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### CLA Project

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**Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA)  
Instructor's Assessment Report**

**By**

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**1. Course Information:**

The Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA) was conducted in POLI 320, Public Leadership and Management (POLI 320) and Strategic Management (MGMT 470) courses during the spring semester 2009. A total of 33 students enrolled in both course. One of the students dropped out during the course of the semester due to personal reasons leaving a total of 32 students in the two classes. Of this total number of students, nine students agreed to participate in the CLA. One of the students was a senior, one was a junior, five were sophomores, and two were freshmen. Students who agreed to participate in the exercise were informed that they will be given extra 5 points to count toward their final grade in the course if they complete the CLA.

**2. The Public Policy Issue: Economic Growth**

The Collegiate Learning assessment involved asking the students to act as a consultant to Senator John McCain, a conservative republican, who is running in the general election for President of the United States. Senator McCain's opponent is Senator Barrack Obama, a liberal democrat. Each candidate has a proposal for stimulating economic growth in the United States. While Senator McCain proposes to continue the George W. Bush's of tax cut for the top one percent wealthy citizens in the U.S., Senator Barack Obama proposes to repeal the Bush tax cut policy and replace it with tax cut for the middle class.

**3. CLA Scenario**

The students were presented with the following scenario: Senator John McCain is running for general election as President of the United States. Senator McCain's opponent in this contest is Senator Barack Obama. You are a consultant for Senator McCain.

Senator Obama presented three arguments during a nationally televised town hall campaign stop in Ohio:

First, Mr. Obama said that Senator McCain's proposal to stimulate the U.S. economy by continuing the Bush tax cut policy for the rich is a bad idea. Senator Obama said, "The Bush tax cut policy for the rich is a major contributing factor to the current economic recession which we are now experiencing, and continuing more of the same will only drive the nation's economy into a depression in the years to come." Mr. Obama supported his argument by referring to a commentary (Document A) published in the Tax Foundation website by Derald Prante, an economist, who rejects a Los Angeles Times newspaper article by Jared Bernstein, director of research program at the Liberal Economic Policy Institute, suggesting that tax cut for the wealthy contributes to the high economic growth. According to Mr. Prante, there is no evidence that lower tax rate with some spending offset helps promote economic growth.

Second, Mr. Obama said, "in this very difficult times what we need is tax breaks for the middle class which has proven during the Clinton Administration years to be most effective in stimulating spending on goods and services, which in turn increased gross domestic production and jobs, and economic growth." Mr. Obama supported this argument with a chart (Document B) that compared the average GDP growth during the Reagan and Bush Administrations era when tax cuts for the wealthy was in effect to the Clinton Administration years when no tax cut for the rich was in effect. Mr. Obama based this chart on data from the U.S. Department of Commerce Bureau of Economic Analysis.

Third, Mr. Obama said that historically, every time that an Administration has adopted a tax cut policy for the top one percent of our citizens, it has only benefitted the rich, and worse still, it has not stopped the decline in economic growth. On the other hand, a policy of no tax cut has lead to relative stabilization and growth of our economy. He presented a chart (Document C) that displayed a graph showing variation in economic growth trend from 1981 to 2007. Mr. Obama based this graph on data obtained from the U.S. Department of Commerce Bureau of Economic Analysis.

#### **4. CLA Task**

Senator McCain wants the best tax policy identified. As an independent public policy consultant, the student is requested to evaluate the strength and/or limitations of each of Senator Obama's three main points, explain the reasons for his/her conclusions, and justify those conclusions by referring to specific sources of evidence provided in the accompanying documents.

#### **5. CLA Questions**

Specifically, the student was asked to respond to the following questions:

1. What are the strengths and limitations of each of Senator Obama's positions on the matter?
2. Based on the evidence, what conclusions should you draw from Mr. Obama's position on this matter, and why?
3. What specific information in the document and any other factors to consider (such as quality of research, factual opinion, or the data and information sources about the link between no tax cut and economic growth) led you to this conclusion?

## **6. CLA Documents**

The students were instructed to be as objective as possible in their assessment of Mr. Obama's position. To do so, the students were provided three documents which Mr. Obama used to support his position. The documents are attached as supplemental information to this report.

