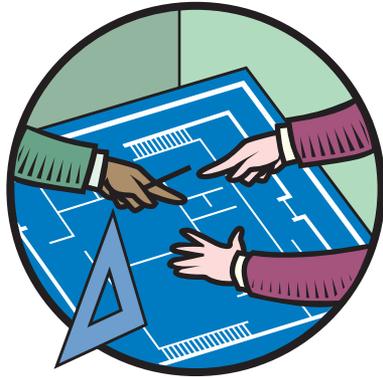




## Switch to Performance-based Assessments and Increase Retention

by Sherman Elliott, TFS Author

Given the abrupt change in college student demographics, specifically, the rise in the at-risk student population, many instructors have been frustrated by the poor assessment scores of their students when tested by traditional college assessment methods.



### Traditional Testing May Equal Poor Scores and Demotivated Learners

Whether one uses essay exams, multiple-choice tests, or term papers, traditional assessment methods often fail to accurately measure achievement of all students, particularly the at-risk student, and do precious little to motivate students to succeed.

### Why I Switched

After discovering that many of my students demonstrated profound mastery of the material in class but scored poorly on essay exams and multiple-choice tests, I decided to switch to a performance-based measurement. The results have been extremely encouraging. The assessments more accurately measure the achievement of my students, specifically the at-risk population, and amplifies their existing desire to succeed.

## **Rationale**

The typical student, when asked to apply content knowledge to a real-world task, not only internalizes the material, but also demonstrates a higher degree of interest in mastering the course objectives. Although performance-based assessments involve more work and surely more time for the average student, the assessment itself goes beyond simply measuring achievement and abilities; it proves to be a valuable learning process unto itself.

## **The Assignment**

For example, my students in a U.S. Constitution course were asked to create, administer, and interpret a U.S. Constitutional knowledge survey. The goal of this performance-based assessment was to assess the knowledge and abilities of the students enrolled in the course by measuring average Americans' knowledge and understanding of the U.S. Constitution.

By creating their own content-knowledge questions, the students approached the material in a very personal manner and thus internalized the normally dry and objective content material. Once the students created the survey, they were asked to go into their communities and survey a diverse population.

## **Frustration Diminishes**

As an instructor, I learned that students who engaged in a dialogue with members of their own communities on material in a college course no longer felt intimidated or frustrated by the course content. In the U.S. Constitution course, each student became an instant authority and had the responsibility of discovering what people know and need to know about their government and Constitutional rights.

After surveying the community, the students wrote a one-page synopsis of their findings. By writing a synopsis that evaluated public knowledge of the Constitution, students inherently demonstrated their own knowledge

of the U.S. Constitution and thus revealed mastery of the course objectives.

At this juncture, they were not expected to write a research paper or complete an essay exam, where they would often regurgitate someone else's ideas or research. On the contrary, it was their ability to perform hands-on research and apply the Constitution that formulated the basis of their assessment.

### **Typical Assessment Actions**

Students complete the following steps during their performance-based assessment:

- Create a survey based on course content.
- Submit the survey to the instructor for comments and scoring.
- Go into the community and conduct the survey.
- Tabulate the results of the survey.
- Submit the survey tabulations to the instructor for comments and scoring.
- Write a brief synopsis of their findings (one page).

### **Scoring Rubric**

I recommend providing students with a detailed rubric for scoring each stage of the assignment. As students complete a particular portion of their assessment, they have the advantage of following a rubric to be certain that they are completing the task well. Not only does this encourage students as they receive positive feedback on an ongoing basis, but it also allows the instructor to maintain a dialogue with students while they are being tested.

Here's an example of a scoring system I use for a U.S. Constitution Survey Creation assessment. Students earn 25 total points divided into the following categories:

Composition (15 points)

- Survey questions are relevant to the Constitution.
- Questions represent more than one specific issue found in the Constitution.

- Questions may be answered objectively and thoroughly.
  - Survey consists of at least five specific questions.
- Objective (5 points)
- Survey questions have relevance to contemporary society.
  - Survey is directed toward obtaining meaningful data.
- Format (3 points)
- Survey choices correspond to questions and are well organized.
  - Survey data may be easily graphed.
- Grammar (2 points)
- Survey questions and choices are grammatically correct.

### **Results: Retention Increases Markedly**

Since I implemented this performance-based assessment, I have achieved very promising results. With traditional college assessments, it was not unusual to lose ten students from a class of 35. After the switch to performance-based measurements, the number of students who drop from a given course has fallen to less than five!