MEMO

DATE: March 18, 2008

TO: Program Review Committee

RE: CLA Results

As part of our overall program review strategy, Westmont students participated in the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA) during the 2006-2007 school year. The CLA is designed to evaluate general thinking and communication skills. Each participating student was assigned to one of two types of exams: a performance task or an analytic writing task consisting of make-an-argument and critique-an-argument. Sample questions can be found at the Council for Aid to Education (CAE) web site at http://www.cae.org/content/pro_collegiate_sample_measures.htm.

The performance task is of particular interest. In it, students are asked to work with multiple documents of varying types and relevance. Students are asked to use these documents to write a memo addressing a related question and to make a recommendation. These are exactly the types of flexible and general thinking skills that we claim result from a Liberal Arts education in general and a Westmont education in particular.

The primary aim of the Collegiate Learning Assessment exam is to document changes in students’ abilities between the first and fourth years of college. CAE refers to this change as the value added.


I am pleased with Westmont’s CLA results. I’ve included highlights below.

CLA Highlights:

- 100 randomly selected first-year students took the CLA during orientation. This represents a very high response rate from invited students. Since an SAT score was required, only 88 first-year students were part of the data analysis. 57 graduating seniors (from a stratified
sample invitation list of 243 students) participated in March and early April of their last semester. 49 seniors met all of the criteria to be part of the analysis.

- Westmont scored at the 7th decile for value added. In other words, the *improvement* shown by our students from year 1 to year 4 is greater than that of at least 60% of all participating schools. This is particularly affirming given the high scores of our incoming students (see below).

- From figure 1, it appears that only about seven schools (6% of 115) had raw scores better that those of our incoming students. More significantly, after accounting for predicted differences in CLA scores predicted by SAT scores, Westmont’s average incoming-student score was in the top 20%. This high performance is represented visually by the height of the solid blue dot above the blue line. The first graph in the second set of figures provides a second representation. This would indicate that our incoming students are “over achieving” making it more difficult to demonstrate improvement.

- After accounting for differences due to SAT scores (height above red line), Westmont’s average graduating-senior CLA score was in the top 10%. Only one institution had a higher raw score. (See figure 1.)

- The performance task measures student’s ability to analyze and make use of disparate types of data in order to come to a conclusion and/or make a recommendation. This is precisely the type of general thinking skill that we claim should issue from a Liberal Arts education. Our incoming students had a deviation score of 1.4 (i.e. top 10%) and our seniors had deviation score of 2 (top 2.5%) on this part of the exam. The value added (or improvement) for this score places Westmont in the top 30%. Again, I find this gain particularly gratifying given the high scores of our incoming students.

- First-year students had a deviation score of 0.5 (top 31%) in the Make-an-Argument task. Our seniors had a deviation score of 0.9 (top 20%). The difference score of 0.4 of indicates that the gain in ability for Westmont students as in the top 35%.

- The number of Westmont seniors completing the Critique-an-Argument task was too small to draw meaningful conclusions.
Figure 1: Relationship between CLA Performance and Incoming Academic Ability

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<th></th>
<th>Intercept</th>
<th>Slope</th>
<th>SE</th>
<th>R-Square</th>
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<tr>
<td>Spring 2007</td>
<td>397</td>
<td>.72</td>
<td>59.3</td>
<td>.77</td>
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Freshmen (○) and Seniors (□) at other schools
Freshmen (●) and Seniors (△) at your school

Distribution of schools by actual versus expected scores (in standard errors) and performance levels

Each solid square represents one CLA school. Solid black squares (●) represent your school as applicable within the distribution of actual minus expected scores for freshmen (■) or seniors (□) or estimates of the actual value added (△) between freshman and senior years.