As discussed above, Document A is a commentary published in the Tax Foundation website by Derald Prante, an economist, who rejects a Los Angeles Times newspaper article by Jared Bernstein, director of research program at the Liberal Economic Policy Institute, suggesting that tax cut for the wealthy contribute to the high economic growth. According to Mr. Prante, there is no evidence that lower tax rate with some spending offset helps promote economic growth. A student who carefully reviews the commentary will realize that Mr. Prante provided neither objective data nor the source of his opinion to substantiate his claims about the link between no tax cut policy and economic growth. Instead all of his claims are based on conjectural personal opinion.

Document B is a chart that compared the average GDP growth during the Reagan and Bush Administrations era when tax cuts for the wealthy was in effect and the Clinton Administration years when no tax cut for the rich was in effect. Mr. Obama based this chart on data from the U.S. Department of Commerce Bureau of Economic Analysis. If the student examines the chart carefully, he/she will notice that the chart provided conflicting average current and "real" GDP growth outcomes for tax cut policy and no tax cut policy. A student who carefully reviews the chart will also realize that to base conclusions on current GDP data is less reflexive of the "true" impact of tax cut on GDP since current dollar figures do not account for variation in inflation. Also, combining the Reagan era and Bush era economic growth data to make comparison with economic growth data during the year is erroneous (or spurious) since it fails to account for other variables or policies which may have contributed to the outcomes. The students were asked to base their assessment and subsequent recommendation solely on the documents provided.

Document C was a chart that displayed a graph of change in economic growth trend from 1981 to 2007. Mr. Obama based this graph on data obtained from the U.S. Department of Commerce Bureau of Economic Analysis. Although the source of the

data from which the graph was generated is authentic, the student should notice that the graph does not clearly delineate a correlation between tax cut and economic growth, and hence drawing conclusions as Mr. Obama did from this evidence about the positive influence of no tax cut for the rich on economic growth is inappropriate.

## **7. CLA Performance Task Administration**

The performance task was administered to students enrolled in Public Leadership and Management (POLI 320) and Strategic Management (MGMT 470) course on week of April 13, 2009. The students were informed that participation in the assessment is voluntary and as part of their homework for extra 5 points credit towards their final grade in the course. Nine of the thirty three students enrolled in the courses agreed to participate in the assessment. The sample consisted of two freshman, five sophomores, one junior, and one senior. The students who did not volunteer to participate in the assessment were asked to leave the classes prior to commencement of the CLA.

Prior to handing out the task, the nine students who agreed to participate were informed that they were about to take an assessment that was designed to measure their critical thinking, analytic reason, problem solving and written communication. They were informed that they will be answering a series of open-ended questions about a realistic situation, and that the assessment contains a number of documents that include a range of information sources. The students were instructed that while their personal values and experiences are important, they should base their responses on the evidence provided in these documents.

The students were provided with note pads and asked to write their responses directly on them. They were asked to abide by the honor code and spend a maximum of 2 hours writing their responses on the notes pads provided. The students were provided with the assessment scenario and questions to read before preparing their responses. They were asked if they had any questions or need further clarifications. A number of the students asked for clarifications of the assignment and the clarifications which we provided to their satisfaction. They were informed that their response was due in the next class session, which was in two days.

## **8. Student CLA Performance Result**

The students' responses indicated that they all reviewed the scenario, assigned tasks and documents. All the students made references to the documents provided. However, with the exception of two students, one a senior and the other a junior, all the students did not clearly identify the strengths and weaknesses of the document in drawing conclusions about Mr. Obama position. Rather their conclusion seem to based strictly on preconceived personal subjective opinion that tax cut for the rich was a bad idea which will not stimulate the economy, but will only provide more money to the rich who will not invest it in the economy. In particular, they all seem to be persuaded by Mr. Prante's argument against tax cut to the wealthy presented in

Document A, despite the methodological limitations of his claims. For example, all of the seven students were of the opinion that the rich care nothing for the poor, but themselves and their families. None of the students commented on the lack of objectivity of Mr. Prante's data or the source of his opinion. Meanwhile, the junior and senior students did question Mr. Prante's lack of provision of the source of data from which he drew his conclusion of no link whatsoever between tax cut and economic growth. However, the junior student commented that as an economist, Mr. Prante may be right. The senior student on the other hand rejected Mr. Prante's claim outright.

