# The Rubric:
# A Tool for Authentic Assessment

There is a growing trend in higher education to rely on authentic assessments (e.g., presentations, exhibits/displays, portfolios, blogs/wikis, written responses) as a means to assess student learning. As opposed to more traditional objective assessments (e.g., true/false, multiple choice, fill-in-the-blank), authentic assessments typically require that students move beyond simply remembering and understanding to higher levels of thinking that include applying, analyzing, evaluating, and creating. Wergin (1988) summarized the important connection that exists between assessment and the ways that students learn:

> If we have learned anything from educational research over the last 50 years, it is that students learn according to how they are tested. If we test students for factual recall, then they will memorize a set of facts. If we test them for their ability to analyze relationships, then they will begin to learn to think critically. If we assess how well they can apply classroom material to concrete problems, they will learn to do that. But despite the general agreement that classroom assessment procedures have a powerful influence over learning, testing is the bane of most faculty members' lives. (p. 5)

One of the challenges faced by faculty who choose to move in the direction of authentic assessments is designing a strategy for consistently evaluating student performance in relation to identified learning outcomes. An excellent tool that can be used to remedy this situation is the rubric. According to Montgomery (2002), the rubric provides a consistent mechanism that allows the faculty member to ask several important questions:

- What are the parameters of a quality process or product?
- Are the expectations for excellence clear to the students and the instructor?
- What have the students learned after completing a task?

Rather than simply labeling a student's work as "well done" or "lacking in overall quality," the rubric allows the instructor to efficiently and succinctly share with the student those aspects of the assigned task that were completed with excellence and those that failed to meet the established criteria.

Most rubrics are arranged as a matrix with a series of dimensions or variables listed on the vertical axis (e.g., organization, quality of references, grammar/mechanics, creativity) and a scale of values or descriptors listed on the horizontal axis (e.g., excellent, fair, good, poor). In the corresponding boxes within the matrix (i.e., where the two axes meet), descriptions or examples are included both for the reference of the student completing the assignment

> … students should be attempting to complete tasks that are visible and meaningful to others. A performance is in a sense autonomous; it is an accomplishment, a piece of work that stands alone to the extent of at least having not entirely derived from its context. In this sense, studying for a test is an activity, but not a performance. A performance is not a drill or an exercise; it is in some sense a completed activity. (Tagg, 2003, p. 155)

and of the instructor evaluating it. The scenario below illustrates the application of the rubric to the assessment process of a common classroom task.

*Scenario.* You have assigned your students the task of creating a digital presentation that summarizes their investigation into a topic related to your course content. As a way of communicating your expectations for this project, you provide your students with the following rubric:

| | Excellent | Good | Fair | Poor |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Presentation** | Well-rehearsed; smooth delivery; held audience attention | Rehearsed; fairly smooth delivery; held audience attention most of the time | Delivery not smooth but held audience attention most of the time | Delivery not smooth and often lost audience attention |
| **Organization** | Content well organized; headings and/or bulleted lists used to group related material | Content logically organized for the most part; headings and/or bulleted lists used to group material | Content logically organized for the most part | No clear or logical, organizational structure, just lots of facts |
| **Content** | Topic covered in-depth with details and examples; excellent subject knowledge | Included essential topic information; good subject knowledge | Included essential topic information but with 1-2 factual errors | Minimal topic information or several factual errors |
| **Mechanics** | No misspellings or grammatical errors | 3 or fewer misspellings and/or grammatical errors | 4 misspellings and/or grammatical errors | More than 4 misspellings and/or grammatical errors |
| **Originality** | Large amount of original thought; creative and inventive ideas | Some original thought; some new ideas and insights | Little original thought; used other people's ideas but gave credit | Little or no original thought; used other people's ideas but did not give credit |

*Figure 1.* Sample rubric for a digital presentation. Created using the rubric generator at http://rubistar.4teachers.org

These criteria are reviewed with the students and discussed in class prior to their embarking on the assigned project. A question and answer time provides students with the clarification that they require. Once the projects have been completed, the same rubric, marked with the results of the instructor's evaluation, can be returned to the students for their reference and understanding. As a follow-up, students can be offered the opportunity to meet with the instructor to review the rationale for their performance rating.

