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Kristine Johnson

Sara Vander Bie

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Johnson, Kristine

Vander Bie, Sara

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# Directed Self-Placement for Multilingual, Multicultural International Students

**Kristine Johnson**, Calvin University, US, [kristine.johnson@calvin.edu](mailto:kristine.johnson@calvin.edu)

**Sara Vander Bie**, Calvin University, US, [sara.vanderbie@calvin.edu](mailto:sara.vanderbie@calvin.edu)

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**Abstract:** Directed self-placement (DSP) methods remain relatively rare in multilingual writing programs because such methods present unique ethical and academic risks. Grounded in five years of institutional research, this article reports on a first-year writing program in which DSP is the sole means of placement for international students and in which the international student population is linguistically, educationally, and culturally diverse. We offer logistical and technical guidance for creating DSP programs for multilingual writers, and we argue that DSP can be a vehicle for more equitable, socially just writing placement for multilingual, multicultural writers.

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*Keywords:* multilingual, multicultural, directed self-placement, first-year writing

Born to Korean parents, Esther<sup>1</sup> spoke Korean at home and identifies Korean as her first language. For the first thirteen years of her life, she lived with her missionary parents in a remote area of Kenya, and in seventh grade, she left for boarding school—an international school for missionary children—several hours away in a larger Kenyan city. She learned Swahili (and its local dialects) as a young child, speaking Swahili in the local elementary school and with her friends and neighbors. When she was five years old, she began learning English in school and at home with her mother. Esther took all her classes in English at the international boarding school, where she experienced a North American curriculum and took Advanced Placement classes, and she identifies English as her primary academic language. After graduating from high school, she traveled to the United States for the first time to attend college at our institution. Esther identifies most strongly not as Kenyan or Korean but as a third culture kid, someone who has “has spent a significant part of his or her developmental years outside the parents’ culture” (Pollock & Van Reken, 2009, p. 13). Basic information about her residency status, ethnicity, first language, and secondary schooling cannot capture the complex linguistic and educational story that she brings to college. And Esther is not alone: hundreds of thousands of international students bring with them these rich, complex stories of language and culture and education.

When writing programs and writing scholars describe students whose first language is not English and/or whose home is outside the United States, they invoke a variety of terms: *international*, *multilingual*, *ESL*, *nonnative*, *L2*, *English language learner*, and *second language writer*. Some terms emphasize residency status, others linguistic background, and others linguistic competence and educational experiences. Esther could be described as an *international* writer because she has never lived in the United States, a *multilingual* writer because she regularly writes in both English and Korean, and an *ESL* or *L2* writer because she learned English after acquiring Korean. Rebecca Lorimer Leonard, Shanti Bruce, and Deirdre Vinyard (2021) argue that terms used in language surveys—*monolingual writer*, *multilingual writer*, *ESL writer*, *second language writer*, and *dialect writers*—cannot capture the complex lived experience of speaking and writing in multiple languages. Students bring to college complex discursive resources, which are “fluid in use but fixed in representation . . . [they] map onto but also exceed those that are assumed by institutions” (Leonard et al., 2021, p. 10). And beyond the inadequacy of the descriptors themselves, institutions often use the terms interchangeably or simultaneously, with one too easily slipping into a proxy for others; *international* does not necessarily imply *multilingual*, nor does *multilingual* or *nonnative* imply *international* (Lawrick, 2013). If Esther were asked to choose one of these descriptors, would any represent the fluidity of her linguistic resources as she each day speaks Swahili with African friends, Korean with Korean friends, and English with English-speaking friends and professors? As she uses Korean to write in her personal journal and to email her parents? As she composes academic papers in English? Do her discursive resources exceed whatever her university assumes about that descriptor?

As an incoming international student, Esther was invited to complete a directed self-placement (DSP) activity through which she would choose her first-year writing (FYW) course(s). For writing programs, DSP is one means to an important administrative end: placing students in courses. It also allows writing programs to communicate not only about logistics but about values, revealing how programs understand writing, literacy experiences, and the needs and desires of their students. By asking students to make placement decisions, programs further communicate

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1 The research reported in this article received IRB approval (17–029 and 19–030). All names are pseudonyms.

“to incoming students our humility. We tell students that we do not know their whole story, that we will not presume to know it, and that we invite them to tell it” (Johnson, 2022, p. 113). Yet just as language surveys ask students to claim institutionally recognizable identities, so too do DSP methods. Placement materials outline the linguistic, educational, and cultural factors that make someone the kind of student who takes the standard course, the accelerated course, the stretch course, the international course, the multilingual course, the studio course (Johnson, 2022). Although DSP indeed invites students to tell their stories, it nonetheless establishes which stories—which linguistic, educational, and cultural identities students bring to college—are institutionally recognizable and thus salient in the placement decision. Perhaps DSP gave Esther the opportunity to decide that her experience in high school was more significant than her linguistic background; perhaps other elements of her identity were not represented in the placement materials and so exerted less influence in her decision.

