

**A national survey on the assessment
and improvement of the academic skills
of entering freshmen: some implications
for writing program administrators¹**

*Marie Jean Lederman, Michael Ribaldo,
and Susan Remmer Ryzewic*

College educators have been concerned about the preparation of students entering higher education since the early 1970's when a number of historic forces coalesced, leaving us with little certainty of the skills possessed by freshmen entering American colleges and universities. Among these forces was the entry of large numbers of students for whom college access had been previously denied. One may speculate, too, about the significance of a range of other forces, including the legacy of the sixties which, in an attempt to change fossilized curricula from kindergarten through graduate school, resulted not only in much needed experimentation and reform but also in what appears to be a systematic lowering of academic expectations for students. Today, more and more, students passively receive entertainment and information about the world from either a television screen or telephone receiver rather than from active involvement with the printed or written word, and these forces have radically altered student performance in classrooms.

The present state of education in America is suddenly receiving a great deal of national attention. "All At Once Everyone Is Worried About Schools," reads the caption in a recent *New York Times* article which details the findings of the National Task Force on Education for Economic Growth, the National Commission on Excellence in Education, and a task force of the Twentieth Century Fund.² In the news too are a number of recent studies demonstrating that students are doing poorly in higher order skills.³

At The City University of New York (CUNY), we have been actively involved in the education of academically and educationally disadvantaged students since the mid-1960's when special opportunity programs were first designed and implemented. Since 1970, CUNY's policy of Open Admissions has brought large numbers of underprepared college students into the University. In 1976, in response to increasing concern about students' skills, CUNY's Board of Trustees mandated a minimum competency testing program, the Freshman Skills Assessment Program; this program has been in place since the fall of 1978.

As we worked at CUNY to improve the skills of our students, we were reading these headlines in *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *The Chronicle of Higher Education*: "Scholars Increasingly Concerned About 'Deterioration of Literacy,'" "Employers Take Over Where Schools Fail to Teach the Basics," "Competency Exams Test Schools as Well as Pupils," and "The End of a Dream: Literacy Invades the Middle Class." We read about actions taken by

other colleges, universities, and state education systems which indicated similar concerns about the skills of their students. As far as we could tell, however, up to 1981 no systematic survey had been conducted to ascertain the pervasiveness of the problem of skills levels of entering freshmen in colleges and universities across the country. We decided to do such a study, and while our findings are of general interest to faculty and administrators in higher education, they are of particular interest to writing program administrators.

In the Spring of 1981, the Office of Academic Affairs of The City University of New York sent a questionnaire to each of the approximately 2,800 institutions of higher education in the United States which offer undergraduate programs. Fortyfive percent (1,269) of the institutions responded, and we found that these institutions are a representative sample of colleges and universities nationwide. While it would have been impossible for us to assess the basic skills levels of students across the country with a common instrument--especially their writing skills--we were able to ask about institutional perceptions of the basic skills preparation of entering freshmen, the extent to which students in various types of institutions are being diagnosed as needing help in basic skills, and the ways in which colleges and universities across the country are choosing to respond to the needs of students they determine to be unprepared.

Findings

The popular perception has been that basic skills problems are confined to urban, open-admissions institutions serving predominantly economically and educationally disadvantaged students. This survey, based on a representative sample of almost half of all colleges and universities in the country which offer undergraduate programs, explodes this widely held belief. The most dramatic finding of this survey is that only three percent of the responding institutions perceive the skills levels of their entering freshmen to be no problem at all. A full 85% of the responding institutions perceive poor academic preparation of incoming freshmen to be either very much of a problem or somewhat of a problem.*

Almost all of the institutions (97%) assess the skills levels of entering freshmen. Not surprisingly, the few institutions which feel that poor academic preparation is not a problem are most likely to say that no assessment is necessary. However, even among these institutions, fewer than three out of ten felt that the assessment of skills levels is unnecessary.

Tests are the most common method of assessment. Results of scholastic tests such as the SAT and the ACT are used by about three-fourths of the institutions, as are results of tests which are locally administered to assess the academic skills levels of students. Clearly, the universities and colleges are not saying that they have problems because of the much publicized concerns with the quality of education and student performance, but because of evidence based on admissions tests results or on assessment of academic skills levels of their entering students.

