

Regents Exam Review Panel
Hosted by the Rockefeller Foundation
November 30, 2001

The 3rd Regents Exam Review Panel to be hosted by the Rockefeller Foundation included professionals from the universities (admission directors and professors) and a congressional aide to a NYS legislator. We were given the chance to critique the Regents exams in two subject areas, English and Global History/Geography, and as part of our discussion, to actually *take* sections of the exams to better understand the challenge it poses for students.

What we discovered was that the *challenge* was minimal and fell far below the standards needed for a college prep curriculum. To understand the causes for this, we referred back to the standards set by the State Education Department (SED). To our surprise, we found that the exams also fell far below the standards set by the SED itself!

Our panel concluded that if you want to know whether this test helps prepare kids for college, the answer is no. College requires critical thinking and the weighing of evidence; this test does not. As one of our participants noted, these tests “simply test how well people can take tests.” The evidence for this conclusion is explained below.

The ELA Regents Exam: Not an Indicator of College Readiness

Since students’ grades on Regents exams become part of their high-school transcript when they apply to colleges, we assumed that the test is probably a good indicator of a student’s readiness for college work. However, once we studied the structure and content of the exam, we realized our assumptions were unfounded.

Tasks students are asked to complete on the ELA do not correspond to the types of tasks they would be asked to complete in their college courses. For example, the *Listening* section of the ELA exam has no parallel in college work. It would be very difficult for a student to answer comprehension questions based on a spoken text without having seen the questions ahead of time; their listening would be untethered. Not one person on our panel felt that this task was a useful preparation for college. In fact, said one professor, “the worst college classes are the ones in which students must listen to a lecture without having foreknowledge of its purpose.”

Several participants commented on the odd structure of the exam, which offers no choice of essay topic at any point. In contrast to the active learning valued in college classrooms, the ELA is structured to impede students’ critical skills by preventing them from using their own individual expertise and preparedness. All students must take the same prescribed approach to the same material.

Not only did this structure seem antithetical to the goals of higher education, but panelists contended that not offering a range of passages to comment on, or a range of approaches to take to the given passage, created a potential for bias since certain passages clearly favor specific populations. On any given sitting of a test, students with particular life experiences will have an advantage: students who live in homes rather than

apartments, for example, on the passage about home heating costs; students who understand football (in the Chuck Noll speech); students who are familiar with Suzuki violin.

We also noted that the reading and listening passages on the ELA seemed purposefully dry and dense as well as poorly written. We couldn't help wondering what pedagogical purpose the test makers had in choosing these awkward passages for students to analyze. "If we want to encourage excited, engaged learners, this type of writing won't do it," remarked one of the admissions officers. One participant wondered whether such selections were chosen "in a grim and dutiful way" to prepare students to confront the "type of writing I encounter on government forms." The panelists agreed that challenging passages need not be this dense or opaque.

On the second half of the exam, participants wanted to know what was meant by a *controlling idea* and a *critical lens*. These terms are not used in college instruction or in any informed discussion of literature. These constructs seemed to have been created for the purpose of the test, and we were concerned about the effect this would have on teachers, whose use of terminology specific only to the Regents would be disorienting for students.

There is plenty of conventional terminology -- teaching students to develop a thesis and support theses with evidence, for example -- which would better support their academic futures.

The ELA Regents Exam: Not Aligned with Standards

When we realized that the exams did not assess the skills students would need at the college level, we referenced the State Learning Standards to better understand just what the exams might be assessing. We discovered that one of the skills that is extremely valuable in college (speaking) was indeed listed as a central standard, yet does not appear at all on the ELA exam. We were concerned since not only the college classroom but certain jobs, even those requiring only high school diplomas, demand oral skills that are not assessed on these tests. The professors in our group felt that oral presentation skills were invaluable for success in college. One said that she liked "the idea of having an assessment that includes a discussion - you can really see what the student knows." The admissions officers agreed that these were skills their faculty wanted students to have. Because the test does not involve an oral component, we felt certain that teachers preparing students for the test would simply drop that portion of the curriculum in favor of drilling for the skills that are on the test. This is an excellent example of the exams' potential for trivializing the classroom curriculum and reducing it to simply "test-prep."

