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## TESTING TESTING: THE POLITICS AND PRACTICE OF LARGE-SCALE WRITING ASSESSMENTS

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This session examined state minimum-competency exams used to determine graduation which arbitrarily limit access to education (and thereby limit access to jobs and prosperity). Within the last fifteen years, twenty-one states have instituted such tests. The rise of these tests seems to have been prompted by the effects of three forces on state policy makers:

1. A belief in the ability of education to improve living standards.
2. A belief in the ability of tests to improve the quality of education.
3. An attempt to assure employers that graduates will have the prerequisite skills.

Assessing the effects of the quality of education presents difficult issues of developing valid, reliable measures. There are no national standards that permit comparisons of the quality of education. Each state that offers a minimum-competency graduation test devises its own exam and scoring procedures. Ranking states by student performance on the SAT or the ACT is not a reliable indicator of the worth of the education within a state because of the varying percentage of students within each state who take the tests. However, access, unlike quality, is a topic that more readily lends itself to quantitative comparisons. The number of students who drop out of school suggests something about the quality of their education. Any program that causes students to dropout before obtaining a diploma will harm the fortunes of those who drop out. There exist some interesting connections between drop-out rates and minimum competency tests. Of the fifteen states with the worst dropout rates, ten use state-controlled minimum-competency tests to determine graduation. In contrast, of the fifteen states with the lowest dropout rates, only one uses test results to determine graduation. These comparisons suggest an indirect connection between minimum-competency tests and dropout rates.

Although minimum-competency tests seem to be associated with increased dropout rates and seem to play a role in decreasing educational opportunity, an argument might be made for them were the tests capable of providing employers with information that would help them decide whom to employ. It has been argued that grade inflation and social promotion have debased high school diplomas, which harms employers by depriving them of a useful criterion for sorting applicants and which harms more capable graduates by lumping them in with the less capable. Minimum competency tests, it is argued, can remedy this situation by performing the sorting before graduation and assuring that only

those students who have the necessary skills receive an official diploma.

The best study of correlation between performance on standardized tests such as minimum-competency tests and performance after high school graduation was Bruce Ecklund's 1972 report on the National Longitudinal Study. This project administered ETS-devised Math and Reading tests to 18,000 seniors from the class of 1972. Ecklund found that the employability of White students who do not go on to college appears to bear no relation to their test performance. Whites in the lowest decile stand just as strong a chance of getting a job as those in the highest. For Blacks, these skills help a little. Blacks in the lowest decile have a 40% unemployment rate while those in the highest deciles have a 20% rate. However, even the highest scoring Blacks have a higher unemployment rate than the lowest scoring Whites. When employers make hiring decisions, they appear to be overlooking skills. There are two possible implications that can be drawn from this information: (1) the tests do not measure the factors that matter to employers and (2) racism is so strong that everything else is irrelevant.

The last part of the session focused on the effects of basing college attendance on test performance. Who would be harmed if low-achieving students were denied high school diplomas and given certificates of attendance as are students who fail minimum-competency tests? The Longitudinal Study shows that despite their level of skills as measured by this 1972 test, Blacks were more determined—especially in the lower deciles—to use education to improve their condition. Since 1980 the percentage of Blacks going on to college has declined and though the rising cost of education and the decrease in public support have played important roles in this trend, the decline may in part be attributed to the effect of minimum-competency testing rather than to a diminishing of their desire. Blacks and minorities may not be falling out of our society; they may be being pushed out.