

The VALUE Breakthrough

Getting the Assessment of Student Learning in College Right

BY Daniel F. Sullivan
With a foreword by Carol Geary Schneider



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Contents

Foreword by Carol Geary Schneider v

Acknowledgments viii

The VALUE Breakthrough: Getting the Assessment
of Student Learning in College Right 1

Appendix: The Multi-State Collaborative to Advance
Learning Outcomes Assessment 12

Notes 13

About the Author 15

Foreword

Ten years ago, in a board of directors' statement titled *Our Students' Best Work*, the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) called on higher education to pioneer an approach to accountability “worthy of our mission.” The assessment of college learning, the board affirmed, ought to be based on students' authentic educational work—that is, the work students create for course and program assignments—and not on standardized tests of generic skills that are disconnected by design from students' programs of study.

This year, as AAC&U celebrates one hundred years of leadership for liberal education, I am delighted to report that my colleagues and thousands of partners throughout the higher education community have rallied to that 2004 call. As *The VALUE Breakthrough* explains, the AAC&U community today is helping to move the assessment of college learning in an important new direction.

Valid Assessment of Learning in Undergraduate Education—AAC&U's VALUE initiative—is a far-reaching effort to focus assessment on the work students produce in their progress toward a degree. Faculty serving as assessors use validated VALUE rubrics or scoring guides to determine whether students are practicing and developing key learning outcomes such as inquiry and analysis, quantitative reasoning, or problem solving through their course of study and through informal learning such as internships and cocurricular experiences. They use as evidence students' own authentic work, which might include research papers, laboratory reports, writing samples, creative projects, e-portfolios, or even videos showing the students at work in field-based projects or practicums.

By focusing on assignments produced for a degree program rather than on answers on time-limited standardized tests, VALUE has become a national movement to change the way we envision and approach the assessment of student learning gains and accomplishments in college. Grassroots and experimental at first, the VALUE movement is now becoming organized through a national effort to develop and deploy a common platform for showing what students are actually gaining from their studies. *The VALUE Breakthrough* explains succinctly and directly the progress and importance of this movement. Author Daniel Sullivan, a wise advisor to the VALUE effort and to AAC&U, tells us how VALUE relates both to the larger aims of a quality liberal education and to the capabilities employers seek and reward.

As you read this report, I hope you will share my excitement about the benefits to students that are inherent in this new approach to assessment and learning. I also hope you will be inspired to become part of the VALUE redirection of assessment principles and basic practices.

VALUE brings faculty and students together not only as co-creators of new evidence for assessment, but also, far more fundamentally, as shared partners in the larger project of helping students make the most of their college learning. The VALUE movement is not simply an assessment project. Rather, it is a collective embrace of what college learning should be for all our students: an apprenticeship in powerful learning, an immersion in complex questions and evidence-based reasoning, and an

opportunity for students to show themselves and others what they can successfully do with their college learning. VALUE provides public information to stakeholders about student achievement in college. But it also engages faculty directly with their shared role in developing assignments that help students practice and develop the capabilities they need.

The VALUE approach to assessment has developed in phases. VALUE became possible when AAC&U's Liberal Education and America's Promise (LEAP) initiative first articulated a set of essential learning outcomes—knowledge, skills, responsibilities, and applications—that educators view as necessary to quality learning and that employers see as necessary to workplace success.

With a widely endorsed consensus on essential learning outcomes in hand, AAC&U Vice President Terrel Rhodes saw immediately that higher education needed rubrics to assess students' achievement of these outcomes. But he also knew from his work on campus that many institutions already had created their own locally applied rubrics to evaluate specific learning outcomes. It was his insight that VALUE could tap these already developed local rubrics and faculty expert judgment on what counts as excellent work in such areas as writing, ethical reasoning, integrative learning, and intercultural learning. The VALUE rubrics were conceived as meta-rubrics that identify the core criteria associated with each learning outcome that are most widely shared across all types of institutions and that build statements of demonstrated achievement at progressively more advanced levels. From the day the VALUE idea was first generated at AAC&U, we all agreed that faculty judgment would be the crucial animating component in developing the rubrics for each learning outcome, but also in using these rubrics to take a close look at the strengths and weaknesses that are visible in students' curricular accomplishments.

AAC&U secured funding, initially from State Farm Companies Foundation and then from the US Department of Education's Fund for the Improvement of Post-secondary Education, to develop rubrics or scoring guides. Sixteen separate liberal education VALUE rubrics were developed by sixteen teams of faculty, representing the full diversity of colleges and universities, and assessment experts. With nearly a hundred diverse institutions involved, the rubrics were validated against samples of student work, revised, tested again, and then made public in 2009. And very soon, they were being used across the United States and even around the world. Today, in the latest phase of this work, nine state systems and some ninety institutions—public and private, two-year and four-year—are working together to field-test and develop a national platform that will enable any campus to use the VALUE rubrics to assess students' gains in the LEAP Essential Learning Outcomes. We are pleased and appreciative that the State Higher Education Executive Officers Association and the Multi-State Collaborative to Advance Learning Outcomes Assessment project have become our partners in this far-reaching educational change initiative. Funding for the current work has been provided by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and by the Sherman Fairchild Foundation.

The timing of the initial release of the VALUE rubrics was auspicious. For over a decade, there had been a notable increase in the pressure on higher education

to become more transparently “accountable” for student learning. But as AAC&U repeatedly pointed out, most accountability proponents were vague and reductive with regard to what higher education should be accountable for.

