

**University of Texas at El Paso**

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Winter 2008

# Predicting Success: Increasing Retention and Pass Rates in College Composition

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## Predicting Success: Increasing Retention and Pass Rates in College Composition

As Writing Program Administrators, one of our foremost concerns is students' success in required writing courses. Prompted by conditions on our campus, we set out to discover methods for increasing retention and success in our first-semester composition course. What we found, however, is that while considerable scholarly attention has been directed to issues of retention vs. dropout and success vs. failure among first-year college students generally, few studies have examined retention and success in the composition classroom specifically.<sup>1</sup> Composition studies has moved us forward in terms of placement and assessment, but we find that retention is an area that deserves more of our attention. The study reported here focuses on students already enrolled in the first-semester composition (English 1311). Our goal was to test methods of identifying those students who might struggle to complete and/or pass the course in hopes of then targeting those students for some form of intervention or remediation. This study should be of value to WPAs who are concerned about the retention and success of students in their programs.

### **Background**

The First-year Composition program at the University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP) offers approximately 100 sections of composition per semester, more than half of which are English 1311, or Expository English Composition, the first semester course of a two-semester sequence. This course is primarily taught by

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<sup>1</sup> This study is approved by UTEP's IRB #2420 "Surveys on the Impact and Influence of Student and Instructor Attitudes on Success and Retention in Composition Courses." Approved November 1, 2006.

We owe a debt of gratitude to Yowei Kang who helped us to make sense of the numbers our data produced. We'd also like to thank Trent Hudley and Barbara Thompson for their help in collecting research.

Master's level teaching assistants, doctoral-level assistant instructors, part-time instructors, and full-time lecturers.

UTEP is a mid-sized, commuter, Hispanic-serving university located on the U.S.-Mexico border. Many of UTEP's students would be characterized as non-traditional. We educate a large number of first-generation students who return to school after (or while) working full-time and/or raising a family. According to 2006 statistics from the university's Center for Evaluation, Research, and Planning, 76 percent of the population boasts Hispanic (mainly Mexican) heritage. Many UTEP students speak Spanish as a first language or are bilingual, having learned English and Spanish simultaneously.

Active English as a Second Language (ESL) and Developmental English (DE) programs assist those students whose placement and TESOL scores mark them as having difficulty with English. Yet, in spite of a state-mandated placement program, dropout and failure rates have been a continuing, if not increasing, problem in UTEP's regular composition program. In 1311, students must achieve a grade of C or better to enroll in the second composition course. Each semester, every section has students who fail to progress. After four semesters of accumulating anecdotal evidence concerning students' lack of preparedness and an increasing drop rate—in some sections, numbers of students scoring below a C or failing to finish can reach as high as half the original enrollment—we saw a clear need to reconsider our nearly wholesale reliance on the placement system as a predictor of our students' success in the course. We cannot work under the assumption that because a student places into 1311, that student is prepared to succeed in the course.

The Texas Coordinating Board of Higher Education determines the placement guidelines for all state-funded universities in Texas. It defines placement assessment as the act of “determining the academic skills of each entering undergraduate student and the student's readiness to enroll in freshman-level academic course work” (“Rules”). UTEP's students are placed

according to Accuplacer (offered by College Board), one of four Coordinating Board-approved placement tests.<sup>2</sup>

Of concern for us here is the written essay, which Accuplacer bills as “a direct measure of student writing skills” (“WritePlacer Plus”). Test-takers are given a prompt, and their writing sample is scored electronically<sup>3</sup> according to five “characteristics of writing”: focus, organization, development and support, sentence structure, and mechanical conventions (“Accuplacer Tests”).<sup>4</sup> Student scores are provided almost immediately, thereby allowing students to plan their schedule and register for the appropriate courses in the same day that they take the placement exam.

When incoming students score a 4 or lower on Accuplacer, they have “failed” the test and are placed into Developmental English courses. When students score a 6 or higher, they have “cleared” the test and are placed into English 1311 (“Rules” 3). Those students who score a 5 are subsequently required to take a sentence skills test. Students who score a 70% or above on the sentence skills portion have passed the test and can enroll in 1311. Students who do not score that high are required to enroll in Developmental English. Because the state encourages institutions to maintain low numbers in their developmental classes and to create ways to do this, in 2003 UTEP introduced a system where students who score a 5 may still enroll in 1311, but are additionally required to enroll in a one-credit lab called English 0111.

