UCF

Faculty Focus

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This issue contains articles by the following:

The Adventures of Implementing Research Experiential Learning for Reluctant Student Travelers

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Kim Anderson is Professor in the School of Social Work and teaches in the Public Affairs Doctoral Program. She has over 30 years of teaching at all levels of the Social Work curriculum. She has served as the program coordinator. She recruits, advises, chairs dissertations, and coordinates graduate assistantships. Her scholarship includes the methodologies of mixed methods, qualitative (Grounded Theory, Narrative, & Thematic Analysis), and community-based participatory research (CBPR).

I teach courses in the graduate social work research sequence where clinical students often feel reluctant or resistant to include research skills in their burgeoning professional toolbox, as they tend to find research material dull and unrelatable. They do not always see how developing their research muscles will help to affect change that makes a difference for vulnerable populations. Although first-hand experiential learning is central to social work education, it is less emphasized in research instruction. Research courses, in general, often receive lower Student Perception of Instruction (SPIs) ratings than other social work courses in the curriculum. For instance, students' SPIs for my research section indicated a lack of effectiveness in stimulating interest, explaining course requirements (e.g., grading and learning expectations), and communicating information. This dissatisfaction was also reflected in students' comments, such as, "The course content isn't the most fun or interesting" and "The quizzes are confusing." In response to this feedback, I set out to transform the introductory research methods course from a traditional model based on lectures and quizzes to a participatory action research (PAR) approach to encourage students to take ownership of their learning. Through the PAR approach, students came to understand the value of translational science in driving positive social change as their findings were shared with faculty in the School of Social Work.

While PAR is typically associated with community-based research, I wanted to apply it to the classroom, mainly to engage students in research on adverse child experiences (ACEs) among social work majors at UCF. PAR values the expertise and insights of the individuals involved—in this case, the social work students—creating a more democratic and inclusive research environment that focuses on the perspectives and experiences of those directly affected by the topic. They collaboratively determined their focus of inquiry related to ACEs,

collected data, analyzed results, and developed program recommendations that were shared with faculty. I offered detailed directions for each project step to help students navigate the alignment of course content, assignments, and assessments while maintaining a pace that kept all students engaged. Students submitted drafts of various research study components throughout the semester, such as literature reviews and data analysis. I provided grades and feedback on each submission, helping them refine their work, culminating in a final cohesive product at the end of the semester. Students played an active role in the research process, from the initial project stages to the dissemination of findings. Results from students' ACE inquiry indicated a high incidence of ACEs among social work majors, with 78% reporting at least one ACE and 33% reporting four or more ACEs. Faculty brainstormed ways to weave these insights into creating safe learning environments and trauma-informed educational practices, such as developing self-care plans for all students.

Teaching participatory action research can be quite an adventure, especially when fitting a project into just one academic semester. For course-based PAR to be successful, I needed to effectively engage students from the very beginning, assist them in completing research tasks, and navigate the research process in a timely manner. Initially, many students felt overwhelmed when they received the course syllabus. However, as students realized they could work on a research project that would positively impact their peers in the social work program, their confidence and motivation for conducting research increased. Students reported that the most impactful strategies for their learning process were being able to select and conduct research on a topic of interest, along with weekly check-ins, group work, and dedicated consultation times with me. Additionally, using detailed grading rubrics and my feedback on assignments helped them manage their research anxiety and achieve course expectations. By the end of the semester, course grades showed an improvement in student performance compared to previous semesters. And SPIs indicated increased ratings in all dimensions, particularly in stimulating interest.

Students' direct involvement in the course-based Participatory Action Research project deepened their understanding of the research topic and enhanced their skills in conducting trauma-sensitive inquiries. These experiences equipped them with valuable abilities, enabling them to critically evaluate research studies, formulate insightful questions, and confidently share their findings with others. Furthermore, implementing a course-based PAR project focused on Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) provided students hands-on experience researching sensitive topics. These skills are crucial not only for their academic pursuits but also for their future roles as social workers, where they will need to address complex situations with empathy and analytical rigor to promote positive change for their clients and contribute to the social work field. My next steps include collaborating with the Faculty Center for Teaching and Learning (FCTL) to create a professional development module on implementing trauma-informed pedagogy for faculty and staff to develop effective teaching practices, interventions, and supportive services within higher education.

Empowering and Engaging Students to Thrive in a Global and Fast-Evolving Digital Context

Wei Wei

Wei Wei is Associate Professor and Master's Programs Coordinator at the Rosen College of Hospitality Management. Dedicated to student engagement and learning, she has been recognized with multiple awards, including Excellence in Undergraduate Teaching, Excellence in Graduate Teaching, the Teaching Incentive Program, and the Recognition of Excellence in Diversity and Inclusion.

At the heart of my teaching pedagogy is the commitment to preparing students not only academically but as global citizens who can navigate and excel in a multicultural, rapidly evolving digital landscape. The hospitality industry, by its very nature, is global, requiring professionals who are not only skilled but also culturally competent and technologically adaptive. Recognizing this, I have strategically integrated multicultural experiences and emerging digital tools into the curriculum, fostering an educational environment that broadens students' perspectives and equips them with the skills necessary for a dynamic industry.

A key initiative in this effort was the launch of the University of Central Florida's inaugural "Study Abroad Program to China" in 2017, along with Dr. Cynthia Mejia the Dean of the Rosen College of Hospitality Management — a milestone in providing students with firsthand global experiences. This program was designed to immerse students in a different cultural and business environment, challenging them to apply their learning in real-world international settings. On the one hand, the program was structured around two courses—Culture & Cuisine and Destination Marketing & Management, which provided an academic foundation for their hands-on experiences. On the other hand, the study abroad experience offered students a rich, multifaceted engagement with China's hospitality, tourism, and cultural landscape. Over the three-week program, 21 UCF undergraduate students participated in immersive learning activities across five cities—Beijing, Xi'an, Hangzhou, Suzhou, and Shanghai. Their itinerary included visits to world-class hotels, cultural landmarks, and industry sites, such as Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) hospitals, tea valleys, and heritage museums. Additionally, students attended cross-cultural lectures at four Chinese universities, where they exchanged perspectives with local students and faculty. These activities deepened their understanding of China's tourism and hospitality sector while exposing them to diverse cultural traditions and business practices.

Technology played a critical role in enhancing student engagement and fostering global perspectives throughout this experiential learning experience. Students engaged in daily reflections via the Journi app, responding to instructor-led prompts that connected course objectives with field visits. As such, the Journi app served as a personal learning environment (PLE), enabling students to document experiences, track their reflections, and integrate multimedia elements such as photos and videos. Beyond the journaling component, technology was used to facilitate virtual pre-trip orientations, connect students on the go, and provide interactive discussion forums for continued engagement post-trip. These digital tools not only enriched the study abroad experience but also reinforced the importance of leveraging technology to cultivate global awareness and cross-cultural competencies in an increasingly interconnected world.

The post-trip reflection papers from the study abroad program to China revealed several key learning outcomes (for more details, see Wei, Mejia, & Qi, 2021). Students reported enhanced cultural awareness as their firsthand experiences challenged preconceived notions and deepened their appreciation for Chinese traditions, business etiquette, and culinary diversity. They also gained industry and career insights, particularly in the hospitality and tourism sectors, which expanded their perspectives on global career opportunities. Many students highlighted personal and academic growth, citing improved adaptability, problem-solving skills, and confidence in navigating unfamiliar environments. Additionally, while the app was widely appreciated for its user-friendly interface and ability to create a digital travel journal, students also highlighted technological constraints, occasional connectivity

issues, and the fatigue of maintaining daily reflections. Overall, students found the program transformative, increasing their interest in future international experiences and fostering a more globalized mindset.

I won't deny that organizing and facilitating a short-term study abroad program came with significant logistical and pedagogical challenges. Developing this program required extensive planning, collaboration with global partners, and the creation of a curriculum that balanced structured academic learning with experiential opportunities. While students were eager to engage, language differences sometimes limited deeper interactions. Creating a program that was both academically rigorous and adaptable to on-the-ground experiences required careful planning. Unforeseen changes, such as weather disruptions or scheduling conflicts, reinforced the importance of flexibility. Some students initially struggled with cultural differences, food preferences, and intensive travel schedules. Providing structured debriefs and peer support mechanisms helped students adapt more smoothly. That said, the success of the program (helping to earn UCF's Recognition of Excellence in Diversity and Inclusion), underscored the transformative impact of experiential learning, preparing students to navigate diverse global environments with confidence, curiosity, and cultural intelligence. Moving forward, integrating technology-driven reflection tools, expanding interdisciplinary collaborations, and enhancing cultural immersion strategies will be key to further enriching study abroad experiences.

Beyond study abroad, I have worked to embed global perspectives and cultural literacy directly into classroom learning. By incorporating case studies on international hospitality markets, discussing HR practices across different nations, and inviting guest speakers from diverse backgrounds such as China, India, Turkey, and Dubai, I have cultivated an inclusive learning environment that reflects the complexities of the modern workforce. Students gain exposure to different business practices, traditions, and consumer behaviors, enhancing their ability to work effectively across cultures.

