CHAPTER 4.

DEFINING THE VALUE RUBRICS AS BOSS TEXTS

The language of institutional ethnography helps define the role that rubrics play within the larger institution of higher education. This chapter defines the rubrics as boss texts that function as a part of the institutional circuit of accountability within higher education. As explained in Chapter 3, boss texts as a concept is similar to that of the administrative genre. Boss texts "*transmit ruling relations between sites*" (LaFrance, 2019, p. 42). They "regulate—often standardize—practice, mediating idiosyncrasies and variability in local settings" (LaFrance, 2019, p. 43). By following common genre conventions, boss texts represent the work of the individual as actionable at the institutional level. Thus, they complete a circuit that represents actual lived work of individuals in a way that is accepted by institutions. People engage in institutional circuits by "building from an actual situation, a textual representation that will fit an institutionally authoritative text" (Griffith & Smith, 2014, p. 12). One specific type of institutional circuit that is particularly relevant to assessment work is the "accountability circuit," which is used to separate work into components to measure that work (p. 14). A rubric clearly fits this definition by separating the complex work of writing into clear, measurable components.

In fact, LaFrance (2019) called rubrics "the quintessential institutional circuit" (p. 43). At the classroom level, rubrics are used to define "good writing" to students, who work to produce writing in line with the rubric, and to teachers, who then assess that work according to the rubric. Work that the student puts into drafting, researching, or other parts of the writing and learning process ultimately must be represented in a way that aligns with the rubric. That rubric holds both teachers and students accountable to the same definitions of success. It makes the work of the individual student actionable in the form of a grade—the common currency across education as an institution. At a programmatic level, rubrics often serve as an institutional representation of the teaching and learning achieved within a writing program. They smooth out the idiosyncratic nature of instruction in a way that shows the classes across the program meet the same goals and learning outcomes (LaFrance, 2019). They close the institutional circuit by making the work of the writing program actionable—whether that action is changing curriculum or (more likely) simply reporting on current practice in order justify and continue that practice. In this way, all rubrics function as a part of accountability circuits.

Thus, all rubrics can be viewed as boss texts. Even in cases where the teacher designs their own rubric and the student can directly interact with that teacher; even when that student is consulted in the rubric development, teachers and students draw on prior genre knowledge to create the rubric. Key terminology that is repeated over time, across locations, is a sign that ruling relations are at work (LaFrance, 2019). For example, an individual teacher may use the category "Style and Mechanics" on their rubrics, simply because it is a common category that they have seen on rubrics over time. Dylan Dryer's (2013) corpus study of rubrics showed that these categories are common across institutions and teachers. Yet, it is unlikely that teachers using these categories recognize their origins in Diederich, French, and Carlton's 1961 ETS rubric. Organizations, such as ETS—or the AAC&U—thus function as the "bosses" that define our conception of good writing over time and across locations. However, those creating the rubrics may follow these conventions without knowledge of this larger institutional circuit they operate within. A professor may create their rubric based on one they saw in a book or received from a colleague; a group of students will draw on genre knowledge from other rubrics they have been scored on in the past. The use of these repeated conventions is simply how genres and boss texts work, but such workings are often not acknowledged or explicitly considered by those interacting with the texts.

The difference between the VALUE rubrics and classroom rubrics is that the VALUE rubrics are boss texts *by design*. The AAC&U sought to create meta-rubrics that would be used across institutions. Although they did expect that individual institutions would adapt and localize these rubrics, the rubrics also grew from the LEAP Outcomes, which are viewed as shared outcomes across various higher education stakeholders, as discussed in Chapter 2. Whether or not the VALUE rubrics are tweaked for local practice, they are still meant to connect local practice to national practice. This initiative has been wildly popular. As of 2018, the AAC&U reported that the rubrics had been downloaded over 70,000 times by members representing over 5,895 unique institutions and organizations (McConnell et al., 2019, p. 1). These national rubrics close an even larger institutional circuit. Rather than make the work of teaching and learning within one classroom or program actionable, they represent the work of higher education as a whole. They smooth out differences between institutional contexts in favor of representing an overview of commonly achieved outcomes and levels of proficiency. That overview is then viewed as actionable to organizations hoping to improve higher education at the national level.

The years of my study (2016-2018) represent a key time in which the AAC&U's VALUE rubrics "moved from the periphery of student outcomes assessment discussion to the center of conversations about the quality of student

