TERREL RHODES

The VALUE of Learning

HOW WELL ARE WE DOING? This question is central to the enterprise of higher education—students want to know what grade was received on the paper or test, faculty want to know what it will take to reach tenure or be reappointed, admissions staff want to know how many students need to be enrolled in order to provide the tuition revenue required to pay the bills, and so forth. In essence, individuals in higher education spend a good portion of their time measuring and assessing how well they are doing and whether they are meeting expectations or goals. It is ironic, then, that higher education institutions are so often described as resistant to assessment and standards of performance.

Just over ten years ago, the report of the Secretary of Education's Commission on the Future of Higher Education took post-secondary education to task for not being accountable for student success and challenged institutions to demonstrate serious attention to performance measures for students.¹ Among the commission's favored ways to address the perceived lack of accountability for student learning was through the utilization of standardized testing. The recommendations in the report, which came to be known as the Spelling's report, followed closely on the heels of the federal No Child Left Behind Act, which also targeted the measurement of achievement, but in primary and secondary education, through increased standardized testing of all students in key areas of learning—for example, language arts and mathematics. Following the release of the Spelling's report, significant pushback came from higher education leaders and organizations.

In response to widespread objections to the use of standardized testing in higher education, the US Department of Education issued a special call for proposals, inviting higher education partnerships to design alternative approaches to measure student learning. The Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U), along with the American Association of State Colleges and Universities and the National Association of State Land Grant Universities (now the Association of Public Land-Grant Universities), received a grant from the department for a project called Rising to the Challenge: Meaningful Assessment of Student Learning.

Through this project, AAC&U oversaw the development of sixteen rubrics, each keyed to a specific learning outcome that faculty and employers alike regard as essential to success in life and employment after college.

AAC&U's work on assessment

For well over two decades—beginning long before the release of the Spelling's report—AAC&U has worked with faculty and other educational professionals, students, regional and professional accreditation, and employers to develop responsive curricula and to identify learning outcomes that are central to success in life, democratic society, and careers in a global environment. AAC&U's work in this area has been guided by four underlying principles: (1) the measurement of student success should be multifaceted, (2) expected learning outcomes should reflect broad consensus among educators and employers, (3) education providers have valuable expertise and are central to improving student achievement, and (4) examining the actual work students produce in relation to their education yields the best evidence of how well educators and students are doing.

In brief, AAC&U has for decades been engaged simultaneously with assessment for learning improvement and assessment for accountability, viewing these two strands as intertwined by necessity and practice.

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Meaningful Assessment on the Rise

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Beginning in school, and continuing at successively higher levels across their college studies, students should prepare for twenty-first-century challenges by gaining:

Knowledge of Human Cultures and Critical and Natural World
- Through study in the sciences and mathematics, social sciences, humanities, languages, and the arts
- Focused by engagement with big questions, both contemporary and enduring

Intelectual and Practical Skills, Including
- Inquiry and analysis
- Critical and creative thinking
- Written and oral communication
- Quantitative literacy
- Information literacy
- Teamwork and problem solving
- Practical, extracurricular, and co-curricular
- Civic knowledge and engagement—local, national, and global
- Intercultural knowledge and competence
- Ethical reasoning and action
- Foundations and skills for lifelong learning

As championed through active involvement with diverse communities and real-world challenges

Integrative and Applied Learning, Including
- Synthesis and advanced accomplishment across general and specialized studies
- Demonstrated through the application of knowledge, skills, and responsibilities to new settings and complex problems

Through a series of projects, surveys, and focus groups over several years, AAC&U has been exploring these principles. As the measurement of student learning has become a critical component of the accreditation process, for example, and as accreditation has become more important for student access to financial aid, AAC&U has engaged with regional and professional accrediting organizations to encourage their recognition of the need for multiple measures to satisfy internal academic and external policymaking audiences. Indeed, while the increase in retention and graduation success, there always is enough benefit to engage in explaining and exploration. When the results fail to live up to expectations—even when there are repeatable benefits—we simply move on to the next simple thing that emerges to capture privacy.

