

Integrated Learning and the Value of the VALUE Rubrics

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Background

We are engaged in nothing less than an effort to change the focus of the national conversation from artificial, shorthand indicators of learning to something that reflects the shared work and understanding of faculty members and academic professionals across campuses”

--Terrel L. Rhodes

The Association of American Colleges & Universities focuses its approach on student learning outcomes through its LEAP (Liberal Education America’s Promise) VALUE (Valid Assessment of Undergraduate Education) Rubrics, a set of general education rubrics developed by faculty groups across the country looking internally at common general education outcomes. The process for developing the rubrics emerged from “Principles of Excellence” developed by a leadership council of educators, which include: “giving students a compass (*focus each student's plan of study on achieving the essential learning outcomes--and assess progress*), teach the arts

of inquiry and innovation, connect knowledge with choice and action, assess students' ability to apply learning to complex problems" (AAC&U). The internal yet cross-national look at refined student outcomes through the VALUE rubrics has the potential to measure student outcomes across campuses, across classrooms and longitudinally through multiple iterations.

As one of 12 community colleges named by the AAC & U and MetLife as Giving a Roadmap: Enrollment to Engagement in Educational Achievement and Success Campuses, Queensborough Community College was invited to apply to the Collaborative on Authentic Assessment of Learning (CAAL):pilot, and was accepted to participate." CAAL is currently being developed to provide a virtual community where institutions can upload, share, and discuss their campus assessment results using the VALUE rubrics. This collaboration among e-portfolio vendors and campuses is intended to expand communication across campuses regarding common instruments, compelling findings, potential benchmarks for student success, and best practices of assessment using rubrics and e- portfolios." Queensborough was tasked to score the Integrative Learning Value Rubric on 100 student work samples. The scores and samples will be placed in a repository. Queensborough's "Roadmap" activities, made possible by the Freshman Academy structure launched in 2009, will therefore be deepened and better supported, as the current student learning outcome work is currently being implemented as a teaching and learning tool as much as an assessment tool in small interdisciplinary faculty cohorts on campus approaching high impact strategies. The detailed attention to naming principles of excellence and general education outcome rubrics as in the LEAP VALUE project offer the opportunity for a culture of evidence that allows for a reflection process that focuses on student learning, as well as partnerships with business groups and state officials to ensure not only greater access but greater

success in United States higher education and the workplace. Through the use of rubrics, students, notably historically underserved and first generation college students, are given a clear outline of expectations, assisting them in the achievement of the learning outcomes which will enable them to complete their educational goals.

Organizing a First Year Experience:

Queensborough Community College's goal is to provide an academic environment that strengthens students' commitment and makes it possible for them to graduate or complete their goals in a timely manner. In the fall of 2009, after 8 years of preparation Queensborough launched the Freshman Academies. All first-time, full-time students are enrolled in one of six Freshman Academies based upon his/her chosen field of study. The six Freshman Academies are Science, Technology, Engineering and Math; Liberal Arts; Visual and Performing Arts; Education; Health Related Sciences; and Business. What is different about Queensborough's Freshman Academies is that it is a scaled-up and institutionalized effort for activities which rarely move beyond the pilot stage and rarely reach the least prepared student, and concentrate all services into six academies for all first-time, full-time freshmen. The Freshman Academies are mandatory for all 3241 first-time, full-time freshman who enrolled at this open access community college of the City University of New York during the fall 2009.

Academic Enhancement: High Impact Strategies & Integrated Learning:

The academic enhancement initiative centers on the directed focus of high impact classroom strategies in the first 30 credits. George Kuh, who first identified high impact practices through a study of the National Survey of Student Engagement (2008) writes. "The results of participating

in these high-impact practices are especially striking for students who are further behind in terms of their entering academic test scores. The benefits are similarly positive for students from communities that historically have been underserved in higher education.”

At Queensborough, the high impact strategies for freshman include cornerstone courses, e-portfolio, learning communities, service learning, and writing intensive courses.

1. Cornerstone Courses are introductory courses that teach general education skills of communication, critical thinking, organization and development of values.
2. e-Portfolio is a personalized, electronic archiving system which allows students to express their educational goals and see their own progress as a student as they move through college. It can also incorporate social networking.
3. Learning Communities are two courses taught by two different professors which are linked by a theme. The same students are in each of the classes. These classes assist students in seeing connections between disciplines, and help them get to know their fellow students and professors.
4. Service Learning employ class assignments that take students' work out into the community. Students learn more about the subject they are studying while making an impact outside the classroom, encouraging civic engagement.
5. Writing Intensive Courses are specifically designed to improve students' writing ability through all the academic disciplines. Two writing intensive courses are required to graduate.

