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Self-Characterization in the Self-Placement Assessment Ecology

Theresa Tinkle, University of Michigan, tinkle@umich.edu
Jason Godfrey, University of Michigan, jgod@umich.edu
J. W. Hammond, Michigan Technological University, jwhammon@mtu.edu
Andrew Moos, Colby College, amoos@colby.edu

Abstract: Scholarship on student self-placement (SSP) emphasizes the importance of understanding methods like directed self-placement (DSP) as dynamic assessment ecologies (e.g., Inoue, 2015; Nastal et al., 2022; Wang, 2020), with implications not only for placement but also for how students conceptualize writing and themselves (e.g., Johnson, 2022). What can be learned about SSP's ecological impacts by more meaningfully attending not just to patterns in students' placement decisions but also to the qualitative content of their (self-)reflections and (self-)characterizations? Leveraging a dataset of more than 5,000 SSP pathways, we examine a corpus of short-answer survey responses, totaling more than half a million words, in which students wrote about their strengths as writers and what writing tasks they find most challenging. Students' words help us understand how they see themselves as writers and how they conceive of college writing expectations. Through data analysis, this study found implications for how corpus data can be used to better understand potential tensions between students' and institutions' understandings of academic writing in a self-placement ecology.

Keywords: assessment ecology, corpus analysis, qualitative analysis, self-placement

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Increasingly, scholarship on student self-placement (SSP) advocates for understanding methods like directed self-placement (DSP) as dynamic assessment ecologies (see, e.g., Inoue, 2015; Nastal et al., 2022; Wang, 2020), with complex implications for how students conceptualize *writing* or themselves as *writers* (e.g., Johnson, 2022). Research is needed to consider all aspects of the placement ecology, perhaps particularly with respect to the ways students' perceptions and expectations can shape (and be shaped by) their engagements with SSP. Given the continued adoption of self-placement methods within writing programs, due in no small part to their many purported benefits to student agency and empowerment (e.g., Moos & Van Zanen, 2019), we propose that mixed-methods research can productively explore SSP's effects on writing ecologies beyond placement outcomes—such as SSP's complex relationship to students' self-characterizations.

This article contributes to ongoing discussions of the effects and ethics of self-placement processes by analyzing how SSP instruments guide students to see themselves as writers. What can be learned about SSP's ecological impacts on students by more meaningfully attending not just to patterns in students' placement decisions but also to the qualitative content of their interaction with an instrument that structures their (self-)reflections and (self-)characterizations? As one way to extend this ethical inquiry into SSP, our article draws on mixed-methods analysis of student questionnaire data and written reflections (triangulated with placement data) to ask: What does investigating student self-characterizations change, or reveal, about conflicts between institutional and student perceptions of writing in a self-placement ecology?

In this article, we leverage a dataset of more than 5,000 student SSP pathways. In particular, we examine a corpus of short-answer survey responses, totaling more than half a million words, in which students write about their strengths as writers and what writing tasks they find most challenging. When paired with data about student course preferences and final enrollment, this short-answer dataset helps to shed light onto the ways that students who self-place into a variety of writing courses differentially construct their identities as writers in relation to what SSP tells them about the writing program. By exploring this large corpus of students' self-characterizations, we provide insights into how writing programs can engage with SSP data to assess the placement method's local effects. In doing so, we aim to help readers consider how self-placement can function as a method for institutions and students to better understand and align learning goals, writing constructs, and course selection with one another. Modeling ways to examine how students' constructs of college writing align (or not) with those we seek to encourage via local SSP processes, our mixed-methods analysis of SSP data can help to raise more complicated questions about SSP's local effects and effectiveness.

Literature Review

The ethical promise (and peril) of SSP methods such as DSP has, from its earliest days, been partly anchored in their potential for broader *ecological* impacts within writing programs (Moos & Van Zanen, 2019; Royer & Gilles, 1998; Saenkhum, 2016; Schendel & O'Neill, 1999; Toth, 2018, 2019), including self-placement's potential impacts on students' orientations to themselves as writers. Such methods, after all, not only depend on acts of student self-determination but aim to cultivate student agency. So it is that, as Toth (2018) observes, "from its first articulations, advocates have advanced DSP using the language of *rightness*, *fairness*, *agency*, and *choice*" (p. 147).

Despite SSP's promise, there is considerable variation and complexity in the ways SSP processes position students to exercise agency and choice. After all, self-placement methods

operate, as Brathwaite et al. (2022) write, at the intersection of "student choice and institutional guidance," the latter of which can vary in degree and in kind, depending on how "students are provided with information about courses, programs, and pathways and have the opportunity to reflect on their experiences, skills, and preferences relative to course options" (p. 7). Complicating matters, the local effects and effectiveness of institutional guidance depend, in no small part, on the ways students *interpret* and respond to that guidance—matters that may harbor hidden complexities and challenges. As Bedore and Rossen-Knill (2004) caution, "DSP, though attractive in the simplicity and fairness of its application, may not fully take into account the complexity inherent in the processes of choice and communication," such that "in terms of writing placement . . . we must ask ourselves if giving students a choice is equivalent to students receiving the choice as it was intended" (p. 56). Indeed, viewing self-placement as an ecology, it becomes clearer that in SSP processes like DSP, "the 'direction' in DSP is but one ecological resource that mediates and is appropriated by student agents to make placement decisions" (Wang, 2020, p. 47). Institutional guidance is not the sole information (re)source available to students when they navigate and negotiate self-placement.