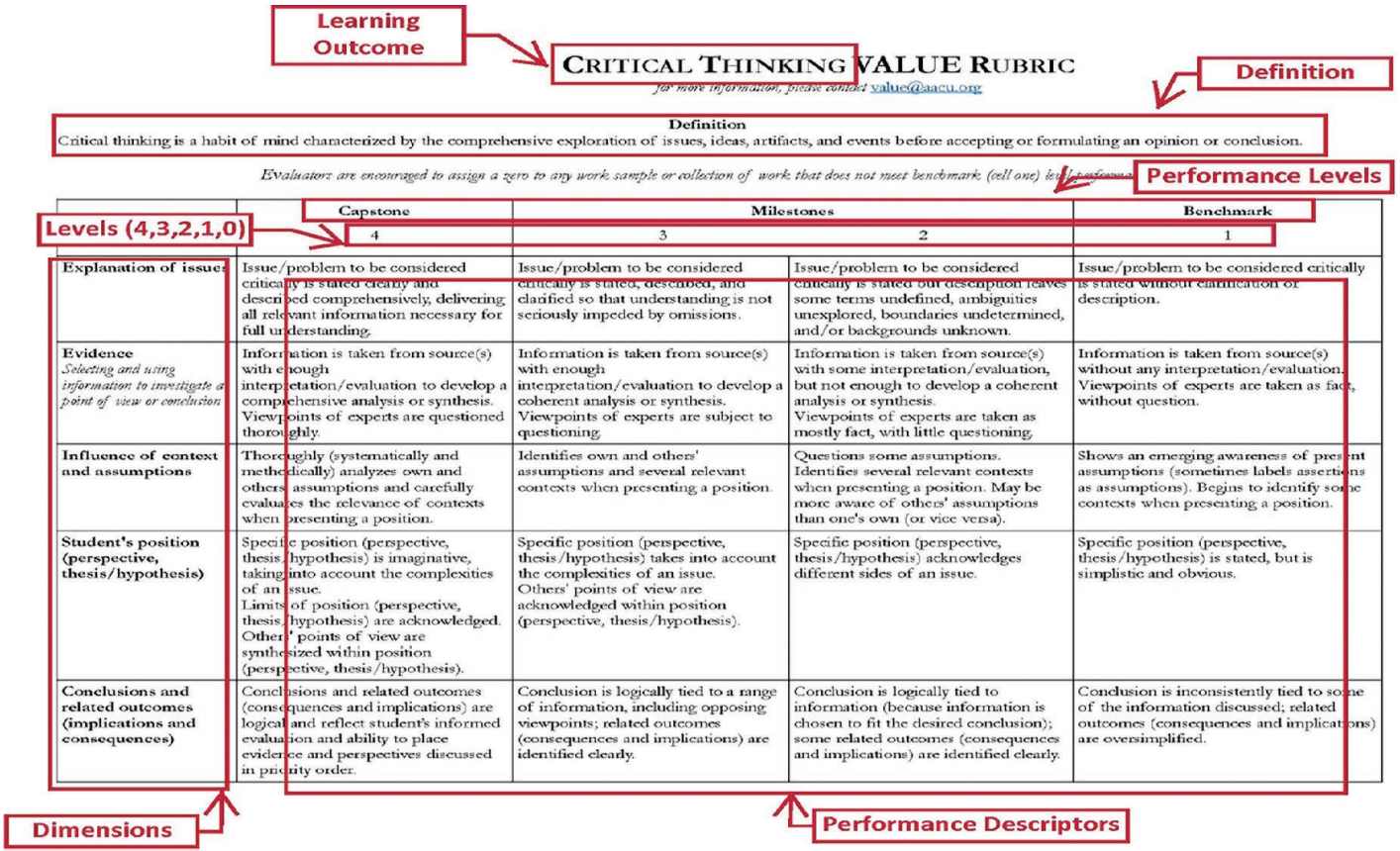
learning within and across institutions" (McConnell et al., 2019, p. 1). As highlighted in this chapter, the increasing popularity of the VALUE rubrics solidified their position as boss texts and furthered the power of both the AAC&U and its funders over higher education. This chapter explains the VALUE rubrics themselves: their creation, their purpose, their form, and their use. Using documents from the AAC&U about the VALUE rubrics and connected initiatives, this chapter maps how these particular rubrics act as boss texts at the end of an accountability circuit in higher education. I then demonstrate how this relationship plays out at Oak and St. Rita's. In particular, I explain how these two small schools sought out the VALUE rubrics specifically for their status as boss texts. They strategically make use of the rubrics as a part of a package of texts that defines them as an institution of higher learning, worthy of accreditation. While not every individual at these schools is aware of the origins of the rubrics or their role in higher education, those in administrative positions do recognize the authoritative power imbedded in these texts and seek them out not because they agree they are valuable instruments of learning but *because* they legitimize their institutions.

THE VALUE RUBRIC DESIGN

To further understand the way the VALUE rubrics work as boss texts that define assessment in higher education, it is important to understand how they were developed, their intended use, and the way that this purpose has shifted over time. In 2007, the U.S. Department of Education funded the AAC&U to develop 15 VALUE rubrics based on the LEAP Outcomes (McConnell et al., 2019).[3] Each rubric contains a definition of the outcome it is meant to score, framing language that adds to this context, and a glossary of terms. For example, the framing language for the Written Communication rubric grounds it in disciplinary knowledge and cites statements by our national organizations: NCTE, CWPA, and CCCC. The glossary defines language, such as "disciplinary conventions" and "genre," that may not be known across fields (AAC&U, 2009b). This page is separate from the actual scale of the rubric, which has a set of dimensions along the left-hand side and performance levels at the top (Figure 4.1 and Appendix C).

Each rubric contains four performance levels, one capstone level (4), two milestone levels (3 & 2), and one benchmark level (1). The levels are always presented in this order with the highest first as a philosophical move toward an "assets-based—versus deficit-focused" view of learning (McConnell & Rhodes, 2017, p. 26).

3 A 16th rubric was added later.



CRITICAL THINKING VALUE RUBRIC

for more information, please contact value@aacu.org

Definition

Critical thinking is a habit of mind characterized by the comprehensive exploration of issues, ideas, artifacts, and events before accepting or formulating an opinion or conclusion.

