in Spring 2015, I did so across both levels of the FYW program, and across all 100-level courses. The survey received 804 total responses, which was 25.4% of the total enrollment in FYW courses in Spring 2015. The questions I asked students to identify demographic information, and asked students about their awareness of the FYW placement process, their experiences with courses they placed into, their satisfaction with their placements, and whether they believed they should have placed into a different course. Overall, this survey was designed to provide a picture of the landscape of placement, at a structural level.

Table 1

FYW enrollments in survey sample, compared to enrollment totals

	Survey Responses: Spring 2015		Total FYW Enrollment: Spring 2015	
	Survey responses (n)	Percent of sample	Total enrolled	Percent enrolled
PCW	128	15.9%	461	14.6%
100-level courses	676	84.1%	2696	85.4%
Total	804	100%	3157	100%

Sampling. I surveyed students across the whole FYW program in Spring 2015, distributing the survey to FYW teachers via listservs, and by enrolling the support of leaders in the PCW and FYW programs. I asked teachers if they would permit students in their courses to spend some time in class completing the survey, beginning in Week 13. As responses came in, I tried to achieve a balance representative of the proportion of students placed at different levels. In statistical terms, the sampling method used was a quota sample, as I encouraged teachers to distribute the survey in such a way that would reflect the placement distribution. As the table above indicates, student participation in the survey reflected actual enrollments in FYW courses within ±1.3% of actual enrollments in Spring 2015.

Statistical methods

After distributing the survey to FYW students, I began to work with a graduate consultant at Michigan State's Center for Statistical Training and Consulting (CSTAT), Wenjuan. With the guidance of undergraduate students' questions about placement, I began to discuss possibilities for quantitative analysis with Wenjuan. While more detailed discussions of specific statistical methods follow in subsequent chapters, this section provides a brief overview and explanation about the kinds of statistical methods used, and why we selected those methods.

Statistical methods for considering "bias." To determine the answers to students' questions about bias, I first consulted previous literature about using statistical methods to discern biases in writing assessments. In Poe, Elliott, Cogan Jr., and Nurudeen Jr. (2014), the authors offer the legal heuristic of "disparate impact analysis" as one way to discern whether or not assessment techniques may be considered unintentionally discriminatory in the eyes of the US justice system. According to the authors, this three-step process involves (1) determining "adverse impact" on one subgroup, compared to other subgroups; (2) considering whether there is "justifiable need" for the disparity in impact; and (3) whether there exist alternatives that would achieve the same outcomes, without producing adverse impact. In the case of the first item, the authors provide two commonly-accepted mathematical procedures: the "four-fifths" rule, and a chi-squared ($\chi 2$) test of statistical significance. The authors point out that mathematically, $\chi 2$ tests are considered more robust than the "four-fifths rule."

With this in mind, I worked with Wenjuan to develop regression models – typically considered even more statistically robust than tests of statistical significance, such as $\chi 2$ tests. While $\chi 2$ tests of statistical significance can demonstrate the relationships between two items – students' racial identifications and placements, for example – regression models can compare those items to other variables – such as their gender identifications – and provide a basis for making determinations about the effect of certain variables on a given outcome. For instance, $\chi 2$ tests might show that there are statistically significant associations between identifying as white and placing into a higher course, as well as identifying as female and placing into a higher course; a regression model, on the other hand, might show that considered together, all white students surveyed were more likely to place into a higher course, controlling for the effects of gender. This possibility provided us with a justification for moving from descriptive and into

predictive statistical models. Predictive statistical models, in other words, furnished us with the opportunity to take a closer look at the systemic effects of placement, and identify a range of possible patterns consistent with colonial "bias," including racism, sexism, and national origin discrimination.

Ultimately, we used binary logistic regression models to investigate the statistical relationships between students' demographic characteristics and their placement level. Binary logistic regressions are considered appropriate in cases when variables can be constructed as binary in nature (eg. students place into either PCW or 100-level courses; students either identify with the Asian racial formation or they do not). Because all of the demographic variables were measured in such a way that we could produce a binary representation of data, we were able to use binary logistic regressions for measuring the effect of students' demographic characteristics on their placement levels.

Statistical methods for considering helpfulness. Helpfulness emerged as an analytical focus as a consequence of my conversations with student participants, and review of participant responses in the open-ended portions of the survey. It was an effort to shift accountability and fulfill the epistemic desires of participants.

Unfortunately, what this meant was that I had not anticipated measuring "helpfulness" directly, when I built and distributed the survey. However, I had measured related items in which I asked participants about the extent to which their course had helped them move toward specific outcomes. In order to establish the basis for a "helpfulness" variable, I would need to run a factor analysis on the responses participants offered. Because of the level of technical detail required to explain the process of constructing this analytical model, I will reserve a more thorough description of this quantitative process for Chapter 4, which addresses the issue of helpfulness

explicitly.

The consequence of this operation was a single value (which we called students' helpfulness scores), that represented the average of each students' perceptions of all the learning outcomes measured, on a scale of 1 to 7. Unlike the categorical variables we used to investigate bias, these helpfulness scores were continuous variables, meaning we needed to use different statistical methods for investigating the relationship between participants' demographic data, and their helpfulness scores.

Linear regression models are considered appropriate in trying to determine the potential effect of independent variables on a continuous variable. In order to see, for example, if participants who identified as Black were more or less likely than their colleagues to have high *helpfulness scores* we would need to use a linear regression model. Therefore, statistical investigations into helpfulness involved a linear regression model that attempted to discern if demographic characteristics or course satisfaction had an effect on participants' *helpfulness scores*.

Descriptive statistics. In the appendix, you will find the descriptive statistics, which detail the demographic characteristics that survey participants identified with.

Conclusion

I outlined six principles of my larger methodological aim of epistemic decolonization: (1) articulating epistemic desire and epistemic contributions; (2) Centering student perspectives; (3) Scaffolding decolonial critique; (4) Engaging in ethical representations; (5) Accountability; (6) Aiming at material decolonization.

I also detailed the specific methods I used in the process of conducting placement research. These included historical inquiry, interviews, and qualitative and quantitative analysis

of survey responses.

The following chapters detail the findings from three research questions that emerged from my interactions with students:

1. How does placement work? Why does placement work in the way that it does?
2. Was the placement process biased at all?
3. How helpful did students find their FYW course?
    a. Did students believe their courses fulfilled institutional learning goals? Was there a difference in how these goals were perceived by different student formations, or different enrollment levels?
    b. What specific features of their FYW courses did students find most helpful?

In chapter 3, I address the first two questions, describing both the technical operation of placement, as well as the biases that I found evidence of. In Chapter 4, I answer Part A of the third question, describing what I learned about *helpfulness* through quantitative inquiry. In Chapter 5, I answer Part B, describing specific *helpful* features that interview participants told me about.

CHAPTER 3. THE 'QUITE ELABORATE' REALITY OF PLACEMENT AT MSU

Early on in the research into placement at Michigan State, it became clear that for myself, and for participants in this research project, I needed to develop an understanding of the placement process at Michigan State University (MSU), and how the model came to take its current shape. The confusion students might have had regarding this process first became evident to me during interviews I conducted with three students in the first-year writing (FYW) program in Spring 2015. One student, Kenneth, described his lack of certainty about how he was placed into FYW courses.

> Kenneth: What I originally thought was when we enrolled for classes, it's just that slot's available, and then you just enroll in it. I wasn't really sure if there was another way around it. Is there?

After asking a few clarifying questions, I responded to Kenneth:

> Matt: Depending on where you are applying from as a student, if you were...because you are a citizen, and they only used your SAT scores, then if your SAT scores were too low -- and I'm not quite sure what the number is, but there's a number where it's too low -- then they would say, you can't take 110, you can't 150, you can't take 140, you can't take any of the 100-level classes. You have to take the 1004 class.
>
> Kenneth: Oh, ok.
>
> Matt: And so you would not be allowed to take the 100-level classes. And then, if you were applying from outside of the country, and you were not a citizen, then you would have to submit your TOEFL scores, and those would be evaluated by the ELC, and then if they're a certain level, then they make you take a test at the ELC, and depending on your performance on that test, then they either say you should go to the FYW program, or you should take classes in the ELC. And if you take classes in the ELC, then they decide which classes you need to take, based on how you did on that test, and then at the end of it, you take some timed writing tests, and those timed writing tests, the FYW program will use and read them, and they'll make a decision about whether you should go into 1004, or whether you should go into the 100-level classes like 150, 110, 130, 135, all those classes.
>
> Kenneth: Mmhm. Ok.
>
> Matt: If the test that you take at the ELC early on, the one they administer here, if

> you have a high enough score on them and they send you back over to the FYW program, then they'll use your SAT or ACT scores to make a decision. And so from there they might decide, well your ACT scores or you SAT scores are too low, so you have to take 1004, or no, they're high enough, and you can take 100-level classes.
>
> Kenneth: That's quite elaborate. I did not know.

While Kenneth's reaction to my description offered me some insight into students' perceived knowledge of how placement worked, a survey I administered in Spring 2015 provided me a better sense of the pervasiveness of students' confusion around placement. In this survey, I asked participants to respond both to closed and open-ended questions, including the following two open-ended questions:

1. What questions do you have about your course placement, or the system used to place you into courses?
2. What comments do you have about your course placement, or the system used to place you into courses?

When I reviewed survey participants' responses to these questions, I found the vast majority of responses I received were about the procedures the FYW program uses to make placement decisions. Participants' questions ranged in specificity, from very specific ("What are the most specific criteria regarded with highest importance when determining the course placement of the student? And does the process differ from other areas of course placement?") to very vague ("What was the system?").

Additionally, some of the survey participants indicated that the survey itself furnished them with a sense of the possible factors that might have contributed to their placements, and wondered about the actual bases for making placement decisions. Others denied having any knowledge of the placement system at all ("I am completely oblivious of the system that sets me into a particular writing course"; "I don't know anything about this or what you are talking about"). Some survey participants questioned whether there was anything systematic about the

placement system at all ("Is there actually a system?), with at least one participant asserting that he was not placed into his WRA 150 course because he had chosen it. In contrast, other participants were aware that a system existed but were uncertain about the effects of that system, asking questions like, "was it biased at all?"

In the end, two central inquiries emerged from my review of students' questions: the first, an inquiry into the operation and history of the FYW placement process. *What is the placement process, and how did it get the way that it is?* The second, an inquiry into the demographic consequences of the current placement process: *are there patterns of bias in the FYW placement process?*

The answer to these questions entails a structural description of the current placement model. Thus, in this chapter, I offer three categories of findings, based on archival research, as well as quantitative analysis of participants' survey responses. First, I offer a technical description of the FYW placement process at Michigan State, offering a response to the common question, *how does placement work?* Second, I offer brief historical portraits of the major institutional units implicated in FYW placement, the FYW program, and the English Language Center (ELC). This offers an answer to a second theme that emerged in participants' questions about placements: *Why does the placement process work in the way that it currently does?* Third, I offer statistical analyses of survey responses to examine patterns of bias that emerged from a Spring 2015 survey of FYW students. Specifically, I describe the relationships between institutional demographic categories (race, gender, citizenship) and placements.

The Structure of Placement at MSU

As per a curricular overhaul in the early 1990s, the general education curriculum at MSU

requires students to take at least two courses that count toward different writing requirements, designated as Tier One and Tier Two. My focus in this study is on Tier One credit, which is offered most-widely by 100-level courses in the FYW program provided by the Department of Writing, Rhetoric, and American Cultures (WRAC).

The FYW program at Michigan State is comprised of two courses – WRA and placement refers to the process by which students arrive in one of these two courses. In Spring 2015, the FYW program placed most students (around 85%) directly into 100-level courses that met the university's Tier One writing requirement. About 15% of students were placed into WRA 1004: Preparation for College Writing (PCW), a course that prepares students for the 100-level courses. According to the FYW program website, PCW requires 5 hours of attendance, payment for 4 credit hours, delivers 3 credit hours toward graduation, and 0 credits toward fulfilling Tier One writing requirements (FYW Program, 2015a). When the university places students into PCW, those students need to successfully complete two courses – both PCW and a 100-level class – to receive Tier One credit. The flowchart on the following page illustrates the process by which students are placed into FYW courses.

FYW Placement methods

Currently, for domestic students, the Office of Admissions places students into FYW courses on the basis of standardized test scores, specifically the ACT English test score, or the SAT Critical Reading sub score, based on guidelines provided by the FYW program. According to FYW program guidelines, students are eligible for 100-level classes, when they have a score of at least 15 on the ACT English or 390 on the SAT "Verbal" section (called Critical Reading

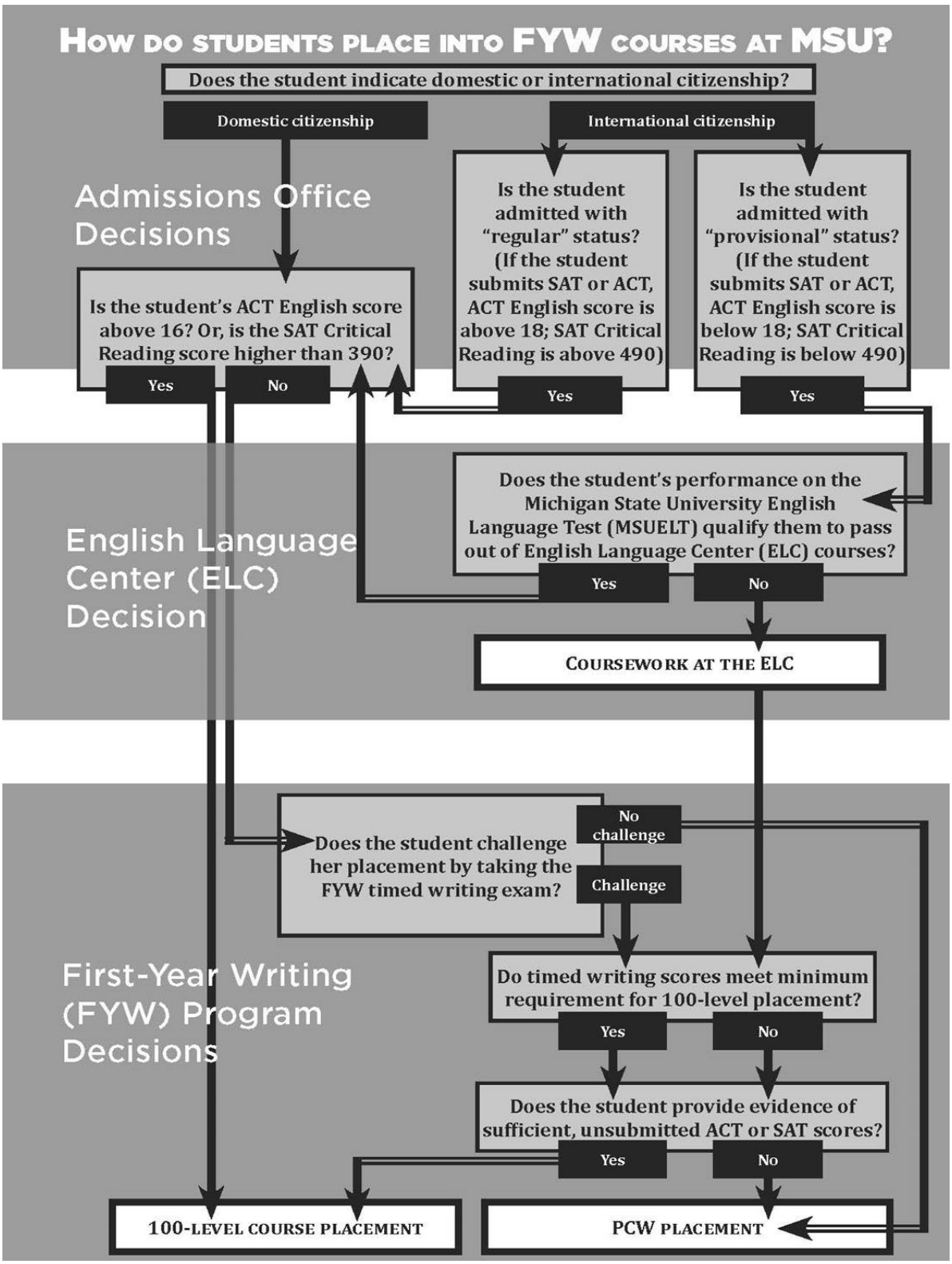


Figure 2. Flowchart of how students place into FYW courses.

since 2005). A score lower than either of these means that students will place into PCW (FYW Program, 2015a). Additionally, there is one other option available for completing the Tier One writing requirement, which is an honors course, WRA 195H. This course provides the same Tier One credit as WRA 110-150. In order to place into these courses, students need to achieve a minimum score of 28 on the ACT or 580 on the SAT Critical Reading.

When students place directly into 100-level courses, they face a range of options that fulfill the Tier One requirement. In Spring 2015, there were at least seven (7) courses (besides the honors course) that students could take for Tier One credit. These courses bore names like "Writing: Science and Technology," or "Writing: The American Racial and Ethnic Experience." Institutionally, the description of these courses are all the same. According to the MSU course catalog, all of the seven (7) 100-level courses are described as being about:

> The study and practice of varieties of invention, arrangement, revision, style and delivery to help students make successful transitions to writing, reading, and researching in higher education (Office of the Registrar, 2015c).

The similitude in official course descriptions will become important in the following chapters, in which I describe the varied phenomenology of placement and students' perceptions of helpfulness. However, in this chapter, the similitude in institutional description is important because of how it compares to the description of PCW:

> The study and practice of varieties of invention, arrangement, revision, style, and delivery to help students make successful transitions to writing, reading, and researching in Tier 1 writing (Office of the Registrar, 2015c)

Based on the differences in language, the course schedule indicates that the primary difference between the two courses is that FYW courses may have at one point been designed to help students "[transition] to writing, reading, and researching," in college (in the case of 100-level classes) and in Tier 1 courses (in the case of PCW). The titles of these courses, and their

descriptions, will be changing soon to reflect changes in how current FYW leadership imagines the function of Tier 1 writing. However, when this happens, the current placement process will stay in place, at least for several semesters.

FYW Placement methods: Challenges and exceptions. After the placement decision based on ACT or SAT scores, the FYW program also permits students to challenge the program's initial placement decision by taking a timed writing exam, which is usually administered just prior to start of a semester. These timed writing exams are scored by the assistant FYW director and instructors from the FYW program with experience teaching both PCW and 100-level courses (J. Meier, personal correspondence, February 2015). This timed writing exam is intended to measure students' abilities to:

- summarize an author's perspective in a provided text
- present multiple arguments related to a single issue
- support claims with specific examples
- produce clear and understandable timed writing responses

Raters score students' work along each of these criteria, providing one of three judgments for each criterion: students can either:

(1) clearly fulfill the criterion;
(2) partially fulfill the criterion; or
(3) clearly *not* fulfill the criterion (FYW Program, 2015b).

Based on example prompts provided by the FYW program, these tests follow a common format from semester to semester. Below, I've included the generic format for this test:

> Please read the following passage by [author]. Note that it presents only one side of a rather complex issue, and that you may or may not agree with everything she says.
>
> Using the author's argument to inform your response, what other arguments can you imagine? Based on your personal experience and beliefs, which of these arguments is most useful or beneficial?
>
> While answering the question in your essay, be sure to describe the main issue,

> offer a brief summary of the author's position, and identify at least two other ways the issue might be discussed. Be sure to support your claims with examples (FYW Program, 2012).

On the basis of conversations I've had with the current assistant FYW director, students who take these timed exams have a low rate of placement into 100-level courses. For example, in AY 2014-15, 63.4% of all students who took this challenge test were placed into PCW. The majority of these students challenged their placement in the summer preceding AY 2014-15 (FYW Program, 2015c).

Additionally, the FYW program also frequently needs to make placement determinations for students who arrive into the program from the ELC, an entity on campus that often requires students with international citizenship to take additional courses in writing, listening, and reading (eg. ESL 221: English Composition for Non-Native Speakers of English; ESL 222: Listening and Speaking for Academic Purposes for Non-Native Speakers of English; ESL 223: Reading for Academic Purposes for Non-Native Speakers of English). Students routed through the ELC must take these courses before becoming eligible for taking courses that carry Tier One credit.

As with students who decide to challenge their initial placement decisions, the FYW program makes determinations about students coming from the ELC on the basis of timed writing exams. These exams are written and administered by the instructors of courses housed within the ELC, and when those instructors determine that a student has done sufficiently well on these tests (those tests with average grades of 3.25), they pass them along to the assistant director of the FYW program to read with other instructors, and decide whether or not a student should be eligible to take a 100-level Tier One course, or whether they should take PCW. To make this decision, the FYW program uses a portfolio of work from ELC students, and a modified version of the rubric I presented above, focusing more on "claims, evidence, focus, and

clarity/understanding" and less on "presenting multiple arguments related to a single issue" and on "summarizing a single author's perspective" on that issue (J. Meier, personal correspondence, October 2015). According to the assistant FYW director, she and her colleagues very rarely determine that students coming from the ELC are eligible for 100-level courses, and that for those students, PCW is virtually the *de facto* placement decision. This is reflected in data about placement rates for students coming from the ELC. In AY 2014-15, for example, 80.8% of all students who came from the ELC were placed into PCW (FYW Program, 2015c)

History of the FYW program. Above, I've outlined the basic procedures that underpin the operation of the placement procedure within the FYW program. Despite the existence of these sets of procedures and considerations, conversations with administrators within the FYW program and WRAC, it has become clear to me that these procedures have been inherited from former institutional configurations, and represent a process that the current program has little investment in.

