

THE FLORIDA COLLEGE-LEVEL ACADEMIC SKILLS PROJECT: TESTING COMMUNICATION SKILLS STATEWIDE

Editors' note: In Fall 1981, Professor Rubin served as Faculty Program Consultant to the Florida Board of Regents. Together with a team of external consultants, he visited and interviewed representatives from Florida's public community colleges and universities as part of the Board of Regents' review of basic skills education. Part of the following information is contained in the consultants' report to the Board of Regents.

INTRODUCTION

Reacting to the much publicized "crisis" in writing and basic skills generally, the state of Florida recently embarked on a testing program that will have both an immediate and a long-range impact on the English curriculum in Florida's public community colleges and universities. In Spring 1979, the Florida Legislature enacted several laws designed to improve the quality of basic skills instruction in both communication and computation throughout the state system of higher education. In December 1979, in order to meet the objective of the new laws, the State Board of Education formed the College-Level Academic Skills Project (CLASP) and appointed a committee of university and community college faculty to identify communication and computational skills essential to successful higher education; and identify instruments to assess student performance of those skills. The long range task of the project is twofold: first, to assure that students entering public universities and community colleges are correctly placed so that they can more readily acquire the needed skills; and second, to assure that students entering the junior year have acquired those communication and computation skills essential to success in upper division programs.

In January 1981, a list of 113 "essential skills" in communications and computations was approved and submitted to the State Board of Education. In August 1981, the BOE in turn approved the list and work was begun on a statewide testing program to be administered to all students at the sophomore level. In the area of communications, four generic skills were delineated: reading, writing, listening, and speaking. The first round of testing will assess student competency in reading and writing only. Strategies for the assessment of speaking and listening are in development, and testing in these two areas should begin within two years. The writing portion of the test will include a writing sample which will be graded by faculty trained to score holistically. The test will be administered statewide for the first time in October 1982.

INITIAL REACTION AND MAJOR CONCERNS

In Fall 1981, prompted by the imminence of the October 1982 date for the first sophomore test, the Board of Regents, in cooperation with the Division of Community Colleges, conducted a system-wide program review of communication and computation instruction related to the college-level skills to be assessed. The purposes of the review were 1) to determine institutional readiness to implement CLASP—the extent to which institutions were providing students with educational opportunities to prepare themselves for the sophomore test, 2) to identify present and potential problems associated with initiating the project, and 3) to develop a general understanding of faculty and student response to the project.

Faculty and administrative reaction to the project varied dramatically. There is, to begin with, the prevailing opinion that a good, intelligent testing program—one that would be properly implemented and judiciously evaluated—will help students reach a minimal level of

proficiency in communication skills. It would screen those students in need of more work, help diagnose deficiencies, and enable individual institutions to develop more effective remedial programs. Poorly prepared students would be diverted from entering the upper division and identified for developmental instruction. In short, many expressed the feeling that the testing program has the potential for improving student performance in basic reading and writing skills, thereby preserving the academic integrity of the state system. There also exists the long range expectation that CLASP will have a "filtering down" effect, increasing the level of instruction and student performance throughout the educational continuum, from elementary through high school.

There is also serious concern and apprehension over the possible negative aspects of the project and the very real problems (financial, pedagogical, legal, and the like) that it will engender. Most significantly, institutions will need help in solving their funding problems when preparing for the CLASP program. Specifically, such non-FTE generating services as writing laboratories and developmental programs are in need of special and immediate additional financial assistance. Unless institutions are going to refuse admission to applicants with inadequate preparation in college-level skills (an option not usually available to public community colleges), or unless such students are put in regular classes (for which they are unprepared), public community colleges and universities will by necessity be more involved than ever in developmental education. Because remedial work requires more individual attention than regular college-level instruction, developmental programs need to be funded more generously per student contact hour than regular instruction. Similarly, learning laboratories, which are generally not associated with academic credits and thus do not generate money on the state FTE funding formula, will need to be funded by the state in an adequate and permanent manner.

UNRESOLVED ISSUES

Among the many uncertainties surrounding the future of CLASP is the issue of the program's impact on minorities. There is concern that Black and Hispanic students will possibly have more difficulty than dominant culture students with the writing portion of the test. A fundamental question remains: to what extent will all students be expected to master the conventions of edited written English and those of "standard" pronunciation? Similarly, teachers need to be made aware of dialect and linguistic differences and the inherent difficulties of teaching standard English to linguistically handicapped students.

There are obvious legal ramifications to this question as well. If there are legitimate language variances among students, it is the responsibility of the school system to provide equal educational opportunities to those students whose language or dialect differs from standard English. In the 1978 "Ann Arbor" case 1 for example, a Michigan judge ruled that the language spoken by Black students constituted a separate and distinct dialect. The school district was therefore required to provide special training to teachers of students with linguistic differences.

Equally problematic is the issue of faculty preparedness to teach writing skills, which need to be addressed if the state intends to test student performance in this area.

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Although faculty are well trained in their specific disciplines, few have been specifically prepared to teach composition. Graduate programs throughout the state typically train students in literary theory and the critical evaluation of literary texts. Few receive specific instruction in the teaching of writing or in such related subjects as linguistics and rhetoric. In the opinion of the consulting team that took part in the Board of Regents' program review, there exists "a great need for at least one graduate program in the state that prepares teachers to teach the full range of college English, with emphasis on language, rhetoric, and composition."

Finally, the potential legal implications of CLASP and the question of students' rights remain to be resolved. In a recent appellate decision in Florida (*Debra P.v. Turlington*)² the U.S. Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals ruled that a competency test must be "fair;" that is, it must test *only* what is actually taught in the curriculum. Obviously, the ramifications of such a decision for the classroom teacher may be far reaching and potentially damaging to

creative approaches to the teaching of writing.

CONCLUSION

As a result of CLASP and the sophomore test of communication skills, the future of the writing curriculum throughout the state is about to undergo an interesting transformation. Whether these changes will actually be for the better remains uncertain. For the present, CLASP is seen by many as an important first step in improving the writing skills of Florida's post-secondary students. The sophomore test intends to measure performance of these skills. Ultimately it intends to insure the quality of writing instruction throughout Florida's public community colleges and universities.

¹ *Martin Luther King, Jr. Elementary School Children v. Michigan Board of Education*, 451 F. Supp. 1324 (E.D. Mich. 1978)

² 474 F. Supp. 244 (M.D. Fla. 1979)

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