



INTRODUCING **cla+**
fostering great critical thinkers

College graduates face greater demands upon entering the workplace than at any time in the recent past. The skills required of these students are far greater than those required of students just a decade ago. So how do we know whether students are prepared to be successful in a world of increasing complexity?

National and international assessments (such as NAEP and PISA) suggest that students are not measuring up to the demands of today's workplace and college classrooms. Commissioned surveys (such as AAC&U and

I think most people would agree that skills like critical thinking, complex reasoning and writing – the things [CAE] does measure – are pretty important.

Bill Gates - "The Gates Notes"

Hart Research Associates' "Raising the Bar," 2010) suggest that employers want institutions of higher education to place more emphasis on intellectual and practical skills). Educational bodies at both the state and national level have recognized this growing challenge and have called for greater focus in mathematics and language arts. But content mastery in these areas, while important, is not enough.

Meanwhile, higher education is under attack from all sides. Politicians publically question the value of college and various media outlets support this message, knowing that it makes good copy. Alternative forms of higher education, spurred by the rapid ascension of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), posit that necessary higher-order learning can be credentialed in new and different ways.

All signs point in the same direction; students need stronger education preparation if they are to be successful critical thinkers and contributors to society. And institutions of higher education need ways for proving that their contributions to student learning do indeed matter.

But developing and improving students' critical thinking skills can be a challenge. While there is a wide variety of ideas offered by experts for achieving this goal, most agree that improving critical thinking hinges on these of effective and authentic assessment practices.

Since 2002, CAE has pioneered the use of performance assessments for determining whether students are great critical thinkers. Over 700 institutions—both in the United States and internationally—have participated in our performance assessments, either through the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA) or College and Work Readiness Assessment (CWRA).

Performance assessments—constructed-response instruments that require students to demonstrate their ability to perform—are directly aligned with Common Core State Standards (CCSS) that focus on the improvement of instruction, teaching, and the development of 21st century skills.

Specifically, CLA+ measures critical-thinking, problem solving, scientific and quantitative reasoning, writing, and the ability to critique and make arguments. Member institutions use CLA+ results to evaluate students' strengths and areas requiring further attention, sometimes placing results on transcripts to demonstrate that they have, indeed, graduated students with the skills needed to succeed beyond college. Students themselves use CLA+ results as a credential, illustrating to graduate schools and prospective employers their talents as 21st century thinkers.

Our fundamental goal at CAE has been and remains the better alignment of assessment with teaching and learning. Thus, the CLA+ approach of using performance tasks for assessing these skills has made it novel and indispensable for educational improvement.

The abilities to think critically, communicate effectively, and solve problems are so key to the kind of intellectual nimbleness that will be required of our graduates.

Margaret "Peg" Miller - "Demonstrating and Improving Student Learning"

HOW ARE MEMBER INSTITUTIONS USING CLA+?

There is a great deal of flexibility for how schools may use CLA+, which our member institutions have taken advantage of to fulfill their specific educational improvement needs. Here are some benefits to assessing different academic classes of students:

ENTERING STUDENTS

admissions | baseline | placement

Assessing freshmen allows institutions to understand students' specific strengths and weaknesses which provide for more pointed instruction, making formative use of returned results. Colleges and universities that value the skills assessed by CLA+ may consider using it as an admissions tool for students transferring from community colleges. (There is also a high school version of the assessment, CWRA+, which, for some institutions, may present a better tool than what they are currently using for admissions purposes.)

EXITING STUDENTS

competency | verification | transcripts

Given the skills increasingly requested by graduate schools and employers, administering CLA+ at the senior level can enhance credibility by providing third-party assurance of the quality of that institution's level of education. Institutions may place results on student transcripts as certification of a critical thinking competency. Students also receive their results in the form of a credential.

Of course, at the institutional level, senior results help institutions understand whether they've met their own expectations for excellence, by providing an independent evaluation of general skill development. Institutions use such results, when applicable, to create an action plan for improvement by focusing on specific skills that may require additional refinement.

VALUE-ADDED

targeted instructional improvement

By looking at the performance of both entering and exiting students, institutions learn more about their contributions to students' cognitive and intellectual growth. Some schools go even further. By assessing sophomores and juniors, results can show more specifically where and when the development of these skills are occurring most (or least).

critical thinking skills assessed

- analysis & problem solving
- writing effectiveness
- writing mechanics
- scientific & quantitative reasoning
- critical reading & evaluation
- critiquing an argument

what is new about CLA+?

- student-level reliability
- additional subscores
- criterion-referenced reporting
- more flexible assessment options
- utility as an admissions tool

What is Performance Assessment?

Performance assessment asks students to illustrate what they've learned through, well, performance. Rather than have students regurgitate content knowledge that they may have simply memorized or rehearsed, performance assessment asks students to illustrate the ability to apply, rather than collect and return, knowledge. CLA+ employs two types of performance assessments: a performance task and a series of selected-response questions, both of which require students to go through a thought process in order to arrive at a solution to a problem.

Sample:

The city of Springfield is deciding whether to implement a tax on junk food. Some citizens of Springfield believe that junk food is the cause of the obesity epidemic in their city. Others believe that individuals have the right to consume whatever foods they choose and citizens should not be taxed for purchasing foods that are high in fat, sugar, or sodium. The representatives in Springfield's senate are deciding whether to implement this tax.

As an intern for one of the senators, you have been asked to write a memo that addresses whether the Springfield senate should implement the junk food tax.

Draw evidence from the following documents:

- An abstract from a study reporting a relationship between obesity and junk food consumption;
- a political cartoon depicting how taxing junk food affects the under-privileged;
- a post from a blog supporting healthy eating;
- a letter to the editor discussing the rights of "tax-paying" citizens