Using the VALUE Rubrics for Improvement of Learning and Authentic Assessment

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Three Chapter Excerpts
CHAPTER 1:
Frequently Asked Questions about the VALUE Rubrics

As faculty and other academic and student affairs professionals have begun using the VALUE rubrics to assess student learning, many questions have been raised about the intent, design, and application of the rubrics. Following is a compilation of the nine most frequently asked questions, along with a brief response to each. Many of the issues raised below are explored further in subsequent chapters.

1. Why was this particular set of rubrics developed?
The Valid Assessment of Learning in Undergraduate Education (VALUE) project is part of the broader Liberal Education and America’s Promise (LEAP) initiative of the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U). The VALUE rubrics were developed to help assess the Essential Learning Outcomes around which the LEAP initiative is organized (see fig. 1, p. vi). These outcomes represent a consensus among educators and employers about the kinds of learning students need as preparation for successful participation in civic life and the global economy.

At the time the VALUE rubrics were developed, it seemed that some of the LEAP Essential Learning Outcomes—namely, those focused on areas of knowledge, rather than on skills or abilities—were already well covered by existing measurements and, therefore, did not require the development of rubrics. A reading rubric was added during the development process, however, as faculty insisted on the importance of assessing student reading as an underlying ability necessary for enhancing student writing, critical thinking, quantitative literacy, and other outcomes. Most recently, an additional rubric to address global learning has been developed with future possibility of rubrics on scientific literacy and other interdisciplinary outcomes.

2. How were the VALUE rubrics developed, and by whom?
The VALUE rubrics were developed by teams comprised of faculty members, academic and student affairs professionals, and other experts from public and private, two-year and four-year higher education institutions across the United States.¹ (For a detailed description of the process, see Introduction above.)

3. How were the VALUE rubrics’ descriptors or labels determined for each level of achievement?
The goal was to identify descriptors or labels that do not have pejorative connotations when used to describe student achievement and that incorporate terms commonly used in academic settings. Hence, “capstone” was selected to describe the culminating level of achievement, whereas “benchmark” was chosen to describe the starting point for learning exhibited by entering students. “Milestones” simply represent progressively more

¹ The team members who participated in the development of each of the fifteen VALUE rubrics are identified online at http://www.aacu.org/value/rubric_teams.cfm.
sophisticated or accomplished performance as students move from benchmark to capstone. Other terms can be substituted according to campus preference.

4. Do the performance-level numbers in the VALUE rubrics represent year in college (e.g., 1=freshman, 2=sophomore, etc.) or grades (e.g., 4=A, 3=B, etc.)?

The numerical scores do not represent years or grades. The development teams indicated that “4” represents the level of achievement expected for a student to be awarded a baccalaureate degree, whereas “1” reflects the level of performance the rubric developers found among entering students in their own classrooms. “2” and “3” represent intermediate milestones that indicate students are moving toward more complex and sophisticated demonstrations of learning. Community colleges often use “2” and “3” as expected levels of achievement for associate-level degrees and for transfer, although in practice their students often exhibit higher levels of achievement in various rubric areas. The VALUE rubrics initially included a total of six levels of achievement, but faculty testing the rubrics argued forcefully that four levels were sufficient and, indeed, preferable for programmatic and institutional assessment purposes.

5. How do the VALUE rubrics fit within the national accountability frameworks associated with accreditation requirements and standardized testing regimes?

The VALUE rubrics have been embraced by all the regional accrediting bodies as one acceptable approach for institutions to use in assessing student learning. The rubrics represent an alternative to standardized testing, providing more robust and nuanced information on areas of strength and weakness in student learning and across a wider range of outcomes than are addressed by the most commonly used standardized tests—the ETS Proficiency Profile, the Collegiate Learning Assessment, and the Collegiate Assessment of Academic Proficiency. Moreover, the rubrics align with faculty and employer expectations for what college graduates should exhibit. Public institutions may now use the VALUE rubrics to display student learning as part of the Voluntary System of Accountability.