Along related lines, Johnson (2022) reminds us that SSP decisions depend on complicated imaginative and interpretative work: Students' responses to self-placement are shaped by the "figured worlds"—the imagined lifeworlds, spaces, and trajectories—that students bring with them when interpreting and navigating the self-placement process. "Placement is," Johnson (2022) writes, "for most students their first material encounter with the figured world of college writing, and DSP initiates a feedback loop that (re)shapes [students'] conceptual model" of that world (pp. 98-99) as well as their relation to/place within it. Prior to this first material encounter, students' senses of themselves as writers, and of what constitutes writing quality or ability, have *already* been partly (pre-)figured by "their previous experience in the world of school" (Johnson, 2022, p. 102). Thus, when DSP materials attempt to communicate with students about expectations for college writing, students' responses are "mediated by their identity in the figured world of school and their perceived distance from the figured world of college writing" (Johnson, 2022, p. 106). Put another way, no student comes to self-placement *tabula rasa*: What students know about pre-college writing necessarily shapes how they conceptualize college writing, no matter what DSP materials explicitly tell them about local expectations.

Investigating students' figured worlds of college writing provides a vital means of inquiry into the ways students make sense of (and choices in response to) self-placement processes, challenging us to remember that students' placement choices are complexly contingent on their existing knowledge about their writing, feats of figuration, and world-making. To consider how attention to students' (self-)characterizations can deepen and complicate understandings of SSP, we offer the following sections as a case study focused on one particular local self-placement process: UWrite at the University of Michigan (U-M).

Methods

Institutional Context

The study[1] was conducted at U-M, which has employed self-placement tools for its first-year writing (FYW) courses for more than two decades (Frus, 2003; Gere et al., 2010; Gere et al.,

1 IRB Protocol #HUM00234033

2013; Tinkle et al., 2022). Specifically, we collected data from the largest undergraduate college, annually enrolling between 4,500 and 5,000 FYW students. Given the justice-oriented aims and implications of SSP, it is important to note that the overall demographic composition of the student body at U-M is predominantly White and relatively affluent. Notably, the students in this sample have an average high school GPA of above 3.8, and the university itself has a graduation rate exceeding 90%. Of the student population at U-M, 55% identify as White, 16% as Asian, 10% as other categories, and 7%, 7%, and 5% as Hispanic, foreign nationals, and Black, respectively.[2] Additionally, 82% of the student population are from affluent backgrounds, and 18% of students are from low-income backgrounds.

Data Collection

The data examined here come from students' interactions with the UWrite placement tool during the summer of 2022, combined with an institutional dataset that contains background information on student demographics, course enrollments, and academic standing. UWrite does not collect information about student characteristic variables, such as race, socioeconomic status, or sex. Those data are collected separately, and this article focuses only on data from the online placement tool. UWrite contains various short-answer and rating scale questions, and is described in student-facing material as

> an online self-placement tool [that] provides information about what students can expect in [FYW] courses, guides them to reflect on their experiences as writers and their academic interests, and helps them select [FYW] courses that fit their interests and needs. (Sweetland Center for Writing, 2023)

UWrite's broad writing construct attempts to value all forms of writing experience, with the goal of validating students' diverse backgrounds; as the online form states, "in this context, 'writing' includes multimedia projects, traditional essays, lab reports, online discussions, and the like."

Students' responses to UWrite encompass various types of data: rating scale assessments, detailing students' prior writing experiences; UWrite navigation/course ranking information, indicating students' course preferences; and short-answer inputs, documenting students' perceived writing strengths and challenges. The specific short-answer questions students responded to are, "What are your strengths as a writer?" and "As you look back over your responses to the [rating scale questions about writing experiences], what do you think will be new and perhaps challenging tasks for you in a university writing course?" As a shorthand throughout this article, we describe responses to these questions as "strengths" responses and "challenges" responses, respectively. Our data collection protocol comprised the following components. First, we collated an aggregate of 5,422 natural language responses to the questionnaire section of the UWrite placement protocol. Second, we collected 36,897 instances of log information from student pathways through the UWrite system; this information primarily showed us which FYW courses students investigated during their course selection process. Third, we collected enrollment data from 4,864 students who completed UWrite.[3]

Our work in this article takes inspiration from existing corpus-based scholarship related to writing assessment (e.g., Anson & Anson, 2017; Aull, 2021;). Drawing on insights from previous research on the disparate impacts of self-placement systems on marginalized student groups (e.g.,

2 The demographic groupings reported are those formally collected by the university.

3 The disparity between UWrite responses and enrollment is largely due to students who deferred their FYW course to semesters not included in this study.

Balay & Nelson, 2012; Tinkle et al., 2022), we also utilized cognitive interviews, focus groups, and surveys to garner nuanced insight into these student populations' navigation both of past self-placement processes at U-M and of the current UWrite tool; although these interview, focus group, and survey data were not used directly in this analysis, these additional layers of inquiry allowed us to better explore the complexities and particulars of the self-placement process from student stakeholders' perspectives.

Corpus Cleaning

The corpus of students' written responses to UWrite questions underwent thorough preprocessing to enhance analytical accuracy. Initial steps separated the responses to three short-answer questions from one another (which, respectively, asked students to describe their writing strengths, challenges, and any additional concerns about FYW). In cleaning the corpus, we first performed initial preprocessing and corpus cleaning, which included many small steps. We normalized the text for case and spelling variations. For example, all words were converted to lowercase and all international spellings (e.g., [color, colour]) were standardized. Additionally, extra spaces, new line characters, and tabs were removed for consistency. The goal of each of these steps was to reduce the principal components within the corpus so that distant analysis of the corpus would be maximally beneficial.

We next removed stopwords—commonly used words (e.g., *a*, *an*, *the*) that offer little value in terms of understanding the content. Once the corpus was rendered sufficiently uniform through the steps described above, we performed tokenization, a process that breaks down sentences into smaller units and subwords. For example, "I didn't think I was a bad writer" becomes ["I", "did", "n't", "think", "I", "was", "a", "bad", writer"]. With this refined corpus, we examined patterns of word usage, focusing on the frequency of co-occurring word pairs (bigrams).[4] This involved calculating the frequency of these occurrences relative to the total number of bigrams in the corpus.

