FOSTERING ENGAGEMENT AND ACHIEVEMENT IN LOWER-DIVISION COURSES

Successfully negotiating the first year of college is a key indicator of future academic achievement and degree completion. Unfortunately, many of our least experienced students are uncertain about how to transition successfully from high school. How can you support these most vulnerable students?

CONVEYING A SENSE OF PURPOSE

Many of today's students are unabashedly pragmatic in their academic attitudes and behaviors, looking to extract as much practical value from every course, be it a major class, a core course, or an elective. One productive response to this stance toward higher education involves affiliating your teaching with a clear sense of purpose: be explicit about what students can achieve at a course's macro-level (value gained over the semester) and micro-level (goals for a specific class meeting). By helping students identify the value of what you have to offer and by providing them with opportunities to contextualize their developing knowledge, you help them appreciate the importance of your class to their larger academic formation.

STRATEGIES FOR ENGAGEMENT

As academic success is positively correlated to engagement, encouraging students to connect with a class should help many of them better understand the material. What policies and practices might foster stronger, more meaningful connections to your course?

Make Attendance Count

Intuition about the positive effect of attendance on performance is backed by the literature. In a 2005 study, Gendron and Pieper develop a statistical model that shows how "missing a few [class] hours will have a small negative effect on achievement while missing a significant number of hours will have a negative and significantly larger effect on achievement." Similar research by Halpern (2007) indicates that the coefficient for attendance on final course grade (controlling for other factors) is 0.29. For example, increasing attendance from 50 percent to 75 percent can translate into a 7 percentage point gain on the final grade. By attaching value to attendance, you encourage turnout which, in turn, should improve academic success. You also send an important message: *Showing up matters.*

Frame Each Class Explicitly and Imbue it with Purpose

Students benefit from knowing what can be expected by attending each class meeting and how the material from today's session might relate to what has been covered before and what is coming up. Providing students with clear expectations at the micro-level not only helps them discern a sense of purpose but also reinforces the need to be present for each session.

Help Students Construct Knowledge

Using class time to transmit knowledge that is otherwise easily found (think "Google") contradicts the common sense of today's students, many of whom take for granted the ubiquity of information. Finding facts is easy; what needs to be learned is how to apply, analyze, synthesize, or evaluate information. Cultivate a culture whereby having the facts is *given* and employing the facts for higher order purposes is the goal.

Always Look to Capture their Interest

Although students are most likely to miss class because they are ill, have to work, or are "too busy," the two next most common reasons for absenteeism are "the class was boring" and "the topic was boring" (Massey, 2006). Be willing to grow as a teacher by considering how you might make class meetings more engaging and student-centered, but fully within the context of your own code of professional integrity and academic standards. A simple suggestion: Invite colleagues to chat over coffee about what types of course activities have resonated with their students and then try a few in your own class.

Consider Supplemental Instruction (SI)

Find out if your lower-division courses are eligible for Supplemental Instruction, a program whereby academically strong upper-division/graduate students offer weekly review sessions. To learn if SI can be developed for your course, visit **http://www.uta.edu/soar/ut/services/sifaculty.php**.

Encourage Students to Seek Tutoring

Through our newly instituted University College, UT Arlington offers students low-cost tutoring. Especially noteworthy is the new Start Strong program, which provides limited free tutoring for first-year students. Encourage students to seek help before it's too late. To learn more, visit **http://www.uta.edu/soar/ut/services/sign-up.php**.

PROVIDING EARLY FEEDBACK TO STUDENTS

A critical prerequisite to offering academic support to students is knowing how well they're doing. Hence you will need to gather data about their academic performance well before midterm. By giving students feedback by the end of week three or four, you can help them make the most of their experience at UT Arlington. This is especially true of those students whom you've identified as academically struggling.

THE BENEFITS OF PROVIDING EARLY FEEDBACK

On our campus, we have evidence that early feedback can spur improvement. In its 2009 report, UT Arlington's Task Force on the First Year Experience and Undergraduate Retention notes:

"In fall 2008, 4,893 students received a progress report indicating they were earning a D or F at the midterm. This represents nearly one in five students at UT Arlington. While the task force is not aware of any norm of performance in this area, we are struck by what seems to be a high number of at-risk students. It is worth noting that the progress reports do encourage some level of improvement: 57 percent of the students receiving a D or F at the midterm received a final semester grade higher than their midterm report."

By giving students constructively critical feedback during the first weeks of a course, you:

Help Students Make Sound Educational Decisions

Early feedback can provide a catalyst for students to re-examine how they're studying and, if necessary, seek help via tutoring, SI, the writing center or math lab, etc. In extreme cases, your feedback can help a student make timely decisions about officially dropping the course.

Help the University Identify and Support At-risk Students

In efforts to improve student academic success, we have issued progress reports for certain undergraduates, including those who have completed fewer than 30 hours and those on academic probation. Beginning in fall 2010, all instructors must provide interim grades for these students *twice* each semester: in weeks four and eight. So that these reports best serve the students receiving them, it is critical that you base interim grades on actual academic performance (as opposed to estimating them otherwise).

Foster a Culture that Values Dialogue, Inquiry, and Achievement

Students who receive feedback have evidence that you are attending to their intellectual growth, thereby encouraging them to ask themselves how they might better meet your expectations regarding their academic achievement.

