

INTRODUCTION

Assessment as a High-Impact Practice

America's institutions of higher education have been challenged to develop new strategies to improve the success of all students. With more and more students attending multiple institutions, improving the transfer process is key to ensuring all students succeed. AAC&U launched the Quality Collaboratives (QC) project in 2011 with support from Lumina Foundation and the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation in order to find ways to make transfer between institutions easier and more efficient and, more importantly, to make students' achievement of important learning outcomes, as measured by authentic assessments, the central metric that should guide transfer.

Lumina's recently developed Degree Qualifications Profile (DQP) was an important tool in this larger movement away from credits as proxies for student learning toward a system in which genuine proficiency is the measure of student progress and success. The DQP is a framework describing the essential learning outcomes that both employers and faculty claim as critical for college graduates and the levels of achievement on these outcomes that students should be able to demonstrate at the associate, baccalaureate, and master's degree levels (see page 22, below). As part of AAC&U's Liberal Education and America's Promise (LEAP) signature initiative to ensure that all college students in the United States receive a liberal education, the QC project brought together twenty campuses and nine state university systems or state higher education commissions to collaborate and develop models that placed assessment of student learning at the center of the transfer process. This brief folio along with its more in-depth companion volume, *Collaboration for Student Transfer: A Nationwide Degree Qualifications Profile Experiment*, describe ways to refocus student transfer on demonstrated student learning proficiencies as a primary basis for transfer student success.

In today's policy environment, transfer success is too often defined narrowly as the timely completion of a degree. That desirable but inadequate measure has emerged largely because the current transfer process, especially from two-year institutions to four-year institutions, does not directly measure student learning proficiency and often presents vexing barriers for accepting student work at one institution that was

completed at a previous institution. Under most current practices, students are accepted for transfer when they have completed a negotiated set of credit hours attached to a defined set of courses. But those courses and credits are often determined institution by institution or even program by program, which can result in confusion that often leads to delayed progress or attrition, especially for students who change majors or attend more than one institution. Recently, however, many key stakeholders, particularly employers, have come to understand that seat time is an inadequate proxy for learning.

This folio is designed to help institutions interested in building successful cross-institutional collaborations to use the DQP to develop new approaches to advancing transfer student success and to assessing student learning. It begins with a flow chart (see pages 4–5) that summarizes the main components of the successful cross-institutional collaborations that were developed by the QC institutions. The folio then charts key action steps in the process flow chart and lessons learned by these institutions through their implementation of these kinds of collaborative projects.

Ten “dyads” composed of one two-year institution and one four-year institution, many of which already had established transfer relationships, participated in the QC project. All of these institutions also had already committed to developing better approaches to assessing student learning rather than settling for a list of completed courses, credits, and grades. Each dyad was encouraged to build on its pre-existing structures, policies, and practices as points of departure. Each dyad was free to determine its own approach to engaging faculty on its campuses. Finally, in order to bring coherence to the initiative, QC dyads were asked to assess the utility and viability of the DQP, the LEAP Essential Learning Outcomes (ELOs)¹, and the VALUE rubrics² for assessing evidence of student learning for transfer success.

The flow chart below focuses on key components for change, and the results flowing from each component provide a generative framework for any institution or system to begin to reassess its transfer processes. Supplementing the flow chart are links to a set of QC project case studies on AAC&U’s website; these case studies contain many examples of the agendas for meetings, templates for documents, and examples of

1 Developed by a national committee of faculty and employers as part of the LEAP initiative, the Essential Learning Outcomes describe the learning students need for successful participation in a global economy, democratic civic engagement, and enriched lives.

2 AAC&U’s VALUE (Valid Assessment of Learning in Undergraduate Education) rubrics were developed by teams of faculty and other educational professionals to articulate expected levels of learning on the core dimensions of learning aligned with the LEAP ELOs.

collaborative processes and actions taken, all supplied by the participating institutions. These resources are intended to assist others seeking to jump-start their own efforts to make assessment of student learning the basis for transfer success.

Although none of the QC dyads instigated substantial institutional change in transfer practices during the three-year project period, many of the dyads developed new assessment models that are still being further developed and expanded. In addition, faculty at these institutions determined that the DQP, the VALUE rubrics, and the LEAP ELOs were useful frameworks that articulated shared expectations for learning and important markers for how students can demonstrate their learning proficiency for transfer between institutions. One of the most exciting elements of the project, common across all the participating institutions, was the ability of campus leaders to engage large numbers of faculty and other educational professionals both within a single campus and across different campuses in this work. This was particularly evident when faculty found that student learning was the purpose of assessment—that was when assessment of learning outcomes proficiency became a part of their own daily work, something that was both useful and important. As the efforts of these participants demonstrate, a transfer process that is guided by evidence of student learning outcomes can be understood not just as “my work, in my course, at my institution,” but as “*our work*,” shared among colleagues.