Bad News, Good News: 
*Academically Adrift, SCSU's CLA Performances*  
By Joe Melcher

Approximately 15 faculty participated in a recent Book Talk on *Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses*, by Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa. We discussed the ramifications of its longitudinal study of 2,400 undergraduates’ critical thinking and writing performance at a variety of 24 colleges. The study indexed these skills using the *Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA)*, which measures critical thinking and writing skills by means of rubric-scored texts that students write on the basis of various documents and other sources. Students were given the CLA as incoming freshmen, as rising juniors, and as graduating seniors. The study’s much-discussed negative finding was that on average, CLA scores barely improved. Fully 45% of students did not significantly improve by the end of their sophomore year and 36% did not improve by the time they graduated!

The more hopeful result was that many students did improve their performance. Arun and Roksa identified *two factors that were strongly associated with improved performance – regardless of other student characteristics or type of institution...*. These two factors were that they took at least one course each term that required 20+ pages of writing, and one that required 40+ pages of reading per week. (Unfortunately, 32% of students never did the former and 50% never did the latter!) What might SCSU do to ensure that it is not possible to avoid taking more rigorous classes?  *(Cont’d p. 2)*
How many of your courses, even liberal education courses, require similar levels of reading and writing?

SCSU has administered the CLA two times. Although Arun and Roksa used longitudinal testing (comparing the same students over time), cost necessitated that SCSU use cross-sectional testing (comparing a sample of 100 incoming freshmen with a sample of 100 graduating seniors). The results show that in general, our students gained about the same as national average. The figure on page one provides details. It shows our students' percentile scores compared to the large national sample, broken down by CLA task. Within each cluster of bars the first pair of bars shows the 2007-08 freshmen-senior score (as percentile rankings); the second pair shows the 2008-09 rankings; the final two bars (indicated with arrows and qualitative labels) shows the CLA estimated value-added for the institution, also expressed as percentile scores. With one exception, SCSU’s value-added percentile rankings are generally “at” or “above” the national rankings. The exception is caused by the fact that in both years the incoming students scored higher on the Performance Task than the seniors.

Using Assessment to Close the Loop in Biology

Like other departments, Biological Sciences has a consistent issue with enrollment in its majors introductory courses (BIOL 151, 152). Insufficient capacity makes it is common for 150+ seat sections to fill before some freshmen reach their registration windows. Compounding the capacity problem is the fact that these courses typically have 15-20% DWF rates, which means that many of the students who got into the courses were not going to be successful. This wastes their time and money, and, in effect, penalizes the students who could not register, but might have passed. In Fall 2010, Biology faculty analyzed course sub-populations and their success rates with the goal of identifying predictors of failure:

We obtained data for the previous four semesters and used it to determine that students who enrolled with math placement test scores below 100-level MATH courses had a 26.1% DWF rate, while those with higher scores had a much lower, 11.7 DWF rate. In other words, students with low math readiness represented more than half of DWF outcomes. Consequently, we decided to make eligibility for 100-level MATH courses a prerequisite for BIOL 151 and 152, and the proposal is currently moving through the curriculum process. We hope that this change will increase student success rates, improve the quality of the courses, and better serve our majors.

Bill Cook, Associate Professor of Biology

If you have an assessment case that you would like to share in a future issue, please contact the assessment office.
Assessment for Accountability and Improvement

All higher education accrediting agencies require assessment of student learning in courses, programs, and institutionally. The Higher Learning Commission, which accredits SCSU as an institution, requires that we document assessment activities and outcomes. All of the disciplinary organizations (e.g., ABET, NCATE, AACSB, CAAASLP, etc.) that accredit individual schools or programs at SCSU require assessment. In other words, they are asking us to be accountable. These organizations require evidence of assessment because they know that faculty and programs that gather actionable evidence of student learning are best able to determine whether student achievement is acceptable and, if not, how they might improve learning. Assessment is required because we are accountable for the learning that takes place on our campus. We are accountable to our students, ourselves, parents, employers, and to the state, which partially funds our activities. However, doing assessment merely for the sake of complying with accreditation requirements is merely extra work if it is not linked with a second, internalized goal of improvement.

According to a widely cited survey, 94% of college professors indicated that their teaching skills were above average. (Although, this study is widely mis-generalized to all professors, it was based only on University of Nebraska faculty in 1976.) Nevertheless, this "Lake Wobegon effect" has been replicated with numerous professions. Humans are mostly overconfident and overestimate our abilities. This is why we need to do assessment for more than compliance. Skilled teachers do not simply assume that their excellent teaching skills are causing students to learn; they gather evidence about students' learning in order to determine what, and how well, they are learning, and they adjust the teaching-learning process when improvements are indicated. This approach highlights the important role of setting learning outcomes (at the course, program, and even institutional levels). When outcomes have been specified, progress toward them can be measured. Engaging in this process is new for many faculty, few of whom were trained to teach. And although teaching is certainly more than just getting students to demonstrate having learned certain outcomes, the achievement of desired outcomes is certainly something to strive for. Likewise, it is satisfying to be able to show the achievement, to implement improvements, and to be able to account for them.

"Assessment, understood as extra activities, will end when... colleges and universities define each degree as a set of expected learning outcomes and track each student's progress as a developing set of actual learning outcomes."—David Shupe

Quotable:
Assessment is what “we faculty members can do in order to demonstrate to ourselves that we actually do what we say we do.”

“...The best teachers constantly monitor what is happening to students as they set about learning and investigate when things do not proceed as planned or expected. They also enquire their own practice so they might get better at ensuring that their students learn successfully.”

IN THE KNOW

Assessment Peer Consultants

Here to help

Don’t know where to begin? Have questions? Need help? Let our assessment peer consultants come to your aid. They are available free of charge to assist programs, departments and units with any aspect of assessment of student learning.

People you know

Our consultants are people you know and work with every day. Visit our website for the full list of trained consultants!

Teagle Assessment Scholarship

Apply Now

Applications for the 2011 cohort of the Teagle Assessment Scholar Development Program are currently being accepted. Teagle Assessment Scholars are faculty, staff, and administrators with a strong interest in using evidence to improve student learning. Teagle Scholars have the knowledge, technical skills, social prowess, and political savvy necessary to help colleges and universities use evidence to strengthen the impact of liberal arts education within the complex organizational structures and practices that govern our institutions. If you are interested in becoming a Teagle Assessment Scholar, and you do not have significant experience with assessment at the department, program, course, or institutional level, you are invited to apply. The Development Program began in fall 2010. The deadline to apply is May 15, 2011. For additional information, visit their website.

Now Offering:

Focus Groups

In Fall 2010, a group of twelve Assessment Peer Consultants went through additional training on conducting focus groups. We can now offer this service to the campus community. Do you have qualitative questions? Ask your graduating seniors about their program experiences and learning or ask mid-level students about their current observations and impressions. Assessment Consultants will:

• help you organize a focus group(s)
• two consultants will run the focus group(s) for you
• collect the data and provide you with a confidential report

If your department or program would like Assessment Peer Consultants to run a focus group, please contact the Assessment Office.

Calendar

May 15, 2011
Teagle Assessment Scholar Development Program
Application deadline

June 4-6, 2011
AAC&U Institute on General Education and Assessment
San Jose State University
San Jose, CA

September 15, 2011
Annual Assessment Reports are due to your College or School Assessment Coordinator

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