All five of the high impact strategies had been adopted by faculty members before the launching of the academies. The academies initiative has served to target, promote and scale up the high impact strategies, as well as to examine best practices and general education objectives in relation to those strategies. As students began to hone an academic identity by virtue of membership in one of six academies based on field of major interest, the role of participating faculty expanded beyond individual discipline identifications into the multidisciplinary academies. Greater faculty consciousness of general education and the students' complete academic paths has been achieved through efforts to implement and assess high impact strategies on a larger scale.

To support and promote the high impact strategies and co-curricular activities, as well as to serve as a communicative bridge to the Freshman Coordinators (Student Affairs personnel described as “relationship guides” who provide enhanced advisement and referral to freshman), a group of faculty leaders have emerged who serve as Faculty Coordinators, Learning Outcomes Facilitators and Basic Education/Developmental Mathematics. The faculty leaders meet regularly with freshman coordinators and participate in Freshman Orientation and other Academy gatherings with students. They also facilitate interdisciplinary faculty cohort groups which meet throughout the semester to discuss best practices as well as to support the development and implementation of cross cutting general education rubrics. The General Education Objective rubrics, which focus on speech, reading, writing and quantitative illiteracies served not only as assessment tools, but as a method of communication of expectation and goal setting for students in the classroom.

By Fall 2010, the Learning Communities Initiative began to implement the Integrated Learning VALUE rubric as a tool to demonstrate student integration of the two disciplines that comprised each Learning Community.

The interdisciplinary conversations that ensued among the faculty have created a greater consciousness of the general education objectives that had been voted on by the faculty as well as led to examinations of the true 'impact' of the high impact activities in dialogue with the principal investigator of the Freshman Academies Assessment Protocol and the Office of Academic Affairs.

The feedback loop from faculty to student and among faculty have initiated greater articulation of integrative strategies in the classroom, such as the institution of supplemental education assignments in Freshman

Composition, a cornerstone course in cooperation with the Kupferberg Holocaust Archive and the QCC Art Gallery. Academy specific cornerstone courses have been created which feature readings which relate to students' field of major interest and assist with making connections to student aspiration. Additional academy specific courses address areas in which certain groups of students traditionally encounter roadblocks, for instance a remedial math class has been formed dedicated to visual and performing arts students which employ the arts to teach basic mathematics. The Student Interdisciplinary Wiki Project incorporates groups of three classes which all participate in a virtual learning community through ePortfolio and shared interdisciplinary wiki assignments, which also layers service learning. The Academies therefore are not only ensuring that students receive two high impact practices, but are attempting to

ensure that the quality of these experiences are relevant and memorable. The Student Wiki Interdisciplinary Group began using the Integrated Learning Rubric in Spring 2011, attempting to demonstrate the active reflection on interdisciplinary connections that was inherent in that practice. In Summer 2011, the initiative “Moving Ahead with ePortfolio” incorporated a longitudinal exploration of the Integrated Learning VALUE rubric in classes using ePortfolio integrative learning assignments.

As a result of the constant evolution of the high impact practices in their emphasis on interdisciplinarity, experiences beyond the five named high impact strategies occur through the vehicle of the Freshman Academies, such as diversity/global learning, common intellectual experiences and collaborative project based learning, which have also been named as high impact practices by George Kuh (2008).

The VALUE Rubric and Integrated Learning

The VALUE Rubrics reflect the emphasis the academy places on the ability to analyze and integrate knowledge in a variety of ways--

Terrel L. Rhodes

Alongside the Principles of Excellence, the LEAP campaign identified a series of Essential Learning Outcomes which include: knowledge of human cultures and the physical and natural world, intellectual and practical skills, personal and social responsibility, and integrated and applied learning. In the case of integrated and applied learning, demonstration is to take place through the application of knowledge, skills and responsibilities to new settings and problems. Teams of faculty and other academic professionals developed fifteen institutional level VALUE rubrics corresponding to elements of the Essential Learning Outcomes using existing campus

rubrics, other organizational statements on outcomes, disciplinary expertise and an iterative process which included faculty feedback (AAC & U).