Finally, as hospitality and related fields embrace automation, artificial intelligence, and data-driven decision-making, it is essential that education evolves in parallel. Recognizing this, I have proactively integrated emerging trends and technologies into my regular classrooms, fostering a learning environment that is both engaging and future-ready. One of the key innovations in my teaching has been the introduction of AI-driven tools, such as ChatGPT in HR practices, to enhance critical thinking, problem-solving, and digital literacy. These tools expose students to real-world applications of artificial intelligence, encouraging them to explore its implications and risks in hospitality management. Gamification has been another transformative element in my approach. By collaborating with instructional designers, I have developed course materials that incorporate interactive simulations, case-based learning, and game mechanics to improve student engagement and retention. These methods not only make learning more immersive but also align with modern pedagogical strategies that emphasize experiential learning and adaptability. Students have reported increased engagement, deeper understanding, and greater confidence in applying digital tools to real-world scenarios. Such efforts were notably recognized by an invitation from Dr. Aimee deNoyelles to feature in an entry for the CDL website, highlighting our adherence to current teaching trends.

Reflecting on this journey, the transformative power of global perspective and constant innovation is undeniable. The challenges encountered—from integrating emerging technologies and fostering cultural competence to ensuring curriculum relevance in a rapidly evolving industry—have reinforced my commitment to teaching excellence, student empowerment, and lifelong learning. Education extends beyond imparting knowledge; it is about inspiring changes, fostering global citizens, and shaping future leaders in hospitality and beyond. By continuously refining teaching methodologies, integrating new technologies, and expanding experiential learning opportunities, I strive to create a dynamic and inclusive learning environment that prepares students for the complexities of a digital, interconnected world. The journey of teaching excellence is ongoing, driven by the aspiration to innovate, inspire, and make a lasting impact on students, the academic community, and the industry.

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From Red to Green: Guiding Transparent AI Use in Higher Education

Michelle Kelley and Taylar Wenzel

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While Artificial Intelligence (AI) is not new, the recent advances in generative AI tools have made it more visible and prevalent in our personal and professional lives. As the printing press did in the 15th century, AI is poised to reshape our everyday lives (Ball, 2023). In our role preparing pre-service and in-service teachers, we can't ignore the impact AI has had and will continue to have on education (Marino et al., 2023).

Recognizing that we were behind the curve, we realized that we needed to bring AI into our courses. We began our journey by increasing our own AI literacy as faculty, including using it more frequently for a variety of tasks, critiquing its outputs, evaluating different AI tools, and attending professional development opportunities hosted by the UCF's FCTL and the professional organizations in which we belong. We learned about Large Language Models, prompting, hallucinations, ethical concerns, existing policies, and guidelines for transparency related to AI. This article describes our learning, including how we adapted and are employing a stoplight framework for transparent AI use in our teacher preparation courses.

In 2024, we participated in the FCTL Summer Institute as part of the Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) track. This opportunity offered us the time, space, and interactions with other UCF faculty to expand our own AI literacy. It also prompted us to develop a path of inquiry related to how AI could be meaningfully integrated into our teacher preparation coursework. During the institute, our WAC leader, Laurie Pinkert, provided us with numerous resources and facilitated our conversations around AI. One topic that cut across all disciplines was the need to make AI use more transparent by providing students with clear expectations and guidelines for when to and when not to use it. The principles of the Rome Call for AI Ethics (2024) emphasized the need for transparency in the development of AI systems, especially in research, education, and workforce development. When instructors make learning processes more transparent, it benefits students and increases predictors of student success in college (Winkelmes et al., 2019). Transparent instruction includes faculty-led discussion before students undertake work grounded in the purpose of the work, what they will gain from the work, the tasks involved, examples, and real-world applications (Winkelmes et al., 2019).

Christopher Randles, an Associate Professor of Chemistry, was in our WAC track, and he shared the stoplight concept with us and how he has been using it with students to promote AI transparency. The stoplight framework is one way to promote AI use and transparency with students in his department (Mormando, 2023). The stoplight concept offers a visual image to alert students to the acceptable use of AI for assignments that include three levels: red, yellow, and green. Each color represents a category that corresponds to transparent AI use. The goal of the spotlight is to teach students responsible AI usage and empower them with the knowledge and understanding needed to make ethical choices. Some assignments may use more than one stoplight, such as when an assignment has multiple parts. Therefore, it is important to clearly articulate your expectations for AI usage which should be differentiated based on the task and desired learning goal.

The red light indicates that AI usage is prohibited, and all work must be completed without AI assistance. An assignment with a red light alerts students that the work they produce should be original and include their own thoughts and ideas. An instructor can communicate this directly using the language noted in Table 1. Assignments that may fit in this category include quizzes, tests, performance tasks, and short responses that are designed to assess a student's knowledge and skills related to a specific topic or content.

The yellow light means AI can be used but with instructor guidance and permission (Mormando, 2023). Tasks that fit in the yellow category might include a student using an AI tool for part of an assignment or task, but not the whole assignment. Therefore, this level of use requires the instructor to clearly delineate when and how a student can use an AI application. For example, a student might use AI to brainstorm or provide feedback on an essay outline or a first draft; however, the final paper should be their original work. GrammarlyTM offers another example of an AI yellow light tool to assist students. AI yellow light tasks that can enhance and support a student include but are not limited to brainstorming, revising, planning, correcting, providing translation, and feedback. Group activities, case studies, and long-term projects are assignments that can also fit into this category.

In the stoplight model, the green light means AI use is allowed and even anticipated. Since AI use is encouraged with this level of use, students need instruction on how to evaluate content generated and how to credit AI for ideas and use, including how to cite AI. Assignments in this category typically involve writing, design tasks, and research projects, in addition to the tasks previously described for the level of AI use within the yellow light.

Table 1 Stoplight Framework for AI Use

AI Use	Stoplight	AI Disclosure Expectations	Potential Teacher Language
No AI Use	Red	May require an academic honesty pledge.	"AI cannot be used for this assignment. All work must be original, and use of AI will be considered plagiarism."
AI-Assisted Idea Generation & Editing	Yellow	AI disclosure statement must include specifying AI use.	"AI use can be employed for _____, but in your final submission, _____ should be your own work."
AI Use for Assignment Content Generation	Green	AI use must be cited using APA (or other citation style)	"AI use is permissible to complete this assignment (with attribution)."

In an effort to integrate AI into our curriculum and develop consistency across courses and programs in our department, we are initiating discussions with our colleagues to innovate and empower responsible use of AI. We offer these questions as potential springboards for future learning and research:

- How prepared are our future graduates to address AI literacy in their content?
- How might AI reshape roles and responsibilities for recent and future graduates in their career settings?
- What training and support will our current students need, and how will these needs be continually reassessed at the rate of technological advancement?
- Are our faculty, current students, and recent graduates prepared for a future where AI is ubiquitous in personal and professional contexts?

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Empowering Autistic Students Through Faculty Engagement and Support

Dawn Turnage & Missy Radecki

Dawn Turnage is Assistant Professor and a four-time UCF College of Nursing alumna. Her research focuses on the health of parental caregivers of children with autism spectrum disorder. In addition to her autism-related research, Dawn works tirelessly to improve the lives of caregivers and individuals with autism spectrum disorder through service on leadership boards for national and international autism organizations.

Melissa " Missy" Radecki is Lecturer and Director of the BSN program. She is an experienced nurse educator at the undergraduate and graduate levels, with significant adult critical care experience. She is a National Council Licensure Examination (NCLEX) item writer and an expert on NCLEX preparation and the Next Generation NCLEX. Radecki' s dissertation research focused on inclusive learning for students with disabilities, and she is an expert in nursing pedagogy, including curriculum and instructional design.

Autism is a developmental condition that can affect social skills, behavior, and executive functioning skills. Autism occurs on a spectrum and each autistic individual will require different support needs. In an academic setting, faculty and staff can support students to be successful by recognizing areas where support is required, providing individual academic success plans, creating accessible courses and course material, seeking existing campus resources, and empowering students to advocate for themselves.

Prevalence

The prevalence of autism in the United States has steadily been increasing over the past several years. This is due, in part, to better diagnostic testing, awareness of autism, and reduction of the stigma of diagnosis. Currently, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention report that 1 in 36 children is diagnosed with autism. With this increased prevalence, it can be assumed that the prevalence of college students with autism is also significant; however, there are challenges in arriving at an exact number because students may be undiagnosed and because disability disclosure is voluntary for students.

Levels of Support Needs

Autism is diagnosed by support needs in three levels: Level 1: Low support needs; Level 2: Moderate support needs; and Level 3: Significant support needs. While it is important to note, as previously mentioned, that everyone with autism will have nuanced presentation of their condition and all students will have different needs unique to their own place on the spectrum, here are some generalized examples:

Level 1
These students may have difficulty forming relationships with peers, may have difficulty with changes to routines, may have concrete or literal thinking, may miss social cues, and may have difficulty with executive functioning skills. These students can usually navigate these challenges with support.

Level 2
These students may have these same challenges, but to a greater extent. They may have greater social and communication challenges, more adherence to routine, and may have difficulty regulating emotions. These students require a moderate amount of support.

Level 3
These students may be non-verbal or minimally verbal and require life-long 24/7 support to perform daily care and routine tasks. These students will need significant support and may need communication devices and 1-to-1 caregivers.

Undiagnosed Or Self-Diagnosed
In addition to students diagnosed with autism, we may have undiagnosed or self-diagnosed students. This is especially prevalent in college-aged, young adult students who are becoming independent and self-aware. These students may have had barriers to healthcare or may have had parents or guardians who were fearful of the stigma of getting a formal diagnosis of autism. Self-diagnosis of autism can be an important step in a young adult's journey toward recognizing their own behaviors and accepting the possibility of autism, however, self-diagnosis does not replace a formal diagnosis of autism. Undiagnosed or self-diagnosed students may need resources to help them obtain a diagnosis and receive support. Because student disclosure of any disability is not mandatory, we may have students who are not willing to disclose their diagnosis of autism due to fear of stigma or invasion of their privacy. Students with a documented diagnosis of autism may be eligible for accommodations that an undiagnosed individual may not be eligible for. Faculty can provide a supportive environment and discuss available resources for these students. We can encourage students to seek the resources that they need by ensuring the student that confidentiality will be maintained and that support services will contribute to their academic success.

