

DEVELOPING AND EVALUATING A WRITING ASSESSMENT PROGRAM

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Lorenz Boehm and Mary Ann McKeever addressed issues of designing, implementing, and evaluating an essay test currently being used by three Chicago-area community colleges. This test is designed both to place students in appropriate composition courses and to determine if students in developmental or ESL composition courses are prepared to move on to Freshman Composition.

Although the test has been used since 1984, preparations for its implementation began in 1982, and evaluation and refinement of test questions and procedures is ongoing. This test replaced an objective test of grammar and usage that was being used at the time. During the planning process, prompts were developed and pilot-tested, evaluation criteria were discussed, and reader training methods were developed. In addition, those developing the test sought to gain campus-wide support

and involvement from faculty, staff, and administration.

In the test, students are given two argumentative topics from which to choose. With each topic, they are given a context for writing and an audience for whom they are told to formulate an essay arguing their position. They are given 50 minutes to plan and write their essay. Efforts are made to be fair to ESL students: topics are as "culture free" as possible, prompts are worded simply, ESL (and Learning Disabled) students are given an additional 20 minutes to write their essay, and specially-trained readers evaluate ESL and LD responses.

Each essay is holistically scored on a 6-point scale by three readers, two of whom must agree in their assessment. In cases of disagreement, an additional reader may be used, and an appeals procedure is available to students. These readers come from across the college and all of them participate in frequent, extensive training to be sure that they understand and agree upon criteria for the essays they will be asked to evaluate. In training, as well as before actual evaluation sessions, agreement among readers is reached by examining, rating, and then discussing sample essays; discussing criteria for scoring; and then rating more sample essays.

Many benefits have come from Oakton's use of this writing placement test. Primary among them is the greatly increased dialogue among faculty, administrators, staff, local high schools, parents, and students about writing. Such cooperation is essential to the test's success, because it has helped short-circuit potential disagreement and has made members of the college community more receptive to what the composition faculty are trying to accomplish. It has also greatly fueled writing across the curriculum efforts on campus.

This test is continually being evaluated by Boehm, McKeever, and their colleagues to ensure that it is placing students appropriately, that the different prompts are eliciting responses of comparable quality, and that agreement among readers is high. The results thus far are quite positive: composition teachers are very satisfied that students are being placed in the courses they need. Pilot testing prompts in composition classes and then carefully monitoring the ratings given to essays written in response to these prompts has helped ensure that different versions of the test are comparable; and evaluation criteria are kept consistent by frequent, ongoing training of essay raters.