

2010-2011 Seminar Participants

"Measuring the Influence of Course Preparation Assignments on Student Learning Outcomes"

Prof. William Ewell, Political Science

Prof. Robert Rodgers, Political Science

Project Proposal:

Student preparation for class is an integral part of the college learning experience. Classroom time is typically restricted to three hours per week or 45 hours in a 15-week semester. Rarely can students meet the learning objectives of the typical college course in such a limited time frame. As a result, much student learning must occur outside the classroom. Professors have struggled with the most effective method for ensuring student learning outside the classroom; they have employed such techniques as reflection papers, quizzes, and group discussion, to name but a few.

One method used to improve student learning, class preparation, and ownership of course learning is a technique known as "course preparation assignments" (CPAs) (Yamane 2006). This instructional tool provides opportunities for significant guided learning beyond the classroom through low stakes writing assignments that emphasize critical thinking and analysis of assigned primary or secondary source materials. The literature, however, provides little evidence as to the effectiveness of CPAs to improve student engagement and learning.

We are currently working on research to measure the effectiveness of CPAs in terms of student preparation for class. Our research design utilizes within and across classroom evaluation methods. The within classroom design measures perceptions of preparedness for classes that utilize CPAs compared to classes for which a CPA was not assigned. The across classroom design allows for an examination of semester long effects of CPAs and their impact on self-reported perceptions of preparedness for class and of the impact of preparation on learning.

Participation in the Teaching and Learning Strategies Seminar (TLSS) would provide the opportunity to extend the depth and scope of this research project. First, we plan to build upon our existing knowledge the scholarly literature on strategies to foster out-of-class learning. Second, we plan to improve the study to achieve a more robust examination of CPAs. An enhanced research design would move beyond the sections of the course we teach in common and would control for potential variation in student ability and effort across classrooms and instructional methods. The enhanced design would also allow an examination of different methods for utilizing CPAs as well as the variability in their effectiveness at improving student learning outcomes. Third, we plan to extend our research to include measures of student learning outcomes including course and assignment grades.

We have already been accepted to present our preliminary research at the annual American Political Science Association Teaching and Learning Conference in Philadelphia in February 2010. Our participation in this conference will provide an excellent opportunity to gather feedback on our research. The TLSS would provide the ideal setting for further developing our CPA research with the goals of enhancing our teaching and producing a scholarly journal publication. We plan to share in multiple venues the pedagogic methods, research findings, and teaching strategies that we learn through the seminar.

Specifically, we plan to develop a roundtable for Stonehill faculty to discuss strategies to encourage effective student preparation for class. Furthermore, we plan to develop a program for Stonehill students to examine ways they may improve their out-of-class learning and class preparation strategies.