The ELA Regents Exam: Mistreating Literature

We're deeply concerned about the effect of this test on classroom instruction at the secondary level. Preparation for the exam requires a steady diet of short passages of literature robbed of their context. We were appalled to see that one of the compare-and-contrast passages, taken from Isaac Bashevis Singer's memoir, had been completely stripped of its context by removing all references to Jews and Gentiles, which had been

the subject of the original. This clearly violates the state's learning standard of understanding the "social, historical and cultural dimensions of literature" since this passage's social, historical and cultural dimensions had been excised for the test! Several panelists also commented that by making such extensive cuts without indicating that anything was missing through brackets or ellipses, the exam did exactly the opposite of another learning standard: "to follow the conventions of standard written English."

Global Studies and Geography Exam: More of the Same

The Global Studies exam was no better at indicating preparation for college level history classes than the ELA had been for literature classes. Historians on the panel deemed the Global Studies Regents "just another reading comprehension test" rather than an examination of students' historical knowledge or ability to handle historical concepts. The exam's approach to history bore no relation to history as it is practiced at the college level. Panelists were particularly concerned about the brevity of the "documents" provided for the document-based essay and the fact that these documents were presented devoid of context. To our surprise, one document on the exam was given no date at all (a fact acknowledged by the grading manual, which advised that the document could therefore be used either to represent "traditional" or "modern" society). The historians were appalled by this cavalier approach.. The fact that the document concerned rural Africa was particularly egregious as contemporary historians are especially concerned with conveying the specificity of time and place in relation to allegedly "pre-modern" peoples.

Furthermore, we surmised that the documents themselves had been presented with a bias toward only one possible interpretation, which is completely antithetical to the approach students will encounter in college. As one history professor commented, "Historians do not teach this way. Once kids get admitted to college, they won't get this kind of approach to history. With the exception of some large lecture classes, historians do not teach from textbooks and we do not learn how to teach from textbooks. We teach documents in context. We use primary sources. We teach kids how the text is a sociocultural construction, and we teach them how to question the text."

We all agreed that in college-level history courses, history is contested; it's not a neat and tidy sequence of events. There is a disjunction between how high school approaches history, as evidenced and reinforced by this test, and the way college does. As one of the panelists concluded, there is therefore "very little predictive validity between doing well on this test and doing well in college."

The Regents Exam and College Admissions

The admissions officers reported that their understanding of the meaning of the exam grade had radically altered after seeing the exams themselves. One dean of admissions commented: "Having seen what these exams are all about it makes you wonder what the scores really reflect." Another admissions dean added, "I have always believed that the discrepancies on students' transcripts between Regents test scores and

class grades meant something significant. Before having had this opportunity to examine the ELA test, I had trusted the test and simply assumed that the discrepancy was a result of grade inflation at the school. Having looked at the ELA exam, the meaning is different for me now.”

The college admissions officers agreed that because they come from smaller, private institutions, they have the luxury of getting to know specific high schools and are comfortable admitting kids who have proven themselves on alternative assessments, but a professor who teaches at a large, public university lamented that many state universities have done away with the essays in their college applications, and he feared that the Regents exams would take an undeserved prominence in such an equation.

Panelists asked what would happen to students who either didn't take or didn't pass their Regents exams. They were concerned that although they would be willing to accept a student who had fulfilled all the other requirements of his or her high school, such a student would be ineligible for Federal financial aid. They felt that such students' college plans would be unfairly jeopardized by this poorly designed exam. To encourage greater awareness among college admissions deans and professors, we agreed it would be extremely valuable to offer others involved in higher education the opportunity to examine the Regents tests.

Signed by:

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