Overview of Data Analysis

We analyzed the collected data using a combination of computational and manual methods. Beyond running basic descriptive analyses on categorical questions, we employed the Natural Language Toolkit (NLTK) and #LancsBox (Brezina et al., 2021) to scrutinize the 5,422 responses to both the strengths and challenges queries in UWrite. Our analysis involved conducting word searches, examining collocates (using 5L/5R parameters), contrasting the strengths and challenges corpora to identify potential discrepancies between them, and performing frequency tests to identify common bigrams and the presence of specific writing terminology from UWrite.

Additionally, we analyzed the corpus for evidence of students' preconceptions about college writing, which can reveal how students conceptualize themselves as advantaged and/or disadvantaged, via thematic analyses using NVivo. We performed thematic analysis manually by identifying recurring patterns or themes in the responses; we performed sentiment analysis computationally using a pre-existing sentiment lexicon, which assigns polarity scores to words based on their perceived positive or negative sentiment. Through these combined analytical approaches, we were able to gain a detailed and multifaceted understanding of the corpus, illuminating the latent patterns, themes, and sentiments within the students' self-placement narratives. Put another way, these analytical approaches provided us with glimpses into the ways

4 Freq(W1,W2) = Count(W1,W2) / Total bigrams.

that students "position themselves in the figured world of college writing" (Johnson, 2022, p. 110) in the process of engaging with UWrite.

One of our aims was to identify and examine writing terms from UWrite (and relatedly, from U-M's FYW course descriptions) that students employed in their reflections. Students' use of specific terminology from UWrite (and/or from course descriptions) may give an indication of how they are interpreting and responding to local "program constructs" (Johnson, 2022) when locating themselves in relation to the figured world of college writing. Furthermore, we examined the collocates surrounding common terms identified via frequency tests. This multi-faceted approach proved valuable in analyzing thousands of responses to determine not only *whether* and *how often* students were discussing specific writing features (such as grammar) as a strength or challenge but also *in what ways* they were discussing these elements.

Findings

Bigram Analysis

The findings from our bigram analysis suggest that when students engage in self-placement, they may bring with them prior experiences and understandings that narrow their construct of writing and their sense of where writing occurs. This way of narrowly figuring writing goes against UWrite's broad writing construct, which attempts to value all forms of writing experience, with the goal of validating students' diverse backgrounds and experience of non-academic writing. For brevity, we will discuss only findings from the UWrite output, juxtaposing the language students used to discuss their strengths and challenges in writing.

The language students use to describe their writing strengths and challenges reveal distinct patterns of recurring bigrams in the corpora (see Appendix A). In the challenges corpus, the most frequent bigram was "writing course" (1288 instances). The high frequency of this bigram—and the frequently occurring bigram "university writing" (1117 instances)—might partly be the result of students copying language from the UWrite query itself: "As you look back over your responses to the last question, what do you think will be new and perhaps challenging tasks for you in a university writing course?" Relatedly, "high school" (1041 instances) also ranked high in the challenges corpus, perhaps signifying that students interpret the mention of "university writing course" in the UWrite query above as an indication that "university writing" may be distinct from "high school" writing. At a minimum, the frequency of the bigram "high school" suggests that (understandably) students often conceptualize "new and challenging tasks" relative to prior tasks and experiences encountered in high school.

The presence of specific task-related bigrams—such as "writing paper" (398 instances), "writing longer" (308 instances), and "academic paper" (307 instances)—indicate that students conceptualized "new and perhaps challenging" work in relation to UWrite's description of FYW, which includes writing 4-8 page papers and "academic papers." Bigrams associated with paper length—"longer paper" (259 instances), "page length" (187 instances), and "long paper" (183 instances)—provide evidence that students anticipate the need to compose longer papers as something new and perhaps challenging for them. The bigram "new task" (377 instances) provides evidence that students took seriously the prompt to consider what would be new for them (even when novelty was not necessarily accompanied by difficulty). The paired bigrams "audio visual" and "visual component" also appeared frequently in the challenges corpus, each with 318

instances. In this vein, students' responses to another question within UWrite (How often had they "composed multi-media pieces that included audio and/or visual components?") indicates student anxiety about multi-modal composition, a finding discussed in greater detail in the next section. The bigram together with the Likert data point toward potential concerns students may have with integrating multi-media elements into their compositions.

