constantly evaluating our assessment plan. We want to be sure that our writing assessment evaluates our writing curriculum as we strive for writing courses that represent current writing theory and pedagogy.

WRITING ASSESSMENT: THE UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MILWAUKEE MODEL

Charles I. Schuster and Margaret Mika,
University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee

The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee is an urban, state school with an enrollment of 25,000 students. For the past ten years, we have developed and refined an assessment program that we think stands as a model for other, large high school and college writing programs. In our session, we described our two-tiered assessment program. All entering students initially take a 100-item, multiple choice exam which focuses on sentence structure, grammar, usage, editing, and reading comprehension. The score, along with a first-week diagnostic essay, allows us to place students properly in our four-course freshman-level composition sequence. We also use the score to identify students who are qualified to take our English Proficiency Essay Exam, required of all students in the university before they can become juniors.

Our first composition program assessment occurs at the end of our remedial, noncredit, basic writing sequence. At this point, we evaluate all students in our second-semester course on the basis of a 50-minute essay exam. Failing students submit a portfolio which is similarly scored. Essays (and portfolios) are evaluated holistically by instructors who participate in a training session during which they establish a pass/fail consensus by reading samples and discussing criteria before evaluating student essays.

The second stage of our assessment involves a University requirement; all UWM students must pass a 90-minute proficiency essay exam before they can attain junior status. We described the procedures we have developed for administering this exam, focusing particularly on: creating and pretesting questions; creating evaluatory criteria; training readers; acquiring necessary funding; developing a public relations network with students, parents, and administrators.

DETERMINING THE DEGREE OF DIFFICULTY OF WRITING PROMPTS

David E. Schwalin, Arizona State University

This presentation described variables that make writing tasks hard or easy. Writing instructors often need to determine the relative ease or difficulty of writing tasks, whether developing assignments for composition courses or prompts for purposes of placement, diagnosis, or assessment. Moffett proposes that writing tasks become more difficult as subject matter becomes more abstract and audiences more remote because of increasing demand on writers' cognitive development. But difficulty can also depend on the demand a writing task makes on writers' linguistic development. Poor writing may not be so much an indicator of an inability to think as it is of an inability to express one's thoughts because of lack of control over semantic, syntactic, and rhetorical potentials of language. Thus, to determine the difficulty of writing tasks, one must take into account not only their cognitive complexity but also the linguistic demands of varieties of content, writing contexts, and rhetorical purposes.

Much insight into the linguistic demands of language tasks can be derived from the work of Oral Proficiency Interviewers who have observed what features of content, context, and purpose actually challenge the linguistic competence of second-language learners. We proposed a rough guide to degree of difficulty in writing tasks, drawing on research in both cognitive and linguistic development, and demonstrated it with reference to particular writing prompts. We especially emphasized the challenge posed by the movement from personal and autobiographical topics to data-based or reading-based prompts.