

CLASP/CLAST Evaluation Report
Articulation Coordinating Committee
Task Force on Transition Assessments

Florida is fortunate to have a strong "2+2" articulation policy that guarantees community college Associate in Arts (AA) degree graduates access to upper-division in the state university system. This policy has been in law since 1979 (s. 1007.23, Florida Statutes). With this guaranteed transfer came concern over the quality of lower division instruction. In response, the Florida Legislature adopted the College Level Academic Skills Program (CLASP) as a mechanism to measure student preparedness for upper-division instruction.

Since its inception, the program, and the exam created as a component of the program (i.e., the College Level Academic Skills Test, a.k.a., the "CLAST") has been challenged and modified to provide alternatives. Over recent years, use of the alternatives to meet CLASP requirements has actually surpassed use of the exam, generating questions about the viability of the exam.

The State Board of Education (formerly the Florida Board of Education) adopted "Setting and Aligning Academic Standards" as one of its eight strategic imperatives. Project 5.2.2 was adopted as a feasibility study of the CLASP/CLAST and its alternatives as measures of postsecondary level general knowledge proficiency. Project 2.2.1 Enforcement of Postsecondary Student Achievement and Accountability, related to strategic imperative two, "Applying Existing Standards Consistently At All Levels", was adopted as a subsequent activity to uniformly apply recommendations adopted from the feasibility study. This paper outlines the findings and results of the feasibility study.

Background

Creation of the CLASP/CLAST Program

CLASP/CLAST developed to ensure quality of rising juniors. CLASP was created in response to a feeling that there was considerable variation in the preparation of community college transfer students and their ability to perform at the upper division level in the state university system. The program was established by the Legislature to ensure that students advancing to the upper division had mastered a set of skills that faculty deemed important for success in communications and computations. The program was created in the early 1980's and the first test was administered in October 1982.

By 1984 cut scores had been established and students were required to pass the test as a prerequisite to earning the Associate in Arts and/or admission to the upper division at a state university. The original intent was to develop cut scores that would indicate mastery of the skills that formed the basis for the test. However, that did not occur. Over time, the scores needed to pass the College Level Academic Skills Test (CLAST) were raised, but the final scores were not based upon faculty determination of what constituted mastery.

CLAST became a "high-stakes" test. A second component of the original intent was to have students take the test as they neared the 60-semester hour mark in their academic career. However, once the test became "high-stakes," the court ruled that students must be given multiple chances to pass. The result was to allow students to take the CLAST once they had earned 18 semester hours of college credit. This ability to take the test more than once allowed students who had initially failed one or more sections to pass the entire test prior to completing the Associate in Arts degree. Cohort tracking done by the Department of Education showed that

the group of students who took the test in October of 1994 had an initial overall passing rate of 59.1%. By June 1996, that overall rate for the cohort had been increased to 84.0%.

Without a defined mastery level for scores and once students with only 18 hours were allowed to take the CLAST, then the question became, "What is the purpose of this test?" A test that was originally intended for rising juniors, now appeared to be more of a freshman test. There also were questions related to where students should acquire the skills contained in the skill set. Much debate has been devoted to this issue.

CLAST rigor questioned. A 1990 study conducted by Gulf Coast Community College and Bay County Schools indicated that many of the skills tested on the CLAST mirrored those contained in honors level high school courses. Based upon this study, several individuals began describing the CLAST as a 10th grade test. However, many high school students are not exposed to honors or acceleration courses and thus do not learn these skills in high school. For these students the CLAST is truly a college-level test because that is where they are exposed to the skills involved.

CLAST alternatives created. Research done by community colleges, particularly Miami-Dade Community College, was used by the Legislature to provide alternative methods of meeting the CLASP requirement. Students can apply two alternatives to taking the CLAST: (1) earning designated scores on either the ACT or SAT tests; and (2) earning a 2.5 grade point average (GPA) in two courses designated by the Council for Education Policy Research and Improvement (formerly the Postsecondary Education Planning Commission).

A lesser known and discussed option is contained in subsection (17) of Chapter 6A-10.0311, Florida Administrative Code, that states "For purposes of evaluating student grade point averages to implement the provisions of subsection (14) [GPA alternatives] of this rule, each postsecondary institution may determine how to make allowances for students who have earned credits in Advanced Placement, College-Level Examination and International Baccalaureate Programs." With the advent of CLEP testing as a mandatory component of the Bright Futures Scholarship Program, this method of meeting the CLASP may be used more frequently.

Impact of CLASP

Over the course of the past twenty years, many studies have been conducted related to various aspects of the CLASP. One of the major concerns has been the differential impact of the test on various ethnic groups. The accountability system used by the Florida Community College System includes data on the percent of students with 60 or more hours who have met the CLAST requirement. The data for 2000-01 indicate that the percent of the overall group meeting the CLAST requirement was 95.9. The percent for Blacks was 89.3, for Hispanics 94.1, and for Whites 97.3 (see Table 1). This data indicates a significant difference in the variation of test scores for different ethnic groups.

