Testing In and Testing Out

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The single most vexing issue that WPAs have to deal with is the endless writing assessments of students for program purposes, from placement of entering students to certification of graduating seniors.* This problem often blends into program assessment, another assessment issue of great importance for writing programs, and another topic about which most WPAs know little. In recent years, program assessment has received a good bit of specialized attention (see, for example, Haswell, Huot and Schendel, White, “The Rhetorical Problem”), so I will not deal with it here. Instead, I will focus on the testing of students for various other purposes beyond a single classroom. I intend to disentangle the concepts and conflicting practices that make this aspect of writing assessment particularly burdensome. While I have solutions to propose for some of these assessment problems, my principle goal is to clarify the issues that lie behind them, so they we can think clearly about the practices that make sense in our particular institutions.

Society has given us a heavy responsibility. When we try to put entering students in the classes that will challenge them, yet allow them to succeed, we are acting as benign gatekeepers, but gatekeepers nonetheless. If students get in and through our first-year writing programs, the chances that they will graduate and share in the goods of our society are strong. If we—and they—fail to meet that challenge, many who might accomplish that goal drop out. And our responsibility is not only to our weakest writers; many of our most gifted students are likely to continue to believe that writing is a matter of error avoidance, not discovery, if we mishandle placement. It may be a losing struggle to keep doors open that are swinging shut for the less privileged, but it is our struggle to make—just as it is our job to keep reading and writing alive in the college curriculum for all students.
This is the testing “in” of my title and I’ll return to this matter in the second half of this article.

There are also two kinds of testing “out” that are our responsibility: testing out of first-year composition requirements (as with Advanced Placement exams) and testing out of whatever writing requirements our campus may have in place for general education and graduation. Again, society often puts in our hands the scales for weighing our students’ access to the rights and privileges of advanced higher education and college degrees. These are gate-keeping functions that almost none of us are prepared or trained for. Furthermore, they are hateful to many of us, for whom gatekeepers are the natural enemy for a democratic education. Witness the regular appearance on the WPA listserv of some version of this plaintive appeal from a new WPA: I find I have to be in charge of placement testing as well as a graduation requirement. Does anyone know of any scholarship I can find that will help me? And, by the way, what on earth is the CLEP and is it contagious?

So I have set myself the task here of untangling the muddle of theories and practices that make testing out and testing in a perennial agony for most WPAs. I will look at the issues in reverse chronological order, beginning with the graduation writing requirements at many universities and university systems, then moving to the equivalency tests and transfer options that are designed to meet our first-year requirements, and finally to the most complicated issue of all, placement testing. I will focus on the issues and theories that lie behind our problems with these matters, give you my suggestions on where I think we should stand in practical terms, and then propose a WPA assessment agenda.

Graduation and Upper-Division Requirements

With depressing regularity, faculty outside the writing program, university administrators, and those who hire our graduates discover that some of our students do not write very well, even though they have met all requirements for the degree. Even though that sad fact is surely our fault, they will argue, since we do not insist on enough grammar drill in first-year-composition, they nonetheless turn to us to solve the problem by giving a test. If we accept that logic, and I regret to say that over my long career I have routinely done so, the debate centers upon the nature of that test, its standards, what, if anything, we should do with the large number of students who fail it, who should pay for it all, and so on. If this scenario is not occurring on your campus, it probably has in the past or will in the future. So what should be the position of the WPA?
The most important principle to apply here is to reject all but one of the premises of the argument. We can accept without trouble the assertion that most students on campus do not write as well as we would like them to; neither do their teachers, for that matter. And the administration is not a model of great prose either, when you look closely at its documents. So we should welcome the concern about student writing. After all, we can point out, one of the problems with the first-year writing course is that it is seldom reinforced elsewhere in the curriculum.

But a test, no matter how carefully put together or how rigorously graded, is not the answer to this problem. In fact, it creates many more problems than it solves and we should not be party to such a superficial and ineffective way to deal with a serious matter. No, we should say, we will not accept responsibility for the writing of students we have not seen since their first year on campus or for the transfer students we have never seen. And we will not agree to the absurd proposition that a single test can measure every student’s eligibility for a college degree, whatever the student’s major. But we stand ready to help our campus establish a culture of writing, to help faculty in all disciplines develop ways to use writing to help students learn, and to oversee a high-quality writing center as a resource for students and faculty writers. We are eager to work with our colleagues in all departments to help them meet rather than avoid their responsibility to improve student writing in their majors and it is in the major that any graduation writing requirement must reside. And, finally, we will be glad to advise the division of Institutional Research in developing studies of student writing outcomes by portfolio assessment in the major.