The definition of integrated learning on the VALUE rubric is: “An understanding and a disposition that a student builds across the curriculum and co-curriculum, from making simple connections among ideas and experiences to synthesizing and transferring learning to new, complex situations within and beyond the campus.” Integrated learning can take place when assignments develop students’ ability to synthesize knowledge and make connections, increasing the potential for personal success, social responsibility and civic engagement. Structures, assignments and environments where the exchange of experience and understanding is encouraged cultivates the opportunity for integrative learning, and is embodied in Queensborough’s practices of Service Learning, Learning Communities and the Student Wiki Interdisciplinary Group.

The rubric holds five dimensions:

1. Connections to Experience, in which student connects relevant experience and academic knowledge
2. Connections to Discipline, in which student sees (makes) connections across disciplines and perspectives
3. Transfer in which student adapts and applies skills, abilities, theories, or methodologies gained in one situation to new situation
4. Integrated Communication

5. Reflections and Self-Assessment in which student demonstrates a developing sense of self as a learner, building on prior experiences to respond to new and challenging contexts (may be evident in self-assessment, reflection, or creative work).

Performance gradients begin at zero, in which there is no demonstration of a dimension, and then are staged on level 1 as benchmark, the learning skills and abilities among beginning students, levels 2 and 3 as milestones, which suggest key characteristics of progressive learning, and level 4 as capstone, which reflect achievement for the specific criterion for a student who graduates with a BA.

The Collaborative for Authentic Assessment of Learning Pilot Process at Queensborough

The purpose of the Collaborative for Authentic Assessment of Learning pilot was to gather information on how the process of gathering student work samples and scoring the rubric would interact with the life of the colleges which participated.

Queensborough initiated a call for faculty participant / student permission forms collected along with their work samples –de-identified through an anonymous numbering system. The permission template provided by the pilot facilitator did not ask demographic information and first generation college status, and it was discovered that there was no database which collected first generation status, so a second round of student work was collected and a more extensive permission form was used. Student work in the Honors Program and students in the Student Interdisciplinary Group from Basic Educational Skills in Reading and Writing, Freshman Composition and content courses in Chemistry, Math, Art History, Business and the Health Sciences comprised the first group of samples collected. In addition, a second round of samples

were collected from a homogenous group of students all participating in the University Summer Immersion Program which the City University of New York provides for incoming students, all of whom were asked a series of reflective questions.

Two separate scoring sessions were held, the first by a group of paid faculty which scored work samples from the honors students and Student Wiki Interdisciplinary Group, the second by tutors from the Basic Educational Skills learning center which scored the reflective essays. The brief training and norming session was met with enthusiasm and vigorous discussion which led to consensus as the understanding and dialogue around the Integrated Learning rubric grew.

Preliminary Observations

Work samples had been gathered based on proximity—both the honors program and the Student Wiki Interdisciplinary Group had called for artifacts for demonstration of student learning, so it was an efficient form of collection for the purposes of the study. It was clear from the results that the integrative nature of the Student Wiki Interdisciplinary Group assignments held prompts which led to higher levels of evidence of integrative learning, particularly in the dimensions of Connections to Experience and Reflection and Self-Assessment. Some students in that group had also been introduced to the rubric in the classroom, and the higher scores suggest that inviting students to consider the learning outcomes of the class and providing articulation of what constitutes the ultimate goals in the assignment increases their ability to demonstrate the outcomes sought. The summer immersion pre-college students predictably scored at zero or benchmark levels.

Additional qualitative information emerged from a faculty reflection on the process, in which themes of faculty's deeper understanding of integrative and applied learning emerged from the process of calibrating the rubric and discussing the dimensions with each other. Said one faculty scorer, "Professor L.'s comment made me understand the difference between 'connection to experience' and 'reflection,'" Another faculty member wrote, "I appreciated the time spent in groups collaborating on the scoring process—I now have a better understanding of integrative learning." A theme emerged in the reflections that faculty would welcome more such opportunities to dialogue on pedagogy. Based on this small sample, it may be suggested that faculty participating in interdisciplinary faculty development may uncover evidence of integrative and applied learning when implementing the rubric in their classrooms, as well as approach those competencies in their classroom informed by their development activities.

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