THE COUNCIL OF INDEPENDENT COLLEGES

CATALYST FOR CHANGE:
The CIC/CLA Consortium

By David C. Paris

The Council of Independent Colleges gratefully acknowledges the generous financial support of the Teagle Foundation for the work of the CIC/CLA Consortium and the publication of this report.

The Council of Independent Colleges is the national service organization for small and mid-sized independent colleges and universities. It includes more than 600 independent liberal arts colleges and universities and more than 70 higher education affiliates and organizations that work together to strengthen college and university leadership, sustain high-quality education, and enhance private higher education's contributions to society. To fulfill this mission, CIC provides its members with skills, tools, and knowledge that address aspects of leadership, financial management and performance, academic quality, and institutional visibility. The Council is headquartered at One Dupont Circle in Washington, DC.

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FOREWORD

In 2002, when the Council for Aid to Education (CAE) first asked the Council of Independent Colleges (CIC) to help select a few colleges to participate in a pilot project that would measure the effects of an institution on how much the students had learned during college, CIC jumped at the opportunity. It had been our view that the prevailing and largely anecdotal ways of describing the distinctive educational advantages of smaller, largely residential, liberal arts-based, private colleges and universities had been only modestly persuasive and a more empirical approach was needed. The Collegiate Learning Assessment appeared to be well suited to the challenge we faced. It avoided the dangers of "high stakes" tests that could intimidate individual students and faculty members by keeping its focus on the institution as a whole. It did not require large amounts of time to administer. And—a particular advantage for small colleges—it did not require large amounts of money or specialized staff expertise in order to be used effectively.

The response by CIC colleges and universities was very positive and, over time, increasing numbers of CIC colleges made commitments to administer the CLA and to use the results to stimulate reforms in teaching and learning on campus. Between 2002 and 2011 several foundations—chief among them the Teagle Foundation—supported efforts to develop and expand a consortium of CIC colleges that had pledged to use the CLA and to share results with one another. Over the years, our hopes of identifying effective practices that actually improve how much students learn between their freshman and senior years were largely fulfilled.

CIC's interest in this venture was—and remains—a reflection of the biggest story in American higher education during the second half of the 20th century: the massive expansion of college-going to include two-thirds of all high school graduates, including those with middling academic abilities and those from "at risk" groups of the population who had previously been underrepresented in higher education. These groups include first-generation, low-income, and minority students. How were the rank and file of American colleges doing, we asked, in educating these new college-goers? Did a medium-selective private college with a commitment to enrolling and graduating students with these characteristics do a good job in advancing its students' cognitive development over the four years of college? Because there was some evidence to suggest that, on average, our colleges are more effective than other kinds of institutions for students with these characteristics, the CLA offered a promising means to document the performance of independent institutions.

CIC has long been a national leader in voluntary efforts to improve the quality of student learning and a strong advocate of institutional autonomy in accountability efforts. For more than a decade, CIC has tried to help its member colleges navigate through the array of initiatives that are underway—those by regional accreditors, foundation-supported projects, and various campus efforts—focusing on specific aspects of the overall topic at different times. In 2001, CIC was the first national presidential association to urge its members to use the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) as a means of gauging student involvement in educationally purposeful activities that are highly correlated with academic success. In 2004, well before then-Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings' Commission on the Future of Higher Education proposed to mandate the use of outcomes assessment, CIC had established its CLA Consortium.

Now, nearly a decade later, more than four dozen CIC institutions have been part of this voluntary effort. In the interim, regional accrediting bodies, state agencies, and more than one federal official have called for mandatory assessment of students' "learning outcomes" and some state systems have provided funding to campuses to administer the CLA.

Nonetheless, the voluntary CIC Consortium is still the largest group of colleges that work together to learn from one another's experiences in the use of the CLA.

In 2008 we produced a progress report on the Consortium's work that stimulated other colleges and universities—public and private—to launch their own projects based on use of the CLA. Now CIC has produced a final report on the Consortium's work—final, not in the sense that the colleges are dropping their use of the CLA (most are continuing), but final in that the annual Consortium meetings, supported by the Teagle Foundation, are ending after seven years of very generous funding. Both CIC and the Teagle Foundation are willing to declare victory: the use of the CLA has been piloted in a wide variety of institutions; many colleges and universities have developed habits of using it to propel reform efforts in teaching and learning practices; the collaborative approach of a consortium of institutions has proven to be a catalyst for change on individual campuses and with this report seeks to stimulate similar change in other institutions; and the hunch in 2002 that voluntary efforts will work and government mandates are not necessary appears to have been amply demonstrated.

Alaska Pacific University, established in 1959, is a small independent university devoted to innovative teaching and learning, where students receive personal attention in small classes and acquire leadership capabilities, moral character, and self-direction through active learning. To achieve these educational goals, the university nurtures spiritual and moral values consistent with the its Christian heritage while respecting the religious convictions of all. The university now offers 11 undergraduate majors and five graduate programs. *www.alaskapacific.edu*

CIC owes a great deal to the Teagle Foundation's stalwart support and to its past and current presidents, Bob Connor and Richard Morrill, and its vice president, Donna Heiland. We also thank our CAE colleagues Roger Benjamin, president, and Marc Chun, director of education. Guiding this work at CIC from the start, with both deft diplomacy and excellent judgment, has been Hal Hartley, senior vice president. The informative report that follows was written largely by David Paris, a CIC senior advisor and now executive director of the New Leadership Alliance for Student Learning and Accountability.

I hope that readers of this report will find in it helpful advice that enables them to advance efforts on their own campuses to assess students' cognitive growth.

Richard Ekman
President
Council of Independent Colleges
Washington, DC

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

From the fall of 2008 through the spring of 2011, 47 colleges and universities, organized and supported by the Council of Independent Colleges (CIC), administered the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA) to their students. The CLA is a test of critical thinking, analytic reasoning, problem solving, and written communication developed by the Council for Aid to Education. The purpose of the CIC/CLA Consortium, underwritten by grants from the Teagle Foundation, was to embed a "culture of assessment" on participating campuses, refine the methods used to assess student learning, and identify "best practices" for the improvement of student learning and teaching that could be confidently shared with other small and mid-sized independent colleges and universities and made known to the public. Each institution was free to develop its own way of administering and using the CLA. In this last phase of the Consortium, summer meetings were held in 2007 through 2011 during which institutions compared notes, tactics, and results as well as discussed strategies to improve student learning on their campuses.

This monograph provides a summary of the experiences of Consortium members. Participating in the Consortium led to a wide variety of effects. These ranged from fairly immediate changes in program and pedagogy to indirect, but no less important, shifts in conversations among faculty members and with administrators and in the campus culture. The initiative also led to increased interest in teaching critical thinking through the presentation of ill-structured problems, particularly CLA's "performance tasks." With each annual iteration, institutions steadily developed better ways of administering and using the CLA and conducting other assessment exercises. Overall, participation in the Consortium had a significant, positive impact on the vast majority of the institutions. The initiative produced a steady expansion of efforts, changes, experimentation, and conversation.

One of the words most frequently used in the CIC/CLA Consortium campus reports is "catalyst." The CLA results might not be immediately or directly connected to a change in program or pedagogy in every case, but the instrument did spark consideration of what assessment should be and do on a campus and which academic programs or pedagogies need to be revisited. These "catalytic" effects involved both programmatic and pedagogical effects as well as changes in institutional culture. Sometimes programmatic effects included the CLA influencing how assessment activities occurred on campus. The CLA served as a catalyst for rethinking assessment among Consortium colleges and involved the triangulation of CLA results with other measures. The CLA was also a catalyst for changes in academic programs and pedagogy. The administration of the CLA prompted a reexamination of programs and practices that, though not always directly tied to the CLA instrument or its results, are nonetheless a significant change in an institution's approach to student learning. These changes varied from the revamping of a broad, perhaps institution-wide assessment program to shifts in programs and pedagogy.

The experience and success of the CIC/CLA Consortium offer lessons for other colleges and universities as well as policy officials, as they respond to demands for more assessment of, and accountability for, student learning outcomes.

The first lesson is that **measures and measurement matter**. The CLA is a powerful and potentially valuable instrument, and, equally important, having a key measure or measures is crucial to focusing discussions of student learning within an institution. Every institution wants to improve its students' critical thinking skills, and the CLA provides an opportunity to measure those skills in ways that most faculty members recognize as being important and authentic. Similarly, once a measure like the CLA is used it establishes the principle that an institution can and should consider it as well as other types of measures and evidence. The frequent attempts to triangulate CLA results with National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) and to conduct analyses of CLA by area or program reflect the fact that there are a variety of measures available and analyses that can be done. Whatever other changes have occurred at the colleges in the Consortium, what

has changed dramatically is a disposition toward use of evidence and analysis of student learning.

Second, and similarly, the process of measuring student learning creates **a catalyst for institutional change**—and it is difficult to imagine reversing this momentum. As most of the institutions in the Consortium reported, once begun, assessment becomes part of the conversation and an ongoing activity of the institution. For some institutions the reaction was immediate and moved to focusing on those areas—especially critical thinking and writing—assessed by the CLA. These and other efforts have expanded in a range of ways, from changing specific courses and programs, to focusing faculty development efforts, to revisiting how assessment was conducted on campus more generally. Once these changes are made, the logic of assessment and working to "close the loop" develop a momentum of their own.

A third lesson is that assessment and institutional change can be greatly aided by **collaboration among institutions**. The CIC/CLA Consortium illustrates the possibility of a professional community of practice that supports assessment and improvement of student learning. Common measures and common issues across institutions give the assessment process some measure of credibility. Having other institutions provide advice on everything from logistical challenges to the broadest ideas about curriculum and program creates a community of professional practice that makes it easier to improve an institution's work. The work of the CIC/CLA Consortium provides a model of how undergraduate education can become more professionalized through shared understandings, measures, and practices.

A final lesson that can be drawn from the CIC initiative emerges from the recognition that the pressure on higher education to demonstrate its value, especially in light of rising costs, is not likely to fade. Worse, the temptation for public officials to use regulation as a means to spur innovation and improvement is also likely to be present, at least for the near term. The CIC/CLA Consortium offers an example of **self-directed, voluntary professional efforts** that have and will continue to provide a sound response to legitimate public demands for assessment, accountability, and improvement. The distinctive system of higher education in the United States—its mix of diverse, autonomous institutions, including a robust private sector—once engaged in thoughtful cooperation and experimentation, does not need external direction to continue to improve its work with students. What is needed, and found in the CIC/CLA Consortium, is the dedicated work of individuals and institutions in higher education, particularly in the independent sector, constantly working together to improve the education of their students. ■

Allegheny College (Pennsylvania), established in 1815, is the 32nd oldest college in the nation and will celebrate its bi-centennial in 2015. One of the 40 institutions featured in Loren Pope's *Colleges That Change Lives*, 90 percent of Allegheny alumni seeking employment start a career within eight months of graduation, and the college ranks in the top 5 percent of colleges nationally whose students go on to earn PhDs. Allegheny enrolls more than 2,100 students. *www.allegheny.edu*

I. WHO'S LEARNING...AND HOW DO YOU KNOW?: THE COUNCIL OF INDEPENDENT COLLEGES AND THE COLLEGIATE LEARNING ASSESSMENT

There is no simple blueprint, roadmap, or formula for establishing a successful assessment program, with or without the CLA. This endeavor provided the opportunity for making improvements, especially as institutions drew from the experience of colleagues through the CIC/CLA Consortium.

Over the past three decades colleges and universities have improved their efforts to assess student learning. There are a number of reasons for this—a sense of professional responsibility, state and accreditation agency reporting requirements, and greater clarity and understanding about the process and measurement of learning. Public officials and the general public have also called for greater transparency about, and accountability for, what students are actually achieving. Given the importance of higher education for economic competitiveness and civic participation and the large investment of public, philanthropic, and family resources in higher education, the recent demands for better assessment and disclosure of results in assessment of student learning are probably inevitable and surely reasonable.

The 2006 Department of Education report, *A Test of Leadership: Charting the Future of U.S. Higher Education*, commonly known as the Spellings Commission report, increased pressure for greater accountability. That report suggested that the traditional advantage of the United States in higher education was eroding as greater percentages of students in other countries, especially among younger segments of the population, completed degrees. Similarly, comparative performance on several types of tests and poor results on measures such as the National Assessment of Adult Literacy (NAAL) suggested that undergraduates in the United States were faring poorly on some reasonable standard of literacy compared with students in other countries. The Spellings Commission report strongly implied that some overall test or tests of results should be administered. It specifically mentioned as a possible indicator the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA), a measure of critical thinking, analytic reasoning, problem solving, and written communication developed by the Council for Aid to Education (CAE).