# Getting Started

**S**everal excellent web sites containing sample designs related to a wide variety of project assignment areas, including written reports, digital presentations, group participation, musical and dramatic performances, and art works are available (e.g., http://www.teach-nology.com/web_tools/rubrics/ and http://rubistar.4teachers.org/).

The examples can easily be adapted for specific classroom uses, and the sites provide online tools to assist faculty with identifying and choosing their own rubric variables and descriptive criteria.

In addition, bringing students into the discussion and rubric development process can engage them more fully in their learning at the beginning of a project. During a class session prior to an assignment, students can spend time identifying the most important variables to consider during the assessment process. This provides students with a real sense of ownership for the process and the outcomes.

According to Chun (2010), one of the primary purposes of assessment is to determine the level at which chosen instructional strategies have the desired effect on student performance (i.e., if students are not mastering identified learning outcomes, then the chosen pedagogical techniques may need to be altered or abandoned). Thinking in this way requires the availability of cogent and meaningful assessment techniques that can create a direct link between teaching and learning. It is proposed that rubrics, if properly constructed and validated, can serve that purpose. Rubrics can be a powerful tool for strengthening your awareness of student learning and the power of your teaching.

### References

Chun, M. (2010). Taking teaching to (performance) task: Linking pedagogical and assessment practices. *Change, 42*(2), 22-29.

Montgomery, K. (2002). Authentic tasks and rubrics: Going beyond traditional assessments in college teaching. *College Teaching, 50*(1), 34-39.

Tagg, J. (2003). *The learning paradigm college.* Bolton, MA: Anker.

Wergin, J. F. (1988). Basic issues and principles in classroom assessment. In J. H. McMillan (Ed.), *Assessing student's learning* (pp. 5-17). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

# What's Happening at the National Resource Center
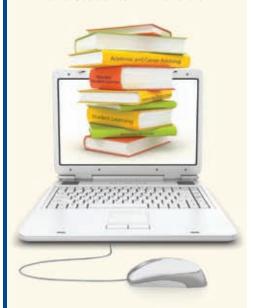
## Conferences and Continuing Education

### Online Courses

The National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition is embarking on additional professional development opportunities for educators at colleges and universities by offering online courses on topics of interest in higher education. The courses are designed to provide participants with the same content and opportunities for interaction with peers and with the instructor as traditional (i.e., classroom-based) learning environments while taking advantage of pedagogy and teaching techniques that are not possible or common in those settings. The courses will use tools such as e-mail, threaded discussions/ forums, listservs, and blogs. For more information, visit http://www.sc.edu/fye/oc

# Online Courses

on The First-Year Experience® and Students in Transition

## Fall 2010

**October 25-November 26, 2010**

Fostering First-Year Student Success

## Spring 2011

**March 7-April 8, 2011**

Teaching That Informs and Transforms: Strategies and Techniques for Engaging and Challenging Today's Learners

**April 4-May 6, 2011**

Models and Methods of Student Advising: Promoting Career and Academic Success and Transition

**May 9-June 10, 2011**

Proving and Improving: The Pillars of First-Year Assessment

## www.sc.edu/fye/oc

## 30th Annual Conference on The First-Year Experience

**February 4-8, 2011 – Atlanta, GA**

The First-Year Experience conferences are meetings where educators from two- and four-year institutions come together to openly share ideas, concepts, resources, assessment tools, programmatic interventions, and research results focused on the first college year. Registration information is available at http://sc.edu/fye/annual/

## 14th Outdoor Orientation Program Symposium (OOPS)

**February 5, 2011 – 9:00 am - 4:30 pm – Atlanta, GA**

*Held in conjunction with the 30th Annual Conference on The First-Year Experience*

The Outdoor Orientation Program Symposium (OOPS) is a conference within a conference. Leading experts and practitioners involved in adventure-based, outdoor, wilderness, and extended orientation programs meet annually to share information in a one-day mini-conference with nine workshops and two keynote presentations. Presentations will include information on best practices, new program techniques, and nuts and bolts information that will help established and aspiring programs. A consistent focus at OOPS is a current update on research and assessment. OOPS is pleased to be partnering with the Annual Conference on The First-Year Experience. Registration information for the symposium is available on the FYE Annual Conference form (http://sc.edu/fye/annual/Annual_Registration_2011.pdf) in the Preconference Workshop section.

