VALUE-able Assessment
Pragmatic Lessons Learned through Guided Pathways

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Association of American Colleges and Universities
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The first goal of the Strengthening Guided Pathways and Career Success by Ensuring Students Are Learning project—to contribute to the existing research for the ensuring students are learning pillar of the guided pathways framework and create a set of professional development tools for institutions to achieve their stated outcomes for measuring success—is a highly ambitious one. According to a 2020 survey of higher education institutions conducted by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U), most colleges and universities struggle to robustly measure student learning on their campuses.

Figure 1 demonstrates the significant gap that was found between the number of colleges and universities that report having “a common set of learning outcomes” and the dramatically low percentage of campus respondents who indicated that “almost all” students are aware of those outcomes. The twenty community colleges participating in AAC&U’s Ensuring Students Are Learning project, however, leaned into articulating and assessing the student learning outcomes that they identified as key to their students’ success. They did this by collecting authentic examples of student work and submitting them for assessment through AAC&U’s VALUE Institute. What follows are the most critical lessons learned from participating campuses’ engagement in this type of direct assessment through the Ensuring Students Are Learning project. We anticipate that these lessons will continue to enhance and improve our ability to ensure that students are indeed learning in guided pathways and beyond.

What is VALUE? What is the VALUE Institute?
Valid Assessment of Learning in Undergraduate Education (VALUE) is a campus-based assessment approach developed and led by AAC&U. VALUE rubrics provide needed tools to assess students’ own authentic work, produced across diverse learning pathways, fields of study, and institutions to determine how well students are achieving learning outcomes that both employers and faculty consider essential. Teams of faculty and other education professionals from institutions across the United States—two- and four-year, private and public, research and liberal arts, large and small—developed VALUE rubrics for sixteen Essential Learning Outcomes that all students need for success in work, citizenship, and life.

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Since their release in fall 2009, the rubrics have become a widely used form of assessment on campuses across the United States and internationally. Since 2014, more than 664,314 individual VALUE rubrics have been downloaded from more than 5,895 organizations, including 2,810 colleges and universities.

From its inception, VALUE has been guided by a core set of fundamental assumptions:

- To achieve a high-quality education for all students, valid assessment data are needed to guide planning, teaching, and improvement. This means that the work students do in their courses and the cocurriculum is the best authentic representation of their learning.
- Colleges and universities seek to foster and assess learning outcomes beyond the three or four typically addressed by currently available standardized tests.
- Learning develops over time, is nonlinear, and should become more complex and sophisticated as students move through their curricular and cocurricular educational pathways within and among institutions toward a degree.
- Good practice in assessment requires multiple assessments over time.
- Assessment of student work, particularly work produced from students’ engagement in high-impact educational practices (HIPs) such as creating ePortfolios, can inform progress in achieving expected learning goals at the programmatic and institutional levels for internal and external accountability reporting, while also providing faculty with information necessary to improve courses and pedagogy.

Launched in 2017, the VALUE Institute enables any higher education institution, department, program, state, consortium, or other educational provider to utilize the VALUE approach to assessment by collecting and uploading samples of student work to a digital repository to have the work scored by certified VALUE scorers for external validation of institutional learning assessment. Results from the VALUE Institute provide actionable information about student learning at individual institutions while providing external validation for achieved learning at the local campus level. The Institute also includes additional capacity-building resources for faculty, institutions, and policymakers on how to use VALUE evidence to support student success and effective pedagogy. Results can also strengthen existing programs—such as guided pathways—to help students achieve and demonstrate key learning outcomes articulated in particular learning pathways as part of general education or majors.

Painting a Picture of Pathways Learning

The twenty campuses that participated in the Ensuring Students Are Learning project had the opportunity to select any of the available rubrics within the VALUE Institute for scoring their student work. Most institutions chose the Critical Thinking or Written Communication VALUE Rubrics, though at least one campus looked at student work through the lens of the Ethical Reasoning VALUE Rubric and another chose the Quantitative Literacy VALUE Rubric.

Each institution was also required to think through its approach to sampling student work in relation to its goals, both for the project specifically as well as for its institutional goals vis-à-vis student learning and assessment more broadly. For example, one institution stated that its goal for participating in the VALUE Institute was “to gain valuable insight from the student artifacts/evidence of learning to improve teaching and learning, as well as to further engage discussion about student success” on its campus. Another institution described how engaging in the VALUE Institute as part of the project would help the institution to focus on specific pedagogical aspects of its general education program, including working to align signature assignments with its student learning outcomes, and to verify that its implementation of ePortfolios was indeed a HIP. Still other institutions submitted samples of student work that would allow them to interrogate questions regarding student development over time and across different student populations.