As for the data presented by Mr. Obama's in Documents B, again with the exception of the two junior and senior students, none of the other seven students pointed out that making conclusions based on current GDP data is not reflexive of the "true" impact of tax cut on GDP since current dollar figures do not account for variation in inflation, as well as observing that combining the Reagan and Bush eras' economic growth data to make comparison with economic growth data during the Clinton Administration years is erroneous (or spurious) since such comparison fails to account for other variables or policies which may have contributed to the outcomes. Rather, the seven students generally were of the opinion that the data presented on the table helps only to confuse the issue of their preconceived belief that Republicans favor tax cut simply to put more money in the pockets of the very wealthy in this country. The junior student acknowledged the validity of the data source, but could not distinguish between the appropriateness between current GDP and "real" GDP in making conclusion about the relative impact of the two types of tax policies being proposed by the Republicans and Democrats. As a result, the student concluded that the data presented in the Table does not help in resolving the issue. Meanwhile, the senior student correctly identified the "real" GDP data to be more accurate, and concluded that cutting taxes for the wealthy as adopted by the Republican Administrations does not improve economic growth. Furthermore, he cautioned that other government policies and variables should be taken into account when arriving at this conclusion, not the data presented on this table alone. Both the junior and senior students did acknowledge that the data source (i.e. the U.S. Department of Commerce Bureau of Economic Analysis) was reliable.

With regards to Document C, all the students generally could not tell what to make of the trend shown on the graph. Two of the students concluded that the graph does seem to substantiate Mr. Obama's argument that during the Republican Administration era characterized by tax cut for the wealthy, the economy did not show any noticeable growth, but they did not explain why. The junior and senior students, while acknowledging the authenticity of the data source, simply commented that the graph did not provide sufficient information to draw any meaningful conclusion.

## **CLA Discussion and Recommendation**

The students' performance on this CLA assessment exercise may have been affected by limitations of the three documents which were provided, as well as the students' limited knowledge of research methodology. For example, Document A contains conjectural/anecdotal subjective "expert" opinion about the effect of tax cut on economic growth. The methodological literature generally considers this type of method for validating claims to less reliable in drawing conclusions than more rigorous quantitative approach like projection and prediction methods, especially if the anecdotal comments have not been properly verified and corroborated. Without a sound training in research method, the students in the assessment may have been "handicapped" in assessing the validity and reliability of this document as evidence in determining the appropriateness of the two policy alternatives presented in the CLA performance task in enhancing economic growth. Second, Document B required the students to have a basic economic knowledge of the distinction between current dollars and "real" dollars. Most of the students in our sample could not distinguish between the two, which may have contributed to them not being able to draw the right conclusion. The senior student who arrived at the right (expected) conclusion may have taken some course(s) in economic to be able to distinguish between the accuracy of the two types of data or dollar estimates, as well as an understanding that other variables should be taken into account when establishing causation. Third, the graph presented in Document C requires some knowledge of statistical trend/projection analysis. The students in our sample seem to be generally lacking in this type of knowledge, which may have contributed to them having difficulty in interpreting the graph.

These limitations notwithstanding, three major conclusions and recommendations can be gleaned from the findings of this CLA. First, it is quite obvious that almost all the students who participated in the assessment need to continue to improve their basic critical thinking, analytic reasoning, problem solving skills. However, their written responses, despite a few spelling and grammatical errors which may have been due to rush in meeting the assigned deadline for turning in their responses, demonstrate that the students possess adequate basic written communication skills. Second, the fact that the junior and senior students did perform better than the freshman and sophomore students in the CLA, suggest that academic class does matter in gauging students' critical thinking, analytic reasoning, problem solving and written communication skills. In particular, this assessment suggests that students in higher academic class seem to possess more of these skills than those in lower academic classes. Third, the design of task for CLA also matters. The type of quantitative and qualitative data and information provided to the students seem to have diminished the effectiveness of the student's ability to rely on the documents provided to make their assessment of the CLA tasks.