We suspected that the trend in increased dropouts and failures precipitated from a lowering of our placement cut scores. Previously, all students who scored a 5 were enrolled in developmental courses, and those who scored a 6 were enrolled in 1311 with the lab.<sup>5</sup> However, in order to align our institutional

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<sup>2</sup> Other state-sanctioned placement tests include Compass and ASSET (offered by ACT) and THEA (Texas Higher Education Assessment offered by National Evaluations Systems).

<sup>3</sup> Accuplacer uses “IntelliMetric, an artificial intelligence based writing sample scoring tool” to evaluate the writing samples (“WritePlacer Plus”).

<sup>4</sup> For an extended critique of automated placement scorers, see Anne Herrington and Charles Moran’s “What Happens When Machines Read Our Students’ Writing?” Additionally, see Cindy James study that tests the validity of computerized essay scoring.

<sup>5</sup> Under this previous system, UTEP’s composition program designated a placement cut score independent from the state’s guidelines. This became “problematic” because we were placing more students into developmental courses than they recommended.

practices more closely with the Texas Success Initiative and according to our administration's push to decrease developmental enrollment, many students who would have been placed in DE were now placed into regular composition courses—in some cases without the lab for additional support.

As a result of this change, we felt the need to provide extra assistance to this low-scoring student group. While implementing additional placement mechanisms might seem like a possibility, persuasive reasons prevent us from doing so. First is efficiency. Rapid test results allow immediate placement of students during freshman orientation. The additional time required for a human-scored writing sample would create an unacceptable bottleneck in the system. Second, is cost. Our institutional testing centers are self-funded, so any tests beyond those which are state-approved would require additional funding or come out of the students' pockets. A more persuasive financial reason at the institutional level is that the university receives formula funding for students "correctly" placed into developmental courses via the state-approved placement mechanisms. However, any student we *locally* deem developmental would not garner such funds for the institution. Obviously, our administration strongly discourages additional placement methods—especially any that might contradict the sanctioned results. As Susan Harrington explains, "power and politics" are certainly at play in our placement system (11). As far as we know, few states have such rigid constraints on placement as does Texas.

Therefore, our options do not include reconsidering or revising the placement system; rather we must work within it. To that end, we created a method first to identify, within our own department, those students who may not be well-prepared to succeed in a first-year composition course and then to take appropriate actions toward assisting them. It is important to note that we are not placing students—we are not moving anyone in or out of the regularly assigned 1311 class; rather, we are identifying those students who might require additional assistance in order to succeed in the course. While scholarship on both placement and basic writing addresses several of our concerns, we found few studies published on student success in composition courses at the

programmatic level, particularly at Hispanic-serving institutions. We have, therefore, expanded our literature review to consider student success through retention and remediation at the institutional level.

### **Literature Review**

Considerable research has addressed the general problem of first-year student attrition rates at colleges and universities across the United States. A 2002 study found that nearly a fifth of the students who enroll in four-year institutions drop out (Bradburn). Serge Herzog (2005) notes that “the departure risk of students is typically the highest in the first year” (923) and suggests that we must examine and address risk factors if we want to retain our least-prepared students beyond this initial year. Further, studies find that first-year attrition is particularly high for Mexican-American students, and while Mexican-American and other Hispanic student populations have increased in the past 20 years, “the proportion of Hispanic students finishing college has not improved” (Otero, Rivas, Rivera 163-4).

In their study on remedial education, Jeff Hoyt and Colleen Sorensen find that while student success problems have been documented, research reveals little understanding of the issue and a slow response toward change. Evidence suggests that college students may struggle for a variety of reasons. Proctor, et al, point to weak study skills, time management, inappropriate goal setting, anxiety, and similar problems as impediments to success. Paul Gamache claims that students struggle “because they have an inappropriate conception of what learning is and involves” (278) and calls for a new understanding learning. In his many writings on retention, Vincent Tinto cites similar problems and adds the many difficulties students experience when they live away from home for the first time. John M. Braxton, et al, differentiate, as does Tinto, between commuter institutions and residential colleges and universities and calls for “additional remedies” to “the marked difference between the departure rates of racial or ethnic minority students and white Caucasian students” (111).

