

WPA PRESENTATION ON EVALUATING WRITING PROGRAMS

- Speakers:** *Robert Christopher*, Ramapo College,
New Jersey
Donald Daiker, Miami University, Ohio
Edward White, California State
University, San Bernardino
- Introducer/
Recorder:** *John Schwiebert*, University of
Minnesota

This session was organized by the National Council of Writing Program Administrators (WPA), and the panelists

wished to share their experiences as writing program evaluators and to address salient issues of writing assessment as they pertain to writing program evaluation.

Upon request, consultant-evaluators from the National Council of Writing Program Administrators will conduct a writing program assessment for a college or university. To prepare both themselves and the WPA evaluators (usually a team of two) for the assessment, schools are asked to complete a narrative "self-study" of their writing program at least one month before the WPA team visits. Robert Christopher distributed copies of the self-study guidelines, which can be obtained from the address given at the end of this abstract. The purpose of the assessment is to help faculty and administrators develop more effective writing programs appropriate to their institutions' needs. Donald Daiker and Edward White described occasions when the WPA service assisted writing faculty on a campus to enlist high-level administrative support for innovative reforms in their writing programs.

Most of the session focused on the topic of testing, which, it was emphasized, is only one dimension of an overall program assessment. To be effective, institution-wide programs of assessment should be appropriate to the particular needs, demographics, and aims of the individual school. The challenge of deciding what is appropriate underscores the relevance and value both of the WPA assessment and of the self-study a school does before the WPA visit. Panel members discussed some of the key issues involved in each of the following kinds of testing: admissions, placement, equivalency, and course exit. Rising junior and value-added tests were also mentioned but could not be discussed in detail in the time allotted. Key points about each type of test are below:

Admissions Tests: Discussing the purposes of the SAT verbal exam, White stressed that the SAT assesses verbal aptitude and not writing ability. As such, it is useful as a criterion for admissions but should not be a basis for exempting students from freshman composition.

Placement Tests: Before actually developing a placement test, a school should decide if it needs one. Many institutions do need such exams to assure that individual students receive writing instruction appropriate to their abilities and experience. After a need has been determined, a school should develop a test based upon its own curriculum--specifically, upon what is taught in freshman composition. Some schools borrow or adopt tests that fail to mesh with their own institutional needs. Only by examining its curriculum can an institution rationally decide what it is testing for.

Equivalency Tests: These tests provide a special service to students, and they differ fundamentally from

placement exams. The basic message of an equivalency is: "Show us that you (i.e., the student) are in control of what we do in freshman comp and we'll let you out of it." As such, equivalency tests must be based firmly on the school's curriculum. Given its special purpose, the testing instrument must also be more complex than one used for placement.

Course Exit Tests: The course exit exam is a common test that all students must pass in order to complete a course (freshman composition or other). Noting that such tests can discriminate against students who write well but who are poor drafters or test takers, White urged against tests being the only basis for exit. A good exit exam covers materials and processes which students have addressed in their class. White observed that the greatest potential benefit of an exit test derives less from the test itself than from the incentive it can provide for departmental and interdepartmental faculty discussions of writing and curriculum.

Institutions desiring more information on the WPA consultant-evaluator service should write to Professor Tori Haring-Smith at the following address:

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