

## Chapter XII: COLLEGIATE LEARNING ASSESSMENT

*Who takes it?*

A sample of first-year and senior students.

*When is it administered?*

First-year students take the CLA in the Fall and seniors in the Spring.

*What office administers it?*

The Council for Aid to Education administers it online with coordination from the Assessment and Testing Office and Vice President for Academic Affairs Office.

*Who originates the survey?*

Council for Aid to Education and the RAND Corporation.

*When are the results typically available?*

First-year results are available in the spring and senior results in the summer.

*What type of information is sought?*

The CLA is divided into two tasks: an Analytical Writing Task and a Performance Task. Students take one of the two tasks, which measure critical thinking, analytical reasoning, and written communication.

*From whom are the results available?*

Council for Aid to Education  
215 Lexington Avenue, 21<sup>st</sup> Floor  
New York, NY 10016-6023  
(212) 661-5800  
[http://www.cae.org/content/pro\\_collegiate.htm](http://www.cae.org/content/pro_collegiate.htm)  
e-mail: [cla@cae.org](mailto:cla@cae.org)

*To whom are the results regularly distributed?*

Vice President for Academic Affairs, Assessment Committee, and the campus community through this *Almanac*.

*Are the results available by division or discipline?*

No.

*Are the results comparable to data of other universities?*

Yes.

## *Measuring Student Learning*

How can colleges measure what students are learning as a result of experiences at their institutions? This question has challenged educators for decades. While U.S. News and World Report has provided rankings of the “best colleges” for a number of years, many educators believe that the rankings are more about selectivity than the quality of education offered. One current assessment tool, the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), gauges key indicators of student engagement known to predict student learning. While this information is useful, some educators believe that an indirect measure of student learning is not enough. We need to learn not only *how* but *how well* students learn (Mathews, 2004). In response to this need, Richard Hersh, former President of Hobart and William Colleges, and Richard Benjamin, President of Rand Corporation’s Council for Aid to Education (CAE), designed a new direct measure of student learning, the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA).

### *The Collegiate Learning Assessment*

The purpose of the CLA is “to measure not the particular facts students have memorized, but rather how well they have learned to *think*” (Mathews, 2004). The assessment, which requires all open-ended responses and no multiple choice questions, measures cross-cutting skills and abilities we expect every college student to learn: critical thinking, analytical reasoning, and written communication. Originally a three-hour exam, the CLA has been modified to ninety minutes. Students are asked to *either* write two essays in response to prompts asking them to construct an argument and to respond to an argument *or* write one long essay in response to a series of questions concerning a “real life” problem.

The make or break an argument task, borrowed from the Graduate Record Examination, is called an “analytical writing task.” The “real life” problem task, adopted from the New Jersey critical thinking tests, is called a “performance task.” Performance tasks, the most unique elements of the CLA, span a range of major areas of study. One performance task, for example, puts students in the role of “an assistant to Pat Williams, the president of Dyna Tech, a company that makes precision electronic instruments and navigational equipment.” In the scenario, another colleague has recommended the purchase of a small plane to be used by the sales force, and Pat was about to approve the purchase when there was an accident involving that particular make and model of plane. For this task, students are given various pieces of information surrounding the accident and the overall performance of the plane and asked to compose a memo to Pat Williams making recommendations regarding the purchase of the plane.

Students take the CLA online, and both machine and human scorers score their writing. When their results are ready, students receive an e-mail notifying them and providing information about where they can go to access their individual score report. Institutions are sent an institutional report so that they may compare their institutional performance to institutions nationwide that participated in the CLA.

The CLA is administered as a “value-added” assessment. Using the institution, rather than the individual student as the unit of analysis, the CLA measures and reports the value an institution has added to its students’ learning in two ways. First, the CLA provides a “deviation score” that indicates the degree to which a school’s students score higher or lower than would be expected given their ACT or SAT scores and the typical relationship between ACT or SAT scores and the CLA scores across all participating institutions. Second, the CLA provides a “difference score” that indicates if, after holding ACT or SAT scores constant, an institution’s seniors score significantly higher than its freshmen and if this difference is larger or smaller than that observed at other colleges.

Results of the CLA are an important indicator of the overall academic performance of the institution. It is recommended that institutions that score above expectations look closely at what works and continue to reinforce these positive outcomes. On the other hand, institutions that perform below expectations should

examine student learning outcomes, curriculum and methods, and other assessment data in order to get a clearer picture of student learning and development.

### *The Missouri Pilot Project*

Missouri's involvement in the CLA began in 2003, when the Missouri Department of Higher Education (DHE) formed the Missouri Consortium for Measuring Value-added Student Learning. The Consortium, made up of 33 public four-year, public two-year, and independent institutions, has two major goals: 1) to provide baseline data on the value each institution has added to the education of its students, and 2) to improve teaching and learning.

In order to achieve these goals, the Consortium agreed to enter into negotiations with CAE for the purpose of piloting the CLA cross the State. After lengthy negotiations between representatives of the various institutional sectors and the CAE, a Memorandum of Agreement was drafted and signed detailing the responsibilities of both parties participating in the pilot. In addition to obtaining a deep discount for the first year of testing from the price normally charged by CAE, Missouri institutions also secured several unique services not available to other institutions. Among these services, Missouri schools were offered web conferences on issues such as data interpretation, opportunities for faculty to complete the CLA instrument, and consideration of qualified campus representatives for future CLA scorer training sessions.

In the first year of testing, 23 Missouri institutions participated in the fall and 25 institutions participated in the spring. A Missouri sector report was made available and can be accessed by Truman faculty, staff, and students at <http://assessment.truman.edu/components/CLA.htm>. Discussion among representatives of the Missouri Consortium for Measuring Value-Added Student Learning as well as the grassroots Missouri Assessment Consortium is ongoing concerning strengths of the CLA and areas for improvement. Recent discussions have focused on sampling issues, student motivation, faculty buy-in, administration issues, and data analysis and reporting. Communication between the Missouri schools and the CAE continues as both parties work together to provide valid and reliable information concerning student learning and effective teaching.

### *Truman Administration and Results*

As a member of the Missouri Consortium for Measuring Value-Added Student Learning, Truman State University participated in the 2004-2005 testing year. A large random sample of first-year students was invited to participate in the Fall 2004 CLA with a letter from the Vice President for Academic Affairs. Fifty-three Truman first-year students volunteered to participate. Students attended one of five three-hour sessions scheduled in the Violette Hall computer labs in October and received a \$25.00 Truman Bookstore/Barnes & Noble gift card in appreciation of their participation. A large random sample of seniors was invited to participate in the Spring 2005 CLA with a letter from the Vice President for Academic Affairs. Seventy-five Truman seniors volunteered to participate. Students attended one of five ninety-minute sessions scheduled in Violette Hall computer labs in April and received a \$25.00 Truman Bookstore/Barnes & Noble gift card in appreciation of their participation.

Truman faculty were encouraged to proctor for the CLA, given the results of on-campus research validating the benefits of faculty proctoring to student motivation and performance on assessments. Six faculty and staff members volunteered to proctor the Fall 2004 and/or Spring 2005 CLA sessions along with trained student proctors from the Assessment and Testing Office. Additionally, four faculty and staff members attended CLA web conferences during the fall and/or spring. A recorded version of the spring web conference was made available to any faculty or staff member who could not attend the scheduled conference.

Truman State University's institutional results for 2004-2005 are available to faculty, staff, and students at <http://assessment.truman.edu/components/CLA.htm>. Results have been presented to the Board of Governors and are currently being examined and discussed by the Assessment Committee in consultation with the University Assessment Specialist.