

# VALUE Rubrics: Valuable Tools for Improving Teaching and Learning

## Part 1: Guiding Questions to Consider

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This project focuses on the use of the [VALUE Rubrics](#) as a pedagogical tool. Assessment tools can serve as a resource for reflecting on pedagogy, improving instruction, and preparing classroom material. The American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) VALUE rubrics are designed to assess student learning outcomes in the context of strong pedagogy and a firm curricular structure. These rubrics can therefore assess and inform what is happening in the classroom. The focus of this paper is to broadly introduce these rubrics and other components of the [LEAP Project](#) and the context in which they were developed and are being used. Future papers will consider how these rubrics can be operationalized within the classroom and teacher training.

### **LEAP, the Texas Core, and Three Guiding Questions to Consider**

Liberal Education & America's Promise (LEAP), which advocates for the importance of twenty-first century liberal education, is the overarching initiative that fostered the development of the VALUE Rubrics (Valid Assessment of Learning in Undergraduate Education). The Association of American Colleges & Universities (AAC&U), a one hundred-year old organization comprised of over 1,300 diverse institutions of higher education, began the LEAP project in 2005. Hundreds of educators and administrators have contributed to various aspects of the LEAP project, including the development of the VALUE Rubrics, a set of 16 rubrics used to evaluate [intellectual and practical skills, personal and social responsibility, and integrative and applied learning](#).

The Texas Core Objectives, a set of six skills that are considered "essential for all learning" are closely aligned with the essential outcomes assessed by the [VALUE Rubrics](#). Between these essential outcomes and rubrics, three key questions are broadly addressed:

- 1) What should 21<sup>st</sup> Century students learn?
- 2) How should 21<sup>st</sup> Century student learning be assessed?
- 3) How do 21<sup>st</sup> Century faculty members design curricula and teach outcomes so that student learning can be authentically assessed?

Each of these questions is intended to help set the context for teaching in the state of Texas, understand the unique historical moment (politically, demographically, and ideologically) in which we are teaching, and to recognize how these LEAP initiatives, including the VALUE Rubrics, can serve as important tools for assessing as well as improving teaching and learning.

### **What should 21<sup>st</sup> century students learn?**

The Essential Learning Outcomes (ELOs), the Texas Core Objectives (TCOs) and the VALUE Rubrics explicitly express *what* twenty-first century students should learn. While traditional knowledge acquisition is far from abandoned, twenty-first century learners are expected to acquire academic and practical skills that lead to responsible action. Students have long been expected to develop these attributes, but today's college and university classrooms are far more intentional about teaching, learning, and assessing these skills: communication skills, critical thinking skills, empirical and qualitative reasoning skills, team work, social responsibility and personal responsibility. In lieu of data relative to knowledge acquisition, the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB) uses student learning data regarding these skills and responsibilities to assess the core curriculum. These Core Objectives have become the educational goal of higher education in Texas. Therefore, these objectives are not only *what* students should learn, they are the measuring stick by which we assess student learning.

### **Effect on Teaching and Learning**

Skills are learned through practice. The Texas emphasis on skills and responsibilities requires faculty to provide extensive opportunity for practice. Didactic pedagogies must, in many cases, be replaced with experiential pedagogies that engage students beyond the subject matter and expose them to the implications of the subject matter. Many of the [High-Impact Practices](#) (HIPs) suggested by the AAC&U provide learners diverse opportunities to practice skills and responsibilities in meaningful ways. The VALUE Rubrics and the [Essential Learning Outcomes](#) (ELOs) include language related to how students demonstrate their learning. These ideas can be turned into projects or reflective assignments. Each rubric also includes a glossary of key terms to help faculty process what is to be learned and how it can be demonstrated.

### **How should 21<sup>st</sup> century student learning be assessed?**

Knowledge acquisition as a broad learning outcome (Knowledge of Human Cultures and the Physical and Natural World) is a major component of the Essential Learning Outcomes. However, the Texas Core Objectives to be assessed and reported to the THECB focus on six academic and practical skills and responsibilities, not the knowledge relative to the Foundational Component Areas. Therefore, the assessment of these skills and responsibilities is more valuable to the overall student learning

experience assessment completed by the state. The memorized, the learned, and the practiced are all accounted for in classroom assessments and graded work. The goals of the THECB's Core Objectives is to understand how skills and responsibilities considered essential are learned and understood by students. While these goals (knowledge and skills) can be read as separate, they are far more integrated in an ideal classroom.

### **Effect on Teaching and Learning**

Historically, the most common metric for assessing student learning in higher education were test scores. These tests, which consisted of multiple choice, short answer, long answer, and other types of items, were commonly used for student learning assessment, especially as a summative tool. The items on the test were aligned with the behavioral, but mostly knowledge-based objectives of the unit of instruction; e.g. "At the end of this unit, student will be able to identify and describe the major components of the Krebs cycle."

