In all three school systems mean and median scores improved between 6% and 27% from pre-to posttest. Additionally, the percentage of passing and high scores increased between 4% and 57% and the percentage of low scores decreased from 29% to 3% on pre-to posttest among the districts. Students participating in the Foundations program in all districts showed progress in writing ability.

**USING COMPUTER-ASSISTED GRADE PROFILES**
**TO EVALUATE ESL STUDENT PLACEMENT IN**
**FRESHMANWRITING COURSES**

Marc Maire and Linda T. Calandrillo, University of South Alabama

This session focused on a research project aimed at reviewing evaluation of the skills of ESL writers. Administrators of freshman writing programs often receive complaints from instructors about the poor writing skills of ESL students. These administrators need to determine whether problems with ESL students are significant enough to warrant separating them from native language students in freshman writing courses. The University of South Alabama used a review of computerized records to assess the nature and severity of difficulties evident in ESL writing. The data revealed great variability in the performance of ESL students, with differences in performance strongly associated with both academic records and social background characteristics of ESL students.

Session participants seemed to reach consensus about the heterogeneous nature of the ESL student population and the need for careful assessment of students, rather than wholesale treatment of large categories of students. Additional comments concerned the limitations of data available for ESL students and the need for more complete information.

**ASSESSING THE WRITING OF ESL STUDENTS IN A WRITING ACROSS THE CURRICULUM PROGRAM**

James Dean Brown, University of Hawaii at Manoa

The presentation described a study of the place of English as a second language (ESL) students in a writing across the curriculum program. Using placement tests, the University of Hawaii at Manoa assigns incoming freshmen to one of six composition courses: accelerated composition, regular composition, regular composition with required laboratory, remedial composition, regular ESL composition, or preparatory ESL composition. The five-hour Manoa Writing Placement Test (MWPT) requires students to write on two topics and revise each essay later in the day. At least two raters per topic assess each student's work for a minimum of four raters per student. The data for this study were based on the MWPT administered for an entire academic year to all incoming freshmen, i.e., both native speakers of English and ESL students. We require ESL students to sit the 3-hour English Language Institute Placement Test (ELIPT), which has two subtests each for ESL listening, reading, and writing skills.

The results were described in terms of cultural tendency, dispersion, and reliability for each of the groups of students on the MWPT, the ELIPT and all subscores for each. As would be expected, the position of the ESL students is clearly low in the overall distribution of MWPT scores.

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

Thomas Flynn, Ohio University, Belmont

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 drop out 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 baising 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.