



Pursuing Academic Rigor One Course at a Time

In their controversial book *Academically Adrift*, Arum and Roksa (2011) call attention to the lack of academic rigor in American colleges and universities. Citing surveys, transcript analyses, and results from the Collegiate Learning Assessment, the authors reported that 2,300 students at 24 institutions demonstrated few, if any, gains in critical thinking, complex reasoning, and written communication from their first to sophomore years.

Throughout the book, Arum and Roksa (2011) maintain that educational practices promoting academic rigor—coursework requiring reading and writing at significant levels, for example—improve student performance, and they describe specific variables that contribute to higher levels of learning. In particular, they propose that faculty who maintain high expectations for performance and instructional programs that emphasize student learning demonstrate evidence of academic rigor. Other variables include the availability of educational experiences reflecting the best practices and research in the scholarship of teaching and learning and an institutional commitment to transparency and accountability. In other words, colleges and universities are urged to use the best possible approaches to teaching, engage students in challenging academic tasks, assess the levels at which students are learning, and openly share the derived results.

Individual faculty members may not be able to change the culture of their institution, but they can use Arum and Roksa's (2011) variables as a guide to promote high academic expectations, select best practices, and design solid assessments. Here are some recommended approaches to achieve academic rigor and excellence in the first-year classroom.

Promote excellent student performance through carefully selected learning outcomes and assessments. Great courses begin with well-defined learning outcomes, including the knowledge, skills, and dispositions that students are expected to attain by participating in a course or program. Faculty must have a clear sense of these outcomes and connect them with robust assessment strategies. The course syllabus should clearly outline identified learning outcomes, but faculty members also should make frequent and intentional references to them throughout the semester. It is critical that faculty members know for themselves and define for their students the destination before beginning the semester's journey (Gahagan, Dingfelder, & Pei, 2010).

Avoid the twin sins of course design. Wiggins and McTighe (2005) have defined the *twin sins* of course design as (a) teaching in a manner that promotes hands-on learning without being minds-on (i.e., assignments and other experiences that do not require students to engage in critical thinking) and (b) the tyranny of coverage (i.e., a tendency to march through a textbook or PowerPoint slides in an effort to



“The quality of a university is measured more by the kind of student it turns out than the kind it takes in.”

—Robert J. Kibbe,
educator



present course content without engaging students in real learning). These principles impede academic rigor. Well-designed courses focus on experiences that view content as a vehicle to learning and require students to engage their minds and wrestle with the complexity of ideas, concepts, and uncertainties. For example, students can be systematically exposed to course content through classroom-based learning experiences or assigned readings and then required to engage with that content critically through discussions, problem-based learning tasks, or projects involving higher-order thinking skills (i.e., application, analysis, evaluation, and creation).

Communicate high expectations for student performance and define excellence.

Arum and Roksa (2011) reported that students learn more when instructors have high expectations of their academic performance. To ensure high expectations, faculty should define what excellence means in a course and outline the steps students need to follow to achieve that level of performance. The path to excellent performance should provide students with multiple opportunities to demonstrate their learning through varied types of assessments, including examinations, projects, written communication, presentations, and problem-based learning tasks.

Provide feedback to students promptly and often. The path to excellence also requires frequent assessment from faculty so that students know how they are progressing. If an assessment strategy has enough value to be a required experience for students enrolled in a course, then faculty should be expected to provide prompt and detailed feedback that will assist students in their learning. For example, if students are required to create written products (e.g., research papers, memoranda, journal entries), faculty should be willing to provide prescriptive feedback that identifies strengths and weaknesses of the final product. By knowing what they have done well, and where improvement is needed, students have the information necessary to improve and grow in relation to the course-related learning outcomes.

Summary

Academic rigor often is portrayed as a macro-issue of the entire academy or institution, yet it begins with the decisions and actions of individual instructors. Faculty can play a critical role in establishing and maintaining rigor by ensuring that the courses they teach set high expectations for student performance; focus on learning; and provide prompt, precise feedback on assignments.

REFERENCES

- Arum, R., & Roksa, J. (2011). *Academically adrift: Limited learning on college campuses*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Gahagan, J., Dingfelder, J., & Pei, K. (2010). *A faculty and staff guide to creating learning outcomes*. Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina, National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition.
- Wiggins, G., & McTighe, J. (2005). *Understanding by design*. New York, NY: Pearson.



NATIONAL RESOURCE CENTER
FIRST-YEAR EXPERIENCE® AND STUDENTS IN TRANSITION
UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH CAROLINA

Journal

of The First-Year Experience & Students in Transition

A semiannual refereed journal providing current research and scholarship on significant student transitions. The primary purpose of the *Journal* is to disseminate empirical research findings on student transition issues, including

- Explorations into the academic, personal, and social experiences—such as outcomes related to success, learning, and development—of students at a range of transition points throughout the college years. These transitions consist of, but are not limited to, the first college year, the transfer transition, the sophomore year, the senior year and transition out of college, and the transition to graduate work.
- Transition issues unique to specific populations (e.g., nontraditional, traditional, historically underrepresented students, transfer students, commuters, part-time students).
- Explorations of faculty development, curriculum, and pedagogical innovations connected to any of the transitions identified above.

