



Committee on Instruction

Standing Faculty Committee of the College Senate
State University of New York College at Oneonta
Academic Year 2007-2008
Brian Beitzel, Chair

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Dr. Adam Ryburn
Presiding Officer of Faculty
Chair of College Senate

Dr. Ryburn:

At the request of the College Senate, the Committee on Instruction has reviewed the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA) instrument for its appropriateness as a method for measuring critical thinking skills on our campus. The Committee's findings are summarized below.

The members of the Committee were enthusiastic about the potential of the CLA to relieve the burden placed on a significant number of instructors around campus (80 instructors, by estimate of the Council of Chairs). The current approach to measuring critical thinking is to have these instructors use a rubric provided by GEAR; however, in order to implement this rubric properly, all instructors must be consistent in how they assign scores when using the rubric—a requirement that is much more difficult to meet than it may first appear. Therefore, we see the CLA as an improvement over GEAR's rubric because the CLA eliminates (a) the need for cross-discipline training and, concomitantly, (b) concerns of inter-rater consistency. Adoption of the CLA would allow instructors across campus to spend more time focusing on instructional strategies for developing students' critical thinking skills.

In any educational assessment, reliability must be demonstrated if the results are to be credible and useful. Thus, the Committee examined the reliability estimates presented by the publisher of the CLA and found them to be acceptable for the purpose of reporting campus-wide results to SUNY Administration.

Further, the Committee searched the available documentation for evidence of the validity of this instrument relative to the purposes for which it was designed—to measure “students’ critical thinking, analytic reasoning, problem solving, and written communication skills.” We were deeply disappointed to find practically no evidence that this instrument is truly measuring critical thinking. The Chair of our Committee even contacted the publisher of the CLA and at that time they were unable to provide any empirical evidence of the validity of this instrument. The unfortunate conclusion from this is that **at this point we cannot be certain that CLA scores would be accurate assessments of the critical thinking skills of students on our campus.**

The Committee also noted that the data presented in the 2005 *Research in Higher Education* article (which is the only relevant peer-reviewed publication that we are aware of) were not based on the CLA itself, but rather on a subset of the tasks upon which the CLA was later

developed. Therefore, it is not reasonable to draw any firm conclusions about the psychometric properties of the CLA from this article.

One of the promising (although not empirically validated) claims made by the publisher of the CLA is that the CLA can measure written communication skills. We find this prospect to be heartening, in light of the efforts of faculty in the English Department to meet GEAR's requirements for measuring writing skills. If the CLA can be validated for this purpose, an even greater number of instructors could be released from burdensome assessment activities to provide a higher quality of instruction. We urge the Senate to promote this use of the CLA in the future if suitable evidence can be collected that the instrument is up to the task.

Finally, the Committee wishes to emphasize that the purpose of the CLA is to evaluate the student body as a whole, not individual students or programs. The Council for Aid to Education, who publishes the CLA, has been very clear in stating that the unit of analysis is intended to be at the *institutional* level. Further, the current estimates of the reliability of the CLA confirm that attempts to interpret the CLA score of any individual student would be a misguided effort.

In sum, we find this instrument to have some promise, but this Committee cannot endorse it wholeheartedly because of the significant shortcomings cited above. Nevertheless, **we see it as an improvement over our current method of measuring critical thinking and therefore we recommend that it be adopted by this campus in spite of its weaknesses.** Ideally, there will be a probationary period after which the merits of this instrument will again be reviewed by qualified faculty.

We hope our comments are useful to the Senate in considering this important aspect of assessing instruction on our campus.

Respectfully submitted by the Committee on Instruction
Brian Beitzel, Chair