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ASSESSING ASSESSMENT: HISTORY,  
HOSTILITY, AND HOPE

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Since the Governor of Missouri required state institutions of higher education to implement assessment programs, the University of Missouri-St. Louis has been regularly assessing the writing of freshman and junior English composition students, using a writing sample. To design the writing assessment, the English Department relied on previous experience with a placement exam and a basic writing exit exam. For the freshman/junior writing assessment, students were given a prompt and allowed to discuss it or to prewrite about it on the first day of the exam. Then, on the second day, their papers were returned to them, and they were instructed to complete a final draft. Since that first experience, we have allowed students more time to work on the first draft in order to replicate the writing process we use in our composition classes.

Both the placement/exit exam on which we modeled our assessment and the current assessment resulted in student and teacher hostility. Students resented the time required to participate and felt threatened by a testing environment. Writing instructors who were not directly involved in the original assessment decisions also resented the time taken by the assessment and worried about having their teaching ability evaluated by a procedure they did not design.

However, as we move towards additional changes in assessment, we are discovering hope. First, we are involving writing instructors in planning the assessment and are sharing the results with them. Then, we are using the assessment rubric to train our TAs, who teach most of our freshman writing courses, and will offer additional faculty development opportunities this year to all writing staff. Finally, we are

constantly evaluating our assessment plan. We want to be sure that our writing assessment evaluates our writing curriculum as we strive for writing courses that represent current writing theory and pedagogy.