After four years of continuous assessment of the experimental Directed Self-Placement program at CSUCI, we can report with confidence that DSP is an effective placement tool for first-year writing which provides a more efficient pathway to graduation than does the English Placement Test. The data included in this report verify this claim. The benefits of DSP extend from incoming students to faculty to the institution itself. For the many reasons articulated below, we request the Chancellor’s Office formally approve DSP as a permanent means of placement in first-year writing on the Channel Islands campus.

“Choosing the First Year Writing Course that Fits You”

“Stretch composition 102-103 was a great choice because you can learn at your own speed. You have the time to really focus on developing your writing style rather than just busting out a bunch of papers in a semester and praying for a good grade.”
—Rachel Luciani

“Being able to choose my own level of English has made my first year easier and more worthwhile, since I had time to adjust from high school writing to college writing.”
—Vanessa Sherman

“If you’re a FastPass worker, take ENGL 105. If you like to have more time for papers, 102-103 would fit you best.”
—Aden Gomez

“The English department is here to help you find the right class. They don’t care whether it’s 102-103 or 105, just as long as it is the right fit. So listen to what they have to say.”
—Hayley Redburn

DSP brochure [first and last pages] mailed to all incoming first-year students, Summer 2007
How do students make their decisions?

Each summer, potential first-year students are sent a brochure, like the one pictured on the first page, outlining the DSP program, their options, and the different writing courses offered by the English composition program. The brochure, and its accompanying letter, prepare students to make an informed decision during orientation, at which time composition faculty answer student questions and trained advisors assist in the enrollment process. The brochure describes in detail the students’ three options: the two-semester STRETCH option (ENGL 102-103), the intensive one-semester course (ENGL 105), and the service-learning course (ENGL 106) for students eager to do volunteer work with community organizations.

Heuristics for each course help students determine which course is right for them. For example, the following statements describe the kinds of students who will likely find the service learning course (ENGL 106) an appropriate choice:

**You’re a good candidate for ENGL 106 if:**
1. you are a strong reader and writer;
2. you work well with others;
3. you want to volunteer your time;
4. you know how to use peer feedback to revise your writing;
5. you possess solid library and research skills;
6. you’re confident about the conventions of grammar, punctuation and spelling;
7. you’re ready to work at a fast pace.

In addition, a set of descriptors helps students decide if they are better prepared for the intensive one-semester course (ENGL 105) of if they should elect the two-semester STRETCH sequence (ENGL 102-103):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stretch 102-103</th>
<th>ENGL 105 or 106</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I’m an average reader and writer.</td>
<td>I’m a strong reader and writer.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I prefer beginning with personal and narrative writing.</td>
<td>I’m ready to begin with a documented research paper.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I want to learn more about revising.</td>
<td>I know how to use feedback to revise.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am not very confident giving advice to other writers.</td>
<td>I feel comfortable giving feedback to other writers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I’d prefer a steady pace with time to work on my writing skills.</td>
<td>I want the challenge of a quicker pace.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I could use help using the library to do research.</td>
<td>I have solid library and research skills.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Finally, general information about the composition program and advice from former students (see p.1) is included. The brochure and letter are mailed to students prior to the on-campus orientation sessions, during which a member of the composition faculty gives a brief presentation on DSP and answers questions. By the time students are asked to select their fall courses, they are well informed of their options and well prepared to make a choice appropriate to their needs and experiences.

What choices do they make?

Students choose from three “paths” to fulfill the first-year writing requirement: STRETCH 102-103, ENGL 105 or ENGL 106. Each requires the same final portfolio of papers, and all portfolios are graded by the same team of composition faculty, to assure that students in all classes are meeting the same final objectives. The primary differences among the courses lie in how each arrives at that goal: e.g., STRETCH 102-103 builds on student success with writing narratives while slowly introducing research and argumentation over two semesters, while ENGL 105 assumes students are ready to begin immediately with research and argumentation. Writing assignments for ENGL 106 depend on the needs of the community partners and, therefore, varies markedly from year to year.

Prior to admitting the first freshman class in fall of 2003, those of us involved with scheduling classes had assumed that students would overwhelmingly elect a one-semester course over a two-semester sequence. But we were wrong. By a ratio of roughly 2 to 1, students elected the STRETCH sequence over ENGL 105 (106 was not offered until fall of 2006), and that ratio has persisted for the years since, with 68% electing STRETCH 102-103 and 32% electing an intense one-semester course, 105 or 106. (Complete numbers for all graphs are available in Appendix 2.)

For the first two years of the DSP program, Professor Harley Baker (Psychology, CSUCI) surveyed student attitudes toward writing. His research provides some clues about why students make the choices they do. Baker found that the course students elected to enroll in was consistent with how they rated themselves in academic ability and writing ability: the more confident they were of their writing and academic skills, the more likely to enroll in the intensive one-semester course, ENGL 105. Baker also discovered that students who chose ENGL 102-103 tended to focus on a Surface Writing approach (greater concerns with surface “correctness” and
conventionality), while those who chose ENGL 105 preferred a Deep Writing approach (concerned as much with process as product).

