

Sarah Anderegg

From: Jonathan Eldridge
Sent: Wednesday, September 20, 2023 9:36 AM
To: Jonathan Eldridge
Subject: Fall 2023 Faculty Information & Updates, Volume VII
Attachments: 3 Ways to Improve Student Group Work.pdf; LRC_Accessible Pathways.pdf

Dear College of Marin Faculty:

This week I am sharing two updates (one on enrollment, the other on the LRC construction project) and an article on how to improve student group work. It's a short piece but offers three concrete and easy ways to provide just enough structure to help students have a good experience—and learn what you intend. I'll be curious to hear which of these strategies you are already using and which you might try!

Enrollment Update

If our campuses, classrooms, and offices seem a bit busier this semester, there's a reason: This fall there are 1,009 more students enrolled at the College than last fall. This is a nearly 20% increase. Just under half of this increase is in credit enrollment and just over half is in non-credit enrollment. Non-credit enrollment has now surpassed its previous all-time high pre-pandemic. Credit enrollment has recovered more than half of the pandemic-era losses. Our collective efforts to help these students reach their educational goals will be key as we work to fully recover from the impact of the pandemic and fully meet the educational needs of Marin County residents. Thank you for your part in this work.

Construction Update

The design of the new LRC will require that the current accessible ramps be fenced off for the duration of construction. A temporary accessible path has been identified but needs to be brought into compliance with current codes. **Work will begin on Friday, September 22, and will require re-asphalting the new path and installing a temporary ramp and handrails.** Please see the attached map for the exact location that will be closed off. The work to bring this walkway up to compliance is expected to take approximately four weeks. Once complete it will reopen and the construction fence will be moved to enclose the current ramps at the LRC until the project is complete. If you have any questions please reach out to Klaus Christiansen at kchristiansen@marin.edu.

Thank you for all you do.

Jonathan



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3 Ways to Improve Student Group Work

Throwing students into groups without an accountability system rigs such work against them, writes Christina Katopodis, but we can transform it by thoughtfully structuring it in equitable ways.

By [Christina Katopodis](#)

“When I was a student, group work made me so nervous,” a professor confided to me over Zoom. “I just did all the work because I didn’t trust anyone else with my grade.” Her story is not uncommon—and that’s unfortunate. No one student should shoulder all the responsibilities. Nor should students in a group assignment be simply tossed together, like a salad where all the tomatoes fall to the bottom, and then expected to simply *figure it out*.

What I see now—after teaching dozens of college classes, working through the pandemic to [improve group work online](#) and collaborating on diverse and inclusive teams in adulthood—is that throwing students into groups without an accountability system rigs it against them. We can, however, transform group work by taking a moment to thoughtfully structure the work in equitable ways.

First, we need to *teach* students collaboration skills and project-management strategies if we plan to assess them based on their ability to carry out a project with others. Second, we must clearly lay out the workload and our expectations for the results. Third, every step, when we think about it, actually has 10 steps beneath it, and by taking a moment to slowly break down the smaller steps of the process, we empower our students to think through those steps with us and ultimately succeed in their work.

Here are three simple ways to transform your student group work this academic year to give every student an equal opportunity to flourish in a learning environment built to support their success.

1. **Have students select their roles and responsibilities.** Once you’ve introduced your students to the work at hand—whether a short- or long-term project—ask them to reflect on what skills and strengths they have that they would like to contribute to a group. You might suggest roles and responsibilities that they could list in order of preference and form groups that way. This resembles how

teams are usually formed in the workforce, to tackle a particular task with employees who specialize in the skills required.

This year, I wrote a list of suggested skills on the board that included things like, “verbal communication,” “written communication” and “organizational skills.” I asked students to consider the list I provided and to write down one or two things they could contribute to group work. I also asked they add at least one of their own to describe themselves.

Students shared a variety of contributions they could make, such as “patience,” “bilingual skills and translation,” “simplify and communicate complex ideas,” “detail-oriented,” and “time management.” The idea behind having students add their own is to infuse them with confidence.

They often share something about themselves that I might not know. For example, one student confessed that the required collaborative oral presentation fills her with dread. She also wrote that she has great design and editing skills, so I suggested she manage visuals and script editing for their presentation and minimize her talk time.

