

REPORT OF THE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON ASSESSMENT AND PLACEMENT

Stephen Mitte (Chair), John Daly, Nancy Earl,
Paul Kelley, and John Ruszkiewicz

27 April 1983

The Subcommittee acknowledges the contributions of Roger Cherry to its deliberations.

REPORT OF THE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON ASSESSMENT AND PLACEMENT

ISSUES ADDRESSED

The Subcommittee on Assessment and Placement concerned itself with the following issues:

1. Placing transfer and nontransfer students in E106, E206, E306, E316K, and E346K.
2. Diagnosing the strengths and weaknesses of student writers placed in E106 and E206.
3. Granting equivalency credit for E306, E316K, and E346K.
4. Costs and logistics of a large-scale assessment of writing abilities.
5. Effects of placement, equivalency, and diagnostic testing on writing curriculum and instruction.
6. The relationship of placement, equivalency, and diagnostic testing to course and program evaluation.

ASSUMPTIONS UNDERLYING THE SUBCOMMITTEE'S RECOMMENDATIONS

In developing its recommendations for an assessment program that addresses these issues, the Subcommittee assumed that

1. assessment of writing, for whatever purpose, in the new program should be systematic, specifying not only procedures for placement, diagnosis, and equivalency testing but also providing information about the effectiveness of particular courses in the new program and the new program as program;
2. all tests used for placement, diagnosis, and equivalency must include at least one writing sample;
3. the writing abilities of transfer students must be assessed locally to determine where in the new program a transfer student should be placed;

4. transfer students cannot be required to sit for writing assessments for which nontransfer students are not required to sit; and
5. students must be given the opportunity to earn equivalency credit for E306, E315K, and E346K through writing assessments designed, developed, and administered locally and tied to specific course goals and objectives.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Subcommittee recommends a comprehensive assessment program. This assessment program is summarized graphically in the attached "Flow Chart for Testing/Assessment in the 'New' Texas Writing Program." The Subcommittee recommends this particular assessment program because

1. it demands the involvement of all supervising committees of the various courses in the program;
2. it assumes the presence of a coherent writing program rather than a loose confederation of courses which purport to teach writing;
3. it can positively affect writing instruction in the new program;
4. it is consistent with the best information available on writing assessment;
5. it can contribute significantly to the evaluation of the new program;
6. it is logistically feasible; and
7. it is inexpensive given what it does and the kinds of information it yields about the effectiveness of the new program.

The following paragraphs tell briefly how the recommended assessment program addresses the issues the Subcommittee considered within its charge.

1. **Placing transfer and nontransfer students in E106, E206, E306, E316K, and E346K.** As the graphic indicates, placing students and granting equivalency credit, while different in some

respects, are similar in other respects. In both cases, the critical issue is determining the "fit" between the student's writing abilities and the courses in the new program. For the incoming freshmen and transfers who come to the University without credit in a nonremedial college writing course, placement would be determined in two ways. Students would be sorted initially on the basis of weighted scores on a combination of objective tests of writing-related skills (e.g., reading comprehension, vocabulary, error recognition, usage, and mechanics). This initial sort would place freshmen and "freshmen-like" transfers into two groups, one likely to consist of about 15% of the population and the other likely to consist of the remaining 85%. The smaller group would then take a diagnostic writing test (based on at least one writing sample and scored analytically) to determine whether they should enroll in E106 and E306 or E206 and E306. The larger group would take the E306 equivalency examination, which would consist of a writing sample and an objective test of library skills, to determine whether they should be placed in E306 or E316K, or be advised to take the E316K equivalency test, etc. (In APPENDIX A we have described what the equivalency test for E306 should consist of.) Since students could presumably pass the writing sample part of the E306 equivalency test and not the library skills part, the Subcommittee recommends creating a special course (perhaps administered by the Undergraduate Library staff) which teaches only library skills. Once certified as having developed the requisite library skills, these students would then be granted equivalency credit for E306. Students who pass the library skills component of the E306 equivalency test but not the writing component would be placed in E306.