CLAST Costs

The University of Florida (UF) develops the items used on the CLAST. The Department of Education has two contracts with UF, one for support and one for administration. The current support contract cost is \$1,258,446 and the administration contract cost is \$1,488,490 (totaling \$2,746,936). The new 3-year CLAST contract began March 1, 2003, at \$1,541,495 for administration and \$1,257,563 for support (totaling \$2,799,058). Institutional costs are more intangible and include such items as personnel to support testing centers, equipment, and courses that are developed and offered to students who do not initially pass the various

components of the test. These testing center costs are rolled into costs associated with other institutional tests (e.g., placement tests, CLEP, etc.). Additionally, there is an indeterminate cost associated with institutional review of student transcripts for purposes of implementing the CLAST alternatives related to course GPA requirements. Miami-Dade estimates that the cost of the CLASP to their institution is at least \$86,600 per year.

Evaluation Strategy & Findings

Implementation of the CLAST alternatives in 1995 resulted in a decline in the number of students sitting for the CLAST test. Over the subsequent years, the number of test takers has dropped from 53,470 first time takers in public and private institutions in 1994-95 to 13,108 in 2001-02, and the number and percent of students using the alternatives has increased.

Articulation Coordinating Committee Input

The Articulation Coordinating Committee (ACC) and individuals involved in the development of the new K-20 Strategic Plan wanted to know the impact of this change and if the alternatives were appropriate. A second consideration was if CLASP was still needed in light of the work recently completed by the K-20 Accountability Advisory Council. The Task Force on Transition Assessments, a practitioners group formed under the ACC, was charged with the assignment of studying the CLAST and alternatives and providing an evaluation of the program as it is currently structured.

The Task Force investigated the following questions:

- Has there been a change in the preparation level of students entering the upper division of the state university system via the CLAST alternatives versus the exam itself?
- Are the grade point average requirements set at the appropriate level in the alternatives?
- Does the CLASP/CLAST remain a viable means of assessing readiness for the upper division?

Findings

- *Student preparedness for upper-division, as determined by grade point average in upper-division, remains steady regardless of a student's use of CLAST scores or the alternatives as a means of satisfying CLASP requirements.*

Since a fundamental reason for the CLASP was to ensure students would be ready for upper division work, any change in the ability of students to perform in the upper division might indicate that allowing students to meet the CLAS requirements via alternatives was not appropriate. Information compiled by Miami-Dade Community College, based upon the Florida Community College System accountability measures, indicated that there have not been any changes in the ability of AA transfers to do well in the upper division of the state university system. As the shift has occurred from the test to the alternatives, the average GPA earned by AA transfers has remained steady.

- *The grade point average requirements of the English coursework alternative should be raised.*

If the alternatives are to be true substitutes for the test, then there should be an underlying relationship between the grades earned in English and mathematics courses and scores earned on the CLAST. This relationship should guard against the situation that is known as “false positives”, i.e., cases where students met the requirements of the alternatives but are unable to pass the CLAST. Two studies have investigated this relationship. The first was conducted for the State Board of Community Colleges in 1997 in response to Legislative mandate. It identified the percent of students failing the CLAST who would have qualified for an alternative. This study used a cohort of students from the fall 1995 sitting of CLAST and course information contained in the Division of Community Colleges Student Data Base. The conclusion was that the alternatives based upon ACT or SAT scores were meeting the Legislative intent of equivalency, but the course option was more difficult to interpret. The 2.5 GPA requirement for math courses appeared to be working as intended. The 2.5 GPA requirement for English courses, however, appeared to be too low.

A second study of this relationship occurred in conjunction with the work of the ACC Task Force. This study compared students CLAST outcome with the grades they earned in the courses that could have been used as an alternative method of meeting the requirement. The data were extracted from the Division of Community Colleges supplemental accountability files and the Student Data Base.

Based upon this data set, it appears that in order for the course alternative to be better aligned with the CLAST, the GPA used as the basis of the alternatives should be raised to 3.0 for the communications portion of CLAST. The computation portion should be addressed by either raising the GPA to 3.5 and retaining all of the current course alternatives, or remain at 3.0 with a review of the courses allowed as alternatives. One potential outcome of the course review is to reduce the sets of courses to those listed currently as option 1a (MAC*102 College Algebra or any other MAC course with the last three digits being higher than 102), option 2b (any two of MGF*113, MGF*114 or MGF*118), and option 3 (MGF*106 or MGF*113 and MAC*102 or MAC*105).

With 2/3 of students using the alternatives as a means of satisfying CLASP requirements, the CLAST exam is no longer the primary method of assessing student preparedness. Florida is one of only a handful of states in the nation that has a “rising junior” test. As discussed above, the use of the CLAST as a high stakes test has necessitated allowing more opportunities for students to pass and has caused the test to be moved back to the 18-hour mark. Also, about two-thirds of the students with 60 hours who have met the CLASP requirement have done so via the alternatives rather than the test.