In Liberal for Civic Engagement: Designing Liberal Education for the New Digital Ecosystem, Randy Bass and Brette Yoon offer a singularly insightful exploration of the nexus between higher education and technology. They argue for an approach to technology that is in service of student learning, rather than technology utilization per se. They call for breaking the educational process into discrete and disconnected pieces that promise greater efficiency or cost savings, but for a focus on how to integrate and make meaning of learning in ways that also yield efficiencies and cost savings through higher rates of student retention, graduation, and engagement. In other words, Bass and Yoon argue for re-harnessing higher education, rather than unbundling it.

A prominent technological medium already university-wide is the eportfolio. According to the key premise of the eportfolio is the espertofoilo. When done well, the use of eportfolios can be a high-impact practice. That is, eportfolio use has been identified as one of a set of educational practices that share several traits: they demand focused time and effort, facilitate learning outside and inside the classroom, require interaction between both faculty and students, encourage collaboration with diverse others, and provide frequent and substantive feedback to students and faculty.

As George Kuh recently observed, “the eportfolio is much more than just a means for learning and sharing best practices.” Therefore, the work that students produce in response to assignments or prompts from their instructors should logically be the best representation of the students’ learning.

A role for technology

One of the twenty-first-century drivers of life, both in and out of the academy, is the explosion in technology, which creates new possibilities for information processing and communication. Technological change is a given for today’s students, and it needs to become an integral part of the decision-making process within higher education organizations and institutions. The biggest cautionary point may be the inclination to automate, or at least empirically designed instructional approach that among other advantages prompts students to periodically reflect on and deepen what they are learning and helps them connect and make sense of their various experiences inside and outside the classroom that—taken together—add up to more than the sum of their parts.” As Kuh explains, the eportfolio has the potential to “serve as a portable, expandable, updatable vehicle for accumulating and presenting evidence of authentic student accomplishment including the creation of specific proficiencies and dispositions at given points in time”; to “document, integrate, and enhance the positive effects of other high-impact practices,” and to “make the extended educational transcript (something like a cocurricular transcript on steroids) initiative now being tested even more attractive to employers, institutions, and students themselves.”

Perhaps most significantly, eportfolios can be used effectively at higher education institutions of all kinds and to benefit all students. Further, the eportfolio also accommodates the use of smartphones, social media platforms, networking, information search and processing, and other types of technology associated with generational differences as well as learning gained in online environments and from peer or parallel experiences.

The role of accreditation

Assessment of learning in higher education has been spurred and sustained primarily through regional and specialized accreditation. As a result, much of the culture among higher education providers has centered on compliance with accreditation standards. This, in turn, has been reflected in policy circles by demands for fairly simple metrics to measure student success. It is unfortunate that the assessment movement has been directed into this unsatisfying sidetrack. As a critical component of quality higher education accreditation has historically offered a way to ensure that a purveyor of higher education is financially capable of sustaining teaching and learning throughout its lifetime expectancy, leading to complete a course of study (hopefully culminating in a recognized credential) and that it provides the teaching and learning through well qualified and prepared individuals, curricula, and associated support services. The assumption has been that the ensuing learning would be of sufficient quality to warrant the investment. Accreditation has offered accreditation-seekers the opportunity to make their own case and to reflect upon their enterprise in terms of demonstrating the myriad standards of capability and implementation, at least at an accepted minimal or average level of performance. By and large, higher education institutions have responded well to the standards, sufficiently meeting the expectations for reaccreditation with few, if any, recommendations for improvement in process and information. However, as the economic situation has changed and new demands from employers, students and their families,
Rather than assess what students cannot do, the VALUE rubrics were designed to assess what students can do and the level of learning demonstrated by their actual work that educators believe graduates need and deserve for a lifetime of flourishing or what employers indicate they seek in hiring college graduates. It was precisely this lack of widely vetted and measured measures of essential student learning outcomes that prompted the AAC&U-led Rising to the Challenge proposal to the US Department of Education in the wake of the Spellings report a decade ago and that led to the creation of AAC&U's Valid Assessment of Learning in Undergraduate Education (VALUE) rubrics.