The breadth of research questions and methodological approaches taken across the twenty project campuses makes it inappropriate to generalize data. With that caveat, sample project-level aggregate results provide an illustrative example of the kind of information that the VALUE Institute provided participating institutions. Additionally, the results presented here challenge the assumptions some may hold about learning and student achievement within the community college context.

Figure 2 reflects the aggregate distribution of scores—from capstone (4) to benchmark (1)—on the Critical Thinking VALUE Rubric, the most frequently selected VALUE rubric by the twenty participating colleges. These results challenge the notion that students at two-year institutions should be “expected” to achieve only half of the anticipated progress of students at four-year institutions. Specifically, although across nearly every dimension on the rubric student work received a score at a milestone (2) level, more than a quarter of students’ work, on average, received a score of the combined milestone (3)/capstone (4) levels (i.e., levels typically associated with students approaching the end of their baccalaureate degree experience). In other words, a substantial percentage of
rubric dimensions. However, rather than this necessarily meaning that students are not able to think critically, this finding more likely suggests an opportunity for faculty to reexamine the way they construct assignments to more intentionally invite students to demonstrate competence.

Despite the methodological diversity within and across project schools and respective samples, these initial aggregate findings show how guided pathways assessment of student learning data can be positioned to ask more informed questions of intended outcomes linked to guided pathways, faculty’s pedagogical approaches, and even assumptions about what learning looks like at community colleges.

**VALUE-able, Pragmatic Lessons Learned**

The twenty community colleges participating in the Ensuring Students Are Learning project each came to the VALUE Institute with unique strengths, needs, and concerns. The colleges leveraged their participation to advance local teaching, learning, and assessment efforts while engaging in a process that would provide externally generated insights into student learning.

Figure 2: Overall Score Results: Critical Thinking

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>4-Capstone</th>
<th>3-Milestone</th>
<th>2-Milestone</th>
<th>1-Benchmark</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Explanation of Issues</strong></td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Evidence</strong></td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Influence of Context and Assumptions</strong></td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Student’s Position</strong></td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>54%</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Conclusions and Related Outcomes</strong></td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 3: Overall Score Results: Evidence vs. No Evidence

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Evidence (4, 3, 2, 1)</th>
<th>No Evidence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Explanation of Issues</strong></td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>90%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Evidence</strong></td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>78%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Influence of Context and Assumptions</strong></td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Student’s Position</strong></td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>86%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Conclusions and Related Outcomes</strong></td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>85%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

community college students in this sample are already doing baccalaureate-level work, some at the highest levels measured by the VALUE rubrics.

Figure 3 illustrates evidence of learning within guided pathways from a simple binary of whether students demonstrate some level of achievement or not. Though VALUE rubrics present four explicitly articulated levels of performance—from capstone (4) to benchmark (1)—rubrics also include the option of assigning a score of “zero” to a piece of student work. A zero score is best described as reflective of an absence of evidence of student learning for a specific dimension. An absence of evidence may be the result of the student not demonstrating minimum benchmark level performance. But it can also be a consequence of an assignment design issue or flaw, in that the prompt from which the student work product was derived was not written to invite demonstration of a particular dimension of a skill. For example, from the sample of artifacts drawn from the Ensuring Students Are Learning project campuses for critical thinking (see figure 3), on average, 16 percent of student work products received a score of zero across
within each institution’s unique guided pathways. From this individual and collective engagement in the VALUE Institute, several pragmatic lessons emerged that are worth highlighting.

**Lesson 1: Recognize that process matters.** A singular focus on the end product of participating in the VALUE Institute—the numerical results in the form of scores—is misguided. The power of participation lies in the ability to boost institutional capacity for assessment of learning by joining with other institutions to compare results and expand our field of vision beyond our own campus contexts. If the approach taken focuses solely on generating scores as the end goal, institutions may inadvertently miss the opportunity to engage skeptical colleagues, to identify additional sources for collecting student work, or to develop more inclusive approaches to diversifying samples of students work.

**Lesson 2: Engage in the important conversations—multiple times.** When focusing on process, be prepared to repeat yourself. A mindset of overcommunication will ensure that you and your colleagues will be available to listen to the concerns and questions of faculty whom you hope will contribute to assessment. Resist dismissing questions as evidence of resistance. The goal isn’t for faculty to “buy in” to your ideas but rather to enable them to ask questions that will encourage them to become genuinely engaged in the work.