6. How are the VALUE rubrics being used on campuses?

The VALUE rubrics are being used for multiple purposes. They are being used for summative assessment of the learning required for graduation and accreditation, for example, and for both formative and summative assessment of student learning for program achievement and progress—both within individual disciplines and across general education programs. At the level of the individual course, modified rubrics are being used for grading.

7. Can I use the VALUE rubrics in grading student work?

The VALUE rubrics were not developed as grading rubrics. They were developed as “metarubrics” to be used at the institutional or programmatic levels in order to assess student learning overall and over time, not for specific assignments. The rubrics can be translated into grading rubrics for specific courses, using the same criteria or dimensions for learning, but...
the performance descriptors would need to be modified to reflect the course content and assignments being examined, while still preserving the dimensions of learning in the original rubric.

8. Are the VALUE rubrics valid and reliable?
Yes. The development process itself established the face and use validity of the VALUE rubrics, which was confirmed by the adoption and use of the rubrics on more than three thousand campuses since the fall of 2010. Campus-level calibration analyses have consistently demonstrated high levels of agreement among evaluators. In addition, a national reliability study and several consortia of campuses have achieved acceptable levels of reliability in projects focused on one or more of the rubrics.

9. Do the VALUE rubrics have to be used as they are, or can they be modified?
The VALUE rubrics are meant to be adapted in order to reflect the individual mission, program mix, and student demographics of the institutions where they are used. The performance criteria for each rubric represent the most commonly expressed dimensions of learning that the development teams found in their survey of existing rubrics. On many campuses, the language has been modified to reflect local terminology. And in some cases, dimensions or criteria have been added to a rubric in order to represent particular aspects of how the specific learning outcome is manifested on a given campus.

However, modifications should be considered carefully; the more modifications made to a VALUE rubric, the more difficult it becomes for the institution to place its findings within a broader national context.
CHAPTER 8:
Using Results for Improvement

The use of rubrics is intended to yield meaningful evidence of demonstrated learning from students doing their best work. But nothing undermines the assessment process more than unused data. As campuses implement the VALUE rubrics, we are learning more about the specific ways in which the evidence they gather can be used to improve many different facets of student learning and campus practice—from the curriculum to the cocurriculum, from individual courses to entire programs. Such improvements are typically focused on the assessment process itself, on modification of the rubrics, on the development of recommendations for best practices, on assignment redesign—or on some combination of these. The examples discussed below are drawn from colleges and universities where specific steps have been taken to gather data, discuss findings, and pursue evidence-based action.

FACULTY DEVELOPMENT
At campuses that have implemented rubric-based assessment, faculty members have engaged in conversations about student learning across varied areas of the curriculum and cocurriculum. An important outcome of these conversations has been the realization of a new outlet for engaging in productive faculty development. Even as faculty have discussions about rubrics, they are also having broad discussions about what matters in terms of learning outcomes, pedagogy, assessment, and student learning in general.

During faculty development sessions focused on using the VALUE rubrics for assessment at Daemen College, for example, the discussion expanded to include consideration of the meaning of the competencies being assessed as well as what a competency-based curriculum entails. The goal was for the competencies to become central to undergraduate education at Daemen. Faculty members also discussed the importance of communicating the coherent nature of such a curriculum effectively, making it clear that it is more than a simple checklist of requirements. Similarly, faculty development initiatives at Carroll Community College use rubric data to guide instructional improvement strategies.

PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT FROM GENERAL EDUCATION TO THE MAJORS
Evidence gathered through the use of rubrics to assess student learning can help guide programmatic development. At Lewis University, use of the VALUE rubrics for written communication, quantitative literacy, and critical thinking has led to improvements in student learning within the school of business. Texas A&M University used the VALUE rubrics to guide improvement across academic departments: assessment results are disaggregated by major, and reports are generated for each participating department. These reports, which compare the achievement of each department’s majors to that of students across the respective college and across the university as a whole, are used to inform ongoing efforts to improve the major programs.

