

Essays an endangered species in crowded university classes

LOUISE BROWN
EDUCATION REPORTER

For the first time in recent memory, sociology professor Bob Brym's first-year students will not have to write a single essay all year: Not during the term, not on the exam, not on any of the three tests.

With two fewer teaching assistants this year for a class of 1,431, the 30-year University of Toronto veteran says he no longer can ask students to write something a human must mark — there is time for only the multiple-choice tests marked by machines.

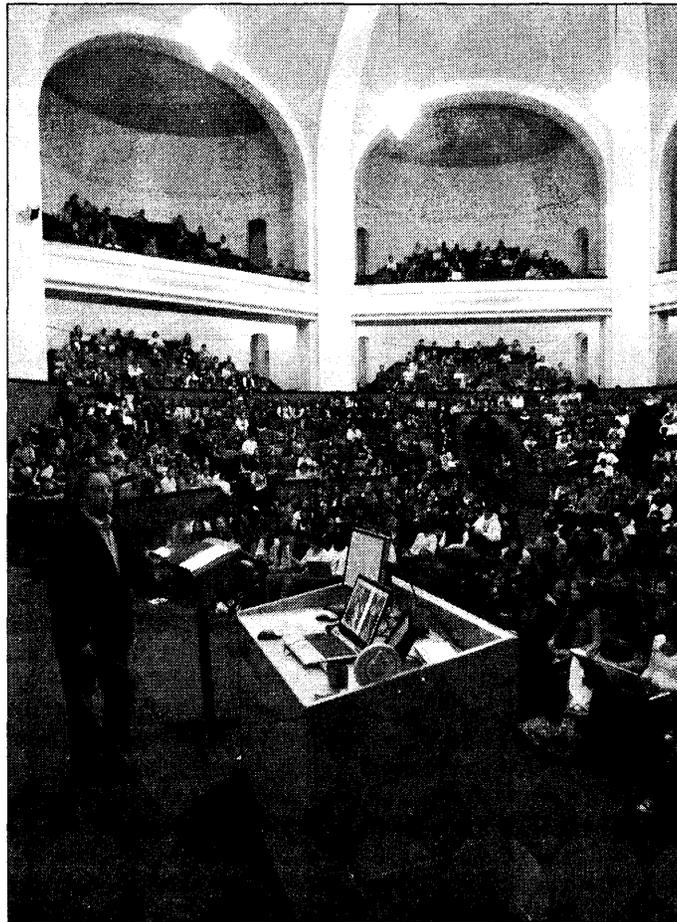
"I used to include an essay question on one of the three tests and on the final exam, but I don't have enough teaching assistants for that this year," said Brym. His class is held in Convocation Hall.

"I need at least 8.5 teaching assistants for the labour power to mark an essay on one test and one exam, and this year I got only six," said Brym, who is now studying ways to design multiple-choice tests that measure analytical skills, not just rote memory.

Nearly one in three Ontario professors said classes have become so large they have turned to using multiple-choice tests instead of essays, according to a survey of 1,400 professors released Tuesday by the Ontario Confederation of University Faculty Associations.

Some 55 per cent of professors said their classes had grown larger in the past four years.

"Without essays, students lose the chance to learn how to construct an



RICK EGLINTON/TORONTO STAR FILE PHOTO

U of T sociology professor Bob Brym says his first-year class is so big that he must rely on tests that can be graded by machine.

argument and present evidence — you can't do that when you're checking a box," said confederation president Mark Langer, a film professor at Carleton University. "The irony is, the kind of empirical knowledge you test with multiple-

choice is what students today can retrieve with the stroke of a key.

"What's important is what they do with that knowledge, and that's what an essay can show."

Indeed, U of T English professor Nick Mount said he has been able to

keep assigning the 500 students in his first-year course four essays a year because his department believes writing is so crucial. The department continues to provide him with 10 teaching assistants.

But resources shrink in second year, he said, and essays take a hit.

"That's when you see more multiple-choice electronic quizzes; class sizes have increased. Our department guidelines say students should produce between 5,000 and 10,000 words a year in writing, but we're struggling."

Queen's Park has given universities 70 per cent more in operating funds since 2002, and institutions themselves decide what portion they use for hiring, said Tyler Charlebois, a spokesperson for John Milloy, Ontario's minister of training, colleges and universities.

Some university departments are fighting to restore the essay:

- The University of Western Ontario's biology department brought in a new focus on "biological literacy" two years ago. It includes a written component on the final exam.

- Several U of T programs in engineering, arts and science have restored writing to course work, including anthropology, which just reinstated a writing assignment for its 1,000 first-year students.

- At Ryerson University, all 3,700 psychology students must produce a written assignment and answer short-essay questions on tests; the department has resisted hiking the use of multiple-choice tests over the past five years.