The VALUE rubrics Developed by teams of faculty and other educators from public and private higher education institutions across the country, the VALUE rubrics are based on previously existing rubrics and on research related to the key components and dimensions of each of sixteen learning outcomes. Before they were released publicly in the fall of 2009, the rubrics underwent two to three rounds of testing and revision by faculty on over a hundred campuses. The VALUE rubrics were designed to reflect expected levels of learning as demonstrated by the work students produce in response to curricular and cocurricular assignments across two- and four-year degree programs. That is, the same rubric can be used to assess student achievement across different types of institutions, across different disciplinary areas, and by faculty from different fields of study. Rather than assess what students cannot do, the VALUE rubrics were designed to assess what the student can do as demonstrated by their actual work. The rubrics reflect the level of learning, not the year in school; diverse students have diverse patterns of learning strengths and weaknesses that are not necessarily parallel to their year in school. The rubrics capture and reflect variation in learning, not in learning level. The key dimensions of the learning that underlay each of the learning outcomes.

Thousands of educational organizations have explored and used the VALUE rubrics since 2009, modifying and adapting them as needed to conform to their own missions or priorities. The consistent feedback from educators has indicated that the rubrics effectively capture the key dimensions of learning for each outcome, that the information gained through the use of the rubrics leads to improved pedagogy and assignment construction, and that the availability of the assessment results enables discussion of student learning and engenders faculty collaboration within and across departments and colleges.

The VALUE/Multi-State Collaborative Beyond the anecdotal evidence that has emerged since 2009 from educational institutions and organizations using the VALUE rubrics for assessment, a national initiative—called the VALUE/Multi-State Collaborative to Advance Quality Student Learning—is now underway to determine whether rubric-based assessment of student learning outcomes can be taken effectively to scale. A partnership between AAC&U and the State Higher Education Executives Officers Association, this national initiative involves nearly a hundred institutions—two year and four year, public and private—and thirteen state higher education offices. The participants have committed to collect samples of student work from their respective institutions, identify faculty to score the work on three or four learning outcomes, and use the VALUE rubrics as the shared metric to assess the student work samples. In addition, the initiative is conducting extensive reliability and validity studies and as results of the large-scale research efforts to enable examination of student demographic and institutional variables in relation to the assessment findings. After differentiating the landscape of rubric-specific rubric application of VALUE rubrics to assess student learning, Dan Berrett reported on the VALUE/Multi-State Collaborative on the Chronicle of Higher Education. "It's the kind of acronym-heavy, jargon-laced endeavor that's easily overlooked," he observed. "But by measuring students' intellectual and professional skills, it might turn out to provide telling insights into one higher education's central functions." Berrett noted that what makes the effort notable is its subject of analysis: the authentic staff of college—the homework, problem sets, and papers that students regularly produce. From those, evaluators can generate generalizable and comparable findings across disciplines, institutions, and states about students' critical-thinking, writing, and quantitative-reasoning skills. He concluded that, citing the view of George Kuh, "the rubrics' fundamental connection to the daily work of education... means this attempt may succeed where others have failed.""4

Assessment for learning is happening Simpler dichotomizing conceptions of assessment—accountability versus improvement, faculty led versus externally imposed, compliance versus learner centered—are being replaced by a recognition of the importance of demonstrating student learning and a reconsideration of what constitutes the best evidence of learning. Over the past ten years, higher education faculty and institutions have begun to meet the challenge of accountability by placing faculty and educator expertise and judgment at the center of assessment efforts that have student learning improvement as their primary purpose. Building on its earlier work, AAC&U has helped facilitate the transformation of assessment into a high-impact practice. Assessment can be used effectively to improve student learning—not only content knowledge, but also the skills and abilities needed to apply knowledge to complex, unscripted problems and for career success in an ever-changing, technology-driven global environment. Indeed, we have now reached a point where learning improvement can be demonstrated in meaningful ways to students, ourselves, and those outside the academy.