

THE SYSTEM-WIDE TEST: ISSUES AND PROBLEMS IN DEVELOPING LARGE-SCALE TESTS

Chairman: Marie Jean Lederman, *The City University of New York*

Panelists: James L. Hill, *Albany State College, Georgia*
Edward M. White, *California State University, San Bernardino*

In her opening remarks, Dean Lederman reminded the gathering that she and her panelists were not writing assessment "specialists," for, as George Bernard Shaw said, "No man can be a pure specialist without being in the strict sense an idiot." Rather, her panel members were teachers of students and lovers of writing. Assessment of writing is for them, as for all teachers, a necessary part of the domain of college writing, but only one part.

The three systems represented at this session, Lederman noted, comprise seventy colleges. In two of these vast systems, student writing is assessed through a writing sample alone. In the third, a combination of a writing sample and an objective test is used, proving that essay testing *is* possible in a mass testing situation. Lederman also suggested that the difference between the issues and problems these systems face and those of a single campus testing program is largely one of size: decisions made about assessing student writing affect greater numbers of students; problems of the politics of testing, test administration, data collection, research, and the relationships of tests and curricula are intensified in system-wide assessment programs.

The speakers reviewed the background, history, development, and present status of their writing assessment programs, and generally agreed about the objectives: to help students write better; to identify those students needing writing instruction; to create programs and services to assist these students; and to be accountable as teachers. How to achieve these goals, Dr. Hill noted, is fraught with problems relating to allocating limited financial resources, tracking students, and making decisions about writing competency.

What emerged from the session was a consensus that a writing assessment program is more likely to succeed if certain conditions are met: the goal must be to improve instruction; English faculty must be involved from the beginning in the development, maintenance, and control of the testing program and should encourage the use of test scores in ways that are appropriate to their curricula; readers of essays must be teachers trained and experienced in assessment procedures; and finally, review procedures must be an integral part of the program along with opportunities for continued research and evaluation. The involvement of English faculty is crucial even if, as Dr. White said, they "stumble backwards" into becoming testing experts.