More recently, several reports suggest that many college students are not learning at the levels expected. One particularly strong critique using results from the CLA (*Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses*, Arum and Roksa) concludes that students are not studying very hard and as a result are not learning very much. Arum and Roksa, in the finding most commonly noted in the popular press, report that more than one third of students show no gain in critical thinking over four years in college. Unfortunately, attention to this finding has distracted from other results of the study and ignored some developments in higher education that tell a different and more nuanced story that is particularly relevant to small and mid-sized private colleges and universities. Specifically, students majoring in traditional liberal arts fields demonstrated greater gains in learning than others. Also noteworthy is the fact that because the study draws from a limited sample of 24 institutions, differences in learning across various types of institutions could not be fully addressed. Finally, and perhaps necessarily, in reporting on their research the authors did not take much notice of the wide variety of efforts to assess and improve student learning that has been taking place in higher education, especially recently.

Aurora University (Illinois and Wisconsin) is an inclusive community dedicated to the transformative power of learning. Founded in 1893, Aurora is a private university that enrolls more than 4,300 students in its two locations. The university offers bachelor's, master's, and doctoral degrees. *www.aurora.edu*

This report provides a picture of how higher education, and specifically 47 independent colleges and universities in the CIC/CLA Consortium, are working to improve student learning by administering and responding to the CLA.

The Council of Independent Colleges (CIC), an association of some 600 small and mid-sized private colleges and universities, has been a leader in responding to calls for greater efforts in assessing and accounting for student learning. Indeed, its efforts to support the development of the CLA and encourage its use preceded the Spellings report and the controversies surrounding it. In 2002 CIC worked with the CAE to identify private institutions that would be willing to participate in a beta test of the CLA. In 2004–2005 a dozen CIC institutions administered the CLA and formed the initial CIC/CLA Consortium with support from the Teagle Foundation and the Carnegie Corporation of New York. Interest in the assessment instrument was high enough among CIC members to suggest expanding the group for a multi-year period.

During the period from fall 2005 through spring 2008, supported by a new grant from the Teagle Foundation, CIC established a Consortium of 33 institutions that agreed to administer the CLA. Part of the grant initiative was to bring Consortium institutions together annually for a summer meeting to exchange experiences of working with the CLA and to discuss topics concerning assessment and higher education more generally. In 2008 CIC published a report on the experience of the Consortium to that point, *Evidence of Learning: Applying the Collegiate Learning Assessment to Improve Teaching and Learning in the Liberal Arts Experience*. That report was devoted primarily to individual descriptions of a dozen or so colleges and universities' experiences with the CLA, a discussion of the challenges institutions faced in administering and using the CLA, and lessons learned to be shared with other institutions. The report was used by many other colleges and universities as a set of cautionary tales that informed their own assessment efforts.

From fall 2008 through spring 2011, again with Teagle Foundation support, the CIC/CLA Consortium expanded to include 47 institutions. *(A list of the participating colleges and universities and their years of participation in the Consortium can be found on page 44.)* The summer Consortium meetings continued in this phase. In the proposal to the Teagle Foundation, CIC President Richard Ekman stated, "CIC seeks to firmly embed a 'culture of assessment' on participating campuses, refine the methods used to assess student learning, and establish best practices for the improvement of student learning and teaching that can be confidently shared with other small and mid-sized independent colleges and universities and made known to the public." Also, involvement in this phase required colleges to use multiple sources of evidence beyond the CLA and participation of faculty members on the CLA "team" at Consortium meetings and on campuses.

True to the spirit of independent higher education, each institutional member of the CIC/CLA Consortium was free to chart its own course with respect to how to administer and use the CLA. There was no uniform expectation about the ways in which an institution might decide to change its work, if at all, in response to CLA results. At the same time, the Consortium offered an annual opportunity for representatives from member colleges to meet and discuss their progress, and there were ongoing discussions and consultation with CAE about the CLA results and possible developments in the use of the instrument. With few exceptions, the CLA had a considerable impact on institutions, resulting in a deeper "culture of assessment"

and altered programs and pedagogy in response to CLA results.

The final summer meeting of the Teagle-funded Consortium members occurred in August 2010. The ending of this phase of CIC's work with the CLA (and the beginning of a new "Pathways" phase discussed in Section X) suggested the desirability of some kind of summing up of the experiences of the 47 Teagle-funded colleges and universities in the Consortium between 2008 and 2011. After the August 2010 meeting of the Consortium, colleges were asked to submit responses on the following topics related to their work with the CLA:

- Overview: The basic story of what happened on your campus, who was involved, what difference using the CLA made;
- Successes: The particular successes and how the day-to-day work on your campus has changed as a result of working with the CLA;
- Process: The thorny issues of introducing the CLA on campus (particularly to and by faculty), administering the test, and reporting and discussing CLA results;
- Challenges: The difficulties and even disappointments experienced, since these are sometimes as important to understand as successes;
- Consortium: The impact of participating in the Consortium (did it make a difference?); and
- Looking ahead: Plans for using the CLA beyond this academic year.

A select group of presidents of Consortium institutions also was asked to comment on the changes resulting from the initiatives and their hopes and plans for future development of assessment efforts.

Summarizing and doing justice to the work of each of the institutions would require a much larger volume (or volumes). As one might expect, there is a variety of distinctive stories about institutional experiences and results. Instead of focusing on each institution separately, what follows is a description of some of the major trends and issues among the colleges, responses to results and problems, successes and challenges, and remaining questions and issues. In each section, the examples given from specific institutions almost certainly have parallels at other colleges as well, even as institutions responded in different ways to their own circumstances.

Averett University (Virginia) is a private, co-educational institution affiliated with the Baptist General Association of Virginia. Averett offers undergraduate curricula blending the liberal arts and sciences with professional preparation, as well as graduate programs in education and business. Averett is a community that values cultural, individual, and racial diversity. *www.averett.edu*

The next section of this report offers a brief overview of the CLA. The sections that follow discuss some of the ongoing challenges of assessment generally and of administering and using the CLA in particular, the direct and indirect impact of the CLA on different institutions, including the increasing interest in the "CLA in the Classroom" program, and what the future might look like for CIC member colleges—including CIC's next CLA-related initiative, the Pathways Project. The concluding section summarizes the general results and lessons learned from the CIC/CLA Consortium.

The various sections do not provide sharp distinctions between and among institutions nor do they reflect some strict categorization of what goes on within any college or university. Rather, the sections point to the various aspects of the introduction and development of most new campus initiatives. For example, the distinction between "direct" and "indirect" impact is not always clear, and at almost every institution both can be found. The introduction of a new initiative, in this case using the CLA to assess student learning, sometimes produces immediate actions, or sometimes it marks the beginning

Barton College (North Carolina), founded in 1902, is a four-year, private liberal arts college that offers a wide range of professional and liberal arts programs leading to the baccalaureate degree, as well as the MEd in elementary education. The college serves approximately 1,150 students and boasts a solid international travel study program and an active honors program. *www.barton.edu*

of a process of considering a broader range of issues and how they might be addressed—or both. A new initiative typically precipitates discussion, and sometimes conflict, about institutional purposes and means for evaluating change. These discussions occasionally or even often have long-ranging influence in that they provide new ways of thinking about and understanding the work of the institution.

And of course, new initiatives almost never move from proposal to action to results without encountering challenges along the way. Introducing the CLA necessitated finding ways to overcome practical issues of administration and institutional process, as well as the very real questions of how to interpret and what to do with any given set of results. Over several years, not surprisingly, many institutions developed ways of more effectively administering the CLA and using it for programmatic and pedagogical change. The annual meetings of members of the Consortium were almost universally cited as being a useful source of tips and tactics for making the administration and use of the CLA easier and more productive.

As will be seen from the descriptions in the succeeding sections, in almost every case the CLA had both direct and indirect impact on the programs, pedagogy, and thinking at these institutions. On many campuses workshops on the pedagogy of writing and critical thinking were developed in response to CLA results. Programs and pedagogy about writing and critical thinking, among other things, were reexamined and changed. Faculty members became interested in using the CLA's notion of an "ill-structured" problem as an organizing concept for understanding critical thinking, and many specifically wanted to create performance tasks for their courses (following the "CLA in the Classroom" approach). The consideration of these initiatives very often involved broader discussions of institutional purpose, the aims and value of assessment, and best ways to promote and evaluate change. These broader discussions often produced cultural changes—changes in perspective that accompanied programmatic and pedagogical shifts.

There is no simple blueprint, roadmap, or formula for establishing a successful assessment program, with or without the CLA. This endeavor provided the opportunity for making improvements, especially as institutions drew from the experience of colleagues through the CIC/CLA Consortium. There is greater understanding and acceptance of the CLA and assessment generally among these colleges, as well as many programmatic changes and improvements. Certainly many questions remain, but these are in sharper focus because of the introduction of the CLA in these small and mid-sized independent colleges and universities. The willingness of these institutions to experiment, interact, and learn from their experience in the CIC/CLA Consortium points to a continuing leadership role for CIC in the national discussion on improving student learning. ■

II. CRITICAL THINKING AND PROBLEM SOLVING IN AN IMPERFECT WORLD: THE COLLEGIATE LEARNING ASSESSMENT

"The CLA is a unique instrument and, as such, can be an important piece, albeit not the only piece, of an effective assessment plan."

—Cynthia Zane, President, Hilbert College

The CLA was developed by the CAE as a way of measuring institutional contributions to gains in student learning. The CLA is one of the first widely-used testing instruments to measure student learning directly by capturing the contribution of the institution to students' cognitive development. The test provides a standardized measure of "higher order" cognitive skills and competencies that are often aligned with the general education goals of the undergraduate curriculum: critical thinking, analytic reasoning, problem solving, and written communication.

The CLA instrument asks first-year and senior students to evaluate arguments and to write a response to practical problems using provided materials that do not yield any precise or correct answer. Specifically, the CLA uses three key measures to assess student abilities:

- Make an Argument: The ability to take and justify a position on an issue.
- Critique an Argument: The ability to evaluate an argument for how well-reasoned it is.
- Performance Task: The longest section of the test asks the student to complete a real-world task, such as preparing a briefing report, using a set of provided materials.

Thus, in making or critiquing an argument the test might state, "In our time, specialists of all kinds are highly overrated. We need more generalists—people who can provide broad perspectives," and ask the test-taker, in 45 minutes, to agree or disagree with the statement and explain the reasons for his or her position.

The performance task, the best-known and most well-regarded element of the CLA, assigns the student a role in a scenario and asks him or her to write on the basis of provided materials an analysis of the problem and response to it. For example, a test taker might be asked as a consultant to a mayor to respond to criticism by an opponent in an election. The opposing candidate has criticized the mayor's proposal to increase the number of police officers in order to reduce crime. In suggesting how the mayor should respond the test taker is provided with several different kinds of documents, police tables, crime statistics, one of the opponent's exhibits, etc. Taken together, the documents do not (obviously in the case of the opponent's exhibits) support the mayor's claim or for that matter the claim of the opponent. This kind of

Bethel University (Minnesota) is a leader in Christ-centered higher education with approximately 6,400 students from 47 states and 32 countries enrolled in undergraduate, graduate, seminary, and adult education programs. Based in St. Paul, with additional seminary locations on both coasts, Bethel offers rigorous bachelor's and advanced degrees in nearly 100 fields. *www.bethel.edu*

Cabrini College (Pennsylvania) is a residential college founded in 1957 by the Missionary Sisters of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. Cabrini offers 1,400 undergraduate students more than 30 majors, pre-professional programs, concentrations, and minors. More than 2,000 students are in graduate and professional studies programs at the main campus and at 15 off-site locations. *www.cabrini.edu*

Carlow University (Pennsylvania), the first Catholic, women-centered, liberal arts university in Pennsylvania, currently enrolls 2,200 students, has a student-faculty ratio of 10-1, and offers small classes and individual instruction. The student population is culturally diverse and contains traditional and nontraditional students, and more than half are first generation. *www.carlow.edu*

"ill-structured" problem is the hallmark of the performance task.

While certainly not the only means of assessing student learning, the CLA provides an assessment instrument that has considerable intuitive plausibility. Critical thinking in terms of analyzing arguments or constructing them in general or in the face of an ill-structured problem—and writing well about them—are widely held aims for undergraduates. As John Reynders, president of **Morningside College** puts it, "the CLA has captured the interest of the faculty. This has led to discussions on how better to deliver two of our student learning outcomes, writing and critical thinking." Moreover, unlike most tests of student learning that use multiple choice, true-false, or short-answer questions, the CLA uses written, student-constructed responses to open-ended assignments. In contrast to subject domain instruments that test students' knowledge of particular disciplinary content, the CLA poses problems that students must address by constructing their own arguments for or against a particular position in general or, in the performance task, evaluating evidence, synthesizing information, and drawing conclusions about a real-world problem. Research scientist Marc Chun of the CAE said, "Our goal has been to support schools in aligning the teaching, learning, and assessment of critical thinking and other higher order thinking skills. And what has been really exciting is to see how quickly this happened at some institutions."