VALUE brought to the assessment dialogue, in our view, the right balance of specificity, commonality, and respect for the full spectrum of college learning. Through LEAP and the VALUE rubrics, AAC&U was far more specific than almost any other accountability proponent on the multiple forms of learning that provide needed “value,” both for the economy and for democracy. At the same time, the VALUE rubrics allow faculty and students to draw student work and artifacts from quite different settings and disciplines in order to determine whether students are developing the expected capabilities. The VALUE rubrics respect the complexity of the American higher education system, while also providing some common prompts for determining students’ level of achievement across the educational continuum.

In 2007, AAC&U published Stanford scholar Richard J. Shavelson’s highly illuminating *A Brief History of Student Learning Assessment: How We Got Where We Are and a Proposal for Where to Go Next*. In the opening pages of that study, Shavelson reminded readers with italicized emphasis that “*cultures of evidence will not automatically lead to educational improvement, if what counts as evidence does not count as education.*” Moreover, as he went on to say, higher education lacked any meaningful measures at all for many learning outcomes—personal, moral, civic, social, and intercultural—that are essential to individual and societal functioning. The danger, he reminded readers, is that assessments would focus too narrowly and thereby run the risk of “narrowing the mission and diversity” of the American educational system.

The VALUE initiative moves us away from the “narrows.” It embraces multiple essential learning outcomes, not just a reductive few. Most of all, it recognizes the central reality that our graduates will be grappling, both in the economy and in civil society, with complex questions to which the right answers are not yet “known” and any solutions may be vigorously contested. VALUE encourages and supports educators’ efforts to engage students with exactly the kind of complex questions and unscripted challenges that matter in the world beyond the academy.

As a historian, I am convinced that just as standardized tests with standardized answers became the metric of choice for the age of industrialization, valid assessments of students’ nonstandard and inquiry-based learning will become the assessment strategy of choice for this new era of innovation and global interconnections.

It is an honor and a pleasure to begin AAC&U’s second century with such an important contribution to our students’ best learning and our society’s long-term needs.

CAROL GEARY SCHNEIDER

President, Association of American
Colleges and Universities

Acknowledgments

The VALUE Breakthrough: Getting the Assessment of Student Learning in College Right is one of several publications being released in the context of AAC&U's Centennial Year, 2015. AAC&U is grateful to the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation for its generous support of these publications and of AAC&U's Centennial planning for a second century of educational leadership for quality and inclusive excellence.

AAC&U also expresses its appreciation to the Sherman Fairchild Foundation and the Spencer Foundation. In particular, we thank our partners at the State Higher Education Executive Officers Association and the Multi-State Collaborative to Advance Learning Outcomes Assessment, and all the states and institutions whose support and involvement is helping AAC&U move the VALUE approach to assessing students' authentic work outlined in these pages to active and vigorous educational practice across the nation's college, university, and community college campuses, and in state systems as well.

We also thank David Tritelli for his expert editorial assistance, and Shelley Johnson Carey and Michele Stinson for their assistance in shepherding *The VALUE Breakthrough* through the design and production process. And finally, AAC&U thanks the members of the Quality Assurance Group (listed below), a working group whose members contributed greatly to the development of this document. We appreciate their time, effort, and energy and their many, many good suggestions.

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The VALUE Breakthrough: Getting the Assessment of Student Learning in College Right

There is a sea change afoot in the United States. A consensus has emerged among educators and employers regarding the kind of education college students need for success in work, civic participation and democratic citizenship, and life in the twenty-first century. Access and completion—goals on which federal and state legislators, policy makers, and the general public focus far too narrowly—are not enough. Given the challenges the United States faces in the economy and in the global community, higher education needs to focus with new intensity on providing the kinds of learning that build needed capacity, both for graduates and for society as a whole. Moreover, the growth in college-eligible students, which is occurring mainly in socioeconomic groups that have never been well served by higher education, requires new attention to what all students—including first- and second-generation students—gain from their time in college.¹ This is the new frontier for assessment and accountability: documenting what college students know and can do with their learning.

What should college graduates know and be able to do? The consensus among educators and employers was captured clearly in a 2013 Hart Research Associates study of for-profit and nonprofit employers—the fourth such survey in six years with consistent results²—that was released in conjunction with the announcement by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) of its Employer–Educator Compact.³ That consensus reflects almost exactly the key capacities identified through the association’s Liberal Education and America’s Promise (LEAP) initiative as the LEAP Essential Learning Outcomes (see fig. 1): students need, *across and beyond content knowledge*, high competence in inquiry and analysis, critical and creative thinking, integrative and reflective thinking, written and oral communication, quantitative literacy, information literacy, intercultural understanding, and teamwork and problem solving. As an illustration, here is just a sample of the findings of the Hart study:

- Nearly all employers (93 percent) agree that a “demonstrated capacity to *think critically, communicate clearly, and solve complex problems* is *more important* than [a job candidate’s] undergraduate major.”
- “More than nine in ten [employers] say it is important that those they hire demonstrate *ethical judgment and integrity; intercultural skills; and the capacity for continued new learning.*”
- Eight in ten employers say that, whatever their major field, all college students need broad learning in the liberal arts and sciences.
- More than 75 percent of employers call for *more emphasis* on five key areas: “*critical thinking, complex problem-solving, written and oral communication, and applied knowledge in real-world settings.*”
- “Employers endorse several educational practices as potentially helpful in preparing college students for workplace success,” including “practices that require students to *conduct research and use evidence-based analysis,*” to “gain in-depth knowledge in the major and *analytic, problem-solving, and communication skills,*” and to “*apply their learning in real-world settings.*”⁴

