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 and skills, you help them appreciate the importance of your class to their overall 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

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 clear expectations at the micro-level not only helps students discern a sense of purpose but also reinforces the need to be present—both physically and mentally—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 in which acquiring content serves as a prerequisite to a higher goal: learning how to think critically and creatively.

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.

- **TIP:** 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 more, contact the Learning Center (817-272-2011) or visit **uta.edu/si**.

Encourage Students to Seek Tutoring

Sometimes students benefit from more personalized one-on-one attention. Through University College, UT Arlington offers students low-cost tutoring. Especially noteworthy is the 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, contact The Learning Center (817-272-2011) or visit **uta.edu/startstrong**.

PROVIDING EARLY FEEDBACK TO STUDENTS

A critical prerequisite to offering meaningful and productive academic support to students is getting a sense for how well they're doing as soon as possible. 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.

Letting students know how they're doing sooner than later can make a big difference.

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 our efforts to promote academic success and improve student persistence, we now issue progress reports for certain undergraduates at two times each long semester: around week four and again around week eight. So that these progress reports best serve the students receiving them, it's critical that faculty members enter interim grades that are based on data that reflect documented academic performance. See the back page for specific suggestions on how to gather such information.

Inform Your Teaching

Knowing where your students stand early in the term allows you to reflect upon your teaching and, if necessary, consider ways in which you might fine-tune your efforts to help them learn. Making informed mid-course adjustments can greatly enhance your students' educational experience and help you grow as a teacher.
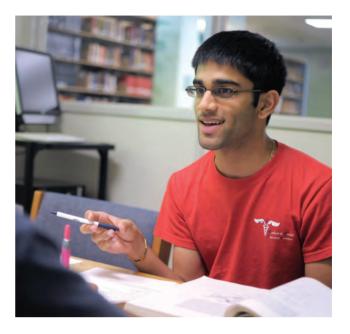
Foster a Culture that Values Inquiry and Dialogue

Students who receive feedback have direct evidence that you are attending to their intellectual growth, thereby encouraging them to ask themselves (and you, the instructor) how they might better meet your academic expectations.

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.
- Review, record, and return students' work in a timely fashion.
- Take time to reflect upon what you're learning about your students.
- Adjust as you see fit.

How to 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 replace delivering content with other tasks. 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 might best suit your classes.

Strive to discern how well students are grasping 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. 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 rate 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. Ratings 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 each class 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, a wiki, or Blackboard.

- **TIP:** Consider rating 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.

Student contributions offer insight into what they're getting and missing, as well as into their depth of comprehension.

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. Rate each summary 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, **uta.edu/ALtechniques**.

EARLY ALERT SYSTEM

UT Arlington's Early Alert System offers faculty a convenient and timely means of notifying the university's support services of students who may benefit from academic intervention. Should you become aware that a student or a group of students are not doing well in your course (based on your personal observations, course performance data, or student disclosure of relevant and reliable information), submit an online Early Alert referral at **uta.edu/earlyalert**. The information will be immediately routed to appropriate academic support services on campus for follow-up with the student(s).

UNIVERSITY OF
TEXAS
ARLINGTON

OFFICE OF
THE PROVOST