

Reflective Essays on Academic Rigor, Relevance and Reflection
2006 Academic Affairs Faculty Symposium
Unicoi State Park and Conference Center
April 14-15, 2006

In preparation for the Academic Affairs Faculty Symposium, the organizers invite you to share with fellow participants some brief reflections on the concept of academic rigor. We would appreciate receiving by Friday, April 7th, your perception of academic rigor, your personal experience with academic rigor as a teacher or student, and/or your thoughts on what faculty and the University should do to promote rigor in our academic programs

Essay ID:285666

1. Relevance and the Connection to Rigor

As James Beane (1997) has argued, the most powerful sources for curriculum are the concerns of students about themselves and about social issues. Relevance as Beane defines it, connecting curriculum to students' concerns and interests about themselves and the world, may seem irrelevant to rigor, with all rigor's implications of rigidity and definitiveness. Students' concerns and interests, by definition, are not rigid or definitive. However, if by rigor we intend to call for meaningful, substantive, and useful knowledge and skills, then we can hardly expect relevance to be irrelevant to our students. If students see knowledge and skills as relevant to their concerns, relevant to real-world tasks required for success in a course, relevant to their capacity for success in their chosen field, then relevance and rigor are, in fact, intertwined. What does that mean in practical terms in college courses? It means making efforts to connect coursework to community, to have students put theory into practice in the real world. It means involving students in decisions about what and how they learn and involving students in making decisions about how they will be evaluated. Service-learning—intentionally connecting academics to community issues, problems, or needs—can provide both the theory and the pedagogy to connect rigor and relevance.

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To me, an academically rigorous course is one in which students are continually challenged throughout the course to increase their previous level of knowledge and skills. The difficulty for instructors is to establish student's initial abilities and continually determine if students are being challenged with new skills and knowledge. Courses without rigor often teach material that students have already mastered,

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