

Proposed Plan for Assessing Student Writing at Bucknell

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I. Introduction

The Writing Program legislation passed by the Faculty in 1983 includes language charging the Composition Council with “approving plans for assessing the writing of entering students” and with “approving plans for evaluating the writing of graduating students.”¹ To date, no such plan has been adopted, despite the language in the legislation and despite increasing pressure from external accreditation agencies; i.e., Middle States and ABET.

In April, 2004, Committee on Instruction (COI) sent the Composition Council the following charge: “COI charges the Composition Council, or a separate and overlapping sub-committee convened by the Council, with determining if it is possible and desirable to engage in a formal process by which improvement in student writing at Bucknell can be assessed.” The Council discussed this issue extensively throughout the past two academic years, consulting with Bucknell faculty and investigating outside sources of information on writing assessment.

Bucknell faculty overall are aware that external agencies (Middle States and ABET) are requiring that we implement writing assessment, and most faculty expressed a somewhat resigned acceptance that some form of writing assessment is inevitable. But there are important pedagogical reasons for assessment as well. In the concurrent review that was done on faculty opinion about the Writing Program, there was a wide range of views expressed about the ability of Bucknell students to write effectively and about the effectiveness of the Writing Program. Whereas many faculty believe the Writing Program to be effective, that view is not shared by all faculty members; for example, one department reports: “Even as we try to achieve the writing goals, many [faculty in the department] still find seniors in classes who cannot compose a simple paragraph. Perhaps the basic structure is flawed.”

Comments like this, along with the mandate from Middle States and ABET, stress the importance of having *some* campus-wide mechanism for assessing student writing. Despite the limitations inherent in any kind of writing assessment, to satisfy both internal and external constituencies, the Composition Council has concluded that an assessment plan *should* be developed. The plan presented below should be viewed as a first stage of a plan that will undoubtedly need revisions and fine-tuning with experience. The plan will be implemented in stages, first as a pilot program using sampling until any bugs in the approach are worked out. Depending on the success (or lack thereof) of the pilot program, the assessment plan will then be broadened to cover all of the writing courses.

II. Rationale and Concerns

Ideally, assessment should address *both* the question about whether graduating students have achieved proficiency in writing *and* whether or not the Writing Program at Bucknell is helping the students achieve this proficiency.

¹ In the concurrent review of the Writing Program, a recommendation is made to change the language to replace these two charges with the single charge that the Composition Council approve “plans for assessing student writing.”

The following criteria were considered essential for any assessment plan for the Writing Program:

- the plan must not be overly burdensome on faculty and staff;
- the assessment should be tailored specifically to address the goals of the Writing Program at Bucknell;
- because of the disciplinary nature of writing and because of the variety of different types of writing, assessment of writing must be considered in the context of an assigned task;
- a mechanism needs to be incorporated to allow continued analysis and discussion of the results of the assessment, with possibilities for changes in the Program based on these results; and
- the assessment plan must be sufficient to satisfy Middle States and ABET, both of which have stated very clear expectations for assessment in recent accreditations.

The Composition Council considered but ultimately rejected a few different approaches to assessment. First, timed writing prompts (e.g., for entering and graduating students) were rejected by the Council for the following reasons: (a) they typically limit the ability of the writer to follow a process of revision, one of the cornerstones of Bucknell's Writing Program; (b) they would require significant additional time on the part of some faculty or staff beyond time already spent teaching classes; and (c) there was strong sentiment expressed against such a form of assessment in the results of the faculty survey from the Fall of 2004.

The use of writing portfolios was also considered. In ideal circumstances, portfolios can be very informative; in fact, a few departments currently use portfolios for assessment purposes. However, the use of portfolios for university-wide assessment of writing was ultimately rejected for several reasons. First, someone has to look at the portfolios as part of the assessment. We concluded that the amount of additional time required to do this would be prohibitive. Second, collection and organization of thousands of portfolios could pose a logistical nightmare. Third, adequate assessment of the writing samples would have to be done by faculty with familiarity with the subject matter and with the objective of the samples. This is more easily done in class by the professor who assigned the writing in the first place.

