TEST ADMINISTRATION, COSTS, AND DATA MANAGEMENT

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The purpose of the session was to discuss the problems and pitfalls of data collection and management of a large-scale testing program. It became apparent early on in the session that data management problems were not limited to large-scale testing programs; in fact, keeping track of, transmitting, and reporting data on the performance of students in a testing program, whether at the level of the individual student or in the aggregate, are concerns that cut across size of institution and of testing program.

Dean Ribaudo began the discussion by noting that considerations governing a particular data management system are both practical and political and generally reflect the purpose of the testing program more than its size. The needs of a departmentally based program where the major purpose is course placement differ markedly from those of university-wide or state-wide systems, where the major goal is usually aggregate reporting of results for specified subgroups of students at selected points in time.

However, just as one rarely finds a testing program which is expected to serve a single purpose, no data management system should be designed to serve a single need. The small placement program designed primarily to sort students into accurate levels should also be able to provide the information necessary to determine the number of sections needed of each course in the sequence, and, ideally, to track the progress of individual students as they move through and exit from that sequence. The system-wide programs should be flexible enough so that they are capable of generating more than mere aggregate reports. They should have the ability to systematically sample individual student records for the purpose of necessary research on the properties of the testing instruments themselves and provide the possibility for long-range follow-up of students once they leave their basic skills courses.

The discussion then focused on particular difficulties encountered by the participants at their own institutions. Many of the problems encountered could be traced to poor communication among the people charged with setting up the testing program and the individuals charged with putting in place the procedures needed to keep track of the information. Administrators and teaching faculty responsible for the program must from the very start work closely with the data processing personnel charged with putting together and maintaining the system. In addition to understanding the practical reporting needs of the testing program, the computer staff needs to be aware of the academic needs of those responsible for the testing program.

Some participants thought that the advent of the microcomputer and, along with it, the availability of "user-friendly" data base management system software would be powerful and promising new tools, particularly for smaller testing programs. However, the strongest agreement among the participants was that initial planning and greater communication among the various players are the essential components of any effective data management system.