

HOW TO BEGIN A TESTING PROGRAM

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Robert Lyons enumerated five questions to consider when thinking about a testing program: what circumstances produced the need for a test; what groups should be involved in creating the test; what is necessary to get them to work in harmony; what is a reasonable timetable; and finally, what kind of outside help should be sought and from whom. He then opened the discussion to the audience, and what follows is a summary of that discussion.

The CUNY Writing Assessment Test (WAT) was related to the advent of Open Admissions. Because graduates of two year units have the right to transfer to four year units, there was pressure for a uniform minimal competency exam that students must pass by the time they accumulate 60 credits. One effect of the CUNY test was to strengthen remediation programs in all the units. Another effect of the CUNY test (which requires students to write an essay) was that it made colleagues in other departments more aware of writing and willing to participate in writing across the curriculum projects. Minimal competency tests should not be confused with proficiency tests. They are not meant to suggest that further writing instruction is unnecessary.

Several factors were involved in CUNY's decision to use an essay test. The CUNY writing faculty was vehemently opposed to objective tests and through organizations like the CUNY Association of Writing Supervisors (CAWS) had spent several years convincing the administration of the need for a writing sample. Many of the CUNY units had developed placement exams that required writing samples so that a tradition already existed. CUNY's intention was also to influence writing programs of the New York City high schools.

It was stated by a member of a team that creates exams for admission to medical schools (MCAT) that a writing component will be added to their tests in order to send the message to aspiring medical students that medical schools also care about writing.

A major goal in creating a test is to avoid having too many demands placed on it, to keep its major purpose in mind. A compromise must be reached between a proliferation of tests and using a single test for purposes for which it may not be suited. At CUNY the WAT is often used as a placement exam as well as an exit exam. However, follow-up methods are used because holistic reading on a 6-point scale with a 2-point differential gives only rough placement. Also, the test is not intended to pick up subtle gains in writing skills.

For those schools whose faculties are resistant to reading writing samples, Lyons suggested using a writing sample in conjunction with an objective test and agreeing to a cut-off point on the objective test. Some schools, like Clarkson College, are beginning to train faculty from other departments as readers. It was also argued that for placement purposes an objective test such as ETS' self-scoring test can indicate if a student has sufficient sentence-level skills to be taught writing skills.

There was some discussion about both the advantages and the dangers of calling in a professional organization such as ETS despite its expertise. When seeking outside advice, faculty and administrators should look for models and information at schools that are comparable to its own. As a beginning, Lyons suggested conferees should examine the preliminary summary of college testing programs prepared by NTNW. A final version of this data will be mailed to conference participants.

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