



Ensuring Thoughtful Assessment: Strategies That Make the Grade

Assessing student learning is pivotal to course design and delivery, but assessment strategies often are simply pathways to calculating final course grades. This perspective assumes, regrettably, that good grades always equal good learning (Jennings, Lovett, Cuba, Swingle, & Lindkvist, 2013). In reality, although course-based assessments can lead to a grade calculation, they also should provide primary evidence that students have accomplished identified learning outcomes. Faculty can add value and power to assessment by informing and engaging students in a transparent process where expectations are known and shared.

Link Assessments to Learning Outcomes

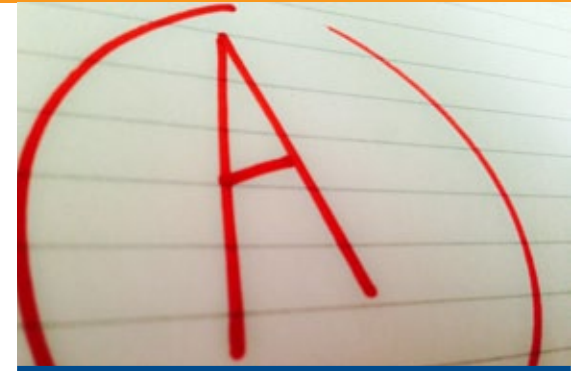
In every course, faculty should intentionally connect learning outcomes, assessment practices, and experiences (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005). At many institutions, general learning outcomes have been vetted thoroughly through rigorous academic approval processes. Within these established parameters, however, instructors generally have tremendous latitude in designing their assessment strategies and course-related learning experiences. Although the popularity of the backward design approach Wiggins and McTighe (2005) proposed is growing (i.e., generate learning outcomes, link assessment to identified outcomes, create learning experiences), faculty often focus primarily on creating engaging classroom experiences. Assessment strategies typically are afterthoughts. To elevate student assessment in the planning process, analyzing current assessment strategies in relation to the course's learning outcomes is a good starting point. These questions can provide guidance:

- Does a direct correlation exist between the critically important variables of learning outcomes and assessment strategies?
- What types of assessment strategies can be included in courses to strengthen the evidence of student learning?

Define Expectations

Clearly describing expectations for course performance (i.e., how student performance will be measured, what defines the criteria for excellence) is one of the greatest gifts instructors can give students. To ensure students understand assessment standards for course requirements, instructors should

- make students aware of the assessment tasks that will evidence their learning (e.g., due dates, descriptions, expectations) at the beginning of the semester;



“Description of a grade: An inadequate report of an inaccurate judgment by a biased and variable judge of the extent to which a student has attained an undefined level of mastery of an unknown proportion of an indefinite material.”

—Dressel (1983)

- designate class time to help students make the connection between assessments and course outcomes; and
- give students a rubric that defines excellent performance for authentic assessment tasks (e.g., presentations, projects, group work, written products).

Vary Techniques

Providing students with a range of assessment options capitalizes on their learning styles and strengths. When considering learning outcomes and related assessments, instructors should think creatively about ways students can demonstrate their learning, mastery of course content, and new skills:

- Do students have varied outlets (e.g., examinations, written work, creative endeavors) that offer different strategies for assessment to communicate their knowledge and expertise?
- Do assessment techniques tap into a hierarchical range of skills (e.g., the elements of Bloom's Taxonomy)?

Give Feedback

Excellent assessment techniques lose their power if students do not receive prompt, specific feedback. Just as students are accountable for submitting assignments on time, faculty should return graded work as quickly as possible, considering these questions:

- What is a reasonable amount of time in which to grade and return student work?
- Do students need specific feedback on submitted assignments (i.e., feedback that will assist them in their learning, feedback that will enhance future performance)?

Learn From Assessments

Instructors can use course-based assessments to inform and improve teaching by reviewing the results of student work at the end of every semester, including

- analyzing student assessment data to determine consistent areas of deficient performance (e.g., areas that may need additional emphasis or a different form of assessment);
- finding gaps in the assessment model that need strengthening (e.g., areas in which assessments appear incomplete or inadequate); and
- examining assessment results to determine particular topics or areas of concentration that need greater or lesser emphasis.

Assessment is more than assigning a grade. To make assessment vital and relevant, instructors should review current techniques, advise students of expectations, and analyze data that emerges from the work students submit.