Any assessment plan must be weighed against the following questions that were raised by the faculty in our concurrent Writing Program Review and by the Committee on Instruction:

- **Faculty time.** How can meaningful assessment data be obtained without adding significantly to the faculty work-load, especially for W-1 and W-2 courses?
- **Inter-rater variability.** How can we make meaningful comparisons between data collected by different professors in different courses and disciplines?

- **Discipline-specific variability in writing.** How will a university-wide assessment plan account for different discipline-specific types of writing?
- **Faculty anonymity.** How can we guarantee that writing assessment results will not be used to reward and/or punish faculty teaching writing-intensive courses?
- **Student confidentiality.** How can we guarantee that writing assessment results will not in any way be attached or associated with the students whose writing is the basis for the assessment?

The Composition Council consulted various sources for guidance on writing assessment, including a position statement (see Appendix) co-written by the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) and the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC). We reviewed writing assessment plans conducted at several other universities, and reviewed the Pennsylvania Department of Education assessment rubrics for writing. We also consulted the Committee on Assessment and Lois Huffines, who (as a former Writing Program Director) had researched the subject of writing assessment extensively.

A proposed assessment plan follows.

III. Learning Goals and Learning Objectives

A set of learning goals and objectives must be the foundation for an assessment plan. The Composition Council wrote the following goals and objectives, based on the wording found in the 1983 legislation that the Faculty passed authorizing the Writing Program at Bucknell. Consistent with the definitions typically used in assessment, a learning goal is an overarching ideal while a learning objective is an assessable outcome that relates to one or more of the goals.

Learning Goals

1. Students will develop expository skills.
2. Students will use writing as an instrument for thinking.

Learning Objectives

For Learning Goal #1 (“Develop expository skills.”)

1. Students address intended audience
2. Students achieve assigned purpose for writing
3. Students structure sentences and paragraphs into a cohesive whole.
4. Students use language appropriate to the task.

5. Students punctuate and spell correctly.

For Learning Goal #2 (“Use writing as an instrument for thinking”)

1. Students rework the paper through the writing process of planning, composing, revising and editing.
2. Students employ writing strategies that foster critical and/or creative thinking. Such strategies may include free writing, journaling, mapping, note-taking, outlining, paraphrasing, summarizing, using field notes, using lab notebooks, and/or other techniques for thinking on the page.

IV. Assessing Learning Goal #1 (“Expository Skills”)

The objectives listed under “Learning Goal #1” (developing expository skills) will be assessed within the W1 and W2 courses. Specifically, faculty teaching those courses will take one writing assignment that they are *already using* and use this assignment for the assessment. For the W1 courses, the writing assignment used should be as close to the beginning of the semester as is possible in order to get a “base-line” (pre-instruction) assessment of writing for incoming students. For the W2 courses, the assignment used should be near the end of the semester, and the results will be sorted according to the students’ time at Bucknell (i.e., first-year, sophomore, junior, senior).

To minimize the additional time required of instructors teaching W-courses and to standardize the assessment as much as is possible, a rubric will be developed (in consultation with the English Department and others as appropriate) that will enable the instructor to complete the assessment. An approach similar to that used with teaching evaluations will be employed: there will be a list of questions to be used in all writing classes, along with optional questions that can be chosen depending on the discipline. To account for disciplinary differences in writing, departments will have the option of replacing the standard rubric with one that they feel is more appropriate for their discipline. Requests to use an alternate rubric should be sent to the Composition Council.

To minimize inter-rater variability, the Composition Council will write a set of guidelines explaining how different scores on the rubric should be assigned. The intention is for faculty to use the same criteria for all courses, regardless of whether they are W1 or W2 courses. In other words, for assessment purposes, entering students need to be judged by the same standards as graduating seniors. Obviously, this will not eliminate inter-rater variability; however, at the very least this approach will tell us what fraction of students in W-classes write sufficiently well according to their own instructors.