FIGURE 1. The LEAP Essential Learning Outcomes

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 THE PHYSICAL AND NATURAL WORLD**

- Through study in the sciences and mathematics, social sciences, humanities, histories, languages, and the arts

Focused by engagement with big questions, both contemporary and enduring

▶ **INTELLECTUAL AND PRACTICAL SKILLS, INCLUDING**

- Inquiry and analysis
- Critical and creative thinking
- Written and oral communication
- Quantitative literacy
- Information literacy
- Teamwork and problem solving

Practiced extensively, across the curriculum, in the context of progressively more challenging problems, projects, and standards for performance

▶ **PERSONAL AND SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY, INCLUDING**

- Civic knowledge and engagement—local and global
- Intercultural knowledge and competence
- Ethical reasoning and action
- Foundations and skills for lifelong learning

Anchored 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

NOTE: This listing was developed through a multiyear dialogue with employers and with hundreds of colleges and universities about needed goals for student learning; analysis of a long series of recommendations and reports from the business community; and analysis of the accreditation requirements for engineering, business, nursing, and teacher education. For more information, see Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U), *College Learning for the New Global Century: A Report from the National Leadership Council for Liberal Education and America's Promise* (Washington, DC: AAC&U, 2007); AAC&U, *The LEAP Vision for Learning: Outcomes, Practices, Impact, and Employers' Views* (Washington, DC: AAC&U, 2011); or visit www.aacu.org/leap.

Tellingly, employers put their compensation dollars into the jobs that require these kinds of higher education learning outcomes. Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce economist Anthony Carnevale reports that “from a federal database analyzing qualifications for 1,100 different jobs, there is consistent evidence that the highest salaries apply to positions that call for intensive use of liberal education capabilities regardless of formal educational requirements, including: writing, inductive and deductive reasoning, judgment and decision-making, problem solving, social/interpersonal skills, mathematics, originality.”⁵ Indeed, the 220 jobs in

the upper quintile with regard to the extent to which they require these liberal education capabilities pay on average more than double what the 220 jobs in the lowest quintile pay.

These are the key capacities that all students seeking at least the kind of compensation necessary for a middle-class existence will need in the twenty-first century because, according to Levy and Murnane, the jobs that don't require these capacities will be "done by computers and low wage workers abroad."⁶ In their illuminating analysis of how work is changing in the twenty-first century, Levy and Murnane say that "we cannot predict with accuracy the occupations that will grow fastest in the future or the precise tasks that humans will perform. Nonetheless, it is a safe bet that the human labor market will center on three kinds of work: solving unstructured problems, working with new information, and carrying out non-routine manual tasks."⁷

The challenge to make high-quality learning a priority for all college students is clear. What will be higher education's response?

How Do We Know What Students Have Learned in College?

How to provide evidence about what students know and can do with their learning is *the* crucial question for a college or university that seeks to provide a high-quality education. And this is a question that higher education itself needs to answer. Both at the state and federal levels, policy and governmental entities are mobilizing to provide metrics about access, affordability, completion, and job-related outcomes such as earnings, but it is clear that these metrics will say nothing significant about student learning. Yet employers tell us that what they want, more than anything else, is to know what job applicants know and can do. How then will educators respond?

Taking responsibility for the quality of all students' learning, not simply degree completion, involves three elements:⁸

1. A clearly articulated, collective conception of the qualities of a college-educated person
2. Intentionality and collaborative, faculty-led efforts across educational programs to cultivate those qualities
3. Cumulative multi-modal assessments, across the curriculum and cocurriculum, to determine the extent to which students have achieved the desired learning⁹

Thanks largely to the dialogue AAC&U has orchestrated between educators and employers—a dialogue captured both in the LEAP Essential Learning Outcomes (see fig. 1, p. 2) and in Lumina Foundation's Degree Qualifications Profile¹⁰—educators have now provided both the clearly articulated conception of the learning needed in college, and a model for faculty-led intentionality to ensure that degree programs provide the needed preparation. But what kinds of cumulative assessments should be undertaken?

While specific policy proposals for assessing student learning in college vary, they have one feature in common. Like the K–12 federal and state reforms that have been enacted under No Child Left Behind, they regard a particular kind of standardized testing—one that includes multiple-choice, "one-best-answer" tests—as the right way

to assess student knowledge and to hold the academy “accountable.” Or policy makers recommend content-neutral assessments of students’ reasoning skills that, by design, tell us nothing about students’ ability to apply knowledge learned in their majors to complex problems and contexts. Although we clearly have entered a new global era when it comes to high expectations for students’ cumulative learning, policy and public understandings of how higher education should be accountable for quality are still mired in the assumptions of a bygone time that continue to disadvantage large groups of students.

It is time to break free of these outdated approaches and to develop new frameworks for assessment that acknowledge the distinctiveness of higher education. In contrast to the leaner and more structured high school curriculum, college students study a wider variety of disciplines, programs, and specializations reflecting an equally divergent set of disciplinary cultures. Every one of these cultures values the capabilities described in the LEAP Essential Learning Outcomes (see fig. 1, p. 2); however, the strategies used for communication, analysis, and problem solving can vary dramatically across disciplines. Similarly, while all fields pose ethical, cross-cultural, and civic questions, these questions, too, vary according to context.

