

Chapter X

Assessing the Composition Program on Our Own Terms

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ABSTRACT

As Jacqueline Jones Royster articulated at the 2006 Conference on College Composition and Communication, English departments are already assessing themselves and should resist suggestions by the Spellings Commission on the Future of Higher Education that a standardized method of assessing students and programs in higher education is needed. In the fall of 2006, the University of Louisville was due to be reviewed by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS). The First-Year Composition program chose to conduct an internal assessment in the fall of 2004. This chapter details the Composition program assessment conducted at the University of Louisville and includes a comprehensive analysis of its rationale, theoretical foundations, methodologies, and results. This chapter also articulates the difficulties of such a large-scale assessment as well as the uniquely local challenges faced during the process.

INTRODUCTION

“Treat program development, including formal assessment, as an adventurous space, open to explore” (Haswell, 2001, p. 188).

The Spellings Commission report on higher education, *A Test of Leadership: Charting the Future of U. S. Higher Education* (2006) has caused much debate and concern among postsecondary educators. One of the primary concerns educators have about this report is its call for a widespread standardized assessment of institutions of higher education in order to encourage “accountability.” Specifically the report recommends the development of a database that houses information comparing the performance, generally based upon standardized testing, of diverse groups of students across institutions of higher learning. According to the report, this collection of data will allow “meaningful interstate comparison of student learning” so that “state policymakers can [. . .] identify shortcomings as well as best practices” (p. 23). Brian Huot (2007), in his critique of the Spellings Commission report, responds to this recommendation and its goals, pointing out, “There appears to be an assumption that all students can learn equally well at all institutions, when in fact it has become increasingly apparent that educational success or failure is about whether or not students can establish relevant and productive learning relationships within a specific educational environment” (p. 519). According to Huot, as well as numerous other scholars (McLeod, Horn, and Haswell, 2005; Whithaus, 2005; Contreras-McGavin and Kezar, 2007), these kinds of standardized assessments provide little useful information about situated student learning. Rather, assessments that take into consideration the local context and culture of the institution yield significantly more information that can be used to reform higher education in a meaningful way while addressing specific student needs.

Standardized methods of assessment cannot possibly be suitable to measure the abilities of the diverse student populations at all institutions of higher education. However, the Spellings Commission report insists on using a standardized instrument, the National Assessment of Adult Literacy (NAAL) to claim that “the percentage of college graduates proficient in prose literacy has actually declined from 40 to 31 percent in the past decade” (p. 3). As Huot notes, these results may indicate that “there is a different population of students entering our doors that we must become more able to teach” (p. 518). However, as he also explains, a more appropriate response might be that we “need to find better ways of testing what people can really do, rather than creating tests that ensure their poor performance and the condemnation of the institutions charged with educating them” (p. 518). Focusing on student abilities is a more useful way of establishing benchmarks within a specific academic program, institution, or higher education system. The alternative is to attempt to assess student learning with a narrow measure of skills valued by an outside testing authority with little familiarity with the institution to be assessed and possibly, in the case of the Spellings Commission Report, little familiarity with higher education instruction in general.

Higher education, however, feels the brunt of the pressure for “accountability,” and this pressure weighed on our Composition program assessment committee throughout the assessment process at the University of Louisville. Our work began due to a combination of factors. First, a program assessment had been planned by the General Education Committee, the Associate Provost for Undergraduate Affairs, and the former Director of Composition, and money had been put aside for the assessment. Second, it was mandated by the university’s regional accrediting body, the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS), that our school assess its General Education program (Gen-Ed) by the year 2007. As the

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