Evaluators are encouraged to assign a zero to any work sample or collection of work that does not meet benchmark (cell one) level performance.

	Capstone	Milestones		Benchmark
	4	3	2	1
Explanation of issues	Issue/problem to be considered critically is stated clearly and described comprehensively, delivering all relevant information necessary for full understanding.	Issue/problem to be considered critically is stated, described, and clarified so that understanding is not seriously impeded by omissions.	Issue/problem to be considered critically is stated but description leaves some terms undefined, ambiguities unexplored, boundaries undetermined, and/or backgrounds unknown.	Issue/problem to be considered critically is stated without clarification or description.
Evidence *Selecting and using information to investigate a point of view or conclusion*	Information is taken from source(s) with enough interpretation/evaluation to develop a comprehensive analysis or synthesis. Viewpoints of experts are questioned thoroughly.	Information is taken from source(s) with enough interpretation/evaluation to develop a coherent analysis or synthesis. Viewpoints of experts are subject to questioning.	Information is taken from source(s) with some interpretation/evaluation, but not enough to develop a coherent analysis or synthesis. Viewpoints of experts are taken as mostly fact, with little questioning.	Information is taken from source(s) without any interpretation/evaluation. Viewpoints of experts are taken as fact, without question.
Influence of context and assumptions	Thoroughly (systematically and methodically) analyzes own and others' assumptions and carefully evaluates the relevance of contexts when presenting a position.	Identifies own and others' assumptions and several relevant contexts when presenting a position.	Questions some assumptions. Identifies several relevant contexts when presenting a position. May be more aware of others' assumptions than one's own (or vice versa).	Shows an emerging awareness of present assumptions (sometimes labels assertions as assumptions). Begins to identify some contexts when presenting a position.
Student's position (perspective, thesis/hypothesis)	Specific position (perspective, thesis/hypothesis) is imaginative, taking into account the complexities of an issue. Limits of position (perspective, thesis/hypothesis) are acknowledged. Other's points of view are synthesized within position (perspective, thesis/hypothesis).	Specific position (perspective, thesis/hypothesis) takes into account the complexities of an issue. Others' points of view are acknowledged within position (perspective, thesis/hypothesis).	Specific position (perspective, thesis/hypothesis) acknowledges different sides of an issue.	Specific position (perspective, thesis/hypothesis) is stated, but is simplistic and obvious.
Conclusions and related outcomes (implications and consequences)	Conclusions and related outcomes (consequences and implications) are logical and reflect student's informed evaluation and ability to place evidence and perspectives discussed in priority order.	Conclusion is logically tied to a range of information, including opposing viewpoints; related outcomes (consequences and implications) are identified clearly.	Conclusion is logically tied to information (because information is chosen to fit the desired conclusion); some related outcomes (consequences and implications) are identified clearly.	Conclusion is inconsistently tied to some of the information discussed; related outcomes (consequences and implications) are oversimplified.

Figure 4.1: Parts of the VALUE rubric, used with permission.

In addition, the move signals an alignment with backwards design and outcomes-focused education by stressing the end goal of college-level achievement. These levels represent a progression through learning but were not meant to represent specific years in school, grades, or college readiness standards (Rhodes, 2010). Nor are the levels meant to be equidistant. As John Hathcoat explained in a 2019 webinar, the rubrics do not provide schools with interval data, but they do have order (Rhodes, et al., 2019). In other words, a project that scores a four is better than a three but not necessarily as much better as a three is from a two. Thus, scores should be reported for each section of the rubric rather than combined for an overall score (McConnell & Rhodes, 2017; Rhodes et al., 2019). In addition to these four scores, the AAC&U makes use of a zero score that indicates that dimension is not present in the artifact being scored or that the performance does not reach the benchmark level (Rhodes & McConnell, 2021).

Unlike the LEAP outcomes that were developed primarily from a survey of employers, the VALUE rubrics were based almost entirely on the work of faculty experts. Including faculty and disciplinary experts in this process was a valuable move against the rhetoric of accountability movements that have typically been rooted in corporate rather than faculty interests. However, including faculty only goes so far. According to Lil Brannon (2016), national organizations tout the fact that faculty are "*being granted* the opportunity for a voice" but this actually "displaces educators from the center of education" simply through the fact that someone *else* is doing the granting (p. 226). Nevertheless, with the creation of the VALUE rubrics, the AAC&U made an effort to connect their LEAP outcomes to actual practice within higher education. Teams of instructors analyzed rubrics that were already being used at institutions across the country with the goal of coming up with wording that allowed the rubrics to be used across multiple disciplines and institutions (McConnell et al., 2019). The Written Communication rubric author-team included heavy hitters from our field: Linda Alder-Kassner, Terri Flateby, Susanmarie Harrington, Jean Mach, Noreen O'Connor, and Carol Rutz (K. McConnell, personal communication, October 25, 2021). However, the VALUE rubrics bear little trace of the specific individuals who authored them. Rather, they are credited to the AAC&U as an organization and "faculty teams" are referred to only in vague terms when explaining the rubric-creation process.

