

SEPT. 4 [2008] Outside the Circle

What's Wrong With Boasting About CLA Scores?

By Kevin Carey

Like all good Ohio State University alumni (M.P.A. '95), I've been preparing to obsessively follow the highly-ranked Buckeyes football team from the pre-season all the way to the traditional blowout loss in the National Championship game on January 8th. But this year my loyalties are divided. I have a new favorite team: the aptly-named Mavericks of the University of Nebraska at Omaha, which recently had the temerity to issue a press release announcing that it may be doing a particularly good job of helping its students learn.

Oh, the controversy! By citing its unusually high scores on the Collegiate Learning Assessment, UNO was either giving in to satanic temptation or paving the way for totalitarian dictatorship, depending on who you asked. "Shame," said one anonymous commenter here at *Inside Higher Ed*. "Lies," said another. "Gamesmanship," said an official at the State University of New York at Binghamton, lamenting that his faculty's hard work in developing local assessments would be undone.

Well, that's easy for him to say. Binghamton is a flagship university in the SUNY system. It can pick and choose from among the best students across New York State and nationwide, most of whom come from relatively well-off backgrounds and enroll full time, living on-campus or nearby. Binghamton's median SAT scores are high, funding levels generous, and scholarly reputation strong, leading *U.S. News & World Report* to rank it as the 37th best public university in America — sorry, 34th best, up three from last year, which Binghamton proudly announced on August 22nd. In a press release.

Apparently, it's perfectly OK to boast about your performance on a measure that's highly correlated with, and partially based on, how well your students did on a standardized test they took when they were juniors in high school. But a test of how much they learned *after* enrolling? Gamesmanship!

More to the point, does Binghamton actually do an excellent job of educating its undergraduates, relative to its peers? I have no idea — and I spent four years there (B.A. '92). To know that, we'd need some kind of comparable measure of growth in the higher-order thinking skills all college students should acquire — something like CLA.

UNO, meanwhile, doesn't have the advantages of the institutions that would like it to keep quiet. It was founded 100 years ago as a local university and didn't become part of the state system until 1968. It admits 86 percent of students who apply, most of whom commute and receive financial aid. UNO's 11,000 undergraduates tend to pick majors like law enforcement, marketing, and elementary education. For every dollar per student in state appropriations that goes to the state's flagship campus, UNO gets less than 40 cents.

UNO is, in other words, the kind of college that most college students attend. That's easy to forget, what with the media obsession over the admissions rat race and breathless coverage of internecine squabbling among faculty and administrators in the Ivy League. The issues that dominate mainstream media news coverage of higher education are simply alien to the experience of the vast majority of undergraduates, who attend community colleges or public universities like UNO, places so anonymous outside their local region that they include directions on how to get there — Southeast University of *this* or State University at *that* — in the name.

These are the students and institutions that were brought last into the higher education fold, when state university systems and community college systems took root in the 50s, 60s, and 70s. In many ways, their integration remains incomplete. They labor under financial arrangements that send the fewest resources to the colleges serving the neediest students. Worse, they've been slotted into the bottom rungs of a pre-established status hierarchy that is completely indifferent to matters of teaching and learning. Instead it's all about wealth, fame, and exclusivity — the stuff measured by *U.S. News*.

The institutions standing atop the existing pecking order aren't going to do anything to change this. Why would they? A fairer, more accurate understanding of institutional quality will only emerge when the UNOs of the world — the institutions that actually educate most college students — step forward and affirmatively support measures that the public can understand and use to compare one institution to another. Institutionally-developed assessments are fine — even vital — for self-study. But they won't do as an external measure of quality. It's simply not credible to say: "We've studied ourselves, and determined that we're great."

That's why UNO decided to publicize its CLA results. Terry Hynes, senior vice chancellor for academic and student affairs, attributes the university's success to an unusually deep and well-developed culture of assessment, along with a "can-do attitude" among the faculty. She acknowledges the CLA's limitations, but notes that there are no "perfect instruments" to measure learning. "We get students from a broad range of backgrounds and levels of preparation," she says, "but they're all here to learn. It's our job to take them from where they are when they arrive and help them become better." Another UNO official emphasized that the university sees the CLA not as a substitute for institutionally developed assessments but as an extension of them. Because UNO faculty explicitly integrate critical thinking skills into their assessments, it made sense to pick an instrument designed to measure those abilities.

There's no doubt that quantitative measures — whether the CLA or anything else — can only reveal so much, and are subject to measurement error that must be properly taken into account. But the potential benefits of such new means of comparison have been

badly underestimated. Last year, I published a set of community college rankings based on a different measure of academic quality, the Community College Survey of Student Engagement. Then, too, people objected, saying that such comparisons were inappropriate. I recently received an e-mail from an official at one of the highly-ranked community colleges with a different perspective. With identifying information removed, the e-mail said:

“Our students now walk with their heads held higher. Our state university is just down the road and we have forever lived in their shadow. Before it had always been that if you couldn’t make it there, then you went here. But no more. We have our own sense of place and prestige now.”

Every college and university in the country, two-year or four-year, public or private, famous or not, should have the opportunity for that kind of recognition. They all deserve the chance to claim a sense of place, to be acknowledged and rewarded for excellence in achieving their institutional mission. For most colleges, that mission isn’t about building a new research center or attracting only the best and the brightest or putting a great football team on the field. It’s about teaching students and helping them make their way in a demanding world.

It is long past time that colleges had the chance to stand up and be recognized for being great at what they were meant to be — and long past time others stopped condemning them for doing so.

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