

Student Group Work Guidelines – Phase 1 Draft #1 – October 30, 2001

Group Work Sub-committee Members, 2001-2002:

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Background:

During the 2000-2001 academic year, the University Committee on Academic Policy (UCAP) was asked by the Provost to develop a set of recommendations (faculty guidelines) regarding criteria for group projects and grading at MSU^[1]. The need for guidelines has emerged in the context of an increasing use of group assignments, coupled with a growing recognition of a need for additional faculty and student guidance concerning the structure, process, and evaluation of student group activities. At the UCAP meeting of September 14, 2000, UCAP members outlined several dimensions relevant to the Provost's charge concerning guidelines development for student group work: (1) student evaluation in group assignments; (2) how to establish group projects for greatest effectiveness; and, (3) effective use of groups in the classroom.

At the UCAP meeting of October 25, 2001, additional discussion occurred concerning the specific charge to the UCAP Group Work sub-committee for this year. UCAP members concurred with a recommendation for a two-phase approach. Phase 1 will involve generating some general faculty guidelines for development of syllabi concerning criteria for group projects and grading, and is envisioned to be a short-term project. Phase 2 will involve developing a set of more detailed guidelines concerning sound pedagogical approaches to group work, and is envisioned to be a longer-term project. The draft guidelines that appear below are intended to address Phase 1 of the charge to the committee.

Group Work Guidelines (Draft #1):

Structure – How to establish group projects for greatest effectiveness

- In course planning, faculty should give careful advance consideration to the specific circumstances in which student learning is likely to be best fostered by an individual or a group approach. Course syllabi should contain clear statements about the intended purpose(s) of assignments, which are explicitly linked to both class and course objectives. Where appropriate, the rationale for the choice of learning approach (individual or group) should be included in course syllabi.
- Expectations for what students are to do for group assignments should be specified in a sufficient level of detail in course syllabi, and linked to behavioral outcome criteria, such that reasonable ambiguity regarding the tasks to be accomplished by students is reduced or eliminated. The expectations should be stated in terms of what students are to do both individually and collectively, explicitly relating the expectations back to the intended purpose(s) of the assignment.
- Expectations for group work that are described in course syllabi should be reviewed with students as part of course orientation activities, and ample opportunity provided for students to ask questions to clarify the written expectations. Potential concerns of students about the implementation of group assignments should be explored and addressed in course planning. Students should also be provided with detailed information in the course syllabus for how they

can contact the appropriate course faculty later on, for any additional questions or concerns about their assignments.

- Course syllabi should include information about the specific steps students can or should take to address problems in accomplishing either individual or collective tasks for group assignments. Where appropriate, relevant timelines for student actions should be included. Where appropriate, the range of possible steps that faculty may take to address problems should also be specified.
- As appropriate, consideration should be given to use of either informal (verbal) or informal (written) group contracts, specifying the individual contributions of group members to the project. The procedures for use of contracts and copies of any forms to be used should be included in the course syllabus.
- Training in general concepts and specific skills for group work should be provided for students as part of any course activities that include group work, taking into account the nature of the group assignment(s), and the developmental phase, level of educational attainment, and motivational level of students. Commonly-occurring issues in the context of group activities should receive special attention; e.g., group conflicts about how to do tasks, assertiveness and communication skills, strategies for dealing with individuals who do not meet their group obligations, etc.

Process – Effective use of groups in the classroom

- Expectations for how students are to work individually and collectively in groups should be specified in a sufficient level of detail in course syllabi, such that reasonable ambiguity regarding expected work processes is reduced or eliminated.
- Faculty should assume primary responsibility for implementation of an adequate monitoring process for group work, that is well-matched to the specific group assignment(s), the context of instruction, and which holds individual students and groups of students fully accountable for meeting expectations for group assignments. Information about the monitoring process, relevant timelines, and contingencies should be included in course syllabi, and reviewed with students as part of the course orientation. The faculty monitoring process does not preclude assignment of students to share responsibility with faculty for monitoring group processes.
- The context of instruction should receive careful consideration in course planning for group assignments; e.g., the size of the class, level of students, type of class content, etc. In instances where it may not be feasible to implement a fully sufficient monitoring process for a given type of group assignment within a given course, one or more of the following strategies should guide course activities involving group work, as appropriate: (1) a type of group assignment should be made for which it is feasible to have a sufficient faculty monitoring process; (2) student grades, individually or collectively, should not be penalized on the basis of the outcomes of the group assignment; or, (3) consideration should be given to use of individual assignments in place of group assignments, as appropriate.
- When feasible, principles of evaluation research should be incorporated into course, going beyond measurement of end-of-course outcomes only. For example, baseline (pre-course) and interim (in-course) assessments of student knowledge of, skills for, and motivation for group work could be done, and faculty approaches adapted accordingly during the course of the semester, based on assessed student needs. The interim assessments may be incorporated as part of a group work monitoring process.

Evaluation – Student evaluation in group assignments

- Course syllabi should contain a detailed description of how students will be evaluated and graded on the basis of their individual contributions to group assignments. Group assignments must be structured so that the contributions of individuals can be evaluated in a sufficient, valid fashion.
- As appropriate, student peer evaluation data may be considered by faculty members in assigning grades for group assignments. Course syllabi should include a description of how faculty will use student peer evaluation data in faculty evaluation and grading of students. The contributions of students to peer evaluation should be clearly described in course syllabi, including copies of any forms to be used. Procedures should be outlined in course syllabi for how discrepancies in peer evaluations are to be resolved.
- Faculty should assume ultimate responsibility for the evaluation and grading of students on group assignments. In no instances should students be solely responsible for evaluating other students on contributions to group assignments, nor should students be responsible for assigning grades to other students.
- Newly-implemented group assignments merit special caution in student evaluation and grading. Especially for untested group assignments, faculty should give careful consideration to the weight of these assignments in individual students' course grades.
- Student input about group learning experiences should be sought on end-of-course measures of satisfaction and learning. The measures should include standard SIRS forms, but may also include Unit or faculty-developed measures that are tailored to (more sensitive) to outcomes for specific courses. Planned evaluation research is desirable, in which the target outcomes of the course are linked to structure and process elements of group assignments, as a more objective means to evaluating the usefulness of group assignments.

^[1] Per Section 4.5.4 of the Academic Governance Bylaws, UCAP advises the Provost on policy related to methods and evaluation of instruction.