The Toolbox

A TEACHING AND LEARNING RESOURCE FOR INSTRUCTORS

Volume 13
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July 2015

Creating Meaningful Assignments

Course assignments, in their various forms, can have a tremendous impact on student learning. Assignments perform a formative function by providing information on how well students are grasping course content and a summative function as evidence for achieving the identified learning outcomes. Robert E. Stake captured the difference between these two aspects of designing assignments as meaningful evidence of student learning by noting, "When the cook tastes the soup, that's formative; when the guests taste the soup, the summative" (Patton, 2008, p. 171). If we are serious about student learning, and the ability to document the level at which it is occurring, then the creation of meaningful assignments becomes a key element in course design.

Two of the five benchmarks for effective educational practice that the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) identified as "some of the more powerful contributors to learning and personal development" (NSSE, n.d., p. 1) are linked directly to course assignments:

- **"Level of academic challenge**—Challenging intellectual and creative work is central to student learning and collegiate quality. Colleges and universities promote high levels of student achievement by emphasizing the importance of academic effort and setting high expectations for student performance.
- **Active and collaborative learning**—Students learn more when they are intensively involved in their education and are asked to think about and apply what they are learning in different settings. Collaborating with others in solving problems or mastering difficult material prepares students to deal with the messy, unscripted problems they will encounter daily, both during and after college." (NSSE, n.d., p. 1)

When thinking about coursework, there are several key considerations for creating meaningful assignments that promote and extend student learning. These suggestions apply to individual student assignments as well as group projects:

- ***Avoid "busy work."*** Students often complain about assignments that seemingly have little perceived connection to course learning outcomes, are almost mindless in the level of required effort, or are graded with a perfunctory checkmark indicating completion as opposed to constructive or evaluative feedback .The three Rs—rigorous, relevant, and reflective—should be kept in mind when creating course assignments. These elements are the essence of creating assignments that embody a high level of academic challenge.
- ***Intentionally share connections between required assignments and course***

> "Good design is making something intelligible and memorable. Great design is making something memorable and meaningful."
>
> **— Dieter Rams, German industrial designer**

learning outcomes. One way to strengthen the value of an assignment is to intentionally draw direct connections and parallels to course learning outcomes, which also represent the expectations for student performance. This can be done in the course syllabus and in classroom discussions (e.g., "This assignment is connected with the following outcomes that we wish to accomplish in this class …"). Establishing this link should become routine when framing and presenting course assignments.

- ***"Do as I say and as I have done."*** To acquire a better understanding of the challenges students may face in their coursework, Kalchman (2011) recommended faculty actually complete an assignment before deciding to include it on the syllabus. This practice also offers added insight into the level of academic challenge, as well as the clarity (or lack of clarity) of the directions given for the assignment along with the associated grading rubric.
- ***Provide transparent assessment criteria.*** Students want and expect specific information on how their work will be graded. Rubrics are an effective way to define levels of excellence and rigor by presenting the grading criteria and scoring weights for the different variables in an assignment (e.g., organization, grammar and spelling, use of reference materials, critical thinking). Rubistar is a free resource that can help instructors painlessly create rubrics (www.rubistar.4teachers.org).
- ***Assign a variety of tasks***. Assignments come in many flavors (e.g., quizzes and examinations, writing projects, presentations, live performances, portfolios). Each of these varied formats has strengths and weaknesses in terms of what is measured and the level of effectiveness. Using the course objectives as a starting point, instructors need to plan how their students can provide evidence for mastering a learning outcome and the best way to measure that evidence. For instance, if basic knowledge about the course topic (e.g., vocabulary, basic principles, people and places) is an essential learning outcome, then an objective quiz may be the most effective assignment and evaluation. If, however, critical thinking and analysis are desired outcomes, then a research paper, essay, or presentation might better assess students' progress toward the goal.
- ***Use authentic audiences.*** Quite often, the only people who actually see a written assignment are the student and the instructor. Expanding the onlookers to include authentic audiences (i.e., naturally occurring external individuals or groups with interest and expertise related to the developed product) can provide students with feedback from others in the discipline beyond the faculty. Examples of assignments that can be submitted to an authentic audience, and which can have meaningful, real-world applications for students in their community and professional lives beyond college, include developing a grant application; submitting a proposal for a conference presentation; writing a letter to the editor of a journal, magazine, or newspaper; or working with a faculty member to create a journal article.
- ***Require assignments early in the course and often.*** Multiple assignments scheduled over the span of a semester provide a range of data points that increases the validity of the assessment process and better demonstrates student learning and achievement of desired outcomes. If the assignments are to be effective, however, instructors need to consistently offer students constructive feedback on completed work so that students can monitor their progress and improve performance on subsequent assignments.