Through inquiries into the history of the placement process at MSU, I learned that the current method, specifically the use of ACT and SAT scores, has been around prior to the current institutional configuration. When the ACT scores were initially implemented as the primary placement tool, FYW was housed within a department called American Thought and Language (ATL), which later became WRAC. ATL was previously a department composed predominantly of instructors specializing in American Studies, not writing studies.

As I've mentioned, ATL was not originally a department with faculty trained in the disciplines of rhetoric and composition studies – as WRAC is now – but slowly acquired these kinds of faculty members over time. In 2003, the department changed from ATL to WRAC (Fero, 2006; MSU Archives, 2015). The name change was an indicator of changes that took a number

of years, and as gradual as this shift was, there was also a gradual accumulation of faculty whose orientations were closer to those common in rhetoric and composition studies (L. Julier, personal communication, November 2012).

The primary distinction between these two departments is that ATL had historically been occupied with the business of instructing undergraduates in general education courses that would fulfill their first-year writing requirements through a variety of courses whose primary content was history. On the other hand, WRAC has served a wider population of students, serving not just first- and second-year students, but also preparing undergraduate majors in Professional Writing (PW) and graduate students in Rhetoric and Writing. Simultaneously, the general orientation of WRAC has been less to use writing as a way of exploring some other content, but instead has made rhetoric and writing the content of its courses.

While many of the people during this time of transition were the same, I find it helpful to think of ATL and WRAC as two distinct departments. These respective departments had different responsibilities, as well as theoretical and disciplinary stances, and these differences caused a great deal of friction between faculty members. This friction is a central interest of Michele Fero's dissertation, *Negotiating Literacy: The Implications of Writing Program Reform in One University*. Fero argues that the tensions between faculty members had functioned as a major impediment to enacting change in first-year writing at Michigan State. Fero argues that this tension, and the history of the department, had facilitated the cultivation of a writing curriculum where, as of 2006:

> … there is no Composition program, no writing program administrator (WPA) and no *regular* first-year writing committee to help monitor and evaluate Tier One. There have been numerous committees and task forces over the years, but nothing permanent or even ongoing. There is no *consistent* attention to Tier One, and so, no sustained opportunity for evolution (p. 66).

I would argue that the state of the Tier One writing program has changed over the course of the last 9 years – since we *do* now have a regular curriculum, a WPA, and a regularly-convening FYW committee. There is also some evidence that there have been efforts to modify the placement system. For example, in a 2004, in a Writing Task Force report, a committee comprised of faculty, administrators, and graduate students from across WRAC and other departments made recommendations to change the FYW placement system. Specifically, the committee recommended a Directed Self-Placement (DSP) model, and the elimination of the PCW course, in favor of a two-semester, "stretch" sequence (Writing Task Force, 2004). However, neither the revised placement model nor the stretch sequence were ever implemented. According to the previous FYW program director, and a leading member of the Task Force, when the recommendations were turned over to higher administration, the Provost decided the task force needed to have a more robust assessment underpinning the recommendations. The major outcome of this report was the hiring of a faculty member to lead writing program assessment. However, that faculty member has since moved on to other teaching and administrative efforts (J. Lindquist, personal correspondence, October 11, 2015).

As I've mentioned, the model is one that the current administrators within WRAC and the FYW program are not particularly satisfied with, or invested in. The desire for a different model has existed for at least a decade, and currently, there is no coherent, publicly articulated rationale for the current placement model. I agree in part with Fero's argument that there has been a lack of sustained attention to FYW, at least as it pertains to placement. While there have been periodic moves toward reform, the lack of change or justification for the current placement model suggests that these efforts of reform have largely fizzled out.

Fero's argument also paints a portrait of an institutional landscape where, prior to the last

decade, there had been few faculty in either ATL or WRAC claiming any particular expertise over the practice of programmatic or placement assessment. FYW. While WRAC did hire a faculty member to deal with program assessment, she has moved on to other projects. These points are important in considering my next story, which deals with the rise of the ELC, because I believe it offers some explanation to the question of how the ELC has come to have such power over the placements for students with international citizenship.

Placement for students with international citizenship

While the placement model I've outlined in the previous section applies primarily to students with domestic citizenship, when students have international citizenship, they are subject to a different set of strictures that impinge on their ultimate FYW placement. Specifically, students with international citizenship are subject to evaluation by an additional, separate program – the ELC – prior to their entry into the FYW program.

To begin with, for students with international citizenship, admission requirements are more stringent than they are for students with domestic citizenship. If students' first languages are anything other than English, then they must provide proof of language proficiency to the Office of Admissions in order to enter MSU as a regularly-admitted student. This distinction might be made on the basis of scores from any of 8 different tests. According to the MSU Office of Admission's "International Application Instruction" website, students with international citizenship can take any of the following tests, which each have unique standards for regular admission:

> **Test of English as a Foreign Language** (TOEFL). In order to remain eligible for regular admission, international students must score either a minimum of 79 on the internet-based taste, with no subscore below 17, or they must achieve a minimum score of 550 on the paper-based test, with no subscore lower than 52. Provisional admission may be offered to students whose score range from 60-78 on the internet-based test, or 500-549 on the paper-based test.

International English Language Testing System (IELTS). In order to be eligible for regular admission, students much achieve a minimum score of 6.5. Students may be eligible for provisional admission if they achieve a minimum score of at least 6.0.

SAT: Critical Reading. Students may be eligible for regular admission if they achieve a minimum score of 480 on the SAT test of Critical Reading.

ACT: English. Students may be eligible for regular admission if they achieve a minimum score of 18 on the ACT English test.

Advanced Placement English Language (AP Lang). Students may be eligible for regular admission if they achieve a minimum score of 4 on the AP Lang test.

Michigan English Language Assessment Battery (MELAB). Students may be eligible for regular admission if they achieve an average score of 80. This includes the MELAB speaking test.

Michigan State University English Language Test (MSUELT). Students may be eligible for regular admission if they achieve an average score of 80, with no subscore lower than 80, or if they achieve an average score of 85, with no subscore lower than 78. Students may be eligible for provisional admission if they achieve an average score of 65-79.

Michigan State University Certificate of English Language Proficiency (CELP). Students may be eligible for regular admission if they achieve a minimum score of 65, with no subscore lower than 15 (2015).

Note that these are the requirements to gain regular admittance, and students who are admitted provisionally are required to take the MSUELT to determine if they need to take additional English as a Second Language (ESL) courses at the ELC. If students with international citizenship gain regular admittance to the university, then the FYW program will make a placement decision on the basis of ACT or SAT scores, if they have these scores (though, they may not, since the school allows for a variety of tests to demonstrate language proficiency). According to the FYW website, students without ACT or SAT scores automatically place into PCW.

However, if students are admitted provisionally and need to take additional ESL courses,

their entrance into FYW does not require ACT or SAT scores. Instead, students who take ESL courses take timed writing exams as part of their exit examination process from the ELC. When students perform well enough on these timed writing exams, according to ELC standards, those students' tests are made available to the FYW program for evaluation. As mentioned previously, a committee comprised of the assistant FYW director and FYW faculty with experience teaching both PCW and 100-level courses read and evaluate these timed writing tests, and place students either into PCW, or – much less frequently – into 100-level courses. Students who do not perform well enough on the timed writing tests, according to the ELC, immediately place into PCW.

What is most significant to me about this separate process is the effect that the ELC's initial evaluation can have over the placement procedures for students with international citizenship. When students enter the program via the ELC, they are effectively subject to an entirely different placement process: first an initial vetting by an English Language Proficiency test; then a second vetting by ELC instructors, based on performances on a timed writing test; finally, if they perform well enough, a group of representatives from FYW place these students on the basis of a timed writing test. This extra set of requirements has the consequence of pushing students with international citizenship toward PCW with more force than for students with domestic citizenship.

History of the ELC. The question that emerged for me based on my understanding of the separate placement procedures that exist for students with international citizenship was, how did the ELC come to have such power over FYW placement decisions for these students? As I did with the FYW program, I felt a bit of history was necessary to understand the current influence

of the ELC.

The ELC opened in 1961 for students with international citizenship who had low-scoring performances on English language tests, to help them study English in preparation for college coursework (ELC, 2013a). The ELC was just one of a number of initiatives Michigan State University undertook in the mid-20th century to increase its international influence. John Hannah – president of Michigan State between 1941 and 1969 – was especially interested in actively promoting the university's internationalization efforts. According to David Thomas (2008), Hannah's efforts to expand the global influence of Michigan State came in response to President Harry Truman's Point IV Challenge, which was called for "a bold new program for making the benefits of our scientific advances and industrial progress available for the improvement and growth of underdeveloped nations" (Truman, 1949). In response, Hannah promised the full cooperation of Michigan State University and, in his capacity as the president of the Association of Land-Grant Colleges, the support of other land grants as well (Thomas, 2008).

In 1957, a study funded by the Carnegie Corporation contributed to these global efforts (Parness, 1969; Office of Study Abroad, 2013). This study, which helped establish the Office of Study Abroad, also found that international student enrollments – especially from non-English speaking countries – would be increasing in the near future. According to a *State News* article by Barb Parness (1969), this also provided an exigency for the development of the ELC.

The development of this resource coincided with Michigan State's effort to expand its land-grant mission globally, which initially entailed a two-fold expansion: (1) creating programs that allowed students with domestic students to study abroad; and (2) inviting prospective students with international citizenship to study at Michigan State. While the ELC initially began as an infrastructural support for international students, housed in the English department, over

time it has transformed into a site for the production of disciplinary knowledge, and an autonomous institutional entity.

In its early history, the ELC did not produce any requirements for students; instead the center simply produced recommendations, which were either honored or ignored by individual students' academic advisers. During the first few decades of the ELC's operation, the center often struggled to prove its legitimacy to administrators, and sometimes battled with advisers and students to have their recommendations taken seriously. This tension is evident in archival documents and memos from the first 20 years of the ELC's history. From my review of these documents, one of the themes that emerged as significant involved a clear effort that ELC directors made to establish the expertise of the center in the emerging fields of TESOL and Second Language Studies (SLS). For example, the early administrators of the ELC clearly had a research agenda that related to the ELC. Each of the annual reports from Director Shigeo Imamura contains information that elaborates the disciplinary productivity of the ELC administration, including publications and conference participation (Imamura, 1965; Imamura, 1966; Imamura, 1967; Imamura, 1968). This was likely due to the fact that these administrators had split duties, between the English department and the ELC (S. Gass, personal correspondence, November 2013). Additionally, according to these documents the ELC quickly became a national leader in the instruction of non-native speakers (Imamura, 1967; Sullivan, 1975). According to Richard Sullivan (1975), who was Dean of the College of Arts and Letters in the 1970s, this helped spur an ambition for national and international recognition, and to become a hub for the academic discipline of TESOL.

The ELC also attempted to establish its expertise in the realm of English language assessment. The Office of Admissions required the TOEFL for international students, so the

Center was obligated to use TOEFL scores as a legitimate basis for making student placement recommendations. However, Center administrators also expressed serious doubts about the faith the university should place in this test. One ELC director, Paul Munsell, was perhaps the most outspoken critic of the TOEFL, and made several recommendations that the university remove the requirement that students take this test. In one of the most extensive critiques of this test, Munsell (1978) expressed concerns about its cost, the frequency of its administration, and the lack of availability abroad. Munsell also called into question the validity of the test on several occasions (Munsell, 1977; Munsell, 1978), and described discrepancies in the judgments between ELC faculty and the TOEFL. Munsell also described the test's reliability as "not…that impressive" (p. 2), and even expressed reasons to doubt the security of the test. In contrast to this, Munsell demonstrated satisfaction with the tests that the ELC had developed and administered. According to Munsell, these tests were "fairer and more useful" (Munsell, 1977, p. 1) and were at least equally reliable (Munsell, 1978).

In making these arguments, Munsell expressed clear confidence in the Center's assessment procedures, and indeed frequently made arguments for the superiority of these assessment procedures over nationally and internationally-recognized tests, like the TOEFL. In this sense, assessment became another domain in which the Center attempted to assert its disciplinary authority.

Two histories, one placement model

While the ELC was ultimately unsuccessful in making its homegrown test the primary assessment mechanism for students with international citizenship, what the center was able to do in its early history was maintain a sustained argument for its expertise in the domain of English language assessment. Importantly, this was happening at a time when, according to Fero's

argument, there were no such claims being made by ATL or faculty in the FYW program. Thus, the way I understand these two histories, the ELC was able to cement its position as an authority in assessing writing, while the FYW program taught American Studies courses that were occasionally informed by the disciplinary knowledges of composition studies or rhetoric. Having gained this position of authority, the ELC has since consolidated power over the placement decisions for students with international citizenship.

Since its early history, the ELC has expanded drastically. Current ELC Director Susan Gass described to me an enormous increase in the size of the ELC, which is directly related to the increase in international student enrollments. These changes have prompted shifts in the operation of the ELC, and as a result, the autonomy and authority that the Center administration had fought to establish in its earlier years have been cemented in place. As one important example, the assessment process which once produced a recommendation has been streamlined. According to Gass and Walters (2013), this process changed in 2007, when MSU saw a large influx of prospective students from China. They cited a combination of factors, including students' desire for a clearer understanding of their placements, as well as the sheer magnitude of students the Center had to place. Currently, computers place students directly into courses on the basis of their test scores. Academic advisers are no longer involved in this process. Thus, the ELC now acts as the final authority in decisions related to whether or not students should be subject to additional requirements.

Thus, while the FYW program has only recently begun to develop a robust agenda for the Tier One writing requirement, the ELC has a long history of arguing for its expertise in matters related to placement. And, it is within the context of these two histories that the current, "quite elaborate" (according to Kenneth) structure for FYW placement has emerged.

The Landscape of Placement

As I indicated in the previous chapter, I administered a survey across the FYW program in Spring 2015, which represented actual enrollments at different levels of the FYW program within ± 1.3% as a result of a quota sampling method. The table below illustrates the placement and enrollment information for survey participants, as compared to the actual placements and enrollments for the FYW program in AY 2014-15. To interpret the table, I need to draw attention to a fine distinction between placement and enrollment.

Table 2

Distribution of survey participants across different enrollment levels, compared to the FYW program in Spring 2015

	Enrollments of survey participants in Spring 2015	Placements of survey participants in Spring 2015	Spring 2015 FYW Program Enrollments
PCW	15.9%	23.6%	14.6%
100-level courses	84.1%	76.4%	85.4%

Because many students who enrolled in PCW in Fall 2014 moved into a 100-level course in Spring 2015, students' stated enrollment did not necessarily reflect where they had actually been placed. In order to determine actual placement for the purposes of this survey, I needed to look not just at participants' indications of their enrollment, but also whether they had previously taken PCW. Unfortunately, such information was not available for the entire program. While I was able to identify data about the number of students who had been enrolled in PCW during Fall 2014 (492 students), I was not able to definitively identify the portion of this population that immediately moved into Tier 1 courses. What this means is that there was no simple method available for identifying the exact numbers representing final placement decisions.

Because total placement decisions were unavailable, I used the closeness of enrollment

numbers as supporting evidence for the representativeness of my sample, a rhetorical approach to sampling favored by some social scientists (Gschwend, 2005). Surveying the program has allowed me to offer a structural portrait of the FYW program, and of student placements.

In the following sections, I offer statistical findings that circulate around the question, "was it [placement] biased at all?" After explaining the methodological intent behind this question, I offer descriptive analyses of the FYW program in terms of its racial formations, gender formations, and formations based on national citizenship. In essence, these three sections describe what I saw among survey participants in Spring 2015. Finally, I offer a predictive statistical analysis of FYW placements. This predictive form of analysis serves a special function in this research. First, predictive analysis indicates the relative effect size of different demographic variables, which in effect provides a more robust intersectional structural portrait of the FYW program. Second, predictive statistical analysis speculates: based on the available data, is there evidence that some outcomes are more likely than others? In my case, are there patterns of racism, sexism, or citizenship-based that appear so prominently, there is reason to expect they might reappear in future placement decisions?

"Was it biased at all?": The demographic consequences of placement in Spring 2015?

When I began research for this study, I was interested in integrating decoloniality into writing program assessment. Mignolo (2011) suggests that such an approach requires first, an analysis of colonial effects. This compelled me to ask survey participants to identify with demographic categories including race, gender, and citizenship. These specific categories were important categories for me because, as Anibal Quijano (2000), María Lugones (2007) and Walter Mignolo (2011) have argued, they are modern identity categories inaugurated by coloniality, and implicated in colonial systems.

Program lore (the stuff of Friday afternoon workshops), as well as prior evidence from internal data collection also indicated that the placement system disproportionately placed students with international citizenship into PCW courses (Choi, 2014). These local patterns also compelled me to pay special attention to race and citizenship.

Additionally, the issue of assessment bias is an important and growing concern within the discipline of writing assessment. A number of assessment scholars have called for an attention to such biases, particularly with respect to race (Kelly-Riley, 2011) and have advocated for integrating such concerns into validity arguments (Inoue 2009) and into research methodologies (Inoue, 2012; Inoue and Poe, 2012). Following the lead of these researchers, it was important to integrate categories of race, gender, and citizenship into my methods of data generation. Therefore, I was careful to ask students to identify these items in the survey because they are facets of colonial systems.

During the process of reviewing survey participants' questions about the placement process, I found that students were also interested in the demographic consequences of FYW placement in my analysis of their open-ended responses. The most pointed and direct form of this question came from one participant who identified as a Black, male student enrolled in the 100-level course, "The American Racial and Ethnic Experience": *was it biased at all?*

In the following descriptions of different demographic categories, I address this question by treating race, gender, and citizenship as structural formations that manifest uniquely at Michigan State. This theoretical approach borrows from Omi and Winant's (1996) articulation of racial formations as structural categories, that are sensitive to local histories and contextual factors. While I believe such a terminology is relatively useless for discerning anything about the individual characters of students in the FYW program at Michigan State, I do believe it is useful

for the purposes of analyzing the structural features of the writing placement model. In addition to describing racial, gender, and citizenship formations, I also briefly describe evidence from descriptive statistical analysis that suggests patterns of disparate impact, based on $\chi 2$ tests of statistical significance as discussed in the previous chapter (Poe, Elliott, Cogan, Nurudeen, 2014). Such tests indicate whether or not the relationships between two variables – race and placement, for example – are statistically likely to have been a matter of chance.

"Was it biased?": Racial formations in the FYW program, Spring 2015

To determine whether or not the placement system was biased, I used demographic information from my survey to examine racial formations within PCW, and within 100-level classes. The guiding question in this portion of my analysis was whether or not the racial formations within the PCW course and the 100-level course were similar or different. Behind this question, I assumed that differences between demographics in these courses were a function of the placement system. While students certainly had the agency within the survey to identify with a racial formation of their choice – or none at all – I believed that the survey demographics, when I sorted them by enrollment level, would illustrate to an extent whether the placement model predisposed certain racial formations to one course or another.

In gathering respondents' information, I used the school's ethnicity categories to guide the racial formation categories I offered survey participants. These ethnicity categories include (1) American Indian or Alaska Native; (2) Asian; (3) Black; (4) Hawaiian or Pacific Islander; (4) Hispanic/Latinx; (5) White; (6) Two or more races; (7) Prefer not to answer. The one exception was that the Office of the Registrar consolidates all international citizens into a single ethnic category – international. However, I turned this into a separate category to better account for the effect of citizenship on placement, and asked all participants to choose one of the above seven

categories.

Below, I've produced a table of the racial demographics indicated by survey participants, compared to the racial demographics of Michigan State's campus. This table shows the frequency with which survey participants identified with different racial formations within the entire sample, among PCW students, and among 100-level students. In the last column, I've included data collected by the Office of the Registrar representing the total racial demographics of the campus. A cursory look at this table shows significant differences between participants who identified as Asian, and those who identified as White. For example, while the racial population of PCW identified as Asian at a rate of 77.4% in my survey, only 13.2% of the population of 100-level students identified as Asian. Simultaneously, only 3.7% of the PCW population in my survey identified as White, while 69.7% of the 100-level population identified as White. Based on the information gathered from this survey, during Spring 2015, PCW appeared to be disproportionately populated by students who identified as Asian.

Additionally, I performed chi-square ($\chi 2$) tests of independence to examine the relationship between racial identifications and placement decisions. The relationship between two racial formations and final placements were statistically significant – that is, unlikely to have been a matter of chance. The relationship between placement and identification with the Asian racial formation was significant ($\chi 2$ (1, N = 804) = 294.15, p <.01)[5], as was identification with the White racial formation ($\chi 2$ (1, N = 804) = 254.71, p <.01). Participants who identified as Asian were more likely to place into PCW than other students, while participants who identified as White were more likely to place into 100-level courses.

[5]This format indicates that the $\chi 2$ statistic, in a test in which the 804 survey participants could either identify with the Asian racial formation or not, had a value of 411.46. This test also indicates that statistically, the likelihood that the relationship between placement and identification is coincidental (*p*) is less than 1 percent (<.01).

Table 3

Table of racial identifications of survey participants across placement level, compared to reported racial formations at Michigan State, Spring 2015

	N	N (% of sample)	Indicated PCW Placement	Indicated 100-level placement	Reported Demographics at MSU
American Indian or Alaskan Native	9	1.1%	0.5%	1.3%	0.3%
Asian	228	28.4%	77.4%	13.2%	4.5%*
Black	52	6.5%	6.8%	6.4%	6.4%
Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	2	0.2%	0%	0.3%	0.1%
Hispanic/Latinx	37	4.6%	4.7%	4.6%	3.8%
Two or more races	10	1.1%	1.6%	1.1%	2.4%
Prefer not to answer	31	3.4%	5.3%	3.4%	1.3%
White	435	54.1%	3.7%	69.7%	66.2%

*Note: Current institutional demographics disaggregate ethnic demographics into an additional "international" category, which may affect how the school reports the Asian racial formation (MSU Office of the Registrar, 2015b).

