

## Beyond the Benchmark: Measuring Student Achievement of Essential Learning Outcomes

Projects for Peace / 2017 Research Project

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The Projects for Peace provides students with the opportunity to develop many skills, particularly around Civic Engagement, Intercultural Knowledge and Competence, and Problem Solving. While these skillsets are especially relevant to the Projects for Peace, they are also of key interest to institutions of higher education across the U.S. Indeed, these are included among the Association of American Colleges & Universities' (AAC&U) prioritized "learning outcomes" – or, skillsets identified as most critical for students to develop during their undergraduate experience. In order to understand how well students at colleges and universities across the U.S. are doing on each of these learning outcomes, the AAC&U developed a series of rubrics to facilitate scoring student work. We adapted these rubrics to the Projects for Peace in order to determine how well students are doing on core parts of Civic Engagement, Intercultural Knowledge and Competence, and Problem Solving.

### **Civic Engagement**

*Working to make a difference in the civic life of our communities and developing the combination of knowledge, skills, values and motivation to make that difference. It means promoting the quality of life in a community, through both political and non-political processes. In addition, Civic Engagement encompasses actions wherein individuals participate in activities of personal and public concern that are both individually life enriching and socially beneficial to the community.*

### **Intercultural Knowledge and Competence**

*A set of cognitive, affective, and behavioral skills and characteristics that support effective and appropriate interaction in a variety of cultural contexts.*

### **Problem Solving**

*The process of designing, evaluating and implementing a strategy to answer an open-ended question or achieve a desired goal.*

AAC&U website. <https://www.aacu.org/value/rubrics>

We scored a sample of final reports from the 2016 cohort of Projects for Peace. These projects took place all over the world: India, Palestine, Rwanda, France, Nigeria, Pakistan, Zimbabwe, Puerto Rico, China, and Turkey. They also spanned a number of types of projects: youth development, humanitarian aid, art, emergency preparedness, water & sanitation, and health & healthcare.

We found that, overall, students exhibited high levels of achievement. In AAC&U terms, this means we found evidence of students exhibiting "Capstone" and "High-Milestone"

levels of achievement. In Table 1, we see the percent of students who reached these levels of achievement for each learning outcome.

Table 1. Learning Outcomes Achievement

	Learning Outcome Competency	Description	% of Students with Capstone & High-Milestone Achievement
Civic Engagement	<i>Civic Identity and Commitment</i>	Having a sense of civic identity or commitment to public action due to one's civic engagement during the project	100%
	<i>Civic Communication</i>	Ability to effectively communicate with community partners or members to further project aims	78%
	<i>Civic Action and Reflection.</i>	Reflecting on the aims and accomplishments of one's project	100%
	<i>Civic Contexts / Structures</i>	Working with community partners or members	100%
Intercultural Knowledge and Competence	<i>Knowledge of cultural worldview frameworks</i>	Understanding what is culturally important and appropriate to community members	100%
	<i>Verbal and nonverbal communication</i>	Ability to effectively communicate with community members	83%
	<i>Openness</i>	Valuing interactions with members of different culture	100%
Problem Solving	<i>Define Problem</i>	Defining the problem that the project is addressing	60%
	<i>Evaluate Proposed Solution</i>	Proposing a project that addresses the problem	90%
	<i>Implement Solution</i>	Implementing a project that addresses the problem	90%
	<i>Evaluate Outcomes</i>	Review of project outcomes and presentation of next steps	80%

We see that 100% of students exhibited the highest levels of achievement for five different components, including *Civic Identity and Commitment*, from Civic Engagement. As one student who displayed “Capstone” level achievement on this measure wrote in her final report:

There is a lot that needs to be done to help students without access to these resources to get the support that they need and my passion to do so has grown by the results that I saw through this project. Young Scientists Rise taught me how to be leader. I realized how much of a responsibility I hold because of the opportunities I have received and how much the following generation is looking up to me. I am representing my country and every black and African girl who has not been able to follow their dreams as I have. I have the duty to take what I learn and cultivate back in to the place that nurtured me into the person that I am. After I had told some students my dream to contribute to the pharmaceutical industry of Zimbabwe through discovery of new therapeutics, one of the girls held my hand and asked me to help her cousin by making sure that anti-retro viral drugs are packaged in smaller capsules to make them easier to swallow. This incident touched my heart and made me realize the potential I have to contribute to my country and my community.

This student, as others did, clearly communicate how their sense of civic identity and commitment to public action was impacted by their Projects for Peace project. For all

learning outcomes, we searched for evidence – a sentence, a paragraph – that was likewise able to clearly exhibit the student’s achievement.

Indeed, we find many substantive examples of students achieving these learning outcomes throughout their final reports, including for Problem Solving. Students discuss in detail their abilities to find and implement a project that would adequately respond to a specific problem. This student, for example, describes in one paragraph the key goals and objectives of his project:

The project’s main task was to reconfigure the [humanitarian organization’s] aid delivery system from a manual process of pen and paper to a data collection and management app called KoBo Toolbox. A major advantage of the app was that it combined the processes of collecting and recording data; aid delivery teams were thus able to save admin time and reduce errors otherwise made in transcribing collected data into digital records. This overall goal was broken down into four sub-tasks: (i) the creation of digital forms that were tailored to their aid operations, (ii) the optimisation of the aid ordering, packaging, and delivery processes, (iii) the training of L’Auberge team members on how to use the app, and (iv) the purchase of phones and a laptop to be used for the KoBo app.