Determining how to handle the placement in the new program of transfer students who have nonremedial writing course credit from other institutions forced the Subcommittee to consider a number of legal and logistical problems. Because of articulation agreements that the University has entered into with other institutions, transfer students with credit the Admissions Office deems comparable to credit at the University cannot be required to take examinations nontransfer students are not required to take. Yet anyone who has taught writing at this University realizes that transfer students usually are not as able writers as UT students who have completed a comparable number of writing courses. Hence the need to assess the writing abilities of all transfer students. The only legal way such assessment can occur is to have nontransfer students undergo such assessment as well. Hence the Subcommittee recommends the use of "exit" examinations in all courses in the new program, examinations which would in effect be alternate forms of the equivalency tests for those courses. All placement/exit examinations would be graded by a panel of trained readers, a panel which does not include the teacher of record for the class. The exit/equivalency

examination for E306, which would be called the E316K Placement Test, would also thus serve to place transfers claiming credit from another institution for an E306-like course. Students who passed this placement test would be eligible for E316K and would be eligible to sit for the E316K equivalency examination. Students who failed the placement examination could not be required to take in effect another E306, but they could be required to take some type of supplementary/remedial course. Thus in addition to E106 and E206, the Subcommittee thus recommends the creation of six such supplementary courses--E116K, E216K, E146K, E246K, E1XXK, and E2XXK--to be taken in conjunction with E316K (i.e., E216K or E116K) or E346K (i.e., E246K or E146K) or to be taken after the student fails to demonstrate graduation-level competency on the E346K Writing Competency Test, in which case the student would be required to enroll in and complete at a satisfactory level either E1XXK or E2XXK. These courses would function in much the same way as E106 and E206 and would be administered through the expanded writing laboratory. One advantage of offering these supplemental "lab" courses through the writing lab is that the costs of operating the writing laboratory could then be partially underwritten by tuition fees. The Subcommittee also recommends these supplemental courses for students whose scores on the course placement/exit examinations indicate the need for additional writing instruction and practice regardless of the grades they may have received in E306, E316K, or E346K.

2. Diagnosing the strengths and weaknesses of student writers placed in E106 and E206. The Subcommittee believes that diagnosis of the particular strengths and weaknesses of students placed in E106 and E206 should be based on the direct assessment of student writing ability, not on indirect, or "objective," assessments. The committee appointed to oversee the writing laboratory should also oversee the development of the diagnostic test(s).

3. Granting equivalency credit for E306, E316K, and each variant of E346K. The Subcommittee recommends that the supervisory committees for these courses be charged with the development of specific equivalency tests. These tests must, however, include a writing sample and reflect the goals and objectives that reach across individual sections of these courses. As indicated above, the Subcommittee also recommends the use of alternate forms of these equivalency tests as placement/exit examinations for those courses. Other matters relevant to equivalency testing are treated in a previous section of this report and in the graphic illustrating the recommended assessment program. As previously noted, the APPENDIX contains a description of an equivalency test for E306, a test tied to the specific goals and objectives of that course. Whatever the

specific form the various equivalency tests take, the Subcommittee recommends that they be developed and pretested carefully.

4. Costs and Logistics of the recommended assessment program. The Subcommittee did not have available sufficient information to determine the exact amount of money the recommended assessment program would cost. A large portion of the cost, however, would be covered by fees incoming freshmen would pay to take the initial set of tests, by fees freshmen and others would pay to take the E316K and E346K equivalency examinations, by fees transfer students would pay to take particular "placement" tests, and a "lab fee" to cover the costs of panel grading of the placement/exit examinations.

The Subcommittee was able to identify certain personnel needs. It was estimated that approximately twenty persons would be needed to evaluate equivalency, placement, and diagnostic examinations during the summer orientation sessions when they would be administered, although these persons would probably not have to be hired full-time. An even larger number of persons would need to be hired to rate placement/exit examinations for E306, E316K, and E346K--a number that would grow each year until the program was fully operational. The Subcommittee also saw the need for the University to hire perhaps two persons, preferably as tenured or tenure-track faculty in the English Department, with demonstrable experience in the development and testing of writing assessment instruments and in the training of raters to judge holistically and analytically large numbers of student writing samples. In addition, the Subcommittee anticipates the need for support staff--including graduate research associates, secretaries, and work-study help. Beyond some substantial personnel needs, the Subcommittee anticipates considerable duplicating costs and computer costs (both time and supplies).