Anecdotal evidence from composition teachers supports Baker’s conclusions. More time is spent in the STRETCH sequence helping students develop effective writing processes that will serve them throughout college and their careers. ENGL 105 teachers assume students already possess such habits.

How wisely do they choose?

Assessing student success in their chosen classes is another way of determining the appropriateness of their choices. If students fail in classes they’ve elected, then they aren’t making the most appropriate choices for themselves. If they succeed, we can conclude that not only are they making wise decisions, but that the DSP program is serving them well. For this reason, faculty in the CSUCI composition program have assessed student writing success in their classes every semester in two ways: first, by assigning in-class, timed essays during the semester, and second, by requiring of every student an end-of-semester portfolio of out-of-class writing. Both kinds of writing, in and out of class, are holistically evaluated by the composition faculty team using a set of scoring criteria (see Appendix 1) based on national models (see bibliography) and adapted for our program.

To put the following data in context, understand that in-class essays and portfolios are blind scored, that is, faculty don’t know who wrote the papers: student names are replaced with ID numbers. Furthermore, to avoid any inappropriate influence or temptation to reward students who work hard, faculty do not score their own students’ writing. These scores reflect only the quality of writing students produce.

Slightly more than 93% of student in-class essays — 3161 of the 3385 scored since the first freshman class enrolled at CSUCI — have met or exceeded the criteria for satisfactory college writing. The results for out-of-class papers are nearly identical: 92.9% of the students’ final portfolios (834 of 897) earned passing grades:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grades on In-Class Essays, 2003-2007</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A, B, C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D, F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3,385</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2,708</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2,031</td>
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<tr>
<td>1,354</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>677</td>
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<tr>
<td>0</td>
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</table>
It’s worth noting that the English Placement Test predicts that roughly 50% of the entering freshman class at CSUCI should be placed in remedial English. To take one year as an example, in 1994, 51% of freshman entering CSUCI failed to meet the cut-off score on the EPT. In the absence of a DSP program, those students would have been labeled “remedial” and compelled to take an additional semester or year of English prior to attempting ENGL 102 or 105. Yet the vast majority of those students passed composition on the first try, without remediation. (The precise numbers who drop out during the semester are elusive but seem to hover around 10 percent. In 2006-2007, 38 of 391 (.097) students enrolling in first-year writing failed to submit a final portfolio. Whether those students withdrew because they couldn’t handle the academic challenge, or for a myriad of other reasons, cannot be determined.)

What contributes to such high rates of success?

- **Self-determination** – When students choose which class to take, rather than having a course imposed on them by an arbitrary test score, they are motivated to succeed.

- **Small classes** – A broad collection of educational organizations and composition researchers attest to the value of small classes in supporting developing writers (NCTE, CCCC, Bracey, McKeachie). Teachers have more time to provide the individual attention necessary to help novice writers gain the confidence and experiences to succeed in college. Composition classes at Channel Islands have a maximum of 20 students, consistent with the upper limit recommended by both NCTE and CCCC.

- **Full-time teachers** – The entire composition faculty at CSUCI are full-time lecturers or professors with appropriate training and experience in teaching writing. Part-timers and graduate assistants often have other teaching jobs and are understandably reluctant to commit the time necessary to make a program like ours work. Consistent with professional guidelines (NCTE, CCCC), our faculty teach four classes each semester. In addition, they hold individual conferences with students, publish a quarterly newsletter and an annual collection of model student essays, participate in team scoring sessions both during and at the end of each term (in week-long portfo-
lio evaluations), and meet twice a month to discuss how to improve the curricula and writing assignments. Such commitment is only possible with full-time faculty.

- **Writing Center support** – The Writing Center and composition program have developed a close working relationship: the Writing Center director joins the composition faculty during holistic scoring and portfolio evaluations; Writing Center tutors meet periodically with composition faculty to discuss mutual interests and share best practices; and most sections of first-year writing have a peer tutor assigned to meet individually with students needing extra assistance.

### What other benefits derive from DSP?

- Student attitudes towards required writing courses improve noticeably when they elect which courses to take and when they are liberated from the stigma of “remedial” designations. CSUCI faculty remark on these changes every year. Students seem more motivated under DSP than under any other method of placement.

- Faculty attitudes towards students and towards teaching a required first year course improve as well. Faculty new to DSP are particularly likely to notice and comment on how much more pleasurable teaching becomes. Not having to face students who resent being placed in a particular class can be quite liberating for composition teachers.

- Increases in faculty enthusiasm for teaching have been shown to have a direct positive impact on student performance — what’s called the “Pygmalion Effect” (Rosenthal & Jacobsen). DSP makes the most of that benefit.

