

## WE DID IT AND LIVED: A STATE UNIVERSITY GOES TO EXIT TESTING

**Speakers:** *Phyllis Liston, John Mathew, Linda  
Pelzer, Ball State University*

**Introducer/**

**Recorder:** *Joyce Malek, University of Minnesota*

In Fall 1987, Ball State University (Muncie, Indiana) implemented exit testing for writing competency as a prerequisite for graduation. The three member panel responsible for establishing the rubrics and coordinating the testing and holistic grading discussed what they learned during this first year. Participants were given hands-on experience with the exam by writing briefly in response to a sample writing test essay assignment and discussing the process we went through to begin answering the essay question. They then ranked actual essays and were led

through the process the panel uses to develop the rubric.

Phyllis Liston began by describing what the exam coordinators learned in the process: (1) implementing, coordinating and gaining community-wide acceptance for exit exams is "a lot harder than it looks"; (2) communication at all levels is essential; (3) low-level mistakes can cause high-level difficulties; money when needed is found; and (4) holistic grading works well. In addition, the exam needs full administrative and faculty support. As the director of the writing competency exam, Liston found the administrative duties to be a full-time responsibility requiring personnel assistance.

Liston explained Ball State's "3/3/3" exam process. Students sign up for the exam three weeks before the exam date and are given an instruction sheet detailing the exam process, the exam question, how to prepare for the exam, and where to go to receive help preparing for the exam. On the exam date, students are given three hours to write approximately three pages in response to the exam question. Students must pass the test to graduate. After two attempts, they are required to enroll in--and repeat until they pass--an upper division writing course. The second opportunity to take the exam constitutes an automatic appeal. Exit from the course is by portfolio prepared by the students with the help of their instructors. Portfolios are evaluated by two or more readers other than the classroom teacher/coach. No student takes the exam more than twice.

John Mathew explained the training process for holistic graders by taking participants through a mini grading workshop. We read and ranked three sample essays high, middle and low. Then we read, ranked and integrated into the previous essays three more, and did the same for two additional essays. We then discussed our ranking of one of the essays in terms of its strengths and weaknesses. Finally we were presented with the six-point rubric developed by the panel for the particular exam and were asked to rate the essay.

In an actual reading, graders read ten papers at a time, assess, record and score, and pass the papers on to a second reader. Papers with scores that do not match are given to a third reader. All pass decisions are made by the University Provost under the advisement of the panel and other administrators after all exams for the quarter have been scored. The panel acknowledges a high reader calibration and suggests a main reason for it is that readers do not know the cut-off point for failing, and therefore are more objective and not sympathetically influenced to pass a border-line paper.

Linda Pelzer described the rubric design process. The panel develops a new rubric for each exam by reading and sorting all essays written for the exam into high, middle and low categories. After sorting, they discuss the categories and write about them, and they draft a six-point rubric--one that is quite detailed and descriptive and that includes specific examples from student papers to

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.