In short, we can accept the criticism of student writing and welcome the urge to do something about it. But we must decline to accept the responsibility that all faculty must share and we must decline to participate in a trivial and invalid testing program as the sole campus response to the situation. Here, we should be able to say to the dean or the provost, here is a coherent plan to establish a writing across the curriculum program and here is another for a writing center; here is what it will cost. Furthermore, here is how we will evaluate the program’s outcomes. And believe me, we can add, it is worth the money and you will be pleased with the results. But it cannot be done on the cheap or by us alone.

In other words, I am urging WPAs not to be drawn into a debate about the best method of testing out of graduation writing requirements. The assessment issue, as is always the case, is a disguise for much larger concerns, here, “what level of literacy a degree in business or history or education represents.” You cannot and should not take on responsibility for any assessment that gives you and the writing program sole responsibility...
for testing out of other peoples’ programs. You must firmly and repeatedly insist that college graduation requirements are the responsibility of the entire faculty and any graduation requirement needs to be enforced by the department of the students’ major. Your job is to help them meet that responsibility, not to relieve them of it.

**Testing Out of First-Year Writing Requirements**

There are three different ways in which students test out of first-year writing requirements: national tests, principally two sponsored by the College Board, The College-Level Examination Program (CLEP) and AP; local equivalents of these tests, sometimes called challenge exams; and transfer of credits from other institutions. You may be surprised to hear me include transfer issues with testing issues, but they are much more similar than they appear to be. In every case, the student presents some kind of evidence that he or she has already met the writing requirement, should receive credit for the achievement, and be certified as ready to move on. Again, as with graduation writing requirements, there is a buried conceptual issue behind the implementation of this policy. In this case, that issue has to do with the definition of what college credit actually represents.

There are two dominant theories about this issue and the differences between these usually unarticulated definitions are the cause of much posturing and argument. One definition of college credit is based on seat time: if a student has sat in class the requisite number of hours and received at least the minimum passing grade from some teacher, the student has earned college units—even if the student is not particularly competent. The competing definition of college credit argues that if a student can demonstrate that he or she knows and can do what someone passing an appropriate college course knows and can do, than the student has earned college credit—even if no seat time at all has taken place. Notice, our routine acceptance of transfer courses depends on the first definition, while our much more grudging acceptance of AP scores as if they certified transfer credit depends on the second definition. When a WPA says, as many do, “I don’t care how well a student writes, she must take a college composition course; there is always more to learn about writing,” seat time is the governing principle for meeting the requirement for credit. When a student comes to your office asking for credit on the basis that he knows what your first-year course teaches, he is following the second definition.

Our programs run much more smoothly when we are consistent in our theory and practice about testing out. But commonly we assert one definition in theory and follow another in practice. Most of us are likely to define
college credit by performance criteria, since we know too many instances of idle and wasted seat time without much effect. The widespread acceptance of the WPA Outcomes Statement certainly urges us to define our course credits by what students know and can do, rather than mere class attendance. Besides we all know in our hearts that the grading standards in all other colleges are way lower than ours are. Yet in practice we are much more ready to accept seat time for credit than we are high scores on performance measures, such as AP. Perhaps that means that we trust our colleagues, broadly speaking, more than we do the professional testing agencies or the content of their tests—even though many of the tests are in fact designed and graded by respected faculty. Or maybe it means that it is just too much hassle to question transfer credit, while the national tests are much easier to attack. But if we distrust AP and its weaker brother CLEP, and we profess to award credit by performance standards, we are obliged to develop our own equivalency assessments, according to our own course goals and the statements in college catalogues. We are often caught in this inconsistency, declaring that credit for our required first year course is a matter of performance but in practice allowing only seat time for credit.