We write from a relatively small liberal arts university in the Midwest, where the defining feature of the international student population is its complexity. Esther is entirely conventional in her complexity, one of hundreds of trilingual (or more), multicultural, third culture kids on campus. Precisely because of this complexity, DSP is the sole means at our institution of placing international students into FYW courses. Our institutional context—one in which most multilingual students are international students and nearly all international students are multilingual—binds us to specific ways of describing students, specific course offerings, and specific administrative realities; readers will find in our writing program elements of both commonality and difference. What we offer in this article is not a model of DSP but an example of programmatic research and an ethical argument for DSP. First, we describe a multi-year research process of attending to the complexity of multicultural, multilingual identity in DSP. We learned how international students choose FYW courses, revised the DSP system in light of that research, and revised that system again to exist fully online. From this research, we offer technical guidance for creating DSP systems and information about the factors associated with enrolling in a one-semester course, a stretch sequence, and a stretch sequence for international students. Finally, we argue for DSP as a vehicle for more equitable, socially just writing placement. When placement systems attend to the complexity of multilingual, multicultural student populations, they have the potential to honor the linguistic, educational, cultural, social, and emotional factors—some predictable and others surprising—that guide self-placement decisions.

### **International Students and Directed Self-Placement**

As one means of student self-placement, DSP is characterized by the principles of direction and choice. DSP systems provide students with information and guidance about their course options, a process that typically includes a structured means of self-reflection or self-assessment, and they assign students primary agency for the placement decision. Daniel Royer and Roger Gilles (1998) argue that DSP is an elegant, fair, locally controlled, and valid placement method, and other writing program administrators have corroborated its value in a variety of contexts and modalities (Blakesley, 2002; Blakesley et al., 2003; Chernenkoff, 2003; Inoue, 2009; Jones, 2008; Toth, 2018). Yet DSP methods raise persistent ethical questions centered on the very idea of student self-assessment. Richard Haswell notes that “directed self- placement puts the burden on the student” not only for imagining an unknown future but also for making “a potentially damaging placement” (Condon et al., 2001, p. 204). When students assess themselves, their judgements may be influenced by

internalized biases around race, class, gender, and ability (Schendel & O’Neill, 1999; Toth, 2018) or by the racial, cultural, or linguistic values projected in the placement materials themselves (Ketai, 2012). Kristine Johnson (2022) also explores how students carry their identities as *good writers* or *bad students*—as well as their ideas about writing, grammar, and education—into their placement decisions, even when the program directs them otherwise. Students indeed arrive at college “hyper-aware” (Royer & Gilles, 1998, p. 68) of their capabilities, but that awareness may be inaccurate or misdirected, not a valid measure of their preparedness for a particular writing course.

DSP remains relatively rare in multilingual writing programs in part because these ethical questions are heightened when students did not attend secondary school in the United States or when they do not identify English as their first or home language. We focus on the ethical questions particular to international students, those who hold F1 visas and have lived outside the United States for the majority of their lives, because this population is the focus of our programmatic research. The very concept of self-assessment may be an unfamiliar, culturally coded practice for students used to working under the weight of standardized tests, national exams, and language testing. Language testing is both something English language learners expect and something on which programs and instructors depend. Yingyi Ma (2020) describes how in China, even though the “insane pressures” of preparing for the Gaokao (the national college entrance exam) do not directly affect students intending to attend college in the United States, “the Gaokao is simply replaced by the pressures of new tests—the TOEFL, SAT, and AP—and more testing, because many students take them multiple times to achieve the best scores possible . . . years of testing anxiety still wire these students to work their hearts out” (p. 59). DSP methods demand adjustment from international students who arrive in North American colleges after working very hard to succeed in the culture of language testing—and often *because* they have succeeded. We must ask if these students can be expected to make a good placement decision while encountering a wholly new paradigm for assessment broadly and writing assessment specifically.

Much of the hesitancy around using DSP with international students is further grounded in the concern that students cannot accurately assess their linguistic proficiency. When English language learners assess themselves, their judgments may be influenced by cultural background, including values around modesty and individual achievement, and by linguistic proficiency; those with greater proficiency assess themselves more accurately and even more critically (Cox & Dewey, 2020; Ma & Winke, 2019; Strong-Krause, 2000). Addressing writing placement, Dana Ferris et al. (2017) consider how “students who are not fully aware (because of their differing cultural and educational experiences) of what language/writing proficiency entails, particularly in a demanding L2 academic environment” may overplace themselves to make faster progress while “other students may lack confidence in their own abilities and place themselves lower than required” (p. 2). Certainly, the consequences of misplacement are serious: students risk spending more time (and thus money) in courses for which they may not earn graduation credit, or they risk low grades and more lost time in a class that is too difficult.

Yet writing programs that employ DSP for multilingual, multicultural students recognize its potential to generate appropriate placements (Crusan, 2011; Ferris & Lombardi, 2020; Horton, 2022; Inoue, 2009; Saenkhum, 2016). Testing the validity of DSP decisions, Ferris et al. (2017) compared results from the local placement exam with self-placement decisions. Incoming first-year students, more than 80% of whom were international visa holders, placed themselves into one

of four second-language writing courses. Seventy-nine percent placed themselves at the same level or within one level of where the test placed them (p. 7). Those who tested at the lowest level were most likely to overplace themselves by two or three levels, and Ferris et al. (2017) note how this finding suggests that “student self-assessments alone cannot do the work of placement for this large program” (p. 8). At the same time, they argue that writing program administrators and instructors should not automatically assume that L2 writers cannot be trusted to provide input about their placement outcomes” (p. 8). It is tempting for writing program administrators to exaggerate the *choice* element of DSP, worrying that students are simply making spurious decisions. Yet Ferris et al. (2017) highlight the importance of the *direction* element, which may include prompts within the placement survey, meetings with placement advisors, or other mechanisms that provide necessary safeguards while allowing for student agency.

