



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.

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- 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.
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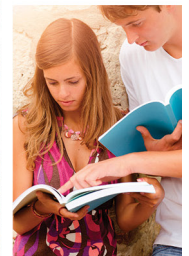
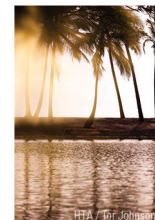
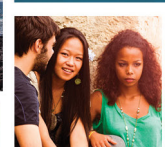
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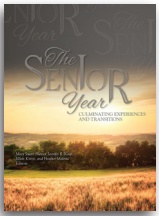


Publications



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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/>



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

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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

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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.

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The Toolbox

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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.

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