

# COMPETENCY TESTING

## WILL IT SOLVE THE PROBLEMS OF HIGHER EDUCATION?

BY DALE JOHNSON

**A** study by the Association of American Colleges several years ago concluded that the decay in college academic achievement signaled a crisis in American education.

Evidence of decline and devaluation is everywhere. The business community complains of difficulty in recruiting literate college graduates. Remedial programs, designed to compensate for lack of skill in using the English language, abound in the college and in the corporate world...

Foreign language competence is now not only a national embarrassment, but in a rapidly changing world it threatens to be a feebling disadvantage in the conduct of business and diplomacy. Scientific and technological developments have so outpaced the understanding of science provided by most college programs that we have become a people unable to comprehend the technology that we invent and unable to bring under control our capacity to isolate the natural world.<sup>1</sup>

Many voices proclaim their agreement with this study and question the quality of both private and public higher education. These include legislators, denominational leaders, students, employers, constituents, college administrators, and teachers—all of whom proclaim that the quality of college education is not what it should be.

This outcry should not have caught higher education by surprise. However, during the early 1980s colleges were concerned with different, though related, issues: declining enrollments, the rising tide of mediocrity, and methods for improving the quality of undergraduate education.<sup>2</sup> Education's role in guaranteeing America's competitiveness with other countries

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### *How do you measure competency?*

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has become a major concern only in the past few years.

A continuing avalanche of evidence indicates that American educational systems can do better. One of approximately 300 studies during the mid-1980s compared American students and adults with those in eight other countries. American college students placed last. One of five Americans in this age group could not find the United States on a world map, placed New York in 37 different places (on both Atlantic and Pacific coasts), and thought that the United States had a population of more than one billion.

That American college students are constantly being outscored by their peers in Asia and Western Europe in such subject areas as mathematics and verbal achievement is a major concern. This deficiency could lead to a decline of American standing in the world market, a lowered standard of living and a permanent underclass.

If educational incompetency is the problem, then requiring competency may be part of the solution. But how do you measure competency? Would this require some form of test in subject areas such as social and natural sciences, English, and mathematics, as well as stipulations about a certain level of attainment in a student's major field of study?

An assessment program raises as many questions as it answers. How will it be financed? Will remediation be provided? Who will define competency and set the standards? What subjects should a college degree include, and how much should a student know about each of these?

In looking at particular areas, specific questions might include the following: Does everyone have to read certain classics? If so, who decides which books belong on the list? Should every student be knowledgeable about quantum physics, higher mathematics, and modern art? Should tests measure knowledge or skills—or both? None of these questions—or a myriad of others raised by competency testing—have easy answers.

### **Essential Preconditions**

Defining competency, either quantitatively or qualitatively, is difficult. Seventh-day Adventists believe in educating the whole person. Therefore, would we want to test for levels of critical thinking, interpersonal relationship skills, and physical fitness? If taken to the extreme, arguments could be made for testing in every area. College professors protecting their turfs might implement requirements that would lead to general studies requirements of nearly 200 hours!

A related problem arises in defining competencies within a particular subject area. James Sledd has indicated that there are "basic incompetencies in defining basic competencies." It is somewhat difficult to define exactly what is meant by statements such as "demonstrating skills of standard written English" or requirements that stu-

dents "must prove their ability to present their ideas clearly in standard English."<sup>3</sup>

### **Defining Competency**

To solve this dilemma, higher education must arrive at a consensus as to which academic skills a student must possess in order to be competent. Otherwise, we will never be able to determine whether the goal of eliminating incompetency has been attained; it will be difficult to obtain or construct adequate measurement instruments; and college students will fail to see the process as valid or beneficial.

### **Ascertaining Test Validity**

A second essential precondition for an assessment program would be ascertaining test validity. However, test validity cannot be defined until faculty and curriculum committees develop instructional goals. Otherwise the test might dictate the curriculum or the two might be unrelated.

Numerous national standardized tests might be used for an assessment program. These include Graduate Record Examination field tests, National Teachers Examinations, American Institute of Certified Accountants exams, and the Undergraduate Assessment Program area examinations.<sup>4</sup> Whatever tests are used, appropriate test construction

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principles and testing procedures would have to be followed to guarantee test validity.

