collegiate learning assessment

WHAT NOW? WHAT CAN WE DO ONCE WE HAVE THE CLA RESULTS?

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Assessing learning is a necessary condition for improving the quality of higher education. In this regard, the purpose of the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA) is to help colleges and universities focus on improving the teaching of key general education skills of critical thinking, analytical reasoning and written communication. By directly measuring the value-added learning in these areas by students, *aggregated to the institutional level*, the CLA enables cross-institutional comparisons of student learning thereby allowing for benchmarking possibilities, the signaling of possible need for changing institutional expectations, standards, curricula, and pedagogy, as well as the measurement of the effect of program changes over time.

Indeed, the signaling power of the CLA to inform institutional introspection is working. Campuses receiving CLA data eagerly ask us, "*Now that we have CLA data—what can we do to improve the teaching and learning of these important outcomes?*" Below we share a number of suggestions gleaned both from the research literature and from CLA campuses themselves.

I. Engage the Campus Community in Understanding the General CLA Approach

An important first step will be to engage your campus community in making sense of the CLA. Of course, some faculty, administrators, students and other stakeholders have participated in the administration of the CLA, and will be aware of the project. But for those who were not, it will be important to communicate what was involved in your campus' participation.

You may want to communicate that there are four key elements underlying the CLA:

1. The CLA focuses on the *institution* as a whole and its cumulative contribution to student learning by using a representative sample of students
2. The CLA measures *value-added*—what students learn over four or five years *because* of where they attend college
3. The outcomes—critical thinking, analytical reasoning, and written communication—are understood to be *collective* outcomes, competencies that are not learned in any one or a few required courses but rather are the cumulative result of the entire college experience. Thus, these outcomes are the collective responsibility of the faculty and the means by which to address these outcomes is a faculty-wide curricular and pedagogical decision
4. Appropriately assessing learning and providing timely feedback to students based on a variety of learning assessments are keys to improving student learning.

II. Make Sure the Campus Community Understands the CLA Measures

Of course, the CLA does not measure everything important learned in college but focuses on several priority outcomes common to every higher education institution in the nation. The CLA uses two types of measures: Performance Tasks and Analytical Writing Tasks (make- and critique-an-argument).

The CLA Performance Tasks provide opportunities for students to use an integrated combination of critical thinking, analytic reasoning, problem solving, and written communication skills to answer several open-ended questions about a hypothetical but realistic situation. In addition to a task's directions and questions, each also has its own mini-library of diverse documents, such as letters, memos, summaries of research reports, newspaper articles, photographs, diagrams, tables, charts, and interview notes or transcripts. Students are instructed to use these materials in preparing their answers to the task's questions.

More specifically, CLA Performance Tasks require students to engage in some combination of the following:

- marshal evidence from different sources
- distinguish rational from emotional arguments and fact from opinion
- understand tabular and figural presentations of data;

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- deal with inadequate, ambiguous, and/or conflicting information
- spot deception and logical holes in the arguments made by others
- recognize information that is and is not relevant to the task at hand
- identify additional information that would help to resolve issues
- weigh, organize, and synthesize information from several sources
- present their ideas clearly, including justifying the basis for their points of view.

CLA Analytical Writing Tasks ask students to write answers to two types of essay prompts, namely: a "Make-an-argument" question that asks them to support or reject a position on some issue; and a "Critique-an-argument" question that asks them to evaluate the validity of an argument made by someone else.

A *Make-an-argument* prompts typically presents an opinion on some issue and asks students to address this issue from any perspective they wish so long as they provide relevant reasons and examples to explain and support their views on the matter.

A *Critique-an-argument* prompt asks students to critique an argument by discussing how well reasoned they find it in terms of the soundness of the argument's logic (rather than simply agreeing or disagreeing with the position presented).

In sum, the CLA assesses critical thinking, analytical reasoning, and important aspects of writing competence by asking students to articulate complex ideas, examine claims and evidence, support ideas with relevant reasons and examples, sustain a coherent discussion, and use standard written English. These skills are learned prior to, during, and post-college and research confirms that how well one learns such skills is heavily dependent on the quality and quantity of instruction.