Such erasure of individual agents is a feature of boss texts. Just as an official police report turns an individual police officer into a generic "police officer" agent (Smith, 2005), ascribing authorship for the VALUE rubrics to generic "faculty teams" erases the identity of the specific faculty who authored the rubrics. The *particular* expertise of the authors is erased. So, too, are other identity markers, such as racial identity. Attribution to a generic faculty team assumes a

racial neutrality that is impossible to achieve (Inoue, 2021b). These erasures reinforce the narrative that faculty are one hegemonic group that has reached consensus on the goals of higher education. Yet, scholars within writing studies have shown that such consensus is neither achievable nor desirable (Adler-Kassner & O'Neill, 2010; Anson et al., 2012; Broch Colombini & McBride, 2012). Consensus is neither liberatory nor democratic but a tool of systemic management (Strickland, 2011; Gallagher, 2012). The "voice" given to individuals is erased and subsumed within the work of the institution. The organization becomes the absent boss—a surrogate author of texts produced by individuals whose identity is obscured. This is reflected in our citation practices—the AAC&U is listed as the "author" of the VALUE rubrics. Yet, ruling relations rely on the narrative that consensus is both possible and positive.

WHO FUNDS THE FUNDERS? RULING RELATIONS AND ADVOCACY PHILANTHROPY

Boss texts cause ruling relations to remain invisible to the user of the texts (Rankin, 2017a). On one end of the spectrum, the specific faculty teams who wrote the VALUE rubrics are invisible to the end users of the rubrics. On the other end, only crediting the AAC&U also erases the involvement of mega-foundations and philanthropists for whom the AAC&U serves as an intermediary. Here, too, the involvement of specific individuals is erased, thus obscuring the connections across multiple organizations and foundations that "rule" higher education. When looking at the ruling relations behind the VALUE rubrics, we must look beyond the AAC&U to the "company they keep" (Alder-Kassner, 2012). The VALUE rubrics are tied to other boss texts in higher education, such as the Lumina Foundation's Degree Qualification Profile (DQP) and systems of accountability, such as accreditation and the Voluntary System of Accountability (VSA), now VSA Analytics. Together these organizations and their documents "rule" higher education by defining for multiple universities what it means to be an institutional of higher education, what outcomes students should achieve for a degree, and the performance level to which they should hold their students.

The philanthropic foundations behind these initiatives also play a significant role in funding colleges and universities in austere times. Adler-Kassner (2017) referred to this web of foundations and organizations operating behind the scenes of higher education as the Education Intelligence Complex (EIC). These foundations seek to influence education on the policy level through broad-scale reform in what is commonly known as "advocacy philanthropy" (Adler-Kasser, 2012; Hall & Thomas, 2012). By involving themselves directly with state government and accrediting bodies, these mega-foundations have focused on

education at the national rather than the local level. Throughout the 2000s, mega-foundations increasingly began to work with intermediaries, such as the AAC&U, to carry out their agendas rather than providing funds directly to individual institutions (Hall & Thomas, 2012). As an intermediary, the AAC&U gains funds from multiple external sources. The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and the Lumina Foundation, who have increasingly become involved in student success initiatives, have also become more involved with the AAC&U. Initially, the VALUE rubric design was funded by the State Farm Companies Foundation and the U.S. Department of Education's Fund for the Improvement of Post-Secondary Education (Schneider, 2015). The refinement of the rubrics in 2016-17 was funded by the Gates Foundation, the Spencer Foundation, and the Sherman Fairchild Foundation (McConnell et al., 2019).

In 2017, Lumina provided a large grant to fund the VALUE Institute where universities can send in student work to be scored by external raters and receive a report in return (AAC&U, 2017). The AAC&U's connection with Lumina explains why the AAC&U's LEAP Outcomes and VALUE rubrics have now been framed as in congruence with the 2014 Degree Qualifications Profile (DQP). The goal of the DQP was to define what graduates should be proficient in when they finish their degrees (Adelman et al., 2014). In the introduction to the DQP, President and CEO Jamie P. Merisotis (2014) listed Lumina's sole purpose as increasing "college attainment" but he links that attainment to quality. By defining a set of proficiencies for each degree level (Associate's, Bachelor's, Master's), Merisotis believes that we can make college "what our global economy and democratic society increasingly demand" (p. 2). After the release of the DQP, the language of "outcomes" in AAC&U publications shifted to "outcomes and proficiencies," and the two terms became interchangeable in the literature (Grouling, 2017). Furthermore, the AAC&U began to frame the VALUE rubrics as designed to assess the DQP proficiencies, despite the fact that the VALUE rubrics were created five years before the DQP was released.

This overlap between the AAC&U and Lumina is not merely a matter of funding. Of the four authors listed for the DQP, two have particularly strong ties to the AAC&U: their President Carol Geary Schneider, and Paul Gaston, Distinguished Fellow in the AAC&U Office of Quality, Curriculum, and Assessment. The other two, Cliff Adelman and Peter Ewell, have since written plans for other AAC&U initiatives. Although less involved in the VALUE rubrics, George D. Kuh is another such individual who has been highly involved in the AAC&U. In addition, he is also the founding director of the National Institution for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA). This overlap in individual leadership between these organizations and mega-foundations is important when mapping ruling relations.

