Quite often in higher education, when students submit a written assignment (e.g., essay, research paper, annotated bibliography), the only two people who actually see or read the final product are the student and the instructor. Further, depending upon the inclination, time, and motivation of the individual faculty member, the quantity and quality of feedback students receive on that written product varies widely (e.g., paper is not returned, only a grade is posted, grade and critical feedback are returned). One approach that can deepen and enrich this process is the use of peer assessments, which Topping (2009) defines as an arrangement for learners to consider and specify the level, value, or quality of a product or performance of other equal-status learners. Products to be assessed can include writing, oral presentations, portfolios, test performance, or other skilled behaviors. (p. 20)

In practice, peer assessment involves inserting an intermediary step when creating a written or oral assignment, portfolio, or performance, where students will evaluate the work of their classmates and provide constructive feedback on areas of strength or needed improvement. This active-learning technique offers opportunities for students to gain knowledge (a) by applying an evaluation rubric to the work of their classmates and (b) through the constructive suggestions they receive on their own work.

In a study by Cassidy (2008), students reported value-added learning from the assessment of their classmates’ work, the process of sharing the results of those assessments, and in receiving feedback from their peers. Interestingly, Kishwar, Ahmad, Sheikh, and Ilyas (2015) found a high degree of similarity between peer ratings and those provided by faculty as they computed final grades on submitted assignments. Peer assessments can serve a powerful formative function as students will have the opportunity to make improvements in their own papers prior to their final submission.

The Peer Assessment Process

To begin, faculty need to make some basic operational decisions about how to implement peer assessment in a course (van den Berg, Admiraal, & Pilot, 2009). Instructors should consider the following parameters:

- Will peer assessments be completed anonymously or with the knowledge of the writer?
- How will assessment responsibilities be assigned (i.e., students and a partner assess one another’s work or students work with multiple partners)?

“...I think it’s very important to have a feedback loop, where you’re constantly thinking about what you’ve done and how you could be doing it better. I think that’s the single best piece of advice: constantly think about how you could be doing things better and questioning yourself.

—Elon Musk, entrepreneur and inventor
Will the results of the peer assessment be delivered verbally or in writing?

Will the assessments be completed in class or out of class?

Is participation in the peer assessment process compulsory or voluntary?

Will course credit or other incentives be awarded for participation and/or contribute the final grade?

Decisions on these questions should be embedded in overall course design and the schedule for completing assignments. Thinking about these matters in advance will lessen the likelihood of confusion during the semester. In addition, when first introducing peer evaluation in a course, including information on the syllabus can be helpful as well as having students initially complete their assessments in writing, which may be a simpler option for the pilot.

**Discussing the Process and Criteria With Students**

For many students, peer assessment may be a new experience. To acquaint them with this process

- provide a rubric that will be used your students to assess the work of their classmates and by the instructor to assign points or a grade;

- review the elements of the rubric (e.g., organization, introduction, spelling and grammar, voice, conclusions, references); and

- make a sample product available for review and, in class, have students discuss the feedback they would provide the author and share suggestions (begin with small groups and end with an entire class discussion).

All these steps should take place before students actually begin working on their own assignments that will be part of peer assessment process. Lastly, students must be held accountable for completing not only their own assignment but also their assigned peer assessment.

**Final Steps**

At the conclusion of the process, seek students’ feedback on their peer assessment experiences (e.g., What did you learn? How can the process be improved?) This can be accomplished through a class discussion and/or an online survey. Feedback can help strengthen the process before moving ahead to the next semester.

**Help your students learn through peer assessment!**

**References**


Conferences and Continuing Education

Conferences and Institutes

Save the Dates

35th Annual Conference on The First-Year Experience
February 20-23, 2016
Orlando, Florida
Early Registration Deadline: February 4, 2016

Institute on Sophomore Student Success
April 22-24, 2016
University of South Carolina
Columbia, South Carolina

Institute on First-Generation College Students
July 29-31, 2016
University of South Carolina
Columbia, South Carolina

23rd National Conference on Students in Transition
October 15-17, 2016
New Orleans, Louisiana

Publications—New Releases

Research Reports on College Transitions No. 6
Dallin George Young, Laurie A. Schreiner, and Eric J. McIntosh
Less is known about the second college year compared to other transition points, and fewer high-impact initiatives and curricular programs tend to be offered to sophomores. To increase our knowledge of this important, but sometimes neglected, year on the collegiate journey, Investigating Sophomore Student Success presents findings from two parallel research projects—the National Survey of Sophomore-Year Initiatives and the Sophomore Experiences Survey. Researchers explored sophomore student characteristics, institutional efforts to support sophomores, and student perceptions of their learning and development. Divided into three sections, the report offers an overview of each survey instrument and an integrated discussion of findings and their implications for practice and ongoing research. The research report provides useful tools for institutions looking for benchmarks to create new sophomore-year programs or restructure existing initiatives. ISBN 978-1-889271-95-8. 124 pages. $25.00. To read an excerpt or place an order, visit www.nrcpubs.com.

An Invitation

While the needs and challenges our students and institutions face are constantly evolving, The First-Year Conference series continues to provide a relaxed environment conducive to intensive learning and professionally enriching discussions. The Annual Conference on The First-Year Experience® provides a forum where higher education professionals can share experiences, concerns, and accomplishments regarding meeting these challenges. We invite you to be a part of productive collaborations, conversations, and relationships aimed at providing successful transitions in the first college year.

Featured Speakers

Brian Murphy
DeAnza College

Mark Allen Poisel
Augusta University

Stephanie Foote
Kennesaw State University
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.

Setting a Foundation for Critical Thinking in the First Year of College. Concurrent session by Jennifer R. Keup, National Resource Center Director, at the 2015 Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) Annual Conference, January 22, 2016, 3:30-4:00 pm at the Grand Hyatt Hotel, Washington, DC.

Leveraging First- and Second-Year Transition Programs to Support Transfer. Presentation by Dallin George Young, National Resource Center Assistant Director for Research, Grants, and Assessment, at the 14th Annual Conference of the National Institute for the Study of Transfer Students; February 3-5, 2016; Grand Hyatt Atlanta in Buckhead; Atlanta, Georgia.

Awards and Recognition

Institutional Excellence in Students in Transition Award
The National Resource Center’s Institutional Excellence in Students in Transition Award is presented annually to institutions that have designed and implemented outstanding collaborative initiatives 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. We are proud to announce this year’s award recipient:

Kent State University

In 2012, Kent State’s University College implemented the Exploration Plan program designed to enrich the first-year experience for undecided students and to expedite a shift into a degree-granting program within the first three semesters. The Exploration Plan comprises six components. Students become engaged in the Plan at the point of admission when they are required to select one of 13 university-wide concentration areas to explore first. Linked courses based on that concentration, a career exploration focus in the first-year seminar, the use of the Career Maturity Inventory, and a newly developed career navigation course series are all components of the Plan. Multiple required advising sessions add to the intrusive, high-touch nature of the program.

Partner Event

National Institute for the Study of Transfer Students
February 3-5, 2016
Grand Hyatt Atlanta
Atlanta, Georgia
http://transferinstitute.org/events/annual-conference/