Obtain Valuable Information that Can Inform Mid-course Adjustments

Knowing where your students stand early in the term allows you to respond to potential problems sooner. Data from formative assessments (see below) may encourage you to consider modifying your teaching to enhance your students' experience and improve their understanding of the material.

THE COST OF PROVIDING EARLY FEEDBACK

Giving students early feedback involves some additional preparation time and effort as you rethink how you evaluate your students. You will need to:

- Develop short but meaningful evaluation tasks.
- Schedule short periods of class time to allow students to respond.
- Grade, record, and return the students' work in a timely fashion.

How you provide early feedback is completely up to you. The key is to keep the costs low while still providing the attendant benefits.

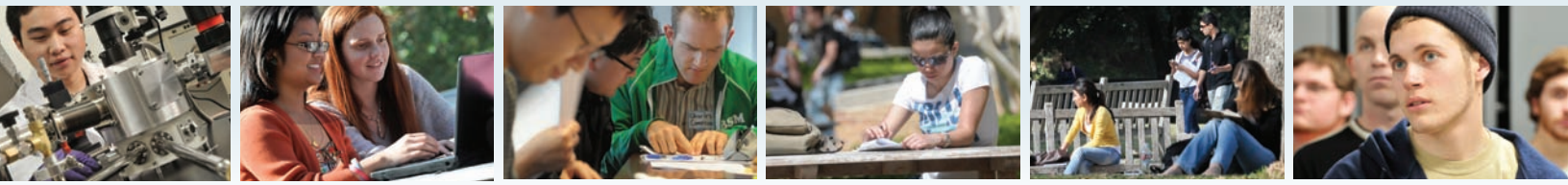
For many instructors, setting aside class time for assessment can be uncomfortable, as doing so might require that they cut some content. While this is true, one might also consider the value in reducing content in favor of activities that significantly help students to master the material.

- **A POINT TO PONDER:** Is it better to commit to 100 percent of your current content and have the average student master 70 percent of it, thereby achieving an overall "knowledge yield" of 70 percent (100 percent × 70 percent), or to focus on the 90 percent of content that is *most* critical and work toward increasing students' average mastery to 85 percent, leading to a 76 percent knowledge yield?

SUGGESTIONS FOR PROVIDING EARLY FEEDBACK

The following examples may help you devise relatively quick and unobtrusive ways of gathering performance data from students throughout the semester (and especially toward the beginning). Not every method is appropriate to every course, so consider which techniques might best suit your classes.

Strive to discern how well students are absorbing core knowledge and grasping the key concepts. Exercises that focus on the minutiae of a particular reading or lecture will yield less useful information.



Short and Frequent Reading Quizzes

A brief quiz about the main points of a reading assignments can provide useful information about students' understanding of (and commitment to) the course material. Reading quizzes can also better ensure that students are primed for that day's meeting. (If they're either not doing or not understanding the reading, how can they reasonably function in class?)

- **TIP:** Keep quizzes manageable. You might have students answer five multiple choice questions during the first five minutes of class, assigning a point per correct response. Alternatively, you might have them write a three-minute essay, which you can grade on a simple 3- or 4-point scale.

Short and Frequent Homework Checks

Depending on the course, you might find it useful to assign a well-defined problem for students to work through at home and then have them submit a short answer at the beginning of the next class. Grades can be assigned as either "right" or "wrong" or on a more nuanced scale (e.g., 0 to 3).

- **TIP:** A take-home problem can be part of a larger assignment or a stand-alone exercise.

The Evolving Study Guide

At the end of class (or after one class but before the next), ask students to contribute to a course-wide "study guide" by submitting two potential exam questions that cover the day's materials. Questions can be gathered via e-mail, a blog, or Blackboard.

- **TIP:** Student contributions offer insight into what they're getting and missing, as well as into their depth of comprehension. Consider grading each question as a reflection of its "goodness of fit" for your course, e.g., on a scale of 0 (not at all usable/reasonable) to 3 ("I wish I had thought of that myself!"). Bonus: You might be able to construct an exam from their input—a truly student-centered approach.

Class Summary Statements

At the end of class, distribute 4-x-6 index cards and have students write a two-minute summary of the day's main points. Alternatively, at the beginning of class, ask students to summarize the *previous* meeting's main points. Assign each statement a grade on a 3- or 4-point scale.

The Five-Minute "Microtheme"

At an appropriate point during class, distribute blank sheets of paper and ask students to write a five-minute microtheme, defined by colleagues at the University of California-Berkeley as:

> a variation on the 'minute paper,' an essay so short that it can fit on a single 5-x-8 note card. It can be graded (as long as you set criteria in advance) or not. Using simple rating scales, instructors can grade large numbers of microthemes in a short time. … [S]ome instructors duplicate some of the best to hand out for class discussion. (**http://teaching.berkeley.edu/docs/early_feedback.pdf**)

As with other forms of essay-based tasks, the microtheme can be graded on a 3- or 4-point scale. Establishing a short rubric in advance can facilitate grading.

- **TIP:** Details about types of microthemes (Summary Microtheme, Quandary-Posing Microtheme) can be found at the link above.

Additional strategies can be found at UT Arlington's Active Learning website, **http://activelearning.uta.edu/FacStaff/ALtechniques.htm**.