The scores on the various elements—for making and critiquing of arguments, the performance task, and the quality of writing—are assigned based on scoring rubrics or criteria that provide a standardized basis for measuring test results. These scores may then be analyzed in two ways. First, the scores on these various parts of the test and the score for the quality of writing can be analyzed in terms of expected performance based on students' entering scores as first-year students on other standardized tests (SAT or ACT). This adjusted score shows how students performed relative to their ability—at, above, or below expected—for samples of first-year and senior students.

Second, the test results produce a second kind of score, an institutional "value-added" score. The CLA is administered to cross-sectional samples of students in their first and senior years. Considering the scores of seniors and first-year students together and using student SAT (or ACT) scores as a control, the CLA reports whether

Charleston Southern University (South Carolina), founded in 1964, is one of South Carolina's largest accredited, independent universities, enrolling approximately 3,200 students. Affiliated with the South Carolina Baptist Convention, the university's vision is to be nationally recognized for integrating faith in learning, leading, and serving. *www.csuniv.edu*

students, when measured as a group, perform at, above, or below expected levels. This gives an indication of whether the institution performed at/above/below expected performance and the "value-added" to students' skills between the first and fourth year. The value-added score indicates how the aggregated first-year to senior gains on these higher order skills compare with other institutions.

Thus, the CLA provides one of the first "value-added" measures that compares what students can do when they start college with what they can do when they finish (controlling for initial ability) and thus arguably demonstrates institutional contributions to student learning. It provides a reliable institutional value-added score that can be tracked over time and benchmarked against similar institutions. By making the institution rather than an individual student its primary unit of analysis, the CLA keeps the focus on how the institution as a whole contributes to student cognitive development.

It is important to note that the CLA is intended as one source of evidence in assessment of student learning, not as the sole measure. CLA results can and should be combined with other institutional data to determine factors that promote student learning and growth. Cynthia Zane, president of **Hilbert College**, notes, "The CLA is a unique instrument and, as such, can be an important piece, albeit not the only piece, of an effective assessment plan." For example, an institution might compare scores on the CLA, an outcomes measure, with reported experiences on the National Survey of Student Engagement, a process measure. As noted previously, since the summer 2008 meeting of the CIC/CLA Consortium, participating colleges and universities have been expected to triangulate data from several sources in assessing student outcomes.

This kind of triangulation is extremely important. It is simply good practice to gather data from several sources, using different methods, to obtain a valid picture of what is going on. Moreover, as will be discussed in more detail later, often faculty members and administrators wondered how CLA results could be translated into proposals for change or strengthening of existing practices. This is especially true for faculty members who may see little or no connection between their work in a single class or even a major and the larger pattern of CLA results. It is therefore important that CLA scores be combined with other measures to round out the picture of what is happening across the campus with regard to student learning. The good news in the experience of the Consortium is that all institutions, to a greater or lesser degree, have sought to do some kind of triangulation and are likely to do so in the future. The CLA has served as the anchor in the assessment portfolio of these institutions. ■

III. THE CLA IN CONTEXT: ASSESSMENT BEYOND GRADES

"Building a culture of assessment takes time and is most effective when grassroots efforts combine with administrative decision and support."

—Frederik Ohles, President, Nebraska Wesleyan University

As important as putting the CLA in the context of other measures of student learning is, it is also important to see the CLA in the context of the everyday practices of institutions of higher education. Despite several decades of discussion concerning the assessment of student learning, conducting systematic assessment—beyond the traditional grading of pieces of student work and overall course performance by faculty members—does not come naturally to colleges and universities. It is still common for faculty members to say that they are already doing assessment by grading. How well a student has performed is traditionally assessed through the grade for a course and the compilation of grades and an average on a transcript. It is largely assumed that in taking the courses that fulfill general education requirements and completing a major a student is making gains in knowledge, skills, and abilities, thereby achieving (to a greater or lesser degree) the outcomes sought by the institution. Therefore, demands for more or other assessments of student learning beyond grades is often not an idea that is seen by members of the faculty as necessary.

College of Saint Benedict (Minnesota) for women and **Saint John's University** (Minnesota) for men are liberal arts colleges ranked as two of the top three Catholic colleges in the nation. They share one academic program, and students attend classes together on both campuses. The combined enrollment of more than 3,800 students makes CSB and SJU one of the largest of the nation's liberal arts colleges. *www.csbsju.edu*

Two other features of the typical institutional context of colleges or universities are also relevant to the way in which assessment, through the CLA or any other measure, might be received. First, many faculty members think of their teaching role in the context of a discipline. They teach what they are expert in—biology, history, economics, literature, etc. They are not trying to teach students directly to "think critically," but rather are trying to teach students to think critically about a given subject matter. The extent that learning rigorous analytic skills in a field can be applied to all learning is the goal of a liberal arts education. But too often the emphasis falls on subject matter to the exclusion of transferable critical thinking skills. Moreover, even when faculty members are sympathetic to the kind of measurement introduced by the CLA, they also legitimately may wonder what its results imply for their individual teaching and the work of their departments.

Second, it is important to keep in mind that colleges and universities work through a system of shared governance. A president or dean typically does not and cannot dictate how individual departments and faculty members will participate in or respond to assessment

College of St. Scholastica (Minnesota) is a Catholic Benedictine institution founded in 1912 that enrolls more than 3,300 students. The college awards bachelor's and master's degrees, and two doctoral degrees. *www.css.edu*

Dominican University (Illinois), founded in 1901, is a comprehensive, coeducational Catholic institution offering bachelor's degrees through the Rosary College of Arts and Sciences and master's degrees through the Graduate School of Library and Information Science, the Brennan School of Business, the School of Education, and the Graduate School of Social Work. The university also offers a doctoral degree in library and information science. *www.dom.edu*

initiatives or results. In assessment, as in many aspects of college and university policy and practice, consultation and consensus building are the rule. The presumption that governs questions of individual faculty members' or departments' efforts in teaching is the classic principle of "*Lehrfreiheit*," or "freedom to teach"—the autonomy of faculty members and their departments in deciding what to teach (and how). This suggests that ultimately if the CLA or any assessment regime is to have the desired effect—the consideration of evidence and action for improvement based on it—faculty involvement in the discussion of the regime is necessary and desirable. The requirement of faculty participation in the teams on CIC/CLA Consortium member campuses recognized the importance of faculty involvement in the process.

These features of colleges and universities and the institutional context into which the CLA has been introduced complicate what is always the potentially difficult challenge of analyzing data, interpreting results, and deciding what to do in response. Conducting assessment and gathering data, in any endeavor and especially in higher education, rarely lead obviously and directly to action. Data need to be interpreted; conversations need to take place; and decisions need to be made about what, if anything, can or should be done in response to the findings. The arrival of some data or a report inevitably leads to the question, "Now what?"

In the case of the CLA, these "Now what?" conversations between and among faculty members and administrators naturally began with the data. The questions of whether the measure or the results are valid or reliable were often raised immediately. Even before questions such as these were raised at the institutions in the Consortium, it was typically necessary to discuss what the CLA is and what it purports to show. Further questions often arose about the student sampling methodology and how the data were gathered, a particular issue with the CLA. Finally, it was often the case that a discussion of the instrument, the data, or the data-gathering process would quickly expand to a more general discussion about assessment, its purpose and validity, and how it might best be done.

On any campus a conversation about assessment results evolves into the question of what, if anything, needs to be done in some shorter or longer term. What do the data tell us and how should we respond? Even assuming the shared desire to respond to results, it might be unclear what an appropriate response might be. Positive or negative results

might, respectively, be seen as confirming institutional practices or signaling the need for some immediate action. Alternatively, some specific response might seem apparent to administrators and faculty members. Moreover, the intersecting paths of conversation and action are hardly predictable. Institutions may start taking one direction in conversation or action and end up discussing or doing something entirely different.

The reports of the CIC/CLA Consortium institutions illustrate a wide range of responses to the question, "Now what?" In almost every case the CLA had an impact on these colleges and universities, although these impacts varied in substantial ways. What does emerge overall is the seriousness of the attempts to understand what students were achieving at these institutions and to wrestle with the questions raised by the CLA.

Later sections of this report describe some of the ways in which the institutions reacted to the CLA results, with examples of each. At the same time, however, even where there were demonstrable successes, in many cases the administration and use of the CLA faced significant challenges. These included practical problems in administering the test, political problems in persuading faculty members to become involved in the initiative directly or indirectly, and persistent questions about the use and usefulness of the CLA. ■

Drake University's (Iowa) mission is to provide an exceptional learning environment that prepares students for meaningful personal lives, professional accomplishments, and responsible global citizenship. The Drake experience is distinguished by collaborative learning among students, faculty, and staff and by the integration of the liberal arts and sciences with professional preparation. *www.drake.edu*

IV. CHALLENGES: THE LOGISTICS, POLITICS, AND PUZZLES OF THE CLA

"Institutions need to find a way to embed assessment measures like the CLA into capstone courses for seniors. When students can connect these metrics to performance in the majors they tend to be more motivated to give their best effort. This allows for a more accurate snapshot of institutional and program effectiveness."

—Michael Bassis, President, Westminster College (Utah)

Anyone familiar with the process of reform in colleges and universities knows that change is often slow, uneven, and occasionally even futile. Introducing the CLA to the CIC/CLA Consortium institutions has been no different. What follows is a description of some of the challenges and obstacles these institutions faced and how some dealt with them. These examples are illustrative of what many CIC/CLA Consortium institutions encountered, and almost all reported some mix of success and challenge. For the most part, experience in administering the instrument and continuing conversations helped institutions meet the challenges and overcome the obstacles.

Perhaps the most significant challenges confronted by the CIC/CLA Consortium institutions were getting students to take the test and to take it seriously. The cross-sectional method for administering the CLA requires that random samples of 100 first-year and 100 senior students take the test in order to produce some measure of "value-added" on the components and overall results for gains in critical thinking. This means that students must be recruited to take the test and their performance needs to reflect their sincere efforts.

Recruiting an adequate sample produced a set of significant challenges for many campuses. There were basic logistical issues in finding times and available spaces and computers for students to take the test—claims on time, space, and coordination that can be difficult on a small campus. The **College of Saint Benedict** and **Saint John's University** reported that administering the CLA was a challenge due to "student schedules, extracurricular activities, and availability of testing labs on campus." Similarly, **Drake University** reported logistical challenges in finding computer labs that were not already booked for classes, as well as "difficulties in recruiting enough students to ensure an adequate sample size that is likely to garner representative results." In these and in other cases, careful attention to details and embedding the test into other formally scheduled classes or activities (as described later) helped resolve these problems.

Experience showed that occasionally even a slight adjustment in test administration can produce changed (and more, or less, valid and understandable) results. At **Jamestown College**, it was relatively easy to recruit seniors to take the test on an annual "assessment day" in the spring. However, the first year the CLA was administered, students in some of the larger majors (such as nursing) could not take the test due to other commitments. The results of this administration were inconsistent with other assessment data—and in the "wrong" direction, seeming to show less positive results for students. The second year, Jamestown "sampled seniors by major so we would have a better cross-section of students.... Our results were significantly better and more consistent with what should be expected between first-year and senior students."

Franklin Pierce University (New Hampshire) prepares its students to become active, engaged citizens and leaders of conscience. Whether at the undergraduate, graduate, or professional level, its academic programs are grounded in a liberal arts tradition and are unified by the theme of the individual and community. The university enrolls 1,500 undergraduates and 1,500 graduate students. *www.franklinpierce.edu*

If logistical problems regarding scheduling, computer and room availability, and sampling are worked out, there is then the challenge of getting students to show up to take the test. There frequently needs to be some incentive to encourage students to report to the test site if, as was mostly the case, participation is voluntary. On the other hand, many of the Consortium institutions embedded the test in existing settings, making the test in some cases mandatory for students. For example, **Westminster College** (Missouri), administered the test "to all beginning freshmen during their first week on campus in the fall." The CLA is administered to seniors "as part of the spring Assessment Day that is scheduled each year in March." Other institutions embedded the CLA into existing courses. **Bethel University** (Minnesota) administered the test in some of its freshman-level courses and in senior-level general education courses. Since many CIC/CLA Consortium institutions have required first-year seminars and capstone courses, they have natural settings in which to administer the test. Perhaps the most emphatic form of requiring students to take the test comes from the **University of Charleston** (West Virginia): "It became a graduation requirement that students participate in the University's assessment activities." This requirement was supplemented by embedding testing into course and orientation settings, and having the "institution's commitment to assessment…reflected on students' program evaluation or degree audits."