There is no easy way out of this muddle. However we may dislike using seat time elsewhere as a criterion for credit, we are often bound by institutional or even statewide articulation agreements that mandate such transfer credit. But wherever we can, we should insist on, or even develop, performance measures such as AP or locally designed and scored writing portfolios that will offer students the opportunity to test out by showing how much they know and can do. At the least, we can insist on validity studies of test and transfer policies that meet our writing requirements. Assessment research gives us several studies that show when we put our theories in practice with demanding and valid equivalency performance measures, most students who pass them use the credits they have earned to take more advanced work, not less work. It is a rare WPA who understands, not to speak of controls, campus policy on these matters. But this is really our business, not to be left to the assistant dean of admissions.

Testing In

This brings us to the most complex and difficult assessment problem for WPAs: testing in. As before, we have to look at the concepts behind our practice before we can talk about technologies of assessment suitable for placement decisions into first-year writing courses. And these theories are among the most hotly contested in our field.
I’ll start with the most basic of these issues: whether first-year writing courses should be required of all students, aside from those who test out. After all, if the course is not required, it becomes an elective and placement is no longer an issue. Then I’ll consider the question of the structure—or lack of structure—of the first-year writing program. If there is no structured series of required courses with different goals and demands, there is nothing to place students into. Unless the first-year course is required and unless it has a fairly transparent structure, we should not waste time and money on placement. Finally, I’ll turn to the assessment options for placement we now can select. You may be surprised to find that I have lost confidence in all placement testing, aside from a few specialized local ones, but that I see placement into a structured program as essential if we are to be academically and socially responsible. I’ll conclude by resolving that apparent contradiction.

The Abolitionist Argument.

Some of our most valued scholars, such as Robert Connors and Sharon Crowley, have argued at some length that what Crowley calls “the universal requirement” should be made an elective. Their arguments are not trivial, based in part on the terrible employment practices at many institutions for staffing the course (and who knows that better than WPAs?), the supposed negative tone for any course that is required rather than chosen, the amateur status of most of those teaching it, and the distortion of our field by its weighty investment in an introductory service course. I have not been convinced by these arguments, nor has the profession as a whole. In fact, I am gratified that these “abolitionists” calling for first-year composition to become an elective have had so little effect on practice, though their arguments have elicited some spirited debate. To be sure, for some of us, it would be a great relief to be rid of the writing requirement and the placement process attached to it. But while I must grant the force of much of what the abolitionists say, I think the contrary arguments are much stronger.

For me, the overriding argument for the continued presence of the universal requirement is as much political as academic: what we represent on campus is crucial to any concept of democratic education. Al Gore’s newest book cites Senator Robert Byrd arguing that “reason, logic and truth seem to play a sharply diminished role in the way America now makes important decisions” (1) and goes on to assert that the country’s public discourse has become “less focused and clear, less reasoned” (2). This concern, the basis for rhetoric since before Aristotle, is what lies behind the need for college writing programs. If the abolitionists had their way, there is no question
that our position on campus would be sharply curtailed, and so would our influence.

I don’t mean to minimize the bureaucratic problems that make our jobs so frustrating and difficult. Nor can I pretend that we always achieve our goals; recent political experience suggests otherwise. But if we became as marginal to our institutions as, say, the philosophy department, that loss of power and influence would not only represent a major self-inflicted wound to our field but to the society as a whole. I think even the managers of our increasingly corporatized universities recognize that fact. And so do our incoming students, who expect and do not object to a well-run required composition course in practice. For instance, Duane Roen cites the senior survey conducted yearly by Arizona State University. At the point of graduation, these students routinely rate first-year composition among their most valued university experiences.

So if important constituencies on your campus want to get rid of the universal requirement, look to your first-year courses or your teachers or your administration or yourself to find out why. The writing program and the values we represent on campus are much too important to allow them to dry up and disappear.

The Need for Structure.

