

ESSAY TESTING AT CUNY: THE ROAD TAKEN

Why, if it is cheaper, neater, and politically easier to defend the use of an objective test to measure student writing, should a large, multi-campus university choose to assess student writing through the use of a writing sample? Administrators, lulled by familiarity with objective tests, seduced by the notion of "objectivity," and concerned with both cost-effectiveness and potential lawsuits, may well prefer tests which can be read by computers. Why even consider the use of writing samples? Why, when faced in 1977 with the problem of mass testing of over 30,000 entering freshmen, did the City University of New York (CUNY) choose the less travelled and more hazardous road of the essay test as part of its Freshman Skills Assessment Program? ¹

The answers to these questions began taking shape in 1976 soon after the Board of Higher Education mandated the assessment of basic skills. Fortunately, historical forces coalesced which enabled us to use an essay test as the sole instrument to assess minimum competency in writing. At that time, a dean at CUNY's Central Office had both CUNY-wide and national recognition for her research in basic writing. Mina Shaughnessy's seminal work in the analysis of student writing problems, her charisma, and her considerable influence within the University's central administration had an enormous impact on the direction of the testing program and its underlying assumption that testing is part of the larger issue of how best to teach our non-traditional students.

Mina Shaughnessy was also instrumental in identifying faculty from CUNY colleges to serve on the faculty task forces which shaped the program. In Fall 1977, the Chancellor's Task Force on Writing was formed. Composed of nine experienced writing teachers and an expert in tests and measurements, the Task Force was charged with developing or choosing an instrument to assess minimum competency in writing and with setting an appropriate level to determine that competency. Because of their considerable experience

with Open Admissions and special program students at CUNY, the Task Force members, of which I was then a faculty representative, were able to agree upon certain basic assumptions and goals. We knew that testing inevitably influences teaching, and we felt strongly that the ultimate goal of educational assessment must be the improvement of teaching and learning. If there were going to be teaching to the test, we were determined to construct a test that would be desirable to teach to. We knew that we did not want to encourage thousands of students in writing classes throughout the University to sit in classes and fill in blanks in workbooks. We wanted a test which would signal both our colleagues in CUNY and our colleagues teaching English in the New York City public schools that the business of writing classes is writing.

We believed that a piece of student writing indicates real writing ability more accurately than a machine-scored test. We all had been hearing complaints from colleagues teaching in other departments that our students couldn't write; pressed for a definition, they talked more about students' inability to stick to an idea, develop that idea, and illustrate it with specific examples than about the surface and mechanical errors in student writing. An objective test, we felt, would measure and therefore encourage an educational focus on error correction rather than thinking and organizing skills.

Some members of the Task Force would have liked to give students even more than the fifty minutes which we allow them, but the essay test was to be part of a battery of tests which also included reading and mathematics, and testing time was a major problem. Some would have liked to ask students to write in several modes at several different times, but, again, logistics and time would not permit this. Therefore, faced with choosing a single mode, we decided to ask students to write an expository essay. In the real world of writing there are few "pure" categories such as narration or description. Both are

subsumed in the expository essay. The particular format of the CUNY essay also incorporates features of argumentation. We believed that asking students to assert a position and support it with some evidence would indicate best how ready they are to cope with college writing assignments. More than any other, this format, we agreed, was the one which students would be most likely to use during their college careers.²

During 1977-78 the Task Force developed and piloted various essay topics and developed a method of reader training based on the Educational Testing Service's method of reading Advanced Placement Examinations in English. At CUNY, readers from each of the seventeen colleges' English Departments are trained by Chief Readers who are trained centrally by members of the Task Force. Our readers use a modified holistic method of reading, and the Task Force developed a six-point scale to guide them. The Task Force also published a brochure on CUNY's Writing Skills Assessment Test for faculty, students, and parents which explains the test, describes the six-point evaluation scale, and provides an explanation of why each essay was assigned its scores.³ While each CUNY college conducts its own placement reading, CUNY holds a yearly central audit in which each college submits a random sample of essays to the Central Office.

