

# Assignment Helps Students Assess Their Progress

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Midterm evaluations bring a host of institutional measures to reach out to underachieving students. However, what might make the most difference to students' success in their courses is to enable them to assess their own performance and set goals as well as to ask questions of and provide feedback to the instructor. Instructors can give students this reflective opportunity through an online journal assignment in which students do the following:

- Report their overall grade in the course
- Report their attendance record (when attendance is required)
- Reflect on their performance, whether it meets their expectations
- Provide goals for the rest of the course (often in the form of a GPA, but can also be learning outcomes)
- Provide feedback and ask questions

It is best to implement this progress report assignment about a third of the way through a course so that underperforming students can change trajectory before the midterm.

## **My experience with the assignment**

Since I make all grades available on our university's learning management system, students can always see their grades, but they often don't check or acknowledge that these grades are available. Further, because not all professors provide grades automatically, students may not fully understand their progress even when grades are available.

Students take anywhere from 50 to 400 words to complete this journal assignment, based on their needs. Their posts range from brief conclusions that they are exactly where they want to be to detailed descriptions of all kinds of problems and questions about how to move forward. This process allows me to respond quickly to the positive reports ("Sounds great! Looking forward to the rest of the semester!") and to dedicate more attention to those who are struggling. This journal assignment is not graded, but students are required to complete it before submitting any

subsequent assignments.

Although I am always open to student feedback, students often interpret this assignment as their first opportunity to reflect on the course and ask questions. Some will provide context for their content knowledge and other school responsibilities, which is often very enlightening for me. Students generally express gratitude at the official opportunity to assess their progress in the course (even more so when they are doing poorly or not as well as they expected) because it is early enough in the semester to turn things around.

Even in the case of students who are negative and critical, the assignment provides an opportunity for me to show empathy and clear up any misunderstandings they may have about course procedures and requirements. That's a much-preferred alternative to letting their discontent silently fester and then show up on end-of-semester evaluations. In some cases, it also uncovers opportunities to improve the course and correct mistakes. Colleagues from my discipline and others have received the same positive results I have and continue to use this assignment semester after semester.

### **Tips for getting started**

Here's what you need to know before you implement the progress report assignment in your courses.

- **The instructor requirements.** There are two important requirements that make this activity possible: (1) Students must have already completed some graded assignments, and (2) students must be able to see the individual grades and understand how they contribute to the course grade. Both practices are important for student success. If you don't yet incorporate these two practices, talk with teaching colleagues, instructional designers, or other faculty support personnel you may have on campus to consider methods to implement earlier assessments and transparent grading.
- **What about large classes?** I implement this activity in a writing-intensive course that is capped at 22 students, so courses with more than 50 students may want to offer this as extra credit to control workload. Even for those larger classes, this activity would not take long for the tremendous benefit it provides to the class dynamic, student success, and your end-of-semester evaluations, because many reports do not require a lengthy response.
- **Non-tech version.** Because all my assignments are submitted through the university's learning management system and grades are housed there, it is easy for me to give students an online assignment for this progress report. If you prefer an offline version of this assignment, allow students to type or handwrite their progress reports and turn them in during class.

This small activity can have a big impact on students and on your teaching. It also builds strong rapport at critical points early in the semester.

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