

CARNEGIE FALL 2007 Results

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The Collegiate Learning Assessment: A Tool for Measuring the Value Added of a Liberal Arts Education

In the history of American higher education, arguably two federal acts set the nation on a course that has yet to be replicated anywhere else in the world. In 1862, in the throes of the Civil War, the U.S. Congress passed the Morrill Act (also known as the Land Grant Colleges Act), which sought to extend higher education opportunity to all Americans and to lay to rest the notion that a college education was for the privileged few. Later, as World War II drew to a close, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed into law the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944. This "G.I. Bill of Rights," as the legislation popularly came to be known, as well as subsequent legislation passed during the Korean and Vietnam War eras, opened the doors of the nation's institutions of higher education to increased numbers of men and women. Across generations, American colleges and universities have educated the nation's technical, managerial, and professional workforce and helped to produce its national leaders. At the same time, these institutions have established a record of basic research that has put the United States at the forefront of science and technology and scholarship in the humanities and the social sciences. Access and diversity became the emblems of an American college education, and success and leadership the expected outcomes.

Today, with approximately 18 million students enrolled in American colleges and universities, most high school graduates harbor the dream of universal higher education opportunity for America's citizens implicit in the Morrill Act and the G.I. Bill. Helping all of them achieve that dream, however, is an objective that still eludes us as a nation.

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America's history of achievement in higher education notwithstanding, elected officials, legislators, corporate CEOs, other business leaders and many citizens know that America's college graduates are not being sufficiently educated to succeed and lead in our competitive global society. While America's colleges and universities have been the envy of the world—perceived as the gold standard for producing an educated citizenry—there is a growing understanding that other nations are not only catching up with the United States but also competing effectively in offering higher education oriented toward producing graduates who have the skills and knowledge to succeed in a globalized economy.

Are our college students, enrolled in record-breaking numbers in America's colleges and universities, also learning what they need to in order to meet the challenges of the twenty-first century—for themselves and their families and for their country? What is the evidence that they are learning what they need to succeed personally, professionally and as active citizens?

At a time when the price tag for a year of study at an elite American college hovers around \$45,000, most would agree that these are fair questions. What indeed are the bottom-line outcomes of a liberal arts education in America today? What do colleges actually contribute to student learning? Do we have the tools to measure this “value added” of a liberal arts education? How can we promote a transparent “culture of evidence” in which colleges can harvest the knowledge gained from their respective successes and failures and use it to strengthen curriculum, teaching, and administrative practices?

Roger Benjamin, president of the Council for Aid to Education, numbers among those who believe that these are critically important questions that must be addressed by the higher education community. A senior research analyst at RAND who formerly held professorial and senior administrative positions at the University of Minnesota and the University of Pittsburgh, Benjamin is concerned that the liberal arts are at risk of being “marginalized” in higher education. Indeed, he says, “This is why we got involved,” adding “We don't live in a world in which you can just assert that you are better than other colleges. We have to demonstrate it.” In the summer of 2000, Benjamin shared his concern with Carnegie Corporation of New York—as well as an idea for a unique assessment tool designed to bring some clarity to the seemingly elusive question of how to measure the value added of a liberal arts education.

The Collegiate Learning Assessment

The Collegiate Learning Assessment, an outgrowth of RAND's Value-Added Assessment Initiative, is designed to measure higher order skills—critical thinking, analytic reasoning, problem solving, and written communication—deemed essential in the study of all academic disciplines. Indeed, says Richard H. Hersh, co-director of the Collegiate Learning Assessment Project and former president of Hobart and William Smith Colleges and Trinity College, “What [the Collegiate Learning Assessment] measures is core to everything else.” It is, he believes, a test worth “teaching to.” Stephen P.

Klein, recently retired senior research scientist at RAND Corporation and currently director of research and development for the Collegiate Learning Assessment, agrees. "We made a strategic decision," Klein says, "to go after those things which are common to all curriculums." Our focus, he explains, was to be on "measuring analysis, not memorization." Asking students to demonstrate what they remember about the requisite information and skills pertaining to a task by filling in a line on a multiple-choice test is not the same as asking them to perform that task. After we have memorized the driver's manual, we must ultimately drive the car; after learning the scales, perform that sonata; and after memorizing *Grey's Anatomy*, perform surgery.