Where requiring the test is not, for whatever reason, possible or desirable, institutions have used incentives or persuasion or both. Initially, College of Saint Benedict and Saint John's University "randomly selected student names and invited them to take the CLA. The problem has been that too few students who were assigned to take the test actually came and took the test." The institutions responded to this problem and increased participation by a mix of incentives and persuasion. They gave a small stipend (a book store certificate) to students. This incentive was supplemented by the creation of a group of six student workers to recruit test takers and having faculty members promote the test in courses, particularly in the first year. The numbers of participants rose dramatically as a result of these efforts. Giving specific compensation as an incentive is a tactic used by a number of colleges, including offering lottery tickets for a computer or other prize(s). The exchange of pizza or other popular food for participation was used by several institutions. One interesting initiative at the **University of Evansville** (Indiana) was to give the

Hastings College (Nebraska), founded in 1882, is a private, four-year liberal arts institution affiliated with the Presbyterian Church (USA). A total of 64 majors in 32 areas of study and 12 pre-professional programs are offered to more than 1,190 students. *www.hastings.edu*

Hilbert College (New York) is a private four-year college founded in 1957 in the Franciscan tradition. With nearly 1,100 students, Hilbert offers career-focused majors, including one of the top criminal justice programs in the region, and more than 50 minors and concentrations. *www.hilbert.edu*

top three scorers on the CLA, administered in the required first-year seminar, vouchers to spend at the campus store.

Finally, assuming successful logistics and the participation of students in the CLA, if the results are to be meaningful it is desirable that students put forth sincere effort in taking the test. Since there is no grade on the transcript or other incentive—unlike the SAT or GRE, the CLA is a "low stakes" test—students may not be motivated to take the CLA seriously. This was particularly true of seniors, as **Southwestern University** (Texas) noted in an otherwise very positive report on working with the CLA, "The main difficulty…is recruiting seniors to take the instrument and, once recruited, to take the assessment seriously. We have tried various methods for increasing participation such as financial incentives, but we continue to struggle to get seniors to sign up and participate." While institutions made it clear that the test was not a measurement of the performance of individual faculty members or students, students appeared often to want the CLA to be a test that measured their individual progress over four years—some even wanted to be able to use the test results in their portfolio to prove how much they had learned.

Many colleges reported that they were not confident that students, especially seniors, were trying as hard as they could to do well. At **Marian University** (Wisconsin) initial difficulties in recruiting and motivating seniors reduced the sample size and actually produced results that showed no, or even negative, value-added. Faculty members and administrators made "a more concerted effort…to communicate with the seniors regarding the importance of their participation with the instrument. Advisors have also helped in recruiting seniors to take the test." Similarly, at **Barton College** (North Carolina) the initial assumption that "all we had to do was describe the CLA (giving samples of the writing prompts) to the faculty members and the chairs and deans, in order to get the students to take the assessment seriously" quickly gave way to "the chief academic officer visiting every section of the first-year seminar" with "a direct appeal to the students to take the CLA seriously, explaining why it was important to the college and to them. From then on, the level of engagement with the process improved enormously." Michael Bassis, president of **Westminster College** (Utah), suggests that institutions "find a way to embed assessment measures like the CLA into capstone courses for seniors. When students can connect these metrics to performance in the majors they tend to be more motivated to give their best effort.

Illinois College is a private, Phi Beta Kappa, liberal arts college. With an enrollment of approximately 1,000 students, Illinois College offers a residential liberal arts curriculum of more than 45 majors in the humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences. A rich array of experiential learning opportunities including study abroad, student-faculty research, internships, community service projects, and Division III athletics complement the academic program. *www.ic.edu*

Indiana Wesleyan University is an evangelical Christian comprehensive university founded in 1920 and committed to liberal arts and professional education. Almost 3,300 students are enrolled in traditional on-campus programs and about 12,500 adult learners attend classes at education centers in Indiana, Kentucky, and Ohio and online. *www.indwes.edu*

This allows for a more accurate snapshot of institutional and program effectiveness."

Students were not the only ones who needed to be persuaded to become involved in the CLA initiative. Faculty members, not surprisingly, raised questions about the validity of the CLA and standardized assessment more generally. For example, at Drake University, faculty members doubted "the validity of measuring something as fluid as critical thinking skills via a standardized instrument." These doubts were not lessened by the occasional instances of wide swings in year-to-year scores. For example, at **Texas Lutheran University** the "large year-to-year variation in value-added scores," from being above the 80th percentile to below the 40th, "make it difficult for many at TLU to place high confidence in CLA scores." At the same time these swings may easily be a function of issues of administration, sampling, and motivation.

Although faculty "buy in" concerning the CLA continues to be a challenge on some campuses, ongoing experience with the CLA has in most cases led to increasing acceptance and even enthusiasm about its use as part of an institution's assessment program. Several institutions reported that faculty members' support grew the more they talked about the CLA and as some became involved in its administration. For example, at Westminster College (Missouri), "proctors are chosen from the broader faculty. As a result, there is a sense that faculty members generally appreciate the assessment activity better after looking over the shoulders of students as they complete the CLA each term." Leaders at **Allegheny College** (Pennsylvania) report, "It is also fair to say that our CLA testing has helped cultivate more of a culture of assessment at the college.… We expect the CLA to be a very useful barometer by which to read the success of our curricular change."

Even as most institutions have dealt successfully with difficulties of administering and using the CLA, it is not surprising that at a very few institutions the combination of difficulties administering the test, working with students and faculty members, and interpreting results led to consideration of whether to continue use of the CLA. This sentiment was expressed at **Illinois College**: "Given the cost of the CLA, administrators are showing reluctance to continue its use if results cannot be explained clearly and reliably for a variety of audiences." Finally, **Juniata College** (Pennsylvania) has decided to drop the CLA altogether as a result of "difficulties in recruiting students and finding ways to utilize the results in a meaningful way," issues of "buy-in from faculty and staff," and a lack of correlation between CLA and other assessment results.

No assessment instrument is perfect, and its limitations are compounded by the kinds of logistical and political challenges described above. Indeed, it would be unusual if the introduction of a new assessment instrument went smoothly, was unquestioned, and the data immediately could be translated into clear, positive actions. The responses to challenges arising in the administration and use of the CLA indicate that ongoing conversation and more experience are the best means for meeting these challenges. One particularly good vehicle for having and broadening these conversations and sharing experiences, discussed in Section IX, has been the CIC/CLA Consortium's annual meetings and activities. Despite the challenges and obstacles for almost all of the Consortium institutions, the introduction of the CLA led to significant direct and indirect impacts and positive institutional change. ■

V. A SENSE OF URGENCY: CHANGING THE TEACHING OF WRITING AND CRITICAL THINKING

"The CLA has led to development of a faculty culture of understanding that their responsibilities go beyond 'coverage of disciplinary knowledge' to include the essential development of critical thinking and communication.... Even more telling is that faculty conversations surrounding curricular and outcome measures are utilizing CLA vocabulary and concepts."

—Norval Kneten, President, Barton College

For a number of colleges and universities in the CIC/CLA Consortium, the administration and results of the CLA suggested the desirability of taking immediate action. The answer to "Now what?" was to do something to change and improve a specific part of the curriculum. Not surprisingly, because the scores on the CLA specifically "grade" writing and critical thinking, these were the areas that many Consortium institutions sought to address. Changes in programs and ways of teaching writing, a sharper focus on what critical thinking meant, and how it could be better promoted in courses and programs were often immediate responses to CLA results.

At **Ursuline College** (Ohio) disappointing CLA results reinforced an existing "general dissatisfaction with student writing." This in turn led to the creation and distribution of a "glossary of common terms that includes 'make an argument,' 'critique an argument,' distinguishing between 'writing on demand,' and formative and summative writing." What is especially noteworthy about the idea of a glossary is that it creates the potential for more common understandings among faculty members across departments and programs. The development of the glossary was part of a more general reorganization of the writing center and its program on campus. More support for teaching writing was put into place, specifically the creation of a liaison from the English department to assist in "faculty development workshops providing individual support to instructors for developing and assessing writing assignments." Faculty members now feel they have a much better understanding of teaching and assessing writing.

Barton College (North Carolina) followed a similar path and developed its own campus version of the CLA, which led to some dramatic changes. "After reading samples of the actual writing of Barton seniors…and after extensive discussions involving faculty members, staff, and trustees, the whole community decided that improving student writing should be the major curricular focus." The faculty members at Barton created a standard rubric for evaluating writing and the development of electronic student portfolios that allow a campus-wide assessment of writing. The results have been similar to those of Ursuline's. "Using the standard rubric rating scale and electronic portfolios allows us to analyze and use the large amount of data effectively for program assessment and planning." These actions in response to the CLA have also had the effect of building broader community understandings, even beyond the faculty. "[W]e have found that talking about the CLA as part of our institutional focus on developing communication and critical thinking skills resonates well with prospective students and parents, board members, and prospective donors."

Jamestown College (North Dakota), established in 1883, is a private, liberal arts college granting bachelor of arts, bachelor of science, and bachelor of science in nursing degrees as well as master's degrees in education. Jamestown College offers more than 40 areas of study. It features a four-year graduation guarantee and a guaranteed internship. *www.jc.edu*

In a number of cases, the CLA results led to more targeted curricular changes related to writing. **Seton Hill University** (Pennsylvania) reported that because CLA results suggested that "students may be struggling with writing skills related to critical thinking, the university began an intensive writing program that provides an additional intensive writing class within each major." This involved a substantial redirection of curricular focus and resources. These changes have led to some improvement, in no small measure because of greater discussion and attention to writing in relationship to the CLA results. A similar change occurred at **Stonehill College** (Massachusetts), where the "CLA has been particularly helpful in providing data that led to proposed changes in the general education curriculum—particularly around the development of writing intensive courses, both in the first year and within each major." These changes were not only a response to CLA results but also to data from the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) that suggested a need to "increase academic challenge and rigor," and a stronger emphasis on writing was seen as a means to accomplish this goal.

An even more focused change occurred at **William Woods University** (Missouri). Although faculty members were skeptical of the CLA as a measure of critical thinking ("How can a test measure critical thinking and analytic reasoning?"), several members of the English faculty "recognized the implications of the test" for writing and "realized they would need to change the freshman composition curriculum to meet the writing standards of the CLA." They also went further and "surveyed all faculty on the types of writing assignments they required." The result was a shift in composition courses to making and critiquing an argument in writing assignments and broader faculty development workshops aimed at creating "similar expectations for the quality of writing." Although the efforts have yet to result in dramatic improvement in CLA scores, "faculty stated they believed writing improved between 2007 and 2010."

Finally, with respect to writing, occasionally an institution would respond directly to the CLA results but conceptualize the issue in a distinctive way. The programmatic focus at **Ursinus College** (Pennsylvania) in the teaching of writing, for example, shifted after looking at first-year results. Faculty members concluded that many of the apparent writing deficiencies were accompanied, and perhaps caused by, deficiencies in reading. In its first-year seminar faculty members are now "in the process of initiating a review of how we can improve reading skill" in seminars for first-year students. This was also accompanied by a broader evaluation of writing in capstone courses, again in response to CLA results, "as part of our assessment approach to address problems with 'quick fixes' that lead to larger changes. CLA has helped us address issues without waiting for lengthy reports."

Three of the four scores on the CLA are related to critical thinking, so it is no surprise that a number of colleges used the results to reexamine and change their approach to teaching thinking skills. Institutions made both curricular and pedagogical changes directed at improving critical thinking (and CLA scores). For example, disappointing CLA scores were the motivation for **Cabrini College** (Pennsylvania) to "increase faculty development around critical thinking" and create an entirely new general education curriculum that "centers around aspects of critical thinking in an engaged world." The new curriculum was piloted in 2008–2009 and implemented the

John Carroll University (Ohio) is a liberal arts university grounded in the Jesuit, Catholic tradition. The university has some 3,100 undergraduates and 700 graduate students. Originally founded as St. Ignatius College in 1886, the university was renamed in 1923 to honor America's first Catholic bishop, John Carroll of Maryland. *www.jcu.edu*

following year. The understanding is that "the CLA is an essential piece in the assessment of the new curriculum," and will indicate how much effect these curricular changes might be having.

Similarly, **Nebraska Wesleyan University** has made critical thinking its first priority in a several-year process of strategic planning and curricular reform. Led by a CIC/CLA workgroup composed of individuals in the areas targeted by the institution's Consortium goals, a survey of faculty definitions of critical thinking resulted in faculty-wide workshops on the teaching of critical thinking. These discussions in turn became a key part of a three-year curricular initiative, "Success for Every Student," that will include the embedding of CLA testing in first-year and senior seminars. The university will then analyze data from the CLA and other sources to estimate the effects of its curricular changes.

