

BIG PICTURE RESULTS, FINE GRAINED ANALYSIS: UNDERSTANDING CLA PERFORMANCE AT KALAMAZOO COLLEGE

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SUMMARY

In this paper, we present results of an ongoing analysis of factors influencing the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA) performance of our students. Kalamazoo College seniors performed very well on the CLA and, when compared with the performance of first-year students, showed an exceptionally high “value-added” as a result of their K education. The “value-added” was in the “well-above expected” range, along with two other institutions of the 113 that administered the CLA in 2005-2006. Through our analysis we are finding that at least some of the experiences in which our students engage seem to have a “value-added” effect, and we are gaining insight into what we might do better to have this effect on more of our students.

In a follow-up survey and telephone interviews with seniors who took the CLA, the students said that they took the exam willingly and were motivated, focused, and composed while taking the exam. They perceived the CLA questions to be similar to tasks encountered at Kalamazoo College, even though they found the CLA questions easier, and they thought the CLA allowed them to demonstrate their abilities to think, reason, and write effectively. Both coursework and experiences outside of coursework contributed to their ability to perform well on the CLA. Respondents also noted that the College’s emphasis on writing, especially the SIP, and emphasis on critical thinking and analytical reasoning in coursework contributed significantly to their ability to do well on the CLA. They found that having to think, form arguments, and write quickly within time constraints was the most challenging aspect of the CLA, but they found nothing particularly challenging about the format.

We also examined transcripts of interviews that were done with seniors who took the CLA by students in Dr. Kiran Cunningham’s Qualitative Research Methods course. Reading interview transcripts from seven students with high CLA scores and six students with low CLA scores revealed intriguing differences between the groups: (a) foreign language proficiency (perhaps, communication proficiency in general) seemed to correlate positively with CLA scores; (b) students who used the phrase “personal initiative” (or something similar) during interviews generally did better on the CLA; and (c) science students can get “lost” in their discipline and never “surface,” but those who did get out and explore other disciplines tended to do well on the CLA.

In an analysis of academic transcripts of seniors who took the CLA, we noticed that many students who took four or more courses in a discipline outside the academic division in which they majored performed “above expected” on the CLA, whereas relatively fewer students who performed “below expected” took four or more courses in an “unfamiliar” discipline. This has led us to wonder whether in-depth development of skills in critical thinking, analytical reasoning, and written expression in two distinct disciplines provides a better general education than having a major and a few courses in a variety of different disciplines.

Recently we developed the notion of examining performance on the CLA in an approximate “value-added” way by identifying students who “over-performed” and those who “under-performed.” We found that these “adjusted” CLA scores differed significantly among divisions, even though actual CLA scores did not, with students majoring in Foreign Languages having the highest Adjusted CLA and students in Natural Sciences having the lowest Adjusted CLA. Students majoring in Natural Sciences showed a bi-modal (U-shaped) distribution, with eight “Below Expected,” three “At Expected,” and 11 “Above Expected” scores, whereas students in all other divisions showed uni-modal distributions (upward slopes), with the vast majority of scores in the “At Expected” and “Above Expected” categories.

Clearly, college enhances abilities to think critically, reason analytically, and write effectively, and trajectories students take through that education seem to affect the degree to which those abilities are enhanced. Even though considerable variation in CLA scores, along with small sample sizes, precluded our reaching definitive conclusions, we surmise the following: a curriculum that creates a high “value-added” education emphasizes all three skills measured by the CLA, provides experiences (preferably real-life experiences) that induce students to take perspectives different from those with which they are most familiar, encourages students to reflect on what they have learned inside and beyond the classroom, and then, perhaps to be most effective, fosters an environment in which students communicate outcomes of those reflections to others.