"Was it biased?": Formations of citizenship in the FYW program, Spring 2015

In addition to the racial formations produced by the FYW placement model, I was also interested in knowing about the national formations produced by the placement model. This latter point of interest had two exigencies: methodological considerations compelled me to account for citizenship, as a facet of colonial systems. Second, this inquiry was a response to one of the survey and interview participants' questions and comments about bias. In my conversation with Elle, for example, she had reflected on her surprise about encountering two domestic citizens in her course. She told me about this experience when I asked what she found surprising about her PCW course:

> I saw two Americans in my 1004 class. I didn't really understand why they are in our class, because I knew a lot of international students are taking 1004, but I didn't know Americans were doing the same thing. So I don't know how they can be in our class, so I asked my instructor. One day, I asked her why those American students are in our class, and then she said, maybe just like us, they have to take SAT or ACT test, it's based on their writing score maybe.

> Matt: Why were you surprised to see American students in your class?
>
> Elle: Because we are like, English learners. I feel like we are very behind them, that they already learned like the plagiarism in America. Like when you cannot cite strictly without giving the person credit. But as a foreigner, I never learned or never knew about that. But I feel like they already knew or maybe because they grew up in America, they knew they did a lot of papers in high school too. So, probably they're better than us. So they should not be in 1004. Because I thought like 99% of international students are taking that kind of class.
>
> M: Do you think 1004 is mostly international students?
>
> E: Yeah. I have friends also in 1004 and have never heard about American students. I always heard about like Koreans, Chinese, Japanese. People from other countries in that kind of class. Not like Americans.
> In addition to the programmatic lore about PCW being disproportionately populated by students with international citizenship, Elle's response here indicated to me some evidence that this lore also existed among some PCW students in Spring 2015.

As I did for students' racial identifications, I first constructed a table to see how the national identifications survey participants identified compared to their placement across the FYW program. At first glance, this table substantiated both the institutional lore about PCW, as well as Elle's sense that domestic citizens did not frequently enroll in PCW. As Table 4 on page 91 illustrates, among survey participants, there appeared to be substantially higher concentrations of students identifying international citizenship in PCW, and of students identifying domestic citizenship in 100-level courses.

Additionally, I performed chi-square ($\chi 2$) tests of independence to examine the relationship between citizenship and placement decisions. The relationship between two citizenship formations and final placements were statistically significant. The relationship between placement and identifying international citizenship was significant, $\chi 2$ (1, N = 804) = 407.34, p <.01, as was identifying domestic citizenship, $\chi 2$ (1, N = 804) = 411.46, p <.01. Participants who identified international citizenship were more likely to place into PCW than

other students, while participants who identified domestic citizenship were more likely to place into 100-level courses.

"Was it biased?": Gender formations in the FYW program, Spring 2015

Finally, I was also interested in whether or not the FYW placement model produced any unusual gender formations across different FYW courses. A number of scholars have described modern gender categories as a consequence of colonialism. According to Lugones (2007), modern systems of gender entailed a "deep reduction" in the visibility of genders outside of the colonial, binary (male-female) system of gender (p. 206). For my purposes, it was important simply to collect as much self-identified gender information as possible, and inquire into the possible systematic effects gender had on placement in the FYW program. Because of the systemic invisibility of non-binary genders Lugones has described, I provided survey participants with the option to identify themselves outside of the male-female binary. While some statistical methods used in later chapters ultimately required me to collapse these categories for the purposes of computational accuracy, what was most important to me was that I didn't exclude non-binary genders at the outset, in data generation.

Table 5, on the following page, represents gender distributions across placement level. As this table shows, there were substantially more participants who identified as female and male than as another gender. It also shows that males placed into PCW more frequently than females; however, participants who identified as a gender other than male or female were placed into PCW more frequently than males or females. Additionally, I performed chi-square tests of independence, however, no relationships between placement and gender emerged as statistically significant.

Table 4

Table of citizenship identifications of survey participants across placement level, compared to reported racial demographics of Michigan State, Spring 2015

	N	N (% of sample)	Indicated PCW Placement	Indicated 100-level placement	Reported Demographics at MSU
International	230	28.6%	84.7%	11.2%	15.1%
Domestic	560	69.7%	10.5%	87.9%	
I am not sure	7	0.9%	2.3%	0.3%	Not reported*
Prefer not to answer	7	0.9%	2.1%	0.5%	
Overall	804	100%	23.6%	76.4%	100%

*Note: Current institutional demographic reports from the Office of the Registrar do not report students with domestic citizenship, who are not sure of citizenship, or who prefer not to answer

Table 5

Table of gender identifications of survey participants across placement level, compared to reported gender demographics of Michigan State, Spring 2015

	N	N (% of sample)	Indicated PCW Placement	Indicated 100-level placement	Reported Demographics at MSU
Female	368	45.8%	20.4%	79.6%	51.6%
Male	422	52.5%	25.8%	74.2%	48.4%
MtF Transgender	2	0.2%	100%	0%	
I am not sure	3	0.4%	66.7%	33.3%	Not
I identify with another gender	1	0.1%	0%	100%	reported*
Prefer not to answer	8	1.0%	25%	75%	
Overall	804	100%	23.6%	76.4%	100%

*Note: Current institutional demographic reports from the Office of the Registrar do not report students with non-binary gender identities, or who prefer not to answer

"Was it biased?": A statistical model for predicting placement patterns

While the above tables (tables 2, 3 and 4) indicate clear differences in the distributions of survey participants, I've mentioned that predictive statistical models can offer this research a more robust intersectional portrait of the FYW program from a structural perspective, and can suggest the extent to which the placements in Spring 2015 were part of a larger systemic pattern

that is likely to recur. Thus, in the predictive analysis of placement bias, I am asking "to what extent could demographic information predict students' placements in the Spring 2015 survey?"

To answer this question, I worked with Wenjuan, a consultant in The Center for Statistical Training and Consulting (CSTAT) at Michigan State. With her help, I decided that the best method for predicting placements was to develop a binary logistic regression model. A binary logistic regression is a predictive statistical model, used in cases when the dependent or "target" variable is dichotomous. In essence these models use other statistical data – predictor variables – to determine the extent to which these variables can predict the odds of particular outcome in the target variable. Since at MSU, there are two levels a student can place into – PCW or 100-level – placement level represents a binary target variable. And, because I was focused on the question of possible bias in the placement model, we used only the demographic information that participants had provided in the survey as predictors for placement level.

Logistic regression models require a minimum sample size for each predictor variable in order to produce computationally accurate results. However, for some demographics, I had very small sample sizes. Because of the sample sizes of participants who identified as American Indian or Alaska Native, Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, or Two or more races, I had to collapse these racial formations into a single category for the purposes of computing a logistic regression. The same was true for participants who identified either as transgender, unsure about their gender, and those who declined to identify with a gender.

Logistic regression models also require the use of "reference" variables – groups to whom others are compared – for the purposes of accurate computation. In this case, my designation of reference variables had two considerations: sample size, again, and assumptions about the kinds of identities are typically conferred privilege within settler-colonial societies. We

decided to choose reference groups with relatively large sample sizes, for computational accuracy. At the same time, the white, male, domestic categories represented identity groups that are frequently regarded as privileged within the United States. Therefore, in this model, we used "non-international" citizenship as a reference group because there were relatively few participants who indicated they were unsure, or unwilling to state citizenship identification. I also used "white" as a reference racial variable, since this group was the largest. I also used the "male" category as a reference group. The table below indicates the variables I used as predictors of placement level.

Table 6

Demographic predictors in logistic regression model for course placement

Citizenship identifications	**International** Citizenship **Non-international citizenship [Used as a reference variable]** Domestic, Unsure, Decline to identify citizenship
Racial formations	**Asian** **Black** **Hispanic/Latinx** **White [Used as a reference variable**] **Other racial identifications**: American Indian/Alaska Native, Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, Two or more races **Decline to identify** with a racial formation
Gender formations	**Female** **Male [Used as a reference variable]** **Other gender identifications**: Transgender, Unsure, Decline to identify

Regression model interpretation. To compare the overall efficacy of this model, I used the Nagelkerke pseudo-R^2 value produced by this model. Essentially, this value described the amount of variance in placements that could be explained by the above demographic identifications alone. As Table 7 on the following page shows, that value – 0.633 – meant that demographic information alone accounted for 63.3% of the variance in placement decisions. This is relatively high value – most of the variance in placements could have been predicted simply on the basis of students' demographic information. Overall, this model was able to successfully

predict observed placements of survey participants with 88.6% accuracy, as Table 6 (below) demonstrates. This means that, if I only knew survey participants' demographic information, I would be able to predict 88.6% of those students' placement decisions correctly.

Of the variables in the model, I found that international citizenship, as well as identification with the Asian, Black, and the Hispanic/Latinx racial formations had statistically significant contributions to the regression model. Gender identifications did not have statistically significant associations with placement level in this survey. Statistical significance means that the associations between identification with any of these identities had effects that were statistically unlikely to have been a matter of chance. Therefore, the association between survey participants' citizenship and racial identifications and their placements was statistically unlikely to have been a matter of chance.

This table also illustrates the odds that a given student would place into a 100-level course, when they expressed identification with a particular demographic formation. The table shows that students were less likely to place into 100-level courses when they identified international citizenship, or identification with the Asian, Black, and Hispanic/Latinx racial formations.

Table 7

Classification table, describing accuracy of model for predicting course placement

	Predicted PCW placement	**Predicted 100-level placement**	**Percentage Correct**
Observed PCW placement	155	26	85.6%
Observed 100-level placement	64	545	89.5%
Overall	219	571	88.6%

Model Summary. In summary, the logistic regression model predicting placement (Table 8 on the next page) indicated there were statistically significant predictors for a number of demographic groups, along lines of race and citizenship. Specifically, what this model shows is that when participants identified with the Asian, Black, or Hispanic/Latinx racial formations, or as having international citizenship, they were less likely to place into 100-level courses than the white racial formation, or students identifying domestic citizenship. Students who identified as Hispanic/Latinx had a 20.8% probability of placing into a 100-level course; students who identified as Asian had a 10.7% probability of placing into 100-level. For students who identified as Black, this probability dropped to 9.3%, and for students who identified international citizenship, the probability of placing into a 100-level course was just 4.9%. In other words, there was statistical evidence that survey participants who identified international citizenship, or identification with the Asian, Black, and Hispanic/Latinx racial formations, were disproportionately placed into PCW. This was not a matter of chance, but instead was a matter of systemic effect.

Conclusion: MSU's History of Placement Practice Produces unequal formations of race and citizenship in the FYW program. But is this a problem?

Many students who contributed to this research indicated that they were unsure about how the placement model works on a structural level. My inquiries into the structure of placement revealed, as Kenneth named it, a "quite elaborate" system. This system is one that has coalesced over the duration of the last 50 years, out of the responsibilities – shared by the FYW program and the ELC – of assessing incoming students' curricular readiness. Through my inquiries into the histories and rationales for this placement system, I have learned that the current placement procedures were born from the twin histories of the ELC's struggle for

institutional legitimacy, and the FYW program's long history of institutional stagnancy. These procedures have much to do with Michigan State's claim of the authority to educate the entire world, resonant in Hannah's claim that "the world is our campus," and the materialization of that authority through the ELC. The placement process also has much to do with the ELC's knowledge claims between the 1960s and the 1980s, particularly its claims to authority in the area of language assessment.

Table 8

Logistic regression model predicting placement into 100-level courses based on demographic information

Nagelkerke Pseudo-R^2		.633			
		B	**Std. Error**	**p**	**Exp(B)**
Citizenship identifications	International Citizenship	-2.957	0.366	0.000	.052
	Non-international Citizenship: Domestic, Unsure, Prefer not to identify	REF	REF	REF	REF
Racial formation identifications	Asian	-2.148	0.47	0.000	.117
	Black	-2.227	0.524	0.000	.103
	Hispanic/Latinx	-1.33	0.608	0.029	.264
	White	REF	REF	REF	REF
	Other: American Indian/Alaska Native, Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, Two or more races	-1.325	0.768	0.085	.266
	Prefer not to identify	-1.049	0.711	0.14	.350
Gender identifications	Female	0.316	0.254	0.214	1.371
	Male	REF	REF	REF	REF
	Trans, Other, Not Sure, Decline	-0.602	1.12	0.591	.548

Students also wondered the about the biases that might exist in the placement model. These questions mirror recent lore among faculty and students that PCW is primarily comprised

of Asian students with international citizenship. In response to these questions, I found that the current placement procedure produced unequal formations based on students' racial and citizenship identifications for survey participants. Additionally, tests of statistical significance – which measured the statistical likelihood that the variance in survey participants' responses was a matter of chance – indicated that these unequal formations were likely *not* a matter of chance, but in fact were produced systematically. More specifically, predictive statistical analysis suggests a pattern in the placement process in which the university places students who identified as Asian, Black, and Hispanic/Latinx into PCW at a much higher rate than their colleagues, while also placing students who identified as White into 100-level courses more frequently. It also appeared to systematically place students with international citizenship into PCW, and non-international students (mostly those with domestic citizenship) into 100-level classes.

Currently, the FYW program does not have an explicit rationale for why these formations should exist, or why they are justifiable. Additionally, it is not entirely clear from survey data alone why Asian, Black, Hispanic/Latinx students, and international students were more likely to place into PCW than they were into 100-level courses. However, several possibilities exist, including: (1) test bias; (2) lack of SAT or ACT scores among international applicants; (3) the fact that international applicants are subject to higher test score requirements than domestic students.

The possibility of test bias in the ACT and SAT

In a 2013 report, the ACT published a report that described consistently lower scores among students from Black and Hispanic/Latinx, compared to students who identified as White. That report described achievement of "benchmark scores" across all sections of the ACT, or those cutoff scores that "predict[ed] the likelihood of student success in credit-bearing first-year

college courses corresponding to each tested subject area" (2013, p. ii). In 2013, 75% of White test-takers met the "benchmark" score in English. In contrast, only 48% of Hispanic/Latinx students and only 34% of Black students met these scores.

Similarly, on the SAT, there is evidence that Black and Hispanic/Latinx students persistently achieve lower scores than White students. In 2012-13, for example, the average Critical Reading score among White students was 527 (of 800). However, for Black, Mexican/American and Hispanic students, these scores were 431, 464 and 450, respectively. On the Writing section of the SAT, White students achieved average scores of 515, while Black, Mexican-American, and Hispanic students achieved scores of 418, 442, and 443 respectively. These patterns persist at least as far back as 1986 (NCES, 2015).

While patterns of test bias may provide some amount of explanatory power for students' disproportionate placement, these data cannot fully explain the racial formations at MSU. For example, there are differences for students who identified with the Asian racial formation. According to the ACT (2013), 74% of students who identified as Asian achieved the benchmark score in English, very close to the achievement rate of White students. Similarly, on the SAT, Asian students achieved average scores of 521 on the Critical Reading section, and 527 on the Writing section (NCES, 2015). This latter number was actually higher than that of White students. However, I would hypothesize that the "Asian" racial formation is constituted differently in my survey, compared to the national data offered by the ACT and NCES. Specifically, in this survey, more than 85% of the students who identified as Asian also identified international citizenship; only 15% of the students who identified as Asian were also domestic students. In contrast, given the relatively small percentage of international students in the secondary education system (0.5%), I suspect that the Asian racial formations measured in the

reports from the ACT and NCES were more likely comprised of students with domestic citizenship (IIE, 2014).

Lack of ACT or SAT Scores

Given the large number of students who identified both as Asian and as having international citizenship, it may be instructive then to turn to the guidelines MSU has for admitting international students. According to the Office of Admissions, when students apply with international citizenship, they are required to "provide proof of English proficiency," which can include the TOEFL, IELTS, SAT Critical Reading, ACT English, MSUELT, or MELAB. Additionally, the requirements go on to indicate that students with international citizenship "are encouraged, though not required, to submit SAT scores" (2015). The Office of Admissions does not mention whether the ACT is required, though presumably, it also would not be, since domestic students can submit either of these scores ("Freshman Application Instructions"). In other words, while either ACT or SAT scores are required for applicants with domestic citizenship, they are not required for applicants with international citizenship. And, when students do not submit ACT or SAT scores, they will be automatically placed into PCW. The consequence of the difference between FYW program placement guidelines and international admissions requirements may be that international students, as a total formation, are predisposed to place into PCW. This was likely the case for one of my interview participants, who told me he had never taken either the SAT or ACT prior to coming to Michigan State. From our discussions, this lack of scores was likely the direct reason for his placement into PCW.

Different ACT and SAT score requirements for students with international citizenship.

Additionally, even when students with international citizenship submit ACT or SAT scores, they are subject to produce higher scores than students with domestic citizenship.

According to the Office of Admissions, in order to gain regular admission status, international students need to have a score of 18 or higher on the English portion of the ACT, or a score of 480 or higher on the SAT Critical Reading. Students with lower scores can be admitted provisionally, although this increases the likelihood that they will need to take a course through the ELC. In contrast, domestic students need only to submit ACT English scores higher than 16, or SAT Critical Reading scores higher than 390. This points to an additional reason international students may be predisposed to populate PCW – hypothetically, a student with international citizenship may submit an ACT or SAT score high enough to qualify for 100-level courses, but too low to qualify for regular admission into the university. Such a student would be required to take the MSUELT, and possibly several ESL courses, in which case, they would very likely be placed into PCW, despite having met the minimum requirement for 100-level courses by the FYW program's standards.

While the FYW program *does* accept ACT and SAT scores that fall above its own minimum threshold, but below the threshold for regular admission, I have no evidence of a systematic method for communicating this fact to students who fall between these thresholds, or who do not submit ACT/SAT scores upon admission. Such a student must actively try to set up an appointment with the Assistant Director of the FYW Program to demonstrate evidence of these scores. In AY 2014-15, only one student did this (J. Meier, personal correspondence, October 2015).

Such a situation raises as many questions as it answers. Given the findings I've shared in this chapter, a follow-up question might be: is this a problem? Is it a problem if the placement model systematically produces unequal racial formations and unequal citizenship formations? At this point, the histories informing placement become significant for me, because my version of

these histories interprets the current placement model as a product of coincidence, of competing claims for disciplinary legitimacy, and at its most cynical, a product that is more accidental than it is intentional. My impression here is informed both by conversations with current faculty and administrators, my own historiographical work, and prior histories of the FYW program. And, in the absence of intentions or explicit rationales for the current placement model, this model is both racist and predisposed to confer students with domestic citizenship a faster route to Tier One credit. This is my interpretation, but Poe, Elliott, Cogan, and Nurudeen (2014) suggest it is also prerogative of the US justice system. In other words, even within the context of a legal system underpinned and sustained by colonial dominance, scholarly literature and the findings from my Spring 2015 survey suggest that a student would have sustainable civil rights claim making the same arguments I have made here.

In the following chapters, I take up a different set of questions, offered by a different group of research participants: was the lower-level PCW course helpful? Were there any unique benefits to taking this course instead of a 100-level course? Through these inquiries, I will continue to answer whether the question of whether the bias in the placement model is problematic.

CHAPTER 4. 'DID IT HELP?':

A QUANTITATIVE INQUIRY INTO FYW COURSE HELPFULNESS

In the previous chapter, I described the structure of placement at Michigan State, which responded to students' questions about how placement actually works. Additionally, some research participants expressed an interest in whether there is evidence of bias in the placement model, and in response to that question, I identified patterns of structural bias that predisposed participants with international citizenship, or identifying with the Asian, Black, and Hispanic/Latinx racial formations to place into WRA 1004, Preparation for College Writing (PCW). In essence, I have tried to offer a structural portrait of the placement process, while simultaneously indicating some of the structural effects of that process.

In addition to these structural questions, however, another contingent of participants in this research expressed interest in whether students perceived their writing courses as helpful, and whether there were distinct differences in helpfulness between PCW and 100-level courses. Youssof, for example, asked me at the end of our first interview whether other students in FYW courses found their courses useful. I relayed this question to Elle and Kenneth, and ultimately helpfulness emerged as a major thread in conversations with all interview participants.

In survey responses, too, I found that students were concerned with the helpfulness of their writing courses. One student – who identified as an international student who had placed into PCW – expressed this in a particularly compelling question.

> Has any survey been taken to rate how helpful pre-college writing classes are for International Students?

This question struck me, because, though I had not designed a survey to answer this particular question, it seemed that I might be able to answer it through explicit questions that I had asked.

This project has shown me first of all that *helpfulness* is a complex phenomenon. It occurred to me early that any scheme for analyzing *helpfulness* could only offer a partial view of the phenomena that might for any person constitute "helpful" experiences. And so, in this research, I focus on just two schemes for describing helpfulness: the first scheme pertains to the survey I administered, while the second scheme pertains to interview participants' stories of helpful experiences.

In this chapter, I offer an analysis of the findings from surveys of students in the FYW program. This analysis provides a structural description of *helpfulness*, in which I've defined students' experiences as helpful to the extent that they believed their courses helped them fulfill institutional, program, or transfer-related learning goals. I refer to survey data and interviews in order to answer three questions:

1. What were students' general perceptions about the helpfulness of their courses, across the entire FYW program?
2. What characteristics did students find helpful in their PCW courses? What characteristics did they find helpful in 100-level courses?
3. Per one survey participant's question: Do international students enrolled in PCW find the course helpful?

Answering these questions acts on the methodological principles of trying to center participants' perspectives and epistemic desires. However, it also provides a way forward. The previous chapter, which described findings indicating patterns of systemic racism and ethnocentrism, also suggests the question: *is there any evidence to justify the patterns of bias in the placement process, or to revise how placement should work?* This chapter, in turn, considers what, out of this situation, emerged as helpful for participants.