Marcia A. Roman also considers problems of minority and non-traditional students, pointing out that they “have multiple commitments, are multi-tasking, often struggle to balance work, family and school, and are commuters” (20). Yet, research focusing on at-risk students in their first year, suggests that what we might consider to be obvious predictors— such as family, employment, and financial aid—have mixed results in students’ choices to stay in school or drop out after that first year (Otero, Rivas, and Rivera).<sup>6</sup>

The Braxton and Roman studies are particularly useful to our research because ours is a commuter campus that serves a largely non-traditional majority-minority population. Also useful to our study is Paul Kei Matsuda’s work on second-language writing. Matsuda faults the current “policy of unidirectional monolingualism” (637). According to Matsuda, writing classes generally fail to assist students from non-English-speaking backgrounds, thus reducing their chances of success. He says, “the dominant discourse of U.S. college composition not only has accepted English Only as an ideal but it already assumes the state of English-only, in which students are native English speakers by default” (637). This policy may work for schools with stringent entrance qualifications and small numbers of minority students, but English, particularly Standard American English, is not the default for large numbers of students today. At minority serving institutions of higher education, many students struggle to write at all because their secondary schools have not adequately trained them to do so; then many struggle further to write in privileged English, to which they may have had little exposure. As Matsuda points out, “Although definitions of what constitutes a better writer may vary, implicit in most teachers’ definitions of ‘writing well’ is the ability to produce English that is unmarked in the eyes of teachers” (640). This production remains beyond the reach of many students enrolled in first-year composition classes today. Matsuda’s assumptions are supported by statistics that show that financially needy and minority students

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<sup>6</sup> The authors point out that results differ for students not considered at-risk.

graduate at significantly lower or slower rates than their non-minority counterparts (Burd).

As we have indicated above, for WPAs, the issues of retention and success start with placement. Daniel Royer and Roger Gilles suggest that “there are only two reasons to place students into first-year writing courses: one is to give under-prepared or otherwise disadvantaged students a better chance to succeed in your program, and the other is to separate students of differing abilities so that teachers can design reading and writing activities for students of roughly equal abilities” (265). Placement scores, regardless of how they are generated, are generally meant to indicate that a student will be capable of succeeding in the appropriate course. As Richard Haswell states: “Teachers have always wanted students placed into their writing classes on evidence that they lack but can learn the kind of rhetorical skills the course actually covers.”

But understanding the reasons for placement is only the beginning. We must also examine carefully the means by which students are routinely placed into our courses, given that the methods for acquiring those scores are both previous to any experience we have with these students and often outside our control. Large-scale placement mechanisms are frequently standardized and decontextualized from the writing experiences students will have in their coursework. Additionally, the standardized mechanisms are typically designed to measure performance, not potential.

However, when the placement system is localized, teachers reading student writing generally do not judge the text as a completed product, but infer “the writing ability within a specific writing curriculum and within a specific educational institution” (Williamson 19). Haswell suggests that educators who wish to measure writing promise, through whatever the system of placement, should implement multiple measures and validate with multiple measures.

Although we are not permitted to institute additional placement measures (because Accuplacer is the state sanctioned placement system utilized on our campus), we are interested in Anne Herrington and Charles Moran’s warning about the dangers of a computer-rated writing sample, as such a situation



“defines writing as an act of formal display, not a rhetorical interaction between a writer and readers” (481). We couple this concern with Cindy James’ call for more research concerning the reliability of Accuplacer and similar automated scoring systems. She suggests that when writing samples are scored for admission or placement purposes, “evaluating the predictive validity of automatic essay scores constitutes a very appropriate measurement of test validity and poses an intriguing question: ‘Who or what is more accurate at placing students?’” (168). She additionally mentions that “another issue that has not been explored in much detail is the impact on the validity of utilizing prediction models that include both automated and human generated test scores” (170). She proposes, drawing on William Condon, that theoretically, these models should be increasingly accurate if “instructors of the local writing course assumed the role of human raters” (170). Implementing these suggestions seems appropriate to our situation.

Finally, Hall P. Beck and William D. Davidson call for “an early warning system” that detects high-risk students “before low grades or social problems jeopardize their college careers” (710). They advise use of the Survey of Academic Orientations.<sup>7</sup> While this generalized survey of nonintellectual factors does not seem appropriate to our needs in first-year composition, we are interested in the concept of an early-warning system.