### Save the Dates

**Institute on Transfer Student Success**
April 17-19, 2011
Costa Mesa, CA

**24th International Conference on The First-Year Experience**
June 21-24, 2011
Manchester, England

**Institute on First-Year Success in the Community College**
November 6-8, 2011
Cincinnati, OH

## NRC Exhibits and Presentations

Like many of you, the staff of the National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition plan to be actively involved in the fall conference circuit. We are pleased to share the following upcoming opportunities to hear about the results of research studies conducted by the Center, learn about best practices, and meet NRC staff members.

**The 2009 National Survey on First-Year Seminars: Reflecting on Innovations in the Undergraduate Curriculum**

Presented by Tracy Skipper, NRC Assistant Director for Publications, at the National Orientation Directors Association Conference, St. Louis, Missouri, November 6-9, 2010.

**Recent Findings and New Directions for Research on High-Impact Educational Practices in the Transition to College**

Roundtable presentation by Jennifer R. Keup, NRC Director, and Ryan D. Padgett, NRC Assistant Director for Research, Grants, and Assessment, at the 2010 ASHE Conference, Indianapolis, Indiana, November 17-20, 2010.

## Research

### Grants

The American College Personnel Association (ACPA) Commission for Admissions, Orientation and the First-Year Experience (AOFYE) and the National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition invite applicants for their 2011 Research Grant Competition. AOFYE and the National Resource Center will jointly award one grant in the amount of $500 to promote original, descriptive, or evaluative research; philosophical studies; or institutional assessment or evaluation on issues surrounding admissions, orientation, and/or the first-year experience. All ACPA members are eligible to apply for this research grant. The application deadline is November 18, 2010. Details about the grant are available at http://www.myacpa.org/comm/aofye/grant_guidelines.cfm

### Award Nominations

**ACPA 2011 AOFYE Award Nominations**

The American College Personnel Association (ACPA) Commission for Admissions, Orientation and the First-Year Experience (AOFYE) seeks to recognize the outstanding contributions of ACPA members. Nominations for awards in the following seven areas of Admissions, Orientation, and First-Year Experience are now being accepted: Outstanding Undergraduate Student, Outstanding Graduate Student, Outstanding New Professional, Outstanding Experienced Professional (4-10 years), Outstanding Experienced Professional (10+ years), Outstanding Program/Project, and Outstanding Collaborative Initiative. All institutions are encouraged to participate in this program by nominating deserving individuals, projects, or programs. Institutions may submit one nomination per category. The nomination deadline is November 11, 2010, and winners will be notified in late December. Details regarding the awards and application process are available at http://www.myacpa.org/comm/aofye/award_guidelines.cfm

### NRC 2010-2011 Outstanding First-Year Student Advocates Nominations

The National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition, with the generous continuing support of Cengage Learning, is proud to announce its 2010-2011 campaign to recognize Outstanding First-Year Student Advocates. The annual award campaign, inaugurated 21 years ago, recognizes individuals on college and university campuses who serve as outstanding advocates for undergraduate first-year students. To date, 221 award recipients have been recognized. All institutions are encouraged to participate in this program by nominating an individual (i.e., faculty members, administrators, professional staff, or students) on your campus who serves as an activist, intercessor, and/or supporter for first-year students – someone who is passionate about new students' success. The nomination deadline is October 25, 2010 and details are available at http://u101tech.s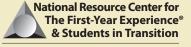a.sc.edu/NRC_advocates/Nominator_add.php