Defining and measuring helpfulness in Michigan State's FYW Program

"Helpfulness" is not an especially transparent construct. Nor was it one of my primary interests when I initially designed a survey to investigate students' perceptions of their placements and FYW courses. However, I had tried to attend to a broader category of "student experience," and as a part of students' experiences, I focused on learning. As "helpfulness" emerged as an important concept in students' discussions and questions about placement, I began to consider ways that survey responses might speak to the question of "helpfulness." In the context of the quantitative research I had done, I *had* asked students about the extent to which they perceived their FYW courses fulfilling institutional, programmatic, and transfer-related goals. Using this information, I believed I could build a quantitative construct for analyzing course helpfulness.

It will help then to define what *helpfulness* means, in relation to survey responses and quantitative analysis: while helpfulness is a broad concept that manifested differently for different research participants, students' perceptions of learning outcomes were one expression of the helpfulness of FYW courses. My aim is not to suggest that students' perceptions of learning outcomes comprises the totality of "helpfulness," but rather that these attitudes offer some insight into whether FYW courses are helpful or not.

In this section, I outline the process of building a quantitative analytical technique that I believe speaks to participants' questions about the helpfulness of FYW courses. This process involved three major quantitative moves. First, I worked with my colleague Wenjuan, a statistical consultant at Michigan State, to define a theoretically and statistically-coherent variable to represent survey participants' attitudes toward programmatic, institutional, and transfer-related learning goals. I refer to this variable as a *helpfulness score.* Second, I calculated helpfulness

scores for all participants, and an average for all survey participants. Finally, I worked with Wenjuan to develop predictive statistical models to identify whether there was evidence that different institutional formations perceived the learning outcomes of their courses differently.

Quantitative Move 1: Theoretical and Statistical Bases *Helpfulness Scores*

After conversations with Wenjuan, a statistical adviser at the MSU Center for Statistical Training and Consulting (CSTAT) who worked with me on the quantitative analysis of this research, we identified possibilities for learning about "helpfulness" through the questions I *had* asked participants.

As I mentioned previously, the survey was primarily designed to elicit information about students' placement knowledge, placement satisfaction, and experiences in their FYW courses. As a part of students' experiences, I tried to account for their learning by asking participants about their perceptions of:

(1) learning related to FYW program goals;

(2) learning related to Michigan State's Undergraduate Learning Goals (ULGs); and

(3) learning related to transferable knowledge.

Additionally, the most of the questions used to represent these three areas were framed explicitly in terms of "help" (eg. "This course is helping me become a better reader"), and the remaining questions were framed in terms of teaching (eg. "This course is teaching me skills that will be valuable in future courses.") So, while I hadn't asked students directly about helpfulness on surveys, I believed that their perceptions of institutional and transfer-related learning goals – particularly because the language of "help" was available to survey participants – could represent an underlying "helpfulness" factor, that I could identify, with Wenjuan's help, through factor analysis.

Factor analysis is a method used to investigate the correlations between directly measured variables in order to identify "factors" or "latent variables" that explain those correlations. That is, given that there are correlations between variables, a factor analysis helps us explain why those correlations might exist. In this case, we used factor analysis to investigate whether survey items about learning might stand in, synecdochally, for a deeper, implicit explanatory factor. Specifically, we believed that learning items could stand in as a partial representation of the "Helpfulness" that Youssof and other students had asked about. While some factor analyses seek to produce generalizable constructs or scales (eg. "coping"), our purpose was not to suggest that the survey items we used offer such a scale. Instead, we understand these survey items, and the "helpfulness" factor we sought to identify, as narrowly local, designed only to represent a form of helpfulness specific to FYW at Michigan State.

I investigated relationships between the responses of the 804 participants in the Spring 2015 FYW survey with help from Wenjuan. The specific questions we looked at came from survey participants' responses to twelve (12) questions about their perceptions of learning along eight (8) institutional goals, and four (4) items related to transferable knowledge. In table 9 on page 108, I've included all the survey questions I considered for factor analysis. Participants registered their responses on a seven-point Likert scale, with responses ranging from: 1 = "Strongly disagree"; 2 = "Disagree"; 3 = "Somewhat disagree"; 4 = "Neither agree or disagree"; 5 = "Somewhat agree"; 6 = "Agree"; and 7 = "Strongly agree."

Factor analysis: Investigating "helpfulness" in perceptions of learning outcomes. In the following section, I describe the theory and statistical operations for developing a "helpfulness" scale, based on participants' survey responses. While I include detailed descriptions of the quantitative methods supporting this decision, I want to emphasize that the

outcome of these operations was support for building such a scale. I made this decision in consultation with Wenjuan based on high correlations between these 12 survey items, and an analysis suggesting that just one underlying factor could explain a high degree of the variance (more than 72.8%) in participants' perceptions of learning. This factor is what we designated as the “helpfulness” factor, and supported our decision to build a “helpfulness scale.”

Initially, I examined the factorability of the twelve “Helpfulness” survey items with help from Wenjuan. We did this by examining the results for several statistical operations, which are typical to ensure that selected items are good candidates for factor analysis. We used the following statistical operations:

- **Correlation matrix**, which tested the correlations between all survey items
- **Measures of sampling adequacy**, including the Keyser-Meier-Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy, and Bartlett's test of sphericity
- **A high ratio** of responses-to-survey items we included in the factor analysis (at least 20 responses for each response item)

We found that all 12 items correlated at least .579 with every other item, well above the values typically recommended as appropriate for factorability (at least .3 between several items). The KMO measure of sampling adequacy was .963, far above the recommended value of .6 and Bartlett's test of sphericity was also significant ($\chi 2$ (66) = 10493.328, $p < .01$). Because there were 12 items included in this factor analysis, we were looking for at least 240 responses, a number that we exceeded well with our 804 total responses. Based on the results of the above tests, we ultimately decided the 12 items we selected were acceptable candidates for factor analysis.

We used principal components analysis, which is an appropriate in cases where the outcome of a factor analysis is a composite score for underlying factors. In this case, we sought to construct a composite “Helpfulness” score for an underlying “helpfulness” factor. Our analysis

indicated just one underlying component, explaining more than 72.8% of variance among responses. We preferred this one-factor solution because it held with our theory that responses to questions learning outcomes might be guided by a general perception of course helpfulness. We did not remove any items from our analysis – all 12 contributed to a simple factor structure with primary loadings of .804 or above. I've included the factor loading matrix for this final solution in Appendix D: Factor Analyis Report. We labeled this factor as "Helpfulness Score." We also examined the internal consistency of the scale using Cronbach's alpha. This value was high ($\alpha = 0.965$), indicating internal consistency within the Helpfulness scale.

Table 9

All survey items used to measure perceptions of learning goals

Individual survey items measuring perception of learning outcomes	FYW Goals	*This course is helping me become a better…* …reader …writer …researcher
	Undergraduate Learning Goals	*This course is helping me…* …engage in inquiry. …engage in analysis of issues or texts …gain an understanding of culture and diversity …become a better citizen or participant in society …make more informed decisions.
	Transfer-related learning	*This course is teaching me skills that will be valuable…* …in future writing courses . …in other college classes . …in other situations outside of school . …in current or future workplace situations .

Quantitative Move 2: Calculating *helpfulness scores* for survey participants

Given the results of our factor analysis, we decided there was acceptable quantitative evidence to warrant the construction of a "helpfulness scale," and scores for each survey participant on this scale. We calculated *helpfulness scores* for each participant, based on the average of the 12 items they had explicitly scored (e.g. the sum of all "helpfulness" items,

divided by 12). These scores gave us numerical representations of each survey participant's perception of the learning outcomes from their courses.

In short, we now believed we had a quantitative measure for evaluating helpfulness: a statistically-coherent variable that measured students' perceptions of their course outcomes. Having produced such a scale, we would be able to see whether students' *helpfulness scores* were associated with other factors, such as course enrollment, or citizenship. In other words, we now had a way of looking for evidence of unique learning happening in different FYW courses, as well as approaching the survey participant's question, "how helpful pre-college writing classes are for International Students?"

On the following page, I've included Table 10, which illustrates mean scores and standard deviations on all learning items and helpfulness scales. Like the individual items originally measured, these scores are on a seven-point Likert scale. As Table 10 illustrates, the "overall helpfulness" of the course – or average of scores across all learning items – was 5.3, indicating that students "somewhat agreed" their courses met the learning goals elaborated in the survey.

Survey participants' *helpfulness scores* indicate generally positive attitudes toward learning along most learning items. While average *helpfulness scores* suggest that, on average, students "somewhat agreed" that their courses met FYW goals, ULGs, and transfer-related goals, the practice of averaging all participant responses is necessarily homogenizing, and cannot speak to the attitudes of students representing different institutional formations, nor to the attitudes of individual students. In order to answer the question of whether there was evidence that international students enrolled in PCW found their courses helpful in statistically significant ways, for example, we would need to develop a predictive statistical model. As I explained in the previous chapter, predictive models are appropriate for identifying strong trends in quantitative

data that might suggest systemic patterns.

Table 10

Mean scores along all learning outcomes and helpfulness scale

	This course is helping me become a better…	**Mean Scores**	**Std Dev.**
Individual Learning Outcomes	…reader.	4.87	1.617
	…writer.	5.70	1.450
	…researcher.	5.63	1.400
	This course is helping me…		
	…engage in inquiry.	5.24	1.367
	…engage in analysis of issues or texts.	5.44	1.405
	…gain an understanding of culture and diversity.	5.17	1.520
	…become a better citizen or participant in society.	4.81	1.519
	…make more informed decisions.	4.93	1.541
	This course is teaching me skills that will be valuable…		
	…in future writing courses.	5.72	1.416
	…in other college classes.	5.67	1.454
	…in other situations outside of school.	5.13	1.499
	…in current or future workplace situations.	5.34	1.475
"Helpfulness" Scores: Average scores on items 1-12		**5.304**	**1.254**

Quantitative Move 3: Investigating patterns in *helpfulness scores*

After calculating helpfulness scores for each survey participant, I consulted with Wenjuan to develop linear regression models to inquire into the factors that contributed to students' overall senses of helpfulness. Statistically, a linear regression model is a predictive model that seeks to determine the extent to which explanatory variables act as predictors for the change in a scaled variable. I developed several linear regression models to examine the extent to which demographic or enrollment variables could predict helpfulness scores. Again, this analytical move allowed us to identify patterns suggesting systemic differences for students with different racial, gender, or national identities, or located at different points in the FYW program.

Thus, we used demographic variables to identify whether *helpfulness scores* had any

associations with participants' race, gender, or citizenship. We also used participants' indications of their enrollment levels to see if helpfulness scores had any significant associations with either PCW or 100-level courses. We also measured the interaction effect of international citizenship and PCW enrollment, or whether there were significant changes in helpfulness scores when participants identified as an international student in PCW. Finally, we measured students' course satisfaction**,** believing that there might also be relationships between students' perceptions of helpfulness and their overall course satisfaction.

Below, Table 11 lists the variables used in these linear regression models. This table also indicates the reference variables used in the model. Like logistic regressions, linear regression models require "reference" variables for categories with more than two options – these are the groups to whom others are compared – for the purposes of accurate computation. Again, we selected reference groups with large sample sizes for computational accuracy, and those that represented privileged formations within the United States. These included: (1) participants *without* international citizenship; (2) participants who identified as white; (3) participants who identified as male.

Regression model interpretation. To compare the overall efficacy of the regression models we developed, we used the R^2 values produced by the models. This value describes the amount in variance in helpfulness scores that could be explained by demographic variables, enrollment level, and satisfaction. As Table 12 shows, these values ranged from .244 to .276, meaning that these generally predicted between 24.4% and 27.6% of the variance in helpfulness scores. This is a moderate value. These models predict some of the variance in helpfulness scores, but not a tremendous amount.

Table 11

Demographic predictors in linear regression models for helpfulness scores

Citizenship identifications	**International** Citizenship **Non-international citizenship [Used as a reference variable]** Domestic, Unsure, Decline to identify citizenship
Racial formations	**Asian** **Black** **Hispanic/Latinx** **White [Used as a reference variable**] **Other racial identifications**: American Indian/Alaska Native, Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, Two or more races **Decline to identify** with a racial formation
Gender formations	**Female** **Male [Used as a reference variable]** **Other gender identifications**: Transgender, Unsure, Decline to identify
Program Location	**Enrollment Level**
Interaction Effect	**International citizenship and PCW placement**
Experiences	**Course Satisfaction**

Table 12

Linear regression models to predict helpfulness based on participants' demographic identifications, placement level, and course satisfaction

	Model 1 (Final Model)		**Model 2 (Course Satisfaction)**	
R^2 Value	**.276**		**.244**	
	B	Std B	B	Std B
International Citizenship	.524***	.191***		
Non-international Citizenship	--	--		
Asian	-.219	-.079		
Black	.115	.023		
Hispanic/Latinx	-.605***	-.104***		
White	--	--		
American Indian, Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, or Two or more races	-.270	-.035		
Prefer not to state	-.501**	-.068**		
Female	-.009	-.004		
Male	--	--		
Gender: Other	.610	.046		
Enrollment Level	-.470	-.136		
Course Satisfaction	.619***	.484***	.627***	.494***
International x PCW	-.500	-.140		

*indicates a *p*-value of exactly .05
**indicates a *p*-value between .01 and .05
***indicates a *p*-value below .01

Model summary. Table 12 shows that for the Final Model, which included all of the

above variables, three variables showed statistically-significant contributions to the regression model: (1) identification of international citizenship; (2) identification with the Hispanic/Latinx racial formation; (3) declining to identify with a racial formation; and (4) expressions of course satisfaction. Gender identifications and enrollment level did not have statistically significant associations with helpfulness in this case. However, course satisfaction did have a statistically significant association with overall *helpfulness scores*.

More specifically, when survey participants identified international citizenship, they had *higher helpfulness scores*, compared to colleagues with other citizenship identifications. Simultaneously, survey participants who identified with the Hispanic/Latinx and those who declined to identify with a racial formation had *lower helpfulness scores* compared to students who identified with the White racial formation. However, the effects of these variables was small in comparison to course satisfaction, which had a strong positive relationship to survey participants' overall helpfulness scores.

The effect of course satisfaction on *helpfulness scores* is also evident in Model 2, in which we only used course satisfaction to predict *helpfulness scores*. As that model shows, perceptions of course satisfaction explained 24.4% of the variance in *helpfulness scores*. In comparison, the final model with all predictors explained 27.6% of the variance in these scores. What this means that by adding students' demographic information and enrollment levels into our model, we increased its predictiveness barely more than 3%, a small amount given the number of variables this represents. Course satisfaction, then, had a very strong and significant effect on participants' *helpfulness scores* – when students expressed higher perceptions of satisfaction with their course, they also expressed higher perceptions of helpfulness, meaning they perceived a greater number of learning outcomes, compared to their colleagues.

For this research, however, I was also very interested in what was *not* significant. Significantly, enrollment level did not appear have statistically-significant predictive value. This finding means that within this survey, the variance in *helpfulness scores* was unrelated to enrollment level. Students in PCW did not have higher or lower *helpfulness scores* than students in WRA 1004, suggesting that students did not perceive differences in the extent to which FYW courses fulfilled institutional and transfer-related goals.

Similarly, there was not evidence from survey data that international students enrolled in PCW perceived learning outcomes differently from international students enrolled in other courses. While participants indicating international citizenship were more likely to find FYW courses helpful overall, this was unrelated to the courses they were enrolled in.

Helpful, but indistinct: Key Findings from Quantitative Inquiries into Helpfulness

Overall, these three quantitative moves revealed several things about the FYW program at Michigan State. First, there was statistical evidence that survey participants' responses to questions about learning goals were guided by an underlying attitude about how helpful their courses were, which allowed me to treat these goals as a single construct, and produce *helpfulness scores* for survey participants. Second, survey participants had generally positive attitudes toward their courses' fulfillment of institutional and transfer-related learning goals. Finally, my efforts to identify patterns in *helpfulness scores* – conceived as students overall perception of their courses' fulfillment of learning goals – resulted in a modestly-successful predictive statistical model that suggested the following patterns for the FYW program at Michigan State:

1. students' perceptions of helpfulness are closely connected to their course satisfaction;

2. international students across the FYW program find their FYW courses more helpful than their colleges;
3. Latinx students find their courses less helpful, compared to white students;
4. students' perceptions of institutional and transfer-related learning goals are unrelated to their enrollment level, suggesting that students do not perceive PCW and 100-level as fulfilling these goals in distinctly different ways;
5. participants who identified as international students in PCW did not have observable differences in perceptions of their courses' fulfillment of learning goals, compared to their colleagues.

And with these findings in mind, it is perhaps possible to begin to answer the questions that initiated my inquiry into *helpfulness*: Did students find their courses helpful? Did international students find their PCW courses helpful? Is there any evidence that might support a placement process that appears to sort students by race and national origin?

Yes, students found their courses helpful, at least to the extent that they generally agreed their courses fulfilled institutional and transfer-related goals. FYW courses, in other words, are doing what they're supposed to do from an institutional perspective, and a little bit more, in that survey participants expressed a belief that their courses had outcomes that would transfer beyond college. This is evidence in support of the idea that students find their FYW courses helpful.

However, in terms of these goals, FYW courses appear to be helpful, but in ways that are indistinguishable from one another in terms of institutional and transfer-related learning goals. The courses are helpful, but indistinct. There was not evidence that students perceived PCW or 100-level courses as more or less helpful, or that they perceived a difference in how different FYW courses emphasized those goals. (Go to the appendix)

Additionally, I find it helpful to remember here that the technique of factor analysis posits that the *helpfulness score* has a dual identity: it is a representation of students' perceptions of the extent to which their courses fulfilled learning goals, but it also represents an underlying, unmeasured attitude toward course helpfulness. This attitude was most closely linked to course satisfaction, was more positive among participants identifying international citizenship, more negative among participants identifying with the Hispanic/Latinx racial formation, and was unrelated to enrollment level.

These findings suggest that if differences exist in the outcomes of the two FYW courses, those outcomes extend beyond simply fulfilling institutional goals, and perhaps beyond those goals altogether. In the following chapter, I move into a description of *helpfulness* grounded in qualitative analysis. That analysis extends this project's theoretical description of helpfulness, by comparing interview participants' ideas about helpfulness, and identifying what elements of their FYW courses Youssof, Elle, and Kenneth found most helpful.

CHAPTER 5. 'DID IT HELP?':

A QUALITATIVE INQUIRY INTO FYW COURSE HELPFULNESS

In the previous chapter, I described one effort to inquire into students' perceptions about the *helpfulness* of their FYW courses. I did this by developing *helpfulness scores* to represent survey participants' perceptions of institutionally-learning goals. While an examination of these scores showed that students generally perceived their courses as fulfilling institutional goals, they told me little about the ways in which students found these institutional goals meaningful, or if there were other course outcomes students found more helpful. I believed a more comprehensive and accurate vision of helpfulness would need to account for the specific learning outcomes students identified as meaningful.

In this chapter, I continue inquiring into the *helpfulness* of FYW courses by focusing on individual students' experiences. These experiences contribute to a richer, more nuanced understanding of learning in the FYW program by describing specific ways in which Youssof, Elle, and Kenneth valued institutional goals, as well as the ways in which their senses of *helpfulness* depart from institutional goals. What did students value as helpful? My description of these values precedes another question: in light of the finding that course level did not have a statistical relationship with students' perceptions of helpfulness, what *distinctions* did these courses offer? Were there unique, positive benefits to enrolling in PCW, compared to 100-level courses? And if so, what were they?

Mapping program outcomes and values is a practice that Bob Broad (2003, 2009) has advocated for, and is one that has been gaining traction throughout the discipline (Hamp-Lyons, 2015). In order to develop a richer portrait of helpfulness, I returned to conversations I'd had with Youssof, Elle, and Kenneth, and mapped the outcomes they had described as valuable.

These responses included both actual, positive course outcomes, as well as hypothetical outcomes – learning, they said, they wished had happened.

Many of the outcomes interview participants described were direct answer to Youssof's questions about course helpfulness. I did not encourage students to distinguish between "institutional outcomes" and the outcomes that may have been unique to their courses. Nevertheless, students' responses comprised items that both reflected, elaborated upon, and at points deviated from prescribed institutional outcomes. Learning about writing, for example, was a program goal. At the same time, Youssof and Elle wanted to perceive improvement in their writing as a direct result of their PCW courses. So there is an argument that there are some shared values between the writing program, and students in the courses.

However, as the last chapter detailed, surveys showed a lack of distinction in students' perceptions of institutional outcomes across FYW courses. In light of this finding, what became especially interesting to me were the ways in which students perceived unique, positive outcomes associated with their courses.

This chapter, therefore, contains several components. First, I map the values interview participants had around their writing courses. This map considers both the positive outcomes they actually experienced, as well as the outcomes they wish they had experienced. This contributes to a theoretical understanding of "helpfulness" in Michigan State's writing program, and helps answer Youssof's questions about course helpfulness. Second, I focus on the outcomes unique to each participant, which included Kenneth's experience of creativity in his WRA 110 class, and Elle and Youssof's shared appreciation for the ethnic composition of their respective PCW courses. Finally, I consider these findings in relation to the to a similar set of subquestions about *helpfulness* as those I identified in the previous chapter:

1. What were interview participants' general perceptions about the helpfulness of their courses?
2. What characteristics did interview participants find helpful in their PCW courses? What characteristics did they find helpful in 100-level courses?
3. Did international students enrolled in PCW find the course helpful? And if so, how?