III. Consider Unanswered Questions from the Research

A key part of the campus-wide conversation may be based on important questions that emerge from the book *How College Affects Students,* in which authors Ernest Pascarella and Patrick Terenzini summarize thirty years of research. They show that *going* to college makes a significant difference in various kinds of learning compared to not going to college.

But, they add, after one controls for admissions selectivity, *where* one goes to college seems to make no difference, a finding counterintuitive to the beliefs of college and university presidents, faculties, students and the public in general.

One of the reasons for the "no difference" conclusion may be that the assessment tools used heretofore to measure learning may not have been robust enough to pick up differences between campuses along important learning dimensions. Indeed, CLA measures, requiring constructed essays (there are no multiple choice, fill-in-the-blank, or true-false questions), show that different but similarly situated institutions do make a significant difference with respect to the learning of critical thinking, analytical reasoning, and writing. Where one goes to college does matter!

But what explains why some institutions create greater value added than others? It is not because of the entering characteristics of its students because such differences are adjusted for as we compare each institution to similar others. And, it is not because one school has "better" students, greater endowment, more attractive residence halls, more library books, or larger swimming pools. There are things high value added schools do in the teaching/learning process and the culture of they create that accounts for quality.

As we identify those CLA institutions that consistently create the most significant value-added, we will investigate them in case studies to ask what conditions in those environments are different from similarly situated campuses producing far less value-added. Until that research is complete we do not have direct cause and effect data from CLA but previous research in higher education and "eyeball" data from current CLA schools do suggest what best accounts for greater learning.

IV. Engage the Faculty in this Collective Effort

As CLA data are presented to the faculty it is often the first time they as a whole have confronted such learning data or recognize that what is being measured is ultimately their collective responsibility. "I teach sociology, not writing!" "We teach chemistry, not critical thinking!" are common responses. But faculty do agree that they rightfully should expect good writing (thinking made visible) from their students and teaching students how to think critically within each discipline is a shared, fundamental objective. And, it is this recognition that what CLA measures is the collective responsibility of the faculty that is key.

The answer to improving value added requires addressing such outcomes in virtually every course and purposefully expect and reinforce such learning outside the formal cur-

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riculum (e.g. civic engagement and community service) as well. Moreover, developing an authentic consensus about and helping faculty to develop the skills necessary to teach for such outcomes within each course, across courses, and in the informal curriculum requires a far more coordinated effort and faculty commitment than usual. Faculty seem quite willing to take on this task and we also have found that they engage in such conversations more easily when working in consortia with other institutions.

The CLA measures core outcomes of a college education yet there is evidence to suggest that such outcomes, while philosophically shared by faculty, are not expectations shared in practice. For example, the phenomenon of one or a few required "writing intensive" courses as part of general education distribution systems is common. But no single or small set of courses by themselves are sufficient to teach most students in college how to ably think critically, reason analytically, or write well. If the CLA results suggest that students are not doing as well as they could and should, a question the faculty might need to ask is, "Do we value these outcomes sufficiently to collectively own them?"

The competencies measured by the CLA are complex and require a far greater collective faculty commitment to teach for such outcomes in virtually every program and course. For example, on some campuses where faculty have become profoundly dissatisfied with current student writing, a writing portfolio requirement has been introduced in which students submit evidence of significant writing from many courses. This wide sample of written work is read and graded by faculty across disciplines. In reading such student work, the faculty has developed a common set of high expectations and standards, made these clear to students beginning with admissions literature, followed up at first-year student orientation, repeated within each course, and reaffirmed in student "handbooks" explaining what the entire faculty expects in these arenas.

The message that students are expected to write extensively as part of their college experience, what is meant by "quality work", and the expectation for frequent assessment and feedback is now embedded deeply in those campus cultures. And, as faculty have read these portfolios, they have come to realize as well that the "reasoning" component is inextricably linked to writing well and thus that outcome too has become an object of assessment.

