

THE POLITICS OF TESTING

Facilitator: Richard Hendrix, *Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education*

After a brief comment on the meaning "politics" has for him ("the 'politics' I see daily are national issues... 'testing' is not that much debated in the halls of government"), Richard Hendrix invited those assembled to introduce themselves, to say where they come from, and to state briefly what "politics" in the context of testing means to them. For a number of people, particularly those from large public institutions, "politics" related to external factors, such as convincing legislators and university administrators of the value of strong writing programs. Others focused on internal issues in using the term "politics." For example, can testing provide a means of convincing faculty in other departments to support a program of writing across the curriculum? What effect does testing have on students? Does it help them master writing more quickly or only catch "losers" earlier? What effect does testing have on teaching? Does it, for instance, contradict what we have learned about the composing process? What are the societal implications of testing? Does it close off higher education to the minorities or the poor?

Much of the discussion focused on ways of gathering college-wide support for a program in writing across the curriculum. Testing can help by concretely defining levels of student ability. When testing involves a writing sample, it communicates to faculty and to students that writing is much more than grammar, and it helps clarify relationships between thinking and writing.

Another concern of the group involved the use of tests: given that tests are here, how do we make the best use of them? A number of suggestions emerged. Have faculty take the writing test to see what the experience is like and to be better prepared to deal with student reaction to

(Continued on page 16)

POLITICS OF TESTING, (continued)

the test. Have faculty generate the criteria for grading a test, then have them participate in grading. Realize that there is significant public support for testing. One participant described a junior-level reading/essay test which avoids the pass/fail grade and asks instead, "What will this student's program for the next two years look like?" Students at this institution also have a chance to revise their essay the next day, and faculty from all disciplines are involved in grading the tests and counseling students.

Are we observing a natural cycle that begins with public alarm at poor writing and that leads to a demand for testing, new courses, refinement of the test, and ultimately an impetus toward programs in writing across the curriculum? Although some participants felt that the notion of a cycle accurately describes recent developments on their campuses, a participant from a SUNY campus argued that there is too much rigidity in the system to permit the cycle to occur. Another participant pointed out that if a movement toward writing across the curriculum is to develop, it must be actively promoted from the very top, preferably by the president of the college.

Hendrix remarked that the discussion confirmed his hypothesis that testing has been a divisive issue on campuses. On the one hand, assessment has been used to get students, especially adults, into education, to develop alternative routes for education, and to educate by defining competencies. On the other hand, public outcry for a return to basics, mandated state-wide or city-wide tests, and new research interests in testing has lead to more and more tests, some of which screen students out of education. Thus, he concluded, we stand at an interesting and complex moment in the politics of testing.

Nancy Black, *Recorder*
Brooklyn College