

PROFICIENCY TESTING: ISSUES AND MODELS

Speakers: Kathleen Soltwisch, *Northern Michigan University*
Eileen Lothamer, *California State University, Long Beach*
George Gadda, *University of California, Los Angeles*

Introducer/Recorder: Stephanie Tucker, *University of California, Davis*

Kathleen Soltwisch began by describing the Writing Proficiency Examination administered at Northern Michigan University. A mid-sized university, NMU has an open admissions policy. Consequently, a number of its students are not proficient writers when they enter. In order to emphasize to the students the importance of competent writing skills and to ensure an acceptable level of proficiency, NMU instituted a proficiency exit test in 1975. This examination is given only to students who have completed two composition courses. It is offered twice a year (fall and winter) and takes two hours. Students choose a topic out of several possibilities, none of which is a response to a text. (Two examples are: "What is the quality of teaching at NMU?" "How do you explain the recent increase in juvenile crime?") The exams are graded holistically (1-very proficient; 2-proficient; 3-not yet proficient; 4-very weak) by readers who are members of the university faculty, all of whom are invited to read, but who must have read at least one set of essays before they can be considered as readers for the WPE. Papers which receive a 1 are read only once; others are read at least twice and two readers must agree on whether or not they are passing or failing papers. Consequently, some require a third reading which must be done by a member of the English Department. Seventy-three percent of the students who take the examination in any given year pass. Those who do not are required to meet with Professor Soltwisch to discuss what steps they should take in order to improve their writing. Frequently, they are advised to attend the writing workshop. Students with serious writing difficulties may be advised to take another composition course. Those who fail may retake the test as often as necessary, although they are charged a fee after the first time.

One problem with the WPE which Soltwisch mentioned is that the faculty use it to avoid assuming responsibility for poor writing in their classes. She also recommended that a course be offered to those students who fail the exam, that readers receive sufficient pay for their work (they presently are paid \$1.00 per paper), and that a training program for readers be implemented, preferably along the lines of a two-day intensive program, with money as an incentive. Professor Soltwisch stated that for the most part, however, the WPE works effectively in a mid-sized, open admissions university. It succeeds in its task of communicating to faculty and to students that writing is important, and it assures the university that its graduates are competent writers.

Next, Eileen Lothamer discussed the California State University system-wide credit-by-exam program and its campus-specific graduation writing proficiency requirement. In writing examinations for these or any testing program, Lothamer suggested that three questions be posed: 1) Why are we testing? 2) What are we testing? 3) What procedures should we follow?

The English Equivalency Examination (EEE) can be

taken by entering freshmen or re-entry students who wish to receive a full year's credit for college-level English. In order to develop the EEE, CSU faculty throughout the system were surveyed to determine what was in fact being taught in the first year's courses. A two-part examination was developed. The first section is a 90-minute, multiple-choice exam which tests the interpretation of literature and reading comprehension. The second is comprised of two forty-five minute essays, the first experience-based analysis and the second an interpretation of an extended literary passage. Topic committees, composed of CSU English faculty throughout the system, write and field test the topics yearly to make sure that they are accessible, non-biased, and not "reader-boring."

A statewide committee annually reviews this program. Since 1973, some 114,000 students have taken the EEE, and 14,000 of these have received the full year's credit. Since 1977, the committee has set a second-cut score so that students can also be exempted from taking the English Placement Test (EPT), a mandatory placement test for in-coming freshmen in the CSU system. If students fail the EEE, they alone are notified. Campuses are told only which students passed for credit and which were exempted from the EPT; they are not told who has taken and failed the EEE.

George Gadda spoke about proficiency testing in the University of California system, which is composed of eight campuses and which possesses few university-wide requirements. It does, however, have a system-wide Subject A requirement. Established in 1898, its purpose was to assure student proficiency in written discourse; at various times, the Subject A requirement has fulfilled the functions of an entrance, placement, and graduate proficiency requirement. Now it serves as a placement "screen" for entering freshmen. Students can fulfill the Subject A requirement by scoring 600 or better on the College Board English Composition Achievement Test, by scoring 3, 4, or 5 on either Advanced Placement Exam in English, or by writing a passing 400-600 word analytical essay. This writing sample is text-based, as part of its purpose is to determine the students' ability to analyze.

The writing sample is graded holistically using a 6-point scale. Each paper receives two readings by writing-program instructors. A composite score of 8 exempts students from taking a pre-baccalaureate composition course. Two UC campuses (Los Angeles and Santa Cruz) also use their exams to exempt from freshman composition students who have composite scores of 11 or better. At Santa Cruz, the students are required to take one further composition course; at Los Angeles, however, they have no further composition requisites. Both procedures exempt a small number of students: about 5% at UC-Santa Cruz, about 1% at UCLA. The other six campuses believe students should not be exempted from freshman composition through examination, because the course serves an important socialization process for freshmen by introducing them to and integrating them into a community of discourse new to them. Also, some educators question whether any test can tap the abilities developed in a composition course which emphasizes revision.

Only two UC campuses (Davis and Irvine) have an upper-division writing requirement. To satisfy this requirement, students have the option of taking either

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a course or an exam, similar to that given to satisfy the Subject A requirement, but more sophisticated. They too are evaluated by the writing program staff, which reads them holistically. At Davis, a score of 8 (out of a possible 12) is necessary to pass, and the percent passing ranges from the high 40's to the mid 60's. At Irvine, where 11 or better is a passing score, the pass rate is 8-10%. In both universities, this test functions as a challenge exam that exempts students from the upper-division requirement; those who fail the exam must take an upper-division composition course.

Soltwisch, Lothamer, and Gadda concluded by urging faculty who participate in test development to be concerned with appropriate, fair, and legally-defensible assessments of writing skill.