HOW TO BEGIN A TESTING PROGRAM

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Edward White opened the session by outlining five problems or stages which institutions and organizations must move through to develop and implement a testing program. He used these stages, listed below, as his framework:

- Discovering or demonstrating the need for a testing program
- Developing the necessary political strengths and goals
- Choosing or developing a test
- Evaluating the program
- Reporting the scores or results of the testing program

White intended to deal with the five phases sequentially. However, in response to the needs and interests of the participants, he devoted most of the session to responding to questions. As a consequence, the phases were not explored sequentially or in the same amount of detail. Particular attention was paid to choosing or developing a test; and specifically the importance of thinking through what it is you want to test.

Demonstrating a need is the first essential step in beginning a testing program regardless of its purpose or focus. If there is no need to test, do not bother. The need for a testing program can be established in a number of ways, including: statistics on the use of services, the performance of students in courses, and the amount of shifting between classes which takes place.

Choosing a test is extremely complicated; test goals must be clear and the test must be compatible with these goals. Tests are not only devices for ranking people—they send messages about what is considered important and as a consequence will have an impact on curriculum. The message of tests is the most important reason for using a test which requires writing, rather than relying solely on a multiple-choice test.

To be able to defend a competency test at a later date, White feels one should make sure that several steps are followed. First, the test should be selected or developed according to accepted procedures, with attention paid to rhetorical mode. For example, when designing an essay test, the questions need to be designed for a particular purpose. Moreover, for a question to work, it must be valid and able to be reliably scored. To do this properly, it is essential that essay questions be pilot tested. The test should exhibit high validity and reliability. It should be fair, proper, and reasonable. Second, it is important that the test be administered properly—students must take the test under the same conditions and within the same constraints. Finally, it is essential that the test be scored properly (controlled readings, with at least two readers scoring each essay).

Although this is not generally the case, the evaluation of a program should start when the testing program is begun. However, in designing the evaluation model, it is important not to fall into the trap of evaluating placement tests in terms of predictive validity (the relationship between scores on the placement test and performance in the course). White feels that this approach to evaluation is flawed because better instruction can result in lower predictive validity.

White closed the discussion by reemphasizing the importance of thinking through *what* it is you want to test and *why* because the answers to these questions must be the foundation of any testing program.

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