

Trends

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CSB/SJU Learning Gains 2007-2008

In late August, the Council for Aid to Education (CAE) released the results for the 2007-2008 Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA). CSB/SJU performed admirably and was ranked in the 67th percentile of schools contributing to student learning gains among 176 participating four-year undergraduate institutions.

The CLA is a measure designed to examine students' critical thinking, analytic reasoning, problem solving and written communications abilities. It specifically targets these broad abilities because they apply to most, if not all, academic majors and tend to be mentioned in a good number of institutional mission statements. Our mission at CSB/SJU commits us to providing "liberal arts curriculum which focuses on questions important to the human condition, demands clear thinking and communicating and calls forth new knowledge for the betterment of humankind." Consistent with the conceptual framework of the CLA, CSB/SJU prepares graduates to apply clear thinking and communication skills to the exploration of the human condition.

The main purpose of the CLA is to provide a summative assessment of the *value added* by institutional inputs. Inputs include instruction, student development and other related programs that when combined, impact the student while she/he is enrolled. According to the CAE, more than 370 institutions totaling 110,000 students have participated in the CLA and this signifies a growing commitment by colleges and universities to place more emphasis on identifying learning gains.

The CLA uses Graduate Record Examination (GRE) prompts, critical thinking tests and performance tasks to assess first-year students and seniors. The GRE essay portion requires students to complete two essays. The first is a 45-minute "make-an-argument" essay in which the student is prompted to write an essay supporting or rejecting a stated position. The second is a 30 minute "break-an-argument" essay prompting the student to critique a position that someone else has taken regarding a particular topic. Critical thinking is assessed through 90-minute tasks that involve working with various documents pertaining to science, social science, arts and humanities. Performance tasks are measured by requiring students to integrate information from various sources and prepare a memorandum which contains an objective analysis of a realistic problem.

CSB/SJU Performance

	First-Year Students		Senior Students		Value-Added Estimate	
	Percentile Rank	Performance Level	Percentile Rank	Performance Level	Percentile Rank	Performance Level
Total CLA Score	42	At	56	At	67	At
Performance Task	51	At	47	At	51	At
Analytic Writing Task	38	At	66	At	75	Above
Make-an-argument	41	At	45	At	57	At
Critique-an-argument	32	At	80	Above	88	Above

In order to measure improvement in higher order skills, a comparison between the CLA scores for first-year and seniors was conducted for CSB/SJU. For ease of understanding, the first-year and senior students' actual performance relative to expected performance was converted to percentile ranks.

CSB/SJU ranked in the top third of 2007-2008 CLA schools that contribute to learning gains made by students.

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Thereafter, CLA assigned performance levels based on percentile ranks as follows: 0-9th percentile (Well Below Expected), 10-29th percentile (Below Expected), 30-69th percentile (At Expected), 70-89th percentile (Above Expected) and 90-99th percentile (Well Above Expected). The respective outcomes are shown in the first four columns of the chart. The last two columns display the value-added estimate for CSB/SJU in terms of percentile rank and performance level. The value-added estimate is the difference between how well the first-year students performed and how well the senior students performed relative to their respective expectations. The total score demonstrates that CSB/SJU was ranked in the 67th percentile for learning gains made by students participating in the 2007-2008 CLA. Most notably, CSB/SJU was ranked in the 75th and 88th percentile for learning gains specific to analytical writing and critiquing an argument. On both dimensions, CSB/SJU acquitted themselves above the expected performance level.

So What – The Significance of CLA

In addition to increasing demand, cost, time-to-degree, economic return and general public concern, post secondary institutions in America are under considerable pressure from the federal government. Student learning is now considered to be a top priority for accrediting agencies (Klein et al, 2005). Currently, most institutions attempt to demonstrate student learning through four main vehicles. These include the tabulation of actuarial data (i.e. graduation rates, student-to-faculty ratio, racial or ethnic composition of the student body), ratings of institutional quality (i.e. U.S. News and World Report, Forbes), student surveys (National Survey of Student Engagement Survey, Cooperative Institutional Research Program Survey) and direct measurement of a student's performance (i.e. course grades, testing, portfolios).

Significant problems arise when these methods are used to assess student learning. Actuarial data, which is now reliably adjudicated and stored in national databases, yields little information about an institution's effectiveness in promoting student cognitive outcomes. The subjective nature of ratings and reputation in ranking institutions is a controversial issue in academia. Student surveys are plagued with the problems that affect all survey research: Participants cannot be relied upon to accurately report how much the institution has improved their learning. And, differences in individual professors, admission and grading standards presents problems with using course grades and testing as a measure of learning institution wide.

From an institutional, instructional and student perspective, there are several benefits that exist for the use of the CLA and the continued participation of CSB/SJU. The CLA accounts for variations in the abilities that students bring to college/university which allows for comparisons across institutions. According to Benjamin (2008), significant differences have been found between colleges regarding their ability to improve higher order skills. This suggests that it does matter where a student decides to enroll and attend a college/university.

In addition to providing faculty and administration with an indicator of where the institution stands when compared to other institutions, comparative-based measures such as the CLA can be used to assist faculty in pedagogical improvement. The developers of the CLA acknowledge that for assessment, the focus is on the institution but real change occurs at the departmental or classroom level. Therefore, the CAE has created CLA in the Classroom www.claintheclassroom.org, which provides faculty members with diagnostic tools which can be used with individual students.

Lastly, it is now more important than ever for students to graduate from a college/university equipped with higher order competencies to succeed in the workplace. There is no doubt that mastering content is a critical component of their educational experience, but that they also must be able to assemble and cogently synthesize relevant information. Immerwahr (2000) suggests that employers are not as concerned about what a student's major is, but rather their proficiency with higher-order skills such as critical thinking and effective communication.

It should be noted that CLA is not the panacea for measuring student learning. However, it represents a significant improvement on previous efforts to assess institutional quality including student cognitive outcomes. The CLA simply provides an institution with a set of standardized scores on a variety of learning variables that accounts for variations in incoming academic ability.

The results for CSB/SJU are very encouraging. Continued institutional support for the development of higher order skills through a variety of programs (i.e. CLA in The Classroom, FYS, Senior Seminar, and Capstone) may contribute to furthering the CSB/SJU mission commitment and improving our position against other institutions.

For additional information on the CSB/SJU 2007- 2008 CLA institutional report and technical appendices, please visit <http://www.csbsju.edu/institutionalresearch> and log in to the Reports menu or contact Tago Mharapara at 5254 (tmharapara@csbsju.edu). Past issues of the *Trends* research newsletter are available at <http://www.csbsju.edu/institutionalresearch/trends/>.