"We must remind ourselves that the value of a liberal arts education and education in general, is to enhance men's and women's powers of rational analysis, intellectual precision, and independent judgment," observes Carnegie Corporation of New York president Vartan Gregorian. "After all, a proper and balanced education is neither a passive act nor an end in itself." In the last analysis, he says, such an education is about *doing*.

According to Daniel Fallon, program director of higher education for Carnegie Corporation of New York, the Collegiate Learning Assessment literally "rose from the field," reflecting the best creative thinking of the academic research and psychometric community. The fundamental objective of the developers of the Collegiate Learning Assessment, observes Fallon, was "to demonstrate the value of a liberal arts education—especially to liberal arts colleges." The Corporation agreed to provide the lead seed funding for its development as well as grants to support pilot experiments. The results of these

pilots, Fallon says, were, in a word, "knockouts." In all, the project was awarded three grants by the Corporation totaling \$1,150,000. The Ford Foundation, the Christian A. Johnson Endeavor Foundation, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, the Lumina Foundation, and the Teagle Foundation provided additional funding.

Available to colleges and universities since the spring of 2004, the Collegiate Learning Assessment is currently being used nationwide by 165 colleges and university systems as well as a number of consortia that use the assessment for benchmarking and comparative analyses. The Collegiate Learning Assessment is not a multiple-choice test, nor does it measure knowledge of course content. It is a ninety-minute, open-ended, computer-administered assessment that asks students to perform "real-life" tasks that they find engaging. For example, they might be asked to prepare a memorandum or policy recommendation after evaluating the credibility and relevance of a variety of sources, analyzing and synthesizing the information, drawing conclusions, and acknowledging that there might be alternative explanations and viewpoints. In addition, students are required to perform two analytic writing tasks ("make an argument" and "critique an argument"), which are evaluated holistically. Natural language processing software is used to score written communication tasks, and performance tasks are scored online by human raters using monitored and calibrated scoring. Within the next few years, it is expected that performance tasks will be scored by computer software.

Some institutions have signed on to conduct cross-sectional assessments in which 100 freshmen are assessed in the fall and 100 seniors in the spring. Others have decided to conduct longitudinal assessments in which a

total of 300 freshmen are assessed three times during their college careers. In both cases, it is the institution, and not the student, that is the primary unit of analysis. Collegiate Learning Assessment results are intended to provide institutions with cues as to where and how to improve teaching and learning. Score reports are confidential and are given only to the institutions; members of consortia agree to share reports with each other. All students who take the Collegiate Learning Assessment do so on a volunteer basis, though they are often offered incentives such as small monetary awards, iPods, and even preferred parking spaces. SAT or ACT scores are used to control for student ability in order to measure improvement within a given institution. The Collegiate Learning Assessment employs a “matrix sampling” strategy, i.e., students are randomly assigned to a set of tasks, and the individual student performs only a small portion of the tasks, though all the tasks are given at the same school.

The Collegiate Learning Assessment measures competencies critical for success in higher education and in the real world for which students are presumably being prepared. Without question, Stephen Klein acknowledges, “One test can’t do everything.” At the same time, he insists, “Because you can’t measure everything doesn’t mean you can’t measure anything.”

Overcoming Inertia—and Fear

At a daylong meeting of the Ivies, called by the Teagle Foundation to discuss the topic of establishing the proper balance between teaching and research, W. Robert Connor, president of the Teagle Foundation, reports

that the word “assessment” came up at 4:15 p.m. The word “assessment,” he explains, is “very rarely used at these meetings.” The emergence of still another standardized test—this time at the higher education level—has not inspired universal enthusiasm within that community. As Connor observes, for the Collegiate Learning Assessment, it’s not so much a case of swimming against the tide but of “struggling to overcome a huge mass of inertia.”