So today, as higher education seeks a way to assess the quality of student work, the best of which is done in the context of students’ majors, it must be able to take these differences among disciplines into account. A standardized test of students’ reasoning and communication skills cannot probe their highest skill levels because applied learning takes such different forms in different fields.

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But everyone, educator and employer alike, has a stake in knowing whether students are developing analytical and problem-solving capabilities—the kinds of capabilities addressed in the LEAP Essential Learning Outcomes—in the context of their most advanced studies. Everyone has a stake in knowing whether students and graduates can draw knowledge and skill from different contexts, both academic and field-based (such as internships), as they tackle new problems and projects. And everyone has a stake in knowing whether and how much students improved in the areas identified in the LEAP Essential Learning Outcomes during their time in college, and how this improvement compares on the basis of students’ learning gains at similar institutions or across higher education.

What Does Authentic Assessment of Student Learning Look Like?

Accountability for the highest standards of undergraduate learning calls for new forms of critical inquiry and reflective practice—forms that are both appropriate to higher education’s mission and feasible in the contemporary academy. Even if better tests continue to be developed, standardized tests *alone* are inadequate to measure individual or institutional progress, or to foster advanced learning and accountability in higher education.

AAC&U affirms that accountability is essential, but insists that the form it takes must be worthy of higher education’s mission to provide a high-quality education for all students. This means that higher education also must hold itself accountable

for assessing students' best work, not just the very small set of general skills captured in the most widely used national tests. And progress must be evaluated over the full range of students' introductory, "milestone," and "capstone" levels of learning.

Authentic assessment places students' effortful work at the very center of the assessment process. Projects, research, writing, performances, portfolios,¹¹ both course-based and field-based, are the centerpieces of the kind of assessment AAC&U advocates.

In response to the need for authentic assessment, and with the support of the State Farm Companies Foundation and the US Department of Education's Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education, AAC&U launched an initiative in 2007 called Valid Assessment of Learning in Undergraduate Education (VALUE) to explore the feasibility of developing assessment rubrics for a broad range of the LEAP Essential Learning Outcomes—outcomes that, as we saw above, have been strongly endorsed by employers as well as educators.

Assessment rubrics for sixteen liberal learning outcomes—above and beyond knowledge and competence in specific content fields—have been developed by teams of faculty and academic professionals from more than a hundred campuses across the country. VALUE rubrics have been developed for the following learning goals: inquiry and analysis, critical thinking, writing, integrative learning, oral communication, information literacy, problem solving, teamwork, intercultural knowledge, civic engagement, creative thinking, quantitative literacy, lifelong learning, ethical reasoning, global learning, and reading. Validity studies, which estimate the extent to which an instrument (in this case a rubric) is actually correlated with the underlying trait it seeks to measure, and reliability studies, which estimate the extent to which multiple raters reach the same conclusion on a rating using a particular rubric, are under way with very encouraging results.

More than ever before in our nation's history, there is close alignment between the intended learning outcomes of liberal education and what the nation needs for its own flourishing. Any serious national effort to assess the performance of colleges and universities and to aid their efforts at continuous quality improvement must have at its center the assessment of students' attainment of these learning goals.

VALUE Is a Superior Assessment System and Will Be Widely Accepted

There are three primary reasons why a VALUE rubric-based assessment system is compelling and is already being adopted by colleges, universities, community colleges, accreditors, and other key stakeholders as the national standard.

First, when institutions use VALUE rubrics, benchmarking can happen. It is insufficient for an institution to assess its students in ways that are grounded only in its local curriculum and understandable only within a specific institutional context. In an era when higher education is more important to our nation's future than ever, and when therefore it is under more scrutiny than ever, colleges, universities, and community colleges must provide useful knowledge to the public about goals, standards, accountability practices, and the quality of student learning. The key to the VALUE assessment approach, therefore, is the creation of *common rubrics* that can summarize

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levels of student achievement across different academic fields and institutions, and for particular groups of students.

Second, this form of assessment is less expensive and far more useful for faculty-led improvement—investments in VALUE, in other words, have a much higher rate of return. AAC&U's pilot testing of the time and cost of assessing actual student work, versus that of administering standardized tests, demonstrates that rubric-based

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assessment is less expensive and requires no additional time from students, even as it provides nuanced developmental feedback that is not provided by standardized test scores.¹² Indeed, what institutions spend on scoring student work by paying their own faculty to do it, while not paying for standardized test administration, is really an investment in faculty development and not just an assessment cost. When faculty apply rubrics to samples of students' authentic work, they begin to ask questions both about how to strengthen the assignments they give students and about ways to ensure that their programs are fostering the kind of learning the degree should represent. Bonnie Orcutt, professor of business administration and economics at Worcester State University, director of learning outcomes assessment

for the Massachusetts Department of Higher Education, and a faculty participant in the Multi-State Collaborative to Advance Learning Outcomes Assessment,¹³ speaks directly to the issue of rate of return:

The benefits of rubric-based assessment are far reaching and accrue over time with the potential to generate lasting impact. A rubric is a multi-dimensional assessment tool that allows for identification of student strengths and weaknesses and facilitates intentional changes in pedagogical practices, course assignments, and curricular designs in order to improve student learning. In turn, improved student learning is linked to increases in the attainment of other direct measures of student success, such as completion rates. Additional to the formative benefits of this approach, rubric-based assessment also can serve as a summative measure of student learning. Conversely, standardized tests are summative in nature only, providing little information to faculty regarding where changes might serve to increase learning.¹⁴

Knowing they are going to use a rubric to assess student work, faculty members must “reverse engineer” their courses, thinking carefully about how their assignments are structured. Is the assigned work going to stimulate the kind of learning the rubric describes, in addition to the content learning intended? That is an example of how this form of assessment feeds back into teaching and learning, creating a virtuous cycle of continuous quality improvement.