The Composition Council and the Writing Program Director will work with ISR and ITEC to develop an on-line data entry form and analysis program. The goals of this web-based system will be: (a) to make it easy for faculty to enter assessment data; (b) to enable sorting and analysis of the data at a later time; and (c) to enable analysis of the data while retaining confidentiality. The names of the professor teaching the course and of the students being

assessed will not be attached to any of the final data; however, some identifying information (e.g., ID number) may be used in the early stages of analysis to enable “longitudinal” analysis; i.e., to track how individual students do or do not improve their writing while at Bucknell. Any identifying information will be removed from the records after the longitudinal analysis is done; no names or ID numbers will be attached to any data that is viewed by anyone during the analysis.

A member of the staff/administration – most likely someone in the registrar’s office – will be designated as the person responsible for keeping the raw data and ensuring confidentiality. Guidance about how to collect and analyze the data will be requested from the Institutional Review Board (IRB). The IRB will also review the detailed approach to ensure confidentiality. Finally, before any assessment is implemented, the Composition Council will report to COI for approval of the approach being used and to assure confidentiality.

After an instructor finishes grading the papers (for the particular assignment to be used for assessment) according to his/her own criteria, he/she will fill out the rubric which asks him/her to rate the students’ writing ability on a 5-point scale for each of the objectives for Learning Goal #1. The instructor will enter the results from this rubric into the on-line form discussed above. (Departments who opt to replace the standard rubric with their own will need a different mechanism for entering results.)

It is expected that this approach will add 1-3 hours of time total per W-course per semester on the part of instructors of W-courses.

V. Assessing Learning Goal #2 (“Using Writing as an Instrument of Thinking”)

The objectives listed under “Learning Goal #2” (using writing as an instrument of thinking) will be assessed using questions that will be added to surveys taken by incoming first-year students and by exiting seniors. Focus groups (facilitated by the Office of Institutional Research) will also be used to assess the objectives of Learning Goal #2. Different focus groups will be assembled, some comprised of students randomly-selected from W1 courses, some comprised of W2 students, some comprised of first-year students, and some comprised of seniors.

This form of assessment will help us to learn the methods that students consider important when writing, and to compare their approach when arriving at Bucknell to their approach when they graduate.

VI. Assessing Writing Courses at Bucknell

Writing courses will be assessed using modified versions of the evaluation forms that faculty teaching and students taking W1 and W2 courses fill out at the end of each W-course. These forms will be revised significantly by the Composition Council. Specifically, the forms will be reduced; the Council will choose 4 or 5 questions of particular interest for the evaluation forms.

Once again, to protect the faculty member, no specific information will be included about either the instructor or the course itself, other than the level of the course (i.e., W1 or W2). These

forms will then be used by the Composition Council to see if the W1 and W2 courses are achieving their stated purposes.

VII. Administration of Writing Assessment

The Composition Council will be the body charged with administering writing assessment, analyzing the results, and making any recommendations based on these results. Specifically, the Council will:

- (a) report its findings and conclusions to the Committee on Instruction and to the Committee on Assessment;
- (b) recommend to COI changes in the Writing Program in response to the writing assessment results;
- (c) recommend changes in the assessment plan itself, based on the success (or lack thereof) of the plan.

Writing assessment is an iterative process. We expect that the feedback received from the first few years of assessment will indicate strengths and weaknesses of the approach. Future Composition Councils will use this feedback to recommend changes not only in the Program but also in the assessment method itself. An iterative approach to assessment such as this is also mandated by Middle States and ABET.

Appendix: NCTE/CCCC Position Statement about Writing Assessment

Writing Assessment: A Position Statement

(<http://www.ncte.org/about/over/positions/category/write/107610.htm>)



Writing Assessment: A Position Statement

Prepared by the Conference on College Composition and Communication

March 1995

Background

In 1993, the CCCC Executive Committee charged the CCCC Committee on Assessment with developing an official position statement on assessment. Prior to that time, members of CCCC had expressed keen interest in having a document available that would help them explain writing assessment to colleagues and administrators and secure the best assessment options for students.

Beginning in 1990 at NCTE in Atlanta, Georgia, open forums were held at both NCTE and CCCC conventions to discuss the possibility of a position statement: its nature, forms, and the philosophies and practices it might espouse. At these forums, at regular meetings, and through correspondence, over one hundred people helped develop the current document.

