

## **Association for Informal Logic and Critical Thinking**

The following press release was issued on Dec. 19, 2007. It began by noting that an electronic [digital and editable] copy of the release could be found on the AILACT web site.

### **For Immediate Release: AILACT re Spellings Commission Report.** (V8.2)

The Association for Informal Logic and Critical Thinking (AILACT) has declared itself in support of the Spellings Commission's recommendations for transparent nationwide testing for critical thinking in higher education. However, AILACT does not support the Commission-recommended numerical comparisons of colleges and universities.

AILACT is an international organization of primarily college and university teachers of critical thinking, about 80% of whom are Americans. "The Spellings Commission" is a frequently used name for "The Secretary of Education's Commission on the Future of Higher Education", which was a 19-member group appointed by the United States Secretary of Education, Margaret Spellings in 2005.

The Commission's task was to produce recommendations for improving higher education in the United States. Accountability testing of crucial areas was an important part of its resulting recommendations. The tests recommended by the Commission, the Commission's analysis of needs, and the comments of Commission Chair, William Miller, show that critical thinking, literacy, and probably mathematics are areas for which it thinks higher education institutions should be held accountable by testing. This accountability, in the eyes of the Commission, calls for assessing "performance outcomes" by using tests to determine the "value added" by a college or university to its students' set of competencies. Transparency and numerical comparability of results, which are to be stored in a national data bank, the Commission claimed, would enable policy makers to hold the institutions accountable, and enable prospective students and parents to tell which institutions are doing a good job in these areas.

In sympathy, AILACT believes that the benefits of high-quality nationwide testing of critical thinking would include:

- increased attention to critical thinking in the total curriculum;
- a check on whether critical thinking is actually being taught, as many colleges and universities claim; and
- helpful information for prospective parents and students about the effectiveness of an institution in teaching critical thinking.

But AILACT strongly opposes a single nationwide critical thinking test and the inevitable accompanying numerical comparisons. Although the Commission did not explicitly recommend having only one test, AILACT believes that the Commission's pressures for numerical comparability might well result in a single test. AILACT opposes having a single test on the ground that it would, AILACT fears, be dumbed down and politicized. Furthermore, attempts at numerical comparisons would not only provide pressure for having only one test, but would encourage manipulation of a number of possible factors to produce a better-looking result, as colleges and universities competed for students and prestige.

On the other hand, AILACT's recommendations for transparency of testing go further than the Commission's modest recommendations, and include the open availability of a) the critical-thinking

conception employed, b) former versions or comparable forms of the test, and c) the argument for the claimed extent of the validity of the test in the given situation. With such transparency, students, prospective students, parents, and policymakers could better grasp what is really being assessed and the significance of the results.

However, because of the many problems and dangers associated with such a testing effort, AILACT urges proactive vigilance on the part of critical thinking faculty and administrators, as well as students, parents, and policymakers. If such vigilance is not successful, AILACT recommends resistance to the testing.

In more detail, possible problems and dangers noted by AILACT include:

- sacrifice of test quality in order to save money;
- manipulation to make an institution look good to the public, policy makers, and accrediting agencies in the context of widespread competition for good students;
- ignoring the actual nature and content of the test used;
- neglect of the everyday concept of critical thinking;
- use of computers to do the grading of essays solicited in order to assess critical thinking;
- lack of comparability among different tests, resulting in pressure for a single, required national test with its accompanying severe political problems;
- failure to provide -- or demand -- an argument for a test's situational validity (the validity of the test in the given situation, or type of situation);
- any "teaching to a test" that damages or destroys the test's situational validity;
- neglect of other possible explanations of "value-added" evidence, pre-test/post-test differences, and "student learning outcomes" evidence;
- penalization, because of ceilings and floors of tests, of institutions with a preponderance of students at either a high level or low level of critical thinking prowess;
- failure to satisfy the need for fairly large organizations for administering, scoring, and providing test security -- and the concomitant need for qualified personnel to make and supervise the use of a critical-thinking test;
- overemphasis on psychometric reliability (consistency) at the expense of situational test validity;
- the possibility that internal-consistency methods of determining psychometric reliability will be biased against multi-dimensional critical-thinking tests;
- in particular, the possibility that in order to secure high internal-consistency psychometric reliabilities, a critical-thinking test will be limited to deductive logic;
- accidental or deliberately induced variation in standard deviations that are used to exhibit practical differences in test results; and
- the exacerbation of the above-listed problems and dangers resulting from the extra pressure on institutions that would result from the numerical comparisons that are specifically sought by the Commission, and would be an inevitable consequence of having only one or a few alternative required nationwide tests.

The complete texts of AILACT's resolution and this press release, as well as an elaboration of the above points, can be found on AILACT's web site, <http://ailact.mcmaster.ca>. Select "Spellings Commission".