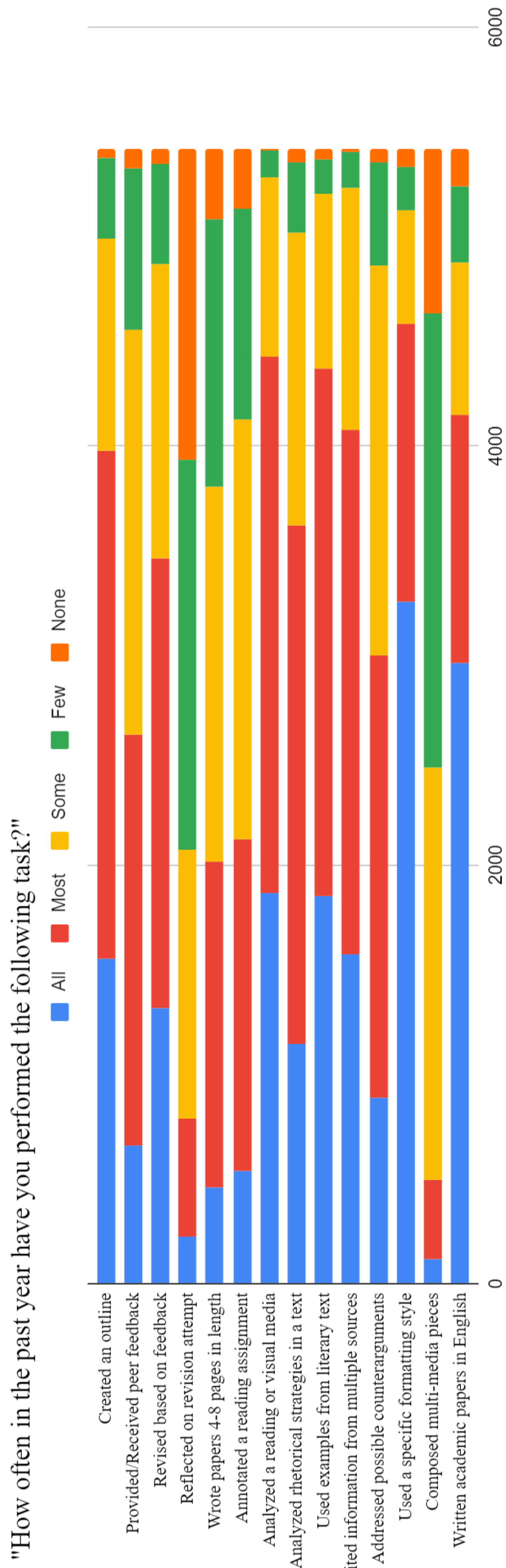
Turning to strengths, "strength writer" emerged as the most frequent bigram (1872 instances), suggesting that many students asserted their writing capabilities when engaging in self-placement. The bigram "high school," occurring 363 times in the strengths corpus, implies that prior educational experiences often shaped positive self-perceptions. The recurrence of "creative writing" (331 instances) indicates that students perceive it as a specific area of strength. Students also recognized their competence in specific writing skills. Bigrams such as "research paper" (203 instances), "word choice" (189 instances), "writing style" (183 instances), "sentence structure" (177 instances), and "able write" (165 instances) reveal a range of areas where students felt confident, from content generation to grammatical proficiency. Interestingly, these bigrams are independent of the descriptions of college writing UWrite provides; they appear to be "external constructs" (Johnson, 2022) students bring with them to self-placement. As Johnson (2022) notes, "when students enter college, they have [already] positioned themselves (and have been positioned) in the figured world of school based on test scores, grades, and [academic] experiences. And they carry this identity as they attempt to learn the figured worlds of college and college writing" (p. 102). Appendix A provides charts of the top twenty bigrams in the strengths and challenges corpora. Although bigrams related to specific writing tasks or assignment components (e.g., those associated with paper length) frequently appear in the challenges corpus, they are noticeably absent in the strengths corpus. This pattern implies a disconnect between students' perceived (transferable) strengths and the concrete tasks they expect to find new or challenging in FYW courses.

Rating Scale Items and Course Selection

In addition to analyzing the students' written responses, we also collected descriptive data from sliding scale components of the survey, which asked about students' experiences with various writing tasks in the past year. Students identified their experiences in relation to a Likert scale ranging from "All" (they had done the specific task in all of their assignments) to "None" (they had no experience with the task). We compiled the results of these rating scale items in a horizontally stacked bar chart (see Figure 1). The chart offers a snapshot of the range and extent of students' perceived writing experiences. Additionally, information concerning final course enrollment, total number of course clicks (measured by how often students clicked on specific courses to find out more information), and top choice selection (i.e., the number of students who ranked a course as being their most desired writing course) can be found in Appendix B. These data help us discern which courses interested students, information that can be useful in the context of curriculum development. We analyze the implications of the rating scale and course interest in conjunction with the thematic analysis of student responses in the next subsection.

Figure 1

Rating Scale Item Responses



Thematic Analysis of Student Responses

As the final part of our analysis, we examined select responses containing terms relevant to our study.[5] While this step was highly selective, all of the 5,422 responses were read by two project members to better understand the many themes present. Thematic findings from students' responses to queries about their writing strengths and challenges are exemplified below.

The following section outlines six major takeaways from both quantitative and qualitative aspects of this study. First, we highlight students' emphasis on prior high school and Advanced Placement (AP) courses as evidence of their preparedness for university writing, a finding consistent with Johnson's (2022) work on students' figured worlds (p. 110). Despite their prior experiences, many students expressed anxiety regarding the perceived gap between high school and university writing, as indicated by the frequency and juxtaposition of terms like "university writing" and "high school" in the challenges column. Second, we discuss students' concerns regarding the length of assignments in university courses. Our analysis of UWrite data suggests that many students had not written longer papers often and perceived doing so as a new and/or challenging prospect. Additionally, students expressed concerns about the volume of reading assignments, though less regularly than they did about the frequency and length of writing tasks. These responses suggest students took seriously UWrite's description of (at least some) college writing expectations: FYW students "read up to 50 pages a week, conduct some research, compose and substantially revise 3-5 essays and/or media projects, each between about 250 and 2500 words long, and write constructive feedback for peers' essay or media drafts."

Third, we outline students' worries about the scale of university classes and the anticipated reduction in support for their writing. Some students were accustomed to smaller class sizes in high school and anticipated challenges adapting to larger university classrooms. Fourth, we point to the varying confidence levels among students who had taken AP courses. Some reported feeling prepared for university writing due to their AP background; others expressed doubts about the transferability of AP-related skills. Fifth, our findings shed light on students' pre-existing beliefs about academic conventions, which were often misaligned with the information given in UWrite. Many students associated success in university writing with a strong grasp of grammar (not mentioned by UWrite) and limited the construct of academic writing to a few specific genres. Indeed, students' writing constructs often divided "creative" and "scientific" disciplines, and we discovered a noticeable gap between students' relative lack of experience with multi-media composition and the emphasis placed on it in the institution's description of FYW. Finally, we explore students' experiences with the writing process, particularly in the contexts of feedback and revision, which are crucial for FYW. Students generally feel confident in initial stages of the writing process, but are comparatively unfamiliar with deeper revision practices and collaborative peer review—something students attribute to limited high school opportunities and COVID's impact on their learning.