Nevertheless, like the authors of the specific rubrics, these individuals are erased through boss texts and ruling relations. Gates may be a household name, but the names listed above are not. As Cassie Hall and Scott Thomas (2012) explained, mega-foundations are "concentrating power away from practice" (p. 30), and in so doing, they cause frustration among those who ultimately use the texts. For example, faculty members may wonder why they are being asked to use a particular rubric that doesn't align with their notions of best practice, unaware that the rubric is attached to grant funding the university needs or that using the rubric can help the university keep accreditation. Furthermore, the obfuscation of ruling relations allows foundations to create an accountability circuit while existing outside of it. These elite individuals are neither elected nor appointed; they simply have the funds or position to make their voices heard (Hall & Thomas, 2012, p. 31). They use institutional power to hold *others* accountability to their visions.

For example, the Voluntary System of Accountability (VSA), a system designed to compare universities based on performance, was originally funded by Lumina. The now defunct VSA College Portrait website was launched in 2008 in order to allow state officials and policy makers as well as the general public to compare institutions and their reports on student learning outcomes (VSA Analytics, n.d., "About"). The AAC&U originally resisted the mission of the VSA. For example, Joan Hawthorne's (2008) piece in the AAC&U's *Liberal Education*, questioned the very idea that comparing how institutions meet outcomes in general education would provide meaningful data, and Terry Rhodes (2012) critiqued the use of tests by the VSA as the primary means of measuring student learning. Yet, by 2012, the same year that Rhodes declared the VALUE rubrics would be used to measure student progress toward the DQP, the VSA and the AAC&U began working together. One potentially positive result of this collaboration was that the VSA moved away from a testing approach to measure success toward one that used rubrics. They provided trainings on using the VALUE rubrics to score student work and then reported on their success (VSA, 2012). However, the original purpose of the rubrics also shifted with these changes. The AAC&U had been clear that the performance levels of the rubrics were not meant to correspond to the year of schooling (Rhodes, 2010), yet the VSA considers the "Capstone" level on the rubric to represent what graduating seniors should be able to do (VSA, 2012). Thus, the AAC&U gradually moved away from their mission of adapting their rubrics for specific context toward a managerial mission of accountability. Whether these changes are directly the result of advocacy philanthropy or not, this shift fits with the larger documented shift in the goals of mega-foundations toward supporting data systems that establish metrics to hold higher education accountable (Hall & Thomas, 2012). It also

solidifies the use of the VALUE rubrics as boss texts that "regulate—and often standardize—practice" (LaFrance, 2019, p. 43).

DRAWING LEGITIMACY FROM BOSS TEXTS

The AAC&U often cites the number of schools that use their rubric as evidence that the VALUE rubrics are working. For example, Kate McConnell et al. (2019) argued that the sharing of the VALUE rubrics among colleagues equated to validity. But as is often the case with boss texts, individuals do not use them because they believe in them but rather because of their status as boss texts. This sort of institutional power is sought after by colleges and universities to verify their position in the larger institution of higher education. Throughout my interviews at Oak and St. Rita's, it became clear that regardless of participants' individual feelings about the rubric, administrators and experienced faculty see the VALUE rubrics as an important way to tie their work to higher education as a whole and thus legitimize their institution. In turn, those in the writing program at Oak see the VALUE rubric as a way to legitimize their new program within their university. None of these participants loved the VALUE Written Communication rubric in its original form, though some were harsher critics than others. Rather, they sought the legitimization that comes from its status as a boss text.

Oak: Being Good Participants

As a part of a conglomerate of small colleges, Oak was targeted by the AAC&U who sought small liberal arts schools to test their rubrics and provided generous funding to do so. Multiple participants mentioned that Oak's most recent accreditation review listed general education assessment as a place for improvement. Thus, when the AAC&U approached administrators at Oak with grant funding and a means to satisfy their accreditors, they jumped on board. Philip, the associate provost, was skeptical of the rubrics, but he was willing to commit to the AAC&U deal, which involved providing artifacts and data to the AAC&U and sending faculty to score national artifacts. The payoff for him was the training on rubrics, the connection to other small schools seeking assessment methods, and—of course—the money. Oak became one of the AAC&U's test schools and began to use the rubrics in core assessment, particularly the rubrics for Quantitative Reasoning, Oral Communication, and Written Communication.

Once administrators become involved in such grant initiatives, they commit their faculty to certain external exceptions. As Philip explained, a certain number of faculty had to be trained by the AAC&U and then commit to the scoring of artifacts collected on the national level. Jon, a political science professor, was

a part of the general education committee using the VALUE rubrics, and he participated in the AAC&U training. The training actually turned him against using the rubrics, and he expressed a hope that Oak would move back to testing instead. However, he recognized the need for Oak to be "good participants in the AAC&U process." For Jon, "the AAC&U deal was really good about providing political cover to academia." He noted the political value of being connected to the AAC&U and using their initiatives, which he hoped could "get state legislatures off our back." Thus, Jon followed along with using the VALUE rubrics not because he agreed with the outcomes they assess or the levels of proficiency but because he acknowledged their value as boss texts that bring an external legitimacy to the assessment process at Oak.