### **Legal Challenges**

Educators also need to address a third precondition to the use of assessment tests: legal issues. Will the use of tests lead to malpractice claims?<sup>5</sup> What role will student test results play in evaluating teachers? What legal problems will be created if assessment programs do not provide remediation for deficiencies identified by the tests? What if restricted diplomas are issued, or graduation is denied?<sup>6</sup> Will procedural and substantive due process issues be raised if competency tests have not demonstrated both curricular and instructional validity<sup>7</sup> and reliability?<sup>8</sup>

Assessment programs would have to be carefully developed and implemented to meet the concerns of minority students, the handicapped, and those who are not fluent in stan-

dard English. Failure to provide mechanisms for these persons to succeed might well produce ethical as well as legal problems.

Issues relating to accountability and fulfillment of contractual obligations might also arise. If a parent invests \$40,000 in his child's college education, and the child earns a 3.75 grade point average, but then fails a competency test during the last quarter of his senior year, the college might face a lawsuit and demand for a financial settlement.

### **Providing Remediation**

Another precondition to establishing competency tests is the ethical responsibility to assist students needing remedial help. Adventist colleges are likely to maintain an open-door policy because of economic pressure, philosophical beliefs, or other reasons. As a result, up to one-fifth of their student bodies might have difficulty passing competency exams. This would necessitate developing much better programs of remediation and counseling than presently exist.

### **Funding the Program**

A financial commitment by the institution to the assessment program is a fifth essential precondition to testing. Funds must be made available for

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within the church and to train them for service to God and humanity. □

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#### NOTES AND REFERENCES

<sup>1</sup> Five percent had attended one year; 6 percent, two years; 6 percent, three years; 6 percent, four years; 5 percent, five years; 6 percent, six years; 9 percent, seven years.

<sup>2</sup> Dann Spader, "Tired of Band-Aid Approaches to Youth Work?" *Moody Monthly* (January 1984), p. 55.

<sup>3</sup> Merton P. Strommen, Milo L. Brekke, Ralph C. Underwager, and Arthur L. Johnson, *A Study of Generations* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1972), p. 295.

<sup>4</sup> See Roger L. Dudley, *Why Teenagers Reject Religion and What to Do About It* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Assn., 1978), chapter 3.

<sup>5</sup> Kevin Treston, Raymond G. Whiteman, and Jerry G. Florent, "Catholic School Religious Training Versus Adolescent Background and Orientation: Two Comparative Studies," *Notre Dame Journal of Education*, 6 (Spring 1975), pp. 59-64.

<sup>6</sup> Elisau N. Menegusso, "An Investigation of the Relationship Between Religiosity, Amount of Exposure to Seventh-day Adventist Education, and Other Selected Variables," Ed.D. dissertation, Andrews University, Berrien Springs, Michigan, 1980.

<sup>7</sup> Joel N. Noble, "Certain Religious and Educational Attitudes of Senior High School Students in Seventh-day Adventist Schools in the Pacific Northwest," Ph.D. dissertation, University of Oregon, 1971.

## ASSISTING STUDENTS WITH DRUG ABUSE PROBLEMS

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"Never give them occasion to say, 'no man cares for my soul.'" □

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#### NOTES AND REFERENCES

<sup>1</sup> D. C. McBride, P. B. Mutch, R. L. Dudley, A. G. Julian, and W. H. Beaven, "Adventists, Drugs, and a Changing Church," *Adventist Review*, 66:22 (June 1, 1989), pp. 12-14.

<sup>2</sup> As used in the document, the word *drug* meant any mind-altering chemical, including alcohol.

<sup>3</sup> Ellen G. White, *The Ministry of Healing* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publishing Assn., 1969), p. 172.

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test construction, selection, and implementation, for faculty and administrator time, and for designing and operating remedial programs.<sup>9</sup>

### Organizational Framework

Finally, competency testing would need some type of organizational framework in order for the system to function properly. It is doubtful that any denominational board at a national level could dictate what assessment programs would be implemented at every college or university.

Many states mandate or require that specific requirements be met, such as exit examinations for teachers, AIDS education programs, or district policy statements regarding religion within public schools. After mandating such requests, the state provides economic assistance, training seminars, and model programs. This approach is successful because the necessary change can be accomplished without major inconvenience to the institution. Something similar could be done within the denomination in regard to assessment programs for college students.