On other campuses, in recognition that frequent assessment and feedback is a hallmark of powerful instruction and learning, faculty have devised first-year seminars that introduce new students to the faculty's common expectation for critical thinking and writing with such requirements weaving throughout the four years in most courses and in some cases formally measured at various points such as in comprehensive examinations for rising juniors, capstone courses, senior projects/theses, and oral examinations by external visiting committees.

IV. Consider the Campus Culture

We are finding that CLA data catalyze conversations and that faculty acknowledge: the need for additional training to teach for such outcomes; reward systems need to be changed; expectations and standards need to be collectively and publicly promulgated and raised; and assessment of and feedback to students need to be far more frequent.

Many faculty tell us that they do not feel equipped to teach writing or critical thinking and that they do not have the time to require the kinds of assignments and reading of papers—final submissions, much less first-drafts—in addition to teaching the necessary "content" in their disciplines. Neither the institutional culture nor the reward system, they suggest, allow for this kind of intensive and extensive demand on students by faculty.

Research suggests that most college students spend little time per week (10-15 hours) in assignments outside of class yet still attain relatively high grades. Moreover, students report that they are not often tested for the key outcomes assessed by CLA measures as described above. That research is confirmed by CLA focus groups in which we ask students not only about their experience with our measures but also how well they feel they were prepared for such performance tasks.

Significantly higher value added can be attributed to what goes on in that institutional black box called a college or university. It is the result of a cumulative combination of:

1. higher expectations for students in and out of class by faculty and administration
2. higher standards of quality
3. greater student academic time (a function in large part of faculty demands) on assignments that require critical thinking, analytical reasoning, significant reading and writing
4. far more appropriate and timely use of learning assessment and feedback to students
5. a positive academic institutional ethos—that combination of values and norms of behavior that influence effort and behavior in ways conducive to learning
6. Collective faculty ownership of outcomes with high, public, and clear expectations and standards

The research is clear—students who have adequate opportunities to practice expected behaviors regularly perform better. To master reasonably high levels of critical thinking, analytical reasoning and cogent writing illustrating these skills requires far more practice and feedback than

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is normal in most institutions—far more reading, writing, assessment and feedback are required. This means many more assignments out-of-class to read and write critically.

Increasing useful student engagement for such learning is a known practice and includes such things as: peer teaching and sharing one's work with others for feedback; learning communities; portfolios of student work and faculty judging committees; first-year seminars and other coursework to introduce students to high expectations; capstone seminars in the senior year requiring students to synthesize years of coursework; comprehensive examinations across general education and within majors; reflective use of student experience outside the classroom.

Reports such as the Association of American Colleges and Universities' "Greater Expectations," National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), and findings by Richard Light at Harvard provide support for and exemplars of such teaching. With these and other resources, faculty are holding special meetings, retreats, and summer gatherings, informing teaching/learning center agendas, and working with each other in and across departments and across institutions on these issues. Consortia such as those currently funded by the Teagle Foundation are examples of faculty sharing best practices.

V. Use Examples of Campus Plans

No one of the aforementioned items will prove sufficient. The research does seem to suggest that there is a critical mass of quality and quantity of student engagement that in a cumulative way serves as a tipping point for promoting significant value added learning. And, while there is no simple algorithm as to what constitutes such a critical mass, CLA does offer one metric that allows an institution to measure the effects of pedagogical and curricular changes over time. Below, please find a sample of case studies to date (names changed) that offer a few examples of how CLA institutions have moved beyond the data and focused on responding to the "What now?" question.

Lexington College

Lexington College is a small liberal arts school with a campus-wide academic ethos that provides students with opportunities and expectations to pursue independent study and to engage in individual research, both efforts guided by extensive faculty advising. The much-heralded campus philosophy is to create a culture that promotes the kinds of skill development measured by the CLA. After participating in the CLA, campus administrators were perplexed to find that their students performed at levels far less than would be expected when compared to other similar liberal arts colleges.