We found that a substantial percentage of entering freshman is viewed as requiring assistance in the basic skills areas--28% in reading, 31% in basic writing, and 32% in basic mathematics. While the institutions which serve a larger proportion of traditional students indicated that fewer students require assistance

in the basic skills areas than the institutions which serve a larger proportion of the nontraditional students, our finding that approximately three out of ten entering freshmen are viewed as requiring assistance in basic writing demonstrates the enormity of the writing problem.

It is interesting that while comparable percentages of entering freshmen are viewed as needing help in basic writing, basic mathematics, and reading, more of the institutions actually offer courses in basic writing. In fact, the only institutions which are not likely to offer courses for students who need help in basic writing are those few institutions in which skills deficiencies are not perceived as a problem--primarily private universities and private four-year selective colleges. With the exception of institutions which feel that skills deficiencies are not a problem at all, between 90% and 95% of the institutions offer basic writing courses.

This tendency for most institutions to offer basic writing courses, even when they may not perceive a widespread need for such courses, raises some interesting questions: perhaps, they are influenced by the nationwide perception that students cannot write; perhaps, because writing is integral to most academic disciplines, basic writing courses are offered as a result of pressures from faculty outside of the English Departments.

There is a difference, of course, between offering courses to students who require help in basic skills and mandating that such courses be taken. The decision to make a course mandatory may reflect the institution's seriousness about dealing with skills problems or it may reflect a lack of faith that the students will recognize their skills problems and voluntarily seek assistance. In the real world, budgetary constraints often dictate whether or not courses are mandatory. We found that the institutions perceiving greater student need are more likely to make basic writing courses mandatory. It is interesting to note that institutions are slightly more likely to make basic writing courses mandatory than other skills courses--56% of the institutions which offer basic writing courses make such courses mandatory, compared with 46% which make basic mathematics courses mandatory and 41% which make reading courses mandatory.

Tests are by far the most common method for placing students in basic writing courses. Approximately three-fourths of the institutions offering these courses use tests for placement, and almost nine out of ten of the institutions which make these courses mandatory use tests for placement into courses in basic writing. About 15% of the institutions which offer basic writing courses mentioned methods other than tests for placing students into courses. Of these institutions, high school grades were the most common method mentioned (46%), followed by faculty referral (40%). Student request, the third method, was mentioned by a relatively small percentage of the institutions.

More than half of the institutions use either a locally developed test or a writing sample for placement into basic writing courses.⁵ Although tests are the common method for placing students into courses, there is little agreement on the tests themselves. Do the institutions disagree about what skills students should possess? Are the commercially available tests perceived as inadequate? What is clear is that a substantial proportion of the institutions--at least half--are committing resources to the development of local instruments for course placement. The tendency to rely on locally developed tests or writing samples for placement into basic writing courses certainly corresponds to the movement toward consensus within the field

that the best way to measure writing is through writing.

The responding institutions use two basic approaches to determine when students have shown adequate improvement in basic writing--teacher judgment or more standardized criteria such as a locally developed departmental final or a commercially developed test. The assessment of student progress has long been a faculty right. At the same time, however, using more standardized criteria such as a locally developed departmental final or a commercially developed test assures the application of uniform standards. Because these two concerns are in potential conflict, institutions must balance the two. Reliance on faculty judgment permits more variation in standards, while reliance on test scores which are beyond the control of an individual faculty member may be seen as an infringement of faculty rights.

Although institutions use tests to assess the skills levels of students and to place them in basic writing courses, most of the institutions have gone the traditional route of leaving decisions concerning student progress to the judgment of individual faculty members. However, this pattern is far from universal. Of the institutions offering courses in basic writing, less than 15% rely solely on test scores and approximately 30% rely on test scores either alone or in combination with teacher judgment as criteria for students to exit from courses.

The overall tendency is not to rely on test scores for exit from basic writing courses. However, the institutions which view poor academic preparation to be very much of a problem are twice as likely to use tests solely or in conjunction with teacher judgment as exit criteria from basic skills courses (36%) as are those in which poor academic preparation is considered not much of a problem (18%). Institutions which perceive greater problems with poor academic preparation appear to be more likely to resolve the balance of a need for uniform standards and the protection of faculty rights in favor of uniform standards.

Institutions at which courses are mandatory are more likely to use tests solely or in conjunction with teacher judgment as exit criteria from courses than those at which courses are not mandatory. Perhaps at institutions where courses are mandated, faculty are more willing to relinquish control over assessing student progress because of a greater concern with ensuring uniform standards for determining when students have shown adequate improvement.

