

Use Team Charters to Improve Group Assignments

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Many faculty now have students work in teams to complete course-long projects that are designed to accomplish multiple course objectives and that count for a significant part of the course grade. These groups do not always function well, which concerns faculty. If experiences in groups do not develop good teamwork skills, then maybe it's better not to use groups and have students do assignments individually. Frequently that's what they prefer anyway.

The counterargument for group assignments involves the expectation that people will be working in groups throughout their careers, and if they don't have the necessary skills, the consequences can be significant. Group work in college courses is a better place to develop those skills. The environment is safer, and there's the opportunity for constructive feedback. But that's still a challenge for teachers when they have multiple groups working on projects online or outside class. It's pretty much impossible to keep track of what's happening in every group, so students need to take responsibility for how they are working together. The issue is what teachers can do to help them when they are new to group work or come to it with less than satisfactory skills.

A recent and excellent article that proposes a model for "building teams that learn" recommends that teachers have students develop a team charter early in their interaction. "Completing a team charter encourages team members to set goals and discuss how they will work together; it begins the discussion about expectations for participation and performance." (p. 708) As a working document, it helps establish norms that contribute to group effectiveness. The authors see the team charter as a "necessary first step" to evolve from being a group to being a team. (p. 708)

Most students will not have had previous experiences establishing a team charter and will need some guidance as to what the document should contain. An appendix to the article contains the content areas and questions that the authors give students, which they then use to prepare their team charters. It includes categories and questions such as these:

- How do we want to give each other feedback on assignments? What shall we do about missing deadlines or different views on content or quality standards?
- What are the ground rules (meeting schedule, attendance expectations, being on time, checking for messages and responding to team requests, assignment (non)completion, keeping each other informed, communication methods)?
- How will we assess our functioning? How often will we assess it?
- What has happened on other team projects that has inhibited performance?

There is a Web address in the article that links to a completed team charter. Once it is completed, every group member signs off on the charter and it is submitted for grading.

In addition to helping groups get appropriate norms in place early, the team charter can serve "as a mediator in identifying and addressing problems as they emerge." (p. 708) It aids conflict resolution. If a member fails to comply, the group charter can be used to justify what the group is asking the member to do. The team charter can guide group discussions about how they're working together, and it can be revised to reflect issues that have emerged and decisions the group has made about them.

The authors recommend that the team charter be accompanied by various other feedback mechanisms described in the article. Team charters don't guarantee that groups will function as teams, but they certainly make clearer what that means and make it easier for groups to deal with problems and issues on their own, which is what high-

functioning groups do.

Reference: Hillier, J., and Dunn-Jensen, L. M. (2013). Groups meet ... teams improve: Building teams that learn. *Journal of Management Education*, 37 (5), 704-733.

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