An initial draft of the statement was submitted to the CCCC Executive Committee at its March 1994 meeting, where it was approved in substance. The Executive Committee also reviewed a revised statement at its November 1994 meeting. An announcement in the February 1995 issue of *College Composition and Communication* invited all CCCC members to obtain a draft of the statement and to submit their responses to the Assessment Committee. Copies of the draft statement were mailed to all 1995 CCCC convention preregistrants, and the final draft was presented in a forum at the 1995 CCCC Convention in Washington, DC. Changes based on discussions at that session, and at a later workshop, were incorporated into the position statement, which was subsequently approved for publication by the CCCC Executive Committee.

Introduction

More than many issues within the field of composition studies, writing assessment evokes strong passions. It can be used for a variety of appropriate purposes, both inside the classroom and outside: providing assistance to students; awarding a grade; placing students in appropriate courses; allowing them to exit a course or sequence of courses; and

certifying proficiency, to name some of the more obvious. But writing assessment can be abused as well: used to exploit graduate students, for instance, or to reward or punish faculty members. We begin our position statement, therefore, with a foundational claim upon which all else is built: it is axiomatic that in all situations calling for writing assessment in both two-year and four-year institutions, the primary purpose of the specific assessment should govern its design, its implementation, and the generation and dissemination of its results.

It is also axiomatic that in spite of the diverse uses to which writing assessment is put, the general principles undergirding writing assessment are similar:

Assessments of written literacy should be designed and evaluated by well-informed current or future teachers of the students being assessed, for purposes clearly understood by all the participants; should elicit from student writers a variety of pieces, preferably over a period of time; should encourage and reinforce good teaching practices; and should be solidly grounded in the latest research on language learning.

These assumptions are explained fully in the first section below; after that, we list the rights and responsibilities generated by these assumptions; and in the third section we provide selected references that furnish a point of departure for literature in the discipline.

Assumptions

All writing assessments--and thus all policy statements about writing assessment--make assumptions about the nature of what is being assessed. Our assumptions include the following.

FIRST, language is always learned and used most effectively in environments where it accomplishes something the user wants to accomplish for particular listeners or readers within that environment. The assessment of written literacy must strive to set up writing tasks, therefore, that identify purposes appropriate to and appealing to the particular students being tested. Additionally, assessment must be contextualized in terms of why, where, and for what purpose it is being undertaken; this context must also be clear to the students being assessed and to all others (i.e., stakeholders/participants) involved.

Accordingly, there is no test which can be used in all environments for all purposes, and the best "test" for any group of students may well be locally designed. The definition of "local" is also contextual; schools with common goals and similar student populations and teaching philosophies and outcomes might well form consortia for the design, implementation, and evaluation of assessment instruments even though the schools themselves are geographically separated from each other.

SECOND, language by definition is social. Assessment which isolates students and forbids discussion and feedback from others conflicts with current cognitive and psychological research about language use and the benefits of social interaction during the writing process; it also is out of step with much classroom practice.

THIRD, reading--and thus, evaluation, since it is a variety of reading--is as socially contextualized as all other forms of language use. What any reader draws out of a particular text and uses as a basis of evaluation is dependent upon how that reader's own language use has been shaped and what his or her specific purpose for reading is. It seems appropriate, therefore, to recognize the individual writing program, institution, consortium, and so forth as a community of interpreters who can function fairly--that is, assess fairly--with knowledge of that community.

FOURTH, any individual's writing "ability" is a sum of a variety of skills employed in a diversity of contexts, and individual ability fluctuates unevenly among these varieties. Consequently, one piece of writing--even if it is generated under the most desirable conditions--can never serve as an indicator of overall literacy, particularly for high stakes decisions. Ideally, such literacy must be assessed by more than one piece of writing, in more than one genre, written on different occasions, for different audiences, and evaluated by multiple readers. This realization has led many

institutions and programs across the country to use portfolio assessment.

FIFTH, writing assessment is useful primarily as a means of improving learning. Both teachers and students must have access to the results in order to be able to use them to revise existing curricula and/or plan programs for individual students. And, obviously, if results are to be used to improve the teaching-learning environment, human and financial resources for the implementation of improvements must be in place in advance of the assessment. If resources are not available, institutions should postpone these types of assessment until they are. Furthermore, when assessment is being conducted solely for program evaluation, all students should not be tested, since a representative group can provide the desired results. Neither should faculty merit increases hinge on their students' performance on any test.

