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Marching Forward: Veterans, CLEP, and Student Success

When I first started working in a college testing center in 1999, one of the first things I had to do was to become "CLEP Certified." I had no idea what that meant exactly, but it was something that needed to be done, so I did it. I completed training through The College Board (the organization that administers College Level Exam Program tests, aka CLEP) and received a little certificate indicating I had completed the "CLEP Test Center Administrator Training Course." Little did I realize at the time how much this exam and its overall impact on students would interest me.

When I was in college at the University of Oklahoma, I knew vaguely of the CLEP exams. In the early 1990's, the exam was only available via paper/pencil, and in most places (like OU) it was every third Wednesday after a full moon (a slight exaggeration, but let us say it was not offered very often and was publicized even less). Today, the exam is administered via computer (paper/pencil exams are still available in certain cases which require that method), so the number of exams taken and the frequency of those exams have gone up dramatically. No longer a big campus secret, CLEP exams are a viable method to obtain credit for college-level courses, whether they be core degree requirements or general electives needed for degree completion.

Today over 1,700 colleges administer CLEP exams, and these exams are accepted at roughly 2,900 colleges and universities. According to The College Board, approximately 183,000 CLEP exams were administered in 2011-2012, with over seven million exams taken by students since their inception in 1967. This credit-by-examination program serves a diverse group of students, including adults, non-traditional learners, and military service members (of that 183,000, approximately 55,000 were military service members). Not only does it serve a broad-based cohort, but it also validates knowledge learned through independent study, on-the job training, or experiential learning, and translates that learning into college credit that is commonly recognized. This point will be discussed further when I detail CLEP exam development.

The 33 total exams themselves are broken down into five general categories: history and social sciences, business, composition and literature, science and mathematics, and foreign languages. All exams are multiple-choice in nature, with the English Composition and modular exams having an essay portion, which is graded either by faculty or College Board personnel (a school's policy dictates which method institutions will use). Immediate score reports (except exams with essays) are available to students and college personnel as a result of the multiple-choice test construction. The scoring is done on a "rights-only" system (no penalty for wrong answers, much like the College Board Advanced Placement Exams). The exams are scored on a scale of 20–80—with the American Council on Education (ACE) recommending a credit-granting score of 50 for each CLEP exam. This is a scaled score, equivalent to earning a C in the relevant course. While the minimum CLEP score required for each subject varies from exam to exam and from college to college, the ACE score is a recommendation, and the credit-granting policy of each college or university determines the passing grade. The fee for the exam, as set by the College Board, is currently \$80.00 (Colleges charge administrative fees that will vary to administer CLEP). That fee is paid by the student at the testing center.

CLEP and the Military

This past February, a colleague and I had the opportunity to make a presentation regarding military personnel and prior learning assessments (namely CLEP) at the Military Symposium for Higher Education, hosted by the University of Louisville. During that presentation, we referenced a quote by Dr. Anthony Dotson, Veterans Resource Center Coordinator at the University of Kentucky. Much to our surprise, after the presentation was over and we were in the "Q and A" session, Dr. Dotson stood up and offered even more insight into his use and advocacy of CLEP for military students. He stated "I'm a huge proponent of CLEP. In fact, I CLEP'd my

freshman year of college. I encourage all incoming veterans to consider taking CLEP prior to their arrival at UK, especially if they have not left active duty, as the exams are at no cost to them. CLEP can allow these nontraditional students to enter college a little better prepared and not as far behind their traditional student peers.”

CLEP exams are available to eligible military personnel to assist them in meeting their educational goals. The Defense Activity for Non-Traditional Education Support (DANTES) funds CLEP exams for eligible military service members and eligible civilian employees (specifically Department of Defense Acquisition Personnel). It is important to note that these exams are CLEP and not the traditional DANTES individual subject or general exam administered to military personnel. The U.S. Government will fund CLEP exams (one attempt per title) for the following military groups:

- Military personnel (active duty, reserve, National Guard): Army, Navy, Air Force, Marine Corps, U.S. Coast Guard, National Guard(s), and their designated Reserves.
- Spouses and civilian employees of: Air Force Reserve, Air National Guard, Army National Guard, Army Reserve, Coast Guard (active and reserve).

