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ABSTRACT

A study was conducted at a public, open-door junior college to determine whether students' perceptions of their reading abilities could be used to predict their actual reading skills. The American College Testing Program ASSET test and the Nelson-Denny Reading Test (NDRT) were administered to 443 first-time freshmen. The students were also asked to indicate on the ASSET Educational Planning Form if they did, did not, or might need help with their reading skills. Study findings included the following: (1) of the 443 students, 30% were placed in a course designed for students reading below the 9th grade level, 19.6% were placed in a course for students reading above the 9th grade level but below college level, and 15.3% were enrolled in a course designed for students reading at or above college level; (2) of the students with college-level reading scores on the NDRT, 6 indicated that they needed help with their reading skills, 8 said they might need help, and 32 said they did not need help; (3) of the students with reading scores between the 9th and 13th grade levels, 31 felt they needed help, 38 said they might need help, and 107 said they did not need help; (4) of the students with reading scores between the 3rd and 9th grade levels, 43 said they needed help, 41 said they might need help, and 137 said they did not need help; and (5) students' perceptions of their skill levels were found to be statistically independent of their actual skill levels. (EJV)

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## Summary

Four hundred forty-three (443) first-time freshmen at a public open-door junior college were asked if they needed help with their reading skills and were subsequently administered the Nelson-Denny Reading Test to determine their reading levels in grade-level terms. Students could respond "yes," "maybe," or "no" to the question regarding their perceived need for help with reading. The researcher, using institutional guidelines for placement in reading courses, determined that students whose NDRT scores were below 8th grade level needed help, students whose scores were between 8.1 and 12.9 might need help, and students whose scores were above 13.0 did not need help. Using the chi-square test to compare the students' responses with their actual reading scores, the researcher concluded that the two variables (i.e., student expectation/response and actual ability) were independent: one could not be used to predict the other.

Expectation vs. Ability: Junior College Reading Skills

Many students in public two-year institutions have below average reading skills. Ross and Roe (1986) reported that students who enter higher education without adequate basic skills have been a challenge for postsecondary educators for more than a century, and Spring (1975) concluded that teachers are in widespread agreement that low reading ability is a major problem in the community college. Often, students who are advised to enroll in developmental reading courses complain that they do not need the courses; moreover, the students argue that they already know how to read sufficiently in order to pass college-level courses. Although many of these students experienced difficulty in their high school courses (as evidenced by low grade point averages), the students do not perceive that they need help to improve their reading abilities, even when courses are offered which are designed to improve students' vocabulary, comprehension, and reading rate.

The ability to read successfully has long been a criterion for success, especially in college. Since textbooks are used as the primary resource in many college courses, the reading of textbooks is a major part of a students' college experience. Textbooks vary in format, style, range of content, and difficulty. In short, some textbooks are more difficult to read than others, an assertion supported by subjective (e.g., student opinions, teacher perceptions) and objective (e.g., readability formulas) measures.

Problem

This study sought to determine if students' perceptions of their reading abilities could be used to predict their actual reading abilities. Four hundred forty-three first-time freshmen at a public open-door junior college were administered the ACT Asset and the Nelson-Denny Reading Test. In addition, the students were asked to complete the ASSET Educational Planning Form.

Of the 443 students, 288 (65%) were enrolled in reading courses on the basis of their Asset and Nelson-Denny scores. Specifically, 133 (30%) were enrolled in a course designed for students who read below the 9th grade level, 87 (19.6%) were enrolled in a course designed for stu nts who read above the 9th grade level but below the college level (13.0), and 68 (15.3%) were enrolled in a course designed for students who read at and above the college level.

The background summary portion of the ASSET Educational Planning Form consists of 23 items. Students are asked to identify anticipated majors, high school grade point averages, career goals, and their perceived needs for help while in college. In item 22, students are asked to respond with a "yes," "no," or "maybe" to items which seek to identify students who need help in areas including reading, writing, and mathematics.