The first two chairs of the writing committee, Ben and Kristen, also participated in the AAC&U training for the VALUE rubrics. Ben had already discovered the VALUE rubric for Written Communication when he was searching for best practice while forming the new writing program. However, rather than reinforce that find, the AAC&U training left Ben feeling like the VALUE rubrics were "insufficient." However, he noted that some kind of assessment data must be presented, or the new writing program would "lose legitimacy." The VALUE rubrics served this purpose. Meanwhile, it seems that Kristen draws on the AAC&U not only to legitimize the writing program, but also her status as the "director." As mentioned in the introduction, Kristen was referred to as the director of the program but officially only held the status of writing committee chair. Kristen expressed a desire to "be an expert in [assessment] before we dive in," and lacking her own expertise, she drew significantly on her experience with the AAC&U training when planning how to approach assessment with the writing committee. She recalled the way the AAC&U training gave the new scorers artifacts and asked them to dive in, which she found overwhelming at first. Mirroring the language she used to describe this experience, she explained her plan to give the writing committee artifacts and the rubric and say, "Go." She also noted that she decided not to collect assignment prompts with the writing artifacts because in the AAC&U training she scored artifacts in the absence of assignment prompts. Kirsten sees the AAC&U as a resource she can call on when building her own assessment process. In an early interview with Kristen in 2016, she mentioned being unsure how to implement the program's assessment plan and mentioned that she might reach out to the AAC&U for guidance.

By the time the Oak writing program conducted its first full assessment in May 2018, the rubric used by the program bore little resemblance to the original VALUE rubric for Written Communication. Nevertheless, Kristen began the norming session by talking about the AAC&U and their processes. She explained to her faculty scorers how the rubric evolved from the VALUE rubric.

While some of this may have been added for my benefit and the benefit of my study, the degree to which Kristen ties her practice back to the AAC&U seems to also serve a purpose of legitimizing her process. During the norming session, she also related to struggles expressed by the raters by signaling back to her own learning process in the AAC&U training. In particular, she mentioned on multiple occasions that she had to work to change her own mindset from grading papers to assessing artifacts for large-scale assessment. Drawing on this experience helps Kristen relate to the faculty doing the scoring but also reinforces that she has been through this process and has learned the ins and outs of scoring with rubrics. Jon was a part of the 2018 assessment group, and he backed Kristen up throughout the norming session by also referring back to the AAC&U. For example, when faculty started questioning the language of the rubric, Jon said: "In the AAC&U training, the first lesson of the training is we are not going to revise the rubric today." Later when a question came up about the performance levels, Jon explained the way that the AAC&U purposefully placed the highest (capstone) level first on the rubric. He told others, "The AAC&U people wanted us to follow a very particular process for doing this." Despite his own skepticism of the VALUE rubrics and the AAC&U, Jon seems to use these moments to draw on his AAC&U training to help Kristen quash questions about the writing program's rubric and assessment process and legitimize the writing program in the eyes of the faculty raters. In addition, neither Kristen nor Jon refers to individuals they worked with through the AAC&U training but rather to the AAC&U as an entity in and of itself.

Kristen also recognized the importance of the writing program assessment in connection to larger assessment and accreditation efforts on campus. Initially the writing program had no budget of its own, so connecting with Philip and the AAC&U grant allowed the program to pay faculty to build the writing program rubric. No matter how different the final rubric ended up being, framing it as an "adaptation" of the VALUE rubric allowed for funding that would otherwise not have been available. In addition, Kristen sees the connection between her work with rubrics and the university's goal of meeting accreditation standards. After a couple of years of working on the rubric and writing program assessment process, she described a report she submitted to Oak's head of institutional research. Rather than provide any feedback on the process Kristen had worked so hard to create, the administrators at Oak were simply thankful to include Kristen's report in their materials for accreditation as proof they were doing what was asked of them. The connections between the work of the writing program and the larger grant from the AAC&U as well as accreditation efforts seem superficial, yet they are significant in legitimizing both Oak and the writing program in the eyes of external stakeholders.

St. Rita's: Getting on the Radar

While Oak was approached by the AAC&U to join their consortium and receive grant funding, St. Rita's wasn't initially on the AAC&U's radar. Dwayne recalled how the case study he published about St. Rita's and the VALUE rubrics[4] came about after he initially completed an AAC&U survey:

> I did their survey. And then they [the AAC&U] wrote, and they're like, "Oh, I didn't even know you existed," pretty much. I'm like, "Well, we do." And they're like, "Could you write up what's going on?" And I think they asked about fifty schools to do it, and they took about ten. And they took mine.

Part of Dwayne's motivation for writing the case study was simply to put his school on the AAC&U's radar—to show that they exist. In turn, by publishing Dwayne's case study, the AAC&U gets another notch in its belt to say that another type of institution is using its rubrics. It was this published case study that first made me aware of St. Rita's as well, but I found that what was happening there in practice bore little resemblance to the narrative told in the official AAC&U literature. Even Dwayne admitted that, while the piece was "not all puffering," he was far more hopeful about the impact of the rubrics at St. Rita's at the point when he wrote it.

There is a strong sense at St. Rita's that what is put on paper is not what is put in practice. Dwayne continually lamented that St. Rita's approves ideas and then ignores them. Even Gerald (Dr. Z) complimented Dwayne for bringing in the VALUE rubrics to make the college look good but noted it's only "on paper." In particular, Dwayne explained that initially he got the AAC&U VALUE rubrics added to the college's handbook in the hopes that both faculty and students would see them, and they would become "a part of the culture." But little happened in practice. A few years later, a new dean came on board and "discovered" the rubrics and "acted like nobody had even mentioned it before." This dean attempted to draw connections with the AAC&U's LEAP initiative, but again, nothing really happened. That dean left, and Dwayne became frustrated with the continual turn over in administration and the lack of turnover in ideas.