Hence, we make the following three major recommendations. First, Fayetteville State University faculty should continue to make a concerted effort to adopt active learning strategies involving integration of inquiry guided learning and problem-solving learning approaches in course delivery and student assignments. Second, critical thinking, analytic reasoning, problem solving, and communication skills should be

intensified during students' freshman and sophomore degree program years. Third, the CLA task and supporting document to be used for such assessment should be designed according to the academic developmental stages of the students. The FSU should institute a required university-wide CLA of all students pursuing various degree programs. This way, the university should be able to assess its overall level of achievement in providing its students with requisite "soft skills" needed to be globally competitive as specified in FSU's Mission Statement, Strategic Plan and UNC Tomorrow Recommendations.

## **ATTACHMENTS**



**Document A:**



November 1, 2008

### Are Tax Cuts Good for Economic Growth?

by Gerald Prante

Today's *Los Angeles Times* had a story about how Obama and McCain differ on taxes, with Obama focusing on questions of vertical equity and McCain focusing on efficiency. In the article, there was a quote from Jared Bernstein of EPI:

"You can't find evidence that low tax rates foster high economic growth," said Jared Bernstein, director of a research program at the liberal Economic Policy Institute. "In my view, Medicare, education, child care and preschool services that the government provides are going to be more necessary in the future."

I'm not sure what Bernstein's definition of "high economic growth" would be, but if he's implying that there is no evidence that lower tax rates help promote economic growth, he's way off the mark. Of course, it's not *always* the case that a tax rate cut will promote economic growth given that there must be some spending offset, but I could come up with a pretty good list of tax rate cuts financed by spending cuts that would increase economic growth.

It is true that better education pre-K through grade 12 would promote economic growth, maybe even more than tax rate cut. But I can guarantee that if you cut farm subsidies out of the budget and lowered tax rates accordingly, economic growth would be fostered. (As for Medicare promoting economic growth, I'd say that's a stretch...maybe universal coverage for those under 25, but not for those 65+.)

Ask any left-of-center economist who opposed the Iraq war whether or not economic growth would have been higher under lower taxes instead of spending that money in Iraq. They would be unanimous in telling you that lower taxes would have been preferential (holding the deficit constant).

If Bernstein's standard for "high" economic growth is that a tax cut pay for itself, I would agree that no major tax rate cut at today's tax levels is going to promote that much economic growth. (I'm referring to major federal taxes, as I'm sure there is some state out there with a situation where lower tax rates would pay for themselves...say on a cigarette tax or something where there is a large amount of border activity. Also if you consider certain prohibitions to be implicit taxes, repealing them and in effect cutting tax rates would pay for themselves.)

But Bernstein's position seems to be like that of many on the left, which is a lexicographic preference for government always getting bigger, and he's trying to act as if it's a free lunch. It's very similar to the view of those on the right who say that government is a waste and should be starved of all revenue. The fact of the matter is that the optimal size of government  $> 0$ , but its optimal size is not 100 percent of the economy (and there would be substantially lower economic growth if that were the case).

But Bernstein's position seems to be like that of many on the left, which is a lexicographic preference for government always getting bigger, and he's trying to act as if it's a free lunch. It's very similar to the view of those on the right who say that government is a waste and should be starved of all revenue. The fact of the matter is that the optimal size of government  $> 0$ , but its optimal size is not 100 percent of the economy (and there would be substantially lower economic growth if that were the case).

There are some government spending items currently in existence that are not worth their costs to taxpayers. Then again, there are some hypothetical government spending items that do not exist right now that would be worth additional tax dollars. The secret is finding which spending items are worth their costs and only funding those, and raising the necessary revenue in the best possible way that meets various criteria (such as equity and efficiency).