ONLINE COURSES

ON THE FIRST-YEAR EXPERIENCE AND STUDENTS IN TRANSITION

SEPTEMBER 14 - OCTOBER 9, 2015

APPLYING STUDENT DEVELOPMENT THEORY TO COLLEGE TRANSITION PROGRAMS

Instructor: Tracy Skipper

OCTOBER 5 - OCTOBER 30, 2015

MAXIMIZING DIGITAL TOOL USE IN THE FIRST-YEAR SEMINAR: HELPING STUDENTS TO BECOME DIGITAL LEARNERS

Instructor: Brad Garner

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WWW.SC.EDU/FYE/OC

Carefully and intentionally developed assignments, as well as the effort put into grading them and giving helpful feedback, offer a means to directly enhance the learning and personal development of students and provide evidence of that growth. Creating meaningful assignments should be part of the skill set in every instructor's toolbox of effective educational practices.

REFERENCES

Kalchman, M. (2011). Do as I say and as I've done: Assignment accountability for college educators. *College Teaching, 59*(1), 40-44.

National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE). (n.d.). *Benchmarks of effective educational practice.* Retrieved from nsse.indiana.edu/pdf/nsse_benchmarks.pdf

Patton, M. Q. (2008). *Utilization-focused evaluation* (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

November 6-8, 2015
University of South Carolina,
Columbia, SC

Institute on

FIRST-YEAR STUDENT SUCCESS

IN THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE

With enrollments in community colleges on the rise, the quality of the first-year experience for students is critical to their success, whether they wish to obtain a certificate, an associate degree or transfer to a four-year institution. The Institute on First-Year Student Success in the Community College will provide attendees the opportunity to discuss the current role of the community college in higher education and develop an action plan for creating or enhancing pathways community college student success.

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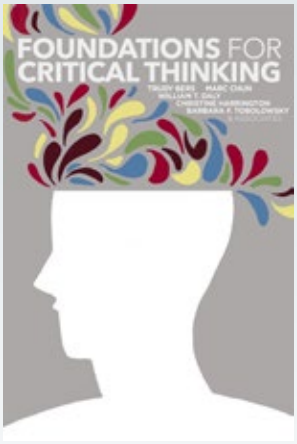
Price per individual: **$645**
2 or more: **$625**

REGISTRATION DEADLINE OCTOBER 28, 2015

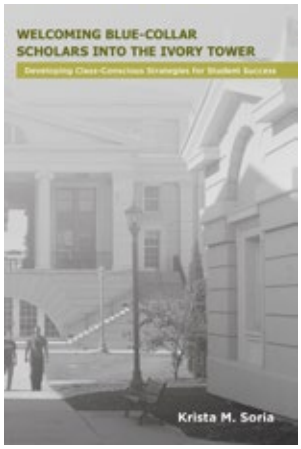
NEW RELEASES



Foundations for Critical Thinking

Trudy Bers, Marc Chun, William T. Daly, Christine Harrington, Barbara F. Tobolowsky & Associates

ISBN 978-1-889271-93-4. 224 pages. **$30.00**



Welcoming Blue-Collar Scholars Into the Ivory Tower: Developing Class-Conscious Strategies for Student Success

Krista M. Soria

SBN 978-1-889271-96-5. 90 pages. **$25.00**

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What's Happening at The National Resource Center

Conferences and Continuing Education

Conferences and Institutes

Save the Dates

22nd National Conference on Students in Transition
October 17-19, 2015
Baltimore, Maryland
Early Registration Deadline: September 23, 2015
www.sc.edu/fye/sit/

Institute on First-Year Student Success in the Community College
November 6-8, 2015
Columbia, South Carolina

35th Annual Conference on The First-Year Experience
February 20-23, 2016
Orlando, Florida

