

Assessment Matters



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Welcome Summer!

Greetings from the Office of Assessment! Right now, the only thing you might be assessing is the weather to see if it's perfect for that BBQ and gearing up for the July 4th holiday. Warmest congratulations to the class of 2024! With the summer sunshine come plans to gear up for another fall semester, and the 2024-2025 academic year is already shaping up to be full of activity and new opportunities for everyone in the SUNY Poly community. We're also gearing up for a visit from Middle States for accreditation this year, so it's certain to be a busy time on the SUNY Poly campus. In this issue of "Assessment Matters," you'll find a new Padlet as well as methods to hack your syllabus! Regardless of how you spend it, make sure you take some time for yourself and enjoy the nice weather!

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IN THIS ISSUE



01 Welcome Summer!

02 Your Thoughts Matter:
Contribute to a Padlet

03 Hack Your Syllabus!

04 Middle States



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Hack Your Syllabus!

Summer 'break' is a misnomer for many educators and education professionals; we often spend our summers looking through classes and syllabi, making adjustments and reflecting on what worked and what didn't throughout the semester. We chat with colleagues and department leaders, offering and receiving insight into what happens in different classrooms and how they facilitate student learning.

One of the first things our students receive within the first week of classes is the syllabus. Whether you distribute it on paper or post it to Brightspace, the syllabus becomes a central figure in the classroom. It offers more than just insight into how grades will be handled and inserting boilerplate information; it renders itself as a map and a contract for how the course will run and how we are expected to act within the confines of academic discourse. Often we go through the syllabus within the first few days and it's rarely referenced again. What if you that you could hack your syllabus to make it a relevant item throughout the entire semester? It's not only possible, but you have the tools already available to make this a reality in your classroom.

When hacking your syllabus, you're taking advantage of spaced learning. In the book *Make It Stick: The Science of Successful Learning* by Peter C. Brown, a case is made for spacing out learning and interleaving lessons and ideas to recall past knowledge. While we often hear about this within the context of course content, it's not often used in relation to a syllabus. To make your syllabus a document your students refer to often, you need to add a certain amount of extrinsic motivation to keep them referring back to it.

To that end, have them bring the syllabus every day to class and use it, because nothing strengthens learning like spacing it out over time. Actively requesting students take note of due dates and deadlines by referencing the syllabus or pointing to specific college/classroom norms in the syllabus will help cement the concept that the syllabus should be referenced early and often.

“*Spaced and interleaved exposure characterizes most of humans' normal experience.*”

Peter C. Brown, *Make It Stick: The Science of Successful Learning*

For example, one way to continue to keep the syllabus relevant is to administer a low-stakes quiz every other week on a previous topic in the syllabus. Like any classroom assessment, having an assignment that is at least partially cumulative indicates to the student that the information is still relevant. It doesn't matter what type of assessment it is; recall allows for multiple encounters with the material over longer periods of time, which makes the learning acquisition more deep and durable.

Another method is to use a commonplace book, which is essentially a journal of ideas, quotes, images, and other items that help a scholar recall past information and set groundwork for future work. Using a commonplace book can help students discover connections between topics and academic areas that they wouldn't usually make otherwise. Using the commonplace book idea, students can write a short paragraph about how the current week's information relates to a previous week's content. In many instances, these types of 'spot checks' offer some formal and informal forms of assessment to determine if your students are learning what you want them to.

As you're examining your syllabus for deadlines, consider spacing out deadlines and tests to take advantage of spaced learning. Six moderately sized exams leverages spaced learning more than 3 larger ones, or assigning multiple short papers building off common ideas beats out a single longer one. Human beings are used to learning in chunks that are self-referential, and we innately look for patterns and connections to previous knowledge. It's helpful to use that information to help our students work within the confines of a syllabus while demonstrating how essential this document is as a road map for learning.



Middle States Progress

The self-study process overseen by the Middle States Commission on Higher Education (MSCHE) is a comprehensive evaluation undertaken by colleges and universities seeking accreditation. It involves thorough data collection and analysis, committee formation, and the drafting of a detailed self-study report covering various aspects of the institution's operations. Following extensive review and revision, a peer review team conducts a site visit to verify the information presented. Based on this visit, along with the self-study report, MSCHE makes a decision regarding accreditation status. Institutions must demonstrate ongoing compliance with accreditation standards through periodic reports and may undergo additional self-study processes in the future. Overall, the self-study process is a collaborative effort aimed at ensuring quality and continuous improvement in higher education institutions.

SUNY Polytechnic is continuing this process with an anticipated Spring 2025 site visit from MSCHE accreditors. Throughout the course of the summer and upcoming semester, the committees will continue to meet and craft the self-study report in a timely manner. The report will tell the story of SUNY Polytechnic and how we are best serving our students, faculty, staff, and greater community.



Your Thoughts Matter!

In our last issue there was a Padlet asking you about what assessment means to you. Thank you so much to all of you that have contributed to it! It remains open to anyone that still wishes to contribute their thoughts to the conversation.

This time, the question concerns the perception of assessment at SUNY Poly. Assessment comes in many forms, and depending on past experiences the term can bring feelings of anxiety and concern. While assessment overall is another tool in the educator toolbox, there is a great deal of weight behind that term and a variety of understandings about its role on this campus. In other words, how is assessment viewed by you personally, within your department, the college itself, and among your students?

You can contribute to the Padlet by clicking [this link](#)!



“ *How is assessment perceived at SUNY Poly?* ”





Student Learning Practices

When preparing a class for the upcoming semester, one of the many things we consider is how can we be certain that students are learning and retaining the material. However, not all pedagogical and andragogical practices are created equal; there are certain practices that we know are deeply rooted in sound research practices that can be used to provide focus and clarity. In particular, Chickering and Gamson (1987) noted many of the same concerns we hear daily regarding student involvement and investment in their education. They proposed seven principles for good practice in undergraduate education:

- **Encourage contact between students and faculty** - the single most important factor in student motivation and involvement is faculty-student contact both inside and outside of the classroom. Your concern for your students help them get through rough points in their education.
- **Developing reciprocity and cooperation** - the most effective learning occurs in cooperation, not in solo ventures. By working with others, we endeavor to encourage active participation with the material because sharing ideas allows an individual to deepen their understanding of the material and perhaps consider it from different perspectives.
- **Encourage active learning** - much like reciprocity and cooperation, effective learning does not occur when students are expected to sit in class and only take notes. To engage in deeper learning, students need to talk about what they are learning and relate it to past and/or current experiences.
- **Give prompt feedback** - feedback allows students to focus their learning and fully benefit from the courses they take. During class, consider offering frequent opportunities to perform and receive suggestions for improvement. Additionally, students need time for reflection on feedback and to seek out resources to improve, such as peer tutors and office hours. This allows them to learn how to assess themselves.
- **Emphasize time on task** - today's students (and professors) are inundated with distractions, which inevitably affect our schedules and day-to-day tasks. Students need to be taught how to manage their time in our courses. While this varies among courses and programs, demonstrating effective time and task management to students will allow them to succeed and reduce stress.
- **Communicate high expectations** - when we communicate high expectations to students and hold them to it, you will find that your students will endeavor to reach those standards. Consistently maintaining high standards with the necessary supports available to reach those goals leads to a self-fulfilling prophesy of success.
- **Respect diverse talents and ways of learning** - every one of us learns a little different than others, therefore we should offer similar learning opportunities for our students. Allow students opportunities to show their talents and you will see them become more motivated to show what they know. Ultimately, the relationships you build with your students will lead them to care deeply about you, your coursework, and their role as members of a college community.