The Logistics of administering the recommended assessment program were not viewed as insurmountable if appropriate funding is provided. The greatest logistical problems will probably occur in administering and scoring examinations during the summer orientation sessions, in administering and scoring the end-of-the-semester placement/exit examinations, and in diagnosing the weaknesses of the students routed into the approved and recommended supplemental courses.

5. Effects of placement, equivalency, and diagnostic testing on writing curriculum and instruction. The Subcommittee is aware that the assessment program it recommends will affect the teaching of writing in particular sections of the different

courses in the writing program. However, the Subcommittee believes that the effect will be a stronger composition program, one in which sections of the same course have similar goals and objectives and one in which the courses are seen as conceptually related to each other. The Subcommittee does not see its recommended assessment program as an infringement on academic freedom because those persons directly concerned with teaching the individual courses would be directly involved in the development of the various test instruments. The involvement of faculty in the assessment program should serve only to strengthen the new program.

6. The relationship of placement, equivalency, and diagnostic testing to course and program evaluation. Although the Subcommittee recognizes that writing samples constitute but one kind of data for course and program evaluation, it believes that the evaluation of writing courses and programs must include the evaluation of student writing. The necessity of placement/exit examinations for all three courses in order to assess the writing abilities of transfer students means, in effect, that at the end of four years a portfolio of at least four writing samples will have been assembled for most students. These writing samples can be used in a number of ways: to help determine the overall effectiveness of the courses and the program, both formatively and summatively; to help determine how well the various courses and the program in general is serving subpopulations of students (e.g., ethnic minorities, transfer students, students in different colleges); to establish correlations between student evaluations of teachers and student development of writing ability. In short, the recommended assessment program provides an adequate basis for ongoing program evaluation.

IMPLEMENTATION PROCEDURES

Before the Subcommittee's recommended assessment program is implemented, a great deal prior work needs to be completed. Funds will need to be made available to hire an adequate staff, both professional and clerical, to carry out this preliminary work. In addition, funds will be needed to develop the six supplementary courses, to develop and validate testing instruments, to begin creating a data base for evaluation, etc. Thus the Subcommittee recommends the following:

1. Immediately hire at least two tenure-track (preferably tenured) faculty with strong backgrounds in writing as a discipline and in large-scale assessments of writing to implement and then coordinate the assessment

program.