**Lesson 3: Partner.** Participation in the VALUE Institute—and, arguably, any similarly robust local approach to assessment—has multiple moving parts and implicates different areas of expertise and skill sets. For example, faculty at the twenty participating colleges often worked to recruit colleagues to submit their students’ work, and assessment professionals and/or institutional researchers explored the institutional and demographic data needs of the project. This helped teams manage complexity and ensure equitable distribution of work among team members.

**Lesson 4: Be explicit about the connections between expectations for students and actual pedagogical practice.** It is not enough to label learning within a guided pathway as critical thinking. Rather, the curricular structure of the pathway and the pedagogical approaches of the courses must be intentionally designed to help foster the knowledge, skills, and abilities reflective of critical thinking. As part of this, faculty must interrogate issues of assignment alignment with the corresponding VALUE rubric and be willing to consider assignment redesign when gaps are identified between faculty expectations for students’ learning and students’ demonstrated performance. This requires being explicit about the connection between expectations and practice with students themselves.

**Lesson 5: Build in time for reflection and sense making.** The work does not stop upon receiving a report from the VALUE Institute. Arguably, it is just beginning. All the preparatory work to ensure valid and reliable information about student learning in a guided pathway was, in fact, only preliminary. Scaling cannot happen without sense making, and the process of sense making should ask important, pointed questions of data, of faculty, of the program, and potentially even of the institution as a place of learning. In examining results, questions to ask include:

- Do you see what you expected to see? What is surprising?
- What implications—resource, policy, pedagogical, or other—do these results have for your program? Your institution?
- Do you notice any disparities or patterns across groups of students (e.g., by sex, race/ethnicity, Pell eligibility, first-generation, transfer status)? If gaps are evident, are these surprising to you? Have you seen other evidence on campus that might also suggest equity gaps between various groups of students?
- What are the implications for equity gaps across demographic groups? In what ways might or do these gaps impede achievement of learning and other metrics of student success on your campus? What are the implications for teaching (e.g., assignment design) or for how teaching and learning environments are organized (e.g., participation in HIPs, scaffolding experiences to maximize learning)?

These five lessons are far from comprehensive. Indeed, they were not anticipated as outcomes of the Ensuring Students Are Learning project at its inception. However, they represent key insights derived from this ambitious collaborative project and capture important observations that may influence future work focused on ensuring students are learning through the guided pathways approach.

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1. As of January 2022, the VALUE Institute will be rebranded as the VALUE Scoring Collaborative. See https://www.aacu.org/value for more information.
3. To find out more about the VALUE approach to assessment broadly and the history of the VALUE Institute specifically, please see AAC&U’s publications *On Solid Ground* and *We Have a Rubric for That: The VALUE Approach to Assessment*.
Acknowledgments

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Ascendium Education Group is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization committed to helping people reach the education and career goals that matter to them. Ascendium invests in initiatives designed to increase the number of students from low-income backgrounds who complete postsecondary degrees, certificates, and workforce training programs, with an emphasis on first-generation students, incarcerated adults, rural community members, students of color, and veterans. Ascendium’s work identifies, validates, and expands best practices to promote large-scale change at the institutional, system, and state levels, with the intention of elevating opportunity for all. For more information, visit https://www.ascendiumphilanthropy.org.

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Center for Community College Student Engagement (CCCSE)
The Center for Community College Student Engagement, a service and research initiative in the Department of Educational Leadership and Policy in the College of Education at The University of Texas at Austin, provides important information about effective educational practice in community colleges. By delivering “aha” moments about the student experience, the Center assists institutions and policymakers in using information to promote improvements in student learning, persistence, and attainment.
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AAC&U is the leading national association dedicated to advancing the vitality and public standing of liberal education by making quality and equity the foundations for excellence in undergraduate education in service to democracy. Its members are committed to extending the advantages of a liberal education to all students, regardless of academic specialization or intended career. Founded in 1915, AAC&U now comprises more than 1,000 member institutions—including accredited public and private colleges, community colleges, research universities, and comprehensive universities of every type and size.

AAC&U functions as a catalyst and facilitator, forging links among presidents, administrators, faculty, and staff engaged in institutional and curricular planning. Through a broad range of activities, AAC&U reinforces the collective commitment to liberal education at the national, local, and global levels. Its high-quality programs, publications, research, meetings, institutes, public outreach efforts, and campus-based projects help individual institutions ensure that the quality of student learning is central to their work as they evolve to meet new economic and social challenges. Information about AAC&U can be found at www.aacu.org.