Methodology

After the above-named measures were completed by 443 incoming freshmen during the 1987-88 academic year, their reading grade scores and their responses on the ASSET Educational Planning Form were analyzed and subsequently compared. To determine if a relationship existed between students' perceptions of the reading abilities (according to item 22) and the students' actual reading abilities (as determined by a grade level score on the Nelson-Denny Reading Test), the chi-square procedure was utilized. On the basis of the students' Nelson-Denny scores, a decision was made by the researcher as to whether students (1) needed help with their reading skills; (2) may need help with their reading skills; or (3) did not need help with their reading skills. Students classified with a 1 according to need had reading grade scores between 3.0 and 8.9; those classified with a 2 had reading grade scores between 9.0 and 12.9; and those classified with a 3 had reading grade scores between 13.0 and 16.9. Table 1

presents a frequency distribution of the students' reading grade scores.

The students' responses to item 22 were also classified. Students who responded "yes" to the need for help were classified with a 1; those who responded "maybe" were classified with a 2; and those who responded "no" were classified with a 3. Consequently, two "scores" were available for each student.

The study sought to test the following hypothesis:

$H_o$: Students' perceptions on the ASSET questionnaire are independent of their actual reading abilities.

To test the hypothesis, the chi-square test was performed. A 3 x 3 matrix was developed that considered the two variables (students' responses and their classification according to their reading grade scores). Table 2 presents the number of students in each cell of the matrix, as well as marginal sums used for the chi-square computation.

Results

Using an alpha level of .05 and four degrees of freedom [(rows - 1) X (columns -1)], a critical value of 9.48 resulted. The computed value for chi-square was 2.083. Hence, the null hypothesis was retained. The two variables were found to be independent of each other: one cannot be used to predict the other.

Conclusions

Many students in two-year colleges read below the college level but do not perceive that they need help with their reading skills. Since the students' responses in this study were found to be independent of their actual reading abilities, some measure must be maintained to assist students in the selection of courses. Many students will undoubtedly continue to lack perception of their true reading abilities, especially those with below average reading skills.

Since students often resist being enrolled in developmental reading courses because of what is perceived to be a negative stigma attached to the courses, two-year college educators must consider alternative means of instruction. Content area teachers can assist students master knowledge by pre-teaching vocabulary terms, developing chapter objectives and outlines, and demonstrating textbook reading strategies like SQ3R.

References

Ross, Elinor P., and Betty D. Roe. The Case for Basic Skills Programs in Higher Education. Bloomington, IN: Phi Delta Kappa, 1986.

Spring, Karen S. "How Much Do Community College Students Learn from Their Textbooks?" Journal of Reading, vol. 19 (October 1975), pp. 131-136.

Table 1

Frequency Distribution of

Students' Reading Grade Scores

| Class | Frequency | Cumulative Frequency | Percent |
|---|---|---|---|
| 16.0 - 16.9 | 10 | 443 | 2.3 |
| 15.0 - 15.9 | 6 | 433 | 1.4 |
| 14.0 - 14.9 | 12 | 427 | 2.7 |
| 13.0 - 13.9 | 18 | 415 | 4.1 |
| 12.0 - 12.9 | 22 | 397 | 5.0 |
| 11.0 - 11.9 | 22 | 375 | 5.0 |
| 10.0 - 10.9 | 61 | 353 | 13.8 |
| 9.0 - 9.9 | 71 | 292 | 16.0 |
| 8.0 - 8.9 | 112 | 221 | 25.3 |
| 7.0 - 7.9 | 43 | 109 | 9.7 |
| 6.0 - 6.9 | 29 | 66 | 6.5 |
| 5.0 - 5.9 | 14 | 37 | 3.2 |
| 4.0 - 4.9 | 14 | 23 | 3.2 |
| 3.0 - 3.9 | 9 | 9 | 2.0 |

N=443

Table 2

Chi-Square Values

Student Responses: Reading Test Scores

| Reading Test Scores | Student Responses: YES | MAYBE | NO | SUMS |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 13.0-16.9 | 6 | 8 | 32 | 46 |
| 9.0-12.9 | 31 | 38 | 107 | 176 |
| 3.0-8.9 | 43 | 41 | 137 | 221 |
| SUMS | 80 | 87 | 276 | 443 |

Chi-square computed value = 2.083

Critical value (alpha level .05, 4 degrees of freedom) = 9.488