SIXTH, assessment tends to drive pedagogy. Assessment thus must demonstrate "systemic validity": it must encourage classroom practices that harmonize with what practice and research have demonstrated to be effective ways of teaching writing and of becoming a writer. What is easiest to measure--often by means of a multiple choice test--may correspond least to good writing, and that in part is an important point: choosing a correct response from a set of possible answers is not composing. As important, just because students are asked to write does not mean that the "assessment instrument" is a "good" one. Essay tests that ask students to form and articulate opinions about some important issue, for instance, without time to reflect, to talk to others, to read on the subject, to revise and so forth--that is, without taking into account through either appropriate classroom practice or the assessment process itself--encourage distorted notions of what writing is. They also encourage poor teaching and little learning. Even teachers who recognize and employ the methods used by real writers in working with students can find their best efforts undercut by assessments such as these.

SEVENTH, standardized tests, usually developed by large testing organizations, tend to be for accountability purposes, and when used to make statements about student learning, misrepresent disproportionately the skills and abilities of students of color. This imbalance tends to decrease when tests are directly related to specific contexts and purposes, in contrast to tests that purport to differentiate between "good" and "bad" writing in a general sense. Furthermore, standardized tests tend to focus on readily accessed features of the language--on grammatical correctness and stylistic choice--and on error, on what is wrong rather than on the appropriate rhetorical choices that have been made. Consequently, the outcome of such assessments is negative: students are said to demonstrate what they do "wrong" with language rather than what they do well.

EIGHTH, the means used to test students' writing ability shapes what they, too, consider writing to be. If students are asked to produce "good" writing within a given period of time, they often conclude that all good writing is generated within those constraints. If students are asked to select--in a multiple choice format--the best grammatical and stylistic choices, they will conclude that good writing is "correct" writing. They will see writing erroneously, as the avoidance of error; they will think that grammar and style exist apart from overall purpose and discourse design.

NINTH, financial resources available for designing and implementing assessment instruments should be used for that purpose and not to pay for assessment instruments outside the context within which they are used. Large amounts of money are currently spent on assessments that have little pedagogical value for students or teachers. However, money spent to compensate teachers for involvement in assessment is also money spent on faculty development and curriculum reform since inevitably both occur when teachers begin to discuss assessment which relates directly to their classrooms and to their students.

TENTH, and finally, there is a large and growing body of research on language learning, language use, and language assessment that must be used to improve assessment on a systematic and regular basis. Our assumptions are based on this scholarship. Anyone charged with the responsibility of designing an assessment program must be cognizant of this body of research and must stay abreast of developments in the field. Thus, assessment programs must always be under review and subject to change by well-informed faculty, administrators, and legislators.

Rights and Responsibilities

Students should:

1. demonstrate their accomplishment and/or development in writing by means of composing, preferably in more than one sample written on more than one occasion, with sufficient time to plan, draft, rewrite, and edit each product or performance;
2. write on prompts developed from the curriculum and grounded in "real-world" practice;
3. be informed about the purposes of the assessment they are writing for, the ways the results will be used, and avenues of appeal;
4. have their writing evaluated by more than one reader, particularly in "high stakes" situations (e.g., involving major institutional consequences such as getting credit for a course, moving from one context to another, or graduating from college); and
5. receive response, from readers, intended to help them improve as writers attempting to reach multiple kinds of audiences.