Mapping Student Values: Helpful Outcomes in FYW

The following sections draw out major themes from conversations I had with each of the interview participants in this research. I do this by addressing participants' responses to two lines of questions: in the first, I asked participants what in their courses they had found most helpful; in the second, I asked participants what they wished they had learned more of in their courses. Additionally, in the course of reviewing what participants named as actually helpful about their courses, and what they wished they had learned, I produced a "map" of actual and desired outcomes. This map provides an overview of all the positive outcomes that Youssof, Elle, and Kenneth identified as either a helpful component of their FYW experience, or a component they wanted to experience more of.

Youssof

As I've mentioned previously, Youssof's participation in this research catalyzed my analytic focus around the concept of "helpfulness." Of all interview participants, Youssof was the most interested in knowing whether FYW students found their courses helpful. Specifically, Youssof posed several questions about the helpfulness of FYW courses at the end of our first interview. By this point, I had learned that Youssof had mixed feelings about his own PCW course. Youssof had expressed to me some of his frustrations, which included the feelings that he wasn't learning as much about how to write as he had hoped, and his belief that the research

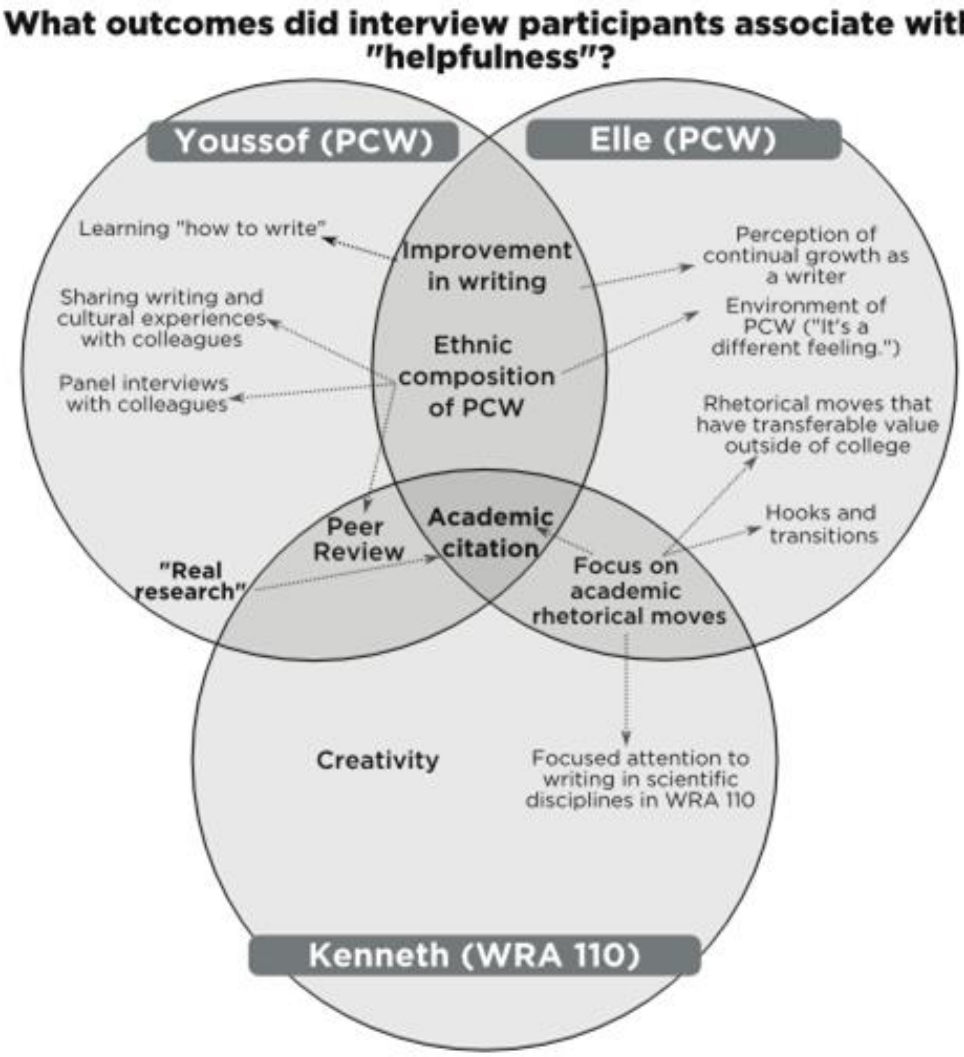


Figure 3. Student outcome map: outcomes interview participants associated with the concept of "helpfulness."

practices his class had engaged in was "not really research."

Indeed, of the learning that Youssof wished had happened in his PCW course, Youssof was most enthusiastic about the prospect of learning research. I asked Youssof to comment on the kind of research that *had* happened in his class, and he described for me his second major assignment in the course.

> **Youssof**: It gave us a brief look at research, not an in-depth kind of thing. I was looking for like learning a lot about research.
>
> **Matt**: So, if you could have done that assignment in a different way, or if you could have made that assignment, what would you have read or done.

> **Youssof**: Well first of all, I wouldn't choose what I'm researching, but if I was the teacher, I would give the students like random topics so they don't know what they're researching about. And. secondly, I would say, like we'd have to find like different kinds of sources, not just internet books and articles, and actually use it, so the paper will be like strong, not just from one kind of source. And, give like real support, maybe do surveys.
>
> **Matt**: Why is it important that you would do random topics?
>
> **Youssof**: So we can learn new things. Because if you want to do research on a thing you like, sometimes or most of the time, you know information about the subject. But when you do research about a thing you don't know about, you actually end up learning a lot.

Youssof went on to describe how, although he hadn't engaged in the kind of research he had hoped for in his PCW course, he indeed felt that he had gotten practice using academic citation conventions, and that this had been helpful for him.

In addition to his ambivalence around research, Youssof also expressed some doubts in our first interview about whether or not he was improving as a writer. He believed, however, that he should be able to perceive improvement in his writing ability.

> **Youssof**: I'm learning new things. Not in writing maybe, but like, interacting with other students and learning about other sources in the university... But writing wise, the writing part, I don't think that I've truly…I don't think there's improvement for myself. Maybe that's wrong with me. Maybe that's not the course. Maybe I'm not getting it…
>
> …I'm feeling like I'm not improving in writing. It's a writing class. I need to improve my writing and I'm not improving my writing.

Youssof's course had focused intensely on the concept of "culture," and to Youssof, sometimes this was at the expense of direct writing instruction. However, by the end of our second conversation, Youssof had changed his mind, believing he had ultimately improved in the course.

Despite his assertion that "learning about culture and writing about culture are two different [things]," Youssof still did express appreciation for the class's focus on culture, and how this was made possible by the ethnic composition of his classroom. According to Youssof, some of the most valuable portions of his PCW experience involved sharing his work and ideas with a

diverse population of students. Youssof's first assignment in the course – "kind of a culture clash thing," Youssof told me – had been a "great" experience, in terms of what it had allowed him to learn about his classmates.

> …hearing all the students and learning from their cultures, that was a great lesson. Like we have students from China, we have one student from Kazakhstan, and we have a couple of American students. And hearing them sharing their thoughts and writing about culture clash was useful.

In our second interview, Youssof brought in an assignment that had reflected this theme, an essay he had titled "Moving to the US," in which he discussed his process of adapting to the culture at Michigan State. Youssof found that this project had some positive learning outcomes, many of which he connected to the presentation of his work to his colleagues. When I asked what Youssof found beneficial about his assignment, he told me;

> **Youssof**: Well, doing peer review. We did like panel interviews. Everybody shared their experiences and there were like similarities between some students and differences between some students. In the culture clash or culture shock part. And just hearing other students talk about their experience was the most helpful thing of this assignment.
>
> **Matt**: What did you learn from other students?
>
> **Youssof**: Well you know like other students are sharing the same feelings that you have about culture. We have...half of our class was from China and they were complaining about food. So they felt the same way. And we had one student from Kazakhstan, and one student from Korea, and one from my country, and another one from Kuwait. And they said, they mentioned the food and weather and getting adapted to leaving family. And some of them didn't feel that. So maybe they didn't feel culture shock yet. Maybe they didn't feel homesick yet. But it was interesting, sharing ideas and feelings about that.

For Youssof, this essay was representative of his experience in PCW to the extent that it focused on culture clash, a major theme of the first half of the course. Youssof said that he appreciated learning about other students, and their experiences adjusting to the United States and to Michigan State.

In summary, Youssof valued the topic of culture clash and what it allowed him to learn about his colleagues. He also described learning about campus resources, which he found

valuable. However, he was less convinced he was learning how to write properly or do “real” research. From his narrative, Youssof articulated value around: (1) the practice of research, including (but not limited to) learning about academic citation; (2) his own perception of improvement, and the sense that he was learning "how to write"; (3) and the ethnic composition of his PCW course, which facilitated sharing writing and cultural experiences with a diverse group of colleagues. These outcomes are represented in figure 3, the student outcome map.

Elle

As I mentioned previously, Elle had enrolled in PCW after having taken a course at the ELC. While the FYW program had affirmed Elle's eligibility for 100-level courses, by the time this happened, Elle was unable to find an open section of a 100-level course that fit her schedule. Instead, Elle decided to enroll in PCW, believing this course would still be able to teach her something. Part of her decision was guided by the belief that she would need more time to acclimate to academic rhetorical practices, like citation. Elle described this to me when I asked about why she had chosen to enroll in PCW:

> **Elle**: I think, to practice more in writing. Because in America… we have to know how to cite. But in China, I never learned this before. So I have to practice more and learn more about citation. And then in my 1004 class, the writing class, we have assignments which we can practice how to cite from online or a book, and then if I learn or practice more about this, when I take a higher level writing class, maybe I know how to do it.
>
> **Matt**: So you thought you would learn how to do more citation?
>
> **Elle**: Yes, I think this is very important.
>
> **Matt**: Yeah, yeah, yeah. And you’re finding that in the class, you are doing more of that
>
> **Elle**: Mmhm, yeah.

In addition to this practice, Elle affirmed other positive learning outcomes associated with academic rhetoric. Elle mentioned on several occasions that her class had practiced writing “hooks,” as well as “transitions” in their essays. Elle found these to be positive outcomes, and

associated the ability to write a good "hook" and to organize papers or stories well as characteristics of good writers. (Elle did not know of any good writers.)

Despite the amount of practice she was getting in writing academic essays, Elle was uncertain if this practice really constituted "improvement," because she was unsure what of her learning would have transferable value, or if it met her own criteria for being a good writer. While Elle expressed improvement as a desirable outcome for her writing class, she was less certain about if and how she was improving.

> I mean, I get good grades on each of my projects, but the thing I don't get is whether my writing improved or not, Like I don't know if it's improved. And I don't know if it's different to write in school or out of school because right now, what we are learning is how to write a good hook in our essay, which can help our audience to be interested in our essay. I think that this is important in out of school writing, like writing in a novel or a report, but we are also learning how to use transitions, like "to begin with," "secondly," something like this. But I feel like this is more an essay which we only write in school. Like if we are out of school and we write something, maybe we won't use "first," "second," "third." So we learned this in the course, but I don't know if my writing improved or not…
>
> …I used the same points in the last semester, in my English writing course, and In this course we are also working on this. But I don't know if this means my writing improved. While I'm writing, I feel like even I have other vocab or words that I know in my mind, but when I write, I always write the words I use the most times. Like I used to use those words. So I feel like it's the same, like I'm writing the same way as last semester. But I don't know if my writing is improved or not.

While Elle had clearly mixed feelings about her perception of improvement, what was clear was that she felt more familiar with rhetorical conventions that she associated specifically with academic writing. What was less clear, however, was what improvement would have meant for Elle, and the relationship of academic rhetoric to her perception of improvement. Nevertheless, Elle had clear doubts that her growing facility in academic rhetoric would have value outside of college essays.

Also like Youssof, Elle also appreciated the ethnic composition of her PCW course.

During our interviews, Elle expressed on several occasions the feeling that PCW was a more comfortable environment for her as an international student. During our second conversation, I asked Elle if she would have changed her decision and tried to enroll in a 100-level class if she had the chance. She told me no, relaying an anecdote about early in the semester, when she had walked into the wrong classroom.

> …I don't feel like I'm ready. I don't think I'm ready for that one. Actually I accidentally went to a 150 course on the first day of this semester. Because I thought the 1004 was in that classroom, so I went to there and I went I went to the classroom with other 150 students, and then I realized I was in the wrong room, so I walked out. But the feeling was different. When I went to the 150 course, I felt like everybody was...a very good student. But when I went to 1004, I could see international students and then we could introduce ourselves and where we're from. But when I went to the 150 course, the instructor just started the class immediately. It's a different feeling.

When I asked more about this "feeling," Elle described how the fact that PCW was populated primarily with international students made it attractive to her. For example, during the course of our conversation, I asked Elle if she had any concerns about 100-level FYW courses, and if so, what those concerns were. Elle related her concerns to her status as an international student.

> **Elle**: I feel like in English writing courses or in 1004, because it's a pre-writing course so the instructor has plenty of time to teach you the easy parts or simple part, like spelling maybe, word choice, hook. But I feel like when I attend into 150, the instructor would feel like we already will know everything… Maybe I still will have problems on that simple stuff because I'm an international student, but I don't know if they will still teach this in the course. It sounds difficult because it's a higher level…I had the chance to enroll in this level. But it doesn't mean my writing skill is the same, maybe we still have problems on those simple things but American students don't. So I don't know if the instructor will still have time to discuss this. And sometimes they don't and then if I still have problems, I'll feel like I'm very behind. Maybe it's very hard to compare with 1004 because if most students in 1004 have a problem which is like spelling, or we don't write a good hook, then the instructor will teach us, like I found out a lot of students have this problem. But I don't know if in 150, the instructor will do the same thing.

In summary, Elle suggested that PCW was simply a better environment for her because her course and instructor were conscientiousness and attentive to her status as an international student. Elle was concerned that, as she moved into courses that had more domestic students, she

would fall behind, and instructors would not be as willing to help her. She felt that she had the ability to practice academic rhetoric and citation, and that this was helpful, but was uncertain about whether this practice contributed to her own "improvement" as a writer, or if it had transferable value outside of college.

From our conversations, Elle articulated value around: (1) practicing academic rhetorical moves, including "hooks" and "transitions," as well as citation practices; (2) learning rhetorical moves that would also have more definite transferable value outside of college; (3) like Youssof, her own perception of improvement, by feeling like PCW would help her continually grow as a writer; and (4) again, like Youssof, the ethnic composition of her PCW course, which offered a "different feeling" than the upper-level WRA courses she had accidentally attended. Again, these outcomes are represented in figure 3, the student outcome map.

Kenneth

Unlike Youssof and Elle, Kenneth placed into a 100-level course. The particular course that Kenneth took was WRA 110, "Science and Technology." Kenneth had taken this course after his adviser recommended it to him. When I talked to Kenneth, he had recently transferred into Michigan State after completing some post-secondary education in Singapore; that transfer also entailed a change in disciplines. Previously, Kenneth had studied game design, but after several years of education in the Singapore post-secondary system, Kenneth decided he wanted to study zoology at a US university. Therefore, Kenneth believed he would benefit from a course like the one his adviser told him WRA 110 would be – a course that would be "a lot around being science related and like learning how to maybe write reports in the lab and stuff like that."

Like Youssof, Kenneth found that the practice of giving and receiving peer review was valuable for his learning. However, while Youssof had connected peer review to his learning

about the cultural diversity of his colleagues, Kenneth found peer review productive because he believed that it made him more aware of his own writing practices and habits:

> …it made me be more attentive, pay more attention to detail in terms of what I was writing. For example, not to be overly repetitive with the words I use, because sometimes when you're writing a paper, you don't realize that you're using the same word over and over and over again...Sometimes it makes you more aware of the words that you're using.
>
> And also because of the peer review thing, when you are looking at other people's papers or essays, and then you're giving comments, in a way you're learning yourself, you're teaching yourself I would say, in terms of grammatical structures and structure. So it kind of reinforces it, because like I said before, sometimes when you're writing your own paper, you don't take note of these things whereas other people might. So because of that, then it makes me more aware of certain mistakes that I'm making, and I can correct them in the future.

Kenneth's comment here revealed for me that peer review was one practice that occurs across FYW courses, that can have a range of positive outcomes for different students. While Youssof valued the ways in which peer review facilitated relationships with his colleagues, Kenneth had experienced peer review as positive because he felt it genuinely improved his sense of himself as a writer.

Like Elle, Kenneth also expressed value around practicing academic rhetoric and citation. Like Elle, Kenneth believed he had practiced and improved in his ability to cite texts according to academic expectations. However, departing from Elle, Kenneth wanted a more intense focus on disciplinary discourse, specifically scientific rhetoric. Part of Kenneth's rationale for choosing WRA 110 was his adviser's recommendation that this course would – more than other FYW courses – help prepare him for writing in the sciences. However, Kenneth did not find there was a close attention to scientific writing or rhetoric.

Kenneth described his slight feeling of disappointment – "not a huge disappointment, just a small thing for me" – that his course was not as intensively focused on writing in scientific disciplines or genres. However, Kenneth felt that "just like 1 or 2 projects of the 5…were really

centered around being in the science or technology field…the other 3 were just general, MLA-format writing." Throughout our conversations, it was clear that Kenneth believed there would have been value in a course like the one he had expected – a course that would help acclimate him to the rhetorical conventions of scientific disciplines.

Despite the "slight disappointment" at realizing that his course would not focus in detail on scientific writing, Kenneth ultimately felt that the course "compensated" by offering him "creativity" and "free expression to do whatever we want with each project." This creativity was important, for several reasons. As he explained, "I'm still a designer at heart. So, having free expression is an important thing for me." Interestingly, Kenneth described a greater sense of freedom of expression in his WRA 110 course than he had studying video game design in Singapore. However, Kenneth also used the creativity offered by the course as an opportunity to learn more about scientific discourse.

Kenneth offered, as a representative example of this creativity, his second essay for the semester. According to Kenneth, he had been prompted to write about, "an object of low technological value, and persuade people that whether it's still low technological value or whether it's of a high technological value." Kenneth felt this essay offered him the opportunity to produce something he felt challenged him creatively. While most people, according to Kenneth, "took an object that was related to their field and then they talked about it using a writing style within their field," Kenneth used the lens of his major, zoology, to transform a common object. Kenneth thus decided to write his project as a zoological description of an animal, but chose to use a screwdriver as the object of description and analysis. Generically, Kenneth's challenge was to write as though he were a zoologist; creatively, Kenneth's challenge was to write about a screwdriver as though it were an animal.

When I asked Kenneth about how this assignment contributed to his goals for the course, he told me that the assignment:

> pushed my limits, it made me to think outside of the box and come up with new ways of trying to write about a screwdriver, which is something that is really mundane and something people wouldn't really think twice about… it didn't really help a lot in the science and technology department other than realizing it's a descriptive and persuasive paper, and how they line up their information in a research paper. But other than that, not so much in the science part, more in the creativity part, for the way I did my project at least.

Despite the fact that Kenneth didn't find the generic demands of the assignment particularly challenging, he did ultimately use the assignment to reflect on scientific discourse. In our second interview, Kenneth discussed how the assignment had changed his perspective on the nature of descriptive writing in zoology.

> …[I had previously thought] there's nothing unique about the writing style of zoology papers, because it's very similar to like newspaper articles and things you find in magazines. But it did help. It helped me realize that it's not just purely descriptive, it is a little persuasive as well.

Elaborating on this claim, Kenneth described to me how it was he understood zoological writing as persuasive. Referring to his "Screwdriver" essay, Kenneth told me:

> I'm kind of persuading the audience to believe that the screwdriver is an animal. And, which, in a way, is kind of what most zoology articles are about as well, where they have these research findings and they're trying, especially sometimes when they're dealing with misconceptions about animals, and they're trying to tell you, "no the animal is not actually like that" and "in the wild they behave this way" and "they're actually more afraid of people than you think" so a lot of it is descriptive and at the same time persuasive.

Thus, while Kenneth expressed repeatedly the "slight disappointment" that his course did not focus more centrally on scientific writing, Kenneth was nevertheless able to learn about scientific writing as a consequence of his instructor's flexibility with the assignment. This freedom also satisfied his personal desire for creative expression.

From our conversations, Kenneth articulated value around the following outcomes: (1)

like Youssof, practicing peer review with his class colleagues (although for different reasons) – this allowed him to feel more aware of his own writing; (2) practicing academic rhetorical moves, including citation, as well as practicing scientific writing, which he wanted more of; and finally, (3) creativity, which he found as a valuable "compensation" for his WRA 110 class's lack of attention to scientific writing. These outcomes are also represented on the student outcome map (Fig. 3).

Extending "Helpfulness" Beyond Institutional Goals

Mapping the outcomes Youssof, Elle, and Kenneth associated with "helpfulness" illuminated a richer landscape of positive outcomes for FYW courses than those contained by the individual "helpfulness" items and *helpfulness score* described in the previous chapter. At once, Youssof, Elle and Kenneth elaborated the learning goals suggested by aggregating institutional, program, and transfer-related outcomes. For example, while "research" may be an explicit program outcome, discussions and analysis taught me that students may not want to simply to learn citation (though all three participants found learning about citation helpful), but also may find value in conducting "real research" (by which Youssof seemed to mean *in-depth research* or *primary research*), or in understanding a relationship between research practices and academic rhetoric.

Mapping these outcomes also revealed *unique "helpful" outcomes*. As Figure 4 (Unique Outcome Map), on the following page shows, "peer review" and the "ethnic composition of PCW" emerged as valuable for more than one participant, and Kenneth experienced "creativity" as a unique benefit of his WRA 110 course. Considering carefully the context of these comments helped me see, for example, how *peer review* (while arguably a practice of reading, writing, and research) was valued across levels of the program, and for reasons that were outside the

parameters of the program goals. Youssof, for example, appreciated how peer review helped him establish and maintain relationships with his colleagues, and described peer review as one practice that was particularly valuable for allowing him to learn and connect with colleagues in his class around the issue of acclimation to US, postsecondary discourse. Kenneth, on the other hand, appreciated peer review inasmuch as it contributed to a metacognitive awareness of writing, and gave him control over his own writing processes.