### **Research Questions**

Because most current research regarding struggling students offers sometimes contradictory information and is not focused on the concerns of first-year composition, we sought out an early warning system appropriate to our disciplinary and pedagogical contexts—one that could draw on both automated and human-generated scores. In hopes of slowing down the trend of dropout and failure, we wanted to identify students at risk of not succeeding and then provide them with a means for overcoming their challenges.

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<sup>7</sup> The predictive information collected through the Survey of Academic Orientations forms the acronym SCREAM: structure dependence, creative expression, reading for pleasure, academic efficacy, academic apathy, and mistrusts of instructors (712).

In order to achieve these ends, we developed the following research questions:

Question 1: Do low placement scores correlate with lack of success?

Question 2: Do low diagnostic scores correlate with lack of success?

Question 3: Do low diagnostic scores correlate with low placement scores?

Question 4: Do diagnostic scores, Accuplacer scores, or a combination of both scores better predict students' success?

As can be seen by our research questions, our goal is not to discover whether 1311 students complete the course as more proficient writers than they were at the start. In other words, we do not intend to measure improvement. Certainly, that is also a concern for us and does play a part in students' ability to succeed. However, our most immediate concern is to determine students' ability to complete the course and to achieve a grade of C or higher. Our objective is to understand from the outset of the semester if and how we can use Accuplacer alone or in combination with a local diagnostic to identify at-risk students. Once identified, these students can be assigned to the 0111 lab mentioned earlier. Here they will receive additional instruction that may help them complete the course successfully. Data for low placement scoring students who have taken the 0111 lab concurrently with 1311 show that these students have greater retention rates and higher grades than those who do not enroll in a lab.

## **Methodology**

We considered interviewing or surveying each student who drops out or fails. However, due to the difficulty of tracking these students and because we wanted to pre-empt their failure, we designed a prediction study, which according to Janice Lauer and William Asher, "seeks to determine the *strength* of a relationship between several variables and a single criterion. . . to predict behavior such as future grades." They suggest that this ability to predict "is of major importance if educators intend to assign students fairly to different kinds of instruction, course levels, or curricula" (109). We correlated two predictor

variables: Accuplacer placement scores and a first-week diagnostic essay scores. The criterion variable was final grades, or lack thereof—for this study, the indicator of success. Our aim was to measure the strength of the relationship between the predictors and the outcome. As Lauer and Asher have pointed out, “the relationships that are found are used to determine which variables...will best predict the success of future students in the composition classroom” (110). If either or both of these measures correlated with success, we predicted we would have an effective warning system.

### Data collection and description

For an academic year, we obtained both placement and diagnostic scores for students enrolled in English 1311<sup>8</sup>. Accuplacer scores were acquired from UTEP’s Information Technology Department; diagnostics scores were ascertained by the composition program. At the end of each semester, we acquired final grades by asking instructors to submit a copy of their grade books.

#### *Accuplacer placement scores*

Our first predictor variable is the university-administered Accuplacer placement scores. Most entering first-year students must take this test prior to enrollment. As mentioned earlier, Accuplacer cut scores are determined by the Texas Coordinating Board of Higher Education. While a 5 is generally the minimum score for students placed into 1311, students may also enroll in 1311 after completing the Developmental English sequence and without retaking the placement exam. For this reason, we have several scores that fall below the cut-off score of 5.

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<sup>8</sup> A number of students did not take Accuplacer in the year for which we requested this data. This may be because they had taken it in a previous year and had been enrolled in developmental English or transferred from another institution. Additionally, not every student participated in the diagnostic as they may have been absent that day or added the course late.

### *Diagnostic scores*

Our second predictor variable is a locally administered diagnostic essay score. We chose this as a predictor because we required something that could be quickly administered and evaluated. We knew that for timely intervention to occur, waiting for a first draft, revised, peer reviewed, and submitted paper would take too long. We also wanted something that could be administered equally and efficiently across all sections.

During the first week of classes, every student enrolled in English 1311 responded to a common writing prompt (question in Appendix A). Students were given 40 minutes to complete their essay. The essays were collected from 70 sections taught by a total of 41 instructors. A holistic rubric based on the local, programmatic criteria of purpose, support, organization, structure, and mechanics—the published goals of English 1311—was created and tested by the assessment coordinator and composition director to assess the diagnostics. The two-point rubric placed students' writing into two categories: a score of 1 indicated the student was well prepared to succeed in 1311; a score of 2 indicated the student was not well prepared to succeed in 1311. (Rubric in Appendix B.)

