

Hilbert College's Experience with the Collegiate Learning Assessment

Overview:

Hilbert College is a four-year, liberal arts college in the Catholic, Franciscan tradition located in suburban Hamburg, NY, just outside of Buffalo with an enrollment of about 1,100 students. Our involvement with the CLA began in 2008 when Hilbert College became a member of the CIC/CLA Consortium through the leadership of Christopher Holoman, Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs. At that time Dr. Holoman was looking for ways to boost Hilbert's involvement with the Council for Independent Colleges and our peer institutions. Not long before, the College had also completed a Middle States reaccreditation visit with a recommendation that it develop and implement an institutional assessment plan that evaluates its overall effectiveness in achieving its mission and goals. Dr. Holoman was aware of the 'buzz' being generated about the CLA and its mention in the Spellings Commission Report. He saw Hilbert's participation in the CIC/CLA Consortium as a possible means for accomplishing several purposes. In the summer of 2008, Dr. Holoman introduced the CLA to the faculty and along with the Director of Institutional Research and a member of the faculty attended the CIC/CLA Summer Consortium Meeting in Washington, D.C. That fall we began administering the CLA to our freshman class.

Our first year with CLA was not hugely successful. While we were able to generate a decently sized sample of 101 freshmen in the fall, we only had 16 seniors complete the assessment in the following spring (2009) with the result being too few to produce a meaningful report. In our second year (2009-10), the faculty member who had accompanied Dr. Holoman to the Summer Consortium Meetings was appointed to be Hilbert College's Director of Assessment and took on the task of increasing awareness of the CLA among the faculty and the students. A series of informal focus groups with seniors had indicated that faculty support of the CLA would be a critical factor in boosting their level of participation in the assessment process. During the spring of 2010, the importance of the CLA as a measure of our Liberal Learning Goals was presented to the faculty on several occasions. Seniors were recruited during classes with the support of the instructors, posters about the CLA were prominent throughout classroom buildings, and small but meaningful incentives were offered for participation. As a result of these efforts a total of 60 seniors completed the CLA that second spring, a still smaller than desired sample size, but large enough to provide an analysis of the data for the first time. As a result of the exposure generated, faculty were eagerly awaiting the 2009-10 report when it arrived in August.

That initial report has been very well received throughout the Hilbert College community, by faculty, staff, students, and the Board of Trustees. While we have been very pleased by the positive value-added results we received, the report has also initiated discussions at various levels regarding its implications for the College's Mission and Liberal Learning Goals. Although our value-added scores placed us in the upper percentiles among similar institutions, we also saw that our students come to us significantly below average in their entering academic abilities. Faculty were particularly pleased by our students' gains in their abilities to analyze arguments yet saw that students were relatively weaker in developing skills of creating their own arguments. As a result, the faculty has begun to reexamine 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 "Make-an-Argument" writing task from the CLA appears to be an important indication of creative as well as critical thinking, that higher order cognitive ability sitting atop the pyramid of the new version Bloom's taxonomy.

The CLA results have also been well received by our students. Several faculty members have used these initial results to generate classroom discussions about the nature and importance of critical thinking. An upcoming article for the campus newspaper will feature an article by a student discussing how important these results are in helping get out the word about the value of a Hilbert College education. As the student writes, "The results of the CLA exam provide evidence that a Hilbert College degree means something. The results also showcase to Western New York and beyond what the value of a Hilbert College education truly means."

Successes:

As we enter into our third year with the CIC/CLA Consortium, the most significant success we can point to thus far has been the generally increased awareness of the importance of institutional level assessment throughout the college community but especially among the faculty. The use of the CLA as an institutional-level assessment has helped bolster an appreciation of the need for assessments at the course and degree program as well. It has

demonstrated how assessment results can both reinforce the positive work faculty do as well as point to areas that can be improved, i.e., “closing the loop.”

Faculty interest in the CLA was especially demonstrated by the fact that on the heels of our recent report, five faculty members have signed up to attend a ‘CLA in the Classroom’ Performance Academy this year with the intention of returning to help others learn how to use performance tasks as a tool for helping our students develop their critical thinking, analytical reasoning and problem solving skills.

Process:

As mentioned in the overview above, our involvement with CLA started off slowly. Faculty were initially somewhat skeptical of the tool and the process. It was generally seen as something the administration/Director of Institutional Research would ‘do’ to satisfy the Middle States Commission that we were doing assessment. Whether it would produce anything of meaning or value to the faculty was questioned, although during that first year, the whole initiative was simply below the faculty’s radar. It really was not until the middle of our second year that faculty began to support the effort and become interested in the outcomes. In large part this interest and awareness was driven by the decision of the Provost and Vice-President for Academic Affairs to appoint a faculty member to be a half-time Director of Assessment and to take over responsibility for the CLA as well as other institutional assessment efforts. This change helped reinforce the perception that assessment was the faculty’s responsibility and generated a spokesperson for the CLA. Getting enough participating seniors to provide a meaningful report became something of a shared goal. During the CLA testing window, the new Director of Assessment frequently shared the current tallies of CLA administrations with the faculty and took several opportunities to provide information about the nature of the CLA and its tasks.

Administering the CLA still provides some degree of challenge on campus, but now faculty feel involved and is generally supportive. We continue to learn how best to recruit and motivate our students in completing the CLA. To this end, the CIC/CLA Summer Consortium Meetings have been invaluable for learning from the experiences of our peer institutions who have struggled with the same issues we now face.

Challenges:

Our greatest disappointment to date was in our first year of participation when we had insufficient numbers of seniors completing the CLA and so had no results reported. It just felt like all the efforts from the previous year had been wasted. Fortunately we were able to use that disappointment as a motivation to increase faculty involvement and student participation during our second year. Now in our third year, we are able to begin applying some of the lessons previously learned.

Other challenges or obstacles faced in using the CLA include the cost, the time required each semester to recruit and test samples of freshmen and seniors, and the strain testing places on already over-extended computer lab facilities.

Consortium:

Participating in the CIC/CLA Consortium has been the key for what 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. In addition to helping learn how to use the CLA effectively, the Consortium has also been invaluable in our initial goal of increasing our involvement with peer institutions and our presence within the Council for Independent Colleges. We feel that Hilbert College will continue to benefit from our participation well beyond our use of the CLA.

Looking Ahead:

At the conclusion of our third and final year in the CIC/CLA Consortium the faculty and administration of Hilbert College plan to internally assess what we have gained and how we want to proceed with the Collegiate Learning Assessment. In all likelihood, we will fold continued periodic use of the CLA into our institutional assessment plan along with the use of other assessment tools such as the NSSE. How frequently we may administer the CLA is yet to be determined and will be a topic for discussion and input from the faculty and administration.

We are excited about the possibilities offered by the CLA in the Classroom Performance Tasks. As mentioned earlier, several faculty have expressed interest in learning more about this initiative and five have signed up to attend an upcoming Academy. Using the Performance Tasks in the classroom promises to be a particularly

good fit between an engaging pedagogical tool and Hilbert College's mission as a Liberal Arts institution. Those members who attend the Task Performance Academies will be asked to share their experiences and knowledge upon their return. The Provost has offered to support the use of performance tasks in the classroom by making modest stipends available to support faculty who adapt and use a performance task for their discipline.

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