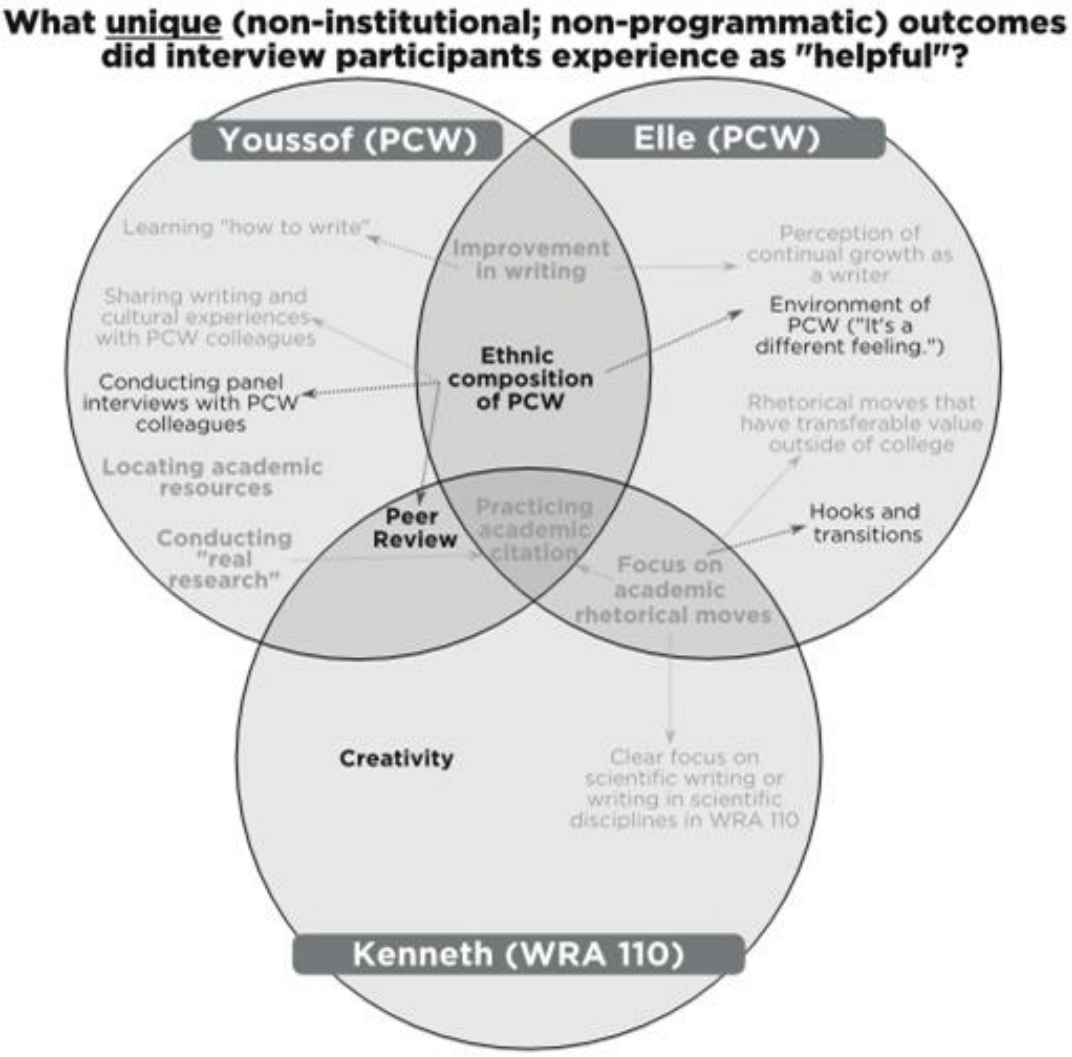


Figure 4. Unique outcome map: non-institutional, non-programmatic outcomes interview participants found "helpful."

However, what I found most interesting was the agreement between Youssof and Elle on

the positive contribution that the ethnic composition of their courses had for students. This was interesting to me because, as I described previously, quantitative findings pointed toward systemic patterns of ethnocentrism and racism, patterns that predisposed many students of color, particularly those with international citizenship, to place into PCW. While this outcome suggests a pattern of systemic racism, both Youssof and Elle said that this outcome *also* created conditions for positive learning experiences, which were (in this research) shared across PCW, but also unique to that course.

While they were enrolled in different classes, Youssof and Elle both experienced a curriculum focused on cultural and discursive acclimation to college at Michigan State. They also both told me they had found helpful their courses' discussions about culture, "culture clash," and being new in the US postsecondary system. Both suggested that these aided in their own cultural adjustments to college, as new students in the US post-secondary education system. For Youssof, these activities allowed him to learn about others in the course, and connect with students over common issues that they associated with their international citizenship. Youssof, for example, talked about his own homesickness, while others described their dissatisfaction with food in the dining hall. For Elle, however, the "cultural" aspect of PCW that she found most valuable was the prevalence of international students in the course, and the feeling that her course was more accommodating of her, as a Chinese citizen.

As I did in the previous chapter, I conclude this chapter by returning to the three guiding questions of my *helpfulness* inquiry: Did students find their courses helpful? Did international students find their PCW courses helpful? Is there any evidence that might support a placement process that appears to sort students by race and national origin?

Again, yes, there is evidence that Youssof, Elle, and Kenneth all found their courses

helpful. All expressed to me that their courses were a good fit, and none of these students expressed a desire to have taken a course other than the one they had enrolled in. However, all three did express ambivalence about aspects of their course, and all three also identified positive learning outcomes that were outside of institutional learning goals.

As for international students in PCW: Youssof and Elle both indicated that the ethnic composition of their courses was a critical part of what made their class experiences *helpful*. The extent to which this was a *helpful* feature of their experiences gave me pause, because it appears to suggest that something about the placement model is working. Something within the institution and student experiences is in alignment, though what it is has yet to be articulated as an institutional intent. Surprisingly or unsurprisingly, the stories Youssof and Elle told me revealed a portrait of PCW in which international students find the course helpful, particularly when their teachers are intentional about crafting courses in which the experience of being an international student within a US college is a central component of the curriculum.

Is this enough to support a process that appears to have systemic biases? Would an effort to intervene in the current placement process significantly damage the unique positive benefits that PCW had for Youssof and Elle?

To the first question, I argue: no. The benefits that some international students experience as a consequence of the fact that they are more likely to be placed into PCW with other international students does not warrant sufficient support for a placement process that produces unequal racial and ethnic formations.

To the second question, I argue: not necessarily. And so, the better question – the one I pursue in the following and final chapter – is what to do with the finding that the ethnic distinctions of PCW represented one of the course's most positive, unique outcomes for Youssof

and Elle. Are there alternatives to the current placement process that do not create adverse impacts for students with international citizenship? Of these options, can any still offer the unique benefits Youssof and Elle associated with the course's ethnic composition?

CHAPTER 6. LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR MICHIGAN STATE AND THE FIELD OF WRITING ASSESSMENT

In the previous chapters, I described findings in response to several questions that research participants, all students in Michigan State's first-year writing (FYW) program, had about that program and its placement process. Participants expressed desires to know more about the technical operation of the placement process, about whether that process exhibited biases, and about whether students, once placed, consequently found their FYW courses helpful.

My research into the technical operation of placement found that the placement process is affected deeply by Michigan State's protocol for determining whether students with international citizenship should be admitted with “regular” or “provisional” status. I also found that the Office of Admissions places students into FYW courses based on guidelines from the FYW program. These guidelines include cutoff scores for subsections of the ACT and SAT; students are placed on the basis of their scores on these subsections. Additionally, the cutoff scores are ultimately lower for students with domestic citizenship than they are for students with international citizenship.

My research into possible biases embedded in the FYW placement process found that students with international citizenship were among the most likely to place into the FYW program's lower-level FYW course, “Preparation for College Writing” (PCW). My research into the technical operation of placement suggests a reason for this particularly disparity: students with international citizenship face extra scrutiny and are actually subject to more rigorous standards than are their domestic colleagues. Additionally, conversations with interview participants revealed to me that not all international students come in having taken the ACT or SAT, though scores on these tests determine student placements to a large extent. I also found

that students who identified as Black or Latinx were also more likely to place into this lower-level course. This finding was consistent with historical patterns, as Black and Latinx test-takers have historically received lower scores on the portions of the ACT and SAT that are used to place students.

Research into course helpfulness found that students across the FYW generally perceived their FYW courses as *helpful*, to the extent that it helped them fulfill institutional goals. However, I also found that there was no statistical difference in the ways that students perceived the learning outcomes when they were enrolled in either lower-level (PCW) or 100-level FYW courses. In other words, FYW courses are helpful, but they are indistinct from one another, at least in terms of institutional learning goals.

However, I also found that interview participants were able to identify *helpful* outcomes that their courses did or could have had. Of these *helpful* outcomes, I learned that both Youssof and Elle perceived the ethnic composition of their courses – both with concentrated populations of international and multilingual students – as a unique benefit of PCW. Youssof and Elle both described this outcome in terms of the dispositions their instructors had, and the pedagogical moves they made in direct response to the high concentrations of students with international citizenship their classes had. For Youssof, the most helpful assignment – the "culture clash" assignment – was founded on the assumption that most students in the class had international citizenship, and had limited experience in US postsecondary education. For Elle, the attitude of her instructor toward students with international citizenship, and multilingual capacities, in light of the high concentration of international students, was what gave PCW "a different feeling" from the 100-level course she had accidentally attended.

This finding creates a tension: despite the ethnic segregation that appears to be a systemic

result of the placement process, Youssof and Elle also conveyed descriptions of the course in which this segregation laid the groundwork for ultimately positive educational outcomes – outcomes that may not have existed in the 100-level courses. What to make of this tension then? Does this mean the placement model is fine as is, because two students found the segregation it produces helpful for their learning?

In this chapter, I address this tension, describing both the limitations of this research, as well as this study's implications for future research into and administration of the FYW program at Michigan State. These include recommendations about how the findings from this research should impact the distribution of knowledge about the placement process, as well as how it should impact the FYW program's questions about its own process of placing students. After elaborating the local implications of this research, I describe both the limits and the implications of this research for writing assessment scholarship. Methodological choices in writing program assessment research are overwhelmingly oriented around the aim of *validation*. In contrast, I reiterate how methodological choices in this research have turned away from validation methodologies, in favor of *epistemic decolonization*. Additionally, I describe specific rhetorical moves writing assessment scholars might consider, particularly in light of recent trends in program assessment research.

If You Don't Like the Effect, Don't Produce the Cause: Limitations and Implications for FYW at Michigan State

While this project had significant philosophical components, and responded to current trends in writing assessment research, the research I have presented also provides rich evidence for future administrative decisions in the FYW program. In the following section, I elaborate the limitations of this research. Next, I offer a set of four recommendations, grounded in findings

and observations that have emerged during the course of this research. Finally, I offer an alternative option to the current placement model that might preserve the positive outcomes Youssof and Elle identified as a consequence of their enrollment in PCW, while mitigating the adverse impact that appears to affect students with international citizenship in Michigan State's FYW courses.

Limitations

While my methodological commitment to *epistemic decolonization* compelled me to identify and pursue participants' questions as focuses of analysis, my initial research design did not fully maximize the extent to which I would have wanted to research those questions. Four specific limitations affecting the empirical portion of this research include limitations to the discussions about *bias*, *helpfulness scores*, and the unique outcomes of students' FYW courses.

Limitations in empirical findings about bias. In response to students' questions about bias, I found that survey participants in Spring 2015 were much more inclined to have placed into PCW when they identified as having international citizenship, or with the Asian, Black, and Latinx racial formations. The 804 survey participants who contributed responses to this research – who I selected through quota sampling – represented nearly 25% of the total FYW enrollment in Spring 2015.

For those inclined to make decisions strictly on the basis of numbers, the quantitative findings related to bias are limited in that it only represents one semester. In terms of quantitative research, a more robust sample of student responses, drawn from students across multiple semesters, could provide more evidence of consistently racist and ethnocentric patterns. Additionally, scholars in the discipline of writing assessment agree overwhelmingly about the importance of continual assessment, many with the specific intent of illuminating systemic

patterns in assessment processes. Finally, the actual students sampled, while close to the actual demographics of Michigan State, compelled me to make some sacrifices related to quantitative analysis for the sake of computational accuracy. For example, I ultimately collapsed the responses for some students of color – including students who identified as indigenous, as Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, or as multiracial – into a single formation for the purposes of computational accuracy. A larger sample would hopefully ameliorate some of the philosophical problems that emerge from such a decision. However, it is also worth considering that students from these racial formations are simply underrrepresented at Michigan State, relative to local populations, and that until there is a larger presence of students identifying with these racial formations on campus, it will always be difficult to use survey methods to compare these students' experiences to colleagues that identify with different racial formations. In other words, there is the distinct possibility that if every student enrolled in the FYW program during Spring 2015 had responded to the survey I administered, the more general underrepresentation of these racial formations would mean that there would *still* not exist a high enough volume of responses from these racial formations to support quantitative interpretations of the effects for these groups, considered separately from one another.

However, I also think it is worth putting my findings about the bias of the FYW system in perspective. The numbers I have presented here tell a story about the predispositions that students with international citizenship and students of color have for placing into PCW. This story more or less echoes countless other narratives, told in the WRAC library, in committee meetings, and in workshops for FYW workshops. For me, the weight of those narratives mean something – they also tell true stories about the realities of FYW placement. To put it bluntly, many people already know that placement is set up in such a way that students with international

citizenship consistently into PCW. And so, while I would certainly recommend continuing to pay attention patterns in placement, and be able to represent those patterns numerically, it is hard for me to believe that a greater volume of data will tell a different story, barring changes in enrollment patterns, or direct intervention in the placement process.

Limitations in empirical findings about students' **helpfulness scores.** In response to students' questions about the helpfulness of FYW course, I found several patterns among survey participants in Spring 2015. First, survey participants generally found their courses helpful, though the specific ways in which these students found their courses helpful were indistinct across different levels of the FYW program. I did find, however, that overall, students with international citizenship had higher helpfulness scores than their colleagues, while students who identified with the Latinx racial formation had lower helpfulness scores.

These findings are limited in two ways: first, as with all the survey data generated in this research, the quantitative findings I have presented are limited in that they represent only a single semester of student experiences. More survey data here would likely be more convincing to those persuaded by quantitative representations of data.

Second, and perhaps more significant, is the inevitable under-representation of the quantitative *helpfulness* construct. There are two facets of this project that lead to this underrepresentation: the first involved limitations related to the amount of time I had to conduct this research, and the second involved limitations related to changes in FYW outcomes that are currently happening.

I developed the *helpfulness score* construct with Wenjuan to investigate patterns in helpfulness among survey participants after they had responded, and so I did not anticipate articulating students' perceptions of learning outcomes as a component of their experience of

helpfulness when I designed and distributed the survey to FYW instructors. I find this kind of *post hoc* construction less preferable to a more intentional design, and so, re-evaluating *helpfulness* with a more intentionally-designed construct for investigating *helpfulness* would better answer the questions that Youssof and other students had about the helpfulness of FYW courses.

Additionally, the *helpfulness score* we constructed was built by averaging students' responses on items related to their perceptions of institutional and FYW program learning goals, as well as items about transferable learning. In designing these survey items, I relied on the articulations of learning goals that were public and accessible in AY 2014-15. Specifically, the learning goals I have associated with the FYW program are those represented institutionally in current course catalogs. However, within the FYW program, administrators and instructors have been working to rearticulate these learning goals, and have published revised learning goals (not yet reflected in course schedules) as recently as October 2015 (FYW Committee, 2015) to make PCW more distinct from 100-level courses, and to eliminate the topical suggestions of the current 100-level courses, in favor of a single course, "Writing as Inquiry." In other words, the FYW program is in the midst of curricular revisions that have not yet manifested in public, institutionalized descriptions of the course. I believe a revised *helpfulness* construct would benefit from integrating the more specific outcomes that the program is moving toward.

That said, I believe it is also worth keeping in mind that in using the statistical method of factor analysis, I presupposed the presence of an underlying "factor" that could explain relationships between their perceptions of individual learning goals. I articulated this underlying "factor" in terms of students' general attitudes toward the learning outcomes they perceived in their courses, and statistically, there is evidence supporting this quantitative construct. In other

words, to the extent that you are persuaded by the technique of factor analysis, there really *did* appear to be a general attitude students had toward their learning in FYW courses. In the context of the *helpfulness score* construct, their specific perceptions about the extent to which their course helped them become better readers, writers, and researchers are simply indicators of that attitude.

Limitations in findings about unique, positive outcomes. In response to students' questions about the helpfulness of FYW courses, I also asked interview participants to speak to the positive outcomes of their courses, as well as the outcomes they wished they had encountered in their courses. On the basis of these interviews, I found that Youssof, Elle, and Kenneth experienced institutional goals in nuanced ways, and that they also experienced positive outcomes that were not part of the institutional goals for PCW. While I believe the method of mapping the positive outcomes students experience as part of their FYW courses have potential to contribute significantly to the administration and assessment of writing programs, it is also worth remembering that these represent the views of just three students, during a semester in which 3,157 students were enrolled in FYW courses. I would find it hasty to make significant curricular overhauls on the basis of the input from such a small portion of the students who enrolled in FYW courses during one semester.

However, I also think that some of these findings – particularly Youssof and Elle's descriptions of how helpful they found their instructors' responses to the ethnic composition of their respective courses – point to pedagogical decisions that are affecting a larger number of students in FYW courses. In PCW, there appears to be evidence that instructors are orienting their courses around students' processes of adapting to both the cultural and discursive expectations at Michigan State. This leaves me with several questions: How many PCW

instructors have begun to reorient their courses in direct response to the ethnic and racial composition of their classes? To what extent have these pedagogical decisions been helpful for other students in PCW?

Implications and recommendations for Michigan State's FYW program

In the previous sections, I've discussed some of the limitations of this research, which include the lack of data to which the program can compare responses students had in Spring 2015. In response to this specific limitation, I offer several recommendations related to ongoing research, and administrative changes that I believe should happen. These recommendations derive from specific findings and observations discussed previously in this project, elaborated in Table 13, below.

Table 13

Observations and findings that necessitate recommendations

1. **Lack of accessible information about placement including**:
   - the absence of a comprehensive, publicly-accessible description of placement into FYW courses (see Chapter 3)
   - the absence of a publicly-accessible rationale for placement procedures, or how procedures reflect or align with FYW goals (see Chapter 3)
2. **Lack of a clear, institutional distinction between the curricula or intended outcomes for PCW and 100-level courses** (see Chapter 4)
3. **Evidence of differential treatment, and adverse impact for some ethnic and racial formations**, including:
   - evidence of heightened scrutiny, and more rigorous standards, applied to students with international citizenship (see Chapter 3)
   - evidence pointing to patterns of systemic racism and ethnic discrimination (see Chapter 3)
4. **Evidence of unique experiences of helpfulness, including:**
   - evidence pointing toward the ethnic makeup of PCW courses as generating beneficial pedagogical responses and learning outcomes for some students (see Chapter 5)
   - evidence pointing toward lower perceptions of learning outcomes among students who identified as Hispanic/Latinx (Chapter 4)

In the following sections, I offer recommendations based around these four sets of findings.

Recommendation 1. Produce accessible information about placement

Many students indicated that they had little knowledge about how placement worked. Many survey participants asked specific questions about the technical operation of placement, and few indicated either the belief that they knew how placement worked, or evidence that matched the technical descriptions I offered in Chapter 3. Of the students I interacted with in this research, Elle had the best understanding of the placement processes, and I suspect that this was directly related to the particular interactions she had with different institutional units during her own placement process. At almost every point in the placement process, Elle faced unique situations, and contingencies that are likely invisible to students with domestic citizenship. Given the apparent lack of knowledge about placement among most students, and the nature of the questions many of them asked, I believe the FYW program should make its placement process visible to students, with clear rationales for the decisions that guide placement. To this end, it will also help if the FYW program develops clear rationales guiding its placement decisions, particularly since there is little evidence that placement decisions are grounded in evaluations that bear direct relationship to the unique goals and literacy constructs represented by current (and future) FYW curricula.

Recommendation 2. Continue to engage faculty to develop clear, institutional distinctions between PCW and 100-level courses

In light of the findings that enrollment level had little impact on students' perceptions of helpfulness, and that institutionally, the course descriptions for PCW and 100-level are nearly identical, I recommend that the FYW program continue to work to distinguish these two courses in a clear way, and to make those distinctions public to students enrolled in FYW courses. Making these distinctions clear and public is essential to developing an effective placement

model. More pointedly, in the absence of such criteria, it will be difficult for the FYW program to justify any placement decision, particularly if the current placement model remains the same. Ideally then, this distinction should happen prior to any revisions to the process of placing students.

Additionally, I think it is worth considering the findings from this research in the process of producing this distinction. To this end, I believe it is worth continuing to ask students enrolled in PCW about their experiences of the course, and specifically, about the extent to which they believe the ethnic composition of their courses, and pedagogical responses to those demographics, produce positive effects for students' learning.