For other CIC/CLA Consortium institutions the CLA results led to a focus on pedagogy, sometimes addressing a more specific aspect of the CLA assessment. For example, while **Hilbert College** (New York) faculty members were pleased with CLA results, they initiated discussions at various levels about mission and pedagogy. Specifically, faculty members "saw that students were relatively weaker in developing skills to create their own arguments. They viewed the 'make-an-argument' writing task from the CLA…as an important indication of creative as well as critical thinking." The faculty responded by reexamining "course syllabi to see how current assignments may relate to these skills and where assignments might be revised or added to bolster argument construction." The broader effect of these efforts has been greater understanding of how assessment results can both reinforce the positive work faculty do as well as point to areas that can be improved.

At **Loyola University New Orleans** (Louisiana), on the other hand, students "did well when making an argument but performed less well when asked to critique an argument that was presented in the test. This result got the attention of the faculty as an indicator of student weakness that needed attention." At the time of initiating the CLA, Loyola had reformed its core curriculum, including the implementation of first-year seminars as part of a broader first-year experience initiative. The changes provided a good location for attention to critical thinking in terms of critiquing an argument, and it produced results: "Since

Juniata College (Pennsylvania) is an independent, coeducational college of liberal arts and sciences founded in 1876 by members of the Church of the Brethren to prepare individuals "for the useful occupations of life." The college enrolls 1,550 students, each of whom is assigned two faculty advisers. The average student-faculty ratio is 13:1. Rather than complete a traditional major, each Juniata student designs a Program of Emphasis tailored to the student's own goals and often crossing departmental lines. *www.juniata.edu*

2008 our students' scores on this portion of the CLA have improved."

The **University of Findlay**'s CLA results for 2007 through 2009, which indicated that "UF students struggled in all areas," created a "sense of urgency in general education assessment." The university focused on inserting problem-based learning into courses:

"Raising awareness among students, faculty, and staff of the CLA and its foci, working to triangulate internal data with external measurements such as CLA and NSSE, and providing extensive faculty development including the formation of a Teaching Academy and a mentoring program for junior faculty to promote critical thinking and workshops provided opportunities to 'make over' courses with a focus on improving critical thinking." As with Loyola, student achievement at University of Findlay improved: "Test results from 2010 indicated an upward trend in student performance."

A direct response to CLA scores in critical thinking need not depend on a reaction to disappointing findings. At **Aurora University** (Illinois), very positive findings concerning "value-added" on the CLA inspired efforts to explain and reinforce these results. A two-day faculty workshop in critical thinking led faculty members to explore more deeply the kinds of classroom practices that could lead to such changes. This was followed by a closer comparison of courses in which "instruction characterized by the kinds of ill-structured problem-solving on the CLA were assessed alongside more traditional teaching methods," producing "an openness to reconsider pedagogical practices and opportunities."

Aurora's inquiry into ill-structured problem-solving points to one of the most common impacts of the CLA—specifically, the introduction of problem-based learning and the performance task as elements in the teaching of critical thinking. These innovations seemed to resonate well with faculty members who usually recognized that the performance task confronts students with the kind of problem-solving challenge that is basic to what almost all faculty members do in their own work. Even in disciplines that are more structured in their methodology and use of evidence, such as mathematics and the sciences, there are typically research questions and problems in which the evidence is fragmentary and perhaps inconsistent and for which there is a need for interpretation and critical analysis. Faculty members likely to be suspicious or skeptical of standardized testing, including the CLA, often are more receptive to the idea of assessing students' skills and development through performance tasks. This has led many institutions to use performance tasks ("CLA in the Classroom") and to participate in CAE's "Performance Task Academy," which will be described in the next section. ■

LaGrange College (Georgia) is a four-year liberal arts and sciences college affiliated with the United Methodist Church. The college, an award winner in sustainability, is the oldest private institution of higher learning in Georgia and has an enrollment of more than 1,000 students. *www.lagrange.edu*

VI. TEACHING IN A NEW WAY: CLA IN THE CLASSROOM

"We have become enamored with the performance tasks as a pedagogical strategy.... Even those faculty members who have not adopted the use of the performance task have been inspired to try out new teaching strategies, particularly those geared toward critical thinking."

—George Forsythe, President, Westminster College (Missouri)

One of the attractions of the CLA instrument is that its performance task mirrors the activity of critical thinking in real-life situations. Students are presented with an assignment and some supporting material that does not provide a definitive answer to the problem. In writing a response the student needs to show an appreciation of competing claims and evidence in writing a persuasive response to the prompt. Performance tasks combine the need for making and breaking arguments, good writing, and, of course, critical thinking. At the same time, performance tasks also mimic what academics typically do in their research by working with ill-structured problems in the context of a discipline. Despite the common distinction made by colleges and universities between their campuses and the "real world," critical thinking in and beyond the academy shares significant features with respect to ill-structured problems.

Although faculty members and others can easily recognize the similarity between the CLA and their own work, they often also wonder how precisely the CLA performance task might have any direct bearing on what they teach. A biologist or historian, for example, might see the challenge in the CLA results at the institutional level but be unsure of how he or she should respond at the classroom level. As the report from Morningside College stated, "Since CLA is a macro indication…the most significant challenge has been the adoption of CLA pedagogy into the classroom." Similarly, Texas Lutheran University reported "uncertainty regarding where and how corrective action should be focused…. How do we actually use the data to drive effective change?" With any data or evidence there is always a question of what it might suggest for change. In the case of the CLA, making this linkage is more difficult because, first, the results are an institutional rather than individual measure and, second, because the results stand apart from any particular courses, activities, or discipline-specific knowledge.

Loyola University New Orleans (Louisiana), a Jesuit and Catholic institution of higher education, is grounded in the liberal arts and sciences, while also offering opportunities for professional studies in undergraduate and selected graduate programs. Through teaching, research, creative activities, and service, the university strives to educate the whole student and to benefit the larger community. *www.loyno.edu*

Lynchburg College (Virginia), founded in 1903, is a private, liberal arts college with an enrollment of 2,600 students. The college offers bachelor's and master's degrees, as well as doctorates in physical therapy and leadership studies. It is one of 40 colleges featured in Loren Pope's *Colleges that Change Lives*. The college also operates the 450-acre Claytor Nature Study Center, which includes a dark-sky observatory. The student-faculty ratio is 12-1, and students regularly do hands-on research with their professors. *www.lynchburg.edu*

Some colleges and universities, as noted in the previous section, have responded to this problem with a specific focus on teaching critical thinking. However, others have seen the idea of a performance task itself as a way of revising their work to teach critical thinking, namely through the "CLA in the Classroom" initiative. This program seeks to apply critical features of the CLA—ill-structured problem-based performance tasks—to course development and pedagogical practices in the classroom.

Early in the development of the CLA, thanks in part to the urging of CIC/CLA Consortium members, the CAE realized that institutions might have some difficulties linking CLA results to program and pedagogy. (For a more detailed description of the development of the CLA in the Classroom program, see CIC's *Evidence of Learning: Applying the Collegiate Learning Assessment to Improve Teaching and Learning.*) One response to this issue is to introduce performance tasks, and therefore assessment of writing and critical thinking, into existing courses in a range of fields. CLA in the Classroom complements institution-wide assessment by focusing on CLA-style assessment of course-level work. In order to do this the CAE created the Performance Task Academy, "a series of workshops open to faculty/instructors/teachers, teaching and learning center staff, as well as others interested in pedagogy and curriculum. The central activity of the Academy is the construction of discipline and course-based performance tasks." After several years of sponsoring these Academies there is now a Performance Task Library of tasks constructed by faculty members. (For examples of how faculty members from Consortium institutions have used performance tasks in their classroom teaching, see "Taking Teaching to (Performance) Task: Linking Pedagogical and Assessment Practices," in the March/April 2010 issue of *Change*.)

For many faculty members, CLA in the Classroom and the Performance Task Academy provide what is commonly referred to as "authentic assessment" that more directly measures what is being taught and sought. By introducing CLA in the Classroom the CAE notes, "The traditional modes of assessment of knowledge are seen as inadequate because they fail to assess students' capability in the authentic activities of their discipline. The authentic assessment movement would instead reflect the complex performances that are central to a field of study (for example, writing a position paper on an environmental issue, investigating a mathematical concept.)" That is, while the CLA may give valuable information at the institutional level, it does not provide the more specific, "authentic" assessment that many faculty members see as more directly connected to their work.

Many colleges in the CIC/CLA Consortium have been involved in the CLA in the Classroom and Performance Task Academies and have modified courses and pedagogy to include performance tasks and testing. For example, at **Charleston Southern University** (South Carolina), 21 faculty members participated in an on-campus Performance Task Academy that "resulted in some faculty beginning to push CLA measures into various majors, most commonly done by adding a Performance Task to class work." The result was a dramatic shift in pedagogical orientation. "For these faculty members, there is now a greater understanding of the connection between assessment and pedagogy."

Perhaps the most dramatic example of a shift in pedagogical focus created by CLA in the Classroom is the

Marian University (Wisconsin) is a Catholic university dedicated to excellent teaching and learning in the Franciscan and liberal arts traditions. The educational experience is framed within the context of Franciscan values of dignity of the individual, peace and justice, reconciliation, and responsible stewardship. Marian has a total enrollment of 2,841 students, 71 percent of whom are women. *www.marian.edu*

Morningside College (Iowa), founded in 1894, is a private, four-year, co-educational institution with a total enrollment of approximately 2,000 students. Morningside's undergraduates represent 25 states and 12 countries. The college offers five undergraduate degrees: Bachelor of Arts, Bachelor of Science, Bachelor of Science in Nursing, Bachelor of Music, and Bachelor of Music Education. At the graduate level, Morningside confers a Master of Arts in Teaching degree. *www.morningside.edu*

experience of William Woods University. Faculty members were dubious about CLA testing and results, and only three (of 65) participated in an information session on the CLA. However, in a workshop on performance tasks, "nearly all faculty members (60 of 66) attended, and from that workshop, 14 faculty members created 18 performance tasks. Faculty members have asked for additional workshops so they can develop additional tasks." Following the workshop, CLA scores did improve, but faculty members nevertheless continued discussion of successes and failures with their performance tasks. "Faculty members understand that the improved 2010 score may or may not be the result of their work but they would like to think so. The next step for William Woods is to investigate methodically whether the improved score is a fluke or the result of learning."

A number of institutions in the Consortium developed performance tasks with less broad faculty involvement but no less interesting results. For example, at **Carlow University** (Pennsylvania), eight faculty members who attended Academies "brought back to campus great energy about the performance task concept" with the following results:

"Over the 2009–2010 academic year and fall 2010, these faculty members have introduced performance tasks in Quantitative Reasoning and College Research and Writing, both first-year core curriculum courses; in English 100 and College Reading, both developmental skills courses; and in an upper level course in Special Education.… Some of the performance tasks have taken the form of 'mini' assignments that could be done within a 50-minute class, while others were larger tasks that extended across a semester. These initiatives by Carlow faculty members demonstrate that there are many possibilities for adaptation and experimentation using performance tasks."

Similarly, performance tasks can be designed not only to produce "authentic" student work and develop critical thinking skills but also to promote greater engagement and broader communication skills. One particularly interesting performance task, "A Referendum on Cell Phone Use

While Driving," was developed for a psychology class at the **College of St. Scholastica** (Minnesota). Using a task library consisting of adequate and inadequate online, news media, and research documents, small student teams within the class each wrote a report explaining and defending a pro or con position on a proposed referendum to ban cell phone use while driving. These teams then had to put their reports together into a final report for a class debate. A similar use occurred at Marian University, involving a performance task in an honors course, Molecules of Emotion, which was taught in the fall of 2010. The task was then transformed into a debate team event during class. "The result has stimulated wider interest in and appreciation of performance tasks."

The wide adoption of CLA in the Classroom performance tasks is one of the significant, far-reaching outcomes of the CIC/CLA Consortium. Since the idea of an ill-structured problem is familiar to faculty members from all disciplines, the development of performance tasks is one way that the CLA can shift approaches to the teaching of critical thinking. It has the potential to bridge the gap between institution-level assessment and outcomes, the CLA as a general measure of critical thinking, and critical thinking in the context of teaching specific subject matter. It also promotes a pedagogical shift to a more student-centered emphasis on problem solving and "authentic assessment" of it. President George Forsythe of Westminster College (MO) reflects the sentiment of many in the Consortium, "We have become enamored with the performance tasks as a pedagogical strategy.… Even those faculty members who have not adopted the use of the performance task have been inspired to try out new teaching strategies, particularly those geared toward critical thinking." ■

VII. THE CATALYST: THE CLA'S INFLUENCE ON CHANGES IN PROGRAMS AND PEDAGOGY

"We aspire to a greater level of faculty awareness of the CLA as well as data that allow them to target their teaching and student learning strategies to improve student learning outcomes."