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

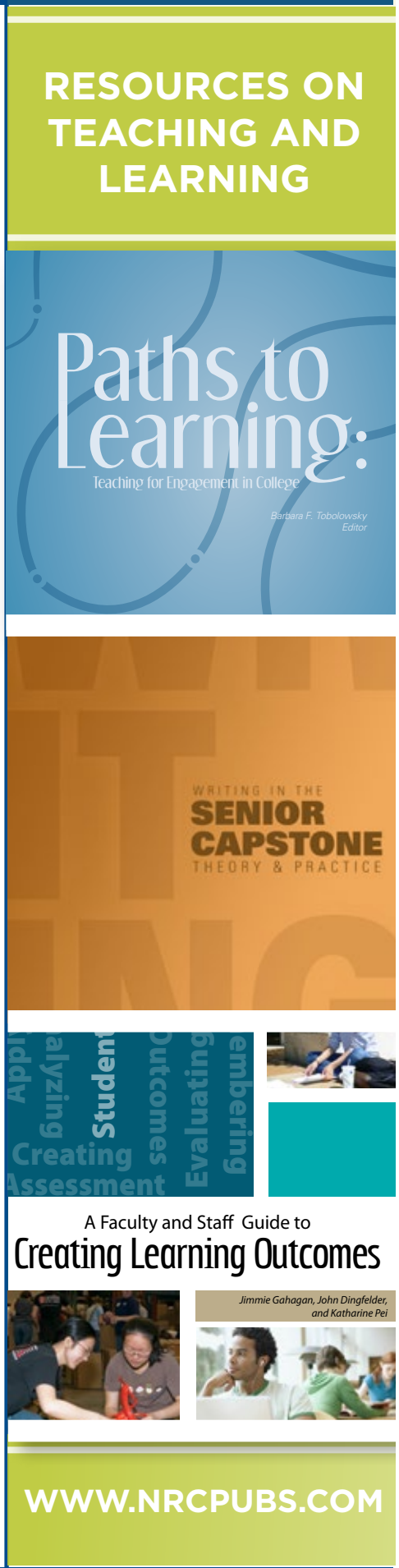
Applying Student Development Theory to College Transition Programs
September 14-October 9, 2015
Registration Deadline: September 2, 2015

Facilitated by Tracy L. Skipper, Assistant Director for Publications, National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition, University of South Carolina

Publications

Foundations for Critical Thinking
Trudy Bers, Marc Chun, William T. Daly, Christine Harrington, Barbara F. Tobolowsky, & Associates

The development of critical thinking is one of the most commonly acknowledged goals for college students, yet it also remains one of the most elusive. A new resource from the National Resource



Center explores the landscape of critical-thinking theory and pedagogy. *Foundations for Critical Thinking* establishes a link between active learning and improved critical thinking and encourages all higher education professionals, in whatever context, to join the ongoing conversation about facilitating the development of this essential skill. Foundational chapters and institutional case studies introduce strategies for developing successful teaching techniques to prepare students to face the challenges of a global economy and lead creative, productive, and fulfilling lives. Educators working with students in a variety of capacities will find insights for moving critical-thinking development beyond the classroom. ISBN 978-1-889271-93-4. 224 pages. $30.00. To read an excerpt or place an order, visit www.nrcpubs.com.

Welcoming Blue-Collar Scholars Into the Ivory Tower: Developing Class-Conscious Strategies for Student Success
Krista M. Soria

Welcoming Blue-Collar Scholars Into the Ivory Tower: Developing Class-Conscious Strategies for Student Success is the first volume in a new book series designed to explore how institutional policies, practices, and cultures shape learning, development, and success for students who have been historically underserved or given limited consideration in the design of higher education contexts. Using the theory of social reproduction as a lens, Krista Soria explores working-class students' access to and experiences in the academic and social spaces of the campus. Chapters focusing on the classroom and social settings offer recommendations for transforming the learning environment to better support students from working-class backgrounds. Strategies for increasing access, including precollege support networks, and creating inclusive campuses are also addressed. This compact, accessible volume provides both the theoretical grounding and the practical strategies educators need to create a welcoming environment for this underserved population. ISBN 978-1-889271-96-5. 92 pages. $25.00. To read an excerpt or place an order, visit www.nrcpubs.com.

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.

An Evidence-Based Discussion of Aligning Objectives, Experiences, and Assessment in the First-Year Seminar to Carry the High Impact Into the Second Year and Beyond.
Concurrent session by Dallin George Young, Assistant Director for Research, Grants, and Assessment, National Resource Center, at the 2015 Assessment Institute, October 25-27; Indianapolis, Indiana.