Is it "Autistic" or "Person with Autism?"
While professionals prefer person-first language, like "students with autism," and use this language to respect the individual, many individuals with autism prefer to use identity-first language, such as "autistic students." Identity-first language is used by the autistic community to denote that autism is part of their identity and is seen by that community as a form of empowerment. Identity-first language may be preferred by autistic students. Faculty can show respect and support for students by asking their language preferences.

Some Common Challenges and Faculty Best Practices for Support
We will discuss some common challenges here; however, it is important to restate that autistic students are all unique and each student may have different barriers and support needs. Faculty can best support autistic students by meeting with them individually to determine the student's specific challenges, and what, if any, support and accommodations are needed. Development of a support plan with student input can empower students and promote academic success. The best support plan for an autistic university student is individualized, created jointly with student input, and makes good use of existing campus resources.

Common Challenges

Communication and Social Interaction
Autistic students may face challenges with communication and social interaction in both in-person and online classroom settings. They may have difficulty interpreting social cues, communicating their needs, and participating in spontaneous conversation. They may also have difficulty with abstract concepts and often prefer concrete or literal thinking. Autistic students may struggle with inferred instructions, requiring more explicit directions. These challenges can be a barrier to forming peer relationships and participating in class discussions or group work.

Faculty can assist by providing clear communication, asking students if they prefer individual or group work, and making sure that group activities are well structured with defined roles for all participants.

Executive Functioning
Executive functioning challenges include difficulty with planning, organizing, time management, studying for exams, and prioritizing tasks. Autistic students may also have a strong preference for routine and may struggle when presented with changes to a class schedule, exam format, or assignment instructions. Faculty can assist by adhering to a routine and schedule, as appropriate. They can also provide visual support like calendars or checklists, to support students to stay on track. Scaffolding large projects or assignments by breaking them into smaller tasks with clear deadlines can also eliminate procrastination, stress, and anxiety. University counseling resources and academic success coaches can also provide support outside of the classroom.

Sensory needs
Sensory needs for students can include sensitivity to light, sound, texture, small, or even crowded spaces. These sensitivities can lead to distraction or anxiety, which can impede a student's ability to focus or participate in class. Faculty can support students by creating a sensory-friendly learning environment. This might include dimming lighting, allowing students to use noise-cancelling headphones, or allowing students to take small breaks away from the classroom. If there is a quiet study space in the building, that might be an ideal place to allow students to take a sensory break.

Resources Specific to UCF

Student Accessibility Services (SAS)
SAS serves students with disabilities to ensure that their experiences on campus and in the classroom are accessible and equitable, ensuring student success. Students can file a request for accommodations here. There are also resources for transitioning to graduate school and assistance with career services. Faculty can also use this resource to seek help on course accessibility and accommodation offerings.

The UCF Center for Autism and Related Disabilities (CARD)
CARD is a state-funded organization that can consult with autistic individuals to provide a list of available community resources. Additionally, CARD offers workshops and events for individuals with autism, families, and providers. Faculty and staff can seek resources for students and can also ask CARD for department specific presentations on serving students with autism.

Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS)
CAPS provides free services to students including crisis services, managing social situations or academic difficulties, or adjustment to college. They offer one-on-one sessions, group sessions, and referrals to local providers for long-term care. Faculty can use this resource to refer students in need of counseling and support.

Conclusion
We are fortunate to have an inclusive campus that respects autistic individuals and supports them to be successful and to contribute to the UCF community. Faculty at UCF can further assist by being aware of students' unique needs and referring students to the appropriate resources to help guide them. We can also encourage self-efficacy by supporting autistic students to build a network of family, friends, faculty, and peers. Empowering our students to seek out these services and to build relationships can help them to successfully navigate academic and personal challenges they may encounter during their time at UCF.

Breaking the Mold: How Universal Design Unleashes Student Potential

Martha Hubertz, Adam Meyer, & Florence Williams

Martha Hubertz is a social psychologist and Associate Lecturer in the Psychology Department. She teaches social psychology and several diversity courses as well as research methods. Dr. Hubertz has been recognized on numerous occasions for her innovative approaches to teaching.

Adam Meyer is Executive Director of Student Accessibility Services and of Inclusive Education Services at UCF with past experience at Eastern Michigan University and at Saint Louis University. Adam is on the Association for Higher Education and Disability (AHEAD) Board of Directors.

Florence Williams is an Instructional Designer with the Center for Distributed Learning where she provides faculty development, coaching, mentoring, and the design and development of online and blended courses. Florence has also worked in several faculty development roles to promote quality, technology, and curriculum integration.

Designing for All: The Universal Learning Blueprint: Florence Williams

Universal design began in the built environment with ramps and sidewalk cutouts. Originally designed for wheelchair access, these architectural features now benefit everyone from parents with strollers to workers with loaded hand trucks and busy householders with loaded shopping carts. Just as these ramps remove physical barriers and enhance the shopping experience for all customers, UDL principles create flexible learning environments that accommodate diverse learners. Like an entrance with both steps and a ramp offering multiple paths to the same destination, UDL provides varied ways for students to engage with content, demonstrate knowledge, and reach learning goals.

Strategic course design through UDL represents a proactive approach to inclusive education that supports diverse learners through intentional flexibility. The work of CAST (2024) provides an updated framework for course design through three essential principles: multiple means of engagement, representation, and action & expression. The framework centers physical access, meaningful learner engagement or support and cognitive access or executive function and identifies the roles of faculty and students in the learning process. Rao (2021) demonstrates that successful UDL implementation begins the same way as backward design, starting with course objectives and systematically building multiple pathways for achievement through instructional methodology.

An essential goal of UDL is to support the development of agency and self-awareness, allowing students to become “expert learners” on their learning journeys. These are the attributes of expert learners that correspond to the three UDL principles (Meyer et al., 2014). Research indicates that implementing UDL principles during initial course development, rather than as retroactive accommodations leads to improved learning outcomes across student populations (Ok & Rao, 2019). A framework based on presence, empathy, awareness, and trust (Pacansky-Brock et al., 2020) emphasizes emotional connection through UDL to support all learners, especially those from historically marginalized groups (Williams, 2024). Building on Ok and Rao’s framework, effective UDL assessment strategies include multiple formats for demonstrating mastery, embedded formative assessment opportunities, and clear rubrics that focus on learning objectives rather than delivery methods.

Studies on student engagement in higher education (Ferguson, 2019) show that incorporating choice and autonomy optimizes motivation and persistence. For instance, allowing students to select personalized research topics while maintaining core learning objectives increased both engagement and achievement metrics when compared to traditional assigned topics (Goodwin et al, 2022). This flexibility in topic selection exemplifies how UDL principles can be practically implemented while maintaining academic rigor.

Content representation requires particular attention to cognitive learning science. Rao's (2021) research on universal design for learning demonstrates that students retain information more effectively when exposed to strategically layered content delivery methods. This aligns with earlier findings (Mayer, 2011) showing that complementary presentation formats support deeper processing and understanding. The key is to provide multiple entry points to course content while maintaining clear learning objectives.

Moving from content design to assessment, course evaluation requires systematic feedback mechanisms. Student feedback can demonstrate the effectiveness of implementing multiple feedback channels and can show how diverse methods capture a broader range of student experiences and needs. This iterative approach allows for continuous refinement of course design elements. Assessment design through UDL moves beyond traditional accommodations. It is important to maintain consistent learning objectives while varying demonstration methods to increase student success rates and satisfaction scores.

With a solid foundation in assessment, educators can then consider how technology supports these goals. Technology integration should follow pedagogical goals rather than drive them (Banes & Behnke, 2019). While digital tools can enhance UDL implementation, the findings suggest that simple, low-tech approaches often prove equally effective. The key lies in strategic alignment with learning objectives rather than technological sophistication.

Gradual UDL implementation proves more successful than attempting comprehensive overhaul. A systematic approach to implementation includes:

- **Analysis:** Begin by evaluating one course component through the UDL lens, identifying existing elements that already support diverse learners
- **Enhancement:** Build upon successful elements by adding one additional means of engagement, representation, or expression
- **Integration:** Systematically incorporate new UDL strategies based on student feedback and observed outcomes

This measured approach ensures lasting change and meaningful integration of UDL principles, allowing faculty to refine their practice while maintaining course quality and academic precision.

Beyond Accommodations: The UDL Advantage: Adam Meyer

UCF's Student Accessibility Services (SAS) works with nearly 4,000 students every calendar year. These students account for nearly 6% of the UCF student body. Interestingly, these 4,000 students are taught by over 80% of faculty who teach at least one course each semester, and they enroll in over 50% of all semester courses. SAS emails approximately 8,000 course accommodation letters every semester.

While faculty tend to view the goal of SAS as being to facilitate the "right" accommodation in a course, the focus is much broader. The purpose of SAS, and of an accommodation, is to ensure that a disabled student experiences equal access and opportunity in a course relative to other students. A student accommodation is one means of facilitating equal access. When a student with a disability receives extra time for exams, the extra time allows the student to complete the exam without time being a major barrier, which creates the same access and opportunity that other students have during an exam. The student's exam grade thus becomes a reflection of their course knowledge. If the student with the disability did not have extra time for the test and failed the exam because a

significant portion was not completed, the exam grade would be a reflection of the student's disability and not their exam knowledge.