Testing has been going on at CUNY since 1978, and we can report now on the progress of the testing program. To begin with, the program has ensured that students in need of basic skills instruction in writing are placed in courses appropriate to their level of skills. While colleges are free to set higher standards of minimum competency, for the first time CUNY has a generally agreed-upon "floor" for these standards. This has improved the communication of standards among colleges and, particularly, has improved articulation between the community and senior colleges. The writing test has been widely, although not universally, supported on the seventeen campuses. In fourteen campuses at the present time, faculty have chosen to adopt the test as part of the exit criteria from the basic writing sequence. When we talk now at CUNY about minimum competency in writing, we have a specific frame of reference which goes beyond our individual mental images of an "A" or an "F" paper. Our central audits of the past three years reveal a high degree of consistency between the colleges' standards for scoring the Writing Skills Assessment Test and the standards of the CUNY audit readers on the pass/fail dimension.⁴ This agreement exceeded 80% in each year, with a three-year average of 83.2%. The rate of agreement on the same point or within one point on the six-point scale of over 90%.⁵

Ironically, one still hears at conferences and reads in journals that it is not feasible to use an essay test in a large-scale testing situation. This view is exemplified by David Foster in a recent issue of *College English*:

No university of any size or diversity has the logistical capacity of administering many thousands of writing samples, evaluating them, and placing students solely according to their results. No faculty would give the enormous amount of time and effort required for such a procedure; even teaching assistants would defy the lash under such a task.⁶

Let me assure you that it can be done. I do not mean to suggest that the testing program is without problems; Robert Lyons, in this issue, deals more fully with the difficulties encountered in setting up such a testing program and identifies potential problem areas.

Faculty involvement in every aspect of the testing program was and is of vital importance. Faculty task

forces continue to work with the administration to assess the impact of the testing program on instruction, and research has been ongoing.

The basic decision made by CUNY's Task Force on Writing has led to a variety of projects, one of which is the National Testing Network in Writing (NTNW). The continuing involvement of the Instructional Resource Center through its collection and dissemination of research and information in basic skills instruction has helped to keep the focus of the testing program on research and teaching. I believe that where testing programs exist without centers for academic support in research and communication, such centers should be created, for we are educators first and "testers" second. We should respond to the testing imperative as we respond to other aspects of our academic lives—as teachers and scholars. We are responsible for the roads we travel, and I believe that our experience and research in the past five years tell us that, in choosing an essay as the sole measurement of minimum competency in writing, we took the better road.

1 FASP, mandated by the Board of Higher Education in April 1976 and implemented in Fall 1978, requires that all matriculated students entering CUNY be tested in reading, writing, and mathematics. If students do not meet CUNY standards, they are assigned to appropriate remediation at their colleges; students must meet CUNY standards prior to entering their junior year. Since the spring of 1978, CUNY has tested annually approximately 30,000 students who enter its seventeen undergraduate colleges as freshmen. In addition it retests large numbers of students throughout each year who do not meet CUNY standards upon entry.

2 Students are given a choice of two questions on which to write for fifty minutes. The topics consist of a short passage on a general subject likely to interest students, followed by instructions asking them to agree or disagree with the passage. Students are asked to develop their essays with personal experience, observation, or information obtained from readings.

3 *The CUNY Writing Skills Assessment Test: Student Essays Evaluated and Annotated by the CUNY Task Force on Writing*, ed. CUNY Task Force on Writing (New York: City University of New York, 1980). Copies of this brochure are available through the Instructional Resource Center, Office of Academic Affairs, The City University of New York, 535 E. 80th Street, N.Y. 10021.

4 Audit readers are chosen from among English faculty who have been consistently competent readers. The group is composed of a nucleus of readers who were found to be most reliable in previous audits. New readers are added through recommendations from Chief Readers.

5 Susan Remmer Ryzewic, *The CUNY Writing Assessment Test: A Three-Year Audit Review*, Research Monograph Series, No. 2 (New York: Instructional Resource Center, Office of Academic Affairs, The City University of New York, 1982).

6 David Foster, "A Comment on Anthony Wolk's Review," *College English*, 43 (January, 1981), 81.

7 See Karen Greenberg, *The Effects of Variations in Essay Questions on The Writing Performance of CUNY Freshmen*, Research Monograph Series, No. 1 (New York: Instructional Resource Center, Office of Academic Affairs, The City University of New York, January 1981); Virginia B. Slaughter and Harvey S. Wiener, *Basic Skills Programs at the City University of New York: Writing* (New York: Instructional Resource Center, Office of Academic Affairs, The City University of New York, Spring 1981); and Lynn Quitman Troyka, *An A Posteriori Examination of the Evaluation Scale of the Writing Skills Assessment Test of the City University of New York* (New York: Instructional Resource Center, Office of Academic Affairs, The City University of New York), work in progress.

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