REFERENCES

- Dressel, P. (1983, December). Grades: One more tilt at the windmill. In A. W. Chickering (Ed.), *Bulletin* (p.12). Memphis, TN: Memphis State University.
- Jennings, N., Lovett, S., Cuba, L., Swingle, J., & Lindkvist, H. (2013). "What would make this a successful year for you?" How students define success in college. *Liberal Education*, 99(2), 40-47.
- Wiggins, G., & McTighe, J. (2005). *Understanding by design*. New York, NY: Pearson.

Good Grief, Another Paper? The Five Stages of Grading

Presented with a weekend of grading term papers, quizzes, or lab reports, instructors might experience something akin to Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's five stages of grief. Following Kübler-Ross's model, the author of the blog Not That Kind of Doctor (<http://notthatkindofdoctor.com/2010/10/the-five-stages-of-grading/>) offered a humorous take on the often arduous task of grading:

- **Denial**—At this stage, the instructor is unwilling to acknowledge the size of the task ahead.
- **Anger**—Anger usually begins once the instructor starts grading. Finding repeated errors of material covered in class can lead to disillusionment.
- **Bargaining**—In this stage, the instructor makes an earnest attempt to buckle down and grade but negotiates a reward for completing a certain amount of work (e.g., taking a TV break after grading five papers; having a piece or candy for every page graded).
- **Depression**—At some point in a marking weekend, the instructor will come to realize that, in spite of good intentions, the papers won't be marked in time for the next class.
- **Acceptance/Resignation**—Finally, the instructor comes to terms with the reality that the papers must be graded and, having finished them, gets primed to begin the process all over again when the next major assignment comes in.

What's Happening at The National Resource Center

Conferences and Continuing Education

Conferences and Institutes

21st National Conference on Students in Transition

October 18-20, 2014

Denver, Colorado

College students experience many changes and transitions throughout their undergraduate years. As educators, we must provide support for the entire undergraduate experience—from the transition into college through graduation. The 21st National Conference on Students in Transition will focus on this wide range of experiences, including the first college year, the sophomore year, the senior year, and the transfer transition. Attendees will have opportunities to share with and learn from each other the latest trends, initiatives, best practices, ideas, research, and assessment strategies aimed at supporting student success in these and other transitions.

Please go to <http://sc.edu/fye/sit/> to register or for more information.

Institute on Peer Educators

November 7-9, 2014

University of South Carolina, Columbia

The National Resource Center invites professionals involved in campus programs and initiatives who engage undergraduate students as peer educators to participate in the Institute on Peer Educators. The institute will focus on effective strategies and concepts that positively impact peer leadership experiences and enhance program outcomes. The registration deadline is October 6, 2014.

Please go to <http://sc.edu/fye/pe> to register or for more information.

34th Annual Conference on The First-Year Experience

February 7-10, 2015

Dallas, Texas

Proposals are now being accepted for the 34th Annual Conference on The First-Year Experience. The proposal deadline is October 15, 2014. Visit <http://sc.edu/fye/annual> to submit a proposal or for more information.

Save the Dates

Institute on Sophomore Student Success

April 17-19, 2015

Columbia, SC

Institute on First-Year Student Success in the Community College

July 24-26, 2015

Atlanta, Georgia

RESOURCES ON ASSESSING STUDENT LEARNING



A Faculty and Staff Guide to Creating Learning Outcomes

Jimmie Gahagan, John Dingfelder,
and Katharine Pei

*Produced in association with the
Office of Student Engagement,
University of South Carolina*

ISBN 978-1-889271-67-5
(2010). 30 pg. **\$3.00**



The First-Year Seminar: Designing, Implementing, and Assessing Courses to Support Student Learning and Success

Volume V: Assessing the First-Year
Seminar

Daniel B. Friedman

ISBN 978-1-889271-81-3.
(2012). 112 pages. **\$25**

WWW.NRCPUBS.COM

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 40 participants. Participants will earn 1.5 continuing education units for each course. Visit <http://www.sc.edu/fye/oc> for more information.