At the University of Mobile, data obtained from the implementation of the VALUE rubrics are used at the beginning of a cycle of improvement that is focused on the general education program. In the fall of 2011, for example, a university assessment committee

CASE STUDY INSIGHT
Our use of the writing rubric and writing portfolio has had a positive impact throughout the institution.

— Kirk Robinson, Calumet College of Saint Joseph
identified as a desirable outcome a mean overall score of 3.0 or above on each of the five dimensions of the VALUE rubric for oral communication—organization, language, delivery, supporting material, and central message. While all the student work that was evaluated met this goal, the committee identified the two dimensions with the lowest mean scores—language (3.0) and delivery (3.06)—as areas for improvement. The committee recommended that faculty members place greater emphasis on the specific language of each discipline, and that the components associated with delivery be addressed in both the first-year orientation course and the upper-level courses in the majors.

The VALUE rubrics are used at a more advanced stage of assessment at the University of North Carolina Wilmington, where a process for disseminating results is clearly defined. After reviewing results, the Learning Assessment Council issues specific recommendations for actions to improve student learning, and these recommendations are provided directly to both the provost and the faculty senate. Final reports are disseminated to the faculty through the faculty senate, made available on a general education assessment findings website, and used to inform workshops conducted by the university’s Center for Teaching Excellence.

**IMPROVEMENT AT THE COURSE LEVEL**

At Midland College, evidence obtained by using the VALUE rubrics to score student work led to the development of a series of specific action steps:

- Systematically analyze sophomore-level courses to determine whether they reflect additional rigor above the freshman level; discuss with faculty how to infuse rubric content into the curriculum.
- Offer professional development training to faculty in the “art” of teaching general education knowledge and skills.
- Offer professional development training on how reading skills relate to student success in all general education courses, and ensure the content of the reading rubric is being reflected in the curriculum.
- Investigate a broader range of core and general education courses, thus ensuring a more diverse group of artifacts to select from.
- Ensure that faculty are familiar with the content and structure of the VALUE rubrics so that assignments can be aligned properly.
- Provide faculty professional development for recording speaking assignments in core courses with the goal of providing ample artifacts for evaluation.

Further, the use of VALUE rubrics to assess reading and writing competencies at Midland has led to specific conclusions and suggestions for change. For example, the assessment process revealed the existence of discrepancies between individual course objectives and their measurement. Some departments articulated learning outcomes for each course more clearly than others, and only some focused on internal measurement. Discovery of these discrepancies led to the suggestion that additional professional development should occur related to the use of assessment tools.

At DePaul University, where the VALUE rubric for integrative learning is used to assess the capstone project in the School for New Learning, the assessment process has led to several improvements. For example, common language and criteria have been developed for the Advanced Project (AP) program. Shared expectations for self-assessment and reflection...
have been built into the AP process, and greater consistency in guiding and assessing student learning has been achieved.

**IMPROVEMENT IN SPECIFIC OUTCOMES AND AREAS**

Many campuses have used the VALUE rubrics to focus their direct assessment efforts on specific learning outcomes, often in particular areas of the curriculum or cocurriculum or in particular programs. For example, Texas A&M University has developed projects focused on improving two outcome-specific areas: written communication and intercultural competence. In connection with the reaccreditation process, the university is using the VALUE rubrics for lifelong learning and integrative learning to help advance efforts to increase students’ access to high-impact experiences. Similarly, Lewis University has used the VALUE rubrics to make improvements in the College of Business. Rubric data were used to identify problem areas, and specific goals for improvement have been set with respect to each area assessed. For critical thinking, the business faculty developed and implemented a three-year plan that includes fifteen specific activities designed to improve student achievement in this especially challenging area.

Implementation of the VALUE rubrics has also helped campuses address targeted outcomes that had been under-assessed or that were not clearly articulated. For example, Loyola University Chicago, Texas A&M University, and Calumet College of Saint Joseph have all identified ways in which the VALUE rubrics for civic engagement, intercultural knowledge, and lifelong learning can be used to help improve student achievement in areas related to the development of personal and social responsibility.