Over the years, I’ve noticed students—when asked—readily reveal whether they consider themselves to be more extroverted or introverted. I like to put the students who are extroverted into the same group so they can enjoy the comfort of bringing similar energy levels and gusto to their group work. Similarly, I put the students who are more reserved in their own group, and they are most patient and sympathetic with one another, which can make room for shier students to come out of their shells.

Or if this is a situation where students will need to meet outside class, you might simply group them together based on their ability to meet. It’s no help if the task requires a synchronous meeting and people’s schedules don’t line up. Either way, each student in a given group should end up to varying degrees with a role that they have self-selected and that comes with clearly laid-out responsibilities that you outline.

2. **Provide task checklists and schedule check-ins.** Every person in a group will need a checklist of the tasks and deadlines ahead. The instructor can assign those tasks to specific students, or each group can start out with one major list and individuals can self-select what they will take on. The trick is to distribute the labor equally.

Let's say each group has four students and 20 tasks to complete. Each person could be given a sheet with five blank spaces they need to fill in until they've equally distributed the labor. Either way you do it, by assigning tasks or allowing students to self-select, each person in the group has their own individual checklist to keep track of what they are responsible for. They can turn those in at the end of the project to show you their work.

Leave room for them to expand on the checklist, too. Perhaps some unassigned "floating" tasks or responsibilities don't fit any particular role—or students identify missing roles on their own when they look at the work ahead of them. For example, if students receive feedback and need to revise and resubmit work, they'll need to divvy up the additional labor. Students can discuss such floaters as a group and divide them up as evenly as possible. It is easier to measure everyone's workload when the responsibilities are laid out in checklists.

If the project is longer with multiple steps or weighted highly in calculating their final grades, work check-ins into the task list to ensure students share their progress, challenges and triumphs with you—to troubleshoot where needed and celebrate accomplishments with them. During these check-ins, it will become clear if certain students are behind, so you and they can address the situation before the workload snowballs. And if students do the majority of the work in bulk before each check-in, great! That means the check-ins are helping them to be accountable.

You can collect the checklists at the end of the project and use them to help you calculate the final grades for each individual. In addition, ask students to review their checklists and develop their own self-assessment—perhaps in a formal cover letter or in a project reflection or summary. In it, they can share with you the challenges they faced and why, how they overcame them, and what they are still learning about themselves as collaborators and project managers.

3. **Foster and measure collaboration.** Somewhere, built into the checklist for each student, include four tasks that encourage collaboration by requiring students to carry out these manageable and important actions:

- I asked my group member(s) for help when _____
- I accepted help from my group member(s) when _____

- I offered to help my group member(s) when _____
- I helped my group member(s) to _____

When I've asked students about their reactions to this to gauge how familiar or unfamiliar this script for collaboration feels to them, nearly all of them have shaken their heads to indicate no one has ever required them to do this. One student this year nodded and said, "This is awesome," and most of the room smiled and nodded while the person sitting behind him shrank even farther down into her seat, shaking her head. Without saying it, she indicated that this felt like the opposite of "awesome." I understood and reassured them, "If this seems terrifying—and I get it because I am really bad at asking for and accepting help—the good news is that you have a room full of peers who are dying to help you so they can fill in these blanks, too."

I pointed to the four steps on the board and explained that those steps are essential to equitable, reciprocal collaboration. It doesn't come easily to everyone, and it's important that we practice teamwork because we'll be working on teams in various capacities for the rest of our lives. Teamwork is one of the crucial career-readiness competencies employers look for, according to the [National Association of Colleges and Employers](#).

When we break collaboration skills into small, manageable tasks, and give them heft and value by including them among the steps required to complete a project, we give students a script they can use if they need one and ensure they all have the tools to collaborate successfully. That way, we both demonstrate our expectations—clarifying common assumptions we sometimes forget to share with our students—and incorporate a transparent method for evaluating the collaboration skills we're demanding they practice in our class through group work.

Christina Katopodis is a senior postdoctoral research associate at the City University of New York's Humanities Alliance. She is the co-author, with Cathy N. Davidson, of [The New College Classroom](#) (Harvard University Press, 2022).

Kentfield Campus Map

835 College Avenue, Kentfield, CA 94904

Current accessible path of travel to be fenced off once new path is complete.

Area of new accessible path of travel