Richard Hersh puts it a bit more bluntly: Higher education, he declares, is “the only industry in which competitors are rated on the caliber of their customers rather than on their product...”¹ It is precisely because the American system of higher education has long been regarded as world class that it is difficult to make the case for the need to assess student learning, particularly among highly selective institutions. These are the very same institutions, after all, that helped establish America’s reputation for excellence in higher education in the first place. Comments such as the following tend to support Hersh’s observation: “You could put every Harvard student in a subterranean vault for four years, and they’d still grow,”² said one Harvard professor. Roger Benjamin says that such comments reflect “the argument of the top schools” which are fearful that “they would be penalized because there would be less growth to demonstrate.” Hersh, however, disputes the notion that comparing the value added of highly selective colleges would produce a limited amount of value added, pointing out that “[No] such

¹ Richard H. Hersh, “What Does College Teach?” *The Atlantic Monthly*, November 2005.

² Linda K. Wertheimer, “Testing Harvard,” *The Boston Globe*, <http://www.boston.com/news/globe/ideas/articles/> April 22, 2007.

'ceiling effect' has been found in the Collegiate Learning Assessment national data sample," which includes highly selective schools.³

In either case, in the current political landscape, relying on reputation rather than performance might just not be enough to prevent a worst-case scenario: the introduction of mandatory standardized testing in our nation's colleges. The recent report of the Secretary of Education's Commission on the Future of Higher Education has cast a sharply critical eye on America's higher education institutions. "Where once the United States led the world in educational attainment, recent data from the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development indicate that our nation is now ranked 12th among major industrialized countries in higher education attainment."⁴ The report laments the inadequacy of "transparency and accountability for measuring institutional performance, which is more and more necessary to maintaining public trust in higher education."⁵ At the same time, it applauds the Collegiate Learning Assessment for "promoting a culture of evidence-based assessment in higher education."⁶ In the wake of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2002, with its heavy—some might say heavy-handed—reliance on standardized testing, there is a growing fear that the feds might be putting America's higher education institutions on notice: *Do something or we will*. Is that the message of the Commission's report?

³ Richard H. Hersh, "Going Naked," *Peer Review* 9(2): 4-8, 2007.

⁴ *A Test of Leadership, Charting the Future of U.S. Higher Education*, A Report of the Commission Appointed by Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings, U.S. Department of Education, September 2006, p. xii.

⁵ *Ibid*, p. 14.

⁶ *Ibid*, p. 23.

Carol Geary Schneider, president of the American Association of Colleges and Universities, points out that "American society is always looking for a silver bullet"—that one brilliant move that will correct all problems. The unwritten message of NCLB, she says, is essentially, "Leave no child untested." As a member of the Board of Trustees of the Council for Aid to Education, Schneider emphasizes that she is a strong supporter of the Collegiate Learning Assessment. At the same time, she says, "No single test can tell us all we need to know about student outcomes." Moreover, she adds, the outcomes that the Collegiate Learning Assessment focuses on are "necessary but not sufficient. The concern we have is not with the measure itself but its use." Schneider's fear is that in American society's never-ending search for that magical silver bullet, "Enthusiasts are rushing to make the Collegiate Learning Assessment 'the measure.'"

Arguing that fifty years of measurement research "have warned against pursuing the blind alley of value added assessment," Trudy W. Banta, vice chancellor for planning and institutional improvement at Indiana University-Purdue University, cautions that such an approach can lead to the "homogenization of educational experiences and institutions,"⁷ and is not appropriate for use in comparing the effectiveness of higher education institutions. While acknowledging the need for standardized measures of student learning to permit institutional comparisons, she proposes as alternatives the use of electronic portfolios that can "illustrate growth over time" as well as academic discipline-based mea-

⁷ Trudy W. Banta, "A Warning on Measuring Learning Outcomes," *Inside Higher Ed*, <http://www.insidehighered.com/views/> January 26, 2007.

tures.⁸ The counter argument to the strategies Banta recommends is that electronic portfolios are “anything but standardized and therefore [are] unable to support institutional comparisons.”⁹ Given the sheer number of academic majors, the second strategy—measures based in academic disciplines—is likely to prove unwieldy. Such measures would have to be “created, calibrated to each other (so results can be combined across majors), and updated,” and the “wide differences of opinion within and between institutions as to what should be assessed in each academic discipline”¹⁰ would no doubtless require endless mediation. Regarding the so-called “blind alley,” according to the counter argument, “...much of the research Banta refers to uses individual-level scores, whereas the Collegiate Learning Assessment program uses scores that are much more reliable because they are aggregated up to the program or college level.”¹¹

