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WRITING ASSESSMENT AT THE UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN

In January of 1978, University of Michigan faculty in the College of Literature, Science, and the Arts adopted a new writing requirement for all students entering the College after Summer Term, 1979. This new program, administered by the College's English Composition Board (ECB), requires that students successfully complete an introductory composition course or its equivalent during their first year in the College and an upper-level course (usually in the area of their major) after reaching junior standing.

As part of the College's two-part writing requirement, all freshmen and transfer students must write an assessment essay before registering for their first classes. Based on the writing skills displayed in their essays, students are either placed into the Introductory Composition course, exempted from it, or, for those whose writing skills warrant intensive training, placed into Writing Tutorials. Tutorial courses are seven weeks long with a maximum enrollment of sixteen students in a section. During the course, each student receives up to 28 hours of classroom instruction and an additional five to seven hours of individual help through scheduled weekly conferences.

At the end of each seven-week course, Tutorial students write another assessment essay on a new topic. As before, their essays are evaluated by two raters, and on the basis of their performance, they are either placed into Introductory Composition, exempted from it, or required to enroll in another seven-week Writing Tutorial. Assessment essays are evaluated by faculty members who teach Writing Tutorials; teachers are not, however, allowed to determine the placement of their own students. One of the successes of the program has been the rate at which Tutorial students progress. Nearly 85% are able to go on to Introductory Composition after one seven-week course; virtually all students are able to do so after two courses.

Because the University's new writing requirement is founded on the conviction that students learn more effectively when their skills are matched with appropriate modes of instruction, the ECB's assessment procedure is

the cornerstone of the entire program. As a result, a great deal of energy has been devoted to ensuring that the procedure is a valid estimate of student writing ability.

Instrumental to monitoring the program is the maintenance of detailed computer records for every essay (c. 26,000) that the Board has evaluated. Beginning with our experimental year in 1978, we have collected and recorded the information pertinent to the testing situation—including scores and placements for each essay, the topic on which the student wrote, and the readers who evaluated the essay. This information is routinely combined with other indicators of the student's academic performance, including grade point average in high school and scores on such national tests as SAT, ACT, and Advanced Placement. These records have enabled us, for example, to identify and retrieve any essay on which raters disagreed and has proved to be invaluable for ongoing training of ECB evaluators. Comparing other academic data with our own results has also been helpful in answering questions about the consistency (and predictive value) of various topics.

Since the program began, we have continuously monitored the reliability of our raters' judgments. We have discovered, by examination of the data, that very few rater discrepancies result from error on the part of either evaluator. In fact, weekly training sessions in which problem essays are read and discussed by the raters are characterized by almost unanimous agreement about the features and qualities of each essay. When raters do differ, it is nearly always about which placement will best serve a student's needs and what type of instruction will best foster the writer's present skills.

Thus, most of our time at the ECB is spent in the attempt to articulate for ourselves and for our colleagues the kinds of instruction that will best serve a particular student. Although we have many questions to which we have only parts of answers or none at all, we are convinced that engaging such questions is exactly the way we should be spending our time and the surest way to provide a profitable curriculum for our students.

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