On some campuses, the direct assessment of student learning outcomes is aligned with cocurricular experiences, and students themselves engage in discussions of outcomes-based assessment. At Drake University, for example, staff members of the Office of Student Involvement and Leadership work together with members of the Student Activities Board in using the VALUE rubric for teamwork as a foundation for cocurricular assessment. Drake students use a self-rating instrument as a pre- and post-measurement tool and discuss their progress in relation to the criteria with student life staff. Similarly, at Calumet College of Saint Joseph, the VALUE rubric for foundations and skills for lifelong learning serves as a tool for talking with students about persistence and retention issues. In addition, the VALUE rubric for writing, which is used to assess student work in a first-year writing portfolio, serves as a mechanism for informing student success efforts.

No single part of a curriculum is solely responsible for ensuring that students achieve the essential learning outcomes of college. Rather, students must be given opportunities to practice the full range of competencies repeatedly—across courses and outside of courses. Thus, as the preceding examples attest, the improvement process must necessarily include specific plans for the dissemination of data, opportunities to gather feedback from multiple stakeholders, and actionable next steps. The case studies from which the examples are drawn provide a window into the broad range of approaches that can be undertaken to engage conversations around assessment data. Although there is no one-size-fits-all model for assessment or improvement, these examples share a common thread of progress—purposeful, incremental, significant, and demonstrated—toward gathering meaningful evidence and using it to improve student learning.
Regardless of institutional type, all higher education institutions are engaged in awarding degrees or other certifications of learning. It is also the case that there is uncertainty and dissatisfaction among many policy makers and employers about exactly what the degree represents in terms of the preparation of graduates. With the emergence of Lumina Foundation’s Degree Qualifications Profile (DQP) as an articulation of what any degree should represent and the level of student performance associated with attaining the degree, the definition of a degree has shifted from the number of credit hours and the grade point average attained to the quality of the learning associated with the degree or credential. For each of the DQP’s five areas of learning that have been identified as essential for student success in employment and life in a global environment—specific and general knowledge, intellectual abilities, application of learning, and civic learning—suggested levels of attainment have been developed for three degree levels: associate’s, baccalaureate, and master’s.

As the DQP continues to be tested and refined, the VALUE rubrics offer one way to articulate for students and faculty alike what achievement of desired levels of learning should look like for each of the outcome areas. The rubrics provide faculty members with a common language and a common set of reference points for comparing performance expectations across courses, programs, and institutions. At the same time, they provide students with a statement of what learning is expected of them as they progress toward their respective degrees or credentials.

Initially, the VALUE rubrics were designed to be used for institutional or campus-level assessment of learning. Yet, one of the lessons learned from campus adoption of the VALUE rubrics is that the rubrics also provide a common framework and language for faculty and students to talk across institutional boundaries about learning and achievement. A particularly useful finding in conjunction with the DQP framework is that the VALUE rubrics are providing a shared approach to the assessment of desired levels of learning, regardless of where the degree is attained and regardless of the specific disciplinary focus of the degree.

CAMPUS CONSORTIA

Several cross-campus consortia have used the VALUE rubrics to examine student learning on their respective campuses. Through a grant from the Institute of Museum and Library Services of the American Council of Research Libraries, for example, a consortium of ten institutions used a modified version of the VALUE rubric for information literacy as a vehicle for professional development, enhanced student learning, faculty development activities and resources, and assessment and accountability.

Through the Rubric Assessment of Information Literacy Skills (RAILS) project, these ten institutions joined together from July 2010 to June 2013 to investigate the potential

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for a rubric-based approach to the assessment of information literacy in higher education. The VALUE rubric for information literacy was used as a common starting point, and individual campuses shared their own modified versions of the rubric on the project’s website (www.railsontrack.info). At each of the participating institutions, the lead librarian gathered one hundred student artifacts for scoring, selected ten librarians or disciplinary faculty members to assist with the assessment, and planned and led a rubric calibration session. The RAILS project produced customizable tools that can be used to demonstrate the value of academic libraries, respond to calls for accountability, strengthen instructional programs, and improve student learning—both alone and in collaboration with faculty.