Just as ethical questions about DSP are heightened for international students, so too are the benefits if programs are thoughtful and deliberate. The benefits are significant enough that the Conference on College Composition and Communication (2020) advocates using DSP for international and residential multilingual students because the method communicates to students that they have agency and that the program respects that agency (Gere et al., 2010; Gere et al., 2013; Johnson 2022; Jones, 2008). In her work on multilingual writing placement and agency, Tanita Saenkhum (2016) ultimately advocates for DSP because the method structurally establishes the best conditions for student agency. With good information and direction, she argues, “multilingual students will be able to make well-informed placement decisions” (p. 115). When considering how to address the effects of linguistic imperialism in FYW placement, Mathew Gomes (2018) similarly concludes that DSP expands student agency while also producing “more socially just outcomes for international students” (p. 222). Resident multilingual students, immigrant students, refugee students, and international students arrive at North American universities with different factors and experiences having shaped their sense of linguistic, educational, and personal agency, but all students benefit when programs affirm their agency. Doing so reinforces a belief that writing teachers and scholars already hold: students are already writers when they enter college, and as such, they bring relevant, valuable knowledge about themselves as writers and learners.

DSP finally opens the possibility for students to make decisions that honor their complex backgrounds and their desires for the future. Language proficiency is certainly a factor influencing self-placement decisions, but other factors should be recognized (Knoblock & Gorman, 2018; Matsuda et al., 2013; Schneider, 2018). Todd Ruecker (2011) found pedagogical reasons why international students were satisfied with their multilingual course, including “because this course is made for the students like me . . . who need special attention in some areas that the English students already dominate” (p. 101) and “because the teachers understand our necessities as a second language learners, and they can explain us better than a English teacher will do” (p. 101). International students also cite social and emotional factors. They may simply feel more comfortable with other international students and thus more willing to make mistakes (Ruecker, 2011). Kimberly Costino and Sunny Hyon (2007) reveal that international students often want to be in a classroom environment where they have a sense of belonging, working with students who share their home language or cultural experiences: “I think multilingual students they have more experience, or maybe because I want to talk to somebody that just like me that have the same experience as me. That’s why I want [the multilingual class]” (p. 75). Another student shared, “when I see American, just always kind of alien to me, you know? Just strange . . . And when I see

Chinese, still kind of like family” (p. 75). By centering and elevating student voices, DSP centers student needs and perceptions, allowing writing programs to hear and meet those needs more effectively. Doing so is an act of equity and justice.

### Institutional Context

The defining feature of our international student population is its diversity, and we have chosen to use the term *international student* because it is the label these students apply to themselves. Founded in 1876 to serve the Dutch immigrant community, our religiously affiliated liberal arts university today serves this culturally, ethnically, and linguistically diverse student population. The religious institutional mission is also an access mission: the admissions rate (in the high seventies) is far, far higher than one might associate with the term *liberal arts university*, and the international students—very often the children of pastors and missionaries—are far less economically privileged than their counterparts at other North American universities. For the 2023–2024 academic year, total undergraduate enrollment was 2,843 students. Thirteen percent of these students hold international citizenship, and another 5% are multilingual U.S. citizens living abroad (Calvin University, 2019). In 2023, students had citizenship in over seventy countries, including large groups hailing from South Korea, China, Nigeria, Ghana, and Indonesia; more than forty languages are spoken on campus. Over the last five years, this international student population has held steady around 13% and is expected to increase in the future.

Even the international student label, however, obscures the complexity of individual student backgrounds. As Elena Lawrick (2013) argues, students who arrive in multilingual writing courses are neither homogeneous nor *tabula rasas* who have never received literacy instruction in English (p. 31). Although most international students—those invited to DSP—hold citizenship in a country outside the United States, some are North American citizens who grew up abroad in missionary families and have never lived in the United States. Some completed part of their pre-college education in the United States and have familiarity with North American academics and writing practices; some studied at international schools throughout Asia, Europe, Africa, and South America, speaking and writing in English among a geographically and linguistically diverse group of peers. Others studied in local schools throughout Asia and Africa, where English was not the primary language of instruction. As many as 65% of international students identify as third culture kids who grew up outside the home country of their parents. These students may too easily be labeled as simply *Korean* or *international* when in reality, they enter with diverse educational backgrounds. One ethnically Korean student, who grew up in Peru and was educated entirely in Spanish, describes part of her preparation for college: “I went to Korea for a visit with my family, and that summer I went to like an institute for the SAT essay test. That academy taught me grammar and essay writing, but they were just preparing you for a test—not really literary or poetic stuff—and writing the essay in time.” Students who report English as their first language may have attended a local school in Thailand; students who report English as a second or third language may have had North American teachers and a North American curriculum in Russia.

The international student label may also mask linguistic diversity. Citizenship status does not reveal whether students are multilingual or whether they are confident in English or any other languages. Speakers of global Englishes identify English as their first or primary language, but that linguistic background cannot guarantee familiarity with the conventions of American academic writing. At our institution, international students are asked to demonstrate English

language proficiency during the admissions process, with the assumption being that students who demonstrate proficiency are equipped for the standard curriculum, including the standard FYW course. The options are as follows, and students are sometimes admitted without having met one of these criteria:

- Citizenship in a country whose primary language is English;
- Educational experiences, such as graduating from an international school;
- SAT (minimum of 510 in reading and writing and 1100 composite) or ACT (minimum of 20 in English and 23 composite) scores; and/or
- English proficiency testing (for example, an internet-based TOEFL score of 80 or above or an IELTS score of 6.5 or higher).