Sharing the rubric with students ahead of their learning experiences gives them a much deeper and more explicit understanding of the growth in higher-order learning skills they are being asked to achieve. Students can see what the institution believes to be the difference between exceptionally fine and less fine analysis, critical thinking, integrative learning, and so on. In some institutions, students observing a public presentation by another student are also asked to use a rubric in order to

evaluate their fellow student's work, adding another avenue to learning and insight for the student observers.

In short, this kind of assessment activity is embedded in the teaching and learning process itself and actually contributes both to learning and to its improvement.

Third, resulting institutional scores are more accurate and valid. Ensuring that the students whose work will be assessed are a representative sample of an institutions' student body is critical to a successful institutional assessment system. Fixing a major flaw in standardized testing strategies, AAC&U's approach ensures that student work will be obtained from virtually every student in the sample, reducing "non-response" bias essentially to zero. This is possible because students must complete the work needed for rubric scoring as part of their course assignments, whereas institutions currently find it very difficult to get students to take and treat seriously standardized tests that are not part of required coursework. So even when the sample of students to be tested has been selected in order to be representative, test-completion rates are almost always very low, calling into question generalizations to the population.

AAC&U's approach also involves students themselves in the intentional project of reporting, integrating, and demonstrating their cumulative gains in college. It gives students focus and skills as they work toward becoming self-directed learners. It is, in fact, another form of active learning.

VALUE Should Become the National Standard

We at AAC&U and the growing number of member-institution faculty and other leaders who are exploring this assessment concept for their institutions are absolutely confident that, over time, a VALUE rubric-based system of learning outcomes assessment will provide what both we and the nation need for continuous improvement in student and institutional performance and, at the same time, will provide the evidence of student learning that those who finance and subsidize American higher education—families, government, and charitable donors—legitimately deserve.

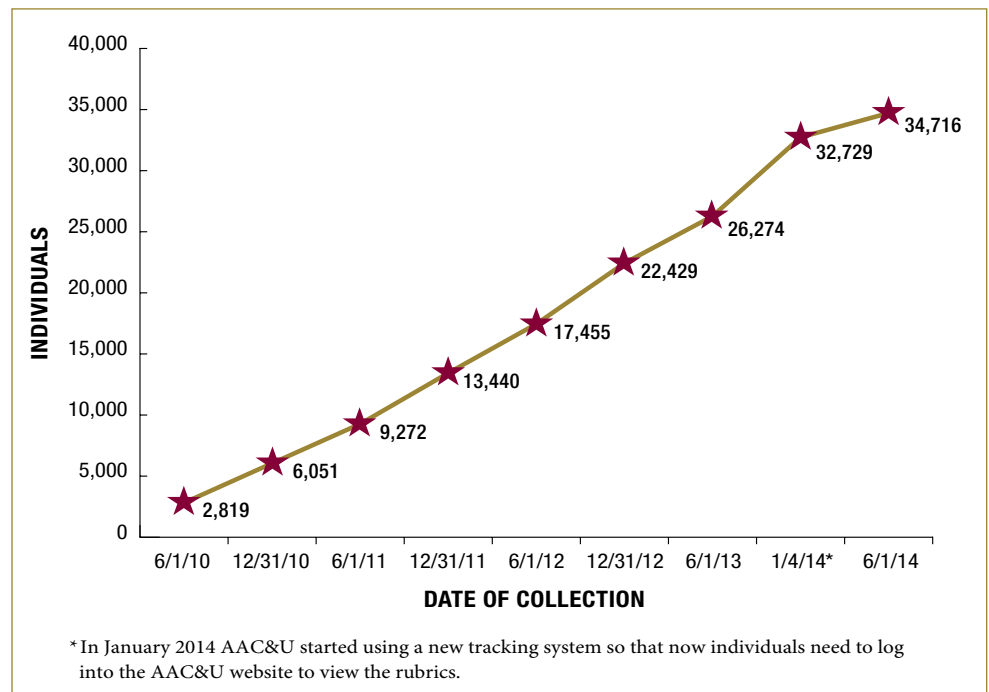
Colleges and universities are rightly resisting federal, state, and other equally oversimplified and flawed attempts to measure college outcomes with generic tests that provide no evidence about how well students can apply the learning they are gaining from the curriculum to complex problems and projects. AAC&U's VALUE rubric approach, on the other hand, has been developed in close collaboration with faculty from a broad range of member institutions. As figures 2 and 3 show, the response to the VALUE rubrics from the higher education community has been dramatic: more than 34,500 individuals from more than 6,500 institutions, including more than 3,800 US and international colleges and universities, have engaged with the VALUE rubrics through the AAC&U website since June of 2010.

