

Philosophy Department

Westmont College

Program Goal

Student Learning Outcome: Students in selected General Education Common Inquiry "Reasoning Abstractly" courses will demonstrate improvement in abstract reasoning by means of argument recognition and analysis.

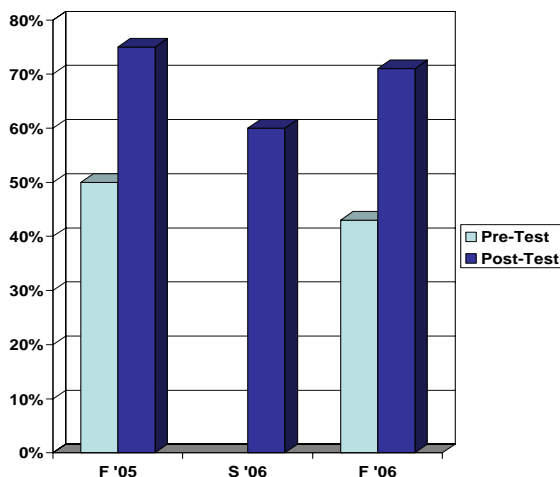
Featured Course: Christian Apologetics (RS 103)

Benchmark: By the end of the semester, 80% of the tested students will demonstrate skill in argument recognition and analysis by exhibiting (a) an ability to identify the conclusion of an argument in a passage containing an argument and (b) an ability to identify the premises that support the conclusion of this argument in the same passage.

Assessment Strategy

- For three semesters (F '05, S '06, & F '06), students in RS 103 were tested in class for argument recognition and analysis skills.
- Each test consisted in a passage from a philosophical essay containing one or more arguments.
- Students were told to identify the conclusion and premises of the main argument of the passage.
- In F '05 and F '06, students were given a pre-test at the beginning of the semester and a post-test at the end. In S '06, there was only one test, at semester's end.

Results



Interpretation of Results

- Student performance declined 15% from F '05 to S '06 probably in large part because there was no pre-test that semester.
- Student performance improved 11% when the pre-test was re-introduced in F '06.
- Student performance improvement between pre- and post-test was 25% in F '05 and 28% in F '06.
- The higher improvement percentage between pre- and post-tests in F '06 may be due to better instruction about argument recognition and analysis that semester.

Next Steps

- Most of the students who did not identify both premises and conclusion on a test were nonetheless able to recognize one or the other of these argument components, so we should begin keeping track of these partial successes as well.
- We have still not met our benchmark of 80% of our students being successful on the post-test, so we should consider giving the students more time for this exercise, choosing arguments that are somewhat less complicated, and/or providing more and better advance instruction about argument recognition and analysis.
- Since our benchmark focuses only on the percentage of students who are successful on the post-test, we are not attuned at this point to the degree of *improvement* between pre-test and post-test, so we should consider adding this extra dimension to our benchmark for this assessment tool.

Definitions

Argument: Two or more *statements*, one of which is the *conclusion* and the other(s), the *premise(s)*.

Statement: A claim about what is the case that is either *true* or *false*.

True (false): A *statement* is true if and only if it corresponds to the way things are and false otherwise.

Conclusion: The *statement* that is being argued for by means of the *premise(s)*.

Premise: A *statement* given in support of the claim that the *conclusion* of an *argument* is *true*.