Given the various edges of diversity among our international student population and the limitations of these admissions criteria, the FYW program has long offered specific courses for international students. These courses are the only credit-bearing courses at the university created specifically for English language learners and those who attended high school outside the United States.

DSP leverages what these students know about their linguistic, educational, and cultural background in the context of writing, and because of the limited course options, the risks of overplacement and underplacement are also relatively limited. The FYW program serves the core curriculum, and students fulfill the core requirement with one of these options:

- English 101—Written Rhetoric: A one-semester course in which students compose several major projects, including rhetorical analysis and research-based argumentation. The course learning outcomes are aligned with the WPA Outcomes Statement, and each section is supported by an instruction librarian.
- English 100/102—Enhanced Written Rhetoric: A two-semester stretch sequence that shares learning outcomes and major projects with English 101. The course has more structural support (they conference on each major assignment) and time for drafting and revision. Conditionally admitted domestic student select this option via DSP.
- English 100/102 International—Enhanced Written Rhetoric: A two-semester stretch sequence that shares learning outcomes and major projects with English 101. The course has more structural support (they conference on each major assignment) and time for drafting and revision. International sections give special attention to the cultural and linguistic features of North American academic writing, and because they are taught by a second-language writing specialist, they provide more support in English language learning. The international section is not designated differently on the transcript.

Programs with more course options accept more risk when using DSP, as Ferris et al. (2017) describe. In a multi-level program involving pre-credit and credit-bearing courses, students who place themselves unnecessarily low potentially delay their graduation and add to the cost of their degree. Because our program offers two choices, either a one semester or two semester option, the risk of delaying degree completion is mitigated, and students earn credits toward their degree with every choice they make. Risk is also reduced, yet only in theory, because students matriculate having demonstrated a minimum level of English proficiency during the admissions process.

### Phase One: Culturally Responsive Directed Self-Placement

For several years before Kristine became director, the FYW program used DSP for all conditionally admitted students and all international students. International students attended a placement session during their summer orientation, and they used exactly the same materials as their conditionally admitted domestic peers: a self-reflection survey closely modeled on the original Grand Valley State measure (Royer & Gilles, 1998) and an essay prompt asking them to offer feedback and revision suggestions on a speech written by a prominent North American author. These materials had obvious flaws for international students, who were often unacquainted with magazines, newspapers, and educational practices mentioned in the survey as well as the cultural references in the essay prompt and sample piece of writing. Although the general sense in the program was that international students made good choices and that those who needed the most writing support received it, we wanted to make our placement system more valid, more culturally responsive, and simply more welcoming and hospitable. We wanted international students to have a positive first encounter with the writing program and to make a good placement decision based on clear, culturally and linguistically relevant information.

The revision process began with extended ethnographic interviews with international students who had recently completed the core writing requirement. As Analeigh Horton (2022) suggests, we believed that the voices of international students should be centered in our programmatic research, and we aimed to affirm the “experiential wisdom” these students brought to campus (p. 13). Conducted primarily by an undergraduate researcher, these semi-structured interviews addressed writing experiences in high school, perceptions of the placement process at summer orientation, and experiences in the FYW program (see Appendix A). And given the diversity of our international student population, we were especially interested to explore the social and emotional value of taking a course with other international students (Costino & Hyon, 2007). Those students who remembered the placement process reported feeling that they had a true choice, and nearly all students were satisfied with their decision. Janelle, who completed an International Baccalaureate curriculum in Jamaica, believed that she underplaced herself, sharing that “honestly, I feel like the English I took here was very repetitive. Obviously, I learned new stuff, like how to conduct research, but I found the class very repetitive.” Another student who attended international school in Nigeria, Andrew, believed that he overplaced himself: “English 101 was fine with my level of English, but it was just too fast. I wanted like to get good grades, so when it was too fast, I didn’t really have time to improve my grade. [If I could go back], I would take English 100. I’d have time to remember some rules that I was learning because there were so many new things that I didn’t know about before. I wish I’d taken the time to take that in.” Although these students expressed regret, they did not share that the three extra credits or the course grade exerted any long-term influence on their college experience.

Students who were satisfied with their placement, particularly when they chose the international stretch sequence, appreciated the pace of the course and the classroom community. Educated entirely in Spanish, Zadie described how English 100/102 matched her desires for the first year of college:

I cannot say if it was the rigor of the course or the course *planification* or just me balancing classes during my freshman year. But the pace [of English 100/102] helped me. I feel like there are two pathways—one is just taking things easier freshman year, and 100/102 is a longer process. I also took Chemistry 103/104 instead of 105, so I think that either way I

would have chosen the longer track. My second reason was to have a good foundation in English. I think it did help me to just get used to writing with sources and with references because that's the part where I struggled the most.

David, a Chinese student educated in China, likewise appreciated the slower pace, and he also referenced the value of working with other international students:

The slower pace made for a much less intimidating atmosphere. Even though English is functionally one of my first languages, I was still very inexperienced in terms of the college writing that I encountered. Taking 100/102 with fellow international students helped me understand my weaknesses much better and also allowed me to tackle them with more grace.

A Rwandan citizen educated in Kenya, Nana appreciated the international course because "it's nice to have a variety of people in class so you can hear different options and how other people are thinking. It was really fun to be with international student friends and everything." The social bonds formed at international student orientation persisted for many students in their FYW course.

