



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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TEACHING FIRST-GENERATION COLLEGE STUDENTS

Valuable strategies for getting to know your first-generation college students include making good use of *written communication*, *electronic communication*, and *roundtable conversations*.

The *syllabus* is the contract between instructor and student. A teaching tool of standardized elements and strands carried out through the course of study, the syllabus provides class timing and organization through the *course outline*. Here faculty pull from course descriptions, rationales, objectives, and goals to plot the progression and delivery of content in the course for the semester. First-generation college students need the grounded nature of the organized course outline to guide the academic process and align the requirements of each class with end-of-semester goals.

Assignment sheets, more detailed than the syllabus or the course outline, are focused and individualized. Here students receive directions, rubrics, break-downs of specific presentations of work, and expected quality of work. If college has not been a part of conversations at home, first-generation students should be able to use this organized direction sheet to develop a better understanding of higher education terminology and expected quality of work.

All students need some grounding in day-to-day operations. *Posted bulletin board notices* of campus activities, services, events, course specific announcements, program announcements, and club and athletic events help students feel connected to instructors and classes, and to the academic setting, as well.

Paper communications are hands-on visuals to notify students of requirements for participating in this electronic setting. *Electronic communication* creates patterns of paying attention to requirements, deadlines, and activities. Electronic and digital communication methods, such as e-mail, online courses, and phone messages, personally connect students with courses

and instructors. Web-based courses, video streams, and webcasts connect with students at multiple levels in multiple environments.

Other early connections with students can include *roundtable conversations*, especially good activities for the first or second class day. Here students meet the professor and classmates. An instructor's teaching and presentation of assignments styles are all new learning to first-generation college students. Roundtable discussions and casual conversations can raise students' comfort levels.

After using the roundtable discussion method and multiple methods of communication, I found that reviewing during the semester improves quality of assignment. Mid-term is a good time to refresh students' memories about meeting deadlines, achieving expectations by semester's end, and wrapping up a semester. Instructors can challenge and prepare students for learning, creating knowledge, and establishing their own success styles.

A successful semester for first-generation college students includes individual responsibility, guided by professional assistance, including *assessment*, *communication*, *consistency*, *study habits*, and *campus familiarity*. *Assessment* is the before and after of a course. Student success can depend on how well you conduct pre-assessment data collection to identify what students know before taking a course. Simple question-and-answer sessions; two or three discussion questions handed out on half sheets; student groups answering a math problem, responding to a question of historical nature, or discussing the meaning a poetry reading are examples of pre-assessments that are simple, yet yield significant student information. Handwritten and electronic pre-assessments measure computer literacy and writing ability before major projects are assigned. Instructors can develop simple ways of identifying where students are before beginning a course of study.

Communication tools must be developed through *consistency* in presentation of materials, written directions, written policies and procedures, written



timelines, and specifications for final products—good for all course offerings. But if students have not had experiences with research papers, public debates, abstracts, electronic presentations, tables, and graphs, then hearing about them for the first time will increase their anxiety about the coursework. First-generation college students have only the faculty member and classmates to look to for encouragement and the “how-to-do” activities.

Good *study habits* will promote success for all, but specifically for first-generation college students. Written directions, writing out all feedback, modeling completed assignments, and mentoring offer extra support. Mentoring by classmates and instructor, and official services on campus, are reliable support mechanisms. Campus services such as writing centers, content-specific tutorial locations, office hours for assistance, and extra work time are positive implementation strategies.

Campus assistance helps the first-generation student develop *campus familiarity*, a sense of community. Assigning library tasks and requiring attendance for open forums, cultural activities, organized seminars away from the classroom, participation in campus lectures and presentations develop participating citizens and more well-rounded members of society. Membership in the campus community leads to membership in other communities-of-choice.

The campus is where first-generation students learn to promote themselves positively, develop ideas about life, and pursue academic goals.

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Community College Week—NISOD Student Essay Contest

The National Institute for Staff and Organizational Development (NISOD) announces the second annual Community College Week—NISOD Student Essay Contest in honor of Scott Wright, past editor of Community College Week (1995-2000).

Essay Topic

Describe your most rewarding learning experience with a faculty member, staff member, or administrator at your community college.

- Each contestant may submit only one essay, and it must address the specific essay topic.
- The essay text is limited to a minimum of 400 and a maximum of 500 words.

\$3,000 in Prizes

- \$1,000 Scholarship to the Student Author
- \$1,000 to the Faculty/Staff/Administrator Featured in the Essay
- Complimentary 2010–2011 NISOD Membership to the Student's College (\$1,000 value)

Essay Submission Deadline
November 6, 2009

www.nisod.org/student_essay

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