

THE JUNIOR LEVEL EXIT EXAMINATION: AN INOCULATION THAT DID NOT TAKE!

In the Fall of 1980, our Vice President—concerned about the 20% failure rate on a locally designed “basic skills” test in English given to a volunteer group of 261 seniors—organized a committee from the Colleges of Science, Engineering, Business, Nursing, Education, and three representatives from the English Department to make recommendations about designing and implementing a writing competency test as a requirement for graduation from the University of Texas at El Paso, a branch campus of the UT system with a student population of 15,500. After meeting on a weekly basis for four months, the committee made proposals for developing the examination, establishing criteria for holistic evaluation, planning training sessions for graders, overseeing the evaluation and administration of the test, and identifying cut-off scores. Yet after all the work was completed, we decided, “You know, this isn't the way; a test tells too little. There must be a better way to encourage students to recognize the importance of writing than merely devising a test for them to pass.”

Before any participant in the National Testing Network in Writing endorses a junior or senior level exit examination, two important issues not initially apparent to us should be addressed: cost and politics. The first, cost, involves several problems. Who pays for designing the examination? Can it be designed locally, or should ETS, ACT, or SRA be commissioned to create it? How valid would a locally designed test be? Would faculty trust the results? What provisions for validation would be available? How much would “test runs” cost? Who pays for graders? Would they be teaching assistants, volunteers from departments across the campus, or the overly worked English faculty?

Second, what are the political considerations of such an examination, particularly for a university with a significant Hispanic population (40%)? What happens when foreign students fail the test, especially, those “certified” as knowing the language by having passed courses in English for speakers of other languages? How would the university administration handle the litany of complaints from students who had successfully passed their freshman composition courses, and who perhaps had even taken a literature or advanced composition course in a content area, but failed to write an acceptable response?

The UTEP committee addressed these and other issues. We decided it would be prohibitively expensive to have a specially designed test created by one of the nationally known testmakers. We proposed, instead, that during a trial period of two years either juniors or graduating seniors be given a writing assignment on a general topic that included instructions to elicit a tightly structured essay. During the trial period, we would establish a reasonable time to be allotted for future administrations of the test by adding thirty minutes to the average time it took students to complete the assignment. Since few people write public documents without the aid of a dictionary, we recommended that students be allowed to use a dictionary (bilingual, if preferred) during the test.

We also recommended that a Guidebook be created for students to explain the format of the test, discuss the subject matter of questions, provide sample topics, establish time restraints for the test, and elaborate other relevant matters. Student participation would be essential in preparing this Guidebook; some members regretted

that student representatives were not appointed to our committee.

Holistic evaluations of answers would be used, and after samples of some answers had been read, evaluators would draw up a grading rubric for scoring the tests. During the trial period, a writing committee would refine its skills both in composing topics for the exam and designing grading rubrics. Training sessions for evaluators would be essential for insuring consistency in adhering to the grading scales. ETS's Advanced Placement model appeared to be the most sensible one to follow for refining the skills of evaluators. We planned to reproduce problem papers periodically, evaluate them, and discuss results with graders; the intent would be to insure consistency among graders.

We believed that the test should be administered early in each academic semester, including the summer term. Other scheduling considerations included varying choice of time and day during the four administrations in a calendar year and making special provisions for handicapped students. Moreover, examination dates would never conflict with religious or university holidays.

To insure security, we believed it necessary for students to provide photo identification when turning in their examinations. We wanted to reach all students, and to do so, we believed it important to have our records' office identify those who had completed 75 hours. If they had not taken the test at the end of 90 hours, their Dean would be asked to inform them that successful completion of the exam was a criterion for graduation. Transfer students would have to pass the examination as well.

An appeals process would be important to handle student challenges. Every student would have to justify reexamination by presenting samples of his or her college writing to an appeals board, which would then determine whether the student should be retested. Clearly, the burden of proof of writing competency would be on the student; we expected only a few appeals would be successful. No faculty member who had graded a paper in question would be allowed to serve on the appeals board.

We also discussed types of junior level remedial courses, either discipline specific or special English composition courses, for those who failed the test. Moreover, we considered special remedial courses that might be developed through our continuing education program, but concluded that a single course, or even a series of freshman or upper level courses, could not insure writing competency. Such competency must emerge from a curriculum that integrates writing with the course work all students attempt: writing must be reinforced throughout a student's education.

As we completed our recommendations for the Vice President, we concluded that we had an excellent set of guidelines for implementing the test. But none of us really believed that a mere test, perceived perhaps by students and faculty alike as punitive, would prove very much. Solving the problem of writing competency, we felt, is a curriculum issue, not a testing issue. Only after a four month study did we realize that an examination is but a temporary inoculation. But if not an exit test, then what?

To insure that its students know how to write, a university faculty—not merely one portion of the faculty (the English department)—must teach writing and support the teaching of writing. All of us in academia use the language in our scholarly writing. We expect our graduates can—and will—write when they enter the professions. Yet a university considering a junior level examination, as we did, might well consider other

alternatives to such a test. Visits from consultants convinced both our Vice President and our faculty committee to seek these alternatives, only a few of which can be mentioned.

We now have course clusters between freshman composition and political science, philosophy, and history; we plan other clusters in forthcoming semesters. We are designing junior level writing courses in content areas; we already have them in business, and English faculty and content area teachers are working on such courses in psychology and biology. Conversations with faculty outside the English department are taking place about such questions as audiences for scholarly articles, for student writing in term papers, or for exams in upper level courses; about conventions of documentation within a discipline and the contexts that make such conventions appropriate; and about the possibility of redesigning assignments or test questions so that they take into account the writing process—getting started, revision, and other matters.

Shortly after we decided to recommend *against* establishing a writing proficiency exam as a condition for graduation, our Dean appointed a committee to study and redesign the Bachelor of Arts degree. The B.A. Review committee clearly recognized the importance of communications skills: "A principal aim of a liberal arts education must be the attainment of refined communications skills as evidenced by effective writing and speaking as well as the ability to listen attentively and read with precision." Curriculum redesign led to a 15 hour communication skills requirement, 9 hours of which would be taken in freshman and upper division English courses or upper division content area courses in which writing is stressed. Involving the entire university in a cross-curricular writing program does show students and faculty alike that writing counts as an important part of any person's university education. A test alone cannot guarantee writing proficiency: it's an inoculation that won't take!

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