From the interview data and from conversations with instructors, we identified three overarching concepts for the new placement materials. Guiding each word in the informational materials and each question on the self-reflection survey, these concepts describe "preparedness for the standard writing curriculum at a given institution" (Toth & Aull, 2014, p. 6). International students chose FYW courses for a multiplicity of reasons, including if it was even possible to fit the stretch sequence into large majors, but three concepts emerged as salient: literacy experience, preferred learning environment, and desire for an international classroom community. These concepts are certainly salient in other writing programs, and indeed the concept of *literacy experience* is among the most frequently measured on DSP surveys (Toth & Aull, 2014, p. 7). What is significant about these concepts, however, is that international students themselves expressed them in their interviews. We identified these constructs by attending to the complex linguistic, educational, and cultural stories these students bring to college. Although the concept of literacy experience relates to linguistic ability, it is notable that linguistic ability alone was rarely the primary reason for selecting a course.

When they arrived for summer orientation in 2017, international students used the revised self-reflection survey and new writing prompt. Students learned about their course options from the writing program director and the course instructors, after which they took the survey and completed the writing prompt. Before making their decision by circling their course choice on the last page of the survey, they were given guidance about how to interpret their survey results and essay writing experience. The writing prompt simply asked students to describe their process of writing academic essays in English; for students, it serves as a self-reflection tool, and for the writing program, it serves as a writing sample to inform difficult placements. The twenty-question survey, which is the focus of this article and of our programmatic research, communicates to students the concepts that we hope will guide their choice (see Appendix B). The first concept, *literacy experience*, is measured in the first ten questions, which address writing processes, genre knowledge, research practices, and use of English as the primary language. Our research revealed that students who in high school had written longer, more varied, more complex essays in English were more comfortable and successful in the one-semester course. Second, *learning environment* is measured by the next nine questions, which address the pace of the course, desired level of

support, and self-confidence. Students who arrived at college more confident as writers, more comfortable seeking assistance, and more enthusiastic about academic challenges were well placed in the one-semester course. The third concept, *international community*, was measured by the final question: “I want to take a writing class where all my classmates are also international students.” In their interviews, international students regularly shared that the multilingual, multicultural community was part of what made them happy and successful in the course; for many, the class community eased the transition to college and the United States.

### Survey Results and Placement Decisions

Over three placement cycles with the revised materials, international students ( $N=204$ ) sorted themselves into the one-semester course, the stretch sequence, and the international stretch sequence largely as they had in the past. Approximately 60% continued to choose the one-semester course, while 24% chose the international stretch sequence and 16% the stretch sequence. Using a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA), we found that the three concepts were significant for course choice (see Table 1). Students choose a one-semester course based on *literacy experience* (the average score of questions one–ten) and *learning environment* (the average score of questions eleven–nineteen); they choose between the stretch sequence and the international stretch sequence based on their desire for an *international community* (the score on question twenty).

**Table 1**

*Average Scores on Three Concepts by Course Choice, Phase One*

Course Choice	Literacy experience*	Learning Environment**	International Community***
One-Semester	1.65	1.85	2.63
Stretch Sequence	2.05	2.16	2.52
International Stretch	2.25	2.40	2.05

\* $p=0.00$ ,  $F=13.99$ . \*\* $p=0.00$ ,  $F=16.09$ . \*\*\* $p=0.005$ ,  $F=5.28$ .

Students who chose the one-semester course had significantly stronger *literacy experience* scores and significantly stronger *learning environment* scores, indicating that their prior experiences with writing and research in English would prepare them for college writing courses in the United States and that they desired a faster-paced learning environment with fewer structural means of support. (On the survey, the score of *one* indicates *very frequently* or *strongly agree*, so lower scores indicate more confidence or a stronger desire.) Students who chose either stretch option had significantly weaker scores, indicating they had less experience with academic writing in English and that they would be more comfortable in a slower-paced course with more support from instructors, writing center tutors, and librarians. Among students who selected a stretch option, those who selected the international option had a significantly stronger score on *international community* (two-sample *t*-test;  $p=0.02$ ) and thus a greater desire for a course with other international students.

It should be noted that during these placement cycles, linguistic background was significantly associated with *literacy experience*, *learning environment*, *international community*, and course choice. Students for whom English was a first language chose the one-semester course at significantly higher rates (two-sample *t*-test;  $p=0.00$ ). Students for whom English was not a first language had a stronger desire to take a multilingual, multicultural writing course (two-sample *t*-test;  $p=0.003$ ). International students who attended high school in the United States almost always chose the one-semester course, perhaps indicating their comfort with North American school culture. English speakers from Nigeria and Thailand and India chose the international stretch sequence, as did Korean speakers raised in China or Ethiopia or Peru. The placement decisions students made during this time reveal clear patterns, but those patterns exist alongside the complex stories and motivations of individual students.

### **Phase Two: Online Directed Self-Placement**

We enjoyed the placement sessions at summer orientation. The arrival of the international cohort on campus near the end of August signaled that the academic year was about to begin, and each new cohort brought new home countries, new languages, new stories. We also enjoyed the one-on-one conversations we had with students just before they circled their course choice and rushed out the door to their next orientation activity. If they were simply not sure which option to choose, we listened, asked questions, answered questions, affirmed instincts, and made assurances. Even if students had good information and felt confident about their choice, many wanted more guidance and more reassurance, and we were happy to offer that direction. These conversations—and possibly conversations they overheard us having with other students—were indeed factors in many placement decisions, yet they were not captured in our survey data.

