

# THE CLA: WHAT IT IS TODAY, WHAT IT WILL BE TOMORROW

A statement on mission, goals and strategy and an invitation to participate.

Today the terrain of education provides numerous obstacles, and the route is often obscured by too little or too much information, by the separation of academic discourses, and by the challenges of teaching in the 21st century. Faculty must guide students along their journey. Authentic pedagogical, curricular and assessment services can provide essential maps of student learning by which faculty can determine the best direction, as well as the tools needed to create effective pathways.

The Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA), an application of performance assessment, was created by academics for academics, focusing on the higher order thinking skills that are crucial to life and work of the future. The CLA is a program of the nonprofit organization CAE, and is the only national program that combines curricular and pedagogical development with campus-based assessment. Performance tasks — which are rich case studies that require critical thinking, analytic reasoning, writing and other problem solving skills — seamlessly link teaching, learning and assessment. The CLA draws on the research literature using the most cutting-edge advances in technology and measurement science to deliver reliable and cost-effective services to colleges, universities, and, through the College and Work Readiness Assessment (CWRA), to high schools. Teaching and learning resources for faculty are available online; student assessment and scoring also occur via the Internet.

## **The Strategy**

Our approach is to build a range of performance assessment applications that support institutions, departments, programs and especially faculty in their efforts to improve teaching and learning. It is from this perspective that we have designed our performance based tasks.

Performance tasks consist of multiple documents, graphs, and figures, some of which are more relevant than others in the process of creating a well-reasoned and well-constructed argument. An emphasis on applying what one knows to new situations is consistent with recent definitions of knowledge that shift away from the simple recall of information to the location and use of appropriate information in real situations.

The CLA permits and encourages comparison between institutions to answer the question, “Are we (faculty and administrators) doing “good enough” in comparison to similarly situated institutions?” Without appropriate comparisons, formative assessment strategies are doomed to remain ineffective, silo-perpetuating activities. Institutional comparisons are necessary for a systematic approach to improving student learning that many in the academy seek.<sup>1</sup>

Comparative-based testing is, however, only one important step in what we consider a continuous system of educational improvement. The CLA now provides an enhanced set of products and services, made possible by recent advances that directly facilitate faculty members’ ability to



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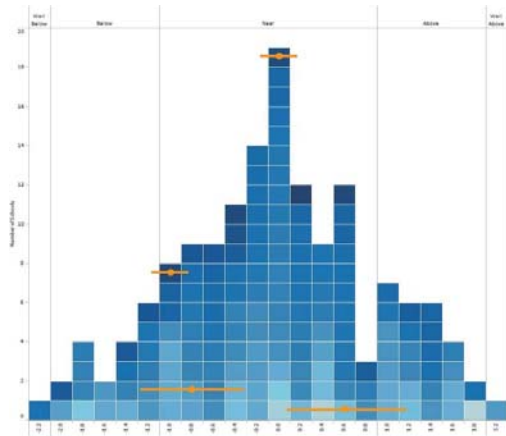




Figure 1: Prototype for New Subscore Reporting  
Subscore Distributions



Figure 2: Sample Standard Error Visualization



improve teaching and learning. These products and services include:

- Performance Task Academies that teach faculty how to develop their own performance tasks.<sup>2</sup>
- A Performance Task Library that is an online community where faculty members who have attended Performance Task Academies in the past can upload tasks for other folks to access.
- Certification in the ability to create Performance Tasks for those faculty members that have attended an Academy and uploaded a full task to the Performance Task Library.
- Student and Institution Feedback Reports that are designed to provide information to institutions without the restrictions of comparative performance.
- Improved Institutional Reports that contain new subscores in the areas of problem solving, analytic reasoning and evaluation, writing persuasiveness, and writing mechanics. (See figure 1.)
- An enhanced value-added methodology that produces value-added scores that are more reliable and have substantially greater consistency across test administrations. The enhanced approach also provides a unique standard error, or “precision-metric” for each school’s value-added score. (See figure 2.)
- Machine scoring of performance tasks could increase the speed with which we are able to report results to institutions and students.

We also plan to develop and implement a new CLA testing protocol that focuses on the individual student.

In addition, CAE has recently established an Institute for Performance Assessment (IPA) with a distinguished measurement scientist as director and its own independent technical advisory board. The purpose of the IPA is to advance the science of performance assessment, propose and evaluate new applications of performance assessment throughout education, and train a new generation of performance assessment scientists.

None of these developments would be taking place without the support and encouragement of our colleagues throughout American higher education and abroad. We appreciate the advice you continue to give us. We remain dedicated to mining the benefits of performance assessment for the benefit of students and faculty.

I encourage you to consider adopting the enhanced CLA for the 2010-2011 academic year. Please do not hesitate to contact my colleague Chris Jackson at [cjackson@cae.org](mailto:cjackson@cae.org).

<sup>1</sup> “Returning to Learning in an Age of Assessment” (R. Benjamin, et al., 2009).

<sup>2</sup> “Taking Teaching to (Performance) Task: Linking Pedagogical and Assessment Practice” (M. Chun; *Change*, forthcoming, March/April 2010).