



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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NEGOTIATING LONG-TERM LEARNING AGREEMENTS

My students and I recently developed the "long-term learning agreement," a mechanism for achieving several learning goals. The course was public speaking, but the strategy is applicable to other disciplines.

Long-term learning agreements are compacts between faculty members and students which permit students to "borrow" grades and pay to keep them by carrying out specified supplementary activities for an extended period *after* an academic term ends. These agreements can combat grade inflation, reinforce students' self-confidence, and allow instructors to diversify and individualize the learning experiences and pathways available to students. The cost of these agreements is negligible, their applicability throughout the community college environment is broad, and their dimensions can be designed by instructors to meet any learning objectives they choose.

Nature of the Agreements

Students who feel their performance does not measure up to their own expectations by the approach of semester's end may join their instructor in signing a pledge to carry out certain supplementary activities during an extended period *after* the term ends. The student agrees that the instructor will withdraw the points associated with the supplementary activities in the event that the activities are not completed. In essence, students borrow a final grade and pay over time to keep it by demonstrating acceptable levels of activity and learning.

Instructors can structure and define the terms of a long-term learning agreement any way they wish. Students might be expected to engage in required tasks that are impossible to complete within the time constraints of a standard quarter or semester. In my public speaking class, for example, one cluster of supplementary extended learning activities—valued at 10 points out of 100 for the final grade—is to join a local Toast-

masters club, attend at least one of its meetings per month for six months, and submit a confirming written statement from the club president after each visit.

The range of assignments included in a long-term learning agreement is limited only by the instructor's imagination. Following are just a few illustrative examples of what students might be expected to achieve in agreements in various disciplines:

- Science: Interview a number of authorities on a topic of contemporary interest, such as biotechnology, and prepare a report which summarizes and assesses their perspectives.
- Mathematics: Solve problems in an area which was not thoroughly covered within a course but about which you have demonstrated aptitude or interest—e.g., multivariate equations or fundamental topology.
- Humanities: Produce a work of art, visit and assess the exhibits of selected museums, attend a lecture series, or interview a speaker of another language in that person's native tongue.
- Social Sciences: Serve as a volunteer in a political campaign, or write an analysis of how effectively a juvenile probation office achieves its mission.

Practical Applications/Implications

Because the agreement offers students an opportunity to transcend the time boundaries and expectations of a particular course in order to achieve a higher grade, instructors may feel less pressure to reduce course standards than they would otherwise during the academic term. The likelihood of grade inflation in the actual body of a course may be diminished.

Some students are more extrinsically motivated than others, and the long-term learning agreement provides a special opportunity for those who are predisposed to strive toward a particular required grade to achieve that goal through hard work. Realizing this opportunity may reinforce students' self-confidence and help them maintain progress in the academic environment.

Long-term learning agreements present a chance for instructors to diversify and individualize the learning experiences and pathways they create for students. The



agreements breach rigid academic time blocks and may allow students considerable latitude in how and when to accomplish tasks. Therefore, they may offer significant challenges and encourage independent personal growth.

Long-term learning agreements resemble an "incomplete" grade, so students who encounter health or personal problems during a course and cannot complete all the required work by the end of the term will have an opportunity to do so. The advantages of signing long-term learning agreements, as opposed to receiving an "I" grade, are that they start with an affirmation of students' abilities, incorporate a promise by the instructor to act as a partner with the students to develop those abilities, and can result in a positive report on the students' transcripts.

Finally, perhaps the greatest implication and strength of the long-term learning agreement as a pedagogical measure is its potential to counteract the perennial

RECOGNITION AWARDS: ENCOURAGING EXCELLENCE IN THE CLASSROOM

Since 1993, Lethbridge Community College (LCC) has recognized excellence by issuing awards, co-sponsored by the faculty association and the student association, to those instructors who have best demonstrated teaching excellence.

Instructors are nominated by students and faculty. The categories of teaching excellence, professional responsibilities, and interpersonal skills serve as criteria. A requisite number of students and faculty are required to support the nomination. The instructors are notified about their nomination and asked to submit their philosophy of teaching excellence, including examples of how he/she has innovated curriculum, created materials, or used teaching methods in ways to stimulate learner curiosity about the subject. They also list professional responsibilities (e.g., served as faculty vice president) and describe how their interpersonal skills allow them to reach out to the students.

Recipients of the teaching excellence award receive an engraved plaque at LCC's annual teaching excellence award ceremonies, held just before convocation. Instructors receiving the awards are introduced and make a short speech in the presence of friends, family, students, and colleagues. Then they receive the ovation that they richly deserve.

tendency of students and faculty members alike to "take" a class in the same way a person "takes" a dose of medicine—that is, to consume it as swiftly as possible and then forget about it entirely. The long-term learning agreement, in contrast to this "medicinal" approach, may contribute to students' lifetime growth and development by focusing their attention, outside and beyond the range of the academic environment, on the nature and value of a particular kind of knowledge.

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At convocation, the president of the faculty association reads the positive commentaries provided by the nominees, then calls the recipients to the stage, where their contributions to teaching excellence are acknowledged before hundreds of students and colleagues.

Reward ceremonies and plaques are inexpensive but effective. It is recognition that really motivates employees. Money and benefits keep them on the job, but they do not invigorate nor do they exhilarate. It is the "pat on the back," the praise, the acknowledgment of a job well done that really ignite the human potential.

For educators, the need for recognition may well be greater than for tradesmen or artisans who create a visible, tangible product, look over their work, and see when they have done well. Feedback is vital, and award ceremonies celebrating teaching excellence are special ways to reward classroom excellence.

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