Some implications for writing program administrators

Because of the inadequate writing skills of growing numbers of entering freshmen, more and more institutions are assessing students' writing, developing their own instruments for such assessment, and constructing new courses and curricula. It is clear that writing program administrators will continue to play a key role in these efforts.

As the demand for writing programs continues to grow, the responsibilities of writing program administrators will become even greater. Writing programs are becoming complex entities with a multitude of administrative demands and tasks. Far example, as the size and complexity of the writing programs increase, the need for full-time faculty to keep abreast of new research in writing and instructional methods becomes critical. Moreover, the expansion of writing programs may

involve large numbers of adjuncts, new and sometimes out-of-department faculty, and graduate assistants. These new staff members must be trained, supervised, and encouraged to participate in the life of the program. Similarly, if writing centers are established, they must be supervised, or if supervised by others, liaison should be maintained between them and the established program. Writing instruction is often given in other departments such as ESL, reading, or speech. Ongoing communication should be maintained among all departments teaching writing. In addition, because of the importance of writing to most academic disciplines, contact should be established and curriculum planned with other faculty, both to establish support for the writing program and to encourage writing across the curriculum. Clearly, meeting these demands and performing these tasks will require a major commitment of time and energy on the part of the writing program administrator as well as the faculty.

Additional administrative tasks inevitably result at those institutions which assess the writing competency and proficiency of students. In these institutions, someone must select or develop appropriate instruments; develop and modify procedures for administering and scoring the instruments; and maintain records of student performance on the writing instruments as well as of placement and performance in courses. Finally, the tests and testing procedures must be constantly re-evaluated.

Writing program administrators are beginning to help each other through sharing information on common problems in writing assessment, curriculum, and research and evaluation. In addition to attending conferences and reading professional journals such as *College Composition and Communication* and the *Journal of Basic Writing*, they are establishing and using networks such as WPA and the National Testing Network in Writing (NTNW).⁶

They are also beginning to reach out to teachers in the secondary and elementary schools. High school-college articulation projects are increasingly heralded in the news media and in the recommendations of national commissions and task forces. While forming productive working partnerships among elementary, secondary, and college teachers is often a Herculean task, such partnerships should result in developing collaborative curricula, assessment instruments, and more effective teaching methodologies. Increased collaboration among teachers at all levels should lead to increased professionalism and performance of teachers and, eventually, to the improvement of the writing skills of students as they move through the educational system.

The writing program administrator's primary responsibility is, of course, to his or her program and its students. However, because our students are products of an earlier educational system, colleges--and especially their writing program administrators--may find that their responsibilities ultimately extend beyond the confines of the program, department, and the college.

Notes

⁶The report on which this article is based, Marie Jean Lederman, Susan Remmer Ryzewic, and Michael Ribaud, *Assessment and Improvement of the Academic Skills of Entering Freshmen: A National Survey*, Research Monograph Series, Report No. 5 (New

York: Instructional Resource Center, Office of Academic Affairs, The City University of New York, 1983), is available through the Instructional Resource Center, The City University of New York, 535 East 80th Street, New York, NY 10021.

²Edward B. Fiske, "All At Once Everyone Is Worried About Schools," *The New York Times*, 8 May 1983, 18E.

³See Gene I. Maeroff, "Pupils Show Gains in Easy Arithmetic," *The New York Times*, 14 April 1983, 21A; A. Applebee, et al., *Reading, Thinking, and Writing: Results from the 1979-80 National Assessment of Reading and Literature* (Denver: The National Assessment of Educational Progress, 1981); and *Academic Preparation for College: What Students Need to Know and Be Able to Do* (New York: The College Board, 1983).

⁴Institutional perceptions of the extent to which poor academic preparation is a problem among entering freshmen is based on a question asked of college officials. The response options range from very much of a problem to no problem at all.

⁵Other instruments which are used by at least 20 institutions to place students in basic writing courses include (in order of usage): the American College Testing Program, the Scholastic Aptitude Test--Verbal, the Test of Standard Written English, the Comparative Guidance and Placement, and state developed tests.

⁶Established at The City University of New York, NTNW has brought together a network of 1500 faculty, administrators, and test developers concerned with postsecondary writing assessment. For more information, write to National Testing Network in Writing, The City University of New York, 535 East 80th Street, New York, NY 10021.