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Can Smaller Colleges Use the AAC&U Rubrics?

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This article introduces the American Association of Colleges and University's (AAC&U) Value Rubrics to smaller colleges and describes how the Value Rubrics (2009) offered free to download from the AAC&U website may be used as effective assessment tools in academic and information literacy courses and programs on their campuses. This article also describe why and how a small Kansas college has proceeded to use the AAC&U Value Rubrics alongside the SAILS pre- and post-test to assess a for-credit information literacy course offered to undergraduate students.

Keywords

Information Literacy, Rubrics, American Association of Colleges & Universities

Can smaller colleges use the AAC& U Value Rubrics?

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Abstract

This article introduces the American Association of Colleges and University's (AAC& U) Value Rubrics to smaller colleges and describes how the Value Rubrics (2009) offered free to download from the AAC&U website may be used as effective assessment tools in academic and information literacy courses and programs on their campuses. This article also describe why and how a small Kansas college has proceeded to use the AAC&U Value Rubrics alongside the SAILS pre- and post-test to assess a for-credit information literacy course offered to undergraduate students.

Introduction

The American Association of Colleges and University's (AAC&U) Value Rubric (2009) is little known at small Kansas Institutions that have created information literacy courses, with student populations below 8,000 head count. This is because the AAC&U Value Rubrics were originally created by subject professors and librarians from large institutions, and used to assess information literacy programs at large institutions. As a result, librarians at smaller institutions were cautious about using rubrics might not be adapted to small institutions.

Institutions with smaller student populations and smaller budgets that implemented information literacy courses have always had the opportunity to either create their own in-house, homegrown information literacy tests or use standardized information literacy tests such as the Project SAILS (Standardized Assessment of Information Literacy Skills) test, for pre-and post-tests to assess student learning in their information literacy courses.

What is the American Association of Colleges and Universities?

The American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) is a leading national association that was founded in 1915. The Association and its 1,300 member institutions are comprised of accredited public, private, comprehensive and research institutions and community colleges that are concerned with the quality, vitality and public standing of undergraduate liberal education and with the extending advantages for liberal education to all students regardless of their academic specialization and intended careers. The mission of AAC&U is "to make liberal education and inclusive excellence the foundation for institutional purpose and educational practice in higher education" (AAC&U Board of Directors of the Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2012). AAC&U offers a variety of signature initiatives that includes an overarching Liberal Education and America's Promise (LEAP) public advocacy program and the VALUE (Valid Assessment of Learning in Undergraduate Education) created to assess "authentic student work" (AAC&U Website, 2016).

What are the AAC&U Value rubrics?

The Leap Program which identifies "six intellectual and practical skills within its broader list of essential learning outcomes for a liberal education" (Berg et al., 2014; AAC&U Website, 2016) was created by instruction librarians in 2005. Within the Leap Program there is a set of sixteen Value Rubrics that were created for use by instructors in their courses and programs for building outcomes for General Education, Information Literacy and Writing Programs, and Subject-specific courses needing to create unique assessment rubrics.

The AAC&U Value rubrics consist of sixteen rubrics that are related to three different skill areas. The three skill sets are: intellectual and practical skills, personal and social responsibility and integrative and applied learning. The first skill set has eleven rubrics and these are: Inquiry and analysis, critical thinking, creative thinking, written communication, oral communication, reading, quantitative literacy, information literacy, teamwork and problem solving. The personal and social responsibility skill set has five rubrics: civic engagement—local and global, Intercultural knowledge and competence, Ethical reasoning, Foundations and skills for lifelong learning and Global learning and the Integrative and Applied skill set has one rubric: integrative learning.

In search of assessment strategies

According to Oakleaf (2011/2012.) in its “original, holistic form”, the “Value rubric “is a significant step forward in the assessment of the student’s ability to locate, evaluate and use information both in and out of the classroom” (p.327). In her paper presented at a conference at the University of York, *Staying on track with rubric assessment: five institutions investigate information literacy learning*, Oakleaf (2011; 2012) states that “information literacy is an especially complex and context-dependent concept that is not easily assessed” (p.325).

Teaching a for-credit information literacy course in a small academic library in Kansas since 2012, adapting the Value rubrics for assessment purposes were never considered because little was known about them, since they had always been considered to be rubrics created merely for use in larger academic libraries and institutions. Also, the information literacy course had been setup, or so it appeared, that there would be no need of any other form of assessment beyond the use of a standardized information literacy test. Each student participating in the class simply completed the standardized SAILS pre-and post-assessment tests, and simple rubrics were created for each the major assignments in the course as guides for students in complete their assignments. As a result they better understood what the expectations were and how best to proceed. Each semester the SALS pre- and post-test scores were compared and the gains and losses made by students were documented and analyzed, comparing each year’s scores with previous ones.

