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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the impact of the Regents' Test, an examination which all Georgia college students must pass before they receive their diplomas. The examination is designed to assess writing ability; some of the factors evaluated are adequate paragraph development, logic, effective and varied sentence structure, and precise diction. Procedures used to administer and grade the test are described. Beneficial results of the statewide standard include clearer delineation of teaching responsibilities, better organization of instructional practices, better student writing, improvement in educational accountability, and a greater degree of literacy. More equivocal results of testing include concerned faculty hiring practices, emphasis on mechanical rather than creative expression, and changes in grading practices and curriculum design as a result of the omnipresence of the testing requirement. (KS)

Paper delivered at the 1977 Conference on College Composition and Communication
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IMPACT OF THE REGENTS' EXAMINATION

In these days of accountability, testing cannot be overemphasized. At least, legislators, school board members, chancellors and other administrative people seem to think so. Therefore testing is vitally important and certainly relevant!

Though the Powers That Be generally agree on the necessity for testing (They even demand it), the method of testing is not so well defined, nor are the method of grading, the practical use, and the impact of tests. These are some problems we classroom teachers must deal with. To shed light on these problems, some testimonials by teachers in Georgia's state-supported colleges and some personal experiences and reactions to the philosophy, procedure, and results of the Georgia Regents' Examination are here compiled.*

With so much publicity devoted to Why Johnny Can't Read and Why Johnny Can't Write, most Georgians feel good that we have a compulsory English grammar and composition test which college students must pass before they can receive their diploma. In fact, this exam has gained national attention. Last year inquiries about it were received from fourteen states, two regional groups, and one European group.

The Regents' Test provides an instrument to see if Johnny can read and write. A unique feature of this examination is the essay. The fact that the College Board is revising its examination to include an essay further attests to the importance of performance in determining ability to write.

*No credit is given for quotations because the respondents asked to remain anonymous.

But the examination is more than a literacy test. Style, as well as fundamental basic mechanics, is taken into consideration. Adequate paragraph development, logic, effective and varied sentence structure, precise diction are also evaluated. So mature thinking, planning, and writing are demanded.

The composition and administration of the exam are briefly this: It is totally an in-house enterprise. The Georgia State Legislature backed it; the Chancellor of the Georgia University System demanded it, and Dr. Robert Rentz of the Georgia Testing Department supervised the writing and administration of it. In fact, a committee of Georgia's college teachers wrote and revised it. They supply the topics for compositions, and they select models for a paper to represent each grade level.

The examination is given each quarter at every state-sponsored college in Georgia to students who have completed a minimum of 45 hours. The three compositions are graded at regional centers over the state by college teachers from each region. (The teachers grade voluntarily on two Saturdays for a modest honorarium.)

Each paper is graded by three readers who do not know what grade the other readers assigned, nor do they know what school the paper is from. The paper, then, receives as a final grade the average of these three grades.

A list of the percent of failures from each school is sent to the President of every participating college. Also the graders' record of agreement (or disagreement) is published.

Not much attention is paid to the graders' percentage of agreement, but much attention is given to the number of failures from each school.

One small junior college was "put on the map" when it rated no failures on the Regents' examination. People came from far and wide to consult and observe this school's English Department. Members of the department even published a text on how to teach composition! So the test makes a notable impact.

In our school, about all the president is aware of regarding the English Department is how many students fail the Regents' Examination. The matter is even aired in Academic Senate and General Faculty meetings.

Such notoriety is both good and bad. As a result of the examination more concentration has been placed on writing. As one teacher in the system put it: "Even though the Regents' Exam emphasizes minimal values, and thus tends to lower and democratize expectations perhaps too far, the overwhelming effect has been positive. In the past, it was simply too easy (and far more fun) to ignore minimal standards of literacy in favor of literature exclusively. This neglect is no longer possible; it should never have been possible."

This emphasis on writing is perhaps a universal result of the examination. For example, at Georgia Tech, we even dropped writing about literature in preference to a course designed for emphasis solely on writing. The basic question governing the Curriculum Committee's deliberations is: "What course will enable students to pass the Regents' Exam?" Even those schools that have not changed their curricula have changed their focus to writing. As one teacher said: "There has been no real effect on the teaching of the two freshman courses at Kennesaw. We have always emphasized the aspects of writing covered by the exam, including in-class writing assignments. A general effect, however, and a good one is that writing has become a greater concern of <u>all</u> teachers." This person underlined <u>all</u>. The emphasis here

summarizes the main impact of the exam. All freshman English teachers now stress composition.

This stress on composition has affected hiring. Department Heads look for candidates' training and background for teaching composition now as never before.