This same pattern of discovering and rediscovering the rubrics repeated in the general education committee I observed. When Dwayne first came to St. Rita's in 2009, the dean tasked him and other junior faculty members with re-writing the general education curriculum. Being inexperienced, Dwayne and

4 I do not cite this case study in order to maintain Dwayne's confidentiality.

the group were "hungry for things that were nationally normed, already benchmarked." The group used the VALUE rubrics to re-write course goals for general education. But, Dwayne said, "we didn't realize that some institutions kill ideas by approving them." When I observed a general education committee meeting in 2016, two junior faculty—Jeremy and Andrea—were re-writing the general education goals based on the VALUE rubrics. Andrea, the co-chair of general education, expressed a need to "be really careful" with how she and Jeremy proceeded when they were fairly new to the institution and working with those who had been there for 20 plus years. Jeremy, like Dwayne before him, saw the VALUE rubrics as a way to convince other faculty members to move forward: "We're going to pin down [the general education goals] using the AAC&U VALUE rubrics because they're normed nationally." In the committee meeting, Dwayne supported these efforts, but to me, he repeated: "But they don't know that we kill ideas by approving them."

There are many reasons that the AAC&U rubrics are difficult to fully implement at St. Rita's, and I will continue to return to this point in subsequent chapters. For the purposes of this chapter, what is important is the tension between the need for the VALUE rubrics as boss texts—they are "nationally normed"—with the fact that the rubrics simply aren't designed for a school like St. Rita's. Gerald (Dr. Z) expressed frustration that the academic world as a whole doesn't see institutions like St. Rita's. He's not alone in this frustration, and almost everyone I talked to at St. Rita's expressed the feeling that their students started well below the benchmark level on the AAC&U rubrics. In Chapter 7, I return to how this characterization of their students is problematic, yet there is a very real difference between St. Rita's and many institutions within higher education that incentivizes them to seek connections to national practice.

In a critique of the outcomes assessment movement as a whole, Michael Bennett and Jacqueline Brady (2014) explained that universal outcomes create a culture where underprivileged students have to catch up on skills rather than one that directly addresses the economic inequities that leads to their under-preparedness in the first place. They noted that the outcomes movement ends up meaning that more "working-class students at poor colleges and universities" are required to take high-stake assessments (p. 150). The students at Oak simply do their coursework, and then it is anonymously sampled for assessment purposes. In contrast, faculty at St. Rita's felt the need to know whether or not *specific* students are ready to move on in the curriculum, and thus their assessment methods are tied directly to students rather than to overall assessment of their programs. At St. Rita's, students submit portfolios at the end of first-year composition to be assessed with the rubrics, and this assessment determines whether or not they pass the class. In addition, to prove that students are progressing in

general education, the committee added other checkpoints where all students are assessed directly. On paper, these checkpoints are called portfolios and thus seem in keeping with best practice and the use of the VALUE rubrics to score portfolios. In practice, the first-year portfolio is a mix of classwork and a timed essay. And sophomore and junior "portfolios" are only timed essays and a reflection letter.

Teachers in both the first-year course and upper-level courses feel a pressure to teach to these assessments. In fact, the remedial course in writing involves what Jeremy calls a "competency-based" approach where students use computer programs to drill grammar knowledge to reach certain "benchmarks." I'd wager that the compositionists who originally created the VALUE rubric would be dismayed at this practice. But for Jeremy, this program is "really drawing from the VALUE rubrics because I know the competencies we're shooting for in the portfolio, and so I've drilled down from those into what are the grammar and mechanics they need to achieve." Again, it is possible that Jeremey made this connection the VALUE rubric for my benefit, knowing that is the starting point for my study. However, Jeremy also mentioned the importance of the DQP for a model of general education. He explained that he saw the DQP as similar to the VALUE initiative in defining standards for higher education, only that VALUE added actual rubrics. Institutional ethnographers look for these references to larger institutional structures to "hear the traces of the institutions' otherwise taken-for-granted social organization" (Rankin, 2017a, p. 4). It's clear that even when the textual traces of the language of the VALUE rubric are absent, the traces of them continue in the discourse of faculty.

Another example of terminology used at St. Rita's that bears the mark of the AAC&U is the repeated reference to "signature assignments." Signature assignments are AAC&U's way to address the fact that many artifacts from the classroom simply do not fit their rubrics. While they do not seek to entirely standardize assignments, they do advocate for signature assignments that are designed specifically to demonstrate growth in key outcomes across the curriculum (AAC&U, 2015a). Dwayne attended a workshop on signature assignments held by Lumina and the AAC&U, and he has incorporated the terminology into the portfolio process at St. Rita's. In particular, he draws on the idea that signature assignments are linked to assess progress as students move through the curriculum. However, rather than referring to work being embedded in coursework at St. Rita's, the repeated timed essays are referred to as "signature assignments." This language is repeated by multiple members of the general education committee as they evaluate general education goals. They referred to the "signature assignments" as points when the goals are "tested" and "measured." When the question of changing the signature assignments came up, Dwayne welcomed

this, stating: "The current model was an emergency lacking other things." He recognized that his version of signature assignments as repeated timed essays is not ideal, and yet he uses that terminology from the AAC&U to stress that St. Rita's needs to assess the same skills at multiple points in the curriculum. Meanwhile, others at St. Rita's seem to repeat the language, unaware of where it comes from or how it does not fully align with the original concept by the AAC&U.