SAS facilitates accommodation in the classroom to address the limitations of the course design, not the limitations of the student (the disability). Accommodation fixes the course, not the student. It is the design of the course that determines how accessible (or not) the course is for the disabled student and every other student in the class. It is the design of the course that determines whether accommodation must be applied. When a course includes universal design elements, the need for accommodation will often be reduced. For example,

- If a course does not have tests, then extra time for exams is not necessary.
- When professors offer large blocks of time to complete assignments and projects, a lesser need exists for deadline flexibility.
- When lectures are recorded and posted online or professors share PowerPoint slides with all students, students with disabilities are less likely to need notetaking as an accommodation.
- Professors who only include videos with built-in captioning and course materials that are digitally accessible reduce the need for reactive accommodations to make this content accessible for select disabled students.

There will always be a need for certain accommodations for equal access, such as ASL interpreters and live captioning. However, universally designed courses naturally offer equal access and opportunity for all students in most situations while creating a more dynamic and meaningful academic experience.

Furthermore, UDL principles naturally support students who require Attendance, Exam and Assignment Adjustment (AEAA), accommodations (UCF, n.d.) by building flexibility into course design from the start. Multiple means of engagement and expression, such as offering varied assessment formats, flexible deadlines for non-time-critical assignments, and hybrid attendance options—can reduce the need for individual accommodations during disability-related flare-ups (Harris & Yearta, 2019). Recording lectures, providing materials in advance, and creating asynchronous participation options ensure continuity of learning when students cannot attend in person. This proactive approach maintains academic rigor while reducing barriers for students with chronic conditions, ultimately benefiting all learners through increased autonomy and accessibility.

From Theory to Practice: A Faculty Journey with UDL: Martha Hubertz

As a passionate educator and researcher at UCF, I have dedicated my career to enhancing the learning experiences of my students. When I first started teaching large upper-division psychology courses at UCF, I quickly realized the traditional one-size-fits-all approach wouldn't serve my diverse student population. This became even more apparent during the COVID-19 pandemic, when students might be absent for weeks while recovering from illness. My classroom was a vibrant mix of experiences—transfer students adapting to a new academic environment, student-athletes balancing rigorous training schedules, military personnel managing unexpected deployments, and working professionals juggling 40-hour workweeks with academic responsibilities.

The turning point came when I noticed that student struggles weren't about ability or effort—they stemmed from navigating multiple life commitments while adapting to upper-division coursework. A student-athlete would miss critical discussions due to early practice sessions, while a working parent taking online classes struggled to participate in traditional group projects. One particularly memorable case involved a military student whose deployment schedule meant missing almost a third of the semester. These scenarios demanded a more flexible, inclusive approach that maintained academic rigor while accommodating real-world challenges.

Universal Design transformed my teaching methodology. Instead of reactive accommodations, I built flexibility into the course foundation. I created multiple pathways to understanding. Video lectures included captions and transcripts, benefiting both students with hearing impairments and those studying during work breaks. Interactive

case studies could be completed individually or in groups, accommodating both traditional students and those with unpredictable schedules or unforeseen issues like illness.

For assessments, I implemented flexible deadlines with clear parameters—allowing students to choose from large submission windows while maintaining course pacing. I also drop a score in each grading category, so students have a cushion if they need it. This particularly helped my student-athletes during away games and working students during peak business seasons. All assignments offered flexibility and encouraged students to stay on track but allowed a cushion for those where life got in the way. Assignments were redesigned to allow group interaction without relying on group members that might fall ill or be unable to participate. These weren't compromises in academic standards—they were opportunities for all students to engage more deeply with the material through their unique perspectives.

The pedagogical benefits extended beyond accommodation. Transfer students found multiple content delivery methods helped them bridge preparation gaps. Students needing accommodations through SAS or Title IX had flexibility built in from day one. Students without specific accommodation needs reported feeling more engaged and successful when they could approach the material in ways that matched their learning preferences. And this allowed students with chronic health issues or accidents to be able to bounce back.

From a faculty perspective, this approach streamlined my teaching. Building flexibility into courses from the start reduced the need for individual modifications. When challenges arose—like a student's sudden work schedule change or an athlete's tournament conflict—the course structure already offered solutions. This proactive design meant spending less time on administrative adjustments and more time supporting student learning.

The Impact manifested in concrete ways. Course completion rates improved across all student demographics. Student feedback highlighted increased engagement and reduced stress about managing course requirements with external commitments. Perhaps most significantly, students demonstrated stronger mastery of complex psychological concepts when they could engage with the material in ways that accommodated their life circumstances.

This journey has reshaped my understanding of effective teaching. Universal Design isn't about lowering standards—it's about removing unnecessary barriers to learning. When we design courses that recognize and support diverse life experiences, we create an environment where all students can excel. The diversity in my classroom has become a strength, enriching discussions and deepening understanding through varied perspectives and experiences.

UDL shifts education from a one-size-fits-all model to an inherently inclusive approach that serves all learners.

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Centering Career Services to Reframe Traditional Educational Values

Sharon Woodill & Emily Flositz

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Thesis: Career Services can articulate a modern educational philosophy that aligns academic traditions with contemporary demands

Contemporary Competencies Embody Traditional Educational Values

In a recent podcast episode with a renowned software engineer, AI researcher Lex Fridman (who holds a PhD in computer science) and his guest lamented about the current state of universities citing the strong censorial atmosphere within liberal academia aimed to silence dissent against liberal positions on a host of cultural issues from free speech to diversity and inclusion policies and politics (Lex Clips, 2025). This sentiment is now familiar to regular consumers of mainstream (and not so mainstream) media that rails against 'useless' or even harmful subject matter being taught, the freeloading "laziness" of tenured professors, the isolation of higher ed institutions from the checks and balances that police conventional workplaces, and the bloated administration driving up tuition with little tangible payoff for students and taxpayers left with increasingly large bills. While this certainly is not a comprehensive list of complaints, the point stands: in the minds of many across the broader social spectrum, universities are broken. While skepticism of higher education is not new, the current intensity and breadth of criticism paired with new innovative political interventions present unique challenges (Bogost, 2024).

Response to the onslaught of critiques has varied. Some administrators reprise the age-old adage that universities are important institutions and indispensable progenitors of light, truth, wisdom, and knowledge (Sonnefeld, 2025). Faculty have banded together to compose statements decrying political interference into higher education (American Association of University Professors, 2024), initiate legal challenges to state-mandated policy interventions (Kumar, 2023), and marshal evidence-based defenses to attacks on programs addressing racial and other equity issues (Liwanag, 2024). The rise of interdisciplinarity within academia is a chronicle of the prolonged

adaptation of higher education in response to demands of various social factions that the knowledge accrued within academia and supported largely by state funding be leveraged to address the complex issues facing society—arguably the primary investors in public education (Callahan, 2020).

Despite the turmoil, enrolment in higher education appears to be trending upward (Nietzel, 2024, Quintana, 2024, Swirsky, 2025), suggesting that its value is perceptible amidst the now familiar rhetoric. Here, it would be preaching to the choir to recount the multifarious good that higher ed proffers; however, the value of higher ed is, evidently, not self-evident to many outside of the towers of academia. If we, as academics, truly believe in the value of our work and institutions, it behooves us to seek a more empathetic perspective of the criticism we face rather than engage in the cultural warfare and contribute to the discord that is dividing our worlds and sowing conflict while possibility, ultimately, contributing to our own demise. We might, instead, seek to broker a new arrangement apt for the contemporary world and in harmony with the broader communities in which we are deeply entangled.

Career Services departments and programs have traditionally operated on the periphery of academic institutions, viewed as an optional student resource rather than an integral component of the educational mission, but this is changing (NACE, 2019; Gary, 2023). Career Services now provides much more than just job banks and resume reviews. Along with a host of cutting edge digital tools to help prepare students for the workforce, Career Services, here at UCF and in many institutions nationally and internationally, are deeply engaged in a network of initiatives and organizations committed to bridging universities and the workforce.

Through this work, a modern educational philosophy that aligns academic traditions with contemporary demands is emerging, and Career Services might now, more than ever, serve a pivotal role in reshaping higher education during this time of upheaval. Bringing Career Services from the periphery to the center can serve three vital functions: it can expose and highlight the existing value inherent within higher education across all the disciplines; it can enhance that value through strategic partnerships and programs designed to elevate academic programs and activities; and it can serve as a crucial liaison between academic institutions and society's evolving needs. These roles can implicitly and explicitly extol the value of higher education while mitigating the impact of assaults.

The National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE), one of the innovators in this work, has developed a competency-based framework for aligning curriculum with industry needs, and they have become integral to operations in Career Services. Their work is rooted in validated research and boasts a full complement of implementation, assessment, and innovation tools. These competencies include career and self-development, communication, critical thinking, equity and inclusion, leadership, professionalism, teamwork and technology.

