

Large-scale testing

Editor's note. The following two articles, by Edward M. White and by Alice Brekke, are the first pair of articles in a series that WPA hopes to publish on the large-scale testing of writing. In each pair, one article will discuss a system-wide test from the perspective of the system as a whole, and will be written, when possible, by the system's current or past director of testing. The other article in each pair will explore the effects and implications of system-wide testing at a local campus within the system and will be written by a current or past writing program administrator at that campus. WPA is most grateful to these enormously busy people for undertaking to explore this issue with us.

I. The California State University English Placement Test (EPT): Purpose and potential

Edward M. White

The California State University English Placement Test (EPT), whatever its character, certainly had the right parentage. It was developed at the request of the writing program administrators from the nineteen campuses of this huge system (approximately one-third of a million students overall and nearly thirty thousand entering freshmen each year). Although students are supposedly "selected" from the top third of the high school graduating class, a combination of admissions exceptions and uncertain preparation for regular students led, in 1974, to a call by English chairs and composition coordinators for a system-wide test that could lead to some placement of lower-division students in different levels of freshman English.

The argument for a system-wide test, rather than local devices, depended upon the recent experiment in testing sponsored by the English faculties of the system; the English Equivalency Examination (EEE). (See the *Journal of Basic Writing*,¹ Spring/Summer 1978, 18-38, for a description of this credit-by-examination program.) The EEE had shown that state funding could be gained for responsible large-scale testing without loss of faculty control. With experience and knowledge of sophisticated testing (both multiple choice and essay) came an awareness of the cost and complexity involved; again, system-wide testing offered the possibility for the scope and quality of testing that was needed.

It took almost two years before that call for a test led to the creation of a test development committee. But by the time that faculty committee began meeting in the fall of 1976, it was facing a tight deadline; its product was to be required of all

entering freshmen the following year. Happily, the Educational Testing Service had been awarded a contract as test consultant firm and gave the EPT top priority as well as substantial developmental funding. The committee worked feverishly and the new test was developed and administered to entering freshmen in 1477; it has since become a regular part of the state university program, with over fifty thousand tests now administered.

System-wide administration of the test has tried to refrain from intruding into matters individual campuses can do best, such as counseling students into appropriate curricula and developing courses and programs. But we have been moderately successful at gaining state funding for local initiative in these areas and at resisting pressures to take such misguided actions as establishing a state-wide cutting score. The principal advantage of so large-scale an operation has been to gain the resources to put together a creative and effective new examination, using the best knowledge and experience of CSUC faculty.

The Test Development Committee tried to take advantage of the opportunity to produce a new test and to introduce some new concepts into large-scale English testing. For example, the EPT includes a forty-five-minute essay portion (whose statistical importance is starting to emerge with startling clarity from follow-up studies). The committee was able to discard the usage- and error-hunting orientation of traditional "objective" English tests for multiple-choice portions on reading, sentence construction, and logic and organization that view the student as writer rather than editor. The deep suspicion most of us have felt at the effect of error-hunting usage tests on racial minorities led the committee to avoid trivialities or nonsignificant dialect issues and to focus on matters of real consequence to writing. (Again, follow-up studies show the EPT distributes minorities in a markedly different, and apparently far more normal, way than the College Board Test of Standard Written English, the most widely used placement test based on usage.)

Each campus in the system uses the test results in a different way-which is appropriate for a system that prides itself on differences in purpose and function. Most use the total score, derived from the four sections of the test, to identify a level below which some sort of remedial/developmental work is recommended or required. Smaller campuses seem to have an easier time requiring such work, though a few large campuses are beginning to do so. Only a few campuses seem to be setting up old-style "bonehead" classes, and even these are breaking tradition by giving these classes to their most experienced and qualified faculty. Some campuses are using the test results, and the new funding for law-scoring students, to establish or improve tutorial support in classes or learning centers. The Dominguez Hills campus, for example, does not group students by test score, as most of the rest do, but requires additional tutorial work for low-scoring students who remain in regular freshman composition classes.

While no one with a sense of history could claim that this renewed attention to weak student writers is unprecedented, or wholly free from economic motivation, some facets of what is happening do represent new professional developments. At least for the present, many of those teaching the remedial/developmental courses seem to share high morale and a sense of important mission. Some serious research is going on, as part of the national effort to discover new knowledge

about writing instruction. There are indications that promotion and tenure committees are taking note of professional activity in this area as work that counts, it is, of course, too early to say whether these developments are permanent changes in departmental policy and goals, or a temporary response to the social and economic pressures of the times.

