The Value of Community Building

One Center’s Story of How the VALUE Rubrics Provided Common Ground

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In an environment focused on research and overhead dollars, it is easy to lose sight of the main purpose of a university, which is to educate students—both as scholars within the disciplines and as citizens within a larger global community. The latter half of that mission has prompted Michigan State University (MSU) to bring attention to the importance of liberal education at Research I institutions. Although their structures and funding sources differ, Research I institutions and small liberal arts colleges share the same goal of helping students master the knowledge and skills that will enable them to become informed citizens who are able to contribute effectively to our democratic society. But how can this transformation be achieved, and what metrics can we use to define success?

To answer these questions, institutions must first identify what students are expected to gain from taking coursework and participating in academic life. These student learning outcomes may represent changes in how students think, feel, perceive, or even act as they learn and undergo various experiences during their college years. Institutions vary in how clearly they articulate expected student learning outcomes, ranging from completely implicit, and therefore unarticulated, expectations to completely explicit lists of the ways in which students should show improvement by the end of their undergraduate tenure. Once learning outcomes have been established, however, the institution must evaluate the extent to which students are making progress in achieving them.

Backward design
According to Keeling and Hersh (2011), the next step after reaching institutional consensus on student learning goals is to link those goals to the general education curriculum. But this

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An important element of the center's success has been the collaborative work of an affiliated faculty learning community.

How they can be operationalized within and across units.

The five liberal learning goals have also been aligned with a previously adopted set of global competencies.

In its approach to general education, MSU is unique among institutions. In 1992, MSU created centers for integrative learning in three areas: arts and humanities, general science, and social science. Because these three centers share primary responsibility for general education and undergraduate liberal learning, and therefore face close scrutiny by institutional accreditation, the gap between student learning goals and curricula can be bridged using the rubrics that the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) developed through its Valid Assessment of Learning in Undergraduate Education (VALLUE) project (see www.aaacu.org/rrubrics). Integrating wide learning outcomes, as well as those at the level of the individual course, can be readily aligned with some or all of the outcomes that the VALUE rubrics were designed to assess (Rhodes 2010). These are consensus liberal learning outcomes that have emerged from efforts of all types and from worldwide. Some are associated with fundamental skills, such as reading, writing, and mathematics (or quantitative literacy). Others are more conceptualized as across levels of education, and yet graduates entering the workforce are generally expected to have developed reasoning, thinking, ethical reasoning, problem solving, and teamwork. The full set of student learning outcomes should be taught within and across curricula, rather than isolated within any single course, discipline, or program.

Liberal learning at MSU

Michigan State University (MSU) recently adopted a set of five liberal learning goals: critical thinking, effective citizenship, effective communication, and integrated reasoning. Over the past year, MSU faculty and staff have developed rubrics to assess student progress on each of these outcomes. The rubrics are currently being evaluated by focus groups composed of faculty and staff from all colleges and instructional resource areas on campus in order to determine how they can be operationalized within and across units. The five liberal learning goals have also been aligned with a previously adopted set of global competencies.

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the meeting, the common themes identified by the content analysis proved useful for stimulating further discussion and generating questions. The meeting also provided an opportunity for faculty to discuss the types of student assignments they had used to evaluate the VALUE rubric.

As a professional development opportunity, the process of evaluating the VALUE rubric provided an opportunity for the center's faculty to share ideas and resources across their own community of practice—and, therefore, across disciplinary boundaries. The group discussed the center's next steps in adopting the global learning rubric, or other rubrics, for use in classes. Before participating in the rubric review process, many of the center's faculty were unfamiliar with rubrics. These faculty in particular gained valuable training in the creation and use of rubrics for their own courses, and all participants came to a better understanding of the use of rubrics as a way to measure and improve instructional efficacy.

By engaging with the VALUE rubric, members of the faculty learning community were able to reflect on aspects of their own teaching, including consideration of where instruction fits into the broader context of general education science training at MSU. Specifically, they asked how the student learning goals included as part of the VALUE rubric for global learning aligned with their courses and with the center's curricular goals. Faculty were also able to recognize both unarticulated alignment with broad institutional goals and disconnects between practices and expectations. Evaluating the VALUE rubric was particularly useful for faculty teaching study abroad courses, given that their respective rubrics, and the adaptation of the VALUE rubric set the stage for the institution-wide evaluation of curricula and student learning outcomes.

The success of the effort is due in large part to buy-in from the faculty who volunteered to participate in the faculty learning community as well as the financial and other support, such as letters of recognition and participation, provided by the dean of the College of Natural Science and the associate provost of undergraduate education. These administrators have also provided resources to support the assessment of student learning outcomes campus-wide, which has led subsequently to further growth in the community of practice. Through its intentional efforts to maintain institutional focus on the goal of providing undergraduate students with a liberal education, MSU can serve as a model for other Research 1 institutions.

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REFERENCES