Moreover, hundreds of institutions already are using the rubrics to drive improvements in teaching and learning. In a recent report, Rhodes and Finley chronicled much institutional experience, along with lessons learned on how to use the VALUE rubrics most productively.¹⁵ Twelve institutional case studies identified as a

AAC&U's VALUE rubric approach... has been developed in close collaboration with faculty from a broad range of member institutions.

part of that report have been posted on the AAC&U website.¹⁶ Additional papers summarizing institutional experiences and results are appearing regularly. The National Institute of Learning Outcomes Assessment will report in a forthcoming book that the percentage of institutions using rubrics has risen from 23 percent in 2009 to 70 percent in 2013. The authors credit the VALUE rubrics as a significant driver of this notable change and provide numerous examples of how institutions are using VALUE rubrics to improve learning.¹⁷

FIGURE 2. **Cumulative number of unduplicated individuals who accessed the VALUE section of AAC&U's website**

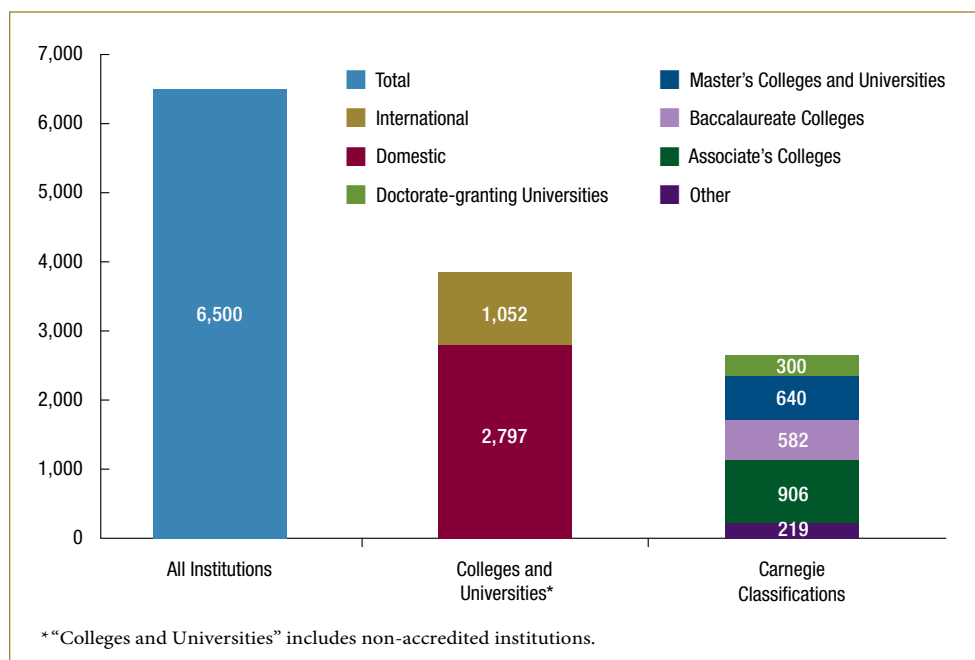


Why is there this rapidly accelerating adoption of a VALUE approach to college student learning assessment by highly diverse kinds of colleges and universities? Feedback to AAC&U from faculty members and other educational professionals indicates that it is because VALUE goes with, rather than against, the grain of American faculty and institutional teaching and learning value systems. It comes from the higher education community, rather than being imposed on that community from without. It respects and raises up the importance of the work faculty members ask students to complete as part of their academic programs, while at the same time providing faculty with feedback on what works to improve student learning, especially for those least advantaged under current assessment practices.

A fatal flaw in previous efforts to reform and improve college student learning is an implicit assumption that all can be made better in American higher education without engaging faculty as partners in the process. The national narrative regarding what is wrong with higher education casts faculty as the problem, just as teachers

are seen as an obstacle to be gotten around in the reform of K–12 education. Faculty surely are part of the problem, but inspiring faculty leaders on campuses all over America are also building the solution. No significant improvement in student learning outcomes in American higher education will happen in the foreseeable future without a national strategy for the development and support of faculty. The VALUE approach to assessment is a key piece of such a strategy. This is why we believe that, in the next three to five years, the VALUE approach will become the national higher education student learning and institutional outcome assessment standard.

FIGURE 3. **Numbers of institutions where an individual has accessed the VALUE section of AAC&U’s website as of June 1, 2014**



Progress So Far

The sixteen VALUE rubrics cover a full spectrum of significant higher-order student learning in college, beyond content, and can be used to assess whether students have developed these key capacities in many different content areas. This is a major step forward.

As indicated above, hundreds of institutions and their faculties are already testing and using the VALUE rubrics locally to improve student learning, and thousands more are learning about VALUE, as the high levels of downloading from the VALUE portion of the AAC&U website show. But until now, there has been no organized way to benchmark and compare results. This year, with major financial support from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and with additional funding from the Sherman Fairchild Foundation, an extensive “proof of concept at scale” has begun in collaboration with eighty-seven four-year and two-year public and private colleges and

universities. These collaborating institutions were recruited for their capacity and willingness to engage in direct assessment of student work across a specified set of learning outcomes at a scale appropriate to their missions and resources. Much of this work is being done in cooperation with state systems, with the State Higher Education Executive Officers Association, and through the Multi-State Collaborative to Advance Learning Outcomes Assessment (see appendix). While nine state systems are officially taking part in this work, numerous others have expressed interest in joining as well.

Very importantly, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation is funding the creation of a national database into which institutions will be able to deposit actual student work products for scoring using appropriate VALUE rubrics. AAC&U will oversee this database, which will operate in much the same way as the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) operates: AAC&U will ensure that the deposited student work to

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be scored will come from representative samples of students; reports to the institution will be created, structured to be useful to faculty and students engaged in a cycle of continuous quality improvement; institutions will control who can see institutionally identifiable data; and AAC&U will release summary reports that are based on aggregated data. Because the focus will be on what students actually learn in college—not just what they know when they complete college, which is greatly affected by what they knew when they started college—institutions will want to follow cohorts of students beginning with their first year.

