The Use of the AAC&U VALUE Rubrics at Winston-Salem State University

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A faculty review of the general education curriculum lead by the provost at Winston-Salem State University (WSSU) between 2009 and 2011 resulted in a revised set of institutional student learning outcomes and a revised framework for general education requirements and courses. The faculty’s assessment of the general education core was guided by a variety of writings on the nature and substance of a liberal arts curriculum and, most importantly, by contemporary views on the role of the liberal arts in twenty-first century education. In this regard, materials from the LEAP (Liberal Education and the American Promise) initiative of the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) were especially valuable. Seven student learning outcomes (SLOs) resulted:

- critical reading
- critical thinking
- information literacy
- oral communication
- quantitative literacy
- scientific literacy
- written communication

During the fall of 2011, seven committees composed of faculty from across disciplines as well as staff from academic support areas such as the reading center and the library were asked by the provost to develop an evaluation rubric for each of the outcomes. The VALUE rubrics (critical thinking, reading, oral communication, quantitative literacy, and information literacy) that corresponded to six of the WSSU SLOs were shared with the committees to provide a starting point and a template. Only scientific literacy did not have a corresponding VALUE rubric, so that committee used the rubric for problem solving and the rubric for inquiry and analysis as points of reference. Over the course of the year, the committees worked with the VALUE rubrics and other sources to define a set of rubrics that they felt addressed the definitions for the WSSU SLOs. Those rubrics will be presented to the faculty academic
approval body at their first meeting in August 2012. Once approved, the appropriate rubric will be part of the assessment scheme for approved general education courses.

Some of the faculty committees accepted the VALUE rubrics with minor changes (e.g., quantitative literacy), while others made major revisions (e.g., critical thinking). But most of the resulting WSSU rubrics are very similar to the VALUE rubrics. Initially, the scientific literacy committee struggled, since there was no model rubric; however, the committee ultimately used criteria from the National Science Education Standards of the National Academy of Sciences to construct a rubric using a format similar to that of the VALUE rubrics. The oral communication committee had interesting and lively conversations about the VALUE rubric and its usefulness for WSSU. Some members felt that the VALUE rubric concentrated on public speaking related to presentations and was missing the interpersonal communication needed for counseling/health care situations or even effective group work. WSSU has several major programs in the counseling and health care fields and, thus, developing interpersonal communication is important. The resulting rubric addresses both types of communication. All the committees agreed that having the completed VALUE rubrics, which had been developed and vetted by faculty across institutions, was extremely helpful and enabled most of them to move more quickly than if there had been no VALUE rubrics.

To date, drafts of the rubrics have been circulated among faculty and among staff of the Office of Institutional Assessment. In addition, the drafts were used in a summer workshop on creating and updating general education courses. With only two exceptions, every course in the general education curriculum has to address one of the seven SLOs. As part of the course approval process, departments that propose a general education course must agree that the university-approved rubrics will be used to assess the general education SLOs. Once approved rubrics are in place, faculty teaching general education courses will be required to create and administer assignments for which they can use the rubric to assess students’ performance in the SLOs and record student data in the university’s electronic assessment data system.

The data gathered from each course-level assessment will be captured by the Office of Institutional Assessment, compiled, analyzed, and presented to the Academic Assessment Committee for review annually. The committee will forward recommendations from their review to the provost, the Academic Standards and Curriculum Committee, and the academic
Using the VALUE Rubrics for Improvement of Learning and Authentic Assessment

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departments for use in improving student learning, courses, and the curriculum. Even though, this past semester, we had been working with drafts of rubrics or the actual VALUE rubrics, some faculty collected data about their students’ progress. Institutional Assessment is working with those faculty to capture and analyze the results as a pilot project that will inform the larger undertaking of using a single rubric across courses in different disciplines to assess learning.

Because the university has the expectation that the SLOs will be evident in our graduates, major programs are being asked to think about how the revised SLOs will be assessed. Because our general education curriculum is so interwoven with the major programs, we anticipate that the rubrics will be utilized in classes beyond general education. We currently are engaged in a “writing in the major” program that uses a writing rubric across junior- and senior-level courses that is very similar to the general education SLO rubric. Over the next year, a faculty committee will work on merging these two rubrics so that writing is assessed across the curriculum using the same rubric.

The SLOs and the rubrics have also been shared with staff in the academic support areas and in student development areas. Again, the expectation is that the SLOs will be addressed and assessed in all activities involving student development. Over the next two years, the provost’s office, the university’s teaching center, and the Office of Institutional Assessment will work with those areas to develop assessments for student learning that utilize the WSSU-adapted VALUE rubrics.

The use of common rubrics to assess a common set of outcomes across courses and disciplines is an ever-evolving process on our campus. The work that AAC&U has conducted and published has been invaluable to our progress. The VALUE rubrics were not only helpful to our campus as very concrete models to use, but they also helped validate that the work in which we were engaged was significant and similar to the work of faculty across other institutions.