Collegiate Learning Assessment developers are in agreement that the test is most definitely *not* a silver bullet intended as a zero-sum assessment of all higher education student learning and should not be used as if it were. It *is*, they say, a step forward in measuring a significant set of higher order skills critical to the broad spectrum of all student learning. Not coincidentally, they say, the Collegiate Learning Assessment’s focus—on the assessment of critical thinking, analytic reasoning, problem-solving and written communica-

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Stephen Klein, Richard Shavelson, and Roger Benjamin, “Setting the Record Straight,” *Inside Higher Ed*, [http://www.insidehighered.com/views/February 8, 2007](http://www.insidehighered.com/views/February%208,2007).

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*

tion through a series of performance tasks and writing prompts—is integral to the statement of mission of most colleges and universities. While debate within the academy regarding whether and how to assess student learning continues, it is clear that the attitude of “trust us, we know what we’re doing” is not going to satisfy those demanding change. “Timing is crucial,” warns Richard Hersh. “Lest the issues of learning assessment and institutional accountability be allowed to become the handmaiden of state and federal politics as many believed has occurred in the K-12 sector, the academy must act now. For this to happen, higher education needs to take the professional lead and control on issues of learning assessment and public accountability...”¹²

Time for a Reality Check

In an effort to assess the performance of their students with measures that could be benchmarked against the respective performances of other institutions, a total of 165 colleges and university systems nationwide have chosen to assume the mantle of professional leadership and control, in part by participating in the Collegiate Learning Assessment. While each of these institutions was motivated by its own particular agenda of issues and concerns, all decided that it was time for what Roger Benjamin refers to as “a reality check” to determine the degree to which they were meeting their respective institutional goals.

The vast University of Texas System (UT), com-

¹² Richard Hersh, “The Feds Are Coming, The Feds Are Coming!” *Inside Higher Ed*, [http://www.insidehighered.com/views/April 24, 2007](http://www.insidehighered.com/views/April%2024,2007).

prising nine academic and six health science-related colleges, selected the Collegiate Learning Assessment as a means to address the accountability concerns of the state legislature and to “show what we had to policymakers, parents, and students,” says Pedro Reyes, associate vice chancellor for academic planning and assessment. Seeking to measure learning outcomes that went beyond the content of specific courses, the UT system elected to participate in the Collegiate Learning Assessment in 2004–2005. The University of Texas System has participated in three cross-sectional administrations of the assessment thus far and will conduct a longitudinal study. “We envision that the Collegiate Learning Assessment will become part of the [University of Texas System] infrastructure,” says Reyes. The Collegiate Learning Assessment is one element of a four-pronged UT effort to address the twin issues of accountability and transparency. The University of Texas System also uses the National Survey of Student Engagement to assess student engagement and satisfaction, licensure exam pass rates to help determine whether graduates are prepared to enter the workforce in certain regulated professions, and the rates of postgraduate employment or further study. “We publish Collegiate Learning Assessment results to the world,” says Reyes, a practice that “begins to get the faculty’s attention.”

Emphasizing that leadership and a willingness to invest resources are essential to addressing the complex issue of accountability, Reyes credits University of Texas System chancellor Mark D. Yudof with providing both. The provost, deans, and faculty were encouraged to look at the Collegiate Learning Assessment reports, he says, and to ask themselves: What is it we need to do to meet national standards? “The individual colleges learned a

great deal about themselves,” observes Reyes. The Collegiate Learning Assessment results for University of Texas, San Antonio, an open admissions institution, were particularly informative because they helped the college “see how much [it] has contributed to student development.”

