Miami University recently participated in the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA), an open-ended test of students’ critical thinking, analytic reasoning, problem solving, and written communication skills. The CLA staff provide a variety of instructions, technical support, and guidelines for conducting the test. However, Miami staff discovered that nothing can prepare you for the CLA like actually running the CLA.

Miami staff encountered issues in five areas: 1) recruiting students, 2) technical details, 3) scheduling sessions, 4) time constraints, and 5) emergency preparation. In some cases, beforehand planning reduced or eliminated potential problems. In other cases, we learned what not to do by doing the wrong thing! To assist other institutions preparing to conduct the CLA, we share some of the unexpected challenges we encountered and present tips for ensuring that the CLA runs as smoothly as possible.

RECRUITING STUDENTS
Tip #1—Send invitations all at once, rather than in waves. Miami initially sent invitations in waves, e.g., 100 invitations were sent, followed by another 100 if more participants were needed. Response rates on the later waves were much lower. In the spring, all invitations were sent at the same time, with a waiting list for those who responded after all sessions had closed. Response rates increased from 26% (fall) to 44% (spring).

Tip #2—Consider using incentives. If you are not conducting the test during a class or as part of a course requirement, an incentive can encourage students to participate. Review your response rates for past surveys and consider that encouraging students to participate in the CLA may be more difficult. The year before conducting the CLA, Miami University asked students to rate the appeal of different types of incentives. The results of this survey helped us determine an appropriate incentive and to achieve a response rate comparable to our typical survey response rate.

TECHNICAL DETAILS
Tip #3—Run a demo session on multiple computers to check for potential technical glitches. Run this demo session before the fall and spring testing sessions, even if everything worked perfectly during the fall. IT staffing changes and computer updates over winter break can create problems in the spring that weren’t present in the fall.

Tip #4—Beware Java auto-updates! If a Java update request appears while a student is taking the test, the CLA’s secure browser will shut down. There are several ways to prevent this problem: 1) Ask your IT staff to suppress Java auto-updates on the computers during the CLA testing period. 2) Request the alternative secure browser testing site from your CLA rep. 3) Kick the computer. (Note: We found this method rarely worked, although the proctors felt much better afterwards.)

SCHEDULING SESSIONS
Tip #5—Don’t forget the unofficial “holidays.” Although we know not to schedule testing sessions on institutional holidays, it’s easy to forget that students sometimes declare their own holidays which don’t appear on the official university schedule. Talk with your Student Affairs staff to learn when these unofficial student holidays occur.

Tip #6—Schedule only a few students for the first session. Scheduling only a few students for the first session minimizes the number of students impacted by any unanticipated first-night problems.

Tip #7—Running night sessions can increase response rates, but decrease access to tech support. Access to your own and the CLA’s tech support may be reduced at night. Schedule night sessions only after running one to two successful sessions during the day, when support staff are readily available.

Tip #8—Double-check the room reservation. Occasionally computer systems—or humans—make errors and rooms are double-booked. Always personally confirm that the room is reserved. It is much better to learn about scheduling problems beforehand than in the middle of the testing session.

Tip #9—Visit the room to make sure it is set-up for your needs. Consider whether the lab has the number and type of computers needed, if there is enough room for students to work, the amount of privacy in the room, and whether you will need a key to access the room.

TIME CONSTRAINTS
Tip #10—Hire proctors. If possible, hire graduate students to run the testing sessions. Running sessions is not complicated and can easily be done by a competent graduate student. The amount of time spent training the proctors is far outweighed by the time saved in running sessions.

Tip #11—Set aside plenty of time. IR staff spent over 100 hours on CLA-related activities during the year of the test administration, with the majority of the time spent during and immediately prior to the month of actual testing. An online scheduling tool, sending students confirmation and reminder emails, and hiring two proctors reduced some of the workload. However, students emailed IR staff with a variety of questions that required individualized responses, increasing the time spent on recruiting.

Tip #12—Assign an extra proctor to sessions with a student with a learning disability. Students with learning disabilities can receive extra time for completing the CLA. Because assigning extra time requires the proctor to enter information directly onto the student’s computer, schedule a second proctor who can sit next to the student for the first few minutes of the test.

EMERGENCY PREPARATION
Tip #13—Make friends with anybody who can help in an emergency. Introduce yourself to the IT staff, the room scheduling staff, the administrative and maintenance staff in the building where you will run sessions, and your CLA rep. Get on the good side of anybody who can let you into a locked computer lab, find a different lab if one is double-booked, or fix your computers if they crash during a session.

Tip #14—Always have a staff member on-call for emergencies. Provide proctors with an emergency phone list that includes IT staff and IR staff in charge of the project.

Tip #15—Cancelling a session is sometimes necessary. When planning your CLA administration, determine when, if at all, you should cancel a session. Issues to consider include whether students have started the actual test portion, whether the problems impacted students’ ability to focus on the test, how much students will be compensated if they do not complete the CLA (if compensation is typically provided), and whether you should reschedule students for a later session.

Share your Tips!
What do you wish you had known before administering the CLA at your institution?