A group of writing instructor volunteers—including TAs, full-time lecturers, and tenure/tenure-track faculty—read and assessed each writing sample. A norming session was held before the raters received their essays. In this session, the rubric was discussed and applied to several sample essays. To achieve rater reliability, we asked raters to follow the rubric closely, concentrating on potential for success in the 1311 course rather than on the relative excellence of the product. Raters looked, for example, at students' ability to think critically and organize ideas even when the writing exhibited frequent usage error. The rubric aimed to identify student writing that would require more attention than that provided in the regular classroom process of drafting, revision, and proofreading/editing. Using the details of the rubric to reach agreement, raters discussed discrepancies as they occurred.

For this study, none of the data collected were revealed to the instructors. They did not have access to their students Accuplacer or diagnostic scores.

### *Grades*

As our criterion variable, we chose final grades. Because of “other” elements involved in course grades such as presentation scores, participation points, and group work evaluations, we understand that the final grade is not necessarily a true indicator of a student’s individual writing ability, but it does indicate for this study whether or not the student was successful in the course.

### *Score parameters*

Each of our variables required that we set parameters, or define what was considered low or high and what indicated success or the lack thereof. Although the Texas Coordinating Board deems an Accuplacer score of 5 to be sufficient indication of a student’s ability to succeed in 1311, we used the previous system established locally in which a score of 6, 7, or 8 was considered high. A score of 5 or below was considered low.<sup>9</sup> We felt that the local system more accurately represented the range of our students’ abilities.

We used a simple two-point system for diagnostic scores. A high diagnostic score was 1. A low diagnostic score was 2.

As mentioned above, we defined “lack of success” as either receiving a D or an F in the course or dropping out before the semester’s end. Because we were not interested in predicting the exact grade, rather in the division between success and lack of success, we grouped together those students who received a grade of D or F. We created a separate category for students who withdrew.

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<sup>9</sup> Under the previous cut scores, those students scoring a 5 would have been placed in developmental composition. This parameter allowed us to see if our previous cut score was a more accurate score for our student population.

## Data analysis

To address our proposed research questions, we correlated Accuplacer scores with final grades. Then we correlated the diagnostic score with final grades for each individual. Finally, we correlated final grades with both the Accuplacer and diagnostic scores for each individual. Before we present the answers to the research questions, Tables 1-4 will describe the data we collected.

### *Accuplacer placement scores*

Table 1 provides data concerning the Accuplacer scores. To remain consistent with our data that used a low number to represent better performance, and a high number to represent poorer performance, the Accuplacer Scores were reversely coded. A score of 8, the highest score possible, becomes a 1; transversely, a score of 1, the lowest score possible, becomes an 8. Of the 1270 students who had recorded Accuplacer scores, 962 of them (75.7%) were evaluated as “High,” while 308 students (24.2%) were evaluated as “Low” in their scores.<sup>10</sup>

**Table 1. Accuplacer Scores**

		Frequency	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
High	1	114	9.0	9.0
	2	295	23.2	32.2
	3	553	43.5	75.7
	4	295	23.2	99.0
Low	5	10	.8	99.8
	6	3	.2	100.0
	7	0	0	
	8	0	0	

<sup>10</sup> Fluctuation of student numbers occurred partially because SPSS software removed some incomplete datasets from later analyses.

	Total	1270	100.0	
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### *Diagnostic scores*

The diagnostic scores in Table 2, reveal that among the 1589 diagnostics rated, 1298 (75.6%) received a “High” rating, and 291 (16.9%) diagnostics were rated “Low.”

**Table 2. Diagnostic Scores**

		Frequency	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
High	1	1298	81.7	81.7
Low	2	291	18.3	100.0
Total		1589	100.0	

### *Final grades*

In Table 3, the final grades for all students enrolled in 1311 are listed. Of the 1620 students enrolled in the course, a total of 1315 (81.2%) students successfully completed the course with a C or better. A total of 305 (18.9%) students were not successful as they earned a D or an F or withdrew from the course.

**Table 3. Final Grades**

		Frequency	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Successful	1 (A)	611	37.7	37.7
	2 (B)	451	27.8	65.6
Unsuccessful	3 (C)	253	15.6	81.2
	4 (D)	106	6.5	87.7
	5 (F)	90	5.6	93.3
	Withdrew	108	6.7	99.9

	Incomplete	1	.1	100.0
	Total	1620	100.0	

## Results

The following tables represent answers to our research questions.