The EPT has made some important contributions to English teaching statewide. One technical advantage it offers is to establish base line data for research, for relations with schools, for campus graduation requirements, and for funding. The EPT data led directly to new enrichment formulas for "remedial" instruction from the state. Two campuses in the system (San Bernardino and Fresno) have received major grants from NEH to teach writing across the curriculum and, while the link to the EPT is unclear, there have been suggestions that the existence of the test has helped both programs.

The most important benefit of the statewide test has been to deliver to each campus a reliable set of reading and writing scores for students. Since the English faculties "own" the test, most of the casual local placement tests have become unnecessary, and the instructional time usually lost in placement has been restored. Some campuses use a local form of the EPT essay as a staff-graded entry exam into freshmen composition for "remedial" students, thus adding a "mastery learning" component to "remedial" instruction that makes good sense. Other campuses have developed mini-courses geared to sections of the test. As long as the test stays current (contractually, 25 percent of the EPT is to be new at each administration) and the faculties feel it to be appropriate and faculty controlled, the writing program administrators will continue to find creative ways to use the information provided by the test.

No one should imagine that so large a program in so large a system could be developed either painlessly or without continuing problems. Funding, which appeared to be the greatest difficulty, has turned out not to be much of a problem. Once the program was launched, the California legislature, despite Proposition 13, came through with the required money. However, campus clerical workers in testing and admissions offices, who needed to create or adapt notification systems, resisted the added workload. This bureaucratic problem, a kind of brute office inertia, will apparently take years to solve; until these systems work smoothly, inefficiencies of various kinds bedevil the program. Linked to this problem is a real difficulty in timing: to achieve reliable essay scores and test security, statewide test dates and controlled grading sessions are necessary; but each campus requires test information at a different time. These and other bureaucratic headaches will be dealt with as the program matures, but they still diminish its effect, particularly on some campuses where a weak English department has little influence.

Finally, the widespread participation in testing on the part of English faculty and writing program administrators has had a generally salutary result. Testing, as many of us have learned to our sorrow, can be a very powerful tool; to gain control over testing and the data it produces is to gain substantial new power, available for use in many ways. The implications of this power for staffing and funding of writing programs are just becoming clear. But some uses of this power are obvious.

Training programs for inexperienced teachers, whether traditional graduate

students or newly designated colleagues from history or physical education departments, gain new strength from informed evaluation components. Thus, an informed discussion of essay testing requires considerable attention to such matters as the design of writing assignments, the ability to clarify quality distinctions for students, the need to notice and reward what students have done well, and the desirability of checking individual judgments against those of one's colleagues. There are even some tendencies toward that most sensible, and most threatening of traditional innovations, staff grading of final examinations.

For better or for worse, probably for better, each of our campuses is now required to certify the writing proficiency of its graduates. While, in general, campus-wide committees have been developing and overseeing these certification programs, it is the writing program administrator who usually sees to it that the plan is carried out. Again, knowledge of and control over testing has led to important curricular developments in writing at the upper-division level, with important benefits to both the university and the English department. Several campuses now require advanced composition classes, either in the English department or in other divisions of the university, usually under campus committee control and writing program administrator direction. On all campuses, the renewed emphasis on writing as necessary for the B.A. has moved English departments, with their real or reputed expertness in the area, back toward the center of the curriculum; this emphasis is also a healthy force in opposition to the new vocationalism. The degree of real expertness the writing program administrator can bring to these graduation certification issues will certainly influence the effectiveness and liberal values of the upper-division writing program.

The CSUC English Placement Test, despite some inefficiencies, has thus brought reliable new information and potential new power to writing program administrators in the California State University system. Some similar programs have been developed or proposed in other states and systems, e.g., New Jersey and Wisconsin. Success of such testing programs must depend on the degree of real control and felt ownership by English faculties in general and writing program administrators in particular. When successful, such programs offer important advantages to the institutions, their faculties, and their students.

Note

1. An article now in the final states of preparation will give details of these findings. The article contains score distributions showing that the asserted high correlation of usage and writing scores does not hold for racial-ethnic minorities.