On the surface, these competencies appear to be specifically for careers; however, it is easy to understand how these competencies are central to growth and development from a more holistic educational perspective and represent long-standing educational values. For instance, critical thinking and communication have been cornerstones of classical education since ancient times, aimed at creating engaged citizens capable of participating in democratic discourse. In our contemporary context, these skills take on new dimensions. Critical thinking entails substantial open-mindedness because knowledge work now demands the ability to navigate an overwhelming flow of information and multifarious perspectives from wide-ranging political, cultural, and scientific domains (Woodill, 2025). "Equity and Inclusion" as a core competency particularly reflects how traditional educational values have evolved to meet contemporary challenges, and it demands significant facility with empathy and intellectual courage (Woodill, 2025). Where classical education might have emphasized universal truths and common humanity, today's framework requires academic orientations that explicitly recognize the importance of engaging with diverse worldviews and actively working toward just solutions for all. These competencies represent a crucial evolution of the traditional educational goal of creating ethical, socially responsible individuals while retaining the long-standing values of education that seeks to foster good people, good societies, and good knowledge.

Similarly, the "technology" and "career and self-development" competencies might initially seem purely professional, but they can easily be read as a reframing of traditional educational emphasis on mastering the essential tools of the age and embodying the classical ideal of lifelong learning, cultivated curiosity, and self-

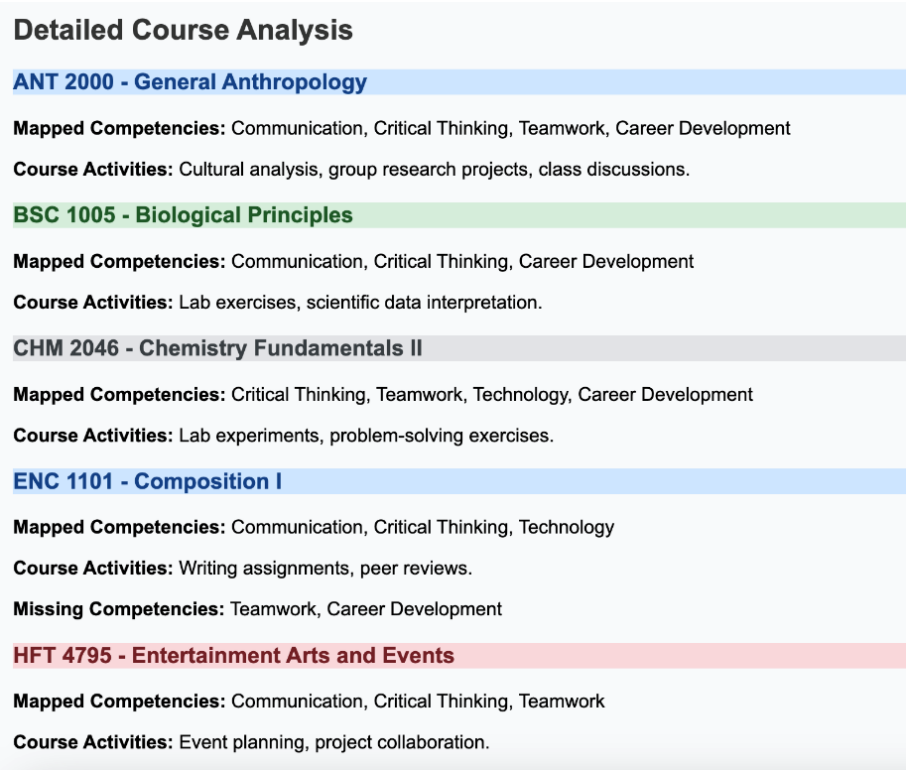
knowledge. Moreover, these competencies offer agility and adaptability as foundational to learning environments which are more aligned with the dynamic nature of contemporary life as opposed to focusing heavily on information transfer in an era where information is coming fast and furiously, changing rapidly, and is often overwhelming and difficult to manage.

Beyond merely building technical proficiency, the competency framework prioritizes the development of wisdom and compassion to understand how knowledge, science, and technology impact human experience and society, echoing traditional educational concerns about the relationship between knowledge and human flourishing. In our rapidly changing world, the ability to continuously learn and adapt is not just a career skill; it is essential for meaningful participation in civic life and personal growth. Put more succinctly, adaptability is a matter of survival.

Identifying and Showcasing Inherent Value of Higher Education

Traditional higher education does not necessarily need to be reinvented, but it may need to be reframed and opened to evolution as it adapts to modern pressures. Many aspects of the competencies identified above already have roots in the traditional academic curriculum. Centering Career Services would be exceptionally beneficial in this regard because this investment in the competency framework provides tools to identify and articulate the ways in which curriculum already cultivates these competencies. In this way, Career Services affirm the inherent value in higher education and the faculty facilitating this work.

In an examination of a random selection of UCF syllabi (from the spring 2025 semester) publicly available via the Simple Syllabus platform, the following competencies can be identified across different disciplines and course types (See Figure below).



Detailed Course Analysis

ANT 2000 - General Anthropology

Mapped Competencies: Communication, Critical Thinking, Teamwork, Career Development

Course Activities: Cultural analysis, group research projects, class discussions.

BSC 1005 - Biological Principles

Mapped Competencies: Communication, Critical Thinking, Career Development

Course Activities: Lab exercises, scientific data interpretation.

CHM 2046 - Chemistry Fundamentals II

Mapped Competencies: Critical Thinking, Teamwork, Technology, Career Development

Course Activities: Lab experiments, problem-solving exercises.

ENC 1101 - Composition I

Mapped Competencies: Communication, Critical Thinking, Technology

Course Activities: Writing assignments, peer reviews.

Missing Competencies: Teamwork, Career Development

HFT 4795 - Entertainment Arts and Events

Mapped Competencies: Communication, Critical Thinking, Teamwork

Course Activities: Event planning, project collaboration.

Figure 1: NACE competencies identified in syllabi analysis. *The syllabi analysis in this example utilized a custom GPT created in Open AI. The process and specifications of this analyzer tool are detailed in the technical report. See Akiyama and Woodill, 2024.

Syllabus information is not necessarily complete or comprehensive, yet, despite its limitations, a base level of curriculum alignment with NACE competencies is apparent with each of these courses clearly aligning with multiple competencies. In Anthropology 2000, for example, class discussions, group research projects and cultural

analysis align with communication, critical thinking and teamwork. In Entertainment Arts and Events (HFT 4795), event planning and project collaborations align with Teamwork and Communication. A philosophy professor using Socratic discussion methods simultaneously develops critical thinking, oral communication, and professionalism competencies. When students engage in peer review of writing assignments, they build both written communication skills and teamwork capabilities. A biology laboratory course utilizing group research projects naturally incorporates technology, teamwork, leadership, and career management as students document their findings and manage project timelines. By mapping academic experiences to these research-validated competencies, educators can demonstrate the value of traditional pedagogies in a Career Services context. Affirming this value is especially important for humanities as they are the longstanding recipients of criticism and chronic devaluation.

At this stage, the objective is to frame the significant work of researchers and educators in ways that broadcast the value of higher education for the contemporary workforce while retaining traditional educational values. Faculty should be encouraged to map existing pedagogical approaches to these competencies. Career Services offers multiple tools for this exercise. In my courses, regardless of the course topic or content, assignments contain a "connecting to careers" section (see Figure 2) The icons in this section are linked directly to the NACE website so students can access information about the competencies they are developing. This framework serves as a universal language that bridges the gap between academic experiences and workplace demands, highlighting how courses across the disciplines develop crucial professional competencies regardless of their specific subject matter.

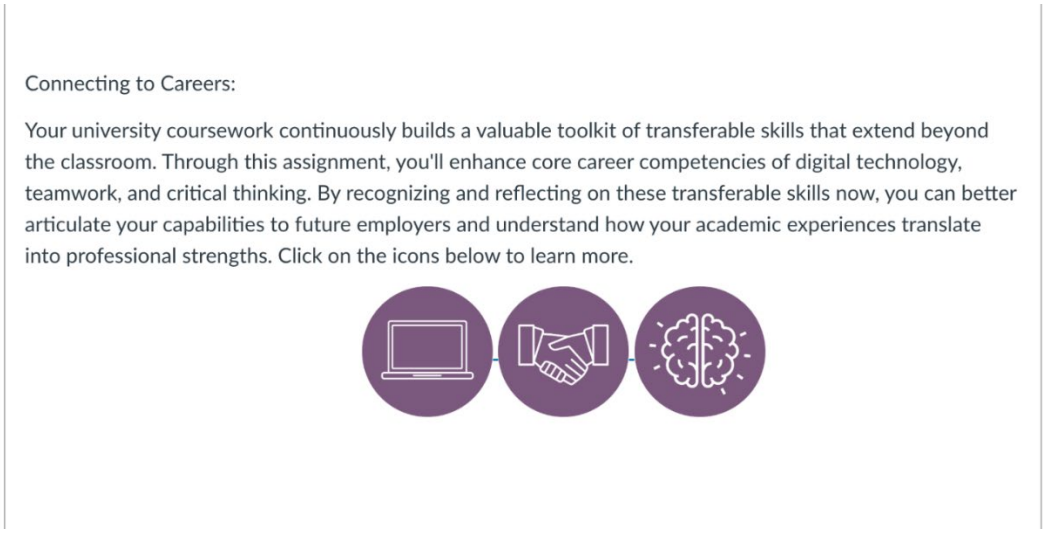


Figure 2: Connect to careers assignment example.

Tweaking Curriculum to Add Value

Beyond identifying and highlighting the inherent value of higher education, Career Services offers a host of resources for tweaking curriculum to include more competency-specific content. These tweaks may include making competency-aligned course content more visible, including more content that explicitly engages career readiness, or including assessment tools for faculty to assess the effectiveness of their curriculum for competency development. Career Services has robust resources for all of these and utilizing their offerings and expertise can significantly enhance curriculum alignment to promote inherent and created value of higher education without necessarily creating undue burden on faculty. The following are just a few examples of what they have to offer here at UCF.