Composition teachers are respected and revered as much as Shakespeare teachers, maybe more. At least, they are getting more attention, and in some cases are getting jobs quicker. New competency-based certification examinations are being developed for certifying composition teachers. (Though many of us may not approve of such certification examinations, at least, we delight in the focus placed on composition.) Administrators are giving more money to English departments to hire composition teachers. Also much money is allotted to remedial work for those who fail the exam. As one teacher noted: "The syllabus for English 1001 and the one for English 1002 have not changed. We do now, however, have a special course emphasizing only writing for those who fail the Regents' Test."

Not only special courses are provided for failures of the test but elaborate labs, innovative techniques, and self-paced methods of instruction have sprung up all over the state. People are thinking, working, creating--trying to cut down on or avoid failures on the Regents' Examination.

At first, the test was taken lightly by many students. Some scoffed at it; some handed in blank paper; some made it a laughing matter, but after many students were actually denied graduation because they had not passed the Regents' Exam, word got around that the exam was a serious matter. Now it affords built-in motivation. As one teacher stated: "The students seem to respond a bit better if they know they must eventually

pass the test." Another teacher protests: "I do not 'teach for the test.'" She then adds: "I use the test as motivation for the assignments I think are valid. I use the testing program idea as a topic for discussion in my efforts to establish a working relationship with students."

The test also provides helpful instruction material. The theme topics afford a ready supply for classroom writing and for teaching aid. One teacher described her use of test materials in the classroom thus: "I use these for discussion of (a) how to pre-write, (b) methods of development, (c) how to read assignment carefully, (d) how to write for specific audience, and (e) how to relate assignment to own experience and knowledge."

The scoring sheet is another teaching aid. One teacher uses it as a "source for explanation to students of how an instructor arrives at a grade for a paper." This is important since students often complain about subjectivity in theme grading and fuzzy bases for their grade.

The sample essays, too, are valuable teaching aids. After I go over the criteria for an excellent paper, a fair paper, and a failing paper, I show on the opaque projector samples of each paper. Since these papers are student papers, all on the same subject, students can see in sharp focus what makes a good paper as opposed to a bad one. These papers provide lively discussion and keen insights.

More meaningful testing is taking place as a result of the Regents' Examination. Practice Regents' exams are being given at the beginning of school for placement of students and for diagnosis. In many schools, the exam is an exit requirement from remedial studies and/or from English 1001 or 2. "Trial-run" tests are given throughout the quarter with time devoted to teaching test-taking strategies.

In spite of all of these advantages, the impact of the Regents' Examination has not been all good. Controversy arises over its effects on creativity, testing techniques, and grading practices, among other things. Perhaps the greatest disadvantage is the emphasis on mechanical writing. As one teacher says: "The Regents' essay has forced me to stay on top of writing skills in all my English classes, so that would be an advantage. A disadvantage is that the emphasis is on mechanical, routine "correctness" rather than creativity. Creativity must be curbed, in fact, so the Regents' essay is, for good students, a deadening influence." The curriculum and methods of teaching composition that have resulted from the Regents' Examination are truly not stimulating to the gifted student.

Another effect of the exam which may be termed a disadvantage is an increased use of departmental exams graded by more than one faculty member. An irate teacher views these consequent department exams thus: "Because of the Regents, Floyd Junior College instituted the "Departmental," which the student has to pass in order to pass the freshman composition course. In other words, some instructor gets to violate the integrity of the course by flunking some other instructor's student." Departmental exams are seldom popular with either faculty or students.

The effect of the exam on evaluation of faculty is equivocal. One teacher approves its effect on faculty evaluation saying: "The Regents' Exam has imposed accountability standards on writing, making measurement of course success where it ought to be--on writing competency." Another speaks of the exam's reflection on the teacher thus: "Faculty are given the results of the performance of their students on the Regents' Exam--no conclusions are drawn, as the charts are there for the faculty members' information--

this has made instructors more careful about who is recommended to take the exam." While another teacher disagrees with the statement, "no conclusions are drawn," by declaring: "Division chairmen follow results rather closely." But a third teacher thinks: "Student performance on this test is not seen as closely reflecting faculty teaching ability." The effect on evaluation of faculty might best be summed up by the teacher who said: "While instructors, in general, are held accountable for ultimate performance of students, there has been no greate effect on faculty evaluation."

Also equivocal is the evidence regarding grading practices and standards. Some say grading has not been affected at all; some say standards for grading in-class essays are lower; some, higher. One teacher stated his reaction to the grading practice thus: "Though there is no 'scientific evidence,' I believe that the examination has made us tighten up our grading practices--no teacher likes to learn that a student to whom he gave a high grade has flunked the examination." This opinion is universal.

But all in all, the impact of the exam might be summed up in the words of one teacher who outlined the consequences thus: "(1) Clearer delineation of teaching, (2) better organized instruction, (3) better student writing, (4) accountability improved, (5) less illiteracy. Impact all good!"

Whether the impact is all good, all bad, or equivocal, the impact is resounding, especially in the areas of instruction, staffing, and teaching techniques.