The presentation reported here outlines the writing assessment programs of two of the nation's largest states: California and New York. Charles Chew began the session with a philosophical and historical overview of New York's statewide writing assessment program. Testing for credentials and other certifications was mandated by New York's Board of Regents in the 1960's. Currently students' writing is tested in the fifth, eighth, and eleventh grades in New York.

Familiarity with testing, both its strengths and weaknesses, has led to a "pragmatic" approach to assessment in New York. Chew stressed that "all assessment situations are artificial" and that all educators need to recognize this limitation. To account for this, at the fifth grade level two writing samples are taken. The writing of these papers is prefaced by a pre-writing session in which students are lead through the task. At the eleventh grade level three samples are taken: a business letter of complaint, a report (data provided), and a persuasive essay. To account for the artificiality of the situation the tasks are placed in a rhetorical context, with purpose and audience provided.

In regard to the strengths of testing, Chew stated that the concern for writing assessment has had "more impact on instruction at the elementary level than any occurrence in twenty-five years." Several aspects of the assessment process have contributed to this change. To aid in assessment, 10,000 teachers have been trained in holistic scoring. This has led to an increase in awareness of the nature of the process of writing. In addition, test results are immediately reported to classroom teachers. Increased awareness coupled with valuable diagnostic information has given teachers understanding of student needs and an idea of what remains to be done. Since the inception of the assessment program, Chew has noted a change in how teachers view students' final products: there has been a move from a focus on mechanics to other issues, as well as an awareness that drill and practice is not the way to teach writing.

In New York, all writing samples are scored holistically. Papers are first scored by the district. Papers that are scored 60% or above are then re-scored by the state (approximately 75,000 per year). If the score is reversed, the school must abide by the state decision, but there is an appeal process. For those students at the high school level who fail, provisions are made for re-testing. At all levels the state mandates that remediation be provided for students who fall below the cut-off score. Teachers must document these remedial plans, and parents must be notified.

The last part of Chew's presentation focused upon other practical considerations related to developing assessment programs: overall cost and test development. The cost of the existing program has been significant. Raters are hired per diem and must be

(Continued on page 21)
MODELS (continued)

The students were also given guidelines to help them determine their probable audience for the fifth task, their letter to the reader.

Camp also discussed the objectives for the Writing Portfolio project at ETS. The original objectives were:

1. to provide a broader range of information about students, talents and abilities than is provided by the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) scores; and
2. to emphasize writing in the secondary/post-secondary transition and thereby compensate for imbalances in secondary school curricula caused by emphasis on the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) scores;

3. to provide a more comprehensive and more reliable source of information for admissions (and possibly placement) than is currently provided by application essays.

Revised objectives for the project are:

1. To provide a comprehensive measure of writing ability, a measure that allows secondary school students to demonstrate a wide range of writing experience.

2. To provide a focus for the improvement of secondary school writing programs by
   a. demonstrating the value of writing in assessment,
   b. formulating a set of writing tasks commonly recognized among teachers of writing,
   c. enhancing the professional development of secondary teachers,
   d. providing the instructional and descriptive materials necessary to the integration of the portfolio into existing writing programs,
   e. providing a forum for discussion of writing and writing instruction.

3. To facilitate, eventually, the transition from secondary to post-secondary institutions by providing information less subject to distortion than that provided by the current application process, and by improving communication between secondary and post-secondary institutions.

In addition to these objectives, Camp said that the Writing Portfolio project will provide valuable information to the field of writing assessment, including information about the relationships between performance on different measures of writing ability (e.g. indirect vs. direct), as well as information on several different kinds of writing tasks. The project will also generate information about sources of error and provide answers to questions about the relative reliability of different kinds of measures (e.g., two essays scored once, or one essay scored twice).

Like Camp, Belanoff raised the issue of the relationship between the curriculum and testing. Belanoff argued that our new emphasis on process in writing may conflict with our method of evaluating students. Belanoff went on to comment on the dissatisfaction teachers at Stony Brook had felt with the traditional proficiency exam, pointing to problems with the validity of scoring, the effects of anxiety on some students, the impact of particular topics on particular students on particular days, and the practice of asking students to discuss serious social and intellectual issues without previous thought in a brief (two-hour) exam.

In investigating alternatives, Belanoff reported that the teachers at Stony Brook initially experimented with portfolio assessment. Five teachers and 96 students participated in the first phase of their experiment. In this phase, each student produced a portfolio consisting of four revised pieces (two arguments, one informal essay, and one piece of free-choice prose, in addition to an in-class writing). Only 55% of the students succeeded in passing. In the second phase, a rather sort of semester evaluation of one of the compositions was instituted so that students and teachers would have a better understanding of the standards expected. In this second semester, the number of students per section was reduced to three (one argument, one interpretive essay, and one piece of free-choice prose). During the second semester, the interpretive essay was replaced with an analysis-of-argument essay. At the end of the semester, 417 portfolios were read and evaluated. Now that the system is no longer experimental, approximately 125 students per section are producing portfolios, which are read by 45 teachers.

Belanoff also discussed problems that have surfaced since the portfolio system has been adopted. Some teachers have complained that the portfolio system robs them of initiative in class, and some feel that they, as well as their students, are being tested by the portfolio system. In addition, some teachers (and some students) believe that certain groups of portfolio graders are tougher than others. Still another problem stems from the desire of teachers to award effort and diligence in students' papers are not evaluated by the classroom teacher, there is no way to recognize effort and progress. Teachers retain the authority to fail a student, but they may not pass a student who has failed the portfolio. Finally, Belanoff also suggested that the fact that some students fail may end up being a good message to teachers — every teacher has students who fail. With the reduced emphasis on standards, Belanoff said that the system itself does not create them. What it does is bring the issue out in the open so that it can be discussed. As far as the students are concerned, Belanoff says that they need to recognize that writing is rarely done for an audience of one; “all of us write for an audience of individuals who agree on some things and disagree on others.” If teachers at Stony Brook feel that their students have been judged unfairly, they have recourse to second opinions from other readers.

Belanoff concluded her talk by discussing positive aspects of the system, briefly summarized here: 1) it judges writing which students have done in fruitful ways, with time for planning, discussing, revising, and copy editing; 2) the message to students is that thinking, and therefore writing is enhanced by conversation with peers and teachers; 3) it makes teachers allies of their students—the coaches of the team rather than the umpire who punishes infractions; 4) it draws teachers together, encouraging discussion about ways to help students and about standards; 5) it makes students work harder. Standards are higher, but students tend to feel that they can meet these standards; 6) it recognizes the reality of differences and similarities in audiences, and it emphasizes work and learning more than evaluation.