### Research Question 1: Do low placement scores correlate with lack of success?

To answer Research Question 1 and determine whether low placement scores predicted students' lack of success as measured by their final grades, a bivariate correlation was run to test the strength of their relationship. The results in Table 4 demonstrate a positive relationship between students' placement scores and their success in this course. In other words, students with a low placement score tended to receive a low final grade.

**Table 4. Correlations: Accuplacer Scores and Final Grades**

		Final Grades	Accuplacer Scores
Final Grades	Pearson Correlation	1	.126(**)
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	1620	1220
Accuplacer Scores	Pearson Correlation	.126(**)	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	1220	1270

\*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).



Research Question 2: Do low diagnostic scores correlate with lack of success?

To answer Research Question 2 and to determine if low diagnostic scores predicted low final grades among students, a bivariate correlation analysis was again run to test the strength of their relationship. Table 5 illustrates that there is a positive relationship between diagnostic scores and final grades. In other words, students with a low diagnostic score tended to receive a low final grade.

**Table 5. Correlations: Diagnostic Scores and Final Grades**

		Diagnostic Scores	Final Grades
Diagnostic Scores	Pearson Correlation	1	.109(**)
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	1589	1514
Final Grades	Pearson Correlation	.109(**)	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	1514	1620

\*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Research Question 3: Do low diagnostic scores correlate with low placement scores?

To answer Research Question 3 and examine if low diagnostic scores coincided with low Accuplacer scores among students, a bivariate correlation analysis was run to again test the strength of their relationship. Table 6 demonstrates a positive relationship between diagnostic scores and Accuplacer scores; the lower students' diagnostic scores were, the lower their Accuplacer scores were.

**Table 6. Correlations: Diagnostic Scores and Accuplacer Scores**

		Diagnostic Scores	Accuplacer Scores
Diagnostic Scores	Pearson Correlation	1	.130(**)
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	1589	1235
Accuplacer Scores	Pearson Correlation	.130(**)	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	1235	1270

\*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

\*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Research Question 4: Do Diagnostic Scores, Accuplacer Scores, or a combination of both scores better predict students' success?

To answer Research Question 4 about whether the Accuplacer and/or the diagnostic scores best predicted students' success, we conducted three regression analyses. Table 7 demonstrates that all three models showed significant relationships between the scores and the final grade. They also indicated that a combination of diagnostic scores and Accuplacer scores best predicted students' final success. However, if used alone, Accuplacer scores were found to be a better predictor than diagnostic scores in predicting students' final success.

**Table 7: Regression Analyses: Best Predictor**

	Regression Model	R <sup>2</sup>	F
1	Diagnostic Scores-->Final Grades	0.012	18.239**
2	Accuplacer Scores-->Final Grades	0.016	19.738**

3	(Diagnostic Scores, Accuplacer Scores)-->Final Grades	0.031	18.935**
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\*\* F-value is significant at the 0.01 level

## Discussion

By answering these research questions, we have also tested the validity of Accuplacer scores and holistically graded diagnostic essays. The results show that either of these measures is a reliable predictor of success and that the two measures together make for an even more reliable predictor. Haswell suggests that educators who wish to measure writing promise, through whatever system of placement, should implement multiple measures and validate with multiple measures. Therefore, low scores on these two indicators can serve as an early-warning system to target students for intervention and assistance.

We understand the potential drawbacks of using a diagnostic or impromptu essay to assess students' writing abilities. Timed writing is not always an indicator of students' best work, and prompts always run the risk of carrying bias toward or against different student populations. Additionally, several factors may affect a student's performance on a diagnostic, particularly a low-stakes one such as this. The diagnostics are not graded by the students' instructor, nor do they bear any consequences, positive or negative. Lack of student motivation to do their best may result in low scores.

As Edward White suggests, however, the impromptu essay may be "the best we can do in an imperfect world" (43). Diagnostic essays are easy to administer and evaluate. Requiring only 40 minutes of class time in the first week, scores can be ascertained within the first week or two of the semester to allow for fast identification and intervention for students in need of help. Furthermore, many faculty members routinely employ diagnostic essays to determine writing levels at the beginning of class. Thus, in some cases, requiring a diagnostic does not take away from regular class time at all. Finally, because

this diagnostic is used not to place students, but to assess their potential for success in the class, we feel that the diagnostic writing sample is sufficient.

