

Overview

Directed Self-Placement (DSP) is a widespread and growing practice in first-year composition. DSP has been conducted in large research universities, selective colleges and universities, regional/comprehensive universities, and smaller liberal arts colleges. Generally, the institution advises students, and then students choose courses based on results of survey tools and information/advice from programs. Noted benefits include higher student satisfaction and ownership; however, there are some concerns about students' ability to successfully judge their own skills and place themselves in an appropriate course.

Strong DSP programs assist students by getting information out early and often. They also advise students to consult others who know their writing skills. Programs that do DSP well report strong validity and reliability with the processes. Often, programs find that they need to revise their courses to meet the needs of new student populations, resulting in increased attention to writing pedagogy within an institution.

Edward M. White, one the preeminent scholars of writing assessment, describes directed self-placement as being 'deceptively simple,' stating

In place of testing students, the institution puts its energy into informing students about the demands and expectations of the composition courses available and how they can meet the writing requirement. Then, students make informed choices, and take full responsibility for those choices, instead of grudgingly accepting the test results and institutional placement. DSP assumes that students will be mature enough to choose the course that is right for them, if they have enough information and pressure to choose wisely . . . And, perhaps the more perilous assumption of all – DSP depends on the institution to clearly defining the requirements of its different writing courses, maintaining consistency in those definitions and then communicating them to entering students. (2003).

What is it? Defining DSP

DSP developed as a result of frustration with traditional placement systems, including on-site testing, portfolios, and more recently, the use of ACT/SAT test scores for writing placement (an option that is often appealing to universities for cost/ease, but has poor validity and reliability for placement in first-year writing).

There are multiple ways that directed self-placement is developed and practiced. Common traits of successful directed self-placement programs include:

- Aligning and defining first-year writing goals and expectations and communicating those concepts effectively to potential students, their parents/families, and teachers.
- Offering advice and direction to incoming students to assist them in making placement decisions.
- Impressing upon students the importance of making the right decision.
- Placing the final decision for placement in the hands of students.

For DSP to work, institutions must

1. Define their first-year writing courses and goals
2. Effectively communicate those course goals to potential students
3. Emphasize the importance of the course selection decision to potential students

Some key questions and issues are outlined in the attached “Introduction/FAQ” from *Directed Self-Placement: Principles and Practices* (Hampton Press, 2003).

What are the general procedures for DSP?

Early/Prior to Admission

- Information on courses is published. Often an open website is developed with detailed course descriptions, goals, and procedures. A sample student survey/self-evaluation tool is provided for students to take prior to applying. A “Note to Teachers” is often connected to website, with information on writing placement and encouragement to have students self-assess their writing skills.

Upon acceptance

- Students receive a letter and a brochure from an authority figure at the university, describing the directed self-placement system, advice for making the correct decision, and a DSP survey. At many institutions, students may be given a specific password and account and then take an ‘official’ survey, with the results going to an academic advisor (for advisory purposes only; the advisor does not choose the course).

During Counseling/Scheduling

- Students choose their first-year composition courses, with advisor input. If students choose against the recommendations from their surveys, they are often quizzed as to the reasoning.

Early-Semester

- Some universities build in a two-week window for course switching, although most writing program administration scholarship on DSP shows that switching is less pervasive than expected.

What are the benefits?

- Student ownership and motivation in first-year writing courses
- Increased success in first-year writing courses
- Student recruitment
- Increased alignment efforts in first-year writing pedagogy within the university

What are the challenges?

- Effective education of potential first-year students
- Alignment and definition of programmatic goals and traits
- Integrating DSP into the admissions, advising, and placement process
- Effects on student population and pedagogy in developmental writing courses
- Allotment of resources to support DSP education and administration

How is DSP conducted at other institutions?

Attached are documents describing the directed-self-placement programs at the following institutions:

- Eastern Michigan University
- Grand Valley State University
- University of Michigan
- Fresno State University
- Buffalo State College, NY

More DSP programs can be found via an internet search of the phrase ‘directed self-placement.’

A draft of a **potential** Western Michigan University directed self-placement survey tool is attached. *This is only ONE part of a full DSP education, alignment, and placement process.*