

## **MAKING AN ARGUMENT FOR SUPPLEMENTING THE RU'S CORE CURRICULUM ASSESSMENT WITH THE COLLEGIATE LEARNING ASSESSMENT (CLA)**

### **BACKGROUND**

“.... how much of what the schools are offering can reasonably be called education?  
.... how far can what is being taught and learned reasonably be called higher?” (p.3)

Andrew Hacker & Claudia Dreifus (2010). *Higher education? How Colleges Are Wasting Our Money and Failing Our Kids—and What We can do About It*. New York, NY: St Martin's Press.

Hardly was there any time in history before the past decade that higher education institutions had been confronted with so much skepticism and ridicule to the extent that necessitates sectoral justification of its effectiveness, quality and relevance to policy makers, employers, and parents. With increasing occurrence, the effectiveness and quality of learning in colleges are surprisingly called to question even by academics (Hacker and Dreifus, 2010; Arum and Roksa, 2010). Arum and Roksa (2010) titled their book, “*Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses*.” In their study of twenty-four higher education institutions, they indicate that 45 percent and 36 percent of students, respectively, show no significant improvement in some general education skills and knowledge from their freshmen year to second year and to four years of college.

Government agencies and the public are asking higher education to show evidence of learning in colleges. Accrediting agencies are forcefully requiring educational institutions to demonstrate the extent of learning taking place. However, non-traditional [academic] institutions are springing up to demonstrate the extent of learning that higher education institutions are reluctant to demonstrate (e.g., competency-based education; tuning; badging; etc.). The fact is time has run out for traditional higher education institutions to be telling stakeholders to “just trust us” that our students are learning. Everyone is now impatient and demanding: show me the evidence!

It is now imperative that every higher education needs a means of demonstrating the value-added knowledge and skills of their students' learning to earn the public trust and demonstrate accountability to students and their parents, as well as political leaders and employers, that their educational investments are not a waste. Is there any wonder this day why employers increasingly set up their own tests for aspiring job candidates regardless of their educational qualifications? The diminishing trust in the quality of diplomas issued to students is a critical factor. No more can higher education institutions shy away from answering and convincing parents and employers that they are able to demonstrate the extent of what their graduates know and can do after graduation.

### **PURPOSE**

The Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA) is a value-added approach for testing students' skills in commonly valued general education areas including written communication, critical thinking, analytic reasoning, scientific and quantitative reasoning. The CLA will be used to supplement current RU's measures to demonstrate the extent of learning taking place in some of the 11 core curriculum goal areas.

## **STUDENT LEARNING OUTCOMES**

The CLA will test students' abilities in the following areas: analytic reasoning and evaluation, writing effectiveness, writing mechanics, problem-solving, scientific and quantitative reasoning, critical reading and evaluation, and critique-an-argument.

The skill areas in which students will be tested closely match the following core curriculum goals at Radford University: **Goal 1, Goal 3, Goal 5, and Goal 6**. In the long run, if the faculty are satisfied with this approach, it might become a default assessment method for the stated goals.

## **COST**

To administer the CLA to a cohort of 100 freshmen in fall and a cohort of 100 seniors in spring will cost a total of \$6,600. For each additional student added to the total of 200 students, it will cost \$25 per student.

The Office of Academic Assessment has been hiring external raters to score student artifacts in University CORE A (Goals 1, 3, and 4) at a cost of \$18,000 in academic year 2011-2012 and \$13,000 in academic year 2012-2013.

## **BENEFITS**

The CLA is used at more than 700 higher education institutions in the United States and at other international institutions. The CLA provides participant institutions with a standard measurement of effective performance among similar institutions through which an institution can demonstrate accountability to stakeholders. Adopting the CLA will allow RU to get a sense of the level at which it is performing relative to comparator peers and provides us an avenue for self-evaluation and self-improvement. We would also be able to place our students' performance in perspective against a more specific group of institutions and enable us gain a better understanding of practice and performance, as well as insights into how we could improve.

## **ADMINISTRATION AND GRADING**

The CLA is a web-based testing which will be administered in computer labs. The assessment will take 60-90 minutes to complete. The students' performance will be evaluated by the Council for Aid to Education (CAE) which administers the CLA.

## **PROCTORING**

The CLA will be proctored by the Office of Academic Assessment personnel and others who might be interested in helping out.

## **TIMING**

CLA will be administered twice in an academic year—once at the beginning of the fall semester to incoming freshmen, and once during the spring semester to senior students. Depending on institutional choice, the test may also be administered to rising juniors after completing their general education courses.

### **SAMPLING APPROACH**

A simple random sample of students may be tested in fall and spring semesters. In the alternative, a representative sample of students from each discipline may be tested. In the fall, at least 100 first-time, full-time students will be tested from the entering cohort of freshmen. In the spring semester, at least 100 graduating seniors will be tested.

### **INCENTIVES FOR STUDENTS**

Many schools have used various approaches (such as cash prizes, course registration preference for the next semester, raffles, gift certificates, reserved parking, public recognition of participants, etc.) to motivate students to take the test and do their best.

Students may include their CLA scores in resumes, and increasing number of employers actually value students' participation in the CLA. In fact, the Council for Aid to Education (CAE) now issues to students who meet proficient or advanced levels of mastery on the CLA+ **credentialed digital badges** to illustrate to prospective employers that they have attained the necessary and desired skills that will set them apart as job candidates. CAE recognizes that recent college graduates, in particular, must be able to distinguish themselves from others with similar degrees and GPAs.

### **INSTITUTIONAL COMPARISON**

Institutional comparison will be based on the profiles of incoming students, based on average SAT or ACT scores. Students with no standardized test scores will be allowed to take a proxy test which will be used to approximate the students' standardized test scores. The overall comparison will not be directly with a specific institution but with a bunch of institutions admitting students with similar profiles.

### **FINAL REPORT**

The Council for Aid to Education (CAE) will provide an institutional report, as well individual student report directly to participating students. The institutional report will highlight an institution's students' overall performance with percentile ranking relative to similar institutions. Also, the report will show how an institution's students perform by student classification in different task areas, such as analysis and problem solving, writing effectiveness and writing mechanics, etc.