—Kenneth Garren, President, Lynchburg College

One of the words most frequently used in the CIC/CLA Consortium campus reports is "catalyst." The CLA results might not be immediately or directly connected to change in program or pedagogy, but the instrument has sparked consideration of what assessment should be and do on a campus, and which academic programs or pedagogies need to be revisited. Although there is no clear line between direct and indirect impacts of the CLA on Consortium institutions, many institutional leaders reported that the indirect effects of the CLA as "catalyst" were significant. These "catalytic" effects involved both programmatic and pedagogical effects as well as changes in institutional culture, which will be discussed in the next section.

Sometimes programmatic effects included the CLA's influence on assessment activities on campus. For example, **Lynchburg College** (Virginia) adopted the CLA because it had no institution-wide assessments of general education. General education outcomes were assessed through course-embedded evaluations and "each professor assessed in his or her own way." The CLA was adopted "with the intention of improving our institution-level assessment of student learning.… What we did not anticipate at the time was a complete revamping of our student learning assessment program. The CLA has served as a catalyst for our freshman/senior institution-wide assessment. In addition to the CLA we now assess freshmen and seniors on writing, speaking, reading, and information literacy." These new assessments are then triangulated with other assessments, including course-embedded assessments. Thus although the CLA did not directly change academic programs and pedagogy, it did have a direct impact on the assessment program.

A similar shift occurred at **Stephens College** (Missouri). The CLA was well received and "caused many instructors to reevaluate the critical thinking content of their courses." As the college continued its work with the CLA it also "initiated a comprehensive assessment planning effort for all disciplinary programs and the core liberal arts curriculum. The plans include use of a consistent framework for assessment across programs, finalizing learning and outcomes measures, and designing course-embedded teaching strategies and assessments to ensure

Nebraska Wesleyan University, founded in 1887, is a liberal arts institution with small class sizes and a broad-based curriculum of 52 majors and three master's level programs. Nebraska Wesleyan enrolls approximately 1,600 undergraduates, 250 graduate students, and 250 adult learners. *www.nebrwesleyan.edu*

Notre Dame of Maryland University, founded by the School Sisters of Notre Dame, provides a liberal arts education in the Catholic tradition. Academics are organized into four schools: School of Education, School of Pharmacy, School of Arts and Sciences, and School of Nursing. Rich in tradition, Notre Dame provides students with opportunities in research, study abroad, and service to the global community. *www.ndm.edu*

that outcomes are achieved and learning is measured." The introduction of the CLA thus stimulated the development of a more wide-ranging and coherent assessment program. "In total, our experience with the CLA along with program assessment design has created a cadre of faculty and administrators with enhanced commitment to critical thinking pedagogy."

Another way that the CLA served as a catalyst for rethinking assessment among Consortium colleges was to encourage the triangulation of CLA results with other measures. For example, Texas Lutheran University administered the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) in conjunction with the CLA. The findings were instructive, first, because many of the "high-impact practices" measured by NSSE were correlated positively with student performance on aspects of the CLA. For example, a student who reported on NSSE that he was required to write more papers tended to score better in writing on the CLA. Second, because the CLA results were disappointing, the university's response was to focus on high-impact practices implied by the NSSE elements:

"Over a quarter of the faculty received money this past summer to dramatically increase the level of active learning and high-impact projects in their classes.… They linked classes, service and community-based learning, and required a capstone course.… While it would be disingenuous to state these changes were solely due to the CLA, the lower-than-desired CLA scores played an important role in driving these changes."

An interesting approach to triangulation arose at Carlow University in which *not* administering the CLA was a catalyst for reshaping assessment practices. It was felt that the case for curricular change had to be built first by using home-grown instruments including a local version of the performance task administered to juniors, measures of critical thinking in the disciplines, and local assessments of first-year and senior writing. "It was only at this point that an external tool, the CLA, could be introduced. Faculty now asked for an external, reliable measure that allowed us to see where we stood in relation to other institutions and to validate or question what we were seeing in our in-house assessment." Once the data from all these assessments were presented, the results were surprisingly similar. "Doubters about our internal measures could not also deny the CLA results; resistors to external measures could not also disabuse the results of the internal assessments." Setting the stage for the use of the CLA in conjunction with other measures had a profound effect on the evolution of program assessment at Carlow.

Besides these effects on assessment programs, the CLA was also a catalyst for changes in academic programs and pedagogy. Similar to Carlow, **Springfield College** (Massachusetts) already had "both a regular program review process and an Institutional Assessment Plan." The administration of the CLA and the subsequent participation of faculty members in the CLA in the Classroom Academy shifted the focus to "using actual student course work to assess their learning"—that is, to see student work as performances, even if not performance tasks. CLA in the Classroom "approaches to pedagogy and assessment are natural for our faculty members as most are heavily engaged in service learning and implement other forms of active and collaborative learning." Further discussion of pedagogy and assessment in these contexts suggested "exploring the use of the Association of American Colleges and Universities Valid Assessment of

Seton Hill University (Pennsylvania), founded in 1885 by the Sisters of Charity, is a co-educational, Catholic, liberal arts university that offers more than 30 undergraduate programs, eight graduate programs and six advanced certifications. The university's enrollment of 2,232 represents students from 33 states and 16 countries. *www.setonhill.edu*

Southwestern University (Texas), the first institution of higher learning in Texas, is a private, highly selective liberal arts institution with 1,300 students. The university features the Sarofim School of Fine Arts, living-learning communities, and the Paideia Program, in which sophomores participate in weekly small reading/discussion groups as a way of connecting coursework and out of class experiences. *www.southwestern.edu*

Learning in Undergraduate Education (VALUE) rubrics as part of our assessment of these important aspects of our general education." The CLA served as a catalyst to consideration of a different assessment instrument consistent with the pedagogy of performance.

A more specific instance of an indirect effect occurred at **Dominican University** (Illinois). Although the CLA has mainly been a spur to thought and discussion across the institution, "even apart from the results, the indirect impact has been significant…. The CIC/CLA experience pushed us toward integrative learning, and specifically, quantitative literacy." The importance of interpreting quantitative information in the CLA performance tasks has led to consideration of "some version of quantitative literacy across the curriculum. Our experience with the CLA has served as a catalyst for this educational advance." Working with the CLA also was a catalyst for a set of conversations about ways to incorporate integrative learning throughout the curriculum. Both at Dominican and Springfield, the CLA was suggestive of alternative pedagogies, assessment measures, and other issues that needed study and improvement.

Stories like these have been repeated throughout the CIC/CLA Consortium. The administration of the CLA prompts a reexamination of programs and practices that, although not always directly tied to the CLA instrument or its results, is nonetheless a significant change in an institution's approach to student learning. These changes can vary from the revamping of a broad, institution-wide assessment program, to shifts in programs and pedagogy. And often both occurred, as at Aurora University where "the intent, at first, was not to directly reform instruction but rather to inform development of a coherent, university-wide assessment system." It ended up, not surprisingly, doing both: exploring the pedagogy of teaching ill-structured problems as suggested by the CLA and anticipating a general education model in which the CLA becomes integral to the assessment plan. ■

VIII. CHANGING THE CONVERSATION FROM "I/MY" TO "WE/OUR"

"Already members of our community see assessment of student learning as a positive, productive—and essential—part of the learning process. This perspective stands in contrast to the viewpoint that assessment is an externally imposed mandate with little real meaning."

—Rebecca Sherrick, President, Aurora University

Academic departments and programs in colleges and universities have considerable independence. Faculty members often speak of *my* class or department and what *I* do as a professor, in a proprietary way. Similarly, observers often comment on how institutions of higher education have internal "silos" in terms of departments or disciplinary areas that do not coordinate their efforts or even know what others do. The loosely-coupled or fragmented nature of colleges and universities, even relatively smaller ones like many CIC members, makes creating or changing shared institutional goals and carrying out coordinated, collective action very difficult.

One of the most widespread and potentially positive effects of the CLA initiative on Consortium colleges and universities was to shift conversations on campus toward a more collective perspective. Specifically, in considering what the CLA results meant and what appropriate responses might be, the conversation almost automatically turned to what *we* were doing in *our* programs and with *our* students. Instead of assessment being some kind of burden required for accreditation, or a puzzling administrative fiat, assessment could be seen as important to what faculty members—indeed, all members of a college or university community—see as their primary aim: improving student learning.

These discussions were not always easy, they were and almost never are completely conclusive, and they are and will be continuing. Nevertheless, being presented with data from the CLA about student results almost always precipitated a discussion about what *we* were or were not achieving or doing or going to do, and how *our* students or programs might improve, and so on. The institutional focus of the CLA as a measure impelled the discussion to collective, institutional considerations.

Although one might be skeptical that this shift in rhetoric is significant—"Talk is cheap"—talk, as has already been shown, often led directly or indirectly to action. And almost all the institutions could point to the ways in which working with the CLA changed the focus of the campus conversation to issues of student learning and increased coordinated and collective action. The CLA has served as a catalyst for reframing the discussion of the issue of assessment. CIC's previous report on the earlier phase of the CIC/CLA Consortium, *Evidence of Learning*, describes initial efforts to establish a "culture of assessment" particularly at Barton College, Cabrini College, and the University of Charleston.

The conversation often began, not surprisingly, with a reaction to whether the news was seen as positive or negative. Perhaps the easiest discussion took place when the data were generally positive. An institution can both take comfort in the results—"we are doing something right"—and come to realize that assessment is not necessarily something to be feared and avoided. Many of the colleges in the Consortium were pleased to find that the CLA provided confirmation that they were in fact contributing to students' growth in critical thinking skills and that "value-added" could be documented. At the same

Springfield College (Massachusetts), founded in 1885, offers undergraduate and graduate degree programs in health sciences, human and social services, sport management and movement studies, education, business, and the arts and sciences. More than 5,000 traditional, nontraditional, and international students study at its main campus in and at its School of Human Services campuses across the country. *www.springfieldcollege.edu*

Stephens College (Missouri), founded in 1833, is a private college and the second-oldest women's college in the country. Stephens offers baccalaureate and master's degrees and an educational experience characterized by intellectual rigor, creative expression, and professional practice. Students are educated in the liberal arts and professionally prepared through internships, community service, and a variety of hands-on opportunities. *www.stephens.edu*

time, positive results still led to consideration of changes.

The report of **Notre Dame of Maryland University** put it succinctly:

"Some of the CLA results validate what we have already surmised anecdotally and also confirm what we have seen through other measures…as well as feedback from our graduates. Despite the successes we have achieved through this assessment initiative, we also face a series of challenges in using the CLA assessment tool.… The conversations should revolve around the implications of CLA results as well as how to use the CLA to improve teaching and learning."

Like Notre Dame of Maryland University, other colleges that reported this kind of reassurance almost never saw this as an invitation to rest on their laurels. For example, Hilbert College reported, "While we have been very pleased by the positive value-added results we received, CLA results also initiated discussions at various levels regarding its implication for the college's mission and goals." Similarly, Southwestern University reports, "Performance on this test tells us that we have very bright students who begin and end their college career strong.… It lets us know we are doing something right." Nevertheless, "We have definite plans for using the CLA in the future.… One of our main goals is to foster a liberal arts education of the highest rank and quality and we will continue to assess our general education requirements and other elements of a liberal arts education such as critical thinking, writing, and problem-solving."

The good news about CLA-inspired shifts in conversations is that even when results were not entirely positive, institutions typically reacted in positive ways. For example, at Morningside College, after data showed disappointing CLA scores, "a board member asked why we were collecting data that might show us in a negative light. Another board member responded that this is the information we need to improve." As a result, "the CLA has singlehandedly made assessment a front-burner topic for faculty and enabled the board of directors to better understand student learning." Similarly, results at University of Findlay seemed to show little or no value added, and "the campus as a whole was disappointed with the results; therefore a number of strategies were discussed.… The implementation of the CLA has led to a

sense of urgency in general education assessment." Finally, at Drake University, "senior results…have been more troubling and served as a notice that Drake must diligently analyze additional data sources to determine if the problem areas on the CLA are consistent and accurate indicators of a problem." In these and other cases, the consistent theme is that the responses to results, negative or positive, lead to productive collective conversations and action.

Beyond reactions to specific results, the CLA has shifted conversations on these campuses about assessment more generally, especially among faculty members. The introduction of the CLA was sometimes met with skepticism and even hostility. For example, at Ursuline College "reactions to the CLA and assessment of learning goals ranged from resentment toward outside controls, government intervention in the classroom, and teaching to the test." But "by 2009–2010, the assessment process was well established." The conversation at Ursuline and elsewhere evolved as faculty members and administrators moved the conversation to the shared task of improving student learning. A good example of this shift is at **Alaska Pacific University**:

"Gradually the faculty appeared to gain confidence that assessment efforts were being used primarily to think about how students learn and faculty teach.… The APU faculty has grown from being resistant and skeptical about the CLA to acknowledging its value as the university evaluates what we do well and areas we need to improve."

