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, flailed by fairness wars and research on objective tests, seduced by the notion of "objectivity," and concerned with both cost-effectiveness and potential lawsuits, resorted to the less traveled 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 had developed the essay test. In Fall 1977, the Chancellor's Task Force on Writing was formed. Composed of nine experienced writing teachers and representatives from the various departments, the Task Force was charged with developing 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 also includes grading, 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 also be a test of teaching. We knew that we did not want to encourage 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 that the 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 mechanics of the 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 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. We opted for the one, full mode. In this 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

THE PROSPECTS AND PITFALLS OF A UNIVERSITY-WIDE TESTING PROGRAM

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The issues of when, how, and whether to test writing skills have received a great deal of attention in recent years from legislators, school administrators, experts in testing and measurement, and, more belatedly, from teachers and students. Concerned with these issues has generated an outpouring of essays and books—many of them impassioned, a few of them informative—by which most of us have come to know a good deal more about testing. The debate is unlikely to slacken, since in the field of higher education alone, many states and colleges are still considering whether to implement inclusive testing programs in writing. However, an increasing number of institutions have decided to introduce new tests. Some universities, The City University of New York being the largest by far, have done so without assigning the work of test development or administration to a large outside agency; instead, they have placed these responsibilities on their own faculty. For these schools, a new question emerges: one that has understandably not received much attention until now: how can a writing test be maintained as a vital element in the educational life of the college? What are the pitfalls once a test has been introduced and officially accepted, and how can these pitfalls be avoided?

Colleges can anticipate problems for two reasons. First, any new policies affecting large numbers of people, unless the changes proved themselves to be utterly unworkable, assume an air of stability and permanence with surprising speed. This is especially true when, as in the case of testing, policy is tied to the calendar; its impact is felt at predictable times and it comes to share some of the inevitability of the seasons. The CUNY Writing Assessment Test (WAT), a matter of considerable controversy within the University before it was introduced, has already, in four years time, settled in as part of University life. The test is given at stated times on each campus, read at stated times, and the results are officially audited each June. Teachers who opposed it may now find themselves pleasantly surprised by its usefulness or resigned to it as an inconvenience, but their thoughts and energies have turned to other issues on their campuses. The WAT now seems as solid and immovable as the filing cabinets in which the test results are stored. Furthermore, one of the crucial elements in testing is reliability, the assurance that students taking or retaking a test will find it consistent in measuring what it measures. That is not the same as saying the student will be taking

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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.

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 Examination in English. At CUNY, readers from each of the seventeen colleges' English Departments are trained by Chief Readers who are hired centrally by 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 teachers, students, and parents which explains the test, describes the six-point evaluation scale, and provides an explanation of how each essay was assigned its score.

When the Fall 1977 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 centrally brym-ermed programs. 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". We have specific audits of the past three years which support 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 directives for the test. 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 89%. This agreement is not surprising, as CUNY's writing test program was developed in conjunction with the state's Department of Education. However, it is noteworthy that university students are not perfectly consistent in their judgments of writing samples, and that even the most experienced teachers make mistakes.

Let me assure you that it is both difficult to write and to judge. I do not mean to suggest that the testing program is without problems. 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 deny the lash under such a task.

Facility 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 the college people's 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 standards prior to entering the FallSenior 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, 533 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.


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