Observations

Native state university students and their AA graduate counterparts from a Florida community college are capable of performing upper division work in the state university system at about the same rate of success (based on GPA comparisons). There has been no change in this performance since implementation of the alternatives to the CLAST.

However, since the majority of students reaching the 60 semester hour mark no longer take the test and the “high stakes” nature of the test has changed the timing of initial testing, the test itself does not appear to be functioning as originally intended. Based upon the performance of upper division students, the lack of mastery levels, the timing issue resulting in a change from a

“rising junior” to second semester sophomore test, and the overwhelming use of alternatives, the necessity of the test can be called into question.

Performance Accountability

Decisions related to the future of the CLASP should be considered in the context of both the K-20 Strategic Plan goals, and State Board of Education performance accountability goals. As mentioned earlier in this document, once policy decisions resulting from this feasibility study are adopted, they will be applied uniformly across the systems, consistent with the strategic plan.

Additionally, Commissioner Horne appointed the K-20 Accountability Advisory Council – a group of practitioners and policymakers from across the K-20 system – to recommend to the State Board of Education appropriate mechanisms for measuring accountability and performance success. Among the nine performance themes are core themes related to “number of students achieving at the highest level”, “number and percent of credentials granted and readiness for the next level”, and “percent of students progressing to the next educational level”.

An opportunity now exists to determine performance measures and standards for each of the accountability themes. For example, in lieu of the CLASP, accountability measures that indicate how well students do in upper division could be adopted. Examples might include upper division GPA and graduation rates at both the overall and individual major level.

“Performance Reports”

Challenges exist when the results of accountability and performance outcomes must be communicated for different purposes—for example, communicating to institutions for effectiveness activities, to policymakers for decision making purposes, and to consumers and the general public for informational and decision making reasons.

One mechanism that will be implemented to facilitate this communication activity and to operationalize the new K-20 accountability themes and measures will be annual sector and institutional “Performance Reports”. Beginning Fall 2003, these reports will benchmark current levels of accomplishment and will provide annual performance information for each institution. Decisions have yet to be made regarding specific measures and standards across the nine themes. Additional decisions related to timelines, improvement plans, and performance funding must also be made.

Given the results of this feasibility study, the timing of decisions that must be made related to the CLASP/CLAST contract, potential cost savings, and the opportunity that exists related to shaping performance accountability policies, the Articulation Coordinating Committee may want to consider replacing the CLASP requirement with a new way of measuring student and institutional success in preparing students for upper-division instruction.

Recommendations

The Task Force held a third meeting on February 19, 2003 following the ACC meeting on the same day. Members discussed the relationship of the CLAST history and current alternatives to the various options listed above. Members also expressed strong consensus that the need for some type of quality control mechanism related to the rigor of lower division instruction needs to remain in place, citing concern that the community college/university transfer process might not work as well as it does now without the maintenance of such a mechanism. Members felt

the current CLASP, including both the test and the alternatives, meet this need. One way of determining if this understanding of the true role of CLAST was correct would be to survey institutions regarding their use of the CLAST results. However, additional discussions with DOE staff indicated the time needed to properly conduct such a survey was more than was available to the Task Force.

Some members acknowledged the wide use of the alternatives has taken away the role of the CLAST by allowing over two-thirds of students receiving the Associate in Arts and/or entering the upper division to meet CLASP requirements via alternative routes. Given the direction of the state in adopting K-20 performance requirements, members also discussed the potential for a different approach to accountability based on the use of programmatic indicators or proxy measures rather than on the individual attainment of CLAST skills or the alternatives.

The Task Force recommends:

- ***A mechanism of accountability needs to exist to ensure quality lower division instruction in both the SUS and FCCS in preparation for student success in upper division.*** While the current mechanism of the CLASP (including both the alternatives and the CLAST) is one option for meeting that need, a different approach based on program performance accountability requirements, as opposed to individual requirements, could replace the CLASP and serve necessary quality assurance needs.
- ***Performance accountability mechanisms should be established to ensure important indicators of lower division quality are quantified and measured.*** At minimum, performance measures must include standards and goals related to improving:
 - Community College Associate in Arts completion rates and the rate of completion of 60 credit hours by FTIC students in the SUS;
 - Community College to SUS transfer rates and lower division to upper division retention rates of FTIC students in the SUS;
 - Student Grade Point Averages for both AA transfers and FTIC SUS students in subsequent selected upper division core courses in the major; and,
 - SUS graduation rates of FTIC students after six years, or community college AA transfers after four years, by major and overall.
- ***If program performance accountability measures, such as those stated above, are demonstrated to be valid indicators of preparedness of students for upper division work, and hence the attainment of College-Level Academic Skills, the current CLASP program should be repealed.*** Savings realized from elimination of a contract for the CLAST should be directed to reward improvement in institutional performance in the measures identified for this purpose.