Arizona State University executive vice president and provost of the University Elizabeth Capaldi shares Reyes’s view of the Collegiate Learning Assessment’s usefulness. “We owe it to the public to measure quality in higher education,” she says, adding, “We want to be able to show the effectiveness of [the institution] even when students who enter score low.” Arizona State University has an enrollment of 63,000 students at its three campuses, and offers 250 majors. “The truly meaningful thing is to educate them all,” she says. “So much of what we think about higher education is elitist,” observes Capaldi, and at many elite private colleges, the question frequently asked is “How high are the SAT scores of our students?” At Arizona State University, where the mission, according to Capaldi, is “To educate as many qualified students as possible,” this is not the relevant question. “The Collegiate Learning Assessment is a very smart test,” says Capaldi, because of what it measures, namely, higher order thinking and writing skills. For Arizona State University faculty, the Collegiate Learning Assessment is viewed as a measure of the university and its effectiveness in helping students to develop these skills. “This puts to rest personal fears,” she says, and encourages faculty to look at how courses in the various disciplines have or have not contributed to learning outcomes.

The motivational issue of getting students to “volunteer” to take the Collegiate Learning Assessment is vexing. “If kids are not working as hard as they can,” says

Capaldi, the concern is that “[we] won’t get a good measure.” The students who do take it “think it’s terrific,” she says. In particular, they enjoy taking a test that is administered online. After two years, Arizona State University has conducted cross-sectional studies and would like to use it longitudinally. “We are interested in building on [the Collegiate Learning Assessment],” explains Capaldi.

While large public higher education institutions like Arizona State University and the University of Texas System have signed on to use the Collegiate Learning Assessment, the assessment was originally designed with small- to mid-size liberal arts colleges in mind. The Teagle Foundation has worked to make the Collegiate Learning Assessment accessible to these colleges through the funding of a number of consortiums nationwide. To elicit their ideas and concerns about student learning assessment, the Teagle Foundation invited representatives of small liberal arts colleges to a series of “listening” meetings. The message communicated by these colleges, according to Teagle Foundation president W. Robert Connor, was essentially “We need to explore what assessment really means to us. But we’re too small and don’t have the experts or necessary resources.” Consensus formed around the idea that for these colleges a collaborative approach might be the best to follow. Out of these “listenings,” the Kalamazoo Assessment Collaborative was formed, which included Kalamazoo, Colorado, and Earlham Colleges.

Paul Sotherland, professor of biology at Kalamazoo College, remembers the “listening” well, in particular, “the fiery talk” about the need for assessing liberal arts learning delivered by Richard Hersh. Out of these

“listening” meetings, a proposal for a collaborative was developed. Entitled “A Value-Added Assessment Collaborative—A Catalyst for Cognizance and Change,” the proposal laid out the following goals: “To create and nurture friendly intra- and inter-campus environments for assessment; demonstrate in a compelling way the value added of a liberal arts education; collect and use ‘stories and data’ to articulate and strengthen each institution’s unique approach to the liberal arts; and in so doing, breathe life into our latent organizational sagas.” The Collegiate Learning Assessment was selected as the instrument of learning assessment; to provide additional data, the National Survey of Student Engagement and the Cooperative Institutional Research Project were also selected.

The Collegiate Learning Assessment was administered to freshmen and seniors during the 2005-06 academic year. Says Sotherland, “Kalamazoo blew the lid off the assessment after the first administration.” Test results demonstrated that the “value added,” i.e., the mean senior Collegiate Learning Assessment score minus the first-year Collegiate Learning Assessment score, of a Kalamazoo College education was well above expected. While the Collegiate Learning Assessment results provided cause for Kalamazoo to celebrate (“Hey, maybe we’re doing something right!” Sotherland admits was their first reaction), the results also raised questions. What was there about a Kalamazoo liberal arts education that could account for this overall performance differential? How did the variations in the students’ educational background (SAT scores, GPA averages) account for the differences? Why were some students likely to thrive in the Kalamazoo environment

more than others, regardless of whether their academic ability was high?¹³

A key outcome of the Collegiate Learning Assessment administration, Sotherland says, is that “Everything [learned] was shared between the three colleges. We built a lot of trust and often shared information not shared even within a college.” For all of us, he explains, the focus was on “friend raising.” The three colleges’ respective presidents, he reports, “marveled at how healthy these exchanges were.” Initial faculty resistance to the Collegiate Learning Assessment was countered by asking tough questions such as, “What are we accomplishing—and how do we know we are?” A longitudinal study will prove the best measure of value-added, Sotherland expects, and will confirm whether a cross-sectional study provides a reliable “snapshot.”