Career Services Toolkit is a self-enrollment Webcourse available to all faculty (Link to CS Toolkit). This course contains a suite of tools including lesson plans, presentations, assignment ideas, and ready-made career-readiness

modules and assignments that faculty can simply insert into their curriculum. These tools are designed to help students connect their classroom experience to their careers. This toolkit also serves as a hub for posting announcements of upcoming events including talks, workshops and other initiatives. This resource also offers assessment tools for faculty to assess and iterate their curriculum. This course is updated regularly, and its content reflects the integration of ideas and feedback from faculty along with findings from research and experiences of career services experts.

The University of Central Florida's Career Services website offers a comprehensive suite of digital resources tailored to support faculty (and students, of course). One of the primary tools available is Handshake, a dynamic platform that facilitates job and internship searches, event registrations, and appointment scheduling with career counselors (Link to Handshake.) Faculty can use Handshake to view job and internship postings, check out upcoming events from Career Services, Experiential Learning, Office of Undergraduate Research, and Academic Advancement Programs. Students can utilize Handshake to explore a myriad of opportunities and connect with potential employers, while faculty can recommend this platform to students as a centralized hub for career-related activities.

Additionally, the website provides multiple professional development digital resources such as VMock, an innovative SMART platform designed to assist users in enhancing their resumes, cover letters, and LinkedIn profiles. VMock offers instant feedback, ensuring that application materials meet industry standards and effectively showcase individual strengths. This resource is particularly beneficial for students preparing to enter the job market and for faculty advising students on professional document preparation. Moreover, the site features a calendar of upcoming events, including workshops and career fairs, which serve as valuable opportunities for skill development and networking. By leveraging these digital resources, both students and faculty can stay informed and proactive in navigating the evolving landscape of career planning and professional growth. Beyond typical career applications, these resources can be utilized in a variety of innovative academic applications. Interviewing preparation resources can be utilized for role-play and simulation exercise in a host of different disciplinary contexts, just for one easy example. Creative uptake of these resources provides a forum for integrating classic educational objects into career-readiness contexts.

Career Services also facilitates numerous partnerships and programs for faculty to adapt their curriculum to align with the competency framework. The "Classroom to Careers" track at UCF's annual Summer Institute offers faculty the opportunity to collaborate with Career Services to integrate the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) Competency framework into their classes. This year, they will be launching a Career Foundations Course Designation program what will allow faculty to highlight and adopt career-readiness components in their courses which will be formally recognized by an institutional designation. Faculty will receive recognition for their participation in this program. The development of career readiness course designations represents an innovative approach to recognizing faculty efforts in this area. These designations will not only help students identify courses that intentionally develop professional competencies but will also provide recognition for faculty who commit to this important work.

Other programs include the Work+ Supervisor Hub for faculty and staff supervising student employees. This program provides tools to promote professional development and align work experiences with students' career goals. This initiative focuses on equipping supervisors to help students develop essential skills that will contribute to their long-term career success. Also, faculty can request Career Services to deliver presentations tailored to their classes or events. Topics include career exploration, resume building, interview preparation, and more. These initiatives provide ways to articulate value in the traditional roles of academic mentors and mentees.

As departments increasingly face pressure to demonstrate their relevance to employers and society at large, the importance of Career Services as a crucial strategic partner increases as it can help bridge the gap between academic excellence and workplace demands. By leveraging their unique position at the intersection of academia and industry, Career Services can help institutions navigate these challenges while preserving their fundamental educational aims.

Career Services as Liaison for Universities and Workplace

Beyond programs and services, the role of Career Services extends much further. As a central academic partner, Career Services can mediate the conflicts and controversies, real or contrived, between universities and their broader communities. Positioned at the intersection of academia and the workforce, they are well positioned to provide a light helpful for navigating the challenges being leveled and higher education while preserving fundamental educational mission.

Faculty buy-in to Career Services initiatives is essential to the mission of both sectors of higher education, yet faculty buy-in remains elusive (Gatta, Finley, and Green, 2024). Skepticism of the corporatization of higher education and the yoking of academic institutions to state-mandated priorities has undoubtedly fueled much resistance to adopting career readiness into traditional disciplinary curriculums, and this skepticism is not unfounded. Indeed, vigilance in the protection of academic freedom and other essential academic values is essential, and while there are always risks and downsides to take into consideration, the proposition here is not to collapse the divide between academia and industry. Rather, the proposition is to embrace Career Services as a liaison between the two. By serving as a liaison between academia and industry, Career Services can help shape both sectors in mutually beneficial ways. This partnership allows universities to better articulate their inherent values while gaining insights into effective adaptation strategies. Rather than viewing industry engagement as a necessary evil, institutions can develop partnerships guided by human values that reinforce both academic excellence and practical relevance. This adaptation does not mean surrendering to market demands but rather finding ways to work within these demands while demonstrating how academic rigor and intellectual growth naturally prepare students for meaningful contributions to society.

The combination of academic backgrounds and industry experience often facilitates a mediation between these two often disconnected worlds. This interdisciplinarity allows Career Services professionals to interpret workforce trends through a lens that takes traditional educational values into account. In this way, they can become a bulwark against the creep of external pressures to relinquish core educational objectives.

Career Services conducts and has access to research that shapes and supports their work. For example, ongoing research projects here are UCF are exploring the impact of student employment experiences with on-campus supervisors through pre and post surveys of student employees whose supervisors have undergone training through UCF Career Services new Work+ initiative. This information will shape the iterations of the Work+ initiatives that provide resources for supervisors of student employees to promote career readiness throughout the student employment experience. Another initiative currently underway explores perceptions of UCF faculty of Career Services with the goal of identifying ways to improve services for faculty, identify opportunities to collaborate with faculty, and to address barriers to infusing career readiness into the curriculum. On a grander scale, a recent grant awarded to UCF by the Strada Education Foundation will provide the opportunity to hire a data specialist in order to examine curriculum integration throughout campus, expand training to the Academic Success Coach community, and promote awareness and use of technology by students to engage in career readiness. This work will be utilized to develop evidence-based initiatives to impact student success with their professional goals. Coupled with access to cutting edge research by partners such as NACE, Career Services is able to address the big-picture intersection of higher education and the workplace.

Developing partnerships and networks across campus and within the broader community is another important function of Career Services. Developing programs for faculty with the Faculty Center for Teaching and Learning and the Faculty Multimedia Center, for example, provides opportunities for faculty to gain insight and experience negotiating educational objectives and workplace needs. Their close work with employers and community-based partners develops opportunities for students to apply their learning in practical contexts while showcasing to employers the benefits of embracing humanities and interdisciplinary graduates instead of focusing solely on technical or business skills. Moreover, these partnerships and networks provide insights into evolving workforce needs, emerging fields, and innovations that can be translated and relayed back to academia to inform curriculum

development and adaptation. Taken together, this work facilitates a way for universities to stay relevant as they continue to pursue traditional objectives.

Conclusion

Demand for universities to cultivate and demonstrate their relevance and significance is not new, but how this demand is met needs to be updated. While there may be other routes to successfully diffusing the conflicts arising between higher education and broader society, centering Career Services is one potentially viable way forward.

The competency-based framework of many Career Services departments provides an opportunity to reframe traditional educational values to refute claims of detractors and align with broader social needs. Career Services professionals, with their unique vantage point at the intersection of academia and industry, can provide valuable insights into how universities can communicate their worth without compromising their fundamental principles.

Centering Career Services and embracing career-readiness, however, is promising only to the extent they are deeply and unwaveringly rooted in human values. This means a commitment to integrity, fairness, justice, equity, empathy, respect, personal fulfillment, well-being, sustainability and social responsibility. This list is by no means exhaustive, but it reflects the long-standing aims of education, and these sometimes-obscured values are likely the forgotten or tacit reason why the value of higher education is still perceptible, if not clearly articulated. We do not need to reinvent the wheel. We just need to update the framework.

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Writer's Block: Common Obstacles and Suggested Ways to Deal with Them

Barry Mauer & John Venecek

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Just about every writer experiences obstacles in their writing. When these obstacles become very problematic and we are unable to write, we refer to the condition as writer's block. The "block" means that something stands between the writer and the task. It may be frustrating, but it can be productive if you work through it. Overcoming writer's block strengthens your ability to solve problems and become a better writer.

A block can be internal, such as psychological resistance. If so, find out why it's coming up. If it's external, it's an opportunity to change your circumstances or your priorities. If it's about the research project itself, it's an opportunity to address complexities or rethink the research problem or your approach.

Common Obstacles and Suggested Ways to Deal with Them

1. **Bad writing (shapeless or meandering prose).** Advice: find a scholar whose work you really admire. Try to write in the style of that person or examine the structure of their work and see if you can structure yours in a similar way. For example, maybe the text you admire is structured as a comparison/contrast. See if that structure works for your project. Ask for feedback and advice from more advanced researchers and writers.
2. **Blocked access to research materials**. Advice: prepare in advance so you are not without your research materials. If you are working with digital materials, carry them with you on a storage device such as a flash drive or in cloud storage. If you need access to printed library materials, make sure you look them up in the online catalog first to see if they are available. Schedule a time to go to the library and scan/photograph shorter works or excerpts and store those on an electronic device or in cloud storage.