That is not to say that these conversations were particularly easy, nor has the process of change always been smooth. For example, at Charleston Southern University, "the CLA was a tough sell on our campus. Some were excited about the results, but others were skeptical of the data and the fact that this was not a longitudinal study." However, "With more faculty exposed to CLA methodology, through summer meetings and the Performance Task Academy, there is greater acceptance of the results and use of CLA measures." Similarly, the report of **Hastings College** (Nebraska) bluntly notes:

"In general, assessment (including the CLA) is an irritating, time-consuming, and absolutely necessary process. However, introducing the CLA has helped make the documentation of student academic achievement, participation, and satisfaction…part of our daily routine. While we think we already do a pretty good job, we now have a much clearer idea of where we can do better.… In addition, comparative assessment data (particularly the CLA) are necessary to meet the increasing oversight by the board of trustees of the academic program requirements."

The collective conversation may not always be smooth, and assessment is not easy, but the institutions in the Consortium have generally found a way to make these conversations productive for faculty and other groups as well.

One major result of these conversations has been the growing number of faculty members who have become willing to take on responsibility for promoting further development of the use of the CLA and other forms of assessment. For example, at Stephens College, "experience with the CLA along with program assessment design has created a cadre of faculty and administrators with enhanced commitment to critical-thinking pedagogy." Similarly, at **Trinity Christian College** (Illinois):

"As a result of using the CLA…we have become more in tune to assessment of student learning outcomes.… In addition, working with the CLA has changed the way we approach data collection and has encouraged us to work in an organized fashion to gather data and design

Stonehill College (Massachusetts), founded in 1948, is a private, Roman Catholic college that offers 80 diverse majors and minors in the liberal arts, sciences, and pre-professional fields to 2,300 students. *www.stonehill.edu*

Texas Lutheran University provides an education in the arts and sciences that is given perspective by the Christian faith. This function is carried out through an undergraduate curriculum leading to the bachelor's degree, a diverse continuing education program, and a variety of co-curricular programs. *www.tlu.edu*

Trinity Christian College (Illinois) provides a Christ-centered, liberal arts education to nearly 1,500 students through more than 40 programs of study, various pre-professional programs, and the Adult Studies Accelerated Program. Students learn through local and global field experience, service projects, and study abroad opportunities in countries such as Spain, Ecuador, and Nicaragua. *www.trnty.edu*

interventions related to our general education learning outcomes."

As faculty members and administrators take charge of these conversations toward a more institutional focus on assessment, the question of "doing" assessment, at least among these institutions, is shifting toward how to make better use of assessment to improve teaching and learning. As the report from **LaGrange College** (Georgia), which started using the CLA in 2008, put it, "The main challenge is taking the next step of using CLA results to improve teaching." Taking on this challenge is increasingly discussed as part of the responsibility of Consortium member colleges and universities. As the report from founding Consortium member Allegheny College put it, "With the opportunity for direct measures that the CLA afforded us, then, it seemed institutionally irresponsible not to confirm our success in these areas—or discover ways in which our educational program might, in fact, be falling short." Finally, as Rebecca Sherrick, president of Aurora University, notes, "Already members of our community see assessment of student learning as a positive, productive—and essential—part of the learning process. This perspective stands in contrast to the viewpoint that assessment is an externally imposed mandate with little real meaning." This change in discussions and attitudes may be the biggest impact of the CIC/CLA Consortium initiative: motivating colleges and universities to improve teaching and learning. ■

IX. BUILDING A PROFESSIONAL COMMUNITY ACROSS INSTITUTIONS: THE CIC/CLA CONSORTIUM

"The greatest strength of the Consortium...lay in the progression of summer meeting topics from necessary logistical matters...to substantive issues facing higher education and inclusion of outside experts to inform our own development."

—Mary Hines, President, Carlow University

If academic programs and departments are often "siloed"—acting independently of one another—the institutional autonomy of colleges and universities is far more pronounced. Colleges and universities often aspire to be distinctive, even unique, in one or all of mission, program, and pedagogy. In part this fierce independence is a function of the way in which the highly regarded system of higher education has developed in the United States. The first colleges and universities were private and fought for and won constitutional recognition to remain so. Even as a now-larger public sector in higher education has developed, there is no national ministry of higher education, and the two sectors continue to offer students an array of options in undergraduate education.

At the same time—however autonomous colleges and universities are and however much they aspire to distinguish themselves from one another—they all share a common purpose to develop similar knowledge, skills, and dispositions in their students. There may be differences in mission, program, and pedagogy, but there is also considerable overlap. If we were to peruse college and university catalogs, we would almost certainly see strong similarities in statements of mission and goals. More specifically, it is hard to imagine any college or university that would not see critical thinking as a desirable outcome of an undergraduate education. Whatever the differences among institutions, there is also a common, if loosely joined, professional community in higher education.

More than one institution reported that the existence of the CIC/CLA Consortium and the support it provided were essential to marking effective use of the CLA. **Franklin Pierce University** (New Hampshire) reported that, "It is unlikely Franklin Pierce would have engaged in this type of general skills assessment as early as we did without the CIC Consortium. The Consortium provided an opportunity…to participate in an assessment strategy we otherwise might not have even considered…. It particularly helped us to commiserate about shared challenges and

University of Charleston (West Virginia) is a private, residential university offering professional preparation in a liberal arts context. It serves approximately 1,500 students from 34 states and 35 countries, offering 22 undergraduate majors, three master's degrees, and a doctoral degree in pharmacy. UC is a leader in outcomes-based education and assessment of student learning. *www.ucwv.edu*

University of Evansville (Indiana), established in 1854, is a private, liberal arts and sciences-based university affiliated with the United Methodist Church. The university's 2,961 students represent 45 states and 46 countries. The University of Evansville has received national acclaim for its study-abroad programs, and the university's British campus, Harlaxton College, is located in a 100-room Victorian manor in Grantham, England. *www.evansville.edu*

possible solutions." Similarly, Springfield College's report noted that, "I can't imagine how we would have made sense of our data…without the resources the Consortium has provided."

The CIC/CLA Consortium made success possible in several ways: providing technical advice, external validation, broader conceptual understanding, and a sense of community about issues of assessment. First, and most simply, conversations among institutions provided basic logistical help and advice. According to Hilbert College, a more recent member of the Consortium: "Participating in the CIC/CLA Consortium has been the key to the successes we have had up to this point. We have benefitted greatly from the experiences shared by peer institutions that had already faced and often surmounted many of the challenges we found ourselves facing, particularly how to use the CLA effectively."

The College of Saint Benedict and Saint John's University noted that one of the benefits of the annual meetings was "sharing suggestions for improving student completion of the instrument and trying to improve student motivation to take the CLA seriously and do their best on the instrument…. Schools have created a variety of clever efforts to deal with the participation/motivation problem." Similar specific assistance was available between meetings as well, as Ursuline College reported, "It was easy to pick up the phone or email a colleague and ask for advice or share concerns."

One specific form of logistical and technical support emerging from the Consortium was an ongoing dialogue between the CAE and the institutions about administrative and reporting issues with regard to the ongoing development and refinement of the instrument. For example, Bethel University (Minnesota) noted, "the power in numbers gave us a strong voice in requesting changes to the CLA (such as how the reports should look, administration issues, etc.). Kudos should go to CAE and CIC for listening to us and making the needed adjustments to the CLA." Morningside College's report noted that "the sharing of information and ability to have input into how to make the CLA more functional has been very valuable." The ongoing interaction between the CAE and the members of the Consortium, including the development of many performance task efforts and academies mentioned previously, has made the use of the CLA and CLA in the Classroom easier and ultimately more productive.

Beyond technical and logistical support and ideas, the Consortium also provided broader but no less valuable external validation and better understanding of this work that placed campus assessment efforts in a larger context. The message that assessment in general and the CLA in particular might be valuable was better received when it was not only one's on-campus colleagues who were delivering it but colleagues at other institutions as well. Many campus leaders adopted the strategy of sending a different faculty member to each of the annual summer meetings to increase exposure to the CLA and to understand better assessment efforts at other Consortium institutions. Some institutions would send a fourth team member, typically a faculty leader, at the institution's expense to further broaden this exposure. Dominican University (Illinois) reported, "As is probably the case at most institutions…faculty are initially skeptical," however, the "materials provided at the conferences…have been very helpful in introducing the CLA to other faculty members."

University of Findlay (Ohio), founded in 1882, serves 3,900 students from 40 states and 25 countries and territories and offers nearly 60 majors leading to baccalaureate degrees, seven master's degrees, and doctorates in pharmacy and physical therapy. Programs include equestrian studies, animal science/pre-veterinary medicine, nuclear medicine technology, and environmental, safety, and occupational health management, among others. *www.findlay.edu*

University of Great Falls (Montana), founded in 1932, is a private, Catholic, liberal arts university that enrolls approximately 950 students and has a 12:1 student to professor ratio. The university offers 40 undergraduate, eight graduate, and four distance learning degrees. *www.ugf.edu*

At William Woods University, "The university may not have been able to sustain its assessment culture if it had not been for the CIC/CLA Consortium. Division chairs and an occasional faculty member were able to come back to campus and work with other faculty members in their respective areas on enhancing curriculum to better serve our students. Talking with other faculty members and learning how things are accomplished at other institutions would invigorate our faculty members and get them excited to try something new for the upcoming academic years." At Marian University, faculty skepticism shifted as a result of participation in Consortium meetings:

"Participating in the Consortium has helped build momentum around assessment. Presenting CLA results did encourage conversation around student learning and assessment. This was instrumental in curricular changes and also determining if the education at Marian is what is needed by students and other constituents."

Over several years the conversations at the Consortium meetings evolved—away from test administration issues and toward more substantive questions—another clear benefit and effect of the Consortium. For example, the **University of Great Falls** (Montana) reported that later meetings led to a more "sophisticated and nuanced understanding of what the CLA test is for and how it can become part of a campus culture." Similarly, Barton College reported that after an early focus on technical issues, "later meetings focused on what the data could reveal about the students, the curriculum, and the quality of the academic program." For Carlow University, the "greatest strength of the Consortium…lay in the progression of meeting topics from necessary logistical matters…to substantive issues facing higher education and inclusion of outside experts to inform our own development."

Overall, the Consortium has produced a professional community around not just an assessment instrument but also the broader issues of how to use assessment to improve programs, teaching, and learning. "We have become part of a larger community—sharing and learning from one another." Many colleges offered comments like those in the report of Seton Hill University:

"Consortium participation provided a valuable context for gaining a deeper understanding and interpretation of results. Members generated commitment, enthusiasm, and support for enhancing student learning outcomes." Several colleges expressed the sentiment of Jamestown College that this kind of community building should be continued. ■

X. CLOSING THE LOOP: NEW WAYS AND PATHWAYS

"The CLA is only one tool; we need multiple and varied assessments."

—Don Bantz, President, Alaska Pacific University

In discussions of assessment it is common to talk about "closing the loop." This phrase is shorthand for moving from gathering evidence to making changes on the basis of the evidence, and then repeating this cycle to see if the changes have led to improvement. Contemporary discussions of assessment among colleges and universities have noted that there are many efforts being made at gathering evidence and accumulating data. It is less clear that evidence is being routinely used to guide institutional decision-making and direct programmatic changes. (See for example the NILOA report, *Opening Doors to Faculty Involvement in Assessment.*)

Getting from evidence to action is seldom straightforward. Often institutions have considerable data from many sources but little time or resources for assembly and analysis. For example, as Allegheny College reported, "one of the biggest obstacles to progress in this area, somewhat ironically, is the large volume of data we have collected through a large assortment of assessment instruments." Also, as noted previously, one difficulty in "closing the loop" is that any piece or set of evidence seldom suggests specific changes without considerable interpretation and discussion. That discussion often requires getting past what the College of St. Scholastica labeled "data denial—faculty members who don't think we have a problem because they found fault with the tool or sampling methods." Even when the data, especially an indicator such as the CLA, are seen as valid, it is not clear what they imply for any specific action. **Willamette University** (Oregon) found "interpreting the results challenging, as is identifying actionable changes and curricular initiatives." As Morningside College reported, "Since CLA is a macro indication, the question of where to focus resources for improvement requires more in-depth analysis, which frankly speaking is not always available." It should be noted, again, that such difficulties of interpretation and connections to action are not unique to CLA; they are complications of any assessment effort.