Recommendation 3. Work with students and faculty to produce evidence supporting differential FYW experiences for some ethnic and racial formations, or to develop new placement methods

I also recommend the FYW program continue to keep track of demographic patterns in how students are placed into FYW courses. Under the current model, there is evidence demographic factors are extraordinarily good predictors of students' placement. I believe there are several reasons why this is the case: students with international citizenship are placed under much greater scrutiny than students with domestic citizenship as different institutional units consider how students should place into FYW. Additionally, the default placement process by default holds students with international citizenship to higher standards in terms of their ACT and SAT scores. At the same time, there is scholarly evidence that ACT and SAT scores are poor predictors of success in FYW courses (NCTE 2005; Scott-Clayton, 2012), and there is evidence that Black and Hispanic/Latinx racial formations in the United States traditionally score lower on the components of this test that Michigan State uses in the process of placing students into FYW

courses (ACT, 2013; NCES, 2015).

At the same time, little internal evidence that supporting why demographic factors *should* be such good predictors of placement. For example, the FYW program has not produced empirical evidence that, under the current system, students with international citizenship, Asian students, Black students, or Latinx students have greater success than they would otherwise. Such evidence might take the form of direct assessments of student writing, surveys of student attitudes, or longitudinal studies of student success when they place into PCW. In the absence of this evidence – and in the presence of clear alternatives (which I will discuss momentarily), the current situation appears to provide the basis for a disparate impact claim. Disparate impact, again, refers to a legal heuristic that US courts use to make judgments about unintentional discrimination (Poe, Elliot, Cogan, Nurudeen Jr., 2014; Poe and Cogan, 2016).

Recommendation 4. Work with students to articulate and map *helpful*, and positive learning outcomes

As I have tried to do in this research, I recommend that the program work to articulate with students the learning outcomes from their FYW courses that they find especially helpful. There was clear interest among students in the issue of helpfulness, which included questions about whether or not PCW students find their courses helpful. This question is especially important, especially considering the fact that perceptions of learning outcomes were unaffected by enrollment level, which suggests a lack of distinction between the two courses.

At the same time, the findings from my inquiry into students' experiences suggest that some international students may benefit in having FYW courses that have high concentrations of other students with international citizenship, or the pedagogies that have developed in response to these high concentrations of students. In response to this finding, I believe one specific

question that the FYW program should continue to pursue involves whether or not there is evidence that this perception is consistent among students with international citizenship. Further research into this area, I believe, will allow the FYW program to make better informed decisions about the FYW curriculum, and attendant placement processes.

Additionally, I want to spend some time dwelling on a pattern that I have not as yet focused on, yet one that remains important as the FYW program considers issues of bias, helpfulness, and how the consequences of FYW placement distribute across different racial and ethnic formations on campus. As I indicated in Chapter 3, when students identified with the Hispanic/Latinx racial formation, they were more likely to place into PCW. Additionally, as I indicated in Chapter 4, these students were also more likely to have lower perceptions of the helpfulness of their FYW courses, compared to their colleagues. While it has been beyond the scope of this dissertation to fully investigate this situation, these two findings suggest a need for greater inquiry. There is little from my research that can explain or justify these patterns. And, in light of the school's propensity (I believe) to construct diversity in terms of its agenda of internationalization, I recommend more dedicated attention to students who identify with the Latinx racial formation, and the effects of FYW placement decisions, and curriculum on these students.

Revising Placement: Options for Different Placement Models

As it stands, evidence from this research indicates the current placement model contains biases that disproportionately, and without clear justification, places students with international students, as well as Asian, Black, and Hispanic/Latinx students into PCW. However, in light of the findings that the consequent ethnic segregation contributed to helpful FYW experiences for Youssof and Elle, should the placement model change?

It is helpful to remember that Youssof and Elle represent only two of the 461 students who were enrolled in PCW, and that, of all students who took part in my Spring 2015 survey, students in PCW were statistically more likely to desire a different course than their colleagues who had placed into 100-level courses (see Appendix D). As beneficial as Youssof and Elle were for my own understanding of FYW *helpfulness*, I do not believe the positive experiences of two people offer enough evidence to justify systemic patterns of racism and ethnic segregation. Additionally, Youssof, Elle, and Kenneth all directly challenged the current method in various ways, and spoke with me about possible alternatives to the current model.

I also find it helpful to return to the disparate impact heuristic to which I have referred on several occasions explicitly. According to the heuristic that Poe, Elliot, Cogan, and Nurudeen (2014) have offered, the questions the FYW program should ask itself include:

1. Does the current placement process result in an adverse impact?
2. Is the current placement process necessary to meet an important educational goal?
3. Do comparably effective placement alternatives exist that have less adverse impact than the current placement model?

In response to the first two questions, I believe the findings I have presented clearly demonstrate adverse impact. When students were placed into PCW, they were subject to additional requirements, paying extra money toward FYW credit fulfillment. Additionally, at the time this research was conducted, students who enrolled in PCW were required to attend 5 hours of class, for the price of 4 credits, and with an outcome of 3 usable credits toward graduation, and 0 credits toward FYW fulfillment. Moreover, since students with international citizenship pay much more per credit than their colleagues with domestic citizenship, there is evidence of extra burden on these students, with very little evidence that such a burden is necessary in light of the

educational goals of the FYW program.

This leads to the third question: do alternative placement models exist that mitigate some amount of the adverse impact created by the current model? And the simple answer to this question is: yes. Since much of the adverse impact in this scenario emerges from the additional cost of enrolling in PCW, there are a number of alternatives this research suggests would be equally viable, and which would create less adverse impact than the current model. Two such models include:

(1) a *limited directed self-placement (DSP) model*, mediating the placement of former ELC students into FYW courses;

(2) an "*all-in*" *model*, in which the FYW program invests heavily in creating a different curricular option based on the notion that PCW provides a unique, beneficial experience for students with international citizenship.

I have arranged these options in terms of the degree to which they depart from the current curriculum and placement model. Both, however, are essentially variant forms of a directed self-placement (DSP) model. According to Royer and Gilles (2003), DSP models can include any number of placement methods in which an institution:

> …both offers students information and advice about their placement options (that's the 'directed' part) and places the ultimate placement decision in the students' hands (that's the 'self-placement' part)" (p. 2).

The difference between these two alternative placement options is in the scope of the placement model revisions, and the hypothetical willingness of the FYW program to change the curricular focus of current courses.

However, both of these alternative placement options are consistent with the

recommendations of the Writing Task Force (2004), mentioned briefly in Chapter 3. As I wrote then, current faculty indicate that the provost had largely shelved the task force's recommendations, for lack of assessment data supporting the recommendation. In contrast to that report, this one provides data supporting two DSP options, alternative to the current placement model.

I describe each of these options briefly in the following sections, describe how they can ameliorate current conditions of adverse impact, and, in several cases, how they can do so while preserving the benefits Youssof and Elle saw in their PCW courses. Figure 5, on the following page, illustrates these options, the differences between them, and between the current placement model. Finally, I was able to ask Youssof, Elle and Kenneth to respond to the prospect of DSP model, and so I consider how these options line up with their visions of DSP.

1. Limited DSP Model

The current placement model disproportionately places students with international citizenship into PCW, in part because these students are subject to extra scrutiny, and are (the only ones who can be) sometimes placed according to a specific method that involves both the ELC and FYW program evaluating students' writing on timed essays. In contrast to this method, it would be possible, simple, and likely more cost effective (Inoue et al, 2011; Peckham, 2009) than the currrent method.

The first time I considered a limited DSP option, it was during a Fall 2014 FYW Committee meeting, and was actually offered as an alternative to the current model by faculty in the writing program. As I understand and imagine such a model, in place of the current method

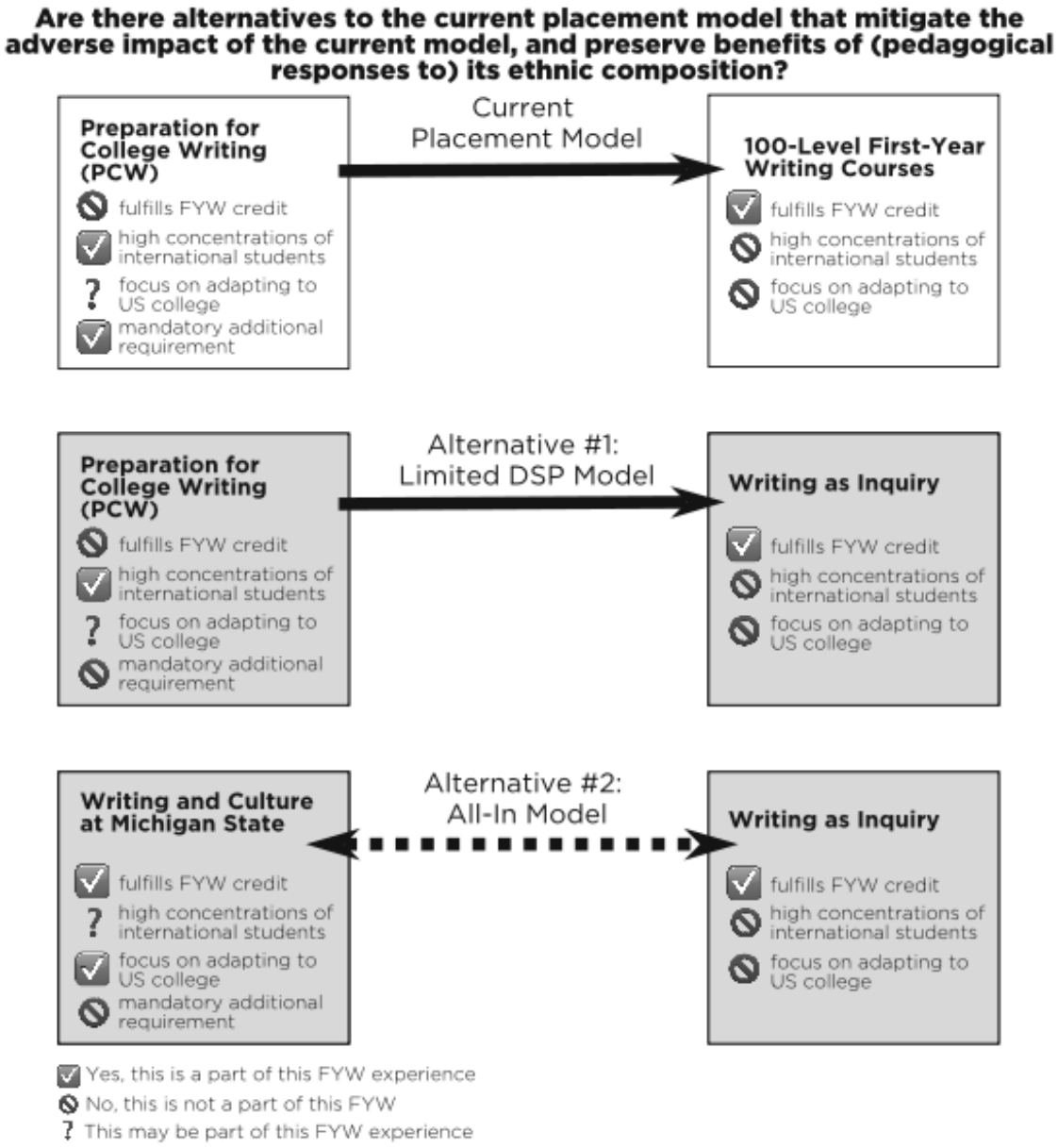


Figure 5. Alternatives to the current placement model

for placing students who have successfully completed extra requirements at the English Language Center (ELC), it would be possible for the FYW program to offer ELC students a clearly articulated set of distinctions between the future 100-level course, "Writing as Inquiry," and PCW. What this entails, however, is a clear articulation of these distinctions, which is an as yet unfinished process. On what basis would somebody decide to place themselves into PCW?

Hypothetically, the FYW program might give a set of guidelines students coming from the ELC – all with international citizenship, by virtue of the ELC's process for admitting students – laying out the distinctions between the two courses. Perhaps the program identifies some of the most beneficial, unique outcomes that students have experiences of when they enroll in either PCW or FYW. Because the currently-institutionalized versions of the learning goals are the same two courses, I will use findings from this project to stand in for these positive outcomes. With a Limited DSP Model, the FYW program would need to provide outgoing ELC students with some amount of information about the options available to them. A description of the courses might look like:

> *Dear future first-year writing (FYW) student,*
>
> *Following your courses at the English Language Center (ELC), we are asking you to make a choice about the next writing course you would like to take.*
>
> *All FYW courses at Michigan State University pursue common goals, and give students the opportunity to practice and reflect on their reading, writing and research. Students coming from the ELC have the opportunity to choose from two different FYW options: a two-semester FYW experience, or a one-semester FYW experience. Students find both experiences helpful, but we have also found that there are unique benefits to each experience.*
>
> ***Two-Semester Experience: Enroll in WRA 1004: Preparation for College Writing (PCW)***
> *You can select to a two-semester FYW experience by enrolling in PCW. PCW offers extra practice toward your FYW requirement. We have found that students who take this class frequently find it beneficial for several reasons.*
>
> > ***1. The diversity of the class.*** *In recent years, teachers have encountered more students coming from different parts of the world, students with diverse language capacities, and experiences with US academic writing. Students who took this class have told us enthusiastically about the benefits of this environment, which included opportunities to bond with colleagues from different backgrounds, by sharing and comparing experiences, and collaborating with those colleagues on their writing and course projects. Students have also spoken positively about the environments that PCW teachers create for diverse populations of students.*
> >
> > ***2. Practicing the "moves" and citation practices of academic writing.*** *Students who have taken PCW have found its focus on academic citation very helpful,*

because it has provided extra practice with an unfamiliar academic rhetorical move. Students have also conveyed learning about and practicing other "moves" common in academic rhetoric, including "hooks" and "transitions." Finally, students in this course have learned about many of the academic resources available to them on campus.

One-Semester FYW Experience: Enroll in "Writing as Inquiry"
By enrolling in this course, you are committing to a one-semester FYW experience. This is a faster-paced option to the two-semester experience. When students have enrolled in "Writing as Inquiry," they have told us that the course offers ***opportunities to practice academic citation*** *in ways that are sensitive to the unique demands of their majors, disciplines, or professions. WRA 100 also offers students experiences of* ***collaborating with their peers*** *during the writing process, and learning to become better peer reviewers and writers. Finally, WRA 100 encourages students to cultivate* ***creativity*** *in their writing, and offers students opportunities for creative expression.*

We recommend you consider these descriptions in selecting the FYW option that most suits your literacy needs.

While the FYW program would likely substitute some of the specific claims I have made with ones grounded in more robust and representative research, this letter represents a rough version of the kind of document we could offer to students coming out of the ELC in a limited DSP model.

I believe a limited DSP process would ameliorate *some* of the adverse impact of the current placement model, primarily by eliminating it as a mandatory component of ELC graduates' FYW experiences (which it is, for most students). However, it does not address several other important findings from this research: race, in addition to citizenship, was also an important predictor of students' actual placements, according to Spring 2015 survey results. Survey participants who identified as Asian, Black, or Hispanic/Latinx were also more likely to place into PCW, accounting for citizenship. As I indicated earlier, the ACT/SAT component of the placement process likely contributes to the unequal racial formations produced across PCW and 100-level courses, given those tests' histories of producing lower scores for Black and Hispanic test-takers (ACT, 2013; NCES, 2015). The limited DSP model, however, does not

intervene in apparent patterns of racism. This suggests a need for a second option, one which attempts such an intervention.

2. "All-In" Model

If the FYW program truly believes there is value in a two-semester FYW sequence for international students and students of color, then I think it needs to invest in PCW more fully. It needs to invest not just in the curricular design of such a course, but also in developing appropriate procedures for placing or guiding students toward this course, and more transparency about the rationales, and benefits that such a course has for students.

Therefore, the "all-in" model refers to a placement process that reflects a revised curriculum, one in which the FYW program has gone "all-in" on the value of the PCW course I have described. This model applies a DSP principle to a non-hierarchical set of writing experiences, including a new class that takes the place of PCW. This additional course, "Writing and Culture and Michigan State," proceeds from the assumption that Youssof and Elle's experiences as more widely-applicable. While I believe this assumption would certainly need to be supported by more research, the reality of the current curriculum appears to be high concentrations of international students and students of color, without explanation for the demographic makeup of the course. In this model, the "Writing as Inquiry" course scheduled beginning Fall 2016 offers just one FYW experience, while the curricular resources currently used to sustain the PCW option go instead toward a separate FYW option, "Writing and Culture at Michigan State."

In terms of logistics, the FYW could offer these courses in the context of a DSP model – students would be able to self-select into either section, whether Michigan State has admitted them as "regular" students, or as "provisional" students required to take ELC courses. Both

courses would fulfill FYW requirements at Michigan State by offering Tier One writing credit. Both courses would be open to all students in the FYW program. Additionally, all students would have the option of taking one or both of these courses, either concurrently or in any sequence. Therefore, students who felt compelled would also have the opportunity for "extra practice," and perhaps a kind of "extra practice."

Like Youssof and Elle's sections PCW, "Writing and Culture at Michigan State" might choose to emphasize the course's ethnic composition, and pursue a curriculum oriented around cultural and discursive adaptation at Michigan State. The two assignments Youssof and Elle brought in as exemplars of what they had learned included: (1) a reflective learning narrative, grounded in personal experience with "culture clash" at Michigan State (Youssof); (2) a research-based project about a specific facet of "culture" at Michigan State University (Elle). These assignments appear to reflect curriculum piloted in Fall 2012.

To advertise this course to future FYW students, the program might describe the courses in the following way. On page 158, I've also included a sample infographic (Figure 6) that the FYW might make available to students in order to support this hypothetical curriculum, and some of the considerations students would need to make to place themselves into a course:

> *Dear future first-year writing (FYW) student,*
>
> *Welcome to the FYW program! All FYW courses at Michigan State University pursue common goals, and give students the opportunity to practice and reflect on their reading, writing and research. However, the program also offers several classes to students as they work toward and beyond their FYW requirements.*
>
> *Therefore, all students have the opportunity to choose from several different options. These options allow students to take one or both of our FYW courses, thus providing for either a one- or two-semester FYW experience. Students find both courses helpful, but we have also found that there are unique benefits to each course. We recommend consulting the following guide (*see Figure 6 on page 158*), as you choose the course that best suits your literacy needs.*

Option #1: Writing and Culture at Michigan State (1 semester)
"Writing and Culture at Michigan State" focuses on adapting to the culture and writing styles at MSU. This course is designed to give students practice adapting and translating their many languages and communicative resources for academic audiences at MSU (rhetorical translation), while simultaneously allowing students to understand more about the unique culture of this institution.

Option #2: Writing and Inquiry at Michigan State (1 semester)
"Writing as Inquiry" encourages students to articulate their educational goals by reflecting on their learning, values, and literacy practices. Students will also learn to use writing to learn, and to write rhetorically. Students in this course also learn how to use course to make knowledge, academic and otherwise.

Option #3: Writing, Culture, and Inquiry at Michigan State (2 semesters)
When students pursue this option, they are able to take both of the FYW courses that our program offers. Students may choose to take these courses in any order, and may make this choice at any point in their FYW experience. We especially recommend this option for students who would like a year-long first-year writing experience, or extra practice learning about what it means to read, write, and research at this university. Some studies have also found that students are more successful when they take two semesters of writing, instead of just one (see Glau, 2007).

First-Year Writing (FYW) Options at Michigan State University

Option #1: Writing and Culture at Michigan State (1 semester)

Writing and Culture at Michigan State

- ☑ provides Tier One writing credit
- ☑ focus on rhetorical translation
- ☑ focus on adapting to US college

"Writing and Culture at Michigan State" focuses on adapting to the culture and writing styles at MSU. This course is designed to give students practice adapting and translating their many languages and communicative resources for academic audiences at MSU (rhetorical translation), while simultaneously allowing students to understand more about the unique culture of this institution.

Option #2: Writing as Inquiry (1 semester)

Writing as Inquiry

- ☑ provides Tier One writing credit
- ☑ focus on articulating and reflecting on educational goals
- ☑ focus on writing as a form of knowledge in inside and outside collegn

"Writing as Inquiry" encourages students to articulate their educational goals by reflecting on their learning, values, and literacy practices. Students will also learn to use writing to learn, and to write rhetorically. Students in this course also learn how to use course to make knowledge, academic and otherwise.

Option #3: Writing, Culture, and Inquiry at MSU (2 semesters)

When students pursue this option, they are able to take both of the FYW courses that our program offers. Students may choose to take these courses in **any order**, and may make this choice at any point in their FYW experience. We especially recommend this option for students who would like a year-long first-year writing experience, or extra practice learning about what it means to read, write, and research at this university. Some studies have also found that students are more successful when they take two semesters of writing, instead of just one (see Glau, 2007).

Writing and Culture at Michigan State

- ☑ provides Tier One writing credit
- ☑ focus on rhetorical translation
- ☑ focus on adapting to US college

Writing as Inquiry

- ☑ provides Tier One writing credit
- ☑ focus on articulating and reflecting on educational goals
- ☑ focus on writing as a form of knowledge in inside and outside collegn

Figure 6. Example "All-In" DSP guide

I believe this model of placement potentially ameliorates the adverse impact of the current placement model by lifting extra requirements that are disproportionately distributed to international students and students of color. Additionally, I believe this model adds value to the FYW experience, particularly for these students, by investing more fully in the idea that a course focused around cultural adaptation and rhetorical translation has value. Finally, this option also opens up another option for students who formerly might have *only* taken FYW courses, allowing them to add a course to their FYW experience.

What did interview participants say about DSP as a hypothetical placement model?

In the previous section, I have described two alternative placement options with the potential to ameliorate the adverse impact of the current model on international students and students of color, while institutionalizing (based on additional research) some of the unique benefits that Youssof and Elle saw as benefits in their PCW course. These options both revise the placement system by offering forms of DSP. And so, before moving on, I want to take time to note that, during the course of my interviews with students, I proposed DSP as a possible alternative to the current placement model.