The COVID pandemic first meant that most incoming international students were not able to travel to the United States for the Fall 2020 term, and second, it meant that our institution permanently eliminated face-to-face placement activities at summer orientation. When international students arrived in Fall 2021, they had already made their placement decisions that summer using our new online system. We moved our informational materials about the courses to a new placement website, and we created an accompanying welcome video introducing students to the writing program and the placement activity. The self-reflection survey and writing prompt are now distributed via the admissions checklist (the checklist on which students, for example, submit health forms and sign up for housing) and hosted on Qualtrics, an online survey program in which students also indicate their course choice. The survey uses the same twenty questions, again scored on a four-point scale. Using the scoring feature in Qualtrics, we generate three composite scores, each representing a different concept:

- Questions 1–10: average *literacy experience* score
- Questions 11–19: average *learning environment* score
- Question 20: *international community* score

Students taking the survey never see these scores. Instead, each composite score is stored as embedded data in the survey, and it is also available for the writing program to download and analyze.

Information from previous placement cycles, both the data summarized in the previous section of this article and our experience working with international students, helped validate our survey, and we understood how survey responses correlate with course choice. However, we also

anticipated that students would want more guidance and feedback, just as they did after summer orientation sessions. We cannot provide individual meetings for all students, so we incorporated the kind of guidance Ferris et al. (2017) suggest could be integrated within self-placement surveys (p. 9). Using the if/then logic in Qualtrics, our survey shows students different messages based on their composite scores. On the penultimate survey screen, just before they indicate their course choice, students see displayed two or more blocks of text. All students receive this message: “As you make your decision, think back to your survey answers. As you click through the next several screens, we will help you interpret your survey answers and suggest what class may be best for you.” Students are next shown these blocks of text under these conditions:

- Students who score less than or equal to 2.5 on *literacy experience* receive a version of this message: “Because you selected **Frequently** most often when describing your writing experiences, **English 101** may be a good choice for you. You have done several things that will prepare you for English 101, including writing different types of essays, using sources in your writing, and incorporating feedback from teachers and peers into your work.”
- Students who score greater than 2.5 on *literacy experience* receive a version of this message: “Because you selected **Rarely** most often when describing your writing experiences, **English 100/102** or **English 100/102 International** may be a good choice for you. Choosing English 100/102 will give you the opportunity to write different types of essays, write essays longer than five pages, use sources in your writing, and incorporate feedback from teachers and peers. Choosing English 100/102 International will also help you become more comfortable writing academic essays in English, according to the expectations of an American university.”
- Students who score less than or equal to 2.5 on *learning environment* receive a version of this message: “You selected Strongly Agree most often when you described yourself as a writer, so **English 101** may be a good choice for you. You are seeking a challenge in your college courses, and you are comfortable seeking help when you need it.”
- Students who score greater than 2.5 on *learning environment* receive a version of this message: “You selected **Disagree** most often when you described yourself as a writer, so **English 100/102** or **English 100/102 International** may be a good choice for you. You may be unsure about the challenges college courses will bring, and you would be more successful in courses with extra support and assistance.”

Although these situations are unusual because the *literacy experience* and *learning environment* scores correlate overall, some students will receive conflicting messages. They might be told, for example, that their previous writing experience prepares them well for English 101 while their hesitancy about seeking help and the pace of the writing course suggests they may be best served in English 100/102. Students who receive this conflicting information must decide which concept is most important in their decision.

Finally, some students see a third message related to the concept of *international community*. We understand that students have historically enrolled in the international course when they have lower *literacy experience* and/or *learning environment* and a desire to take a class with other international students. Students with a *literacy experience* score greater than or equal to 2.6 and an *international community* score less than or equal to 2.0 or with a *learning environment* score greater than or equal to 2.6 and an *international community* score less than or equal to

2.0 also receive this message: “Because you would like to take a course with other international students, **English 100/102 International** may be a good choice for you. If you want to work with other international students on campus to navigate American academic writing, and if you want an instructor who specializes in working with international students, please consider choosing the **International** option.” We know, of course, that students choose the international stretch sequence for a variety of reasons, but we also want to prompt those students who may benefit from the most support into the course that offers such linguistic and academic support.

### Survey Results and Placement Decisions

Over two placement cycles in 2021 and 2022, international students ( $N=176$ ) sorted themselves into courses much as they did in the past. Approximately 55% chose the one-semester course, 27% the international stretch sequence, and 18% the stretch sequence. A slightly higher percentage of students are ultimately registered for the one-semester course, often prompted by scheduling concerns in regimented, credit-heavy professional programs. Although the question of how making a placement decision at home—outside of the summer orientation setting and often months before college begins—influences the course choice is still very much an open question in our program, the survey scores this time nonetheless reveal clear patterns about the factors students seem to be using as they make a placement decision.

Students continue to choose the one-semester course based on *literacy experience* and *learning environment*, and they continue to choose between the stretch sequence and the international stretch sequence based on their desire for an *international community* (see Table 2).

**Table 2**  
*Average Scores on Three Concepts by Course Choice, Phase Two*

Course Choice	Literacy experience*	Learning Environment**	International Community***
One-Semester	1.70	1.93	2.37
Stretch Sequence	2.14	2.38	2.59
International Stretch	2.46	2.27	1.83

\* $p=0.00$ ,  $F=49.66$ . \*\* $p=0.00$ ,  $F=22.18$ . \*\*\* $p=0.005$ ,  $F=12.81$ .

