Rubrics:
Lessons from the Field

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There is no greater tool in higher education for understanding and improving student learning than the rubric. That may seem like hyperbole, but in our years of work as educators, assessment professionals and administrators, we have found time and again that the rubric is the most versatile, powerful instrument in our toolkits. You can use a rubric to generate direct evidence of student learning for just about every learning outcome and type of student performance. The rubric is especially powerful when the work students produce does not have a single correct answer, which is most of the time in higher education. Due to the use of concrete descriptions of each level of performance for each component of a rubric, the information that you glean from applying a rubric to student work provides actionable insights about exactly what students are getting just fine, and what needs targeted improvement.

As assessment professionals we've had the privilege of working with faculty and staff from a wide variety of programs and institutions. Through this work we've come to understand what makes the process of developing and using rubrics effective and successful. While the lessons we've learned can apply to the use of rubrics for any type of academic assessment, we focus here primarily on the use of rubrics for meaningful and manageable academic program assessment. Whether you are an assessment leader, administrator or faculty member, here are five things you can do to ensure successful use of rubrics for program assessment.

1. **Work together.** While anyone can develop and use a rubric by themselves, and likely do for courses they teach, it is much better to work with colleagues when developing and implementing a rubric for a program. After all, the curriculum is a joint production, thus using rubrics to assess achievement of program outcomes should be a collaborative process. Bringing in multiple points of view to the development of a rubric will help ensure that a rubric better captures agreed upon essential learning. After the rubric has been developed, engaging a small group of faculty in norming and then applying it to student work helps to ensure reliable data. In addition, by engaging the faculty as a whole when deciding what the results mean and how to act on them, the program will be able to make better, more informed decisions. Finally, if program faculty are involved in all steps of the process, then they will be more likely to feel a sense of ownership and buy-in to the process. As a result, the decisions faculty make about how to improve student learning will more likely be fully and thoughtfully executed.

2. **Understand the difference between rubrics for grading and assessment.** While rubrics for grading student work and rubrics for assessing program learning outcomes have some common features, they also differ in a couple of important ways. First, the components included in a rubric used to grade an assignment are usually focused on the requirements of the assignment, while the components included in a rubric to

assess an outcome are focused on the components of that outcome. In fact, when selecting an assignment to apply your rubric to, you'll want to look for one that asks students to demonstrate the outcome you are assessing and one that comes from a point in the curriculum where students have had sufficient opportunity to master the outcome related knowledge or skill, such as in the final year of the program.

A second key difference between rubrics for grading and for assessment is in how the scores are used. To grade an individual student you typically compute a single score by summing or averaging the student's performance on all of the rubric components. To assess a learning outcome, you aggregate all students' scores on each component of your rubric. When grading, the goal is to give each student individual feedback about their performance. When assessing a learning outcome the goal is to understand the overall pattern of students' performance on each component.

3. **Test the rubric before using it.** After a draft of the rubric has been created, it is a good idea to test it out on a few examples of student work before you apply it for assessment. Testing can prevent frustration when applying the rubric and when trying to understand what the scores indicate about student learning. Ideally, this test should be performed by someone who was not involved in the drafting of the rubric as that person will be much better able to identify places where the rubric lacks clarity. If the test identifies any issues with the rubric, then those need to be fixed before using the rubric. If the issues are relatively small, such as a wording change in a cell or two of the rubric, then make the change, run it by your tester to see if the issue is resolved, and then move forward with applying the rubric. If the changes are bigger, such as a need to add a new component, then we recommend that this big change gets formally tested before using the rubric.

The key here is not to get stuck in a cycle of test-edit-retest. The goal is not to develop a rubric that is perfect. The goal is to use the rubric to understand and improve student learning. Once the program faculty feel they have a useful rubric, they should move forward with it.

4. **Analyze results in a way that makes sense to you.** In other words, don't let the process of analyzing the rubric scores get in the way of understanding learning. One of the places we often see the assessment process get hung up is in dealing with the data. Faculty collect student work and score it with their rubric, but then they don't know what to do with those scores or how to talk about them. Part of the issue here is that many faculty believe you have to calculate statistics to understand the scores, but as they are not comfortable with statistics so choose not to do anything with those scores. While you could use statistics, like a mean and standard deviation, to examine performance across each component of a rubric, there are many other ways to gain an understanding of aggregate student performance.

The simplest way to look at rubric data is to keep a tally of how many students were assigned a score in each cell of the rubric. The faculty could then have a conversation about patterns in the tallies. Ideally, a criterion for performance would be set to help decide what success looks like. For example, a criterion for success might be that 80% of students need to be in the top two levels of the rubric on each component. The key is that faculty have a conversation about patterns in the rubric scores so that informed decisions about actions for improvement can be made.

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5. **Tie results back to curriculum and pedagogy.** While every step in the process of using a rubric is important, ultimately a successful process is one that uses the rubric scores to make decisions about student learning and guide actions for improvement. To engage in this final step of "closing the loop" you'll want to gather your rubric, rubric data, and curriculum map. Ideally, all of your program's faculty will be included in this discussion, such as during a block of time at a faculty meeting or retreat. Those who led the process should begin the conversation by reminding everyone of the assessment process followed up to this point.

If you decide that there is room for improvement on any component of the learning outcome you examined with your rubric, then you'll want to determine what to do to improve learning. Your curriculum map will be helpful at this point for reminding you of where the outcome is addressed in the curriculum and can be an aid in generating discussion of pedagogy used to address the outcome. Understanding how and how often the outcome is addressed in the curriculum will help you to specifically decide where and how to make changes for improvement.
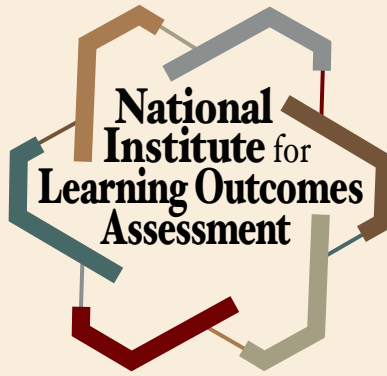
Conclusion

Rubrics are an essential tool for understanding and improving student learning in a program if they are well constructed and implemented in an appropriate fashion. This process need not be complicated or arduous, and in this article we have briefly outlined several steps you can take to ensure the successful use of rubrics for program assessment. If you would like more detailed guidance about the use of rubrics for program assessment, as well as other helpful advice regarding program assessment, you might want to check out *Meaningful and Manageable Program Assessment: A How To Guide for Higher Education Faculty* (Massa & Kasimatis, 2017).

Reference

Massa, L. J., & Kasimatis, M. (2017). *Meaningful and manageable program assessment: A how-to guide for higher education faculty*. San Francisco, CA: Stylus.

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