3. **Busyness.** Advice: commit to a schedule. Do your research and writing on a regular basis (like three times a week). Start the work session by setting a timer and work for 15 minutes without a break. When the time is up, see if you can keep going. Make sure you take an actual break and walk around at least once an hour. If there seems to be too many activities in your life that are overlapping (i.e., social gatherings and research time), buy a planner or use your phone's calendar with audio reminders to help you commit to your schedule. If all else fails, you may need to choose one activity over the other.
4. **Depression/Anxiety.** Advice: prioritize self-care, such as proper eating, sleep, and exercise. Let go of toxic relationships. Get help from professionals if needed. Think of writing as a meaningful activity that actually helps many people overcome their psychological pressures. If you need additional help from UCF, please visit CAPS (Counseling and Psychological Services).
5. **Distraction.** Advice: shut down other things, like video games, web browsers, music, and text messaging. If you care about your success as a student, you will prioritize your research over distractions.
6. **Exhaustion.** Advice: get an early start if possible and go at a steady pace. If you try to do too much too fast, you'll get burn out.
7. **Family and work responsibilities.** Advice: you may need to change your work schedule, find childcare, etc. The realities of life can make being a successful researcher difficult. Make adjustments as you can.
8. **Fear of being wrong.** Advice: do your research and writing in good faith (by trying not to deceive yourself or others) and if you later discover you were wrong about something, you can produce another piece of writing explaining how your views evolved. We likely will be wrong in our writing from time to time.
9. **Fear of controversy.** Advice: if your methods or argument are likely to be controversial, be prepared to defend and justify them in your writing. If you can strongly defend these things, then controversy itself is not a sufficient reason to stop a research project.
10. **Getting started.** Advice: put words on paper (or on screen). Lots of people have difficulty taking the first step on a research project. Motivate yourself by using fun activities to reward yourself after you've done some research and writing. Starting is the most important thing, so don't worry if your first words on paper or screen are bad. Use accountability partners; take turns reading each other's work every few days.
11. **Getting stuck in the middle.** Advice: list the remaining tasks. Do the critical tasks first. Be willing to change to a different part of the research or writing project. Think about your various projects the way a chef does; some things are on the front burners and some things on the back burners. When one project needs to rest, put it on the back burner and work on something else.
12. **Language fluency.** Advice: plan extra time for your work. If you are reading and writing in a language that you don't feel fully fluent in, try writing your main ideas in your first language and then work on translating them.
13. **Negative self-assessment.** Advice: get support from other people. Our self-talk can get negative and tell us we are not smart enough or not capable enough. Other people can see our intelligence and our capabilities even when we can't. Have them tell you about yours!
14. **Not in the mood.** Advice: don't allow yourself to get too fussy about your environment. Some people need a specific set of conditions to do their research and writing: a cup of coffee, a quiet room, and a soft cat. These are all fine, but the best way to get in the mood to write is to start writing.
15. **Other priorities.** Advice: prioritize things by deadlines and that are most valuable to your career (i.e., prioritize work on high value assignments). If other things are left unfinished temporarily, that's ok.
16. **Panic.** Advice: plan far ahead and scheduling tasks on various projects. If it gets to be close to the deadline and you still have too many projects due, prioritize the ones that are most important, take the loss (you'll probably have more opportunities in the future), and let go of the panic.
17. **Slow pace of writing.** Advice: keep making progress. Are you making measurable progress? Then you are doing well. Some research and writing tasks take longer than others. If you are stuck in the weeds (getting obsessive about details), go back to the big picture.
18. **Too much research.** Advice: know when enough research is enough. Researchers rarely have the luxury to gather all the available knowledge about a topic (a maximizing strategy called "coverage"). Sometimes

researchers feel they must keep going until they understand what everyone has ever said about a topic. We have to accept that uncertainty is part of the process and make the project as good as we can (a strategy called "optimizing") or, if we need to move on, make it good enough (a strategy called "satisficing)."

19. **Uncertainty.** Advice: approach complicated issues in your project systematically. Sometimes writers are overwhelmed with the complexity of the task before them. Write down a list of the complications in your project and address them one at a time.
20. **"What I have so far is terrible!"** Advice: take what you have and see how it can be better. Then do it again. Research and writing are about improvement. Making steady improvements is a process called hill climbing. Eventually you will be high enough on the hill that you can see above the clouds. Judging your work as terrible is part of "Negative Self-Talk." Your project is probably not as bad as what your inner voice is telling you. Don't think of what you have written as "terrible"; focus on the good parts of your writing!

All writers want the muse to carry them across the finish line. The truth is that most good writing requires more perspiration than inspiration; inspiration occurs because we created the conditions for it with our perspiration. Keep at it. Inspiration may or may not come. Your writing will improve as you practice and learn. 

Resources:

See Dennis Upper's famous case of writer's block. See this US National Library of Medicine/National Institutes of Health page for further information" https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC1311997/

Writer's Block Refresher: Take this quiz to check your comprehension of this section. Access the quiz on this page: https://pressbooks.online.ucf.edu/strategies2e/chapter/writers-block/.

For additional help with your writing, visit these pages from WritingCommons.org:

Mindset

Growth Mindset

Faith in the Writing Process

The Believing Game

Why Write

Effective Writing Habits

Intellectual Openness

Demystify Writing Misconceptions

Self-Regulation & Metacognition

Establish a Comfortable Place to Write

Overcome Discouragement

Reflect on Your Writing Processes

Scheduling Writing

Resilience

Purdue Online Writing Lab also has great resources:

Symptoms and Cures for Writer's Block

More Strategies

Time Management

On Identity, Ego, and Our Job as Educators

Sandra Sousa

Sandra Sousa is Associate Professor in the Modern Languages and Literatures Department, where she teaches Portuguese language, Lusophone and Latin American Studies. Her research interests include colonialism and post- colonialism; Portuguese colonial literature; race relations in Mozambique; war, dictatorship and violence in contemporary Portuguese and Luso-African literature; and feminine writing in Portuguese, Brazilian and African literature.

It's an undeniable reality that we all have egos. The question is: do we own our egos, or do we allow them to own us? This might seem an unusual topic to introduce in our educational and teaching publication, but I hope you will bear with me. This spring, I embarked on a journey that both transformed me and reaffirmed some of my teaching beliefs. Along with a group of colleagues, I participated in a learning experience aimed at broadening our understanding of our roles as educators for a specific segment of our student population: Hispanic, Latino, and Latinx (HLL) students. As part of one of UCF's Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI) initiatives, we committed ourselves to an HSI Faculty Learning Community.

Throughout the semester, we met to better understand what it means for UCF to be a Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI) and what it entails to be a faculty member in this context. We explored concepts such as "servingness" and the principles of the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) educational framework, discussing how to apply them in our classes. Our readings included Gina Garcia's *Hispanic Serving Institutions in Practice: Defining "Servingness" at HSIs* and bell hooks'*Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*. We also listened to some of Garcia's podcasts. Our semester of efforts and learning culminated in a track at our annual Summer Institute, where we presented our findings and shared what we found most valuable with colleagues both within and outside our cohort.

I have a few takeaways from the entire experience that I would like to share, along with some unanswered questions. First, by spending time, sharing, and dialoguing with colleagues across disciplines, it became even clearer to me that UCF is home to some of the most intelligent, caring, creative, and dedicated educators I have ever encountered. The concept of "servingness" is truly embodied by the UCF faculty: they serve with their hearts and souls because they genuinely care about each and every student. They understand the hierarchical and social history of the country where they teach and recognize that groups of students and faculty, such as Hispanic, Latino, and Latinx (HLL) individuals, and other minority groups, continue to be marginalized by the same institutions that receive grants to support and serve them.

It is inspiring to see that even under challenging circumstances, these dedicated educators refuse to give up on themselves or their students. They continue their work without moral or financial support because they believe in their mission. They are determined to show these students that they are not inferior in any way, that they are capable, and that their differences stem from a long and constructed history designed to set them apart. These educators aim to demonstrate that there is another way to educate, live, and think about the future. They believe that HLL students should have the same opportunities as everyone else because they are not more or less than anyone else. As Elsie Olan, Heather Peralta, and Asli Yalim kindly shared with us during our final session of the Summer Institute, our identities and cultures are much more alike than we are led to believe by those in power who train and "educate" us to think otherwise.

As we conclude the first part of our journey, I reflect on the profound impact of working together as a community with shared goals. It transforms something within us. I wonder what could happen if we, as human beings, stopped

letting our egos command us and instead used them to serve something greater than ourselves: the community of learning that universities are meant to be.

So, my question remains: will we betray our beliefs and sell ourselves in pursuit of personal interests (status, material wealth, titles), or will we do the right thing for our students, even if it means "teaching to transgress"? By doing so, we can help ensure that they, and all of us, achieve the freedom we all deserve.

Due to the type of classes I teach, in the past students have shared with me what it means to them to identify as Latinx and how they feel about UCF. Students have shared how, as a Latina, she didn't really feel that UCF has been serving her and wished there were more initiatives specifically meant for Latino students. For this student, UCF only ever brought up being an HSI for marketing purposes and never really to do anything to help Latino students out. When sharing with students the types of resources I had when a student myself, they have shared that they would really feel supported by resources such as scholarships and programs specifically meant for Latino students instead of, as one student in my class once said, as a one-off email about a conference that maybe 5-10 students out of the thousands of Latino students will get into.

Often, I'm surprised about how much work there is to do at an HSI when it comes to understanding the history of Latinx populations. I have experienced students mistakenly assume that Brazilians and Haitians, of which there are many on campus, are Hispanic. And have had to sit with the uncomfortable and bordering on anti-Mexican statements made regarding Hispanic events. One student a while ago shared the question, "why is it that every Latinx event only have Mexican food and no acknowledgement of non-Hispanic cultures???"