Awards and Recognitions

Institutional Excellence for Students in Transition

The National Resource Center launched the 2015 award campaign recognizing institutional excellence for students in transition on April 15, 2015. The award is given annually to institutions that have designed and implemented outstanding collaborative initiatives

E-Source Submission Guidelines

For complete guidelines and issue dates, see tech.sa.sc.edu/fye/esource/web/submission.php.

Audience: *E-Source* readers include academic and student affairs administrators and faculty from a variety of fields interested in student transitions. All types of institutions are represented in the readership.

Style: Articles, tables, figures, and references should adhere to APA (American Psychological Association) style.
E-Source does not publish endorsements of products for sale.

Format: Submissions should be sent via e-mail as a Microsoft Word attachment.

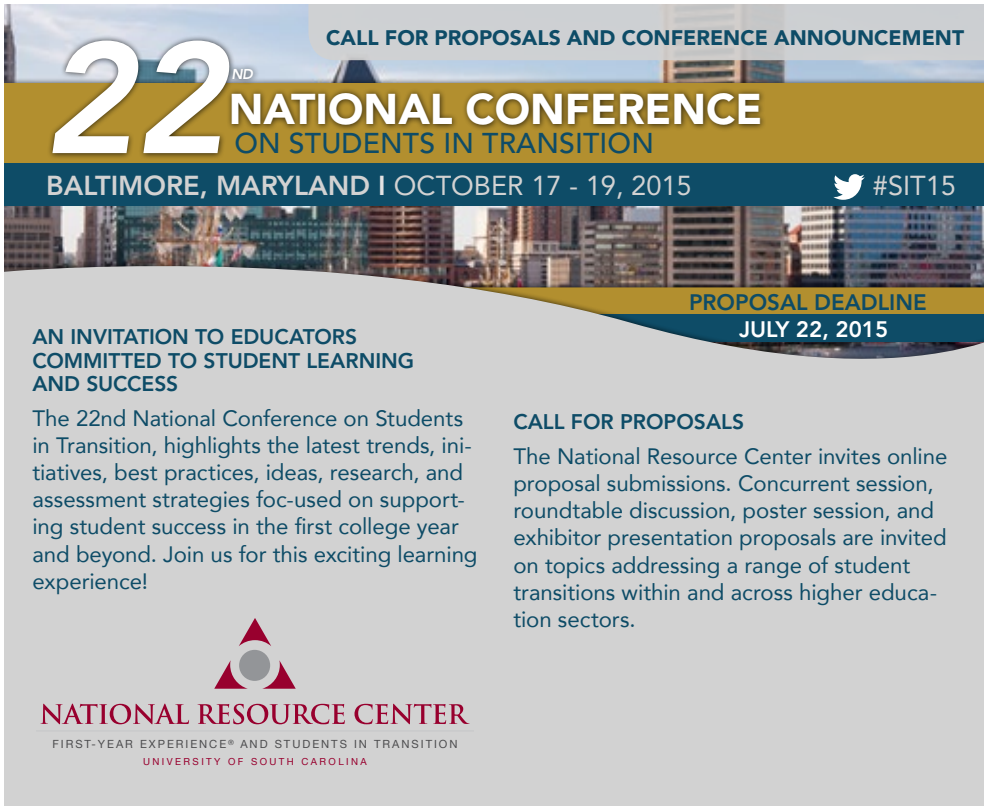
Length: Original feature-length articles should be 750-1,200 words. Annotations of new resources should be no more than 500 words. The editor reserves the right to edit submissions for length. Photographs are welcome.

Please address all questions and submissions to:
E-Source Editor
National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience & Students in Transition
University of South Carolina
1728 College Street
Columbia, SC 29208
E-mail: esource@mailbox.sc.edu

Sign up for

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 2016 issue. To view the archives, review submission guidelines, and receive content alerts for new issues, please go to www.sc.edu/fye/esource.

enhancing significant transitions during the undergraduate experience. Award recipients will have demonstrated the effectiveness of the initiative in supporting student success, learning, and development at a variety of transition points beyond the first college year and in responding to unique institutional needs. Submission deadline is August 3, 2015. For more information, please visit the website at http://sc.edu/fye/awards/IE_Award.html.



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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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