

English Assessment Evaluation

March 1998

Introduction

Since Spring 1997, an intense review of English assessment has been underway due to changing State requirements and as part of regular required evaluation of assessment instruments. The purpose of this review was to determine how the new instrument, Asset 95 from ACT will function as Los Angeles Harbor College's primary placement instrument for English courses in the case of native English speaking students in light of the elimination of our current test from the State approved list. In addition, a careful assessment of the role of previous assessment instruments and new multiple measures was necessary.

Reading and Writing Exam

Until June 1, 1998, Harbor College is continuing to use the College Board Placement APS exam for English placement. This exam will no longer be approved after 1998 by the State Chancellor's office and College Board has not released the copyright for campuses to use the test as their own publisher. The previous test was provided free to the campuses, with a fee paid to the computer system developer and staff. In Spring 1997, the Communications Department reviewed other tests and chose ACT (Asset) to provide reading and writing scores. Both portions of the instrument are multiple choice, similar to the College Board exam.

The length of the test is comparable to the current APS exam, significantly shorter than the main competitor. In addition, the cost of Asset is competitive. ACT provides a software package on an annual fee and charges a per student test fee.

Evaluation of the new instrument included evaluating the old instrument in order to ensure both continuity of placement and as a guideline to a minimum expectation of an English placement instrument. Many years of data and student tracking enable a clear examination of past instrument effectiveness.

Previous studies (see *An Evaluation of English Assessment for Fall 1995 Students*, January 1997 and *English Placement Evaluation: Fall 1996*, January 1998) show that students placed in English 21, 28, or 101 were more likely to receive a passing grade (A, B, or C) than the rest of the class. However, the correlations of the College Board reading/writing score with grade at the end of courses fell below State guidelines (0.30) in all cases, with a near exception in Developmental Communications 35 in 1995. (Since this is a relatively small number of students, the near miss in DC 35 is even less reliable.)

The following table displays the correlations of 355 students at five levels of English placement using scores on the Asset 95 instrument.

**Table 1. Correlations with Grade
ACT pilot study (excluding withdrawals)**

	DC 35	DC 20	ENL 21	ENL 28	ENL 101
Writing score	-.307	.368*	.049	.569*	.286
p<	.08	.002	.751	.000	.008
n	33	71	45	80	85
Reading score	.026	.147	.219	.611*	.356*
p<	.888	.215	.143	.000	.001
n	33	73	46	80	85

*meets or exceeds State required guidelines

The table results demonstrate that Asset 95 is a better predictor of student success in English courses than the College Board test. However, correlations at the Developmental Communications 35 level and English 21 do not meet State requirements.¹ The writing score in English 101 is slightly below the requirements. Recognizing that the reading and writing scores work together in placement, only the DC 35 level has little or no relationship between test score and grade. In addition, more students withdrew from a course if they had lower scores than the class average. (Since reasons for withdrawals vary greatly, they were not included in calculating the correlations.)

In summary, conversion from College Board to Asset 95 for English placement will occur in June 1998. The impact on student placement will be positive, with more appropriate placement with higher content validity as demonstrated by correlations of scores with grades.

Essay Exam

In the past, a major portion of English placement has relied on a subjectively scored writing prompt. The essay did not meet the multiple measures requirements, but did provide additional skills testing. The prompts were read and given a rating with a range of 1 to 6. Most students scored between 3 and 5 with 40% of students receiving a 4. In 1995 and 1996, the essay scores showed either insignificant correlations or negative correlations with grades at all English levels. The highest correlation was in 1996 at the English 101 level (.18) far below the .35 correlation required by the State.

There are several possible factors affecting the correlations of essay score with grade. Essay scoring reliability between raters, a single rater scoring an essay consistently, and instructor grading variability, are just some of the factors. There are several options available to the Communications Department which require careful consideration and discussion. Option 1, to drop the essay as a placement tool, is the recommendation of the Research Office and the Matriculation Committee.

1) Drop the essay as a placement tool. In view of the subjectivity of scoring and the poor performance of the essay exam as a valid test for English placement, the simplest recommendation is to drop using the essay for primary placement of

¹ English 21 is taught on a pass/fail basis.

students. Re-validation of this tool is required by 1999, and we are unable to meet State requirements.

2) Drop the essay as a placement tool with some exceptions. Many campuses use the essay for students who are on the border or placement and who might choose to take the essay to help clarify their placement. This requires only occasional payment of readers or could be absorbed by department costs. It allows the challenging borderline student the benefit of the doubt and an opportunity to raise their placement.

3) Keep the essay as a placement tool and reevaluate needed changes to attempt to bring results up to State guidelines before the next required review in 1999. Although the essay still has full approval with the State based on early research, without considerable improvement, the essay would not be given approval again when the current approval period ends in June 1999. Within the next year, a task force would need to proceed to determine the shortcomings of the tool, changes made, new data gathered, and a determination made as to whether or not it could meet approval requirements.

Suggestions of changes that might be made would include ongoing training and reliability testing of readers. In addition, a review of the rubric for scoring should be thoroughly examined for course content relatedness at all levels of placement. Only after these efforts should new scores be collected and tested for validity.

Due to the lack of statistical support, the costs of readers, and additional research, our failure to meet State guidelines, and the attention required to attempt to meet requirements, the essay will be dropped by June 1998 unless further communication is received from the Communications Department with a plan of action.

Summary

June 1998 brings a change from the current English placement instruments to Asset 95 (ACT). The multiple measures used will be high school grades with objective reading and writing tests. The effectiveness of these instruments will be tracked as required by the State and annual reports will be available through the Office of Institutional Research. The essay will be dropped for use in placement by June 1998 until such time as the Communications Department adopts another option and strategy to overcome its shortcomings.