ABSTRACT

MELODY ANN OWENS. Assessing Directed Self-Placement in the University Writing Program: A Study of Student Perceptions of their Role as the Decision-Maker in the Placement Process. (Under the direction of Dr. Nancy Penrose.¹)

Many studies on Directed Self-Placement (DSP) have examined the ways students assess their abilities, predict their future success, and gain agency using enrollment figures and grades. While these measures are useful for examining what the students’ decisions are, they don’t tell us about why the students made those decisions. Yet, few studies have looked at students’ perceptions of the DSP experience or asked students to elaborate on their experiences. Given that DSP places students at the center of the placement process, the perceptions of students should also be at the center of the measure of DSP’s success. This study aimed to expand the understanding of how DSP is fulfilling the purpose of bringing students into the placement decision by studying students’ perceptions of their experience with DSP by asking them to reflect on their experience as the decision-maker. Sixty-three students enrolled in English 101 during the fall and spring semester of 2016 at NC State University were surveyed electronically to identify how students made course choices, perceived the DSP process, and whether they gained agency with this process. The data indicate that many students may be confused about the placement process overall in first-year writing, and therefore leading many students to not engage in DSP meaningfully or at all. The data do suggest that there are clear benefits for those students who do engage in DSP in meaningful ways as they take control of their education and become aware of the growth of their own skills. The open-ended data suggest that most of these students agreed with the DSP recommendation, reflected about their abilities, and found being the decision-maker to be an important part of their education. However, many of the responses were asking for more information about the courses, placement, and how to assess their own abilities. This study illustrates how students’ perceptions about DSP can shape the future of DSP as the process continues to develop in the ways students need to make this very important first educational decision.

¹ I would like to thank my advisor Dr. Penrose for her insight and invaluable feedback over the past two years, from the beginning when she first made me feel welcome in the graduate program at NC State, until now. I am thankful for your encouragement and mentorship as you guided me through graduate school, as well as this capstone project.