The above problems and preconditions are not insurmountable obstacles to implementation of a testing program. However difficult they may be to solve, they should not be used as excuses for failure to develop assessment programs.

### Making Assessment Work

Assuming that all the preconditions for assessment are met, there are still some fundamental principles that must be followed. These relate to the academic purpose and philosophy of the institution, the involvement of the faculty in assessment, and the benefits to be gained by students, faculty, and the institution.

Assessment must be directly tied to the guiding purpose of the institution.<sup>10</sup> This requires developing a written philosophy that gives direction to the development of academics, states long- and short-term goals, and outlines instructional methodology.

Faculty must not only believe that requiring competencies is essential, but must also assume ownership and responsibility for the program.<sup>11</sup> This requires that they perceive assessment as positive, not punitive. For example, assessment testing should not be used

for teacher evaluations because it creates a negative reaction among faculty, causes conflicts between faculty and administration, and increases the probability that teachers will teach to the test. Using the tests for teacher evaluations may also be illegal in many localities.

A successful assessment program effectively redirects faculty and administrative energy toward teaching and learning. As a result, they view effective teaching as a priority, giving more attention to analyzing the curriculum, examining course goals and objectives, and reorganizing teaching assignments.

Students, as well as faculty, must perceive benefits to be gained from assessment.<sup>12</sup> The results coming in from colleges that have utilized such programs indicate that their students are indeed learning more. Northeast Missouri College students showed impressive improvements in mathematics test scores after the school recognized deficiency in the area and incorporated mathematics across the teaching curriculum.

Several Florida colleges reported increases in student reading performance after they implemented an assessment program. Such results suggest that the learning process itself may be enhanced through assessment. Interviews with students there indicated growth in independent inquiry and greater interest in learning, which was ascribed to the special character of the school's competency assessment-based curriculum.<sup>13</sup> Such evidence indicates that assessment could promote better academic standards, create an advantage in obtaining job prospects, provide better opportunities for students to enter more selective graduate programs, as well as increase their accomplishment and self-esteem.

### Conclusion

Since better test results seem to build confidence in faculty, enhance recruitment efforts, and attract better students, successful assessment programs have increased the respect shown to institutions by their constituency.

Because of issues of accountability, cost, and quality, the demand for assessment will not quickly fade. The difference between a first-rate and a third-rate education is real and has lifelong effects.<sup>14</sup> Therefore, it is essential that each institution pursue the changes itself, rather than wait for such programs to be imposed by outside agencies.

Incorporating assessment into denominational higher education

could prove extremely beneficial. If done properly, it could increase the competency of the system, of individual institutions, of academic departments, and of instructors and students. Since there are a number of legitimate ways to implement such a program, assessment would probably not prove excessively complex.

The possibilities for success are high; the risks are relatively low. Therefore it would be worthwhile for Adventist colleges to implement assessment programs for their students. □

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#### REFERENCES

<sup>1</sup> William W. Turnbull, "Are They Learning Anything in College?" *Change* (November-December 1985), p. 23.

<sup>2</sup> K. Patricia Cross, "Making Students Successful: The Search for Solutions Continues," *Change* (November-December 1985), p. 48.

<sup>3</sup> James Sledd, "A Basic Incompetence in Defining Basic Competencies," *English Journal* (November 1986), p. 26.

<sup>4</sup> Charles J. McClain, "Assessment Produces Degrees With Integrity," *Educational Record* (Winter 1987), p. 49.

<sup>5</sup> "Testing Students May Raise Legal Issues for Reformers," *Phi Delta Kappan* (February 1987), p. 481.

<sup>6</sup> Jeri J. Goldman, "Political and Legal Issues in Minimum Competency Testing," *Educational Forum* (Winter 1984), p. 207.

<sup>7</sup> Merle Steven McClurg, "Are Competency Testing Programs Fair? Legal?" *Phi Delta Kappan*, 59 (February 1978), p. 397.

<sup>8</sup> Donald Marion Lewis, "Certifying Functional Literacy: Competency Process and Equal Educational Opportunity," *Journal of Law and Education* (April 1979), p. 159.

