

HOW THE CLA DIFFERS FROM NCLB

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The federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act and the Council for Aid to Education's Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA) program have two things in common, namely: (1) they both involve testing students with measures of cognitive ability that have time limits and (2) with the possible exception of high school tests that are used for both NCLB and high school graduation requirements, there are no stakes for students for doing well on these tests. However, that is where the similarity between NCLB and CLA ends.

As discussed below, the NCLB Act and the CLA program have different purposes, test types, score reporting methods, and virtually every other feature that could be used to describe a testing program. Indeed, almost every decision that was made by those who formulated the NCLB requirements is the very opposite of the corresponding decision that was made by those who created the CLA.

In this paper, we describe several important ways in which NCLB and CLA testing activities differ as well as some of the implications of these differences for interpreting and using the results. We begin with a thumbnail description of each approach to assessment and then turn to how the main characteristics of these approaches differ.

A TALE OF TWO APPROACHES

NCLB

The goal of the federal NCLB Act is to have all children become *proficient* in reading and mathematics by 2014. The center piece of this law is holding schools and districts accountable for developing their students' skills in these areas as measured by state tests. Specifically, the NCLB Act requires that every state develop and administer annual tests in reading and math for all students in grades 3 through 8. It also requires testing in at least grade 10, 11, or 12.

Each state decides what reading and math skills it will measure and what score on each test signifies "proficient." Consequently, there is no consistency across states in what specific reading and math skills are tested let alone the degree of skill that is deemed "proficient." Each state also sets its own schedule for achieving proficiency for all

students by 2014 and for each of its racial and ethnic minority groups, students with disabilities, and those with limited English proficiency. Progress toward meeting these goals (e.g., the percent of students in each group and overall who achieve proficiency status) is made publicly available by school and district.

The NCLB Act imposes consequences and “corrective actions” on schools that receive federal funds (e.g., Title I), but do not make “adequate yearly progress” (AYP) toward achieving their proficiency goals for two or more years in a row. The threat and potential impact of these publicly announced sanctions puts pressure on educators to define “proficiency” modestly so that targets can be reached more easily. Moreover, the policy of imposing sanctions based on the percentage of students achieving some standard encourages schools to focus their educational resources on those who are just below this standard rather than on improving the skills of all students.

CLA

The CLA program is designed to provide colleges and universities with information about how much progress their undergraduate students (as a group) have made in developing their writing, critical thinking, analytic reasoning, and problem solving skills and whether that progress is consistent with the gains made by similarly situated students at other schools (where “similarly situated” is defined as having comparable admission test scores). Thus, the CLA’s focus is on measuring how much *improvement* a school’s students made both in absolute terms and after adjusting for differences among colleges in the average ability level of their entering students. In that sense, the CLA provides information about the *value added* by the school relative to that contributed by other schools. In short, are the school’s students keeping pace with students in other colleges, falling behind, or forging ahead? Unlike NCLB regulations, there are no state standards or targets that all schools or students must meet.

COMPARISON OF KEY FEATURES

Program Participation

Federal law requires that essentially ALL public schools and students (in the specified grades) participate in the NCLB required testing activities.

In the CLA program, private and public colleges and universities choose to participate (or not) and only a sample of a school’s students are invited but not required to take the tests.

Test Administration, Format and Scoring

All or almost all the tests used for NCLB purposes are multiple choice exams in which students are instructed to select the best answer. Most are paper-and-pencil exams although a few states are moving to computer administration. All students take the full set of tests for their grade level and their responses are machine scored.

All the CLA measures are open-ended constructed response tests that are administered on-line. Answers are up loaded to either specially trained and calibrated readers who grade them on-line or they are graded by a computer using artificial intelligence scoring algorithms. Analytic and holistic grading are used to yield writing and analysis scores.

The CLA uses a matrix test sampling plan (similar to the one used for NAEP)¹ so that each student takes only a small portion of the total CLA test battery. This greatly reduces the testing burden on an individual student without compromising the tests' ability to produce highly reliable school level scores. Students typically take the CLA tests in their school's computer labs.

Abilities Measured

Despite the rhetoric about states requiring high and rigorous standards, most of the tests that are used to satisfy NCLB requirements focus on low to medium level reading and math skills, such as selecting the main idea of a reading passage or recognizing that $\frac{1}{4}$ is less than $\frac{1}{2}$. NCLB focuses on reading and math because of their life criticality and their central role in the K-12 curriculum.