Bridging a Perceived Gap between High School and University Writing

Throughout their responses, students emphasized their prior learning—particularly, high school and AP courses—to warrant their readiness for university writing and/or their ability to acclimate quickly to new writing demands, thereby overcoming new writing challenges. As

5 The terms examined related to the subject matter of rating scale questions, FYW course goals at the institution, and relevant markers of identity (e.g., second(-)language) as well as additional themes that surfaced through both examining word frequency lists.

mentioned above, students frequently referred to "university writing" (1117 instances) and "high school" (1041 instances) in the challenges corpus, suggesting students may conceptualize the distance between their secondary and postsecondary writing courses as being considerable. This perceived distance seemed to be a source of anxiety and self-doubt for many students:

- I have anxiety about the writing courses going into college. I know that college writing is going to be very different from high school writing . . .
- I think the most challenging task/aspect of a university writing course will be the longer essay requirements. In high school, it was a somewhat rare thing to write papers 8 pages in length . . .
- One challenge I will have in a university writing course is the lack of creativity. For the most part, over my time as a high school student I have focused on writing synthesis essays . . .

The student responses above, emphasizing both clear and unspecified or unknown differences between secondary and postsecondary writing courses, are representative examples of a general anxiety many students expressed. When students expressed more targeted anxieties about perceived gaps between "university writing" and "high school writing," these concerns often focused on the length or amount of writing and reading tasks.

Table 1
Select Frequencies in Strengths and Challenges Corpora

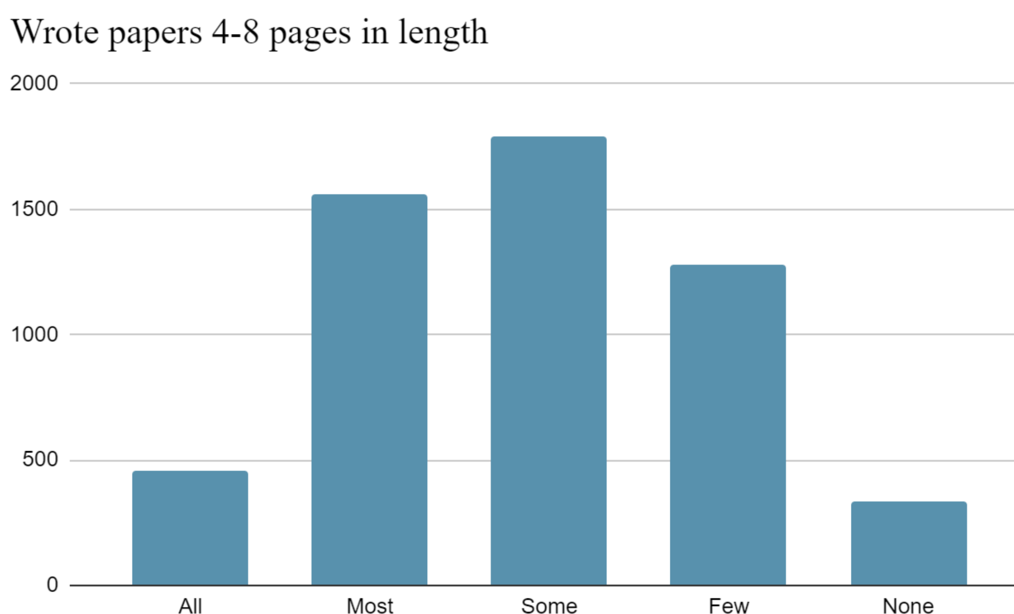
Frequencies in Strengths Corpus	Frequencies in Challenges Corpus
Essay, 921	Papers, 2348
Creative, 862	University, 1429
Evidence, 852	Multi-media, 827
Vocabulary, 732	Longer/Length, 703/624
Papers, 667	Assignments, 600
Research, 589	Research, 516
Reader, 560	Peer(s), 771
Analysis, 547	Feedback, 365
Grammar, 514	Revisions/Revising, 340/242

In response to a question asking students how often in the past year they had written papers "4-8 pages in length"—with the response options consisting of "All," "Most, "Some," "Few," and "None"—the majority of students responded with "Some," "Few," or "None" (see Figure 2). As Table 1 indicates, the terms "longer" (703 instances) and "length" (624 instances) were referenced a combined 1,327 times in students' reflections on challenges:

- I am not quite sure how to address longer assignments
- It will be somewhat new to me to work on longer pieces of writing
- I think the most challenging task/aspect of a university writing course will be the longer essay requirements

Given students' self-reported inexperience with long papers (see Figure 2), their concerns are hardly surprising. Several comments related to paper length also referred to the amount of reading. However, while "read*" did make an appearance (548 instances), it was not nearly as frequently cited as a challenge as "papers" (2,348 instances).[6] However, "read*" and "challeng*" shared a number of collocates with "amount" (158 instances) and "analy*" (406 instances), suggesting that some students anticipated the amount of readings, and the need to thoroughly understand them, as potential challenges.

Figure 2
Experience with Paper Length



It was not just the *amount* of writing and reading that raised self-doubts for some students. At the forefront of many students' uncertainties was the degree of support (or lack thereof) that they would receive from instructors when asked to engage in lengthy reading and writing assignments. U-M has a relatively large student population, and some students' responses indicate they expected university writing classrooms to be large and isolating. In one student's words,

> I really enjoyed writing and English throughout high school, but I also had a really small high school where my classes had a maximum of 15 students. I had a lot of support with writing and English, so I think it will be challenging to dive into an English course on a bigger scale.

