

The Collegiate Learning Assessment's Place in the New Assessment and Accountability Space

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January 5, 2009

Over the past five years, the higher education community has engaged in a national conversation that has focused on if and how to measure student learning. This is particularly noteworthy given that American higher education typically acts as fifty separate state systems and not as a unified whole; one must take notice when there is this level of collective discussion. Arguably, the assessment and accountability space has been permanently changed. The confluence of a number of factors helps to explain what has happened: (1) the entrance of new organizations actively supporting or undertaking assessment (e.g., the Teagle and Lumina Foundations and the Collegiate Learning Assessment [CLA]); (2) the actions of the federal government (e.g., the Spellings Commission, and indirectly, No Child Left Behind); and (3) new initiatives put forth by national organizations (e.g., the Voluntary System of Accountability [VSA], sponsored by the National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges [NASULGC] and the American Association of State Colleges and Universities [AASCU]).

However, given the simultaneity of these factors and the way that the assessment and accountability space has been altered over such a short span of time, it is not surprising for there to be confusion and a conflation of these conceptually connected yet nevertheless separate dimensions. It is the purpose of this paper to help clarify the nature of the CLA, and to detail how it is separate from these other initiatives (and in particular the VSA).

What is the CLA?

The Collegiate Learning Assessment [CLA] was founded by the Council for Aid to Education in 2000 (then a subsidiary of the RAND Corporation) with one goal: to improve teaching and learning. The CLA experienced a rapid rise to the national scene. After two years of intensive development, the 2002-03 pilot testing of the CLA measures and analytical approach proved so successful and the demand from institutions so immediate, that the program launched officially in 2004. Although the student testing component of the CLA is likely the most recognizable, the CLA actually includes four inter-related programs that address dimensions of (1) measurement science (*CLA Testing*); (2) consideration of institutional- and student-level factors that may correlate with measured performance (*CLA Analysis*); (3) curriculum and pedagogy (*CLA Education*); and (4) more general social science empirical work (*CLA Research*).

- (1) **CLA Testing** includes the use of our distinctive open-ended performance-based measures to assess students' critical thinking, analytic reasoning, problem solving and written communication skills. Cohorts of entering and exiting students participate, and a matrix sampling approach can be used to conduct cross-sectional or longitudinal analyses. Either approach provides information about the college or university's overall

value added (the student learning gains made at the institution, after controlling for initial ability, and including comparisons to similarly situated institutions). Although many colleges and universities choose to use the minimum sample sizes that permit such institutional analysis, the CLA encourages institutions to do additional “in-depth” sampling to allow analyses of colleges within a larger university, comparisons of different groups of students, or consideration of other factors that may be of interest. *(CLA Testing features include Cross-Sectional Sampling, Longitudinal Sampling, In-Depth Sampling and the CLA Institutional Report.)*

- (2) **CLA Analysis** moves beyond this summative analysis, and encourages colleges and universities to use the student-level data to do formative analysis by investigating correlations of performance with institutional factors or locally collected assessments. In other words, institutions can drill down to understand the contributing factors that explain their institutional and sub-institutional scores. *(CLA Analysis features include the CLA Student Level Data File and the CLA Local Survey; CLA Student Diagnostic Reports and CLA Institutional Diagnostic Reports are in development.)*
- (3) **CLA Education** focuses on curriculum and pedagogy, and embraces the crucial role that faculty play in the process of assessment. As performance-based measures become increasingly recognized as the most authentic way of teaching the skills that institutions value in their students and that employers demand of college graduates, the CLA has worked to facilitate the connection of institution-wide results to classroom-level and faculty work on student learning. The flagship program in this area is CLA in the Classroom¹; the CLA in the Classroom Academies provide faculty members with tools for creating and scoring their own content-embedded performance measures. No other assessment program has a comparable companion program. CLA takes seriously the informal mantra that we should create tests worth teaching to; if we believe students should be able to demonstrate higher order skills through performance tasks, we not only assess such skills, but we also help to create opportunities for students to develop and practice these skills. Other CLA educational efforts include informal gatherings at national meetings (Coffee [cl]atches), as well as free web conferences and newsletters to facilitate the sharing of best practices (CLA Spotlight and the CLA Pulse). Consortia² of institutions also provide means to share best practices. *(CLA Education programs include CLA in the Classroom, CLA in the Classroom Performance Task Library, CLA Consortia, CLA Spotlight, CLA Pulse.)*
- (4) **CLA Research** includes empirical studies conducted by the CLA research staff to consider larger psychometric, sociological, political and economic analyses of the data, typically looking across institutions participating in the CLA. A current collaboration with the

