

REVAMPING THE COMPETENCY PROCESS FOR WRITING: A CASE STUDY

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Introducer/

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Deborah Holdstein began by describing Governors State University, a junior, senior, and graduate institution with diversified student body. The University used to have a writing competency test for prospective juniors and seniors. Accompanying this competency test were a set of grading standards and a pass-and-fail system, both of which had continually drawn criticism from test readers and scorers alike, because they were vague and not academically sound. According to this set of standards, a passing essay must (1) respond to the stated topic; (2) have a clearly stated thesis; (3) show clear, logical organization of ideas in organized, well-developed paragraphs; (4) include supporting details; (5) demonstrate one's editing ability.

Holdstein was asked to change this system. She observed that the process of revamping an assessment program was as political as it was academic. One misperception bandied around a lot was that the English teachers were determined to flunk students. Holdstein recalled that they needed someone from outside, an expert with no stake, political or otherwise, in the system, to help teachers revamp the system. Ines Bosworth from Educational Testing Service was brought in as a consultant. Bosworth emphasized that as a neutral observer, she was able to get different opinions from faculty in different departments. These discussions became extremely useful because they enabled faculty to articulate their concerns about possible changes in the testing program. Out of these discussions--and the Provost's unfailing support--came the new scoring criteria, which have four major areas: focus, organization, elaboration (support) and conventions (mechanics). These are scored with a 6-point scale, 6 being superior and 1 being seriously inadequate. This scale replaced the old pass/fail scale.

illustrate the rubric's categories. A six-point rubric is used because it eliminates a middle score and because a four-point rubric would not be specific enough to encompass the aspects of the writing they wish to assess. The panel takes care and time in designing the rubric to make it clear and specific in order for readers to reach consensus and to withstand criticism from students, parents and faculty. Rubrics are kept on file at the University library. One indicator of the success of the rubric is that students who fail the exam and wish to contest it usually reach agreement after examining the rubric and evaluating their own writing against it.

Although the writing competency examination project is bigger than the panel first anticipated, they agree that it is worth the work.