Student Performance Q&A:
2003 AP® Psychology Free-Response Questions

The following comments on the 2003 free-response questions for AP® Psychology were written by the Chief Reader, James Freeman of the University of Virginia in Charlottesville, Virginia. They give an overview of each free-response question and of how students performed on the question, including typical student errors. General comments regarding the skills and content that students frequently have the most problems with are included. Some suggestions for improving student performance in these areas are also provided. Teachers are encouraged to attend a College Board workshop, to learn strategies for improving student performance in specific areas.

Question 1

What was the intent of this question?

This question emphasized the importance of statistics in psychology. Its intent was to test how well students understood basic descriptive statistics. Students also used quantitative concepts to describe and interpet the results of intelligence testing. Thus, this question required retrival of factual information as well as an application of more higher order, conceptual thinking.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score for this question was 5.54 out of a possible 10 points. The distribution of scores for this question was relatively symmetrical, with a mode of 5 (out of 10 points possible). The correlation of this question with the multiple-choice questions was high but somewhat lower than Question 2, suggesting that Question 1 overlapped less with the content areas covered by the multiple-choice questions.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Part (b) was the most difficult part of this question to answer. This part required students to apply psychological knowledge to answer questions about intelligence testing. Part (a) was easier because some components tested definitional or factual information.

Based on your experience of student responses at the AP Reading, what message would you like to send to teachers that might help them to improve the performance of their students on the exam?

Several teachers sent letters of complaint about this question. It was also the topic of heated discussions on the AP Psychology Electronic Discussion Group (EDG). Some teachers complained that statistics was either not a major part of their curriculum or that it was not a major part of the textbook they used (i.e., it was in an appendix). The quick rebuttal is that 1) the question was not entirely quantitative, 2) statistics are part of the curriculum as outlined in the *AP Psychology Course Description: May 2004, 2005*, and

3) the students actually perfomed better on Question 1 than they did on Question 2. Some high school teachers may not like statistics, but they must understand that statistics are an important part of psychological research. An introduction to psychological methods is incomplete without a discussion of statistics.

Question 2

What was the intent of this question?

The intent of this question was to test students' ability to apply concepts from different content areas of psychology to one specific problem. Students had to show that they understood a concept by defining it and applying it to the development or the continuation of a particular behavior — smoking.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score for this question was 4.53 out of a possible 10 points. Students performed well on this question, with a mode of 4 (out of a possible 10 points), but the mean was about one point lower than it was for Question 1. Like Question 1, the distribution of scores was relatively symmetrical. Question 2 discriminated best amongst the top students in comparison to Question 1.

What were common student errors or omissions?

I am not aware of any common errors or omissions.

Based on your experience of student responses at the AP Reading, what message would you like to send to teachers that might help them to improve the performance of their students on the exam?

This question covered several content areas that may not be typical of free-response questions in the future. However, free-response questions are likely to cover at least two content areas, as was the case with Question 1.