CLA tests assess higher order writing, critical thinking, analytic reasoning, and problem solving competencies that are appropriate for a broad range of college students. For example, students have to marshal evidence from diverse sources to create a coherent argument to support an explanation of why something happened in a realistic case situation and then defend that explanation, such as by describing the strengths and limitations of competing explanations. The CLA program focuses on such competencies because they are often mentioned prominently by employers and in college mission statements. Information about student development in these areas cannot be inferred from course grades or other sources.

¹ The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), which is often referred to as "the nation's report card," is administered to a national sample of public and private schools and to a sample of schools in most states. Each participating student takes only a small portion of the entire test battery for his/her grade level. Reading and math tests are now administered in grades 4 and 8 in alternating years.

Reporting Results

NCLB requires public release of results by district and school. Results are reported in terms of the percentage of students at each of three or four performance levels (such as “below basic, basic, proficient, and advanced”). Although these labels often correspond to those used to report NAEP results, the level of the skill needed to achieve “proficient” on NAEP is generally much higher than it is to achieve “proficient” on a state test.

NCLB results are reported for all students and for certain groups, such as minority students and English language learners. Because states use different tests, assess different abilities, and set their own proficiency standards, it is not possible to compare results across states. NCLB reporting also is not sensitive to how much improvement in student skills occurred because it only tabulates the percentage of students achieving a given standard. For example, a 5 percentage point increase in the number of students achieving proficient status could occur if just 5 percent of them improved slightly or if 100 percent improved a lot (but most were still well below the cut score). NCLB reporting does not distinguish between these two scenarios. There also may be significant double counting, such as when several English language learners and/or minority students also have learning disabilities.

CLA provides each school with confidential information regarding how well its students (as a group) performed and how well they did relative to similarly situated students at other (but not identified) colleges. The CLA program does not make this information public although colleges may do so if they wish. Schools receive results in terms of average scores (rather than percentages) to avoid the problems associated with arbitrary proficiency standards. Because the same measures, test administration procedures, and scoring rules are used nationwide, CLA results are not a function of the state in which the tests were given. In addition, CLA results are not reported separately by subgroups mainly because differences in mean scores between groups correspond to differences in their admissions scores (and the program already takes these differences into consideration by reporting results in terms of value added).

Measurement Consistency

NCLB allows each state to select or construct its own tests. It also allows each state to set its own standards for what constitutes “proficiency” on the tests it uses. Thus, states can have very different percentages of students achieving “proficiency” because of differences in the tests they use, the score they use to define proficient, differences in the average reading and mathematics skills of their students, or some combination of these and other factors. Consequently, states with students of comparable ability (such as indicated by their average NAEP scores) often have very different percentages of students achieving their respective state’s proficiency standards. Thus, it is impossible to make meaningful comparisons of NCLB results across states.

As noted above, NCLB ignores differences among schools in the entering abilities of their students. This means that it does not give credit to schools whose students may have made outstanding progress unless those score gains lead to a substantially higher percentages of students reaching some arbitrary state standard.²

In contrast, the CLA uses the same battery of measures and scoring rules across all the participating schools regardless of where those schools are located in the country. It also uses the same input measure (SAT scores or ACT scores converted to the SAT scale) across schools for its value added analyses. These features allow a college to see how well its students are doing relative to similarly situated students at other institutions nationwide. It does not penalize colleges for admitting students with relatively low admission test scores or rewarding them for only admitting the crème de la crème. Instead, the CLA asks: what did you do with the raw material you had to work with and is that outcome comparable to that experienced by other schools with similar students?

CONCLUSIONS

No testing program, by itself, can measure all the abilities and competencies that need to be assessed. For example, the NCLB Act largely ignores student development in science, social studies, foreign languages, and other subjects. Similarly, the CLA does not assess student progress in their major fields of study. Nevertheless, when used with other indicators, such as grade point averages and capstone courses, both types of testing can contribute to our understanding of student progress. What college faculty and administrators must realize, however, is that the NCLB and CLA approaches to assessment are fundamentally different in their purposes, methods, and impact. In our view, the CLA approach makes the most sense for colleges and universities that want a reliable and valid indicator of whether their students are on pace with students from other colleges in developing some of the critical skills they will need while in school and after they graduate.

² The discussions related to the reauthorization of NCLB are considering ways of controlling for entering student ability and giving credit for increasing value added.