

October 24, 2022

To: Jessica Cattelino, Chair, Academic Senate

From: Robert Watson, Chair, Committee on Undergraduate Admissions and Relations with Schools

Re: Systemwide Senate Review of Entry Level Writing Requirement Task Force Report and Recommendations

At its meetings on September 23, 2022 and October 21, 2022, the Committee on Undergraduate Admissions and Relations with Schools (CUARS) discussed the report of the Academic Council Entry Level Writing Requirement (ELWR) Task Force, including questions related to ELWR placement and recommendations for updating the UC Entry Level Writing Requirement (Senate Regulation 636).

Overall, members agree with the report's efforts to strike a balance between systemwide oversight and individual campus's autonomy in developing fair, reliable, and locally appropriate standards for ELWR placement. The committee commends the Task Force for incorporating placement principles that emphasize equity and fairness.

One issue of importance and of special interest to UCLA is a problem with the recommendation on p. 13 of the report, titled "Establishment of an ELWR Oversight Committee," where "The ELWR Task Force vigorously recommends the establishment of an ELWR Oversight Committee, an autonomous standing committee consisting of Senate Faculty writing experts from all UC campuses with experience in or familiarity with ELWR."

Specifying that the members be Academic Senate faculty precludes representation from the writing faculty at UCLA (and at Berkeley), where the leading writing experts are Lecturers, and therefore lack Academic Senate status (which is unlikely to change anytime soon). If we insist on Academic Senate status for all members of this committee, it will replicate an existing problem with representation on UCOPE, which is already deprived of this expertise in its overview of issues of preparatory education. Since the ELWR oversight committee should presumably include the experts from each campus who know the field, the systems, the curricula, and the issues best, it seems important either to remove the words "Senate Faculty" from that sentence. Or, if the Board and/or the Senate feels it is best to keep these issues explicitly under Senate control, it could say, "led by Senate Faculty and consisting of writing experts from...".

Having received input from UCLA's Writing Programs faculty, members are generally supportive of the recommendation to allow campuses to develop pilot placement programs with a UC-wide supervisory board tracking their effectiveness and gathering data to ensure that programs are beneficial and equitable, thus enabling informed decisions about which pilots to make permanent.

In line with the report's recommendations, the UCLA campus seems inclined to work towards a collaborative model that involves students substantially in placement decisions, but retains the final placement for UCLA. However, CUARS members and writing instructors both note the impossibility of

establishing a completely new and test-free process for UCLA's incoming 2023-24 class. Evaluating students without standardized testing will be complicated and labor-intensive. A particular obstacle has been UCLA APO's insistence that the recent Unit 18 contract means that Lecturers must be compensated for additional placement duties only with course-releases, not ninths or any form of summer pay; other UC campuses seem to have found ways to pay Unit 18 lecturers for this time-sensitive assessment and placement work, and we encourage the Executive Board to encourage the APO to find some similar arrangement.

CUARS shared the sentiments conveyed by other campuses that robust systems and infrastructure must be developed and appropriately funded in order for alternative placement processes to be successful. Members underscore the importance of achieving a workable, meaningful, and equitable process, grounded in data, that does not add undue burden on students and instructors alike.

Some suggested that a composite capped unweighted GPA could be used for placement, but GPA so compressed in the upper regions at UCLA and a couple of others that it might not be a useful benchmark. Still, UCLA, with help from our Admissions office, is studying whether or not such GPA predicts successful placement for students currently placed in our sections of English Composition 1, 2 and 3.

The Task Force's primary principle—that "Writing placement methods must be first and foremost instruments of equity"—seemed valid to the committee, assuming by "equity" we mean meeting students where they are, and providing them the support that gives each of them the best possible opportunity to thrive in their undergraduate education. It should not mean pretending that all students arrive with equal writing skills, or holding some students back to eliminate advantages they may have had in their previous education.

There was some concern that the "or" in the Task Force's question "Does our writing placement method serve students as an instrument of equity, or do different populations perform differently on the assessment?" implies that any differential performance by groups means the assessment is necessarily ill-serving equity, when often the opposite is true. Any evaluation method should certainly avoid unjust biases, but we believe that the equitable benefit actually depends on placing students differently to help them succeed at UCLA, not waste their time or morale by teaching them in ways not suited to their current preparedness for university-level writing in university modes.

While members were in agreement that a one-time standardized exam should not be only indicator used to place students, some wondered about the striking of the word "test" in point 2 of the proposed revisions to SR 636, given that the guiding principles as a whole still seemed to reflect the tenets of "reliability" and "validity" used in educational and psychological testing. It was suggested that alternative ELWR assessments might instead look beyond traditional standards of reliability and validity.

Thank you for the opportunity to opine. If you have any questions, please contact me via the CUARS analyst, Julia Nelsen, at jnelsen@senate.ucla.edu.

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