Here is a typical situation for me, as a consultant in assessment. I am sitting at a table with eight community college teachers and WPAs, most of them in fact English department chairs on branch campuses of one of the largest institutions in America. I’ve been asked to recommend a new writing placement test that will suit their needs better than the Nelson-Denny reading test, the current placement exam. Since the colleges have coordinated required writing programs, with three levels of non-transfer composition and two levels of transfer courses, it appears as if placement testing should work well. As I always do, we begin with a review of the curriculum. The faculty members present are a bit surprised that I want to start with the curriculum instead of a test, but they are willing to humor the outsider. I turn to the man on my left and ask him what he teaches in English 101, the first transfer level course. He describes a course focused on careful reading of two novels and a collection of short stories, during which students write five papers, none of them revised. The person to his left smiles and says that she uses a collection of essays and has her students write and repeatedly revise one research paper in the course of the term. The person to her left does a great deal of workbook grammar, since, he asserts, you have to know English grammar really well before you can write even a good sentence. The
next teacher focuses on student portfolios and asks the students to choose four topics for the four papers in the portfolio, while the class mostly reads and interprets poetry. And so on, around the room. The last teacher asks why I’m wasting time on how people teach when all they want is a placement test and they all, after all, just teach writing in their different ways. I respond that placement is a waste of time and money until there is a structured program, with defined criteria and goals to place students into.

Many of our colleagues will defend the course I have just described on the grounds that we shouldn’t destroy the creativity and individuality of writing teachers by telling them what to do or making them all do the same things. And in truth, we don’t have conclusive studies to show that there is one best way to teach writing, so we need to be careful about mocking methodologies that seem inappropriate at the moment. But if we are to administer an unstructured program, we ought not to be involved in placement testing. I must say that I think that students do better with a structured program, along with a placement assessment linked to it, but some programs seem to do very well without either. I like best of all programs based on a reasonable adaptation of outcome statements for each level of the course, using the WPA Outcomes Statement as a model. In that pattern, the outcomes (and the requisite starting abilities) for students in each of the program’s courses are stated with clarity, while the teachers have substantial freedom in deciding how to reach those outcomes. Whatever the program, we should all agree not to bother with placement unless there is a structured program aligned with the placement assessment.

*The Theory and Practice of Placement.*

So let’s return to the practical issue of the options for placement that WPAs with structured programs must encounter.

The least satisfactory method of placement—and the most common in American colleges—is by means of some multiple-choice testing of editing skills, a quick impromptu writing sample, or some combination of both. The problems with this kind of assessment have become obvious. The multiple choice test of editing skills does not require the production of text and so measures skills not directly related to the first-year writing course. A recent study by Vicki Edgington et al reports that over 250 students placed in remedial courses through the COMPASS test (an untimed editing exercise on computers) were also placed by a writing sample into the regular first-year writing course at the University of Louisville, and all these students chose the higher placement. More than 70% of these students received an A or B in the course, and over 90% of these students received
at least a C (see O’Neill). The indirect relation of such tests to writing is in much dispute and seems particularly weak for students from homes that do not speak the school dialect. If you need evidence for the invalidity of multiple-choice tests for placement in writing courses, you should consult two essays by Rich Haswell available in the archives of Comppile\textsuperscript{2}. While a written placement test is certainly a better message to students than tests that do not contain any writing at all, the addition of a single impromptu essay to a multiple-choice test doesn’t materially improve the test validity, while weakening its reliability. About the best of the existing placement tests are those that focus on assessing student writing portfolios in terms of a particular college’s curriculum. We do have several examples of local portfolio placement programs that claim to be accurate, reliable and affordable (see, for example, the one at Miami University of Ohio, at http://www.muohio.edu/portfolio/). But these programs are so complicated and expensive that they require special funding, not available for most of us. The situation leaves WPAs in a real quandary: placement is valuable, even necessary on many campuses, but we seem not to have a good way to do it. So we do the best we can with clearly inadequate testing, although we tend to wince at the way these tests define our courses and our discipline: writing as filling in bubbles, writing as first-draft superficial prose, writing as the five-paragraph theme, and so on.