“By probing institutions from several different directions, using different instruments, and taking a healthy inquiry-based approach,” Sotherland says, “we can get a better picture of what’s happening.” Such a process of self-examination inevitably helps the institution—faculty and administrators—to examine what it will take to improve teaching and learning in the classroom.

Teagle President Connor offers this observation: “The statistical best is sometimes the enemy of pragmatic improvement in this work.” He clarifies: “I mean, the benefit of the Collegiate Learning Assessment is often that it raises important questions, not that it provides definitive answers. Kalamazoo College is a good example.

¹³ For a detailed discussion of Kalamazoo’s examination of these questions, see P. Sotherland, A. Dueweke, D. Cunningham, and B. Grossman, “Multiple Drafts of A College’s Narrative,” *Peer Review*, 2007, 9(2): 19-23.

A purist in statistics might object that the numbers were too small to draw attention to important issues that might otherwise have remained on the back burner.” However, he says, “Once they got pushed up front [by Collegiate Learning Assessment results], other evidence came into play, and improvements could be made.”

The Council of Independent Colleges, in cooperation with the Council for Aid to Education and with support from the Teagle Foundation and Carnegie Corporation of New York, decided it was time to participate in the growing “culture of evidence,” and chose to do so by making use of the consortium model. According to Council of Independent Colleges president Richard Ekman, “Five years ago, we had this hunch that small liberal arts colleges needed to use quantitative measures to talk about benefits.” In an increasingly competitive college admissions marketplace, he says, it “became important for small independent colleges to show that they are doing something worthwhile.” Later, Ekman explains, as colleges began hearing “nasty, threatening language from the feds,” the incentive to follow through on this hunch became stronger.

In 2004-05, a total of 12 Council of Independent Colleges member institutions participated in the Collegiate Learning Assessment consortium, and 32 institutions, including 6 of the original 12, will participate in the second phase of the three-year consortium project. Members of the consortium meet annually to discuss and evaluate what they have learned. At the first annual meeting, score reports were distributed in advance, as they will be at subsequent annual meetings. Deans and administrators responsible for assessment and institutional data and some faculty attended the meeting. The presence of facul-

ty will be required at subsequent annual meetings, says Ekman. “The challenge,” he says, “is that faculty are trained to teach their disciplines and not these higher order skills.” Richard Hersh believes that the problem is even more fundamental. “The presumption is, if you know it you can teach it,” he says, but in most cases, “Professors know nothing about teaching other than by accident.” Teacher training for college faculty has not been a priority at most institutions of higher education. This appears to be changing among members of the Council of Independent Colleges collaborative. In the summer of 2007, Ekman reports, a corps leadership will provide training to enable faculty to “develop some parallel assessments in their classes, followed by Web conferences, and sharing information at different levels.”

The University of Charleston in West Virginia is a member of the Council of Independent Colleges Collegiate Learning Assessment Consortium. A small liberal arts institution with an enrollment of fewer than 1,500 students, the University of Charleston has been cultivating a “culture of assessment” for the past decade in which strong emphasis is placed on student learning. “Students know when they enroll,” says Ekman, that they will participate in assessment [activities],” and faculty play a central role in shaping and evaluating these activities. Notably, according to Ekman, in 2005-06, the University of Charleston had “the highest value added score of any Collegiate Learning Assessment user in the country.” The campus culture is such that “a day of assessment” is celebrated during which the public is invited to see and hear a wide range of performance-based learning outcomes. A valuable message of this

exercise, according to Ekman, is that “students learn that performance is important—and often public.”

Well before the report of the Commission on Higher Education was issued, Ekman explains, members of the Council of Independent Colleges Collegiate Learning Assessment Consortium were deeply committed to improving student learning on campus. He believes strongly that the voluntary use of the Collegiate Learning Assessment, in tandem with other assessments, will obviate the need for state or federal government involvement. In such a culture of evidence, says Ekman, the historical ranking of colleges by reputation will inevitably be replaced with a ranking by performance.

