COMPUTERS IN COLLEGE WRITING: PROGRESS REPORT ON A NATIONAL PROJECT

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This presentation focused on the status of a three-year grant made to The City University of New York by the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education (a branch of the United States Department of Education) to investigate the effectiveness of the use of computers in teaching writing at the college level.

The initial goal was to identify a number of representative institututions across the country that had already implemented computer-based writing programs, design a uniform research model for assessing the effectiveness of computers in the writing program, and develop ways of disseminating the results to other institutions seeking to embark on a computer-based instructional approach to the teaching of writing. It was clear from the beginning that although very little has been done to empirically test the outcomes of computers in the English class and that such research very much needed to be done,

that the dissemination aspect of the project was equally, if not more important.

The activities of the first year included identifying a set of institutions that could be included in the research design and whose efforts could later be highlighted through curriculum materials development and dissemination, and the development of the research design that would be put in place at each of the sites during the Fall semester of the following year.

Activities during the second year of the project included the actual research study and analysis of the empirical data generated by the project. Year three's activities will focus on data interpretation and curriculum materials development and will culminate in a national conference on the uses of computers in teaching college writing which will be held in New York in May of 1990.

The research plan called for each site to identify six sections of Fall 1988 freshman writing classes for inclusion in the project. In theory at least, the six sections were to be comprised of similar students, the major exception being that three of the six sections would be taught using computers and three would be taught using traditional teaching strategies without the use of computers. The sites were urged to use caution in assigning faculty to teach the six sections so as not to introduce additional potential bias (the so-called "teacher effect") and were asked to be sure that all sections, both computer-based and computer-free, follow as uniform a curriculum as possible.

Multiple outcome measures were used in the study, and project staff chose or constructed a series of questionnaires and examinations designed to measure change in both the attitudinal realm as well as in the realm of performance. A one semester, pretest-posttest design was employed wherein all students would be tested during the first few days of the semester and then again at the end of the semester with the same set of instruments or with equivalent alternate forms of those instruments.

Work has now begun to analyze the accumulated data from the study and to feed the results back to the participating sites. Project staff are also working closely with local site coordinators on their plans for the development

of model curriculum materials that each will use to showcase their programs at the 1990 conference. For further information, write to Max Kirsch, CUNY Office of Academic Computing, 555 West 57th Street, 14th floor, New York, NY 10019.