¹ For more information, visit www.claintheclassroom.org.

² In 2002, CAE and the Council of Independent Colleges (CIC) jointly established the first CLA consortium of private liberal arts colleges. These 46 institutions share best practices used to administer the CLA as well as improve curriculum and pedagogy based on their CLA scores.

Social Science Research Council [SSRC] illustrates the type of independent research CLA encourages. White papers and other research reports can be found on the CLA website.³

Taken together, it is clear that the goal of the CLA is to promote the improvement of teaching and learning through this full range of programmatic offerings. Formative assessment—not accountability—is the *raison d'être* of the CLA. The entire CLA consists of a number of programs that, taken together, form a continuous system of teaching and learning improvement.

The Place of the CLA in the Accountability Space

As suggested above, there has been much confusion about the CLA, particularly with perceived connections to policy efforts. Some critics have claimed incorrectly that the CLA is a product of the federal government, no doubt given the endorsement by the Spellings Commission. Although we appreciate that the US Department of Education sees value in the work we have undertaken, there has been no direct nor indirect connection between the CLA and any government agency. Also, some have again mistakenly suggested that the CLA is a higher education version of No Child Left Behind. In fact, we have explicitly noted how every key feature of the CLA stands diametrically opposed to the corresponding features in NCLB.⁴

But perhaps the most immediate challenge has been the confusion with the VSA. The VSA⁵ (and public reporting through the common web template the College Portrait) is a program that, as stated on their website, was designed “to improve public understanding of how public colleges and universities operate.” The website notes, “The College Portrait provides consistent, comparable and transparent information on the characteristics of institutions and students, cost of attendance, student engagement with the learning process, and core educational outcomes. The information is intended for students, families, policy-makers, campus faculty and staff, the general public, and other higher education stakeholders.” The College Portrait requires institutions to share information in three areas: (1) consumer information, (2) student experiences and perceptions, and (3) student learning outcomes. For the student learning outcomes section, VSA recommends that institutions use one of three assessment programs: ETS’ Measure of Academic Proficiency and Progress (MAPP), ACT’s Collegiate Assessment of Academic Proficiency (CAAP), and the CLA.

We support the goal of the VSA to assist higher education institutions in providing greater transparency and recognize that higher education constituent groups and accrediting agencies are increasingly requiring institutions to provide evidence of student learning outcomes. However, CLA’s participation in the VSA should not be taken to mean that the CLA is primarily an accountability tool. There are three key distinctions between the CLA and VSA that are most salient: program purpose, stage of development, and focus on faculty. Each will be discussed below.

³ Visit www.cae.org/cla.

⁴ See S. Klein (2008) *How the CLA Differs from No Child Left Behind*. www.CAE.org

⁵ For more information about the VSA, visit www.voluntarysystem.org.

Difference #1: Program purpose

The first difference is the overall purpose. The VSA by design focuses on *assessment for accountability*⁶; the CLA, by contrast, has always been driven by a commitment to *assessment for improvement*⁷. These are not wholly incompatible, but they are nevertheless distinct.