Students who choose the one-semester course have significantly stronger *literacy experience* scores and significantly stronger *learning environment* scores. In contrast with the results from Phase One, however, the concept of *literacy experience* sorted students into three groups, as a Tukey pairwise comparison with a 98% confidence rate shows that the one-semester, stretch sequence, and international stretch sequence scores are all significantly different from one another. Students who choose either stretch option had significantly weaker scores on both concepts. Among students who selected a stretch option, those who selected the international option had a significantly higher score on *international community* (two-sample  $t$ -test;  $p=0.00$ ) and thus a stronger desire for a course with other international students.

During this placement cycle, we had the opportunity to study how the prompts given in the survey—perhaps in contrast with the casual conversations at summer orientation—are related to placement decisions. Overall, students chose the course they were prompted to choose (see Table 3). Of the 152 students who were prompted based on their *literacy experience* score to choose the one-semester course, ninety-four (about 62%) chose that option; of the twenty-four students who were prompted to choose a stretch course based on *literacy experience*, all but one chose that option. Of the 160 students who were prompted based on their *learning environment* score to choose the one-semester course, ninety-five (about 59%) chose that option; of the sixteen students who were prompted to choose a stretch course based on *learning environment*, all chose that option. Only twenty-nine students were shown the prompt for the international stretch sequence, and about 80% of those shown the prompt chose that option. Because the prompts are tied to survey scores, it is difficult to understand to what extent the prompt influences the decision, but

**Table 3**  
*Prompts as Course Choice by Number of Students*

Course Choice	One-semester prompt for literacy experience	Stretch prompt for literacy experience	One-semester prompt for learning environment	Stretch prompt for learning environment	International prompt for international community
One-Semester	94	1	95	0	1
Stretch Sequence	18	6	16	7	5
International Stretch	39	18	49	9	23

we see here that many students heed the prompt, particularly to choose the international course, while many others do not, with students placing themselves lower in the stretch sequence than prompted.

Given these results, we were particularly interested in students who chose the international stretch sequence despite receiving prompts to the contrary. We were also interested in the small group of students who did not desire a course with other international students but chose the international stretch sequence anyway (see Table 4). Only nine students indicated very negative (four) desire for *international community*, and none placed themselves in the international stretch sequence. Students who chose the one-semester course despite their desire for *international community* had strong scores on both *literacy experience* and *learning environment*, well within the standard deviation for students who chose the one-semester course. For these students, their strong preparation and confidence about entering college seems to have outweighed their desire to take a course with other international students. Students who chose the international stretch sequence and indicated a strong desire for *international community* had relatively weak scores on *literacy experience* and *learning environment*, which were in most cases within the standard deviation for students choosing the international stretch sequence. The students who indicated a

**Table 4**  
*Desire for International Community and Course Choice*

Course Choice	Very Positive Desire (Score=1)	Positive Desire (Score=2)	Negative Desire (Score=3)
One semester			
Literacy experience	1.76	1.74	1.68
Learning environment	2.05	1.97	1.85
Total students (n)	14	36	41
Stretch sequence			
Literacy experience		2.18	2.24
Learning environment		2.37	2.40
Total students (n)	0	9	10
International stretch			
Literacy experience	2.37	2.49	2.5
Learning environment	2.94	2.40	2.29
Total students (n)	18	31	8

strong (score of one) desire for *international community* and who chose the international stretch sequence had a *learning environment* score (2.94) that was weaker than the standard deviation for the course. Here we cannot say in which direction the decision goes, whether the desire for an international community originates in a lack of confidence and desire for support, but we can note again that students who chose the international stretch course have lower scores overall. Finally, eight students indicated that they did not want to take a writing course with other international students, but they nonetheless chose the international stretch sequence. These students actually had stronger *learning environment* scores than others who chose the international stretch sequence, but their *literacy experience* scores were weaker, perhaps indicating that their concerns about academic preparation outweighed their desired classroom population.

During these two placement cycles, there were no significant differences between students who identified English as their first language ( $n=56$ ) and those who did not ( $n=120$ ). Their scores on *literacy experience*, *learning environment*, and *international community* were not statistically significantly different (two-sample *t*-test). And linguistic background was not statistically significantly associated (using ANOVA and Tukey Comparison) with course choice, as measured with nearly 30% of English speakers and 40% of speakers of other languages placing themselves in the international stretch course. In contrast with the pre-COVID placement results, linguistic background is not associated with how students interpret their previous literacy experiences, how they view the challenges of college writing, and how they desire a course with other international

students. We can only speculate about why the current trends have shifted, but we can affirm that linguistic background is only one of the reasons students elect to take an international course.

### **Ethical, Pedagogical, and Programmatic Consequences**

Every January, as we anticipate the next incoming first-year class, we update our informational materials and arrange for DSP to appear on the admissions checklist for international students and perhaps soon for other multilingual and multicultural students. And as we reaffirm our decision to use DSP, we consider these practical and ethical questions: Can asking international students to participate in the unfamiliar and potentially confusing process of self-assessment actually work toward equity and justice for this population? Does DSP communicate what we hope it does—our humility and our invitation for students to share their whole story? When we have interviewed and surveyed international students about their placement experience, they often have only vague memories of the whirlwind that is summer orientation or the surveys and forms that inundated their inboxes at the beginning of college. If placement is forgettable, does it communicate anything at all? Our answers to these and other questions are rarely unqualified; however, they are persuasive enough for us to continue using DSP. Simply asking these questions is a critical element of ethical, just DSP in any context.

