

THE PROSPECTS AND PITFALLS OF A UNIVERSITY-WIDE TESTING PROGRAM

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. Concern 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 arises, 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 their 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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an identical test but it does exert a strongly conservative influence on a testing program. The idea, sensibly enough, is to replicate as many of the features of the test and of test-taking as possible. In doing that, test makers can easily find themselves tinkering with surface features and nothing more, preparing Form B, Form C, and so on through the alphabet, without ever thinking again of more far-reaching alternatives.

The major pitfall, then, for a testing program once the test is in place is evoked in the very words "in place"—the risks of stasis, of habit, of benign neglect. One has only to participate in a reading where training procedures are scanted or ignored because "the readers already know all about that" to realize the consequences of familiarity breeding inertia, if not contempt. The question is how can a testing program be continually re-energized without being thrown into confusion?

A successful testing program first requires a change of attitude on the part of those who sponsored the program and now direct it. During the phase of debate and initial implementation, the proponents of the new program may find themselves shouting louder than anyone else—that is, they may succeed by insisting vehemently on the superiority of their proposals. Or they may find themselves speaking more softly than anyone else—that is, they may succeed by claiming most conflicts to be inconsequential or based on misunderstanding. But however they proceed, they invariably welcome the quiet that falls once their program has become part of the way things are. Sponsors of testing programs have to recognize the dangers in this silence of acquiescence and adjust their methods accordingly. They must stimulate new discussion and keep the testing program alive by fostering some degree of renewed debate as part of a search for improvement.

There are various ways in which colleges can assure the continuing vitality of their testing programs. Some have been demonstrated at The City University, which I use for illustration because it is the institution with which I am most familiar. First of all, CUNY has rotated faculty appointments on its policy-making boards for testing so that new members join the boards each year, able to look at the Writing Assessment Test from fresh perspectives. That practice, combined with CUNY's willingness to turn over most aspects of the testing program since its inception to faculty control, has provided a strong base for continuing faculty involvement in the test. Furthermore, the writing faculty who designed the WAT subsequently developed a writing curriculum to serve as an example of how testing might support the needs of college writing programs. This sample curriculum continues to generate interest at individual colleges in alternative ways of adapting the WAT to classroom use.

Faculty can also be involved more meaningfully in a testing program when ways are found to keep testing and related matters a part of the faculty's academic interests. CUNY again provides some examples, for it has made data and writing samples from the test available to teachers who want to do serious research on various features of student writing and of test content. CUNY has also helped to fund such research and has offered seminars for teachers who are interested in learning more about basic research design and methodology. When an institution acts in this way, it confers a new importance on matters that previously carried little academic prestige for English teachers. At the same time, it prevents the test, its contents, and its evaluation from becoming a bureaucratic preserve, another admini-

strative procedure that students submit to and teachers try to ignore.

The faculty's interest in testing can also be maintained by keeping them in touch with individuals in the field from other institutions. The traditional academic exchanges represented by visiting lecturers, panel discussions, and conferences provide contexts for reevaluating what the testing program is accomplishing and what new developments are taking place elsewhere. Again, CUNY is now very active in this direction, for it has established a national center for testing with a variety of responsibilities, including the dissemination and exchange of information about the testing of writing. Most colleges would neither want nor need to undertake anything as ambitious as the CUNY Network, but the pattern of academic involvement in testing beyond the boundaries of the campus itself is within the reach of any testing program.

Finally, all of these activities should have their effect within the testing program itself, provoking more self-scrutiny and more determination to take seriously the guidelines of the program. By establishing strong connections between the testing program and the writing curriculum and between the program and academic research, a college can ensure the continuing interest of its faculty in the reliability and validity of its testing of writing skills. It can also rely on such interest to replace the self-defeating policy of "policing" testing by administrators or outside observers in an attempt to maintain consistency. A faculty that remains attentive to the relation of testing to curriculum and to the needs and capacities of the college's student body is the best guarantee of a test's continuing appropriateness and of a testing program's continuing success.

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NOTES from the NATIONAL TESTING NETWORK IN WRITING

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and the Fund for the Improvement of
Postsecondary Education

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Published by the Instructional Resource Center, CUNY
Office of Academic Affairs. Marie Jean Lederman, Director