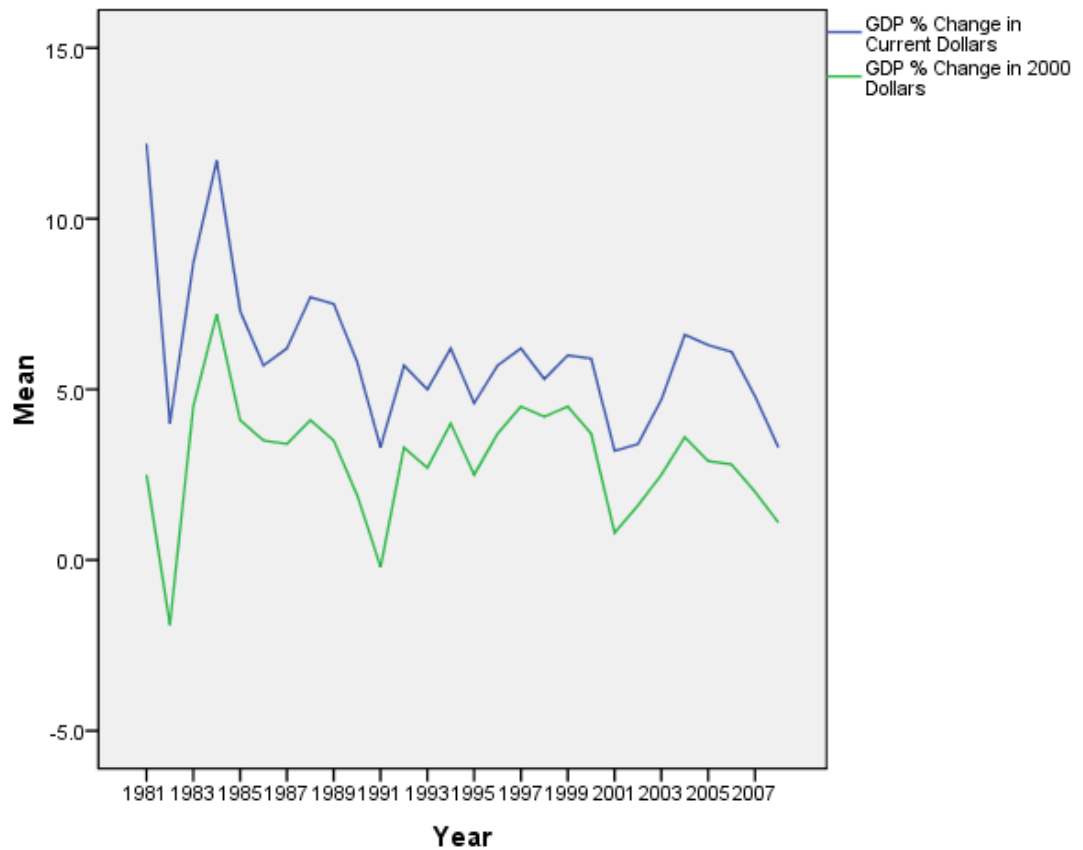
It is one of the paradoxes for those who seek to rally support for starving the beast (even if it worked, say, at the state level under a balanced budget rule). You are starving a beast because you view the beast as too wasteful and not looking out for the best interest of the taxpayer. But who's to say that when you starve it, it's going to devote its now more limited resources to the best interest of the taxpayers? It may starve you in return of the services you and those whom you seek to garner support from value most (since you already believe that it doesn't look out for your own interests), thereby not getting rid of the programs at the margin that aren't worth their costs to taxpayers but instead getting rid of the programs that are worth their costs.

**Document B:** Comparison of Average U.S. GDP Growth in Current and “Real” (2000) Dollars between No Tax Cut Policy and Tax Cut Policy

Type of Public Policy Makers	Tax Policy	GDP % Change in Current Dollars	GDP % Change in “Real” (2000) Dollars
Liberals	No Tax Cut	5.6%	3.7%
Conservatives	Tax Cut	6.0%	2.7%

Source: Bureau of Economic Analysis, U.S. Department of Commerce, April, 2009

**Document C:** Percent Change of United States GDP Trend from 1981 to 2008 in Current and “Real” (2000) Dollars



Source: Bureau of Economic Analysis, U.S. Department of Commerce, April 2009