

## WHAT ARE WE TESTING FOR ?

Moderator: Richard Donovan, Co-Director,  
*National Testing Network in Writing*

Panelists: Daniel Fader, *University of Michigan*  
Alison Bernstein, *The Ford Foundation*

Alison Bernstein introduced the issue by giving five reasons for the continued testing of writing in colleges. First, the testing of writing "legitimizes" those of us who teach writing. Second, we test in order to retain our jobs. Self-interest dictates that testing is a useful way of determining and demonstrating what it is we are accomplishing. Third, we test to implement a legislative mandate that teaching effectiveness be examined in the light of student performance. Fourth, we test, as in triage, to sort out the mortally wounded from the salvageable, to discover better prepared students and those who need more help, and to discover better ways of using university resources. Finally, we test to diagnose students' needs. Testing is a tool to give us more information about students' needs so that we can fashion programs that will enable them to develop their writing skills.

Bernstein ended by cautioning us to use testing wisely, noting that tests can be dangerous weapons in the wrong hands: how we use tests and who controls them may determine the effectiveness of our writing programs.

Dan Fader, in his opening remarks, said that at the University of Michigan the testing of writing has one main purpose: to see if students are prepared to survive in classes at the University. If students cannot write, he

claimed, they cannot survive in college. The writing program at Michigan recognized the admonitions from the rest of the faculty that student writers have to be able to write correct grammar, to argue coherently and logically, and to demonstrate a sense of organization and order. The writing test at Michigan measures these faculty goals in student writing, and their writing program is tailored to the same goals.

Most of the discussion that followed centered on Fader's presentation. The preoccupation with testing students' preparation for survival at the University of Michigan raised several questions from the audience: Does personal meaning, purpose, and investment in a piece of writing do anything to improve mechanics and organization, the latter being among the more important faculty criteria at Michigan for survival? How are students prepared at Michigan for survival in the "outside" world? What about thinking visually? Working collaboratively? Having students generate theses for themselves? Are we training or educating? Are we teaching in order to have students survive in all their college courses or are there more immediate and appropriate goals? Can we change our colleagues' views on how students should write? The questions generated heat as well as light, but in sum, the discussion served to raise the consciousness of all participants, especially concerning the need for more experimental programs and more research.

Lily Kapili and Jerry Megna, *Recorders:*  
*Brooklyn College*