

ARTICULATING WRITING ASSESSMENTS IN TWO-AND FOUR-YEAR COLLEGES

Speakers:

Richard Donovan, *The City University of New York*

Jeaninne Webb, *The University of Florida*

Aida Ruiz, *The City University of New York*

Introducer/Recorder: Pamela Laws, *Tallahassee Community College*

Richard Donovan told the audience about the Ford Foundation Program, a new project that has identified seventy-five four-year colleges where minority students have not been accepted as transfer students from two-year schools. Donovan's preliminary findings were that two-year colleges across the country are, in fact, having articulation problems with four-year colleges. Common course numberings, a logical step towards better articulation, is not widely practiced. Moreover, programs between two- and four-year institutions are rare, and where they do exist, frequently they address only special areas. These problems seem to be common to all of the institutions identified by the Ford Foundation Program.

Noting that students are making uninformed choices about entering programs, Donovan said that four-year schools bring back successful two-year graduates to serve as peer counselors. Other schools have simply become more responsible to two-year colleges that hold Ford grants.

Jeaninne Webb is responsible for the statewide administration of CLAST and the scoring of essays in Florida. She addressed most of her comments to those processes. The most positive result of CLAST thus far has been the stepped up communication between two- and four-year colleges in Florida. Previously, four-year colleges and university faculties had generalized about the poor quality of instruction at two-year colleges. However, a combination of CLAST results and common course numberings has resulted in the unquestioned acceptance by four-year institutions of students with the A.A. degree from Florida two- and four-year faculties to agree on course content. In addition, faculty from both types of institutions have worked together to identify 117 skills in communications and mathematics, and they are creating test to measure these skills. Moreover, two- and four-year faculties, as well as some senior high school instructors, have worked out the focus of an objective skills test, have created the topics for an essay writing test, and have defined the standards for the test.

Webb carefully described the process of holistically scoring 20,000 essays in three sessions per year. At the grading sessions, she has observed that readers learn a great deal about how students write, about how well certain teaching strategies work, and about how beneficial dialogue between disciplines has become. Personally, Webb noted that she has discovered the elegant language of talking about writing.

Aida Ruiz cited the following problems for students attempting to transfer to The City University of New York from two-year schools:

1. Too many people have to be notified before the process is complete.
2. Too many papers have to be processed.
3. Students' grades are frequently not received in time for processing and registration at the four-year institution, although the students may have made the request well before the deadline.
4. Students have to repeat skills test that they have

successfully passed at the two-year institutions.

In her interviews with students at CUNY, Ruiz found several persistent problems. Students were not pleased that some four-year institutions make students repeat the same reading and writing assessments.

A few students have tried to beat the system in order to succeed. In fact, Ruiz cited one incident in which a student memorized six essays and chose one to suit the test topic when it was presented.

In her closing comments, Ruiz offered the following suggestions:

1. Determine the purpose of assessing the writing of two-year college students. If the purpose is to diagnose students' skills, then one composition read holistically is not enough. Text-level skills of communicating should not be measured by holistic reading.
2. Assess and modify programs of English instruction so that they reflect current research on the composing process. Establish a network of two- and four-year college writing teachers to work together on an articulation plan.
3. Consider the nature of the learner, the learning process, and the learning environment.
4. Require writing for a number of tasks, so that students engage in many writing tasks, not just one.
5. Provide enough time for a student to plan, organize, structure, and revise.

SCORING PROCEDURES... (continued)

TEST CONTEXT	TYPE OF SCORING		
	Holistic	Analytic	Primary trait
1. Instruction management			
A. Diagnosis		X	X
B. Placement	X	X	X
C. Guidance	X	?	?
2. Student screening			
A. Selection	X	?	?
B. Certification (of minimal competencies)		X	X
3. Program evaluation			
A. Survey evaluation	X		
B. Formative evaluation	X	X	X
C. Summative evaluation	X	X	X

The Center also collects and studies commercially available writing tests. Counting new tests in increments of three years, it found that the number of new tests is steadily proliferating. Moreover, 58% of the new tests in 1979-81 included an optional writing sample test—up from 0% in 1973-75. There are also interesting trends in specific skills tested. From the advent of modern writing assessment to 1981, those tests that claim to evaluate spelling and mechanics are fewer, those that claim to evaluate usage and writing (indirect testing) skills have remained about constant in number, and those purporting to measure sentence structure and organizational skills have increased in number. Stiggins stated that there are quality writing tests "out there," for *what they are designed for*.

During the question and answer period, thoughts surfaced that served to summarize and conclude this session. Everyone seemed to agree that state assessment tests should be the result of input "trickled up" from teachers in the field rather than from the state down. Stiggins concluded by voicing hope that, in the future, measurement of writing skills will better reflect the complexity of writing.