Facilitator: Elaine Maimon, Beaver College

In her opening remarks, Elaine Maimon noted the broad acceptance of testing by faculty and students in general, how it seemed to sound the voice and values of the larger community and its more immediate and profound effect of shaping the goals and design of writing programs and curricula. She also counseled healthy skepticism toward testing, since any writing test is a kind of compromise which can never reveal the whole truth about a student’s ability to write.

Maimon considered writing assessment in three roles: as a tool for initial placement, as a part of a proficiency requirement, and as one of the ways to evaluate a writing program. Testing as a tool for placement is valuable because it gives students a good start and a better chance to succeed, while sending a strong message to the faculty and to high schools that writing is important. As part of a proficiency requirement for graduation, writing assessment was abandoned by the Beaver College faculty, primarily because it was adopted too quickly and so, became a part of the curriculum. It became apparent that writing was a complex lifelong process about which they needed to know a lot more. The program shifted to faculty and curriculum development. Maimon said that as a way to evaluate writing programs, writing assessment is a very complex variable. No tests submit to the kind of statistical rigor required in the social sciences and are to be approached with a good deal of skepticism.

In the general discussion, an objection was made to writing assessment as a placement tool since it creates too homogeneous a classroom although students at large, open-access, public colleges would probably reflect a greater range of competence than their counterparts at small, private, liberal arts colleges. Recommended ways of enhancing a writing program included teaching teachers how to handle a mixed group of writers, giving weaker students tutorial help or, simply, more time to complete a writing sequence, creating a strong network of peer support outside the classroom and establishing a telephone hotline.

Discussion shifted to the use of the writing portfolio as another kind of “test” of proficiency and as a means of shaping curriculum design. The writing portfolio has its own problems: What do you want in a portfolio: revisions? Permissive essays? Experimental pieces? and the problem of unwieldiness at large colleges. Still, its value is to encourage students to revise their work and that teachers get involved in students’ writing as a process. Maimon concluded that perhaps we need different types of tests for different purposes, but that we must also look carefully and consistently at that test and use tests so that we may remain intellectually consistent.

Peter Miller, College of Staten Island and Pat Lucklinder, John Jay College of Criminal Justice, Recorders

Conference Luncheon

COMMENTS

The Honorable Blanche Bernstein
Board of Trustees of The City University of New York

I am pleased to welcome you to this last session of “Writing Assessment in the 80′s” and to bring you greetings from the Board of Trustees of The City University of New York. You, above all people, know how important is the ability to communicate clearly and persuasively. Yet, the inability of many to do so is reflected in reports from the media, national surveys, employers in business and government, as well as in student writing.

And I can add to the evidence on this from my personal experience in as well as out of government. When I think of the number of U.S. State Department position papers that I had to rewrite in order to clarify what the United States position was and to express it in language that would persuade other countries to support us, all I can say is, “Oh my, it was depressing.” The participation of so many of you at this conference is evidence of both a growing national problem and of a concerted effort to find solutions.

For the last day-end-a-half you have grappled with this major educational issue: how to assess writing skills as part of a broader instructional effort. You have exchanged ideas about what colleges and universities are doing and can do, through writing assessment programs, to provide those skills which are desperately needed in today’s society.

As a member of the Board of Trustees of The City University of New York, I am proud of what our University has done in an attempt to broaden access to higher education and to provide opportunities so that all students can acquire those skills which will make them productive, interested, and interesting members of our society. Although it is important to devise innovative instructional strategies, especially for a population of non-traditional students, it is equally important to evaluate the results of these efforts. In 1976, the Board of Trustees passed a resolution mandating competency testing before students could enter the upper divisions of the University. I believe this action has strengthened the University’s basic skills programs as well as its reputation in undergraduate instruction, especially in the teaching of writing.

We still have much to do in the future to improve the writing and thinking skills of our students. The 1982 report of the National Assessment of Educational Progress, Reading, Thinking and Writing, tells us that while seventeen-year-olds can read on the most basic level, they lack the ability to read and write critically. This will be a continuing challenge to us in higher education. This conference reflects a great deal of thought and effort on the part of educators throughout the country. I commend your enthusiasm, your expertise, and above all your commitment to students and society.