Military Veterans can receive reimbursement for CLEP exams and exam administration fees by completing and submitting the “Application for Reimbursement of National Exam Fee Form 22-0810” located at <http://www.vba.va.gov/pubs/forms/VBA-22-0810-ARE.pdf>. Please note that the Department of Veterans Affairs will not reimburse veterans for fees to take pre-tests (such as Kaplan tests), fees to receive scores quickly, or other costs or fees for optional items that are not required to take an approved test.

In the past academic year, The College Board and DANTES have recently launched a pilot program with college/university test centers. Through this program, eligible DANTES-funded test takers attempting a test title for the first time will not only have their exam fee funded by DANTES, but participating test centers will also waive their administrative fee (usually between \$20 and \$25). If the test center you have selected is fully funded, “Fully Funded Yes” will appear in the test center description, along with the address, phone number, and test center code.

Carlos Paillacar is an example of the impact of CLEP on student success. Carlos retired from the Coast Guard at age 46 after 21 years of service to pursue his education. He stated in a TV interview, “Before I retired, I said to myself, ‘Well, I speak Spanish, I should take the CLEP in Spanish.’” He received 12 credits for successfully passing the CLEP Spanish exam in the summer of 2012 (and an additional 13 credits from Miami Dade College as part of his Prior Learning Assessment in the area of photography). With credit in hand, he enrolled at Berry College as a sophomore with 25 credits and \$12,000 in savings, thanks to CLEP. He also added “Berry took me basically as a second-year transfer student with 25 credits. It basically saved me a year of education.”

CLEP Research and Student Success

What CLEP did for Carlos is not unique to military personnel. In fact, college students in general benefit greatly from the CLEP exam. In a 2010 study of Florida public institutions, preliminary results found that:

- CLEP students graduate in less time than non-CLEP students.
- CLEP students have higher GPAs than non-CLEP students.
- Students earning credit through CLEP perform better in subsequent English courses than non-CLEP students.

But the data and results did not stop there. The Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL), in cooperation with the Lumina Foundation for Education, published a study entitled “Fueling the Race to Postsecondary Success” in March 2010. The study, which surveyed Prior Learning/CLEP data from 48 nationwide institutions, found that in the areas of Persistence in College (i.e., retention), Time to Degree, and overall Degree Attainment (within 7 years), Prior Learning (PLA) students completed course and degree requirements at a pace that was two times, and in some cases as much as three times, greater than their non-prior learning counterparts.

In a separate study released by CAEL in April 2011, research found that Hispanic, PLA students earned bachelors’ degrees at a rate that was almost eight times higher than that of Hispanic, non-

PLA students. In addition, African American PLA students earned bachelors' degrees at a rate that was almost three times higher than that of African American non-PLA students. These findings suggest that CLEP/PLA could be a potentially important strategy for helping underserved or disadvantaged student populations succeed in completing postsecondary degrees and at a substantial cost savings.

While the Florida and CAEL/Lumina data are fascinating and certainly thought provoking, I wanted to see if those outcomes would be duplicated in regard to my own test takers. After I came to North Lake College (NLC) in the summer of 2009, I created an initiative where I would recruit Spanish-speaking, new-to-college students to take the Spanish Language CLEP exam. I had experienced success with that specific cohort while I had been at Tarrant County College, and knew that the ability exhibited by those students was often a stepping stone to a college career. In fall 2009, 54 high school and first-time-in-college (FTIC) students tested using the Spanish Language CLEP. These students were all tested at the North Lake College Testing Center in Irving. Of those 54 students who tested, 47 entered college (87%). In comparison, the number of first-time-in-college, degree-seeking students in fall 2009 was 1196. Two years later, in fall 2011, the number of "CLEP" students retained was 43, or 92%. By contrast, the retention percentage of those 1196 students was only 58%.

The retention for NLC students was a very positive piece of data, but the success did not stop there. The overall GPA of those 47 "CLEP" students who were retained after two years was 2.93, while the overall NLC student GPA for the cohort who entered college at that same time was only 2.18. Much like the outcomes generated from the Florida study, students who take advantage of CLEP as a prior learning assessment can and will succeed at a higher rate than the "average" student.

Summary

Students who earn college credit via CLEP are more likely to persist through college, which creates higher retention rates for your school. Those students are also likely to have higher GPA's when they graduate or transfer, leading to increased student success. In today's world of decreased state funding, lower retention and graduation rates, and increased scrutiny from a government perspective, it is imperative that we in higher education use all of the tools in our arsenal to create strong student success and allow students to achieve the dream of a college education. CLEP is such a tool.

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