

Testing for Better Writers

By Mitch Smith

It's a common gripe of professors and employers: Kids these days just can't write.

Thirty-five years ago—when today's bosses and faculty members were college students—similar laments about the writing abilities of young people floated around.

Back then, Old Dominion University and Hampden-Sydney College decided the best way to make sure their graduates weren't part of that problem was to require them to pass a writing test before receiving degrees.

Administrators and faculty hail Hampden-Sydney's rhetoric assessment program, installed in 1978, as a success. Students take at least two small courses designed to develop writing and speaking abilities before submitting to a test. For the 33 percent of students who don't pass the first time, faculty at the all-male liberal arts college work to make sure they improve their writing and graduate on time. College officials don't apologize for the old-school approach. "It's our longstanding experience that this works, and that this works better than other approaches," said Robert T. Herdegen III, the dean of faculty.

But at Old Dominion University, a large public institution just an hour's drive from Hampden-Sydney's rural Virginia campus, testing didn't work as well. Some students—more than 600 of 42,000 seniors in the past decade—finished every other degree requirement but couldn't pass the test and graduate, Provost Carol Simpson said. Making matters worse, 70 percent of professors said students' writing still needed improvement.

So Old Dominion announced this month it was phasing the test out and instead asking students to instead earn at least a C in three classes—two English courses and a writing-intensive class in their major. Current students who prefer to take the assessment still can.

Simpson said the assessment did a poor job of gauging writing ability. She believes writing should be evaluated in the classroom, not on a test that students take on their way out the door.

"Many students waited until they had completed all other requirements and then go, 'Oh gosh, I have to take this exam,'" she said. "They didn't prepare for it. It was a timed, stressful exam. It just wasn't really a good example of their ability to write."

Students don't seem to be mourning the exam's death. "Does one test, like a five-paragraph essay, really determine your ability to write analytically?" asked Student Body President Luis Ferreira, who passed the exam last year. "It didn't really serve a serious purpose for me. It was just kind of a formality."

The basic structure of the essay exams at both colleges is similar. Students arrive for the timed test and are assigned a reading on a topic. Then they must take a position on one of several questions and respond in a coherent, well-reasoned paper of around 500 words. The tests, with students' identities withheld, are then graded by multiple faculty members.

At Old Dominion, students were expected to use the knowledge they accumulated over four years to write the essay on a general topic they had selected from a list developed by the university.

But at Hampden-Sydney, qualifying to take the test is the culmination of a yearlong (or more) process. The 1,100 men there must first pass two rhetoric classes (or three if they test poorly as incoming freshmen) before sitting for the test. The classes, which are capped at 14 students, stress grammar and essay composition. If a student fails the test, generally taken late in his sophomore year, he has two opportunities to pass it again as a junior and to seek help from writing instructors.

If a student still hasn't passed by the start of his senior year—something faculty say rarely happens—he places into a writing-intensive course in which he is tutored and then asked to write three essays but isn't held to a time limit. Lowell Frye and Elizabeth Deis, both professors in the rhetoric department since 1983, said they can't remember a student not graduating solely because of the writing assessment.

But, they said, the test provides

accountability and encourages a college-wide emphasis on writing. "It creates a climate in which writing is important for faculty and for students," Deis said. "The students, and especially the alumni, are absolutely committed to the idea of this test."

Deis and Frye said such a test would be untenable without the curriculum leading up to it. While it's expensive to teach introductory courses 14 students at a time, they said it wouldn't be fair to ask students to take the test without the classroom preparation.

"The rhetoric program here is really a whole package," Deis said. "All of those rhetoric classes

lead into the proficiency exam. You can't give tests like this without preparing the students and giving them support as well."

Hampden-Sydney leaders know their program is unique. Most writing experts today advocate for a more comprehensive approach to assessing student abilities. Doug Hesse, director of the writing program at the University of Denver, prefers grading student portfolios assembled over several semesters.

"Within the writing community," he said,

"there's a lot of wariness especially of single-measure, single-sitting exams."

But if a college does opt for that route, he said faculty involvement is key. At Hampden-Sydney, faculty members from across the institution grade the exams and are able to see what skills might require more attention in their classes.

Officials at Hampden-Sydney say they've considered changes to their rhetoric department—which is separate from the English department—but have decided to keep the test intact. "It is something that really flies in the face of all of the current approaches to instruction in writing," Herdegen said. "And, the thing is, it actually works incredibly well."



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ELIZABETH DEIS
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