

THE WRITING PROGRAM ASSESSMENT PROJECT

In the fall of 1980, we began work on a project aimed at developing new ways of assessing the effectiveness of college writing programs. This project is supported by the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education and the University of Texas at Austin. The need for such a project seemed obvious to us. Public concern about the writing abilities of young Americans has remained high in the aftermath of the much publicized "literacy crisis" of the 1970's. Accompanying this concern have been demands for accountability in the teaching of basic skills in higher education, evidenced by tests of writing competence that several states now require of all college graduates.

In spite of increasing emphasis upon evaluation, the state of the art in writing program evaluation remains rudimentary, with little concern for theoretical or methodological soundness. Evaluations of college writing programs have typically been of two kinds: "on-site" assessments by visiting "experts" and empirical evaluations of outcomes, often with pretest-posttest designs. "On-site" assessments usually assume some ideal program to which the program under evaluation could be compared, with evaluative evidence changing in kind and importance from one setting to the next, from one expert to the next. Pretest-posttest studies usually focus on written products, making inferences about the effectiveness of a writing program on the basis of changes in students' written products across time. Such measures, however, do not reveal why the products changed, how the products came to be, nor of any of the other possible effects that writing programs may have.

A PLURALISTIC APPROACH TO WRITING PROGRAM EVALUATION

Program directors realize the extraordinary complexity of college writing programs just as writing teachers recognize the complexity of the subject they teach. Hence a valid approach to writing program evaluation must accommodate that complexity. A valid approach must emphasize the dynamic nature of writing programs, taking into account the processes of writing, writer-reader interactions, and the human relationships particular to any program. We believe that comprehensive evaluations of writing programs must examine five major components and the interactions among these components. These components are:

Cultural and Social Context. Writing programs both shape and are shaped by the cultural and social context beyond the institution. Our project attends to cultural and social context in three specific ways: by studying the philosophical assumptions and political uses of direct and indirect assessment of writing, by examining how college writing teachers and directors perceive society's goals for writing programs, and by surveying the writing of college-trained people both on and off the job.

Institutional Context. Institutional context also affects a composition program and is affected by it. Institutions establish graduation requirements, set class sizes, staff courses, determine teaching loads and salaries, provide the physical facilities, specify general educational goals and objectives, and decide the immediate administrative structure for writing programs. Writing programs affect the larger institution as well—by contributing to decisions about who shall graduate, by making large demands on institutional resources, and by often providing the only common course across the curricula of different dis-

ciplines. We have surveyed writing program directors and teachers nationwide to find out what kinds of institutional constraints influence writing programs and how writing programs influence institutions.

Program Structure and Administration. College writing courses are most often organized and administered as a program. We have learned through surveys of writing teachers and directors about aspects of writing programs such as teacher training, faculty evaluation and development, course sequences within programs, and the role of the writing program director in the administration of writing programs.

Curriculum. The curriculum is the content of a writing program—what is taught to accomplish its goals. In writing programs, content can be a body of knowledge to be learned, such as conventions for punctuation, or it can be the processes of reading and writing. From our national surveys of college writing teachers and program directors, we have learned a great deal about the differences and similarities of writing curricula in various types of institutions.

Instruction. Through our national surveys, we have examined instruction in writing programs in different types of institutions. We have looked at the sequencing of curricular elements, the methods and media used to teach writing, and the kinds of assignments given. We have also developed a teacher effectiveness instrument specific to college writing courses, which has been tested at a number of colleges and universities and which we believe meets the criteria of reliability, validity, and ease of scoring. We are now constructing a self-report instrument from the suggestions of college writing teachers.

Effects of College Writing Programs

A college writing program affects the society served by the program, the community of the institution which houses it, the teachers and administrators working in the program, and the students enrolled in the program. The scope of our project does not allow us to study systematically all the possible effects of writing programs, but we are attending to several important ones. Specifically, we are attempting to devise new ways of assessing student performance. In addition to examining written products and the ways to evaluate them, we are exploring ways of studying the effects of writing programs on various composing processes. We are also developing ways of examining the effects of programs on student attitudes toward composing and measuring changes in students' beliefs about writing.

When we finish, we will have developed a body of evaluation procedures, instruments, and materials that will be useful in evaluating a wide variety of postsecondary writing programs and courses. Our work is being issued in a series of technical reports. At the end of the project, we will compile our materials in a *User's Package*—a plain language guide to evaluating college writing programs. Work completed to date may be obtained from the Writing Program Assessment Project office at the University of Texas at Austin.

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