While not everyone supports this type of placement, some research does support the value of this type of diagnostic. For example, Richard Matzen and Jeff Hoyt indicate that when composition “teachers score (or rate) timed essays, scores have been found to have a predictive relationship with final grades and to be more indicative of students’ writing abilities compared to multiple-choice test scores from the same students” (3). Irvin Peckham adds, “I think writing teachers can look at writing samples written in situations comparable to the ones we create in our classrooms and, through comparing them and discussing their evaluations, arrive at some reasonable inferences about the writers’ abilities to meet other kinds of writing demands” (67). Our study replicated this research and determined that a diagnostic essay could predict success in our situation. Peckham reminds us that “placement is a messy business” and that “we do not look for perfect answers; we look for better practices” (66). For our purposes, and perhaps for other institutions as well, the in-class diagnostic may serve as a useful indicator of a student’s ability to succeed.

### **Possible Solutions**

Having established a direct correlation between these scores and final grades, we plan to utilize our already existing English 0111 lab as an additional one-unit, mandatory class for students whose combined scores indicate that they are at risk for failure in the English 1311 course. Outcomes of the pilot will determine whether this type of intervention is effective in raising success levels of low-scoring students.

Rafael Otero, Olivia Rivas, and Roberto Rivera suggest that “the university cannot do much about the demographic variables linked to the attrition of at-risk students because those factors are external to the institution” (172). Thus, we need to focus on those retention-related issues we can control. Braxton, et al, offer sixteen propositions to account for student departure from commuter universities like ours, where students tend to spend little time on campus when

not actually in class (42). One of the propositions involves reducing the fragmentation and disconnectedness that students in this situation often feel (45). Another proposition offers a way to do this by encouraging the establishment of academic situations where students can work together in academic communities as they learn (48). Our campus already offers learning communities in sciences, engineering, and liberal arts, but many students choose not to enroll in these programs because it requires taking a group of specified classes that often do not fit into the students' work and home schedules. We see a need to establish alternatives that will be easier for students to fit into their regular activities.

The solutions we propose for our composition students do not include several things. First, they do not include moving the students out of the course and placing them into another. Second, they do not include mandatory tutoring (although that may be a part of the advice given by their instructors).

Instead, we look to a number of positive alternatives based on a variety of research reports. As mentioned earlier, Gamache found that many students have difficulties or do not succeed at the university level because "they have an inappropriate conception of what learning is and involves." Until they "embrace a new (for them) more appropriate conception of learning" they will not succeed. He suggests helping them to "uncover their unexamined, common-sense assumptions about learning" through self-analysis and reflection (283). Individually, students need to understand how they learn best in specific situations. They need to discover for themselves what will make them successful students (286). A laboratory class is one way to help them achieve this understanding.

Citing the scholarship of Astin and Tinto, Roman suggests a different approach based on the understanding that students who are actively engaged in both the academic and social life of the educational institution achieve greater success.

Braxton, et al, posit that "support from significant others for college attendance decreases the likelihood of student departure from commuter college or university" (40) and identifies teachers as those significant others. In addition,

Braxton, et al, suggest distinct advantages to “communities of learning” where the social and academic can be brought together (40). A laboratory brings students into close contact with a caring teacher in a community of students striving toward similar goals.

Our plan incorporates many of the suggestions offered by these theorists and involves placing students with combined low scores into a one-hour-per-week, one-credit laboratory with a trained English instructor. In this program, the lab instructors coordinate with faculty members teaching the regular 1311 class for each of their lab students. The lab class provides a small learning community that meets together on a regular basis and that joins the academic and social aspects of college life by providing an additional venue for students to learn together as they become better acquainted. Lab instructors will work on group and individual writing difficulties and encourage student involvement in the classroom and in other campus activities. If our pilot study shows that the targeted students succeed, we will move toward placing all low-scoring students into the 0111 lab.

Clearly our project is in its initial stages. While we think the present study is indicative of a need to use diagnostics as an early warning system, we believe we need to know more. Examining students’ attitudes toward learning, writing, and success might lead to programmatic changes that would help students do well in composition classes.

## **Conclusions**

Generally, composition programs attempt to deal with underprepared students through placement mechanisms, plus ESL, and Developmental English programs. Unfortunately, when this process stems from the larger institution, it often fails individual students. Large-scale placement mechanisms are frequently standardized and decontextualized from the writing experiences students will have in their coursework. Additionally, the standardized mechanisms are typically designed to measure performance, not potential. Locally formulated placement or diagnostic programs may lead to greater success.