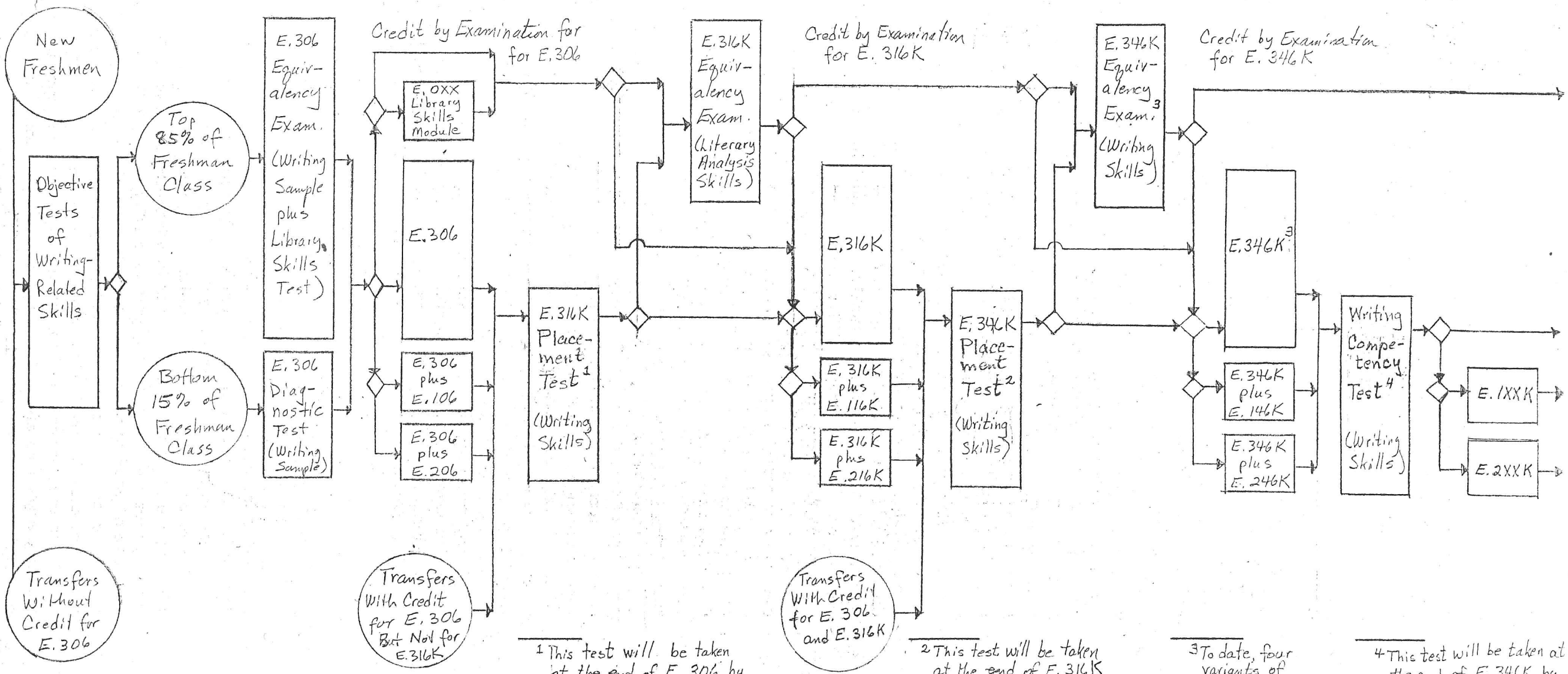
2. Determine the specific goals and objectives of E306, E316K, and the variants of E346K.
3. Develop and validate placement/exit and equivalency examinations for E306, E316K, and the E346K variants based on the goals and objectives of those courses.
4. Determine appropriate score requirements for placement/exit and equivalency examinations.
5. Develop procedures and materials for training readers/raters for diagnostic, equivalency, and placement/exit examinations.
6. Begin developing a data base for program and course evaluation.
7. Begin developing the administrative support structure for the recommended assessment program.
8. Begin developing the administrative support structure for course and program evaluation.
9. Develop and implement the following courses: E116K, E216K, E146K, E246K, E1XXK, and E2XXK.
10. Develop procedures for pilot testing all assessment materials and procedures.

The Subcommittee recognizes that developing, implementing, and maintaining a good assessment program (and the Subcommittee believes that the one it has recommended is a good one) will be costly. The Subcommittee also believes that a good assessment program is a necessary and important part of the new writing program at the University of Texas.

APPENDIX

The Subcommittee outlined in some detail a possible equivalency examination for E306. The Subcommittee limited itself to E306 because that was the only course in the new program for which was a available necessary information about course content. With regard to English 306, Ruszkiewicz (the Director of Freshman English) was able to identify for the Subcommittee the principal "outcomes" of that course. These included (1) the ability to read and comprehend complex texts, (2) the ability to synthesize information from a number of different sources, (3) the ability to produce informative, argumentative, and exploratory texts of some length, and (4) the ability to find information in a library. The subcommittee therefore recommended that the English 306 equivalency test consist of at least two sections or parts. The first part would take the form of an objective test of library skills, with emphasis on using the card catalogue, general indices of periodicals, specialized bibliographies and indices, government documents, and computer-based information services. The second part would take the form of a writing assignment designed to determine whether students could read and comprehend texts, synthesize information to produce texts or parts of texts which are informative, argumentative, and/or exploratory. It was suggested that for this part of the English 306 equivalency test students be given texts to read and then be asked to write an original text which drew on the information contained in the texts offered for reading. Different versions of such an equivalency examination for E306 could be pilot tested during the previous semester(s).

PROPOSED FLOW CHART FOR PLACEMENT/ASSESSMENT IN THE NEW U.T. AUSTIN WRITING PROGRAM



¹ This test will be taken at the end of E.306 by all students enrolled in that course.

² This test will be taken at the end of E.316K by all students enrolled in that course.

³ To date, four variants of this course have been approved.

⁴ This test will be taken at the end of E.346K by all students enrolled in that course.