Faculty should:

1. play key roles in the design of writing assessments, including creating writing tasks and scoring guides, for which they should receive support in honoraria and/or release time; and should appreciate and be responsive to the idea that assessment tasks and procedures must be sensitive to cultural, racial, class, and gender differences, and to disabilities, and must be valid for and not penalize any group of students;
2. participate in the readings and evaluations of student work, supported by honoraria and/or release time;
3. assure that assessment measures and supports what is taught in the classroom;
4. make themselves aware of the difficulty of constructing fair and motivating prompts for writing, the need for field testing and revising of prompts, the range of appropriate and inappropriate uses of various kinds of writing assessments, and the norming, reliability, and validity standards employed by internal and external test-makers, as well as share their understanding of these issues with administrators and legislators;
5. help students to prepare for writing assessments and to interpret assessment results in ways that are meaningful to students;
6. use results from writing assessments to review and (when necessary) to revise curriculum;
7. encourage policymakers to take a more qualitative view toward assessment, encouraging the use of multiple measures, infrequent large-scale assessment, and large-scale assessment by sampling of a population rather than by individual work whenever appropriate; and
8. continue conducting research on writing assessment, particularly as it is used to help students learn and to understand what they have achieved.

Administrators and Higher Education Governing Boards should:

1. educate themselves and consult with rhetoricians and composition specialists teaching at their own institutions, about the most recent research on teaching and assessing writing and how they relate to their

particular environment and to already established programs and procedures, understanding that generally student learning is best demonstrated by performances assessed over time and sponsored by all faculty members, not just those in English;

2. announce to stakeholders the purposes of all assessments, the results to be obtained, and the ways that results will be used;

3. assure that the assessments serve the needs of students, not just the needs of an institution, and that resources for necessary courses linked to the assessments are therefore available before the assessments are mandated;

4. assure opportunities for teachers to come together to discuss all aspects of assessments: the design of the instruments; the standards to be employed; the interpretation of the results; possible changes in curriculum suggested by the process and results;

5. assure that all decisions are made by more than one reader; and

6. not use any assessment results as the primary basis for evaluating the performance of or rewards due a teacher; they should recognize that student learning is influenced by many factors such as cognitive development, personality type, personal motivation, physical and psychological health, emotional upheavals, socioeconomic background, family successes and difficulties which are neither taught in the classroom nor appropriately measured by writing assessment.

Legislators should:

1. not mandate a specific instrument (test) for use in any assessment; although they may choose to answer their responsibility to the public by mandating assessment in general or at specific points in student careers, they should allow professional educators to choose the types and ranges of assessments that reflect the educational goals of their curricula and the nature of the student populations they serve;

2. understand that mandating assessments also means providing funding to underwrite those assessments, including resources to assist students and to bring teachers together to design and implement assessments, to review curriculum, and to amend the assessment and/or curriculum when necessary;

3. become knowledgeable about writing assessment issues, particularly by consulting with rhetoricians and composition specialists engaged in teaching, on the most recent research on the teaching of writing and assessment;

4. understand that different purposes require different assessments and that qualitative forms of assessment can be more powerful and meaningful for some purposes than quantitative measures are, and that assessment is a means to help students learn better, not a way of unfairly comparing student populations, teachers, or schools;

5. include teachers in the drafting of legislation concerning assessments; and

6. recognize that legislation needs to be reviewed continually for possible improvement in light of actual results and ongoing developments in writing assessment theory and research.

Assessment of Writing

Assessment of writing is a legitimate undertaking. But by its very nature it is a complex task, involving two competing tendencies: first, the impulse to measure writing as a general construct; and second, the impulse to measure writing as a

contextualized, site- and genre-specific ability. There are times when re-creating or simulating a context (as in the case of assessment for placement, for instance) is limited. Even in this case, however, assessment--when conducted sensitively and purposefully--can have a positive impact on teaching, learning, curricular design, and student attitudes. Writing assessment can serve to inform both the individual and the public about the achievements of students and the effectiveness of teaching. On the other hand, poorly designed assessments, and poorly implemented assessments, can be enormously harmful because of the power of language: personally, for our students as human beings; and academically, for our students as learners, since learning is mediated through language.

Students who take pleasure and pride in using written language effectively are increasingly valuable in a world in which communication across space and a variety of cultures has become routine.

Writing assessment that alienates students from writing is counterproductive, and writing assessment that fails to take an accurate and valid measure of their writing even more so. But writing assessment that encourages students to improve their facility with the written word, to appreciate their power with that word and the responsibilities that accompany such power, and that salutes students' achievements as well as guides them, should serve as a crucially important educational force.

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Related Information:

There is no related information at this time.



A Professional Association
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