While tests remain a common metric for assessing student learning, infusing knowledge assessment with assessment of the Texas Core Objectives creates practices that are authentic (meaningful, reliable and valid) and match the manner in which students are demonstrating their learning. Projects and other learning activities, while not new, are being used with more frequency, not as a reaction to state-wide assessment practices, but because educators can see the value in simultaneous assessment of both knowledge acquisition and the essential skills and responsibilities highlighted in the core objectives. Projects often result in a student artifact (a paper, a graphic design, etc.) or a student performance (oral presentation, recital, etc.). These products demonstrate knowledge acquisition, often quite meaningful learning, and skills and responsibilities. Moreover, with the aid of VALUE Rubrics, these skills and responsibilities can be authentically assessed.

When students create an artifact or perform a task, that product becomes an assessable item. Rubrics, including the VALUE Rubrics, are metrics that communicate standards of performance to the learner and the rater and are laid alongside the artifact or performance to determine its level of quality. The degree to which these artifacts or performances meet criteria or indicators built into the rubrics can be a formative measure for the student and faculty member. State-wide data can be used to compare the success of institutions in teaching communication, critical thinking, empirical and quantitative skills, teamwork, social responsibility, and personal responsibility. Finally, as more states adopt the use of VALUE Rubrics, we can begin to see national trends in how students are exhibiting the skills and responsibilities assessed through the 16 AAC&U rubrics.

A good rubric will communicate to both the learner and the teacher expectations for the learning experience. Moreover, they also communicate different levels of performance quality so that both the learner and teacher can track the progress resulting from repeated practice. Educators who understand not only *what* students should be learning but *how* classes and schools report assessment of that learning are better equipped to shape curriculum that meets the changing environment of higher education.

## **How do 21<sup>st</sup> century faculty members design curricula and teach these outcomes so that student learning can be authentically assessed using these VALUE Rubrics?**

Knowing what is to be assessed and how it is to be assessed provides great clues for what students should learn and how students should learn. Additionally, familiarity with assessment measures and practices can help teachers decide both pedagogy and class content. As mentioned, rubrics communicate standards of performance. When educators consider the overall learning objectives of their class (inclusive of knowledge acquisition and skills and responsibilities), they have a much clearer understanding of what path will most likely lead them to success at the classroom and student level. Designing curriculum and reconciling pedagogy with the vetted and accepted standards of performance is a logical strategy. Instead of boundaries that are seen to confine the teaching experience, the AAC&U VALUE rubrics and LEAP resources can be opportunities to infuse what is already working in the classroom with additional ways to assess student success.

### **Effect on Teaching and Learning**

While the VALUE Rubrics should not govern how educators design curriculum or teach it, the structure, expectations, and language of these documents can provide significant guidance in classroom, curriculum, and assessment construction. All LEAP initiatives assume and promote a learning-centric philosophy. Teaching is less about teaching and more about students' learning. Teaching is a key input to the process, but learning is the key outcome. LEAP documents emphasize active learning strategies that engage students with big questions and diverse communities. By doing so, learners can extensively practice intellectual and practical skills and can in turn, apply and demonstrate twenty-first century knowledge, skills, and responsibilities.

Finally, the ELOs, Texas Core Objectives, VALUE Rubrics, and HIPs do not only express *what* student should learn, they express *how* students should learn and what skills and motivators they should accrue through the learning process. The language of assessment indicates that learning should be focused, practiced, anchored, and demonstrated. To only concern one's pedagogy with a part of what could be gained in the classroom stops at the water's edge. The inclusion of the core objectives in classroom assessment does not supplant the assessment of knowledge any more than the acquisition of knowledge precludes learning valuable skills and responsibilities. They are, instead, threads of the same cord. The efforts that Texas educators make today to see the VALUE Rubrics as a tool and a conversation will echo into the curriculum and pedagogy of tomorrow. The essential skills the rubrics cover are the things we hope for our students. We expect institutions of higher education to equip students with the abilities to communicate and think critically, understand quantitative data and work in teams, and recognize social and personal responsibility. These VALUE Rubrics and their application to both pedagogy and curriculum empower educators to expect these same things out of their classrooms.

### **Things to Consider**

The introduction of any state-wide initiative in education raises serious questions about what should be required, what should be expected, and what is good practice in classrooms. As institutions in the state of Texas respond both in pedagogy and curriculum to the Texas Core Objectives and their assessments,

educators will need to decide what inclusion of this assessment means in their individual classroom. If, however, the conversation shifts to what students are learning and recognizes that students are learning multiple things at once, the responsibility shifts from having to construct a learning experience to being able to capitalize on the learning experiences that are already happening. Great assessment is built on great questions. Employing the VALUE Rubrics in a classroom encourages good questions. Good questions shared by multiple faculty members over multiple institutions can lead to better data and a more informed way of supporting student learning.

### **Resources**

Association of American Colleges and Universities. (n.d.). Essential learning outcomes. Retrieved from [www.aacu.org](http://www.aacu.org)

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