

Alternatives to Traditional Exams

and Ways to make cheating difficult and to motivate academic integrity

By: Martha Diede, Center for Teaching and Learning Excellence, Syracuse University

Rather than plan on large exams, consider smaller, low-stakes assessments for courses with an online component. These assessments give students the opportunity to demonstrate what they know and give faculty the opportunity to see where gaps are appearing in students' knowledge and skill acquisition. Faculty might also consider assessments alternative to exams, particularly exams that derive their questions from test banks.

Students might be able to suggest other ways that they can show you that they have met the course outcomes. These suggestions might take advantage of new technologies or use existing technologies in new ways. However you construct your assessments, be sure to include three clear parts: purpose (why?), task (what you want them to do) and criteria (what you will evaluate to determine whether the student passed or earned a specific letter grade). Consider [this information](#) from *Inside Higher Ed*.

Below are some possible ideas for assignments to replace a traditional exam:

- A single slide, formatted like an academic poster, that summarizes the information from the unit/module/section of the course.
- A brief video in which students explain the course concepts in each unit.
- A brief video in which students use the course concepts/learning to suggest a solution to a contemporary problem.
- A [concept map](#) showing how the course content from the week/unit/module/semester connects.
- A problem to solve that requires the use of knowledge and skills included in your course outcomes.
- An infographic presenting the most essential course concepts/learning.

Some additional ways to make cheating difficult are as follows.

- Switch up 30% of exam questions.
- Focus on learning, not performance.
- Use random blocks in [setting up exams](#) in Blackboard.
- Rework test-bank questions by reversing them. Start with the correct answer from the multiple choices, then use the question stem to create the answer(s).
- Set the exam to show only one question at a time.
- Set a 15-minute window during which students can sign in. If students don't sign-in during that time period, have them email you to explain why. This technique provides you an opportunity to provide an equivalent, but different exam.
- Limit exam length time so that students will not be able to look up outside sources to find answers.
- Design questions to encourage persistence and resilience.

Consider questions like these ones suggested by [Francis Su](#):

Take one homework problem you have worked on this semester that you struggled to understand and solve, and explain how the struggle itself was valuable. In the context of this question, describe the struggle and how you overcame the struggle. You might also discuss whether struggling built aspects of character in you (e.g. endurance, self-confidence, competence to solve new problems) and how these virtues might benefit you in later ventures.

OR

For any problems you cannot solve on this exam, suggest a strategy you might try to tackle the problem, and show what happened as a result. Describe any strategic gaps you were unable to bridge, and list 3 helpful insights that may help another person trying to tackle the problem. Doing so will earn you up to 1/2 credit on the problem.

- Plan for students to use online tools to find answers to questions.
- Have students record themselves taking the exam and submit that recording.
- Ask questions that require students to show what they've learned and to put together information that they've found.
- Engage students in designing exam questions to show their knowledge and learning.
- Incorporate some writing-to-learn strategies such as [reflection questions](#).

Consider reducing the motivation to cheat.

- Allow students to drop their lowest test scores.
- Use the mixed delivery and online requirements to your favor. Give multiple, lower-stakes exams or quizzes. Homework can also count as an assessment especially if students have to stretch just one or two steps beyond what you've covered in class.
- Consider changing your approach to teaching, even if only for one unit. For example, [Inquiry-Based Learning](#) is an equity-centered teaching strategy that can make cheating tough, and it works for many disciplines. [Process-Oriented Guided Inquiry Learning](#) (POGIL) is another equity-centered teaching strategy that makes cheating challenging.
- Plan for students to work together to complete assessments that demonstrate them building skills and knowledge.
- Tell students the "why" of the exam. If they have to know and show that they can solve big problems because they're going to be designing bridges, building airplanes, and working on projects that impact people, let them know that. Remind them that they are in a safe environment where not succeeding is encouraged when it helps the instructor-learner pair to determine what learning needs to be continued, repeated, or reimagined for success.

Please also keep in mind that online visual and auditory tasks are especially challenging for students who have visual and hearing exceptionalities. Consider contacting the [Center for Disability Resources](#) to ensure you support all of your students.

If you do opt for a test, remind students that taking a test by mobile phone might not be the best option. Also encourage students who have sub-optimal internet access to communicate with you regarding testing.

In challenging circumstances, allowing some flexibility in demonstrating achievement of course outcomes can help all of the students in your class.