In the autumn of 2006, Harvard University, resting securely at the pinnacle of America’s pyramid of selective colleges, nonetheless signed on to administer the Collegiate Learning Assessment to 315 of its freshmen students; a similar number of seniors took the test in the spring of 2007. Derek Bok, until recently Harvard’s interim president and president of Harvard from 1971 to 1991, is the author of *Our Underachieving Colleges: A Candid Look at How Much Students Learn and Why They Should Be Learning More*. Bok’s answer to the question “Are our college students learning?” appears to be “not nearly enough.” According to Andrew Delbanco, professor of humanities and director of the American Studies Program at Columbia University, “Bok paints a picture of colleges that, if not dysfunctional, are operating far below capacity. He questions the coherence and purpose of departmental majors...criticizes lecturers for their indifference to whether students learn anything, and, in general, holds faculty accountable

for ignoring research about which teaching methods are most effective.”¹⁴ Contrary to the Harvard professor who expressed the belief that Harvard students are so bright they require little teaching, Bok offers a decidedly different point of view. Acknowledging that the U.S. Department of Education would like Harvard’s use of the Collegiate Learning Assessment to serve as an accountability tool for parents and students, Harvard’s reason, says Bok, is “to use it as a formative exercise to help us improve [instruction].”¹⁵

The Future of the Collegiate Learning Assessment

So there you have it. After only three years, the Collegiate Learning Assessment is being used by a wide range of institutions of higher education—from highly selective institutions such as Harvard University to vast public universities with diverse student enrollments such as the University of Texas System and Arizona State University—and by small- to mid-size liberal arts colleges, institutions like the University of Charleston and Kalamazoo College. All have come forward voluntarily to respond to the growing pressures for accountability, persuaded that Collegiate Learning Assessment results can provide the vital signals they need to improve teaching and learning at their respective institutions.

Meanwhile, the Council for Aid to Education has begun a community college version of the Collegiate Learning Assessment. “We do know that community college

students [experience] a lot of growth,” says Benjamin, but since they generally do not take the SAT, “another measure is needed” to benchmark that growth. Also under consideration by the Council for Aid to Education is a new generation of assessments in which the Collegiate Learning Assessment framework might be adapted to meet the need for learning assessments within academic disciplines as well as assessments to measure personal and social responsibility outcomes.

At the same time, the Collegiate Learning Assessment finds itself at the top of the list of “preferred” higher education learning assessments of the U.S. Department of Education, inspiring anxiety among some that the assessment could become the feds’ standardized test of choice to measure collegiate student learning. Both supporters and critics of the Collegiate Learning Assessment roundly reject such a “silver bullet” scenario.

Still another indication of the impact the Collegiate Learning Assessment has had on the higher education establishment is that three of the largest testing companies in the country—ACT, the College Board, and ETS—have made offers to buy out the Collegiate Learning Assessment. Council for Aid to Education President Roger Benjamin confirms that the offers have been made and that they are receiving careful consideration.

Given how swiftly these developments have played out, and how impatient for change Americans tend to be, it is instructive to remember that the concept of a liberal arts education that arose in the Middle Ages has evolved gradually over time. Then, study of the *quadrivium* (the four roads)—arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and music—and of the *trivium* (the three roads)—grammar, rhetoric, and logic—were the hallmarks of an education

¹⁴ Andrew Delbanco, “Scandals of Higher Education,” *The New York Review of Books*, March 29, 2007, p. 46.

¹⁵ Linda K. Wertheimer, *op. cit.*

CARNEGIE CORPORATION OF NEW YORK
437 Madison Avenue
New York, New York 10022
Phone: (212) 371-3200
Fax: (212) 754-4073
Web site: www.carnegie.org

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that helped define a free human being. Today, the subject matter of a liberal arts education has changed to include study of the arts, humanities, natural sciences, and social sciences. While the content of a liberal arts education has changed dramatically over the centuries, what has not changed is the notion that the ultimate outcome of a liberal arts education should be the liberation of the human mind and spirit. Unless we are desert monks, most of us struggle to learn so that we can *do*. In a democratic society, it is imperative that we learn to “do” competently, purposefully, and, if at all possible, joyfully. In the highly competitive global society of the twenty-first century, it is equally imperative that we have the means to determine whether we are succeeding. How we measure the results of a liberal arts education has become the subject of a national conversation in American higher education today, a conversation that the Collegiate Learning Assessment has helped to stimulate and inform.

Written by: Anne Grosso de León. De León writes about education.

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New York, New York 10022

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