

## “And Scene!” Using Best Practices from Institutional Assessment Processes to Enhance Virtual Learning Experiences

In 2019, more than 170 faculty and staff gathered at a design thinking session at our institution, Tallahassee Community College (TCC), to answer the following question: How might TCC redesign its student experience through an innovative model that removes barriers to student success? (“C.A.R.E. Model”). The culmination of this session, which identified specific academic barriers, was helpful for the transition to remote learning from a face-to-face course modality in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. To meet the digital needs of students during the pandemic, and keep students engaged in learning, we redesigned a group-based, collaborative activity entitled *Walking the Line of Poverty* in an Introduction to Sociology course using the dimensions of one of the Association of American Colleges and Universities’ (AAC&U) Valid Assessment of Learning in Undergraduate Education (VALUE) rubrics (Arce-Trigatti et al.). Using the AAC&U VALUE rubric as a guide for student learning offered a helpful process by which to continue to address initial digital barriers and keep the focus on enhancing student engagement during this virtual transition.

### Student Success in a Virtual Environment

Student success has always been at the forefront of teaching and learning efforts on campus. That is why the barriers identified in the 2019 design thinking session—which included personal challenges with social distractions, a lack of digital literacy, and limited access to technology—were helpful markers in how to centralize the strategies needed to support student success (“C.A.R.E. Model”). When the pandemic hit, necessitating a quick pivot to online learning by the college, many of these barriers were exacerbated. This resulted in students tentatively losing access to resources that had previously helped address pervasive digital challenges, while also placing many in a new and confusing digital landscape that could impact student engagement and introduce more social distractions.

### The Critical Thinking SLO

Addressing these barriers also offered an opportunity to reexamine student engagement efforts used to advance student learning outcomes, like critical thinking, on campus. Integrating lessons learned from this session and leveraging TCC’s institutional assessment process and culture of continual improvement, we worked to improve and transition an engaging student activity to the virtual learning space. At the time of redesigning this activity, the college was assessing its critical thinking SLO using the AAC&U Critical Thinking VALUE Rubric which offered the

impetus for focusing on this skill. This rubric defines critical thinking as, “a habit of mind characterized by the comprehensive exploration of issues, ideas, artifacts, and events before accepting or formulating an opinion or conclusion,” and conceptualizes the skill as a composite of five major dimensions: Explanation of Issues, Evidence, Influence of Context and Assumptions, Student’s Position (Perspective, Thesis/Hypothesis), and Conclusions and Related Outcomes (Implications and Consequences). These dimensions became the anchors for the learning objectives associated with each component of the redesign of the featured activity.

### Distinct Scenes and Diverse Digital Tools

Table 1 offers a description of the different components of the redesign of the virtual *Walking the Line of Poverty* activity. Inspired by theatrical transitions, which mimicked students’ transition in and out of different virtual spaces, the redesign reimagined the activity as six scenes. Each scene featured an AAC&U Critical Thinking VALUE rubric dimension and interacted with specific digital resources.

Scene one, *Setting the Stage*, was similar to the face-to-face setting and introduced material on competing definitions of poverty, the U.S. federal poverty guidelines, and the state minimum wage through a lecture-based discussion. Following this introduction, students were asked to get into groups of four or five to create a monthly budget that fell under a yearly income provided by the instructor as part of Scene two, *Creating a Family Budget*. The virtual tools used for this activity included virtual breakout rooms, any document sharing function on our school’s Learning Management System (LMS), as well as any chat feature on our LMS or personal computer or device.

Both *Setting the Stage* and *Creating a Family Budget* were anchored in the first AAC&U Critical Thinking VALUE Rubric dimension, Explanation of Issues. This dimension looks at how students are able to use relevant information to better understand an issue or problem, consider it critically, and describe it comprehensively. For example, in Scene one, students were introduced to relevant information to help them better understand the poverty line in their local context; as part of Scene two, they were then asked to critically consider and comprehensively describe the social issue or problem related to living at the poverty line, integrating relevant information from the lecture into their articulation.

In Scene three, *Deciding What to Leave Out*, students were asked to get into different groups and become experts in one of the categories of the budget (e.g., transportation, food, rent, etc.).

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Tasked with performing local research regarding the best offer in each category, students were placed in new breakout rooms and could use search engines, local websites, and the chat function to explore the various options offered in these categories locally. This scene was aligned with the second AAC&U Critical Thinking VALUE Rubric dimension, Evidence, which asks students to select and use information to investigate a point of view or conclusion. By becoming experts in a particular area of the budget, students were responsible for selecting, interpreting, evaluating, and questioning the viewpoints of the “best bang for their buck” in terms of the budget item they were given and the information offered by different state, local, and private resources.

Scene four, *Making the Hard Decisions*, asked students to come back to the main, virtual room and, as expert groups, discuss how to configure the ideal budget using what they learned in Scene three. This scene was aligned with the fourth AAC&U Critical Thinking VALUE Rubric dimension, Student’s Position, which asks them to examine their own perspective, considering the complexities of an issue, the limits of their position, and the value and limits of others’ perspectives. This larger group discussion helped students connect to different perspectives, explore the value placed on diverse budget items (e.g., leisure versus food), and learn to evaluate those values against the evidence offered.

In Scene five, *Reflection*, students were asked to reflect on their experience and decide what iteration of the budget worked best for them. Meant as a homework activity, students shared responses providing personalized reflections on the LMS discussion board and virtual form feature. This scene was aligned with the third AAC&U Critical Thinking VALUE Rubric dimension, Influence of Context and Assumptions, which asks students to analyze their own and others’ assumptions to evaluate the relevance of contexts. By asking students to engage in reflection questions that centered on context and the influence of social assumptions to determine what they considered their ideal budget in class, students effectively evaluated their own context and that of their peers.

Finally, in Scene six, *Debriefing*, students returned to their virtual class platform and engaged in a larger discussion concerning connections made between this activity and the sociological concepts introduced in *Setting the Stage*. This scene was aligned with the fifth AAC&U Critical Thinking VALUE Rubric dimension, Conclusions and Related Outcomes, which asks students to place evidence and perspectives into related priorities, identifying implications and consequences. Using the main virtual room and chat features, the connections made by students were reflective of conclusions that incorporated this type of analysis, often with students recognizing that their own final budgets were based on personal preferences and not necessarily the needs or perspectives of others, which varied.

## Conclusion

We observed several successful outcomes from this redesign. By having each scene centered on a dimension of the AAC&U

Critical Thinking VALUE rubric, we could target specific critical thinking and student engagement components. We could also offer students the flexibility to take on different roles in their group in Scene three and Scene five, depending on students’ access to technology, as a means of addressing barriers to digital access. The five dimensions of the AAC&U Critical Thinking VALUE Rubric additionally let students look at content in new ways, while engaging in interaction that was robust and beneficial for learning. Ultimately, leveraging the AAC&U Critical Thinking VALUE Rubric in digitally-driven redesigns can potentially offer a beneficial way to reflect on—and intentionally address—these challenges while focusing on student engagement, learning outcomes, and overall success.

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To view Table 1, visit [www.nisod.org/2022/04/26/xliv\\_8/](http://www.nisod.org/2022/04/26/xliv_8/)

## Works Cited

Arce-Trigatti, Andrea, and Shawn Gaulden. “Walking the Line of Poverty: Using the Foundry and Critical Thinking to Enhance the Online Classroom Experience in an Undergraduate, Introduction to Sociology Course.” *Innovative Teaching Talk, Research on Teaching and Learning Summit, Virtual Annual Conference*, October 7-8, 2021. Conference Presentation.

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