

CREATING, DEVELOPING, AND EVALUATING A COLLEGE-WIDE WRITING ASSESSMENT PROGRAM

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Introducer/

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In this session, Suzy Groden reported on the University of Massachusetts' writing assessment program, on-going since 1978. She described how it was developed, changed, and validated. The exam is a "rising junior exam," required of students after 68 credits (or within first semester for transfer students). Called a test of writing proficiency, the exam really tests reading, writing, and critical thinking because students have to respond to questions on texts (or "reading sets") with which they are provided one month prior to the exam. Students are either judged proficient or must remediate their writing skills.

The idea behind the test is to teach students what the faculty want them to know in various core curriculum courses, courses designed to include elements of critical analysis and reading/writing associated with that discipline. Each reading set is 20 pages and concerns a controversial topic associated with a specific discipline.

Students chose one of three sets, from natural sciences and mathematics, the social sciences, or the humanities, and they read the set for a month. After the first exam was given in 1978, a sample for students became available and a student manual was developed.

Groden stated that one problem in the exam is the lack of a penalty for those who fail. The exam is graded by readers who are trained in one morning and then read exams all afternoon. A student needs two readers to agree in order to pass, and three readers to agree in order to fail. But there are actually no practical penalties now associated with failing the exam: students can still take upper-division courses if they fail, and there is now an alternate way to demonstrate proficiency--a portfolio.

During the course of subsequent years, changes occurred in the context of the exam. After Groden and the university's ESL Director became involved, an interest in writing and the acquisition of language found its way into the readings. Policies surrounding the implementation of the test were gradually loosened. The use of the portfolio alternative was extended, particularly to ESL students. Also, the range of writing samples included in the portfolio was expanded to include more than just the traditional analytical paper: lab reports, for example, would be accepted. Students were allowed three hours to write the exam, rather than just two. And in one of her more striking findings, Groden found students wrote much more easily when they switched from the standard-size blue books to the larger, 8- and 1/2 inch size (that being the standard in which they most frequently composed). The exam committee also spent more time thinking about readings and questions; the exams became more complicated, involving ideas about the nature of knowledge. What ultimately evolved were two possible questions, one for the non-intellectual and one for the more challenging intellect. Finally, they also offered an evening session for taking the exam.

There were also many changes over the years which Groden termed losses. Faculty involvement waned, with more and more responsibility for grading falling to the exam committee. The school changed, taking in fewer freshmen and more transfer students, with the exam becoming a kind of graduation test. Funding dried up, causing the university to retreat from its core curriculum and limit the number of its core courses, and, hence, severing the relationship between the curriculum and writing proficiency.

One area in which the Massachusetts exam developers were successful was in establishing grading criteria. Sending exam samples to national experts, Groden received strong validation and agreement on their criteria. The experts, however, were critical of the number of questions, feeling they made different cognitive demands and were unfair. The committee is continuing to revise the exam.