Dwayne indicated that he was not yet proud of this process; however, it serves St. Rita's well in terms of legitimizing their institution. Four of the seven faculty members I talked to at St. Rita's mentioned their struggles with accreditation. In particular, the accreditors were concerned about the lack of data-driven decisions on campus and about the lack of assessment as anything other than an end point. "Signature assignments" scored on the same rubric allow for St. Rita's to show that they are assessing outcomes over time, across the curriculum. And drawing directly on the AAC&U's language is familiar to both accreditors and granting agencies. In addition to pleasing their accreditors, the signature assignments program was favored by the Lily Foundation—a top philanthropic foundation that provided St. Rita's with direct funding for initiatives that prepared students for the workplace.

Accreditation and legitimization are particularly important for institutions like St. Rita's. Lucinda, the vice president of academic affairs, described the history of St. Rita's as a school that certified blue collar workers in their highly industrial region and thus allowed them to move up into white collar positions. However, she acknowledged that this is no longer acceptable as a goal for an institution of higher education. Rather, she mentioned multiple times that students must have "a legitimate college degree" and that such a diploma signifies to employers that students have mastered fundamental skills. The rubrics, for Lucinda, fit with the AAC&U's promise to employers. St. Rita's students have a legitimate degree because their work is scored using national rubrics, developed and tested outside of the local setting. Similarly, Jeremy explained the importance of the VALUE rubrics for showing that students had the "minimal competency" for a degree as defined by the DQP. These boss texts—LEAP outcomes, VALUE rubrics, and the DQP—are used strategically, by name, to legitimize St. Rita's and their curriculum, even when faculty repeatedly admit they are pitched too high for their student population.

CONCLUSION

While composition scholars have referred to outcomes assessment as a "Trojan Horse" (Gallagher, 2016) and the VALUE rubrics as "fooling" us (Anson et al., 2012), the AAC&U did not create the LEAP outcomes of VALUE rubrics

to trick faculty. Philip does not join the AAC&U VALUE process to directly regulate what faculty teach—in fact, he shies away from signature assignments because he does not want to encroach on faculty freedom in the classroom. Neither does Dwayne use the terminology of signature assignments to purposefully deceive the general education committee. Rather, these "tricks" are a part of the way that ruling relations and boss texts operate. LaFrance (2019) explained that "key terms and statements are generated by our national organizations to offer a sense of shared values and guide our work with student writers on fairly different campuses" (p. 117). In their role as stewards of higher education, the AAC&U hoped to do just that—to guide, not to regulate higher education. However, they cannot escape the ruling relations of mega-foundations nor can the faculty at St. Rita's and Oak escape the demands of accreditation or the conceptions of what it means to complete a degree that rule their practice.

Ruling relations bring key terms and key documents—boss texts—to multiple institutions, and over time, these terms and documents become embedded in the everyday work of these institutions. Outcomes and terms are reproduced and "become enshrined in the bureaucratic machinery" (Gallagher, 2012, p. 45). While some administrators draw on these outcomes and terms strategically, others—such as those talking of essay exams as signature assignments at St. Rita's—repeat them not knowing that they are drawing on institutional language that goes beyond their own context. Multiple ruling relations are at play and which ruling relations are obscured is dependent on standpoint. Kristen and her colleagues at Oak attended VALUE training sessions held by the AAC&U, and Dwayne went to training sessions hosted by the AAC&U and the Lumina Foundation on signature assignments. They refer directly to the terminology of the AAC&U and sometimes even to individuals on their staff. Philip goes as far as to refer to the two key VALUE staff members—Terry Rhodes and Kate McConnell—by first name only, saying he considers them "friends, in a sense." Yet, even those participants who worked directly with the AAC&U did not necessarily consider the larger connections to institutional power, such as the interaction between the AAC&U and their funders. Similarly, individual faculty members not involved in administration were more likely to see their colleagues—those involved in writing and assessment committees —as rubric-creators and be unaware of the AAC&U as an organization or the faculty teams that wrote the VALUE rubrics. Patrice, a long-time faculty member at St. Rita's, sees Dwayne as the creator of rubrics, and even when I mentioned the AAC&U rubric, she repeatedly said she'd have to ask Dwayne about it, lamenting that he hasn't given her the most recent copy of what *he* wants her to use in her classroom.

Whether participants purposefully draw on boss texts or unknowingly use them, the concepts of institutional ethnography help us connect national move-

ments, such the VALUE rubrics to practices at individual institutions. The concept of ruling relations helps us see where ideas of "best practice" come from, how these concepts unite institutions across locations, and how they morph into everyday practice that may actually look quite different between institutions (LaFrance, 2019). In Chapter 5, I look specifically at the idea of adaptation. From the beginning of my study, I was struck by how different the "adapted" VALUE rubrics looked from the original Written Communication rubric. Through a trickle-down approach of discovering the rubrics, key practices put in place by the AAC&U in the beginning have been lost over time due to both misunderstandings of purposes of the rubric and an inability to align actual practice with those original intentions. Yet the connection with the AAC&U also constrains perceptions of assessment at Oak and St. Rita's.