When the placement system is localized and when potential instructors read student writing, the teachers generally do not judge the writing sample as a completed product, but infer “the writing ability within a specific writing curriculum and within a specific educational institution” (Williams 19). As Daniel Royer and Roger Gilles suggest, one of the primary reasons for placement is “to give under-prepared or otherwise disadvantaged students a better chance to succeed in your program” (265). When the state mandated placement test does not meet these needs, it behooves the local WPAs to seek additional methods to ensure student success. Adding an in-class, locally scored, diagnostic essay may provide an early warning system that will help identify students who can profit from extra help.

At our institution, we can take advantage of an already existing course—the 0111 lab—to improve opportunities for success. We encourage other institutions to incorporate writing labs, but we believe other mechanisms might serve similar purposes if attendance is mandatory for students with combined low scores. These options include, among others, campus writing/tutoring centers and faculty-student mentoring programs. When these special services are not mandatory, students often opt out, and this impedes their chances to succeed. For this reason, we urge a policy that requires and tracks student attendance.

Susan Harrington suggests that “good assessment programs will support good teaching and research efforts, and the best way for us to respond to our students’ needs is to know what those needs are” (25). Combining written diagnostic scores with Accuplacer scores enable us to seek methods for helping our struggling students. We hope that others will focus on the specific problems of retention in first-year composition classes, especially in situations that include many second-language and bilingual learners. Together we may be able to increase the retention and success of these students and help them on their way to eventual graduation.

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## Appendix A

### Diagnostic Instructions and Prompt for English 1311

#### Directions for administering the 1311 diagnostic

1. To ensure uniformity in test conditions, please use the enclosed master to make enough copies for all of your 1311 students. Every student should have his/her own copy. Do not use any other writing prompt in place of this one.
2. Distribute the diagnostic to your students during the first week of class. Explain that it will be used to identify potential writing problems, but will not affect their grade. Ask students to write in ink, on every other line, front of paper, only. Have students write their name and student number on **every page** of their essay. If you class meets in a computer lab, be sure all students disable grammar and spell checkers before writing the diagnostic. If you cannot disable these functions, please ask students to use pen and ink.
3. Read the writing prompt aloud in class. Answer any questions students may have. Allow **40 minutes**, no longer, for students to complete the diagnostic. Do not let them take it home to complete there. It would be helpful if you had a stapler available to staple pages together.

#### Prompt

Some educators and public officials worry that American teenagers spend too much time flipping hamburgers and waiting on customers in fast-food restaurants. They argue that teens are being exploited in low-paying, dead-end jobs instead of concentrating on their education. Others feel that working at a fast-food restaurant helps teens learn valuable work habits. Write an essay directed to educators and public officials arguing for or against the value of teenagers working in the fast-food industry.

## Appendix B

### Rubric for 1331 Diagnostic

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The purpose of this diagnostic is to determine which students can write a successful basic essay at the beginning of the semester. The results will be correlated with placement test scores and success in English 1311. Ultimately, what we hope to determine is whether some students can benefit from special programs to help them complete 1311 successfully.

#### Directions

Determine which category the essay falls into. Remember to follow the rubric closely—do not incorporate your own assumptions. We all need to evaluate according to the same criteria. Essays should be evaluated holistically.

With a blue or black pen, mark the paper's score (1 or 2) on the top right hand corner of the paper.

#### Score 1

- **Purpose**—The essay responds to the prompt, and the thesis is adhered to throughout.
- **Support**—The essay supports the thesis. There is sufficient and appropriate support.
- **Organization**—Essay has a clear organization plan.
- **Sentence and paragraph structure**—The essay is coherent and the reader does not struggle to understand.
- **Mechanics**—The essay has few errors (punctuation, grammar, syntax), and they do not significantly impede the meaning.

#### Score 2

- **Purpose**—The essay does not respond to the prompt, and the thesis is not adhered to throughout.
- **Support**—The essay does not support the thesis. There is insufficient and inappropriate support.
- **Organization**—The essay does not have a clear organization plan.
- **Sentence and paragraph structure**—Parts or the whole of the essay is not coherent. The reader struggles to understand.
- **Mechanics**—The essay has numerous errors (punctuation, grammar, syntax) that impede the meaning.