Online Course Offerings

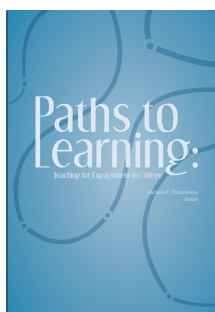
Common Readings: Creating Community Beyond the Book

October 20-November 14, 2014

Facilitated by Catherine F. Andersen, associate provost for Academic Affairs, University of Baltimore, and Fellow, John N. Gardner Institute on Excellence in Undergraduate Education

Common reading programs, defined for the purpose of this course, occur when groups of incoming first-year students read the same book(s) and participate in activities that create a shared intellectual experience. These programs are becoming an important component of first-year experience initiatives and are designed most frequently to introduce new students to the intellectual expectations of college in formal and informal gatherings. High-impact programs go beyond book discussion groups and include students, faculty, staff, and the larger community in an array of social, intellectual, and civic activities. Participants will discuss the benefits and goals of common reading programs; learn about the various types; and explore how they differ in scope, impact, and cost. Participants will design a comprehensive plan for their own campuses that includes goals and outcomes, an assessment strategy, a budget, book selection criteria, and curricular and cocurricular programming. The registration deadline is October 15, 2014. Visit <http://www.sc.edu/fye/oc> for more information.

Publications of Interest



Paths to Learning: Teaching for Engagement in College

Barbara F. Tobolowsky, Editor

Higher education institutions are more diverse than ever before, as are the students they serve. Because of this great diversity, there is no silver bullet—one approach—that will work for teaching all students in all circumstances. This book offers a succinct description of several pedagogical paths available to faculty that can actively engage all students. In addition to providing the most recent information on

learning and assessment, individual chapters tackle different approaches, including critical pedagogy, contemplative pedagogy, strengths-based teaching, and cooperative/collaborative learning. Balancing theory and practice, *Paths to Learning* is a valuable overview of engaging pedagogies for educators seeking to sharpen their teaching skills and help students become more confident and successful learners. ISBN/ISSN 978-1-889271-92-7. 177 pages. **\$30.**

To learn more or place an order, visit our online store at <http://www.nrcpubs.com/p/123/paths-to-learning>

November 7-9, 2014
University of South Carolina,
Columbia, SC

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Looking for new teaching strategies or fresh ideas for first-year seminars? *E-Source*, the National Resource Center's online newsletter for college transitions, offers a wealth of information. *E-Source* also is accepting submissions for the spring 2015 issue. To view the archives, review submission guidelines, and receive content alerts for new issues, please go to www.sc.edu/fye/esource



Academic Advising in the First Year of College: A Guide for Families

Virginia N. Gordon, Julie Levinson, and Tim Kirkner

A joint publication with NACADA: The Global Community for Academic Advising

As the focus on college completion and gainful employment intensifies, the stakes for students entering higher education and the institutions that serve them have never been higher. Yet, new students and their families may have little understanding of the value of an educational plan for helping them stay on track and achieve their goals. They may have even less knowledge about how to create one. This brief guide focuses on the role of academic advisors in helping students chart a course for success and suggests how parents and family members can be partners in the journey. A glossary of key terms and list of frequently asked questions help demystify the college experience and highlight the many purposes of the academic advising relationship. *Academic Advising in the First Year of College: A Guide for Families* is a particularly useful resource for the families of first-generation college students and ideal for distribution at recruitment events, orientation, or parent and family programs. ISBN/ISSN 978-1-889271-94-1. 30 pages. \$3 (1-99 copies); \$2 (bulk, minimum 100 copies). To learn more about this guide or other guides for the families of new students, visit our online store at <http://www.nrcpubs.com/c/10/working-with-parents-families>

National Resource Center Exhibits and Presentations

Like many of you, the staff of the National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition 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 National Resource Center staff members.

Writing for Professional Advancement: Conducting Orientation, Retention, and Transition Research.

Presented by Tracy L. Skipper, assistant director for publications, National Resource Center, and Stephanie Foote, associate professor of education, Department of First-Year Programs, Kennesaw State University, Georgia, at NODAC 2014; 3:30-4:20 p.m.; Monday, November 3, 2014; Hyatt Regency, Orlando, Florida.

Transitions Also Happen in Year 2: A National Portrait of How Institutions Shape the Beginning College Experience.

Presented by Tracy L. Skipper, assistant director for publications, at NODAC 2014; 3:30-4:20 p.m.; Tuesday, November 4; Hyatt Regency, Orlando, Florida.



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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, South Carolina.

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

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