6 In various corpus tools, "*" can be used to search for any number of unspecified characters. As such, a search of "read*" produces results for all the following: read, reads, reading, and readings as well as unrelated terms like readiness that needed to be discounted from the frequency analysis.

In fact, almost all such courses are capped at 18 students, something incoming students apparently do not know. UWrite can easily be revised to include this information, potentially allaying some students' concerns.

The responses above clearly show students recognizing a difference between high school and college writing courses (and questioning their preparedness for postsecondary writing). Even so, in discussing their anticipated challenges, many students ended their responses to both the strengths and challenges questions *optimistically*, asserting their ability to handle new tasks. Students who discussed experiences in AP seemed particularly inclined to express confidence in their ability to adapt to university writing, seeming to frame AP credentials as evidence of preparedness for college writing (as shown by these examples):

- having taken both AP English classes, I feel that I am able [to] read and write about a wide variety of works
- I feel pretty well prepared after taking AP english classes
- in my AP language class I have written many impromptu essays

This connection between confidence and AP courses, however, is not universal in this dataset's many (613) instances of "AP." For example, one student, responding to the optional short-answer question asking if they had any further questions or concerns, wondered: "How does a college level writing class compare to a high school level (AP English)?" Although some students cited specific aspects of AP coursework as evidence of their preparation (e.g., "I remember rhetorical strategies from my junior year AP Lang class"), students did not universally view acquired AP skills as transferable to the university context, as illustrated below:

> I have taken AP English language and AP English literature in which we engaged in analytical writing in the form of narrative, argumentative, rhetorical, and more. We analyzed several novels and writing excerpts in both of these classes, and although they are AP college level, I expect everything to be new and challenging for me in a university writing course as it will be different in multiple aspects.

References to specific writing genres and disciplines receive further attention in the following subsection. We examine how students portrayed constructs of high school/AP academic writing and university academic writing, which they often perceived as either very similar or completely different. Students also often narrowed the writing construct to specific genres and conventions.

Complicating Knowledge of Academic Conventions

One theme in the strengths corpus relates to students' mentions of "good" grammar and their strong, almost intuitive, beliefs about what academic writing should look like. While grammatical knowledge of Standardized English was perhaps the most explicitly discussed example of this theme, students also referenced academic genres and modes of writing they expected to encounter most/solely during their coursework (see Table 2).

As Table 2 shows, we found 605 instances of gramma* in the strengths corpus, with common collocates of gramma* being positive descriptors like "good" (L/94), "strong" (L/87), and "proper" (L/55). Additional collocates concerning certain mechanics—e.g., "punctuation" (R/70) and "spelling" (R/58)—were also present. In context, the responses in which students cited their perceived grammatical strengths often positioned good/strong/proper grammar as an important component for success in a university writing course:

Table 2
Select Collocates of Gramma in Strengths Corpus*

Gramma* (605 Instances in Strengths Responses)	Position[a]/Frequency
good	L/94
strong	L/87
vocabulary	L/79
punctuation	R/70
strengths	L/66
spelling	R/58
structure	R/57
proper	L/55

[a] Position refers to the placement before (L) or after (R) the key phrase. For example "L" = good gramma* while "R" = gramma* spelling

> My strengths as a writer are certainly punctuation and spelling. I have never struggled with comma splices, incorrect grammar, or anything of the sort

In many such responses, students connected their knowledge of grammar to their ability to structure academic writing in a clear manner, as seen below:

> As a writer, many of my strengths stem from the logistical aspects of writing and developing stories. Examples of these include proper capitalization and punctuation, appropriate spelling and grammar, and a suitable break between different ideas or themes.

While discussed far less frequently in the challenges corpus—71 instance of gramma* in challenges corpus versus 514 instances in strengths corpus—grammar was often positioned as a binary right/wrong choice:

> I have taken writing courses at my community college before, therefore I have an understanding of what the papers are like and how to write them for the most part. However, one struggle that I am worried about is that I struggle with grammar and comma splicing and I'm concerned that might be where I fall into some issues. I am not so much worried about the coursework alone, I am more worried about errors that I usually have in some of the other papers that I have written previously.

Students' concerns about academic conventions extended beyond grammar, with some noting challenges or concerns regarding disciplinary differences within the broader label of "academic" writing:

> I have written many papers in English and history classes. However, I have very little experience writing research papers for my science classes

This student is far from alone. Students often split academic writing into "creative" disciplines (i.e., their humanities courses, generally) and "scientific" disciplines (i.e., their more STEM-oriented courses)—a divide reminiscent of the "two cultures" popularized by Snow (1959). In such responses, students often also left unstated what they considered "scientific" writing, while

portraying writing in humanities-oriented disciplines as largely or solely consisting of literary analysis:

> My high school education has also provided me many opportunities of literary analysis within time constraints, equipping me with the skills to analyze excerpts of literature and write a substantial paper.

