

Reflective Essays on Academic Rigor, Relevance and Reflection
2006 Academic Affairs Faculty Symposium
Unicoi State Park and Conference Center
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In preparation for the Academic Affairs Faculty Symposium, the organizers invite you to share with fellow participants some brief reflections on the concept of academic rigor. We would appreciate receiving by Friday, April 7th, your perception of academic rigor, your personal experience with academic rigor as a teacher or student, and/or your thoughts on what faculty and the University should do to promote rigor in our academic programs

Essay ID:285666

Relevance and the Connection to Rigor

As James Beane (1997) has argued, the most powerful sources for curriculum are the concerns of students about themselves and about social issues. Relevance as Beane defines it, connecting curriculum to students' concerns and interests about themselves and the world, may seem irrelevant to rigor, with all rigor's implications of rigidity and definitiveness. Students' concerns and interests, by definition, are not rigid or definitive. However, if by rigor we intend to call for meaningful, substantive, and useful knowledge and skills, then we can hardly expect relevance to be irrelevant to our students. If students see knowledge and skills as relevant to their concerns, relevant to real-world tasks required for success in a course, relevant to their capacity for success in their chosen field, then relevance and rigor are, in fact, intertwined. What does that mean in practical terms in college courses? It means making efforts to connect coursework to community, to have students put theory into practice in the real world. It means involving students in decisions about what and how they learn and involving students in making decisions about how they will be evaluated. Service-learning—intentionally connecting academics to community issues, problems, or needs—can provide both the theory and the pedagogy to connect rigor and relevance.

Essay ID:285817

To me, an academically rigorous course is one in which students are continually challenged throughout the course to increase their previous level of knowledge and skills. The difficulty for instructors is to establish student's initial abilities and continually determine if students are being challenged with new skills and knowledge. Courses without rigor often teach material that students have already mastered, teach the same material repetitively without recognizing that students have mastered those skills, or simply teach content as material to be memorized rather than applied and analyzed in new situations. On the other hand, courses that are too rigorous fail to respond to the student's accomplishments: Instructors start or move to more material before students have demonstrated mastery of the content and skills they need. By these definitions, instructors of courses with just the right degree rigor are those that perform multiple assessments to determine if the student's have mastered the material and respond by adding increasingly challenging material when they know students are ready.

This introduces the major problem I see facing instructors who wish to add rigor to their courses —how to create and respond to assessments when you have many students. For example, the best assessments allow you to test student mastery through authentic means, if you are teaching an engineering course, the students should be able to engineer something at the end. This type of assessment takes a great deal of time to evaluate, and needs to be tiered so that it builds on initial introductory skills to greater detail and complexity. Instructors must provide feedback to help students master these skills in a progressive format, but providing feedback takes time and energy. The more students you have the greater the time required. Additionally, instructors who teach many students