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Advanced News Writing

Assessment Tests

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Assessment tests at universities are used to evaluate the progress of students and teachers to make sure national standards and expectations are met.

Robert A. Alexander, Director of Retention and Student Engagement, Department Head of Interdisciplinary Studies, and Head Chair of the Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP) Committee at Nicholls, said that assessment tests are necessary to ensure the university complies with the standards of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) and following the university’s QEP, a 10 year educational plan approved by SACS. SACS is the commission of higher education for the southern states whose primary goal is to enhance the quality of education and make sure schools comply with standards that address the needs of society and students, according to the SACS website.

Students at Nicholls and other universities are required by SACS to take assessment tests because “SACS argues that grades by themselves cannot tell faculty, teachers, university administrators, and accrediting agencies exactly how much a student is learning,” Alexander explained. Alexander said that by taking these assessment tests it helps Nicholls fulfill the university’s mission to educate students in a way that is compliant with national standards and expectations.

One particular assessment test given in higher education is the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA). Alexander explained that the CLA test is a critical thinking and writing test that is used to access skills that students are learning in a range of different classes that teachers apply a critical thinking rubric given to them by the university.

“Instructors can incorporate the elements of the rubric in their assignments. The rubric focuses on problem solving and addressing different perspectives while also considering the students' own position,” Keri Turner, Associate Professor of Languages and Literature, Chair of the General Education Assessment Committee and Chair of the Subcommittee on Critical Thinking and Writing for the QEP, said.

Alexander said that the test is given nationally to students who learn by the rubric in their classes and to some students who do not use the rubric in their classes. “The students were not separated on the CLA test. All students took the same test. After the scores were received, the results were analyzed to look for differences between the two groups,” Turner explained. Alexander said that the test is given to all levels of undergraduate students nationally and the test compares Nicholls other universities.

CLA, according to Alexander, is given to different groups of students each year so that the QEP board can determine results in different ways to come up with a more refined result. Alexander explained Nicholls has been giving the test for at least 3 years. He said that the first that the first year the CLA was given the university tested a group of first year English 101 students in the fall and group of English 102 students in the spring. Alexander explained by doing this the university could see the results of the pre-test and the post-test but that there were logistical problems to set the test up because nearly 1000 students took the test and it became very difficult.

Alexander said the next series of test they decided to give was to 100 freshmen in the fall and 100 seniors in the spring in hopes that university could see how the students have done throughout their years at Nicholls. Alexander said that this year 300 students of any classification were tested in the fall and 100 students out of those 300 students will be tested in the spring semester. He explained that some of the students taking the test have been instructed in their courses fallowing the critical thinking rubric and some students have not and by giving this test the university will be able to see the trends between the students are using the rubric and the ones who are not using the rubric.

Alexander explained that the challenge with the CLA is that it takes time to get scores back because students have to write in compared to a multiple choice assessment test. He said that the QEP boards are only at the beginning stages of gathering data to actually come to any conclusions.

Alexander said that some of the other assessment tests given at Nicholls is the Beginning College Survey of Student Engagement (BCSSE) and the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE). He explained that the BCSSE is given to freshmen every year and the NSSE is given to students at any level every other year. He said that these assessment tests help the university in understanding factors of student engagement, quality of instruction, application of technology in the classroom, advising and co-curricular activities.

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