This excerpt clearly illustrates their high achievement of the learning outcome, with insight into how their project responded to an existing issue.

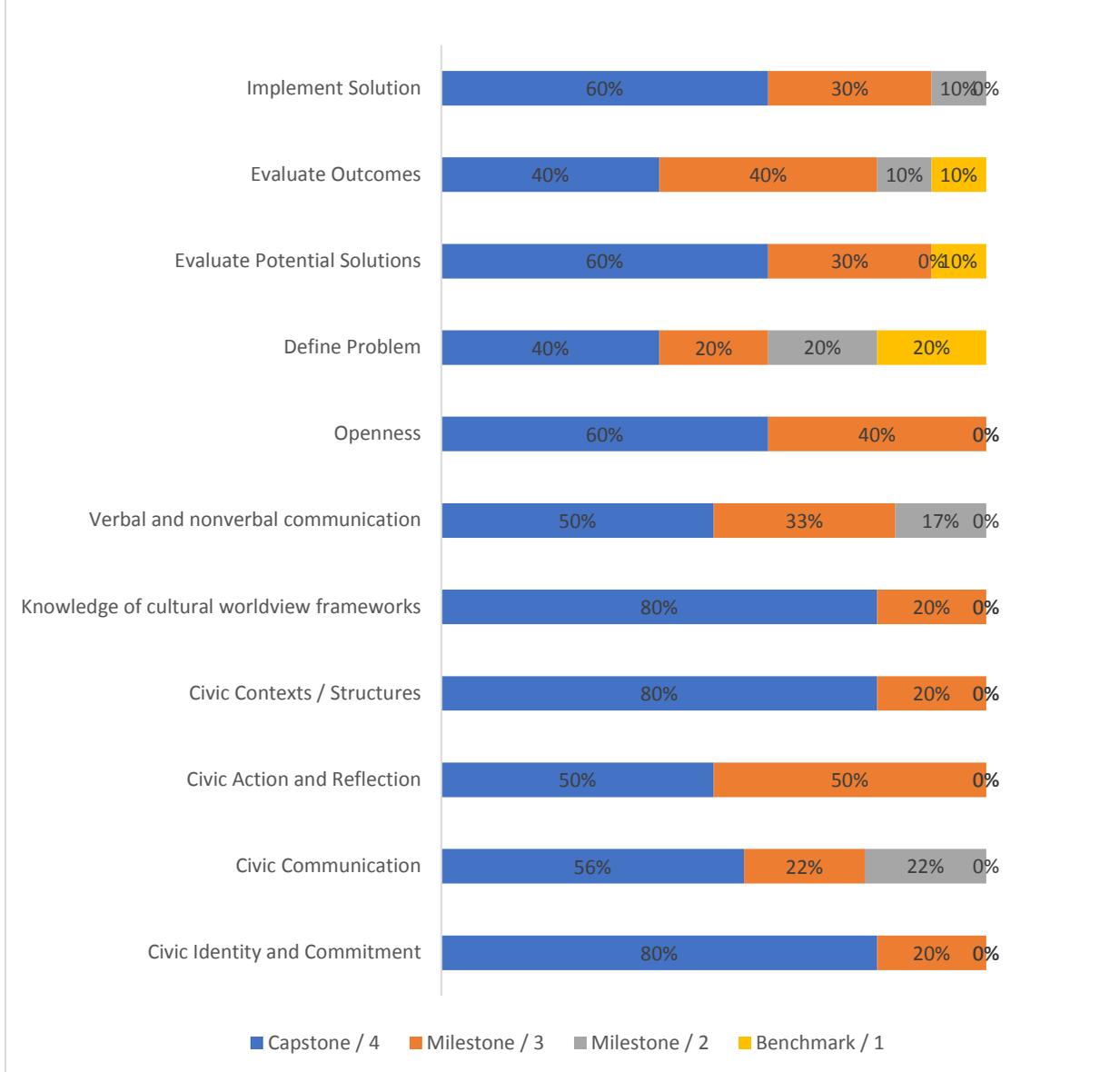
We also found students demonstrating high achievement in the Intercultural Knowledge and Competence learning outcome. For example, 100% of students provided evidence of high levels of competence for *Openness*, such as this student:

I was so impressed and inspired by [my community partners’] relationships with the children, and ability to translate their own experiences in education and passion for photography into examples and explanations that I could not provide.

This student clearly values their interactions with members of a different culture, and highlights how their cultural knowledge allowed them to relate best with the children in their photography program.

In Graph 1, we see the full spread of achievement from the sample of final reports we scored. Overall, students provided evidence of high achievement across all of these components.

Graph 1. Performance on Learning Outcomes



This exercise provides an example of how key learning outcomes important to institutions of higher education and international service programs can be measured. We looked to the AAC&U due to their leadership in the conversation on how institutions of higher education can identify, discuss, and measure achievement in learning outcomes. Based on their work, we chose to score Projects for Peace students on Civic Engagement, Intercultural Knowledge and Competence, and Problem Solving. We hope that the Projects for Peace’s exercise in capturing student achievement in core learning outcomes can serve as a model to the many projects and programs embedded in institutions of higher education that seek to join the conversation and do the same.

For more information on the AAC&U VALUE Rubrics, please visit [www.aacu.org/value/rubrics](http://www.aacu.org/value/rubrics)

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