

**Massachusetts Board of Higher Education Proficiency Assessment Mandate:
UMass Amherst Assessment Pilot Project
Executive Summary – February, 2003**

Under coordination from its Office of Academic Planning and Assessment (OAPA), UMass Amherst undertook the task of researching and piloting several methods of assessing writing and critical thinking according to criteria established by the Massachusetts Board of Higher Education (BHE) Exit Assessment Task Force. In May 2001 the Task Force recommended a pilot phase where each campus would explore one or more models for fulfilling the writing and critical thinking requirement on their campus. A steering committee of UMass Amherst faculty and staff met in September 2001 to address two issues in response to the Exit Assessment Task Force mandate:

1. Identify several approaches to testing students' writing and critical thinking competencies prior to graduation focusing on two important criteria:
 - ◇ Appropriateness to Assessment Purpose: How effective is each data-gathering method in gathering evidence of the proficiencies outlined in the BHE criteria?
 - ◇ Operational Feasibility: How workable does each data-gathering method appear to be given the size and resource capacity of UMass Amherst?
2. Consider whether existing means of assessing those competencies can legitimately exempt some students from further testing or evaluation.

Project Components

The committee identified three writing and critical thinking assessment methods to explore:

1. A timed writing exam administered to junior-year students; 88 samples were obtained, of which 36 were based on a single-reading prompt and 52 were based on a comparison-reading prompt.
2. Portfolios of course-based writing samples compiled by junior-year students; 8 portfolios were obtained.
3. An examination of sophomore-level writing done for class assignments and any potential correlation between performance and grade received in College Writing 112/113; 65 samples were obtained.

Project Limitations

This pilot project was conducted on an extremely limited budget and was designed to provide initial insights into the relative merits of a variety of proficiency assessment methods. Given the limitations of resources we did not try to pursue random samples of students but instead used variations on "convenience samples" to gain initial experiences with these methods. Therefore, the results presented here cannot be considered representative of overall junior-year writing or critical thinking proficiency at UMass Amherst.

In addition, the students taking each type of proficiency test were selected in different ways, with different types of bias. The results for the timed essays are based on the full set of students enrolled in junior-year writing in three different majors. As a group, they probably represent more of the variability in performance at UMass than the group of students who volunteered to provide portfolios or those who were identified by their instructors as good performers in writing-intensive courses and provided course-based writing samples. Therefore, while the observations of those who scored each of these types of assessments is quite informative, it is not possible to make judgments based on the data from this project alone about which method might provide the highest proficiency results.

Suggested Findings

Appropriateness of Various Methods to Assessment Purpose

- The two methods of assessment that provide the least ambiguous opportunity for evaluating students' proficiency in both critical thinking and writing are the portfolio and the course-based writing samples.
- The timed writing exam based on comparison readings provided more evidence of critical thinking proficiency than the single-reading prompt. Student performance on both types of timed exams seemed to suffer from artificial constraints that are the antithesis of the writing processes emphasized in writing courses at UMass.
- A short timed exam (50-minutes in this study) seems particularly problematic in providing an accurate rendering of students' writing and critical thinking abilities. In this study, timed-writing essays reflected evidence of the time constraints with underdeveloped assertions, inconsistent transitions, and grammatical errors.
- For all but one type of assessment method (the timed writing exam based on a single reading), the pass rate for writing proficiency alone was higher than the pass rate for the full BHE proficiency criteria (writing and critical thinking). This suggests the importance of scoring these two sets of criteria separately to provide greater clarity regarding students' strengths and weaknesses in these areas.
- There is initial evidence that students who do well in College Writing 112/113 (earning an A, AB, or Waiver) and earn an A or AB in writing-intensive course assignments could be exempt from the proficiency exam.
- There was no significant relationship between performance in College Writing and performance on the timed writing exams.

Operational Feasibility: How realistic is implementation?

- Developing a set of readings for the timed writing exam is challenging in that the topic must be general enough to stimulate students from a variety of disciplines and the readings must provide enough information and differing perspectives to allow students to demonstrate critical thinking proficiency.
- The portfolio assessment method is more time consuming to read and score, but it is also more reflective of the full scope of students' writing and critical thinking capabilities.
- Given financial constraints, obtaining evidence of student writing for any of these methods seems most feasible if collected through courses, requiring faculty acceptance and participation which may be harder to secure on a larger scale than was possible in this pilot project.
- There was great variability in the numbers of students per course and discipline who volunteered to participate, but this factor would not apply if the assessment was mandated campus-wide.
- Identifying lower-level writing-intensive courses is problematic as there is no official designation of such in the course catalog.

Possible Next Steps

- Collect additional data for the various assessment methods using random sampling to test the validity of these initial suggested findings.
- There has been no further word from the BHE on the status of this project. Given this lack of further directive and the continuing shortfalls in the state budget, it is unclear what the next step may be on a statewide basis.