The initial reaction of the Lexington College administrators might be characterized as defensiveness; they questioned us and sought to understand more about the CLA to ensure the validity and reliability of the measures. However, after we provided such information and through numerous conversations with their staff, they came to recognize that the measures were solid and that they instead would need to consider the meaning of the results. They first shared the results with the faculty and engaged them in a conversation to identify possible causal mechanisms that might explain the disparity between what they expected and the actual assessment results.

After campus-wide "soul searching" and some additional data collection completed on their own, the Lexington College community concluded that its educational philosophy was appropriate but that in practice there was a disconnect or loose coupling between the philosophy and actual day-to-day campus life. They found that students were doing inadequate levels of serious independent work and there was limited faculty advising. Even though students would report that they were having a positive experience at the institution, this had more to do with the fact that they were having a "good time" and not that they were getting a good education.

Participating in the CLA served as a systematic assessment of student performance with valid measures that could be benchmarked against other institutions. The campus was provided with a "reality check" on the degree to which they were meeting their institutional goals. They have moved towards making more explicit the expectations and standards they hold for members of their community (students, faculty and administrators), encouraged more assessment and feedback to students, and facilitated the call for greater student effort. Lexington College plans to use the CLA measures again to chart the efficacy of these reform efforts.

Madison University

Madison University is a high-ranking, research university that attracts top-notch students and faculty. Madison undergraduate curriculum, in place for more than three decades, requires students to complete four core courses (in mathematics, the natural sciences, humanities and the social sciences) in the first year. Some constituents on campus began to feel that the core was at best in need of updating, or at worst, should be abandoned altogether. The university decided to use, among other things, the CLA measures in a four-year longitudinal study.

In addition, after years of debate within the faculty senate, Madison decided to directly assess the efficacy of the core requirements by developing assessment instruments that directly related to the core courses. They randomly assigned half of the first year student class to complete all

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four core courses during the fall term, and the other half taking none of these courses. Using a standard pre-test/post-test design, all students were assessed at the beginning and end of the fall semester. Much to their surprise, it was found that there were no statistically significant differences between the two groups. Subsequently, it has been found there were three elements that provided a reasonable explanation for these findings.

First, the pedagogy employed may have been questionable, in that senior professors lectured once each week and graduate students (who were not provided with opportunities to coordinate with one another) ran discussion sections twice a week. Second, the faculty did not seem to craft the core curriculum to levels appropriate for their student body (students who attend Madison are high achievers, and may have had the equivalent coursework in their Advanced Placement courses in high school). Third, the instruments they developed tested primarily knowledge and comprehension, and not higher-level skills.

In working with the Madison University faculty campus efforts are underway to adapt the core—not abandon it—and raise the expectations and standards, utilize more appropriate pedagogy to engage students, and to assess students more often using instruments that measures higher-level skills. The initial results from the CLA assessment on the first cohort of students will be compared with a later cohort that will be taught under the revised core curriculum.

An important lesson to be learned here is that even though students who graduate from Madison perform well on graduate placement exams and secure employment, until the campus considered issues of value-added did it become clear that they were not providing sufficient opportunities in the core to promote student growth.

Park State University

As a mid-sized university, Park State participated in both the CLA and the NSSE. From the CLA they found that their students were not performing as well as would be expected; from the NSSE they learned that their students were very unhappy and were dissatisfied with the limited levels of academic support from faculty (which was low compared to other institutions participating in the NSSE).

The Park State University provost convened a task force that included faculty and student affairs professionals. Through an earlier assessment, they found that students spent fewer than 13 hours per week studying and spent on average four nights per week engaging in student recreational activities such as parties. The triangulation of the CLA, NSSE and their own internal institutional research efforts determined that at issue were low expectations from faculty, limited student engagement and effort, and a student culture that emphasized drinking and partying. The task force (which now includes student representatives) is spending this year in discussion with all academic departments and undergraduate colleges to gain a better sense of how Park State should proceed.

The task force has reported their initial deliberations to the campus, and has held two large "town hall"-style meetings for input from the larger university community. The task force plans to make official recommendations (which will likely include programmatic and curricular changes, as well as a plan to conduct more ongoing assessment) to the president and provost at the end of the upcoming spring term.

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