To submit or subscribe,
please visit
www.sc.edu/fye/journal



What's Happening at The National Resource Center

Conferences and Continuing Education

Online Courses

The National Resource Center offers online courses on topics of interest in higher education. The courses provide participants the same content and opportunities for interaction with peers and the instructor as traditional (i.e., classroom-based) learning environments while taking advantage of pedagogy and teaching techniques that are not possible or common in those settings. The courses use tools such as e-mail, threaded discussions or forums, listservs, and blogs. Enrollment is limited to 25 participants. Visit www.sc.edu/fye/oc for more information.

Online Course Offerings:

May 21-June 22, 2013

Models and Methods of Student Advising: Promoting Career and Academic Success and Transition—facilitated by Paul A. Gore, Jr., Associate Professor of Educational Psychology, University of Utah, and Editor, *Journal of The First-Year Experience & Students in Transition*

Conferences and Institutes

Save the Dates

26th International Conference on The First-Year Experience

June 17-20, 2013

Early registration deadline: May 27, 2013

Waikoloa, Hawaii's Big Island

www.sc.edu/fye/ifye

20th National Conference on Students in Transition

October 19-21, 2013

Proposal deadline: July 5, 2013

Atlanta, Georgia

www.sc.edu/fye/sit

33rd Annual Conference on The First-Year Experience

February 14-18, 2014

San Diego, California

26TH INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON
The First-Year Experience®

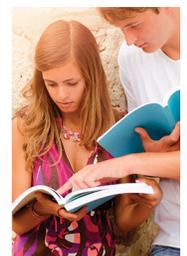
WAIKOLOA, HAWAII
JUNE 17-20, 2013

EARLY REGISTRATION DEADLINE
▶ **MAY 27, 2013**



NATIONAL RESOURCE CENTER
FIRST-YEAR EXPERIENCE® AND STUDENTS IN TRANSITION
UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH CAROLINA

www.sc.edu/fye/ifye/

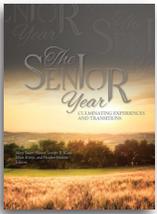


Publications



The Journal Celebrates 25 Years!

The National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition is pleased to announce the publication of Volume 25 of the *Journal of The First-Year Experience & Students in Transition*. The *Journal* disseminates empirical research findings on student transition issues that inform practice in all sectors of postsecondary education. The first issue of the anniversary volume will be available in early May and will include a content analysis of the research and scholarship published in the *Journal* during the past 24 years. For more information about the *Journal* or to subscribe, visit <http://www.sc.edu/fye/journal/>



The Senior Year: Culminating Experiences and Transitions

Mary Stuart Hunter, Jennifer R. Keup, Jillian Kinzie, & Heather Maietta, Editors

Increasing pressures on colleges and universities to ensure degree completion and job placement as measures of success make it imperative that the path to graduation is clear and that seniors receive the support needed to earn a degree and make a successful transition to life beyond college. This new edited collection describes today's college seniors and offers strategies

for supporting them to graduation through high-impact educational initiatives. Contributors also address issues related to career development; workplace transitions; and opportunities for integration, reflection, closure, and ongoing engagement as students leave college. Educators charged with improving the end-of-college experience will find this an invaluable resource. ISBN 978-1-889271-85-9. \$35.00. Visit www.nrcpubs.com to order.

Research, Grants, and Assessment

Paul P. Fidler Research Grant

The Paul P. Fidler Research Grant encourages the development and dissemination of knowledge that has the potential to improve the experiences of college students in transition. The grant is named in memory of Paul P. Fidler, a faculty member at the University of South Carolina, whose pioneering research on student learning and success had a vital impact on work to promote the success of all students in transition. The grant award includes a cash stipend, travel to two national conferences, a presentation at a national conference, and priority consideration for publication. The online proposal system is now accepting proposals. Completed proposals must be received by the National Resource Center by midnight Eastern Daylight Time, July 1, 2013. Visit www.sc.edu/fye/fidler to learn more about the grant.

NRC Exhibits and Presentations

Like many of you, the staff of the National Resource Center is actively involved in the conference circuit. We are pleased to share the following upcoming opportunities to hear about the results of research studies conducted by the Center, learn about best practices, and meet NRC staff members.

Examining the National Picture of Assessment of First-Year Seminars. Presentation by Dallin George Young, Assistant Director for Research, Grants, and Assessment, at the 2013 Association for Institutional Research (AIR) Forum, 4 p.m., May 21, Long Beach Convention and Entertainment Center, Long Beach, California.

Like us on

facebook®

Visit www.facebook.com/fyesit to be directed to our Facebook page. Like us and receive access to a network of educators committed to college student success.

Follow us on

twitter

Visit www.twitter.com/nrcfyesit to follow @NRCFYESIT and become even more connected with the ongoing work of the Center.

The Toolbox

Author: Brad Garner

Telephone: 765.677.2452

E-mail: brad.garner@indwes.edu

Address: Indiana Wesleyan University
4201 South Washington Street
Marion, IN 46953

The Toolbox is an online professional development newsletter offering innovative, learner-centered strategies for empowering college students to achieve greater success. The newsletter is published six times a year by the National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition at the University of South Carolina, Columbia, SC.

The online subscription is free. To register for newsletter alerts and access back issues, please visit www.sc.edu/fye/toolbox.

Publication Staff

Editor: Larry Wood

Graphic Designer: Elizabeth Howell