The goal—increasingly within reach—is an approach to the assessment of college student learning that fosters and supports virtuous cycles of continuous improvement in teaching and learning on college campuses all across the country and that also provides aggregated data across institutions and institutional types on what students actually learn in college. As now with NSSE, the Collegiate Learning Assessment initiative, and other sources of data on student learning, individual institutions will be able to release their assessment results to institutional stakeholders and even the general public, if they wish.

Institutions with positive results will surely do so, and the outcome will be incentives among institutions with respect to how much their students' learning improves relative to learning goals that are critical for success in the twenty-first century. Institutions will be able to benchmark results against those of other institutions with similar missions and students. The VALUE initiative will someday tell us about how well graduates are prepared for the challenges of work and life in the twenty-first century and which institutions foster the greatest learning gains—not just for their relatively advantaged students, but for all their students—while simultaneously recognizing and supporting the critical work faculty do to make that happen.

Indeed, aiding institutions in their efforts to ensure equity in high-quality learning is a top strategic priority for AAC&U, and the development of a widely used, national VALUE rubric-based assessment system is central to this profoundly student-centered strategy. To increase equity in high-quality learning, institutions must be able to monitor inequity over time, understand its sources, discover paths to

improvement, and through benchmarking compare their success against that of other similar institutions.

The sea change we seek represents both a steady and ultimately dramatic increase in college student learning generally and an equally dramatic reduction in the inequity of learning across subgroups of the American population that exists today.

And that is an outcome worth pursuing with the most intense commitment.

Appendix: The Multi-State Collaborative to Advance Learning Outcomes Assessment

The Multi-State Collaborative to Advance Learning Outcomes Assessment (MSC) is an initiative designed to provide meaningful evidence about how well students are achieving important learning outcomes. Sponsored by the State Higher Education Executive Officers Association and the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U), the MSC is designed to produce valid data summarizing faculty judgments of students' own work, and also seeks to aggregate results in a way that allows for benchmarking across institutions and states. The primary goal of the initiative is to provide data that will allow faculty and institutional leaders to assess—and improve—the levels of student achievement on a set of cross-cutting outcomes important for all disciplines.

In its initial phase of work, the project is evaluating student achievement of three of the most important outcomes of a college education—written communication, quantitative reasoning, and critical thinking. In its first year, the MSC is examining student work from sixty-nine colleges, community colleges, and universities in nine states. The initiative builds on efforts in Massachusetts (as part of its Vision Project) and builds on AAC&U's Liberal Education and America's Promise (LEAP) initiative, through which a common set of rubrics to assess the LEAP Essential Learning Outcomes was developed.

MSC Guiding Principles

- Any system of assessment should help build and support a culture of student learning that allows for assessment results to be used by each campus and by larger public systems for improving student learning and for program improvement.
- Any statewide or campus plan for assessment should be based upon authentic student work and allow for the use of multiple measures of student learning—indirect, direct, and embedded—without a single mandated statewide test.
- A common framework is needed for any credible statewide system of assessment and accountability. AAC&U's LEAP Essential Learning Outcomes and VALUE (Valid Assessment of Learning in Undergraduate Education) rubrics designed to assess the Essential Learning Outcomes are a useful framework given their broad adoption nationally and their endorsement both within and outside of higher education institutions and systems.
- Assessment approaches should involve an iterative process and, accordingly, should be viewed as works in progress.
- Assessment is most effective when it reflects an understanding of learning as multidimensional, integrated, and revealed in performance over time.

More information about the MSC is available online at www.sheeo.org/msc.

Notes

1. For a discussion of equity in student learning and the essential role of equity-mindedness in higher education reform efforts, see Keith Witham, Lindsey E. Malcom-Piqueux, Alicia C. Dowd, and Estela Mara Bensimon, *America's Unmet Promise: The Imperative for Equity in Higher Education* (Washington, DC: Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2015).
2. Hart Research Associates, *It Takes More Than a Major: Employer Priorities for College Learning and Student Success* (Washington, DC: Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2013); Hart Research Associates, *Raising the Bar: Employers' Views on College Learning in the Wake of the Economic Downturn* (Washington, DC: Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2010); Peter D. Hart Research Associates, *How Should Colleges Assess and Improve Student Learning? Employers' Views on the Accountability Challenge* (Washington, DC: Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2008); Peter D. Hart Research Associates, *How Should Colleges Prepare Students to Succeed in Today's Global Economy?* (Washington, DC: Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2006).
3. Hart Research Associates, *It Takes More Than a Major*. The Employer-Educator Compact is a statement from educational and business leaders about making high-quality learning a national priority. The full text of the compact, along with additional information about this initiative, is available online at <http://www.aacu.org/leap/presidentstrust/compact>.
4. Hart Research Associates, *It Takes More Than a Major*, 1–2; italics added.
5. Anthony Carnevale, “The Economic Value of Liberal Education” (analysis prepared for Association of American Colleges and Universities Presidents' Trust, Georgetown Center for Education and the Workforce, Washington, DC, 2009).
6. Frank Levy and Richard J. Murnane, *Dancing with Robots: Human Skills for Computerized Work* (Washington, DC: Third Way, 2013), 28.
7. Ibid.
8. This argument draws heavily from Board of Directors of the Association of American Colleges and Universities, *Our Students' Best Work: A Framework for Accountability Worthy of Our Mission*, 2nd ed. (Washington, DC: Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2008), 1–2.
9. George D. Kuh, Natasha Jankowski, Stanley O. Ikenberry, and Jillian Kinzie, *Knowing What Students Know and Can Do: The Current State of Student Learning Outcomes Assessment in U.S. Colleges and Universities* (Champaign, IL: National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment, 2014).