All interview participants agreed that the current placement model has significant problems, and all also saw the benefits of a DSP model. However, they were not equally enthusiastic about DSP.

Youssof expressed the greatest degree of enthusiasm telling me that "letting [FYW students] choose what kind of writing they want ... it will benefit everybody." Elle expressed a similar degree of support for a DSP model, telling me that the benefits of such a model would be that, “you don’t feel like you have to do something for the school, because you made your own decision.” She was, however, concerned about how this would affect students' abilities to enroll

in one course or another, believing that it might create extra demand for certain FYW courses.

Kenneth had the most skepticism toward a DSP model, though he was also firmly not in "not in favor of SATs or ACTs or TOEFLs" or "anything that has you to write something in a short period of time." Kenneth was primarily concerned that some students would not have the capacity for self-assessment for the purposes of placement. His concerns are fairly common to the DSP literature (Inoue et al, 2011; Bedore and Rossen-Knill, 2004), though DSP scholarship also includes arguments and research that affirm students' self-efficacy in DSP models (Blakesley, 2002; Reynolds, 2003).

While most participants agreed that DSP is a better alternative to the current model, if it were implemented, there is also evidence that students would want to ensure that such a model benefits most students who take FYW, and considers how such a model affects course enrollments. Additionally, such a model would need to consider students' ability to assess their literacy practices in light of the literacy construct that permeates Michigan State's FYW curriculum. These considerations will help the FYW respond directly to interview participants' concerns, should a DSP model be implemented.

When I asked Kenneth about an alternative to DSP, he recommended a model in which FYW students:

> …submit an essay that they previously wrote and kind of analyze the student from there…maybe like a previous essay they had written before for like school or anything, and maybe have them submit that.

Indeed, Kenneth's recommendation for a more "authentic" writing sample reflects some of the moves that other institutions have used in placement. Indeed, such technique can be used in tandem with a more general, DSP approach.

The University of Michigan has used for several years in order to place FYW students

into their writing courses (Gere et al, 2010; Gere et al, 2013; Toth & Aull, 2014). This model asks students to complete an online, diagnostic component, as well as an untimed written essay, designed to reflect the rhetorical demands of genres produced in their FYW courses. This model also provides an option for students with international citizenship to take a specific course "intended for all students who feel most comfortable with academic writing in a language other than English" (Sweetland Center for Writing, 2016). Particularly given the geographical proximity of the University of Michigan, and moments of shared histories, I believe the University of Michigan can potentially be a tremendous ally to Michigan State's FYW program, should it decide to pursue a DSP model.

Implications and limitations for writing assessment research and practice in rhetoric and composition studies

In Patricia Lynne's (2004) *Coming to Terms*, Lynne argues that writing assessment scholars in rhetoric and composition studies need to concentrate attention on theories of assessment that are less sidled by the ideological baggage of measurement theory, and to actively develop theories of assessment consistent with the field's own research and knowledge. While Morris, Greve, Knowles, and Huot (2015) have demonstrated that, in terms of published scholarly books, Lynne is outweighed by the numbers of scholars advocating for more cooperative approaches with the field of measurement, many in the field agree partially (if not totally) with Lynne's advocacy for a theoretical separation from measurement (see Condon, 2011; Gallagher, 2012; Inoue, 2015). In April 2016, the Journal of Writing Assessment took up a very similar set of issues, publishing a special issue exploring theories of *ethics* for writing assessment.

As I have argued previously, the theoretical concept of *validity* has overshadowed much

of the work in recent writing assessment theory. Validity has grown into a holistic theory that scholars in rhetoric and composition studies have allowed to subsume most of their own theoretical contributions. Indeed, I have argued that *validation* is a methodology, complete with a theory of epistemic production and use, implied relationships between research participants, and with the overriding purpose of demonstrating the goodness of programmatic decisions. In writing program assessment, more specifically, this research orientation plays out when an assessment expert surveys program data, analyzing that data to determine the extent to which a program can empirically demonstrate that the decisions the program makes on others' behalf are good, fair decisions. Despite the good intentions of many writing assessment scholars – which recently have included efforts to develop locally-grounded, ethical assessments – a methodology of validation can over-determine research methods in ways that preclude genuine engagement with local audiences.

Through this research, I have articulated a methodology for writing program assessment that disengages with *validation* research, instead opting for *epistemic decolonization*. As a set of guidelines for this research project, I have attempted to produce methods for program assessment research that at once challenges the influence of coloniality on writing placements, while simultaneously building new knowledge, grounded in students' questions about placement. To demonstrate the value that this kind of methodology might have for others in the discipline of writing assessment, I want to close by describing what I have learned about writing program assessment in the process of conducting this research. In describing this learning, I will focus on two facets of this research, including (1) what I learned from students' questions, and (2) what I learned from students' perspectives.

Students' questions about placement and the FYW program

One of the major things I learned from asking for students' questions, both of survey and interview participants, was a sense of what students enrolled in the FYW process cared about during Spring 2016. To echo Bob Broad (2003; 2009), this project has given me a glimpse at what *students* "really value," with regards to placement, which at Michigan State, included questions of technical operation, bias, and helpfulness. I suggest that this alone can be a significant contribution to FYW programs, particularly for programs currently using dynamic criteria mapping (DCM) processes as part of their current assessment models. I also believe that this is important in the context of broader disciplinary conversations, which have tended *not* to elicit students' input in these processes.

Second, I believe writing assessment scholars could also pay attention to the nature of the questions survey and interview participants in this research asked. These include the questions that I pursued in previous chapters, including those about *bias* and *helpfulness*. However, they also included smaller questions that I have drawn attention to throughout this research, including questions that writing assessment scholars might interpret as being about *construct representation*, (both Kenneth and Elle challenged the nature of the timed writing exams used, compared to their course experiences), and as about self-efficacy in DSP. While I did not find these questions especially surprising, I do find them notable. More specifically, I think it is worth acknowledging that many students in this research posed questions that were not substantially different from the questions that guide much of current writing assessment research.

Finally, students' questions provided a tremendous amount of insight into the quality of communication about placement. Again, I found that the single most prevalent theme in questions about placement involved its technical operation, and how that operation was

communicated to students.

"What puts students into specific courses?"

"How is it determined?"

"Why does the college use our SAT scores?"

These questions indicate a lack of understanding of the placement process.

"Was I indeed placed or did my advisor just pick one he thought would suit me?"

"Why don't advisers tell us about the difficulty of the class at AOP?"

"Why did I have to rely solely on the adviser for placement?"

These questions indicate a breakdown in communication about placement, particularly in the relationships between students and advisers. However, these are perspectives I would not have, had I not encouraged participants to generate questions about the FYW program and its placement process.

These outcomes, I think, offer three good reasons why other writing program administrators and assessment consultants might reorient some program assessment research around students' questions: it allows programs to engage more fully with the values of its local constituents; it generates good, sophisticated questions about program administration; and it can help illuminate the quality of communication between administration and students.

Students' perspectives about placement, and their course experiences

From engaging with student perspectives in variety of ways, I was also able to learn a tremendous amount. Specifically, I learned with a great deal more nuance and complexity, the consequences of placement for students. This attention to consequences has been a growing concern in writing assessment (Poe, 2014; Poe, forthcoming), and as such, I want to emphasize the value of engaging with students in different ways. By developing a survey, I was able to learn

that students perceived PCW and 100-level FYW courses as equally helpful, in terms of program goals, but that there was evidence of ethnic bias in the placement of students. By engaging with students one-on-one, in an interview setting, I was able to learn about some of the unique benefits of these courses, which included outcomes that were in fact a response to that ethnic bias. This is the kind of complicated, nuanced finding about a writing program that would have been very difficult to articulate without eliciting with modest breadth and depth, the perspectives of actual FYW students.

Additionally, the process of elaborating these outcomes included methods that parallel increasingly frequent dynamic criteria mapping (DCM) methods, and suggest new considerations for programs using or interested in DCM as part of their assessments. As I wrote in Chapter 1, DCM is a process by which a writing program articulates and maps the values that contribute to evaluations of writing within narrowly-defined educational communities (say, within a single institution). While little precludes other uses of DCM, Eric Stalions (2009) has argued that writing programs have taken up DCM predominantly as a method that guides exit assessments. In other words, writing programs typically use DCM to produce curricular goals. As I also illustrated, there is little published scholarship testifying to student involvement in DCM processes.

In contrast to this use, I have borrowed from DCM methods in a limited way to map positive outcomes that students experienced, or outcomes they would have preferred, in retrospect. The *outcomes mapping* process I described in the previous chapter provides a method for identifying, the un-institutionalized benefits of courses. For the purposes of administration, understanding these benefits can illuminate some of the tactical moves of students and teachers, within the context of a particular curriculum. I found that this was particularly useful for

understanding the unique benefits of PCW, in the context of a program that is still in the process of making the course distinct from our other FYW classes.

Admittedly, I did not design this research in such a way that allowed for the kind of robust, collaborative mapping processes Broad (2003) and others (Broad et al, 2009) have described in more intentional DCM projects. This is one limitation of this project; ideally, I would have liked to invite Youssof, Elle, and Kenneth to directly produce an outcomes map, in the same way I produced such a map in the previous chapter. However, what this research *does* suggest is that students can not only make valuable contributions to DCM assessments, but that such contributions can even offer significant evidence for articulating and revising curriculum and program goals.

Finally, I want to comment on *epistemic decolonization* as a contribution to the recent work in writing assessment explicitly pursuing an agenda of social justice. As I have mentioned, this work constitutes a recent and growing movement in writing assessment literature, which include an April 2016 special issue of the Journal of Writing Assessment on ethics, a forthcoming collection on writing assessment as a form of social justice (Poe and Inoue, forthcoming), as well as a special issue of *College English* on the same topic. While this work has been highly influential for my own project, it has also been limited in its engagement with local audiences.

When writing programs conduct assessments, those assessments certainly have impacts that affect a wide range of people. However, I maintain that these assessments are most frequently and deeply felt by students, whose academic lives are directly shaped by programmatic decisions. The style of administration reflected by such assessments belies the ongoing coloniality of universities, like Michigan State, whose historical exigencies are grounded in more or less explicit desires to make colonized land economically productive. In the

case of placement, I see an institutionally-sedimented style of administration, an administrative style that characteristically assumes the authority to make decisions on behalf of others, to deny them self-determination, to produce ranked identity categories, to transfer responsibility for the consequent deficits such classifications produce onto individuals (see Spurr, 1993).

Thus, it seems to me that to pursue any social justice agenda necessitates a reconsideration of administrative style, including assessment practices, as well as self-assessment practices. Published scholarship in writing assessment generally promotes self-assessment in the form of validity inquiries, emphasizing local sensitivity. However, as a methodological orientation, *validation* over-determines the shape and qualities of self-assessments, which I believe accounts, in part, for the lack of student perspective in "local assessments." I think Patricia Lynne (2004) is right in identifying a need for new writing assessment theory. Specifically, I think writing assessment scholars concerned with social justice should hear Lynne's argument, and consider how to develop theories of research and research methods that bear out commitments to projects like antiracism and inclusivity (linguistic and otherwise). If this project is any indication, I suspect the process of developing and enacting such theories and methods will likely produce considerable amounts of information about writing programs, and that such information could prove useful in administrative moments where *validation* becomes rhetorically necessary. However, *validation* does not need to anchor work in writing assessment, and writing program assessment; likely, such an anchoring will continue to occlude possibilities for justice.

In contrast, I believe that the methodology of *epistemic decolonization* presents an alternative to *validation* narratives. Grounded in questions and perspectives I learned from working intentionally with students, I believe this research demonstrates the need for changes to

the technical operation of the placement process – how the program places students – as well as to the material organization of the writing program – where it places students with international citizenship, and students of color. The methodology has also allowed me to perceive the relationships between historically colonial claims to authority and claims to knowledge, and how such claims continue to shape in concrete ways – ways that are visible in students' writing placements. Additionally, I believe this research has allowed me to elaborate several options for alternatives to the current placement method, and curriculum students place into. All of the options I've suggested aim to alleviate some of the adverse impact of the current placement process, and to do so in ways that are sensitive to the positive outcomes that participants identified. My hope is this shows how epistemic decolonization in writing programs can open up possibilities for material reorganization, and the redistribution of its resources.

APPENDICES

Appendix A: Descriptive Statistics

Table 14

Descriptive statistics for survey participant identifications

Citizenship Formations		**N**	**N (% of sample)**
	International	230	28.6%
	Domestic	560	69.7%
	I am not sure	7	0.9%
	Prefer not to answer	7	0.9%
	Overall	804	100%
Racial Formations		**N**	**N (% of sample)**
	American Indian or Alaska Native	9	1.1%
	Asian	228	28.4%
	Black	52	6.5%
	Hispanic/Latinx	2	4.9%
	Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	39	0.2%
	White	435	54.1%
	Two or More Races	11	1.4%
	Prefer not to answer	31	3.9%
	American Indian, Native Alaskan/Hawaiian, Pacific Islander, Two or More Races*	22	2.7%
	Overall	804	100%
Gender Formations		**N**	**N (% of sample)**
	Female	368	45.8%
	Male	422	52.5%
	MtF Transgender	2	0.2%
	Not Sure	3	0.4%
	Prefer not to answer	8	1.0%
	Other	1	0.1%
	Overall	804	100%
Program Locations		**N**	**N (% of sample)**
Placement Level	**PCW**	190	23.6%
	100-level	614	76.4%
	Overall	804	100%
Enrollment Level	**PCW**	128	15.9%
	100-level	676	84.1%
	Overall	804	100%

Appendix B: Interview Protocols

Interview Protocols

The following protocols are for semi-structured interviews I conducted with interview participants, Youssof, Elle, and Kenneth. These interviews represented three different paths into FYW courses (one student enrolled in a Tier One course who took courses at the ELC prior to coming to Tier One; one student enrolled in PCW who did not take courses at the ELC; one student who is enrolled in a 100-level course, and did not have any other writing requirements).

The purpose of the first interview was to learn about students' experiences as students of literacy-related courses, as the subjects of sorting into such courses, and about their expectations of the course into which they have most recently been sorted.

In the second interview, I asked students to respond to questions and comments from other participants, and will ask them to read and discuss a piece of writing from their courses. I also asked them questions that centered around changes in their perceptions of themselves as writers, and how that might affect their sense of whether their course was a good fit.

A. YOU AS A WRITER

1. How would you describe the kind of writer you are?
2. Think of somebody you know who is a really good writer. What makes him or her good?
3. If you heard somebody say, "Oh, so-and-so is a terrible writer," what would you imagine? What do you think he or she would be terrible at?
4. As a writer, what are you most confident about?
5. As a writer, what are you least confident about?

B. PAST EXPERIENCE WITH ASSESSMENT

1. Was there ever a time in your history as a student when somebody made a judgment about your abilities that had real consequences for you? What was the time, and what were the consequences?
2. How did you get into your courses in high school?
3. How would you describe your experiences of the ACT/SAT?
4. How do your experiences with the ACT/SAT compare to the experiences that you are having in your current writing course?

C. COURSE HISTORY AND EXPECTATIONS

1. What kinds of language or writing courses had you taken prior to coming to this program?
2. What previous reading or writing classes have you had at Michigan State?
3. Do you know how you got in those classes?
4. What did you expect to have happen in those courses?
5. Did you get what you expected out of those courses?
6. How many languages can you speak, read, or write?

D. CURRENT COURSE EXPERIENCE AND EXPECTATIONS

1. What course are you currently enrolled in?
2. What were your expectations of this writing course?
3. What did you expect to have happen in this class?
4. What did you think writing courses in college would be like?
5. What were you hoping they would be like?
6. What are you finding to be surprising?
7. What are you finding to be disappointing?
8. What is your experience of your current writing course?
9. What kinds of reading, writing, and research are you doing in your current writing course?
10. How would you describe the course you are currently enrolled in?
11. What words would you use to describe the course itself?
12. What words would you use to describe other students in the course?
13. What words would you use to describe the writing of other students in this class?
14. How is the course you're currently taking a good fit for you?
15. How is it not a good fit?
16. Which of these strengths and weaknesses do you see as most valuable to work on in a writing course, based on what you desire from writing, and what you think you will need in your future?

E. DESIRES FOR WRITING

1. What kinds of things would you want out of a writing class?
2. Does the class you are enrolled in meet the expectations you had for this course?

F. KNOWLEDGE OF WRITING PROGRAM AND PLACEMENT

1. Are you aware of other writing courses in this program?
2. How many writing classes do you believe exist in this program?
3. Do you know how you got placed into this class?
4. If you had to draw a picture of your placement into this class, how would you draw that picture?
5. Are you aware that Michigan State used ACT/SAT scores to determine which writing classes you would take?

G. IMAGINATION OF PLACEMENT

1. There are two options for placement at MSU: PCW, and Tier One (describe).
2. How do you imagine students get put in these courses?
3. Is that surprising to you?
4. Do you think using SAT and ACTS scores is a fair way to make that decision? If not, what would you suggest?
5. Whom do you imagine gets placed in each of those courses? If students could "pass out" of these courses completely, who do you think would do so? What kind of student would "place out" of Tier One writing?

H. QUESTIONS TO STUDENTS ABOUT PLACEMENT

1. What questions do you have about how the placement process works?
2. What information or perspectives might you want to hear from other students enrolled in WRA 1004?
3. What information or perspectives might you want to hear from other students enrolled in 100-level WRA courses?

Appendix C: Factor Analysis Report

Table 15

Component Matrix

	Component 1: "Helpfulness Score"
This course is helping me become a better…	
…reader.	.801
…writer.	.872
…researcher.	.848
This course is helping me…	
…engage in inquiry.	.852
…engage in analysis of issues or texts.	.882
…gain an understanding of culture and diversity.	.804
…become a better citizen or participant in society.	.814
…make more informed decisions.	.825
This course is teaching me skills that will be valuable…	
…in future writing courses.	.891
…in other college classes.	.879
…in other situations outside of school.	.882
…in current or future workplace situations.	.883

Extraction method: Principal component analysis

Note: Only one component extracted

Table 16

Correlation Matrix

	Reader	Writer	Researcher	Analysis	Transfer-writing	Transfer-college	Transfer-workplace	Transfer-community	Inquiry	Culture & Diversity	Citizenship	Decision-making
Reader	**1.000**	.687	.674	.701	.677	.639	.650	.682	.629	.623	.635	.621
Writer	.687	**1.000**	.822	.811	.860	.817	.713	.692	.679	.616	.595	.614
Researcher	.674	.822	**1.000**	.805	.798	.770	.681	.656	.660	.602	.579	.618
Analysis	.701	.811	.805	**1.000**	.817	.788	.717	.723	.716	.651	.627	.658
Transfer-writing	.677	.860	.798	.817	**1.000**	.876	.763	.735	.700	.621	.613	.629
Transfer-college	.639	.817	.770	.788	.876	**1.000**	.787	.747	.705	.606	.601	.633
Transfer-workplace	.650	.713	.681	.717	.763	.787	**1.000**	.829	.753	.681	.716	.734
Transfer-community	.682	.692	.656	.723	.735	.747	.829	**1.000**	.748	.712	.751	.753
Inquiry	.629	.679	.660	.716	.700	.705	.753	.748	**1.000**	.709	.721	.702
Culture/Diversity	.623	.616	.602	.651	.621	.606	.681	.712	.709	**1.000**	.733	.711
Citizenship	.635	.595	.579	.627	.613	.601	.716	.751	.721	.733	**1.000**	.798
Decision-making	.621	.614	.618	.658	.629	.633	.734	.753	.702	.711	.798	**1.000**

Appendix D: Statistical data supporting bias claim

The data below presents the findings from a statistical model that was not incorporated into the overall body of this dissertation, but which supports claims of bias. The below tables indicate that a logistic regression model that accounted for students' demographic information, as well their satisfaction with their FYW courses and placement, predicted a modest amount ($R^2 = .194$) of the variance in students' desires for a course other than the one that they were placed into.

Table 17 indicates that within this model, three factors emerged as statistically significant. When students identified as Asian, they were **more likely** to believe they had placed into the wrong course. When they identified enrollment in PCW, they were more likely to believe they had placed into the wrong course. Finally, students who indicated higher levels of placement satisfaction were less likely to believe they had placed into the wrong course.

Table 17

Survey participant belief in appropriateness of their placements.

Another course		**N**	**N (% of sample)**
Does the participant feel they should have taken another course?	**Yes, another course**	249	31.0%
	No, no other course	555	69.0%
	Overall	804	100%

Table 18

Classification table: Statistical model predicting desire for a different course

	No desire predicted	**Desire predicted**	**Percentage Correct**
No desire observed	485	63	88.5%
Desire observed	153	89	36.8%
Overall	635	152	72.7%

Table 19

Logistic regression model predicting placement into 100-level courses based on demographic information

Nagelkerke Pseudo-R^2 .194

		B	Std. Error	p	Exp(B)
Citizenship formations	International Citizenship	.086	.334	.798	1.089
	Non-international citizenship	REF	REF	REF	REF
Racial formations	**Asian**	**.641**	**.316**	**.042**	**1.898**
	Black	-.138	.374	.712	.871
	Hispanic/Latinx	.122	.414	.767	1.130
	Native American/Alaska Native, Two or more races	.336	.514	.514	1.399
	Prefer Not to Answer	.557	.489	.255	1.746
Gender	Female	.141	.170	.408	1.151
	Non-binary, transgender, or decline to identify	-1.127	.982	.251	.324
	Male	REF	REF	REF	REF
Placement level	**100-level enrollment?**	**-.920**	**.273**	**.001**	**.399**
FYW Satisfaction	Course Satisfaction	-.142	.112	.207	.868
	Placement Satisfaction	**-.518**	**.114**	**.000**	**.596**

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