

## BASIC SKILLS STUDENTS' OPINIONS OF AN ENGLISH PLACEMENT TEST

Amidst all the controversy about testing, surprisingly little attention has been given to student opinions of testing. <sup>1</sup> In 1980, I developed a questionnaire to assess the reaction of junior college students to the New Jersey College Basic Skills Placement Test (NJCBSPT), a test required of all entering freshmen at two and four year schools in the state. The questionnaire was administered to 429 students—reflecting the range in the population in the lowest level basic skills English courses at four urban and four suburban two-year colleges in New Jersey.

The NJCBSPT is a three-and-one-half hour test which includes a brief writing sample, three multiple-choice sections measuring verbal skills (reading comprehension, logical relationships and sentence structure), and two multiple choice mathematics sections (computation and elementary algebra). The reading and writing tests contain three multiple choice sections and an essay. The reading test consists of short reading passages about which the student answers questions. The other sections are designed to measure the students' ability to write standard English sentences, to use coordination and subordination correctly, as well as to measure the students' ability to see relationships among words, among sentences and among ideas.

The questionnaire was designed to elicit students' opinions of the NJCBSPT; the use of the test in advisement; the appropriateness of that advice; and the English course they took as a result of the test. The questionnaire contained 45 statements with which students were asked to strongly agree, agree, disagree, or strongly disagree. (An undecided category was also provided.) The student responses I will discuss are:

- "The 20 minute essay was a good measure of my ability to write."
- "The NJCBSPT provided important information for my adviser to use in selecting appropriate courses for me."
- "The NJCBSPT results made me realize I needed this English course."
- "If I had my choice, I would have taken a more difficult English course."
- "This English course is exactly the English course I needed."
- "I should have been placed in a more difficult English course."

Examining each of the response distributions yielded the following information:

- Approximately 60% of the students indicated they thought the essay test was a good measure of their ability to write; over one-quarter of the students did not believe the test was a good measure of their ability to write.
- A large majority (71.7%) of the students indicated they thought the placement test provided important placement information.
- Slightly over three-quarters of the students reported that the NJCBSPT results made them realize they needed their basic skills English course.
- Almost one-third of the students reported that they would have taken a more difficult English course.

(Continued on page 11)

## DRAKULICH (continued)

- Slightly more than two-thirds of the students indicated they were placed in the exact English course they needed. Only one-quarter of the students indicated they felt they *should* have been placed in a more difficult English course.

From these findings, it may be inferred that an essay test is viewed as an acceptable placement instrument by three-quarters of the students tested. The fact that one quarter of the students do not believe an essay test measured their ability to write may suggest that these students "choke up" when asked to write under time constraints.

Indeed, it appears that the NJCBSPT helped students realize that they were properly placed in a basic skills course. The fact that one-quarter of the students do not believe that they should be placed in a basic skills course on the basis of their scores on a single essay test may suggest that these students "choke up" when asked to write an essay under time constraints. For those students who indicated that they should have been placed in a more advanced English course, teachers should be advised to offer students a second opportunity to demonstrate their writing ability during the first week of class. Finally, it may be inferred from the questionnaire that the majority of students view the essay test as an acceptable instrument for placing students into the appropriate English course.

<sup>1</sup> A few notable exceptions are O.G. Brim, Jr., D. Glass, and I. Goldberg. *The Use of Standardized Ability Tests in American Secondary Schools and their Impact on Students, Teachers, and Administrators*. Technical Report #3, Russell Sage Foundation, 1965; *High School Students View the SAT and College Admission Process* (Princeton, NJ: Response Analysis Corp., 1978), and A. Tesser and T.R. Leidy, "Psychological Testing Through the Looking Glass of Youth", *American Psychologist*, 23 (1968), 381-84.

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