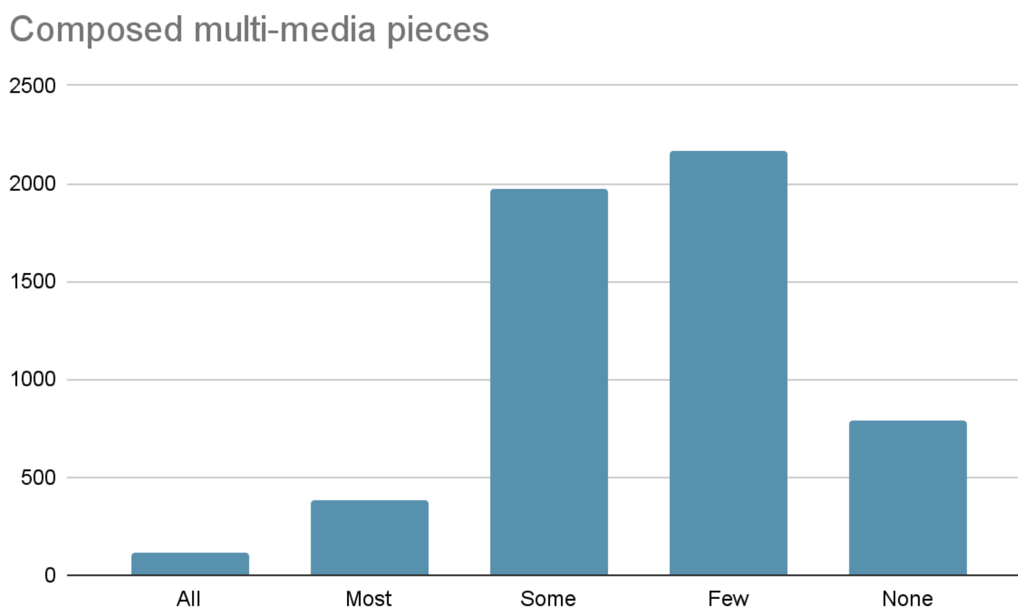
Regardless of their categorizations of writing disciplines (and genres within those disciplines), students typically conceptualized writing as "monomodal" and expressed concerns in response to the rating scale question asking about prior experiences with "multi-media" composition. We found 827 mentions of "multi-media" in the challenges corpus versus only 3 instances in the strengths corpus. As one student wrote,

> Composing and transforming things into multi-media works is entirely new to me, so I think it will be more challenging than the rest. This, as well as writing long papers, are definitely the most foreign to me and will take some time to learn. Though I am familiar with a lot of these, I think it will still feel new, because a lot of them were presented to us in high school as an afterthought…

Collocates of "multi-media"—across both corpora combined—include "new" (101 instances), "challenging" (95 instances), and "never" (42 instances). This finding from the short-answer responses isn't surprising, because students did not report much experience with multi-media composition (see Figure 3).

Students' relative lack of experience with multimodal composition and the respondent's assertion (above) that important aspects of university-level academic writing were simply "an afterthought" in high school coursework is not limited to the topic of "multi-media." As we

Figure 3
Experience with Multi-Media Composition



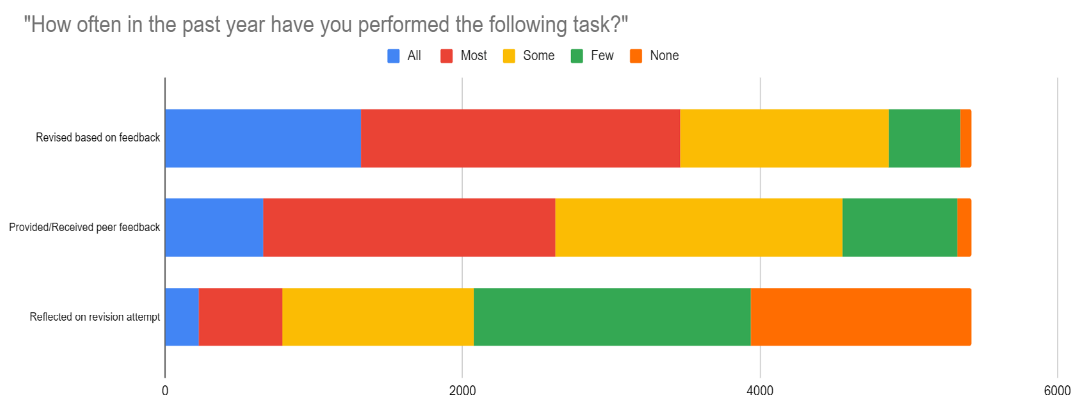
explore in the following subsection, the disconnect between high school writing experiences and university expectations extends to the emphasis placed on writing as a (social) process.

Engaging in Writing as a (Social) Process

Outside of unease about paper length, students generally expressed confidence about organizing academic writing via outlines, brainstorming topics, and using sources. However, their relative confidence did not extend to providing/receiving feedback or to metacognitively reflecting on the act of revision, despite how generally experienced students claimed to be with revision. In the challenges corpus, "revis*" had a frequency of 1,088 (versus 250 instances in strengths) and "feedback" had a frequency of 365 (versus 180 instances in strengths). Three rating scale questions mention revision and feedback (see Figure 4), and while students generally had experiences with revising based on feedback, experiences with peer review and (especially) *reflecting* on revision were much less common.

Figure 4

Experience with Revision in Writing Process



Some students attributed their comparative inexperience with peer review and reflection to their high school's deprioritizing revision, feedback, and process-based writing tasks:

> In my English class last year most of our class writing was timed papers and we seldom revised and reflected on our essays- outside of large papers. Adjusting to a writing process with lots of reflections and collaboration will be a less familiar concept to me in the classroom environment. I also spent the last two years in AP English where we mostly just wrote in-class essays to prepare for the test. I think writing and revising papers will be challenging at first because I have not done that in so long. We also did some, but not a lot, of feedback on others writing or analyzing our own writing, so that will be newer for me.

These students perceived that their experiences of timed, in-class writing did not prepare them for college writing. Students also commented on their lack of opportunities to collaborate with peers:

> One challenging task is peer revision. I always find it hard to comment on somebody's work because I was never really taught the correct way to do so. I focus on too many non-

> important elements, and when it comes to main issues I always am stuck on explaining why I think there is an issue with what they wrote without flat out saying that I don't like their whole essay.

Another student's response exemplifies the challenges students may have seeking out peer help:

> I notice that I rarely had peer editing experiences in my later years of high school. Thus, it may be difficult for me to get into the habit of seeking out people in my classes to gain opinions on the quality of my work. In addition, I should also allow myself more instances of revision since I rarely had multiple drafts of my work in the past.

