AAC&U VALUE Rubrics at Calumet College of Saint Joseph

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At Calumet College of Saint Joseph (CCSJ), we encountered and embraced the VALUE rubrics at an ideal moment in our institutional evolution. Of the VALUE rubrics currently in use at our college, the written communication rubric is already deeply embedded in our culture, playing a role in placement decisions, student support, and the assessment of students and programs. The rubrics for critical thinking, reading, quantitative literacy, and oral communication are in wide use as well. We’ve also modified the foundations and skills for lifelong learning rubric as a cocurricular measure of engagement in several domains, and as a tool to help us talk to students about persistence and retention. We have a very long way to go, but we are moving toward a culture of collaborative assessment, and the VALUE rubrics are a big part of our progress.

Context
Calumet College of Saint Joseph is a small urban liberal arts college serving traditionally underserved, often underprepared populations. In 2008, senior faculty began to address shortcomings in assessing our old general education curriculum, and quickly realized that many of our stated general education learning outcomes simply could not be assessed. They dealt with high-minded abstractions, which sounded nice and were true to our mission, but defied accurate assessment or improvement. When the faculty tried to address this issue, difficulties familiar to anyone working in higher education began to emerge. We established two new bookend courses for a more assessable, revised general education program: a new orientation course as students entered the college, and a new general education capstone course as students entered their majors in the third year. After establishing those courses, we seemed to be at an institutional impasse. While we knew we wanted to move toward a culture of assessment, a useful direction did not immediately emerge. The VALUE rubrics have been essential in moving past that difficult moment.

With the blessing of the senior faculty, the academic dean handed the problem of general education revision to the junior faculty, who were eager to embrace best practices and holistic
assessments. We began (late in 2009) the reform process with our first-year writing sequence, adopting an adapted version of the VALUE rubric for written communication as the essential instrument to measure a new first-year writing portfolio. Previously, we had used a traditional timed essay to measure students’ college-level readiness for the second writing course. With the help of the VALUE writing rubric, we moved to a broader portfolio that requires students to write, read, and revise several projects (including the timed essay). The portfolio is holistically evaluated by a committee of instructors who share the rubric. This helped unite our writing faculty in a community of practice, helped us calibrate among ourselves, and enabled us to articulate our goals in a more concrete fashion to our adjuncts and to our students.

Use of Findings to Affect Student Success
Our use of the writing rubric and writing portfolio has had a positive impact throughout the institution, and the data have helped us see some interesting things. For instance, students who receive a “weak” passing grade on the portfolio are now immediately flagged for writing and reading interventions, even though they passed the portfolio process. This is because we can now see that, even though they are currently keeping pace with their studies, these students are at a high risk of running into extreme difficulty in their second year. On the other hand, students who turn in an excellent portfolio, based on the rubric, are identified as potential candidates for our honors program—even when their placement test scores or standardized test scores are low. We’ve also used concordances (based on portfolio data alongside ACT’s Compass placement test scores) to tweak our placement system. And we have included the rubrics on our “early alert” forms so that any students referred to our Student Success Center (for academic support) can bring a rubric and instructor response with them to help pinpoint a direction for interventions, discussions, or further work. We can’t pinpoint which (if any) of these new developments are responsible, but we experienced a tremendous boost in retention during the 2011–12 academic year.

By the end of 2010, we had also adopted slightly revised and adapted versions of the quantitative literacy, oral communication, reading, and critical thinking VALUE rubrics for use in the new orientation and capstone classes. The students see the rubrics at regular intervals, beginning in orientation and then again in several general education courses during their first two
years. We are now asking all our students—we don’t quite have the teeth behind the effort for a mandate yet—to reach the capstone-level goal of “sufficient” in all these rubrics, including the writing rubric, by their junior-year capstone course. When students fall short of this goal, they do further work with faculty or in our Student Success Center. Encouraged by our successes with our first-year writing portfolio, we may eventually adopt either a second-year portfolio or a broader general education portfolio in order to help all our students progress through college. In this fashion, our efforts can be more continuous and less episodic. For now, outside of the first-year writing portfolio, the rubrics are used in relation to individual assignments or projects.

While we are using the other VALUE rubrics, they aren’t nearly as widely implemented or deeply embedded in our culture (yet!). But we are making progress. We’ve shared some of our findings at the Higher Learning Commission, at the AAC&U conference on general education, and the International Humanities Conference (all in 2011). Our current project is to amplify our efforts toward the LEAP high-impact practices across the curriculum, and we’ll use the rubrics to help guide and assess those efforts. Our current challenge is to calibrate often (among full-time and adjunct faculty) in order to ensure that the rubrics continue to mean the same thing to all of us, and to our students. We also have a long way to go in implementing the rubrics and in compiling and analyzing data from the rubrics, but we do feel that we’ve got a direction. The VALUE rubrics have been an essential part of that navigation. We can easily see how we might go further and implement other VALUE rubrics in our general education program as well.