<sup>9</sup> Goldman, p. 210.

<sup>10</sup> McClain, p. 51.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> Myron Blee and John Nickens, "Is Statewide Exit Testing for Community College Students a Sound Idea?" *Community, Technical, and Junior College Journal* (October-November 1985), p. 52.

<sup>13</sup> Peter Ewell, "Assessment, What's It All About?" *Change* (November-December 1985), p. 35.

<sup>14</sup> Frank Newman, "States Join the Debate," *Ibid.*, p. 7.

## LEGAL UPDATE

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the nature of the work.

8. Beware of sidelining an employee, that is, removing him from his current position and placing him in a less desirable job in order to avoid termination. If the employee resigns from the unwanted position, he or she may charge the organization with "con-

structive discharge," which may open the way to a legal action alleging wrongful discharge.

9. Review your employee handbook. Ask a labor attorney to examine the handbook before it is distributed, and to review any changes that are planned. Handbooks often cover the following areas:

### Probationary Periods (or other appropriate terminology)

Definition  
Length  
Extensions

### Grievance Procedures

Steps to be followed  
Alternatives (if any)

### Employee Access to Personnel File(s)

State law  
Time frames

### Progressive Levels of Discipline

Evaluations  
Offenses meriting various levels  
Verbal warnings  
Written warnings  
Probation  
Time frames

### Termination

Procedures<sup>4</sup>  
Settlement  
Release statement

### Compensation/Benefits/Retirement

Philosophy  
Employee/employer participation

*Consistency and fairness* are the key words to remember when designing an employee-relations policy. As long as these concepts are put into action, and lines of communication are kept open, the threat of wrongful discharge litigation may be significantly reduced.<sup>5</sup>

Awareness of potential risks relative to the topics covered in this column and the two previous columns—sexual harassment, sexual abuse, and wrongful termination—is essential in order to reduce possible liability. Preventive measures as well as guidelines for handling an accusation/complaint must be in place *before* such situations arise in order to safeguard against unjust and unlawful acts.

However, in considering these issues, each person, whether employee or employer, administrator or policy maker, must keep in mind his responsibility to conduct both personal business, as well as the Lord's business, in a Christlike manner. If this policy is reflected through "every action, thought, and deed"<sup>6</sup> it will offer the greatest protection and the greatest rewards. □

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#### NOTES AND REFERENCES

<sup>1</sup> Since each geographic locality has specific laws governing employment, organizations should contact an attorney knowledgeable about the local statutes for advice and clarification of these issues.

<sup>2</sup> The term *employment-at-will* means that the employer has the right to terminate an employee at any time, for any reason, or for no reason. Also the employee has a right to terminate his or her employment at any time, for any reason, or for no reason.

<sup>3</sup> In the United States, Bona Fide Occupational Qualifications (BFOO's) are permitted for sex, religion, and national origin under Title VII, Section 703(a), Civil Rights Act, 1964.

<sup>4</sup> See North American Division Working Policy.  
<sup>5</sup> *Risk Management Services Guidelines—Wrongful Termination*, September 1987.

<sup>6</sup> Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publishing Assn., 1913), p. 308.

## NEWS NOTES

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of action between Washington's troops and the British who occupied it.

### Friday, August 25

This day we had a conventional historic tour of colonial Philadelphia, including Independence Hall, the Liberty Bell Pavilion, Carpenter's Hall, and Christ's Church. All in all, a quite informative and exciting week.

School administrators should be aware that Freedoms Foundation presents programs in the school system throughout the United States. Through cooperation with the American Legion, this foundation sponsors many excellent programs, seminars, and workshops.

The American Legion of California sent more than 40 teachers to the Delaware Valley Workshop. The St. Helena Post paid for my books and the \$500 tuition charge. Freedoms Foundation also has a national awards program open for applicants in both education and citizenship categories.

Topics for 1990 programs include "The American Revolution" (Boston to Philadelphia; Charlotte, North Carolina to Philadelphia; and Philadelphia/Delaware Valley; "The Civil Way" (the eastern campaigns); and "Hispanic American Heritage" (the California missions). Five one-week workshops will be held between June 24 and August 24.

For more information, write to Freedoms Foundation at Valley Forge, Valley Forge, PA 19481. □

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