- Increased faculty enthusiasm means a higher level of commitment to the program, which, in turn, increases the likelihood of the program succeeding. A sort of self-generating cycle of benefits is created: improved student attitudes means improved faculty attitudes which means increased commitment to the program which yields better student performances which improves student attitudes and so on.

### What’s next for DSP?

No stronger case could be made for a placement process. DSP benefits students, faculty and academic programs. So what needs to be done next?

1. DSP needs to be formalized at Channel Islands. The campus was given permission to use DSP experimentally for four years, so the time has come to remove the experimental status and grant DSP permanent status.

2. Assessment of DSP should continue to be as comprehensive in the future as it has been for the past four years.
3. And that means, composition faculty—who are responsible for assessment—must continue to be full-time lecturers or tenure-track appointments with release time for assessment and other activities that support the program and serve students.

4. And to assure that the current benefits to students from DSP are not compromised as the program grows, class size must remain at a maximum of 20 students.

5. Finally, a longitudinal study of student writing across and beyond the four-year undergraduate curriculum should be launched using current data as a baseline.

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**Appendix 1: Scoring rubric arranged by criteria**

**Response to topic or prompt**
6—Addresses topic clearly and responds effectively throughout.
5—Addresses topic clearly, but may respond to some aspects more effectively than others.
4—Addresses topic, slight some aspects.
3—Distorts significant aspects of the topic, neglects others.
2—Demonstrates confusion about the prompt.
1—Does not comprehend prompt or respond meaningfully.

**Quality and clarity of thought**
6—Explores issues raised in paper thoughtfully and in depth.
5—Explores issues, though not as thoughtfully or deeply as it might.
4—Occasionally simplistic or repetitive.
3—Repeatedly simplistic in its thinking, occasionally confused.
2—Often fails to communicate its ideas.
1—Illogical or incoherent.

**Organization, development, support**
6—Tightly focused, coherently organized, richly developed with supporting ideas, examples, and details.
5—Clearly focused and organized, supported by appropriate ideas, examples, and details.
4—Adequately focused and organized, with some support.
3—Loosely focused and organized, with marginally supported generalizations.
2—Unfocused, poorly organized and developed, with inappropriate or simplistic support.
1—Unfocused, disorganized, undeveloped, and lacking any support.

**Research**
6—Extensive use of relevant outside sources which are integrated seamlessly where appropriate and strengthen the entire paper.
5—Relevant outside sources are integrated appropriately and add to effectiveness of paper.
4—Outside sources are used appropriately more often than not and add to effectiveness of paper more often than they detract from it.
3—Outside sources distract from the message more than they add to it.
2—Outside sources inadequate, do not add to effectiveness of paper.
1—Lack of outside sources weakens paper significantly.

**Control of language and sentence structure**
6—Effective, fluent style with sentence variety and precise word choice throughout.
5—Effective style with some sentence variety and frequently precise word choice.
4—Clear style with limited sentence variety and generally precise word choice.
3—Sometimes clear and precise, sometimes confusing. Little sentence variety, often imprecise word choice.
2—Sentence and word choice problems occasionally interfere with comprehension.
1—Sentence and word choice problems make comprehension difficult if not impossible.

**Grammar, usage and mechanics**
6—Mastery of writing conventions, effortless and pleasurable to read.
5—Generally free from lapses in convention, no interference with comprehension.
4—Few lapses in convention that interfere with comprehension; generally demonstrates control.
3—Sometimes clear and precise, sometimes confusing. Little sentence variety, often imprecise word choice.
2—Frequent lapses in convention interfering with comprehension.
1—Serious and persistent lapses in convention making comprehension difficult if not impossible.
Appendix 2: Data for graphs

Self-placement in first-year writing:

<table>
<thead>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>102-103</td>
<td>121 (.57)</td>
<td>194 (.66)</td>
<td>255 (.68)</td>
<td>288 (.74)</td>
<td>858 (.68)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>105</td>
<td>91 (.43)</td>
<td>100 (.34)</td>
<td>107 (.29)</td>
<td>103 (.26)</td>
<td>401 (.32)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>212</td>
<td>294</td>
<td>362</td>
<td>391</td>
<td>1259</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Grades on in-class essays:

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ABC</td>
<td>883</td>
<td>870</td>
<td>831</td>
<td>577</td>
<td>3161</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DF</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>224</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Passing</td>
<td>.95</td>
<td>.95</td>
<td>.92</td>
<td>.91</td>
<td>.93</td>
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Grades on final portfolios:

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<tr>
<th></th>
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<th>2005</th>
<th>2006</th>
<th>2007</th>
<th>Totals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ABC</td>
<td>114</td>
<td>166</td>
<td>240</td>
<td>314</td>
<td>834</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DF</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Passing</td>
<td>.96</td>
<td>.96</td>
<td>.95</td>
<td>.89</td>
<td>.93</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Bibliography