It is important to note here that the VSA utilizes *just one* of the components of our program: CLA Testing. Furthermore, VSA requires just institution-level results; the in-depth sampling and sub-group analyses encouraged by CLA are not part of the VSA's recommended protocol. Moreover, participating in CLA in the Classroom, the analytical research or the other policy work of the CLA goes above and beyond the VSA. This is not to say that the VSA should incorporate those elements into the College Portrait. The mission of their program is quite specific. However, when the work of CLA and VSA get mistakenly conflated, it may be easy to overlook the fact that the CLA involves far more than just institution-based assessment.

While institution-based value added scores may be used to meet accountability requirements, it is important to recognize that separating out the institution-based CLA score can undermine the vision of the CLA as a whole. These scores are designed to be only a signal to faculty and administrators about where their institution stands compared to similarly situated institutions. Indeed, if institutions do not commit to understanding what leads to their institution level scores (as suggested by the other features of CLA Testing, as well as CLA Education and CLA Analysis, they will not reap the full benefits of what the CLA offers.

Difference #2: Stage of Development

A second difference between the CLA and the VSA is their respective stages of development. The CLA has already been established as a reliable and valid measure and analytical approach, and is in its fifth year of widespread use throughout the United States and abroad.⁸ The student learning outcomes component of the VSA's College Portrait allows institutions to have their own four-year pilot phase. It is the *institutions* that are doing piloting testing as they figure out how to use the tools to assess their student learning; it is not the case that the CLA is being tested. VSA's strategy is laudable, in that it allows and encourages institutions to test out the different measures as they prepare to report out publicly such sensitive data for the first time. So although the VSA allows institutions to engage in their own pilot phase (and, as an aside, MAPP and CAAP are engaging in their own experimentation as they attempt to duplicate some

⁶ The VSA's rationale is to assist institutional efforts to get out ahead of potential accountability mandates. The primary stated objectives of the VSA are to help institutions: (1) demonstrate accountability and stewardship to the public, (2) measure educational outcomes to identify effective educational practices and (3) assemble information that is accessible, understandable and comparable.

⁷ See R. Benjamin and S. Klein (2006) *Assessment Versus Accountability in Higher Education: Notes for Reconciliation*. UNESCO, Forum Commission Paper: Paris, France, pp. 27.

⁸ For example see and access the numerous technical publications on methodological issues on the CAE website.

form of the CLA-designed value added protocol), it is important to recognize that the CLA itself is well beyond the pilot phase.

Difference #3: Role of Faculty

A third major difference between the CLA and VSA is the role of faculty. Again, the CLA was created to improve teaching and learning. Notably, CLA in the Classroom was designed to address the specific needs of faculty, and to ensure that they are central to the assessment process. CLA in the Classroom provides professional development to aid faculty in improving teaching and learning in their own classrooms, and has already met with great success in helping to improve teaching practice and encouraging student skill development. The VSA's efforts to make information available to multiple constituencies through public reporting is laudable but there is no direct role for faculty in their program. We believe that faculty must be central to the process in order to ensure the greatest sustainable success in systemic and systematic improvement of student learning.

Overall, considering these three key differences between the CLA and VSA, we remain pleased to be of service to colleges and universities that need to choose a measure of student learning as part of their participation in the VSA, while noting the use of the CLA for the reporting of institutional scores represents only one part of the mechanisms for improvement that CLA institutions have at their disposal.

Conclusion

The focus on institutional level scores, as encouraged by the VSA, can unwittingly obscure the complexity of the teaching and learning enterprise. We trust that the creators of the VSA understand that institution-based value added scores are only one indicator of success in student learning just as graduation rates only partially indicate the success level of a college's undergraduate education program. In the case of the CLA, we offer a comprehensive set of programmatic offerings to improve practice and understanding, that will in turn promote better teaching and learning.

We, all those involved in higher education, must acknowledge that we are only at the start of the long road ahead if we are to succeed in getting our colleagues to focus on the systematic steps needed for a continuous improvement in teaching and learning.