Through another three-year project, funded by a grant from the Fund for the Improvement of Post-Secondary Education and coordinated by La Guardia Community College/ City University of New York, a network of twenty-two community colleges, private colleges, and research universities is developing broadly applicable models for using rubrics in conjunction with e-portfolios. Titled “Connect to Learning: ePortfolio, Engagement, and Student Success,” the project focuses on reflective pedagogy and student learning, and seeks to identify correlations between rubric-based assessment and other measures of student success, including student retention (see www.lagcc.cuny.edu/connections). Participating campuses use the VALUE rubric for integrative learning to examine the role of e-portfolios in helping student integrate their learning across the curriculum, cocurriculum, and beyond.

The issue of student transfer has become another key motivation for adopting the VALUE rubrics. By establishing a shared set of expectations for student achievement and performance across a student’s educational homes, the rubrics can be used to help facilitate successful transition from one institution to another. The South Metropolitan Higher Education Consortium in Chicago encompasses twelve campuses—two-year and four-year, public and private—that share a swirl of students who take courses at multiple institutions. After discussing and testing the VALUE rubric for writing, the members of the consortium determined that the development of a common assignment would facilitate students’ cross-campus work by creating shared expectations for preparation and, thereby, increasing the likelihood that students would be able to transition successfully. In the fall of 2012, to calibrate student achievement across the campuses, all twelve members of the consortium implemented a common assignment for use in required writing courses (see fig. 12).

**BENCHMARKS AND CROSS-CAMPUS COMPARISONS**

As a check on local judgments and a way to gain a sense of how students at one institution are doing in relation to similar students elsewhere, it is important to situate assessment results within larger contexts. To facilitate this good practice and, more generally, to improve the availability of information about student learning trends and levels of achievement, AAC&U brought together the e-portfolio and learning management system communities to help create a repository of findings from VALUE rubric assessment conducted nationwide. If funding is successful, the resulting Collaborative for Authentic Assessment and Learning will enable the creation of national benchmarks for learning. Additionally, the aggregation of results from campuses using the VALUE rubrics to assess student learning will provide a landscape of learning that any institution or state can use to benchmark local

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2. For more information about the Collaborative for Authentic Assessment and Learning, see www.aacu.org/caal.
Two statewide efforts to assess student work using selected VALUE rubrics are currently underway. The first of these is focused on public institutions in Massachusetts, and the second is focused on both public and private institutions in Minnesota. In addition, several other states seeking to base assessment on actual student work are planning to use the VALUE rubrics as the shared standard for student achievement and faculty judgment through a multi-state collaboration.

The further development of the VALUE rubrics will continue to be informed by the growing movement within higher education toward authentic forms of assessment that are, increasingly, tied to the LEAP Essential Learning Outcomes (see fig. 1, p. vi). As this movement has progressed, it has validated the broad approach of the VALUE project, an approach to assessment that is firmly grounded in faculty judgment and in shared expectations for demonstrated student achievement and competence.

Figure 12. Common writing assignment

After reading the article provided, write two paragraphs. In your first paragraph, discuss the author's argument. What evidence does the author provide to support his argument? What position is he responding to? Cite examples from the text to support your answer.

In the second paragraph, either identify the author's strongest claim and explain why it is strong, or identify the weakest claim and explain why it is weak. Use examples from the article to illustrate your point.

After you have written your paragraphs, proofread and make appropriate revisions.

This assignment is to be completed for both of the following readings:

1. “What You Eat is Your Business” by Radley Balko
2. “We, the Public, Place the Best Athletes on Pedestals” by William Moller

Following are the agreed criteria for the assignment:

- Students may not discuss their essays.
- Students may discuss the assignment.
- Students are to be given one week to complete each assignment (out of class).
- Students should revise their essays on their own within the one-week timeframe.

Source: South Metropolitan Higher Education Consortium
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