Upper Iowa University, founded in 1857, is a private university providing undergraduate and graduate degree programs and leadership development opportunities to nearly 6,800 students—nationally and internationally. *www.uiu.edu*

Nevertheless, much of the experience of the CIC/CLA Consortium suggests, first, that evidence can sometimes have the direct effect of suggesting where change is needed even if it doesn't suggest specific changes. A number of colleges, as discussed in previous sections, simply made changes in the areas that the CLA measures (most notably writing and critical thinking) in response to the evidence, even though the evidence at hand did not always suggest what changes might lead to improvement. At the same time, often colleges did focus their efforts on certain obvious areas such as making or critiquing an argument. For other colleges there were more indirect "catalytic" effects in which a range of changes going beyond the CLA

Ursinus College (Pennsylvania), founded in 1869, is a private, undergraduate, liberal arts college that enrolls approximately 1,750 students with a student-faculty ratio of 12:1. The nationally recognized first-year program offers the Common Intellectual Experience seminar, housing centers, one-on-one faculty advising, and laptops for all students. Students are required to complete an Independent Learning Experience through either study abroad or major research or an internship or student teaching. *www.ursinus.edu*

(to the broader assessment program, in experimenting with performance task pedagogy, etc.) were enacted. The "loop" may not be tightly closed among these colleges, but the ability to refer to evidence is spurring direct and indirect action and continuing conversations about assessment.

There are at least two other ways of building a tighter connection between evidence and action found among the CIC/CLA Consortium colleges. First, many colleges have started to do thoughtful triangulation of CLA with other measures. As Don Bantz, president of Alaska Pacific University, succinctly puts it, the "CLA is only one tool; we need multiple and varied assessments." This is what many Consortium institutions have decided. Like several others, Carlow University compared CLA results with some of its internal measures, "along with student profile data from the HERI College Senior Survey." The process of triangulation often led to the consideration of and experimentation with other measures.

The range of possible combinations of CLA with other data is, obviously, huge. Perhaps the most common use of the CLA with another assessment instrument is in combination with NSSE. A good example is Texas Lutheran University, which is administering both CLA and NSSE to the same students: "We hope that our analysis of these combined data will indicate how to improve student achievement and enhance learning outcomes. We hope to identify the engagement practices that have the highest impact on TLU student results." Similarly, Westminster College (Missouri) reports correlations between NSSE and CLA scores "to students through their advisors. The reports are targeted…with suggestions…about specific behaviors [students] might consider if they would like to see better results in the future." Finally, a number of institutions also mentioned the CIC/NSSE "matching project" of connecting CLA and NSSE data as a direction they are or will be taking. This project combines NSSE and CLA so that institutions can discover more about programmatic features and levels of engagement that correlate with gains in students' analytical reasoning, critical thinking, and writing skills.

This in turn suggests a second way that Consortium institutions are using CLA to try to close the loop: using CLA data to examine curricular areas, specific programs, or groups of students. For example, Allegheny College is already looking at data across programs and groups, drawing some "suggestive inferences from the data: that our seniors majoring in the humanities do better at the Performance Task than do our seniors majoring in disciplines in the

Ursuline College (Ohio) offers a holistic Catholic education of undergraduate and graduate programs that emphasize the whole person and provide personalized attention within a liberal arts higher educational environment. *www.ursuline.edu*

natural sciences or social sciences." A similar finding: "And what explains the fact that one student population that significantly improves its CLA scores in their first two years is our varsity athletes?.... A subject for further analysis!"

An unusual strategy was adopted by Westminster College (Utah) to generate information useful for program level assessment: "We began to focus on seniors in particular programs. As many seniors as possible were tested in capstone courses for specific majors, distributed widely across the college. Each year we rotate programs so that over time we can develop a comprehensive view of student performance across the college while still giving programs information they can use in shaping their own curricula."

Southwestern University has tightened its focus even further, comparing the "performance of students who participated in the Paideia program with those who did not." The program involves sophomores participating in weekly small reading/discussion groups "on current issues as a way of making intentional connections between coursework and out of class experiences." These examples suggest both the range and potential possibilities for connecting the CLA to students' experience and institutional programs.

Wagner College (New York), founded in 1883, is a private, liberal arts college that enrolls about 2,300 students pursuing bachelor's and master's degrees in business, education, nursing, theater, the social and natural sciences, and the humanities. Its undergraduates represent 43 states and 15 foreign countries. The college has become widely known for its signature curriculum, the Wagner Plan for the Practical Liberal Arts, which combines three levels of interdisciplinary learning communities with practical internships and community service. *www.wagner.edu*

Examining CLA performance by subgroups is central to the next phase of CIC's use of the CLA. CIC's Pathways Project, funded by the Carnegie Corporation of New York, focuses specifically on underserved students (particularly first-generation and low-income) at nine urban and ten non-urban institutions from the current group of 47 institutions, plus ten new institutions in urban settings.

The purpose of the Pathways Project is to assess and improve student learning among underserved students in urban settings. The CLA will be the primary measure of student success. For the participating institutions, this represents a real opportunity to look at how groups of students perform and discover ways to assist them. For example, Bethel University (Minnesota) sees the "challenges" of getting larger samples necessary for analyzing subgroups of students. "With these challenges come some important opportunities, [but] the ability to see if our Pell Grant and first-generation college students are making the same gains in writing and critical thinking as our other students is important to the mission of our institution." Similarly, Dominican University (Illinois) noted that "Because Dominican has long been committed to admitting first-generation college students and to creating an increasingly diverse student body, we are looking forward to the insights provided by this innovative use of the CLA."

During the Pathways Project, research is being conducted to gain insight into the factors that contribute to (or detract from) the academic achievement of students at urban institutions, with particular emphasis on first-generation and low-income students, which are traditionally underrepresented groups. Information on effective strategies will be shared with academic institutions throughout the CIC membership and more broadly. In this way, CIC intends to create both new pathways to educational and economic opportunity for students who attend urban colleges and universities, many of whom are from underserved populations, and to "close the loop" by connecting assessment evidence with strategies for improvement. The Pathways Project will continue CIC's work with the CLA and with assessment as a means of improving undergraduate education. ■

XI. LESSONS LEARNED: IRREVERSIBLE CHANGE, MOMENTUM, AND PROFESSIONAL COMMUNITY AND RESPONSIBILITY

"It is fair to say that at virtually every institution things have changed—in some instances a lot and almost always for the better."

—Richard Morrill, President, The Teagle Foundation

The preceding report of the activities of the colleges and universities in the CIC/CLA Consortium merely scratches the surface of all the work by colleges that has been undertaken during this initiative. Richard Morrill, president of the Teagle Foundation, said, "It is fair to say that at virtually every institution things have changed—in some instances a lot and almost always for the better." The experiences of the institutions offer many lessons, particularly about the CLA as an instrument, the process of assessment on campuses, the growing community of practice around assessment in general and the CLA in particular, and the likely future evolution of assessment efforts, especially at independent colleges and universities. Overall, the initiative has involved a steady expansion—one is tempted to say "mushrooming,"—of efforts, changes, experimentation, and conversation about ways to use outcomes assessment effectively to improve teaching and learning.

The first lesson is that measures and measurement matter. The CLA is a powerful and potentially valuable instrument. Equally important, having a key measure or measures is crucial to focusing discussions of student learning at an institution. Although some faculty members and others raised questions about whether one can measure critical thinking with a single instrument, the vast majority of institutions in the Consortium recognized that what the CLA measures is central to undergraduate learning. This was especially true of the performance task element of the CLA and the more general notion of an "ill-structured" problem it represented. Every institution wants to improve its students' critical thinking skills, and the CLA provides an opportunity to measure those skills in ways that most faculty members recognize as being important and authentic.

Similarly, once a measure such as the CLA is used it establishes the principle that an institution can and should consider it and other kinds of measures and evidence it has. What happened over the course of the CIC/CLA Consortium's term was increasing attempts to expand the evidentiary base for discussing program and pedagogy. The frequent attempts to triangulate CLA results with NSSE and to conduct analyses by area or program reflect the fact that a variety of measures is available and many analyses can be done. Whatever other changes have occurred at the

Westminster College (Missouri), founded in 1851, is a private, residential, undergraduate college with a curriculum based on the liberal arts with an emphasis on developmental experience. The college of 1,125 students offers 36 majors, 34 minors, and 12 pre-professional programs. The self-designed major offers students an opportunity to design their own major in fields such as advertising, communication, public administration, and sports management. *www.westminster-mo.edu*

Westminster College (Utah) is a comprehensive liberal arts college with 38 undergraduate majors and 14 graduate programs and prepares students for success through active and engaged learning, real world experiences, and a vibrant campus community. The college currently enrolls 3,100 students (2,300 undergraduates and 800 graduate students). *www.westminstercollege.edu*

Willamette University (Oregon) is a private university that educates 2,600 students in a residential, undergraduate, liberal arts college and professional graduate schools of law, management, and education. Willamette is nationally recognized for teaching and scholarly work in a community that models diversity, sustainability, and service to others, values that reflect the university motto, "Not unto ourselves alone are we born." *www.willamette.edu*

colleges in the Consortium, what has changed dramatically is a disposition toward use of evidence of student learning and analysis of it. Assessment of student learning gains much greater legitimacy once institutions have some experience using measures and conducting analyses with them.

A second lesson is that the process of measuring student learning creates a catalyst for institutional change—and it is difficult to imagine going back to the way things were. This report catalogs a variety of types of curricular and pedagogical change in light of CLA results. For some institutions the reaction was immediate and focused on those areas—especially critical thinking and writing—assessed by the CLA. These and other efforts have expanded in a range of ways, from changing specific courses and programs, to focusing faculty development efforts, to revisiting how assessment was conducted on campus more generally. Once these changes are made, the logic of assessment and working to "close the loop" develops a momentum of its own. This is particularly true in terms of campus culture and the shift in the conversation to thinking and talking in terms of "we/our." The notion that *we* will measure learning and respond to evidence represents a significant shift in the culture of most colleges and universities, a shift that is moving ahead at the institutions in the CIC/CLA Consortium.

A third lesson is that the CIC/CLA Consortium established a professional community of practice that supports common measures and practices in assessing and improving student learning. For many years, a common phrase and injunction in efforts to improve higher education has been the need to adopt "best practices." However, the movement from going to a conference or workshop in which an interesting "best practice" is discussed to going back to campus and putting it into practice is usually problematic. Getting attention for an idea can be challenging, let alone acquiring the time and efforts of individuals actually needed to experiment with a new initiative.

The CIC/CLA Consortium experience provides two ways to bridge the gap between a best practice, on the one hand, and innovation and campus implementation, on the other. First, providing a common measure across a set of

similar institutions gives it some measure of credibility. In the case of the CLA, apart from its intuitive validity, the very fact that a number of institutions were committing to experiment with this instrument gave the work some initial legitimacy and traction. Second, the existence of ongoing meetings of the Consortium provided a real opportunity for "best practices" to be developed and disseminated. Repeatedly, Consortium colleges and universities commented on how interactions with other institutions provided advice on everything from logistical challenges of testing students to the broadest ideas about curriculum and program. The work of the CIC/CLA Consortium provides a model of how undergraduate education can become more professionalized through shared understandings, measures, and practices.

What is particularly valuable about the Consortium in this regard is that it is perfectly consistent with the traditional autonomy and diversity of colleges and universities. The scope and variety of the work of these institutions coupled with the interaction through the Consortium offers the possibility for continuing experimentation and imitation. Because these are independent institutions, they can readily adopt best practices as they see them and adapt them to fit their individual circumstances. The community of professional practice represented by the Consortium shows how greater consistency, attention to evidence, transparency, and, ultimately, improvement is consistent with institutional autonomy and diversity.

One final lesson that can be drawn from the CIC initiative follows from the previous one and brings us back to the start of the conversation. The pressure on higher education to demonstrate the value of its work, especially in light of rising costs, is not likely to fade. However, the temptation to use public regulation as a means to spur innovation and improvement is also likely to be with us, at least for the immediate future. What the CIC/CLA Consortium provides is an example of self-directed, voluntary, professional efforts that have and will continue to provide a sound response to legitimate public demands for assessment, accountability, and improvement. It is extremely unlikely that had the CLA been imposed on these CIC institutions by external fiat that we would have seen the kind of experimentation, interaction, change, and progress that these institutions have achieved over the past six years (witness No Child Left Behind). What the Consortium has illustrated is that the distinctive character of higher education in the United States—its mix of diverse, autonomous institutions, including a robust private sector engaged in thoughtful cooperation and experimentation—does not need external direction to continue to improve its work with students. What is needed, and found in the CIC/CLA Consortium, is the dedicated work of individuals and institutions in higher education, particularly in the independent sector, to be working constantly together to improve the education of their students. ■

William Woods University (Missouri), founded in 1870, is an independent, co-educational, professions-oriented, liberal arts-based institution. Offering undergraduate and graduate degrees in a variety of disciplines in both campus and outreach settings, WWU enrolls about 3,500 students from 44 states and 20 countries. Unique programs include ASL interpreting, equestrian studies, juvenile justice, and criminal justice/homeland security. The innovative LEAD (Leading, Educating, Achieving ,and Developing) program promotes learning outside the classroom and provides an annual tuition reduction. *www.williamwoods.edu*

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