DSP can be an ethical way to serve international students when it is built on knowledge of those students. Christine Tardy and Erin Wittig (2017) contend that the ethical treatment of English as an additional language writers begins when programs understand these writers. Understanding requires “not only a knowledge of their distinctive characteristics but also an awareness of the ways in which broad categorizations (e.g., L2 vs. L1) can create a false dichotomy and mask the diversity of student writers” (p. 923). For DSP to fulfill this ethical aim, it must remain grounded in the local context and centered on student voices (Horton, 2022; Tardy, 2011). Our revised placement materials began with local, ethnographic interviews. The interviews helped reveal the concepts that should be measured on the self-reflection survey, and they showed us what constitutes a good placement in our program—they showed us that a *good* placement extends beyond literacy experiences to the learning environment and the classroom community. Analyzing placement data initiates a feedback loop in which emerging information about student demographics, course choice, and student performance shapes the placement materials. As we write, for example, we observe that nearly all Mandarin Chinese speakers place themselves in the international stretch course. We will examine how these students have responded to survey items, if they have heeded the prompts within the survey, how they perform in their courses, and if the international course provides an optimal social and academic environment.

We have focused on international students in this article because that population is institutionally significant. The religious mission and the access mission create a context in which these students are both numerous and visible. It is our attention to this population, its complexity and experience in the writing program, that currently motivates us to consider how other, less visible multilingual and multicultural populations may benefit from placing themselves into stretch courses, studio courses, or other forms of writing support. Domestic students who grew up in multilingual homes, recently resettled refugees with permanent residency status or green cards, and students with a contested citizenship status are currently less numerous and less visible in our institution—and certainly at other institutions, they may be far more numerous and visible. Such students may have linguistic, educational, and cultural characteristics that overlap with those

addressed in our self-placement materials. But just as using materials for domestic students was confusing at best and culturally alienating at worst for international students, so too would be using international placement materials for other multilingual and/or multicultural students. Questions about how to respond to different populations quickly produce more questions: could an online DSP survey, for example, produce different questions and different prompts based on initial screening questions? And if so, which linguistic, educational, and cultural features should be associated with which informational materials, survey questions, writing prompts, and course choices? How specific and responsive must—and can—DSP be to the students it serves?

For DSP to fulfill its ethical purpose, it must also remain *directed* and even *directive*. Beyond providing appropriate courses for multilingual and multicultural students, writing programs “need to design placement processes that effectively support students in selecting from the appropriate options while giving them agency in those decisions” (Tardy & Wittig, 2017, p. 924). Because agency is a central component of DSP, we may worry about being too directive, about being insincere in our desire to understand students and center their voices. However, for international students navigating an unfamiliar placement process, it is harmful not to provide sufficient direction and reassurance. For this reason, we provide directive prompts within the survey and contact information for students who want more guidance, just as some programs provide placement advisors (Horton, 2022; Saenkhum, 2016). Being directive does not ensure that students will accept that direction: students choose the one-semester course too aggressively and the stretch course too conservatively. Assigning students agency for their decision means accepting what we see as questionable choices, but ethical programs provide the resources, the reassurance, and the scaffolding to inform that agency.

DSP invites students to claim multiple identities, decoupling visa status from language background and from ethnicity and from educational background. Doing so challenges writing programs to create classrooms and pedagogical scaffolding that support these identities. We have noted that students make both predictable and surprising course choices: those who have done very little academic writing in English choose the international stretch sequence, but so do students for whom English is a first language or who experienced an American high school curriculum abroad. DSP indeed produces international course sections with varying levels of academic ability, English language proficiency, and writing experience. As an instructor, Sara is challenged to account for all the ways in which students hope to learn, grow, and be supported. It calls her to more than a traditional TESOL perspective, inviting global Englishes into the classroom and acknowledging Standard English as a fraught proposition. Students find a sense of belonging in this context. Because they share more (or less) than language background or residency experience, the class must give explicit attention to identity, a topic that opens the space for more connection. As David shared, working with “fellow international students helped me understand my weaknesses,” but it also helped him find his strengths—the assets he brought to his writing and to the classroom community.

The community students find in the international course often becomes important to them, perhaps even more important than they anticipated when choosing the course. Students may want to take a course or simply spend time with other international students for social, emotional, cultural, or educational reasons (Costino & Hyon, 2007; Pollock & Van Reken, 2009). International students on our campus might join the Chinese Students Association, the African Students Association, or the South Asian Student Association, sharing and celebrating

the languages, food, and practices of their home culture. Yet the FYW course is the only place where these social affiliations deliberately intersect with academic work; it is the only class where international students know they will work with other international students. DSP simultaneously communicates to students that their desire for an international classroom community matters, and it allows them to decide how salient that desire will be in their academic life.

DSP has become for us more than a placement method, more than a means to an administrative end. Beyond simply assigning students to appropriate FYW courses, it has fostered in us posture of humility and learning. Our students have told us more about themselves, and that has in turn challenged us to see them more fully and to learn to see other student populations more fully. DSP has enlivened in us a recursive posture toward placement and pedagogy. And it is not insignificant that this posture resonates with the attitudes and values we hope to foster in our students about writing itself—writing is listening, analyzing, and working with an audience. It is trying, again and again, to make meaning and effect ethical action in the world.

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