Many of you know that I have for some decades been a strong advocate of placement testing, based on the theoretical arguments supporting a targeted writing curriculum for entering college students, according to their abilities. There is compelling evidence that entering college students defined by their institutions as having weak writing skills will persevere and succeed in college at about the same rate as those with stronger writing ability, if the weaker students receive the extra help basic writing programs can provide; without such help, fewer than 15% of those less prepared students, several studies have shown, will still be in college after two years (White, “Reconsidering”). There is also a common-sense argument that regular college composition courses have higher standards when the weakest students receive extra help before or during those courses. But while I remain committed to providing opportunities for success to all admitted students by means of different levels of college composition instruction, I have at last lost confidence in placement \textit{testing} as an appropriate method for determining who should enroll at these different levels. That is, placement into an appropriate curriculum is both responsible and valuable; but placement testing as now generally practiced has shown itself to be a political and economic rather than an academic activity. Everyone knows that such untested matters as social class, finances, motivation, self-confidence, reading expe-
rience, and family responsibilities play a large role in student success in every writing class. In other words, large-scale placement tests, which tend to measure editing skills on other people’s prose or impromptu fluency on a writing topic about which there is little time to think, measure only a small component of what is needed for student success, and they cannot be responsive to the program into which they are placing students. They tend to be a social sorting mechanism, useful for political posturing and gaining funds, but of limited use for students, teachers, or institutions. By far the strongest correlation of the multiple-choice portions of placement tests is with parent income, paralleling the results for the SAT. A series of recent books, such as those edited by William Bowen and by Walter Benn Michaels report that students from families earning over $100,000 had an average combined SAT score (old style) of 1115, while students from families earning between $30,000 and $40,000 had a combined score of 960. Let’s face it: almost all of our placement tests are not valid and we shouldn’t be using them.

So how can we place students into a well-designed series of college writing classes, including a variety of basic writing instruction that will lead to student and teacher satisfaction and to as much student success as possible? At this point, I think our best option is to replace placement testing with Directed Self-Placement (DSP), which I have come to believe is the most effective, ethical, and responsible means to keep the advantages of placement yet avoid the disadvantages of placement testing. The idea of DSP is deceptively simple and yet the most creative idea in assessment in a generation. In place of testing students, the institution puts its efforts into informing students about the demands and expectations of the composition courses available to them and how they can meet the writing requirement. Then the student makes an informed choice, and takes full responsibility for that choice, instead of more or less grudgingly accepting test results and institutional placement. DSP assumes that students will be mature enough to choose the course that is right for them, if they have enough information and pressure to choose wisely. DSP also assumes that there may be many reasons besides test performance for students to choose more or less demanding writing courses in their first year of college. DSP, like any placement procedure, depends on the institution clearly defining the requirements and proposed outcomes of its different writing courses and maintaining consistency in those definitions. But then DSP adds a new demand on the writing program: communicating the structure to entering students. For DSP to be effective, the institution must develop some means of making that information meaningful to young students, generally bemused by the mass of lectures, warnings, greetings, and exhortations offered in the
weeks before the opening of classes (Royer and Gilles). But if the funds now spent on placement testing are redirected to innovative counseling, as many of the campuses experimenting with DSP have done, there is ample money for this new method of placement.

Of course, DSP, like many other solutions to educational problems, offers new problems in place of old. Yet the new problems are those that postsecondary education should be meeting anyway: helping students take responsibility for their own learning, replacing reductive placement testing with sound counseling, developing clear curricular guidelines and outcomes, and becoming less paternal and more, shall we say, avuncular. While DSP, like the concept of placement itself, is a conservative proposal, one that maintains the first-year writing requirement as an essential introduction to college-level writing, thinking, and problem solving, DSP proposes a radical solution to the persistent problems of over testing, negative labeling, and student initial discomfort with required coursework. And, most radical of all, it declares that entering students can responsibly place themselves into writing courses, when given sufficient information.