10. The Degree Qualifications Profile is a postsecondary learning outcomes framework that specifies what students should be expected to know and be able to do at the associate's, bachelor's, and master's levels. For more information, see <http://degreeprofile.org>.
11. Portfolios are collections of a student's work from the beginning of college to the end, available for assessment of student progress at any point. Many institutions are experimenting with and adopting electronic portfolios that make students' work available to them into the future, including for sharing with potential employers or graduate schools, and available to the institution for future, retrospective assessment of student work. Aggregation of summary scores from these assessments can be used to create an institutional score, which, in turn, can then be benchmarked against scores from other institutions.
12. For more information, see Shelley Johnson Carey, ed., "Assessing Liberal Education Outcomes Using VALUE Rubrics," *Peer Review* 13 and 14, nos. 1 and 2 (2012); especially Kathleen Langan Pusecker, Manuel Roberto Torres, Iain Crawford, Delphis Levia, Donald Lehman, and Gordana Copic, "Increasing the Validity of Outcomes Assessment," 27–33.
13. For information about the Multi-State Collaborative to Advance Learning Outcomes Assessment, see appendix.
14. Bonnie Orcutt, pers. comm.
15. Terrel L. Rhodes and Ashley Finley, *Using the VALUE Rubrics for Improvement of Learning and Authentic Assessment* (Washington, DC: Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2013).
16. See <http://www.aacu.org/value/casestudies>.
17. George D. Kuh, Stanley O. Ikenberry, Natasha Jankowski, Timothy Reese Cain, Peter T. Ewell, Pat Hutchings, and Jillian Kinzie, *Using Evidence of Student Learning to Improve Higher Education* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2015).

About the Author

Daniel F. Sullivan is both senior advisor to the president and advancement fellow at the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U). He served as the seventeenth president of St. Lawrence University and professor of sociology from 1996 until his retirement in 2009, when he was named president emeritus. Previously, he served as president and professor of sociology at Allegheny College (1986–96), vice president for planning and development and associate professor of sociology at Carleton College (1979–86), and assistant to associate professor of sociology at Carleton College (1971–79). Dr. Sullivan is past chair of the AAC&U board of directors (2008); current chair of the AAC&U Presidents' Trust; and past chair of the advisory board of Project Kaleidoscope, an undergraduate STEM education reform collaborative that is now a part of AAC&U.



Valid Assessment of Learning in Undergraduate Education (VALUE) is a campus-based assessment initiative sponsored by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) as part of its Liberal Education and America's Promise (LEAP) initiative. VALUE is developing an approach to assessment that is based on examples of student work saved over time in an e-portfolio and completed through a student's curriculum and cocurriculum. Teams of faculty developed sixteen rubrics for AAC&U's Essential Learning Outcomes, which all students need for success as citizens and employees and for fulfilling lives. The VALUE rubrics are used to help institutions demonstrate, share, and assess student proficiencies and accomplishments at progressively more advanced and integrative levels of learning.



Liberal Education and America's Promise (LEAP) is a national advocacy, campus action, and research initiative that champions the importance of a twenty-first-century liberal education—for individuals and for a nation dependent on economic creativity and democratic vitality. LEAP responds to the changing demands of the twenty-first century—demands for more college-educated workers and more engaged and informed citizens. Today, and in the years to come, college graduates need higher levels of learning and knowledge as well as strong intellectual and practical skills to navigate this more demanding environment successfully and responsibly. Launched in 2005, LEAP challenges the traditional practice of providing liberal education to some students and narrow training to others. Through LEAP, hundreds of campuses and several state systems are making far-reaching educational changes to help all their students—whatever their chosen major field of study—achieve a set of Essential Learning Outcomes fostered through a liberal education.



General Education Maps and Markers (GEMs) is a new and far-reaching LEAP initiative designed to significantly improve the quality of undergraduate education, increase student success rates, and chart a new course for general education curriculum design that is aligned with twenty-first-century goals for learning. GEMs—supported with an initial grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation—draws upon AAC&U's long-standing work in the area of curricular reform in order to develop an adaptive and proficiency-based framework for general education. The initiative foregrounds problem-centered inquiry as the touchstone for quality in twenty-first-century undergraduate learning. Through the GEMs initiative, AAC&U seeks to ensure that all students, and particularly those from groups that have been traditionally underserved by higher education, are engaged in deep, inquiry-based learning and have multiple opportunities to apply their knowledge, skills, and ethical responsibilities to complex problems and questions.

About AAC&U

The Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) is the leading national association concerned with the quality, vitality, and public standing of undergraduate liberal education. 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 1,300 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, and faculty members who are engaged in institutional and curricular planning. Its mission is to reinforce the collective commitment to liberal education and inclusive excellence at both the national and local levels, and to help individual institutions keep the quality of student learning at the core of their work as they evolve to meet new economic and social challenges.

Information about AAC&U membership, programs, and publications can be found at www.aacu.org.



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