



# INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

Published by the National Institute for Staff and Organizational Development (NISOD) • College of Education • The University of Texas at Austin

## LET'S PARTY LIKE OUR (SUCCESSFUL) FUTURE IS NOW: THE 10-YEAR CLASS REUNION AS A GOAL-SETTING EXERCISE

One of the most challenging tasks college students face is defining and developing educational goals that align with their dream career. The students who never define an end or career goal often lose all motivation and drop out of college. Some students do have a specific career dream; unfortunately, it is often not grounded in any understanding of the education or training required to meet it. Overwhelmed by the work required, when students do not see the end in sight quickly, they lose momentum. Even worse, they complete a certificate or degree only to find out that the dream was not what they expected it to be. As educators, we know that having a clear view of what awaits and developing specific career-oriented milestones is important for students' retention and success in college, and even, perhaps, their satisfaction in their chosen career.

NO DEVELOPED GOAL = NO MOTIVATION = NO RETENTION

It is not uncommon to have students research their chosen career and type up a report or give an oral presentation. However, a more fun and interactive way to engage students and help them with the daunting task of defining and developing goals is by hosting a mock ten-year class reunion in the classroom. The purpose of the ten-year reunion is to get students thinking realistically about their future education, profession, lifestyle, and family, and to have fun while doing it. The 10-Year Class Reunion Exercise is a very effective way to encourage students to plan their future educational milestones, visualize their goals, learn about their chosen profession, and understand how their chosen profession will affect their lifestyle and family.

The visual stimulation and present-tense language may also increase self-esteem. There is a difference between saying "I hope to be a nurse" and saying "I am a nurse." Using present-tense language and

thinking can help students move to long-term thinking and plan for their future. This can have a positive impact on students' levels of motivation, and it can be very empowering. This type of activity moves beyond naming the title of their career and how much money they will make. It is more about *who they are* and *who they want to become*. Role-playing a future-self can be very therapeutic, as students may consciously acknowledge some of their primary motivators (internal or external).

There are many variations and different ways to develop a 10-year reunion assignment. This activity can be used in a first-year experience course, a trio-program, career counseling, and an introductory course for a particular discipline.

One way of operationalizing the assignment is to set up a short field trip to the library. There, the library staff can introduce students to such resources as the card catalog, the Occupational Outlook Handbook, and other online occupational sources. Students receive a handout, prior to going to the library, with a list of possible questions to answer about their future life. It is best to really encourage them to think about details. For example, one question that worked very well was to ask them how they would need to dress for their chosen career. This simple question forced them to confront the realities of professional life, ie. scrubs, heel-and-hose for meetings, etc. Another question that was a "reality-check" for many students was the one referring to location. Students need to think early in their college career about the fact that some degree pursuits and careers could take them far from home and their geographic comfort zone. The following list summarizes the areas that the questions covered. [A complete copy of the assignment can be obtained by emailing either of the authors.]

- Employer and prospective employers and in what city these employers are likely to be found
- Job title/description
- Typical everyday tasks
- Salary
- What do you like about your job? (something other than money)



- Attire
- Educational institutions attended
- Certificates and degrees attained
- Advancement and future aspirations or education required
- Family, marriage, kids, etc.
- Commute
- Hobbies
- Volunteerism

### Variations

The assignment can be varied for each discipline. For a major's course, students could prepare by interviewing someone on their desired career path. They could be encouraged to think in depth about the possibilities of advancement within that major or how that degree could serve as a "springboard" into a variety of employment opportunities. Students often have a very limited view of career options within a chosen career (i.e., "all history majors teach") and have not really thought about the other options available to them. The assignment can be adapted to fit each student personally and for virtually any course or program. A course in a modern language, such as French, could look at all the careers where an understanding of a foreign language would be an essential or an asset. Alternatively, they could simply complete this assignment orally and explain their future to other students *en Francais*. For a very scholarly course, the students could produce a list of pertinent books they will have read in the first 10 years of their career.

### The Reunion Party

After the students have done their research and had time to think about the list of questions, it is party time. We all know how to party—it usually involves food and a lot of laughter. The laughter starts as students use the "present tense" for the year 2022. And there is a lot more laughter as students supply pictures of their dream house and cars or even their spouses. Some of the students at Texarkana College even brought their high heels in their back packs to slip on for the big class day. The National Park students were even curious to find out where the instructor would be in 10 years! Sharing can be done orally or through PowerPoint, and a paper can also be required (to work on their writing skills).

### Assessing the 10-Year Reunion Party Assignment

Neither of the authors has assessed this specific assignment through a survey. However, Texarkana College and National Park Community College have collected statistics on retention in their College Success/Seminar Courses (the incubator of this assignment). Statistics show a significant difference in retention if

students participate in such a course—a course which centers on goal setting and wise decision making for future careers and life. Retention data for National Park Community College for first-time, full-time students who took College Seminar are available at <http://www.oucourseworkshop.com/Data.htm>. For data on Texarkana College's Quality Enhancement Plan (which is centered on College Success classes), go to <https://www.texarkanacollege.edu/PDFFiles/InstitutionalResearch/QEP/QEPImpactReport.pdf>.

Measuring the success of the specific assignment can be done in several different ways. Students could complete a debriefing form that addresses the intended purpose of the assignment and whether or not students perceived that they met that objective, if they enjoyed the assignment, and if they thought it was useful or helpful. The assignment could be evaluated by comparing the number of students who declared a major before and after the assignment, or by giving the assignment near registration time to determine if the students who completed the assignment did indeed register. Of course, other variables would affect the assessment. However, if students were surveyed to see what factors influenced their re-enrollment, this assignment could be included as one of the possible factors.

### Summary

The 10-Year Reunion Assignment is a pleasant way to encourage students to define and develop goals. The present-tense language encourages self-esteem and reflection. The specifics of the assignment can be useful in a variety of ways on campus, from counseling to TRIO to College Success to introductory courses. Data resulting from courses that focus on goal setting and decision making have shown that such an emphasis encourages retention.

**Samantha Christian**, *Instructor, Psychology*

**Lauren Hehmeyer**, *Professor, English and History*

For further information, contact Samantha Christian at National Park Community College, 100 College Drive, Hot Springs, AR 71913. Email: [schristian@npcc.edu](mailto:schristian@npcc.edu) or Lauren Hehmeyer at Texarkana College, 2500 North Robison Road, Texarkana, TX 75599. Email: [lauren.hehmeyer@texarkanacollege.edu](mailto:lauren.hehmeyer@texarkanacollege.edu)