Although there were more gains to report when comparing information literacy student assessment scores over the past four years, the gains were extremely small, and it was also determined that the standardized SAILS test was not providing librarians with enough information about student information literacy outcomes. One problem encountered was that for the first two years, two different SAILS tests were given to students, the pre-test was different from the post-test, and thus it was not possible to say whether or not students had actually made gains or losses when these were compared. One more concern was that each year, when students took the post-test they often received questions on the test that included content that was never covered during the information literacy class. Thus, the post-test was not a fair analysis of learning during the information literacy class. However, what librarians considered to be more important was to determine, when actually assessing student work, how well they were learning and applying information literacy concepts in their assignments (authentic work) and what concepts they struggled with the most. Investigating assessment options available to libraries as described in the literature, Wiebe (2015) stated that the AAC&U Value rubrics had a scale that covered “five broad constructs of information literacy ranging from benchmark to capstone” and was an excellent assessment tool to consider because it had been “designed to work best with a collection of student’s work emphasizing information literacy as a holistic, as opposed to a task-specific practice and disposition” (Para. 14). Furthermore, the researcher discovered that the AAC&U rubrics were widely used in academic libraries that provided information literacy one-shots and tutorials to their students and then tweaked these rubrics so that it was possible to grade authentic student assignments and score them, making a determination of how well students were really understanding information literacy concepts. Ganley, Gilbert & Rosario (2013) conducted a pilot study at a small California university with 164 students (91 seniors and 54 freshmen) to determine the perceptions of students and faculty as they were related to information literacy and a modified AAC&U Value rubric having a scale of 1-4, with 4 being the most desirable evaluation score, was used to score senior thesis papers. The students were evaluated on five criteria which included defining the scope of their thesis, selecting relevant sources, incorporating these sources, evaluating sources for bias, accuracy and fairness, using sources ethically and legally. The students in the study performed best on selecting relevant sources for their

paper and accessing and using sources ethically and legally. They were least able to incorporate source varieties into their papers and also to evaluate these sources. The study findings further suggested that the senior thesis papers evaluated were not a true reflection of their information literacy abilities and also that not all seniors had satisfactory information literacy skills by the time that they graduated. The study also found that taking advantage of the mentoring and support that was offered to them by librarians may have directly affected the student performance of these students.

The researcher discovered that if the AAC&U Value rubrics were useable, even in smaller libraries for information literacy assessment. It was understood that the best way to use any of the sixteen AAC&U Value rubrics, was to tweak them for use with the unique outcomes of the course, in the same way that these were being used with one-shots and written assignments in larger libraries. However, the researcher was also aware that were they to apply two assessment processes, the standardized pre-test post-test and an AAC&U Value rubric side by side in the course, in an attempt to verify and explain student performance results, in some cases, student information literacy competency was still quite illusive. This was because the college was only offering students one information literacy for credit course opportunity and Wiebe (2015) was apt in stating that ultimately “information literacy cannot be demonstrated by a student in a single piece of work” because “the spectrum of skills that comprised it could not “be taught” either in one singular information literacy for credit course or “in a library session or two interspersed throughout the undergraduate experience” (Para. 14).

Collaboration and assessment process

It is therefore vitally important to do everything possible to collaborate about information literacy assessment practices associated with a course during its design. In the case of the information literacy for credit course being taught at this small Kansas College, four sections over sixteen week sessions, three blended and one online section, were taught by different instructors. The instructors followed the same syllabus, but chose to teach and emphasize sections of the course very differently, based on their own perception of information literacy and what they considered important. They all were firm believers that “emphasis should be placed on” developing their student’s abilities to become lifelong learners who were able “to analyze and solve complex problems” (Berg, 2014, p.17).

Examining the course topics and revising the course assignments after the Fall 2016 semester, it was collaboratively determined that the librarians would work together to tweak three AAC&U Value rubrics: Information Literacy, Critical Thinking and Written Communication Rubrics and use them to score the fifth assignment out of six major written information literacy assignments presented to students in the course. They would also create a Build Your Own Test SAILS Test and offer it to students taking the course as pre- and post-test assessments. Students could then take the post-test having been prepared for it in their class, since topics examined in the test would be covered in class. To improve student information literacy assessment and compare student AAC&U to SAILS scores, and course assignments would be marked by the professor of record for the course. Ten percent of the papers submitted by students in each of the four sections would be chosen randomly and scored by two librarians and the professor of record using the chosen AAC&U Rubrics. Since the SAILS Test is individual and a test average is calculated each semester for the pre-test and the post-test, how the scores are calculated is radically different from the AAC&U Value Rubric scoring, but putting the results together would provide the researcher with a way to examine the phenomenon of information literacy from different angles through multiple assessment techniques. It is hoped that analysis in the end would provide the researcher with a better understanding about what it really means to say that a student is

information literate; and also provide some insights for scaffolding the information literacy concepts and applications that are most difficult for students to learn and to apply in their academic work.

In collaborating about the AAC&U rubrics or any other assessments that you might want to utilize in your information literacy course, it is important to consider collaboratively where you believe students at your college should be functioning when it comes to their information literacy skills. Where should most students in their freshmen, sophomore, junior or senior year be functioning if you scored their papers using the chosen AAC&U rubric you have altered for the assessment? So, if the rubric was used on a sophomore student's paper, what stage would you expect them to be at? Should a freshman student be at a level 1 or at a higher level on the rubric when they enter your college? How would you scaffold when the freshmen that are more than half-way through your course received the lowest score when their papers were scored on the AAC&U rubric? How do you make changes to the course if they are needed, or do you consider other alternatives that could be used to prepare students to do better at their assignments in the information literacy course, before they take your course? These are all questions that really need to be considered by all the instructors teaching the course, before information literacy assessments are chosen for a new course or when changes must be made to assessments that would be more helpful to library instructors assessing a course.

Conclusion

The AAC&U Value Rubrics may be exactly what librarians at small academic libraries are seeking for. With challenges ranging from limited staff to no assessment librarians on staff, the rubrics would provide them with opportunities for assessment after creating a library assignment or two for a one-shot or even considering that information literacy course in the future that will need to be assessed. The AAC&U Value Rubrics provide sixteen starting points from which instruction librarians can start their assessment, meeting their college and university's unique outcomes and requirements in the process. The Value rubric can easily be "adapted for analytical, campus-specific purposes" and can be used ultimately to "spur instructional improvements, increase assessment activity and improve collaborations among faculty co-curricular professionals and librarians" (Oakleaf, 2011/2012, p. 327).

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