But I don’t want to be too optimistic about something as political as placement testing. As we may expect, a simple, cheap, and crude political solution to the issue of placement stands ready to replace existing local placement experiments and abort the promise of DSP. Both of the major American college aptitude testing institutions, the College Board, and the American College Testing Service, added short impromptu writing samples to their admissions testing programs in 2005, which, combined with longer multiple-choice portions, claim to be writing tests. The testing firms pay enough allegiance to their own research to say, in small print, that these tests should not necessarily be used for placement, but the marketers who seem to control the firms, proclaim loudly that the scores should serve for placement into writing courses. Since most students bound for four-year colleges and universities take one of these tests, almost every admissions office now has ready-made placement information at hand, paid for by the student rather than the college, and buttressed by an imposing set of comparative statistics. It will not matter that on many, perhaps most campuses, the information will be meaningless or worse; it will be politically difficult, if not impossible, to resist using it to place students. So we can anticipate that local placement procedures and the high promise of DSP will have a hard time surviving. Like local businesses confronting a new Wal-Mart big box store, most of our local placement procedures will find it hard to compete with the lower prices and standardized goods coming from out of town.
An additional cruel twist still awaits. Although the commercial firms devising and scoring these written tests have been busy recruiting battalions of human readers to score them, does anyone doubt that those humans will shortly be replaced by computers, now moving rapidly into the scoring of writing? Computer scoring is only a decade ahead of computer-generated writing. Students may even now key an essay topic into essay generator software and receive a neat (if hilariously stupid) paper, including an all-purpose graph and fictitious citations, all ready to submit. A grim satire looms: student computers writing out prose to be read by scoring computers, in turn placing the students into composition sections increasingly taught in computer centers by computer-based instruction. The economy and efficiency is stunning: neither students nor teachers will need to write or read, or even show up on campus. Of course, computer technology now plays a significant role in the teaching of writing. But when computer downloading and computer scoring actually replace human writers and readers, as they are now starting to do, we approach the dystopias of science fiction, such as the Terminator films, not the technologically supported learning environment most WPAs are seeking to institute or expand. (For another ironic take on this development see Doug Hesse’s keynote speech at the CCC conference in 2005.4)

Well, we are not there yet. But we must agree that it will be a bold institution with a powerful WPA willing to budget its own placement procedures, for its own students, in the face of the scores that will be arriving at no additional cost to the college. Where will we find the political will to fight such a battle? We have already seen an impressive marketing campaign by the College Board, arguing that the vexatious problem of coping with individual students and a broad writing curriculum has now been solved, in the hope that the objections of the rhetoric/composition community to its new test will be submerged by the enormous wealth and power of the testing industry. Perhaps our almost unanimous negative response to Turnitin.com can provide a model for dealing with the outsourcing of our professional concerns. We must hope that institutions and faculty will resist such false solutions and the mechanistic future they foreshadow.

Conclusion

In conclusion, let me summarize the assessment agenda I propose for WPAs in the near future. As for testing out of our institutional graduation requirements, we should resist all attempts to make us responsible for such testing; our role should be to provide knowledge and support to other faculty bodies that must face their own responsibilities. We can be strong advocates
for modern writing centers, WAC programs, and responsible departmental outcomes assessments without becoming testing centers for the entire institution. When it comes to testing out of our writing courses, particularly writing requirements, we need to take an active role in selecting and evaluating external examinations such as AP or CLEP in terms of the stated goals of our program, and not leave those key decisions to the admissions office. I hesitate to propose the same level of activity in relation to transfer or dual-enrollment courses, since they are so political and time-consuming, but you need to know what your institutional policies are and be ready to challenge unprofessional policies or procedures.

In relation to the knottiest of our assessment problems, placement testing, we have a professional obligation to challenge invalid testing programs or placement programs that are not linked to our writing courses. We need to get our own houses in order if they are chaotic before dealing with placement testing and we need to find ways to move to DSP or other local and professionally sound methods of placement; we then need to institute studies of the effectiveness of our placement program to defend its cost and value.

And while we are doing all of this, we need to maintain our programs in all the areas I’ve not discussed, such as staff development, hiring, funding, and on and on. After all, the WPA is a road warrior, manning and womaning the outposts of reason, rhetoric, literacy, and logic in a world—and often a university—less and less interested in such matters. The job, of course, is impossible, but nonetheless eminently worth doing. I salute you for doing your best at this crucial job.

Notes

* Adapted from a Talk at the WPA National Conference July 14, 2007

1. Gary Hatch of Brigham Young University has completed an unpublished study showing this, as did I when I was coordinating writing testing for the California State University system. The AP web site also lists some in-house studies.

2. “Writing Placement” deals with methods of placement and “Writing Placement Research” gives much useful data: <http://comppile.tamu.edu/archives.htm>


4. The talk, which includes a nonsensical computer-generated “essay” on aphasia that gained the top score from a computer scoring program, is available in three

Works Cited