

CSU and CLA Pilot Test

Background

In summer 2005, CSU was asked to participate in a pilot of a new test, called the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA), developed by the Council for Aid to Education (www.cae.org). We agreed to participate for two reasons. First, while we believe that embedded assessment in general education is almost always more useful, we have not yet developed such an approach at CSU so we need to understand what an alternative - standardized testing- implies. Second, there is considerable discussion at the Federal and State level for the implementation of national standardized test for college students and the CLA is mentioned as one likely option.

The CLA test. This assessment is completed on a computer and has no multiple choice items instead requiring extended responses in two areas: *Performance Task* and *Analytical Writing*. In the performance task students are required to use an "integrated set of critical thinking, analytical reasoning, problem solving and communication skills about a hypothetical but realistic situation." For example, the student is asked to prepare a summary memo about a plane crash based on a variety of documents including Newspaper articles about the accident, a Federal Accident Report on in-flight breakups in single engine planes, emails, and charts on the airlines performance characteristics. Analytical Writing has two components based on a make-an-argument prompt and a break-an-argument prompt.

CSU Sample. In fall 2005 over 300 freshman enrolled in ASC 101 took the test. They were paid \$10 for their participation and were supposed to complete both the Performance Task and Analytical Writing but only 103 completed the writing tasks. The Performance task preceded the writing task and the proctors reported that many freshman did not take the test seriously and spent little time on it. The test has no consequences for students so many are not motivated to do well. Like most institutions we had difficulty recruiting seniors to take the CLA in Spring 2006. We got permission from two instructors, one in Education and one in Business, to use a class session in a capstone course for the testing. The seniors only took one part of the test, Performance or Analytical Writing and they were also paid \$10.00.

Results

The CLA institutional report focuses on whether the CSU students' scores are above, below or at expectations. Expectations are based on CSU students' mean SAT scores, the relationship between the school's average SAT and CLA scores, and a variety of institutional characteristics. CSU results are compared to similar schools by taking into account a variety of institutional characteristics (e.g. Public/Private, Carnegie Classification, minority serving status, admissions selectivity, size of undergraduate body, proportion of students receiving Pell grants, proportion of students over 25 years, status as commuter campus). The CLA results indicate that our freshman scores for the Performance test (the test most completed) were at expectations but were below expectations for the analytical writing task (the test only 1/3 completed). The seniors' scores on the performance task were below expectations and not enough students completed the writing tasks for results.

Value Added

Traditional value added or growth models assess change over time as students are tracked longitudinally (Ohio has begun to do this for all K-12 students). The amount of growth or added educational value is calculated and classified as above at or below expectations. The CLA institutional report calculates a "value added" component but it is based on the relationship between the CLA and SAT scores. The calculations are complex because the sampling is not random and our freshmen have not yet been followed over time. Based on these calculations the difference between freshmen and seniors at CSU was classified as at expectations.

Crucial Caveats

The results should be interpreted with extreme caution. While we had SAT/ACT scores on file for the CSU Freshmen, these test results were not available for the majority of the seniors so we asked them to self report or IR estimated their scores. The sample of seniors was not random as we were only able to sample from two Colleges. In addition, while we provided incentives for students to take the test there were no incentives for them to do well.

Implications

- Recruiting students to take standardized tests seriously when the tests are low stakes for them is very problematic.
- Selecting random samples of freshmen is difficult; selecting random samples of seniors is almost impossible. Other universities have similar problems - some recruit students through capstone courses.
- The difficulty of implementing and interpreting standardized tests suggests the importance of developing good embedded assessment in general education courses