Students sometimes associated this lack of structured opportunities to collaborate with the COVID pandemic and the challenges that online learning presented: "I had less practice revising my peer's papers and taking my peer's revisions into consideration in my own papers because of COVID in high school so that will be a little new to me."

Regardless of the cause, students expressed both a desire for and discomfort with the prospect of collaborative writing experiences and substantive revisions (i.e., not just looking for typos): "There is always edits that can be made to improve my writing, however I need to become more comfortable and willing to do longer, more in depth revisions."

Implications

We analyzed data from more than 5,000 students' experiences with UWrite in order to better understand student perceptions of writing in a self-placement ecology. Data from UWrite enable us to discern *how* students describe themselves as writers and *what* their writing constructs include, foreground, and exclude. Examining students' self-characterizations can highlight the variety of writerly strengths students perceive within themselves *and* the challenges they anticipate in the figured world of college writing. The combined quantitative and qualitative approach we model here—focused on engaging students' written responses, as well as their responses to a rating scale—offers a promising method for investigating the writing constructs students bring to self-placement, which can be used not only to refine SSP tools and processes but also to anticipate and respond to students' needs in FYW and, relatedly, to improve instructor training.

The next phase of our research will involve interrogating students' self-perceptions across multiple years of incoming first-year cohorts. We intend to triangulate this corpus analysis with data from rating-scale items as well as course rankings and final enrollments. We hypothesize that response patterns will present opportunities for the writing program to more proactively respond to students' self-understandings and prior experiences with writing (*within* individual and *across* multiple cohorts). This kind of data analysis can offer important insights into SSP's impacts on (and interactions with) students' figured worlds, including by enhancing our understandings of (in)equity related to placement (see Tinkle et al., 2022) by uncovering the (potentially disparate) ways that students' "literacy identities constructed in the world of school do not transfer to the world of college" (Johnson, 2022, p. 113).

While the UWrite data we've examined here are limited and will need further analysis alongside new UWrite data and other institutional data sets, they demonstrate how even a single year of these kinds of data can be valuable for refining a local SSP. Illuminating how students characterize their writing strengths and challenges—and how they conceptualize college writing—could potentially help us evaluate how well self-placement helps students "negotiate" the writing course that might best suit them (e.g., Bedore & Rossen-Knill, 2004; Wang, 2020). Our experience

with UWrite speaks to the ways self-placement tools can be used to collect data that will enable us to make new discoveries about students' understanding of their choices, clarifying the degree to which "the choices we offer are received as intended" by students (Bedore & Rossen-Knill, 2004, p. 71), and revealing the extent to which students' figured worlds of college writing (do not) overlap with institutional expectations for college writing.

Research into the writing constructs students bring with them to college can help us clarify college writing constructs for incoming college students. As shown in our findings about students' experiences with revision (Figure 4), students generally claimed—in the rating-scale responses—to have had some experience with revision and peer feedback. By itself, however, the story told by rating scale data can be misleading. Closer attention to students' self-characterizations complicates the narrative, raising questions not just about the frequency but also the nature of students' prior experiences with revision/feedback—and about how well those experiences align with the demands of postsecondary writing coursework. Examination of students' written comments can help disambiguate when talk of "revision" actually refers to relatively minor edits, in contrast to the more thorough, process-oriented revision tasks expected in FYW courses.

Analysis of qualitative data also helps us examine how students conceptualize "good" writing and how well students' writing constructs map onto institutional expectations for college writing. This information can be used to refine the local SSP instrument. For example, given students' varying views of what constitutes "revision," our findings suggest that parts of UWrite should be rewritten to be more specific about the different kinds of revision students might have undertaken. Asking how often students revised work in the last year does not get at the equally important questions of what "revision" means to them. Additionally, revision wasn't the only area where there appears to be a misalignment between students' expectations about college writing and those endorsed by the institution. As discussed above, students identified their strengths as skills with "proper" or "good" grammar and their familiarity with certain academic genres (e.g., "literary analysis"), narrowing the construct of "college writing" to a small set of genres and conventions. Even when expressing an understanding that "academic writing" is not a monolith, students generally struggled to figure the world of college writing—as the stereotyping of certain fields and modes of writing into "creative" versus "scientific" demonstrates. Further language may need to be incorporated into UWrite to help students to think more expansively about the writing skills and experiences *they already possess*, and to expand students' notions about what academic writing can look like (beyond, for instance, "grammatical correctness").

Our findings concerning potential gaps between the institution/the SSP tool's writing construct and students' figured worlds indicate the need for further, continuing refinements of UWrite. In addition, our analysis of students' responses helps us to identify opportunities for improved scaffolding in FYW courses for future cohorts. As institutions seek to diversify their student populations and help all students respond to ever-changing disciplinary and workplace writing contexts—as well as contend with the consequences of major events like COVID—self-characterizations can be vital data to help us understand students' perceptions of these evolving needs in a timely fashion. As examined in the findings, students frequently discussed their perceived lack of experience with substantive revision and with lengthier writing projects (i.e., not timed, in-class writing assignments with no significant research requirements). Additionally, in the challenges corpus, students frequently discussed their lack of experience with providing/receiving feedback from peers. Data like these can be used to help inform departmental training

and professional development opportunities for the FYW instructors who will teach these students. The kind of mixed-methods data analysis modeled in this article offers one resource for proactively noticing how an incoming cohort may struggle more than past years in writing long research papers, equipping departmental leadership to work with instructors to adapt quickly to changing student populations.

Being informed about patterns of incoming students' self-reported strengths and challenges, *in their own words*, might help instructors to better address in constructive ways their students' diverse needs and abilities. Investigating students' self-characterizations is thus not only a way to learn *about* the self-placement ecology but also a way to learn *from* it—a way to inform, and perhaps transform, local writing programs and courses.

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