These statements are important because they tell us so much about the different ways students and faculty experience being a part of an HSI. It speaks volumes about all the work that still needs to be done, beyond a faculty training devoid of history about the formation of Latinx as an identity category. In my experience, students need accurate information about what the HSI term means, and Latinx students are hungry for resources that are meaningful, such as scholarships, and to feel like they are more than just a marketing strategy.

I want to extend my heartfelt thanks to each of my colleagues who participated in the HSI Faculty Learning Community. Your teachings, love, laughter, empathy, and compassion have been invaluable. This experience was truly humbling, and I hope it continues to grow and spread for the sake of our students.

Interning Abroad: How Students Value International Internships at Study Abroad Centers

Estrella Rodriguez & Quynh Dang

Estrella Rodríguez is Faculty at UCF Experiential Learning. She supports High Impact Practices (HIP) Global Learning courses on campus and advises students wishing to intern abroad at the study centers.

Quynh D. Dang is the Director of Experiential Learning at the University of Central Florida. She has a mission in supporting students to connect with valuable internships domestically and abroad.

If you have ever wondered about the importance of study abroad centers at UCF (Barcelona, Spain and San José, Costa Rica; the latter launching in the summer of 2025), you should know that they are an important piece of the whole pie. Consider that students sojourning at the study center in Barcelona in the summer of 2023 represented 38% of the total number of students who studied or interned abroad in 2022-2023 (https://analytics.ucf.edu/enterprise-analytics/interactive-dashboards/). In the summer of 2024, students at the same center represented 21% of the total number of students from UCF who went abroad in 2023-2024 across all academic levels and majors.

There are many course offerings in multiple disciplines at the study centers, but what makes our international internship so special and appealing? Students work in teams of 4-5 interns in different companies of the host city through prior arrangements with UCF's study abroad partner, Academic Programs International (API). They also connect mostly in the afternoons with other UCF students taking courses at the center and participate along with them in cultural and academic activities. These outings are organized during the week to keep students engaged with the local culture and to help them develop intercultural competencies (Luxton et al., 2021).

It can be said that study centers function like mini-UCF communities. Students have reliable accommodation, and there are also case managers available on site to support them in the event of emergency situations. Students learn career skills at work during the week with a supervisor who is proficient in English (a condition to sign up the given company in the host country). They are also encouraged to travel on weekends, as there are no classes held or work with the company on Friday, Saturday or Sunday. In short, study centers make students comfortable in their learning and cultural experiences while they work the required hours for internship credit and connect with other UCF students on site in a safe environment. They are a huge part of having a successful internship abroad.

In 2023 and 2024 internships at the study center in Spain were open to all majors. We divided students prior to departure with balanced groups by majors of study; arts and sciences, business, finance, hospitality and tourism, humanities, marketing, political science, public relations, and others. Prior to leaving Orlando, students knew the specific industry site they would be interning at. There were different companies we partnered with. A biomedical clinic, a furniture restoration store, a fitness facility (Anytime Fitness), and a language center.

At the end of the four-week internship, we offered students the possibility to reflect on the experience and then witnessed first-hand the many benefits interning abroad brought to student-interns. Some of their comments follow next. We have not changed the student's original verbatim. "This internship experience helped me learn about working with difficult people, training me on how to deal with these issues, such as difficult coworkers. I guess you can say that this internship helped me learn how to work with a team." Students also reflected on the need to reprioritize career and personal plans after new learnings abroad." Rather than pursuing law school

immediately after graduation, I am now considering furthering my education with a master's degree that integrates business strategy, entrepreneurship, and consulting".

Students saw the benefits of classroom instruction applied to a real-life context thanks to the international internship experience. "In addition to teamwork, for me it was great for me to finally be able to use all the Finance experience that I have learned in the classroom and being able to incorporate it into a real-life business and also being able to prove to myself what I learned in the classroom actually stuck and that I know what I am doing." Some student comments also connect with them appreciating another perspective from the career world which they had not originally envisioned. There is no doubt that students grew culturally. "The emphasis on work-life balance was a refreshing change. Unlike the intense, fast-paced work environments in the U.S., the office in Spain had a more relaxed atmosphere. Lunch breaks were longer, and there was a clear distinction between work hours and personal time. This taught me the importance of maintaining a healthy work-life balance and how it can boost productivity and job satisfaction."

Though students can take multiple steps towards employability and participate in domestic internships facilitated by the new Dixon Career Development Center at UCF, we always recommend an experience abroad before graduation whenever possible. UCF Abroad offers scholarships to students who commit by February of each year (https://studyabroad.ucf.edu/). Financial aid is also available through Experiential Learning for out-of-state and non-profit internships (https://academicsuccess.ucf.edu/explearning/). This year the International Internship course will be offered at the new Costa Rica Study Abroad Center. The three-week program runs May 31-June 21, and it promises to be a memorable internship experience!

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Blended Learning: Where Clicks Meet Bricks in Higher Education

Matt Dombrowski, Susie Jardaneh, Martha Hubertz, & Michael Strawser

Matt Dombrowski is Assistant Director of the UCF School of Visual Arts and Design (SVAD), Animation & Visualization Area Coordinator, and an Associate Professor of Emerging Media. As Creative Director of Limbitless Solutions Inc. His creative and research contributions have been spotlighted by Adobe, Unity, Autodesk, the Smithsonian American Art Museum, GDC, SXSW EDU, and the Gates Foundation.

Martha Hubertz is a social psychologist and Associate Lecturer in the Psychology Department. She teaches social psychology and several diversity courses as well as research methods. Dr. Hubertz has been recognized on numerous occasions for her innovative approaches to teaching.

Susan Jardaneh earned a Masters of Fine Arts from UNC-Greensboro and a MA in Instructional Design & Technology, e-Learning from UCF. She is a former faculty member at UCF where she developed and designed online courses for the Creating Writing and Interdisciplinary Studies programs. Her research interests include quality online instruction, diverse and inclusive teaching, and active learning strategies in online teaching and learning.

Michael G. Strawser is Associate Professor of Communication in the Nicholson School of Communication and Media. His primary research interests include instructional and organizational communication. He is the Managing Editor of the Journal of Faculty Development and often presents on subjects surrounding teaching and learning.

Digital Meets Traditional: The Art of Educational Mixology

At UCF, pioneering work in mixed-mode teaching by leaders like Barbara Truman laid the groundwork for blended learning long before In 2012, UCF's Center for Distributed Learning held a Faculty Seminar in Online Teaching session title "Effective Design Strategies for Blended Courses" for instructors. At that time, blended (also known as mixed mode at UCF) courses had been around for approximately ten years, and blended courses were considered "the best of both worlds" as they integrated fully online and in-person learning. From instructors' perspective, blended learning allows them to combine in-person engagement with the flexibility and accessibility of online learning. It enables instructors to use in-person class time for interactive activities and discussions, and collaborative projects. From students' perspective, blended learning provides in-person instruction with the flexibility of online learning. They can overcome challenges with group work and collaborative assignments because of the in-person element. Blended learning provides students with multiple pathways to engage with course content. Today, UCF's challenge extends beyond simple hybrid delivery - we strive to create dynamic learning environments that thoughtfully integrate digital and face-to-face interactions.

The flexibility inherent in blended learning environments allows students with diverse learning preferences, abilities, and needs to access materials in ways that best suit their individual circumstances. For instance, students who process information more effectively through visual means can utilize multimedia resources, while those who benefit from repeated exposure can review digital content at their own pace. The combination of synchronous and asynchronous learning opportunities supports students who may face scheduling constraints, physical limitations,

or varying attention spans. The digital components of blended learning can automatically adapt to different reading levels, provide text-to-speech functionality, or offer closed captions, ensuring that content remains accessible to students with disabilities. This is a format that can easily incorporate the tenets of Universal Design.

The in-person elements maintain crucial social interaction and immediate support, while digital tools enable private practice and self-paced learning, reducing anxiety for students who may feel pressured in traditional classroom settings. This multimodal approach also accommodates different cultural and linguistic backgrounds, as digital resources can be presented in multiple languages or cultural contexts, making education more inclusive and equitable for all learners.

Stirred, Not Shaken: A Fresh Mix of Online and In-Person Learning

The flipped classroom model is one of the most effective innovations in mixed-mode teaching. Instead of delivering lectures in-person, transitioning lectures to asynchronous videos, reflection surveys, and module reading allows students to engage with core content at their own pace. This shift freed up valuable in-class time for active learning experiences such as discussions, case studies, and collaborative projects. It brought the student voice back into the classroom. No longer will they sit listening passively to a lecture; they will now be actively involved in sharing their stance on the material discussed. Let the students 'voice flourish.

To reinforce the connection between synchronous and asynchronous learning, one can use breakout rooms in Zoom. Small-group discussions allowed my students to reflect on asynchronous activities, share insights, and, most importantly, build community. This synchronous space can help students feel heard and ensure that asynchronous work is more than just a task to check off. During live sessions virtual guest speakers via Zoom can bring industry professionals into the classroom, making course material more relevant to real-world applications.

No shade to traditional classes, but mixed mode is giving main character energy! ✨

Creating a Stir: Tips on Designing a Blended Course

One of the great challenges with blended learning is the purposeful and meaningful integration of the in-person and online portions of the classes. There are some tips that can ensure this integration leads to a seamless blended course design. First, focus on the outcomes. When course objectives are outlined, it gives the course a structure to work backwards from, allowing you to determine which assessments and assignments will help students achieve those outcomes. Remember that blended courses typically have higher rates of student-to-student and instructor-to-student interactions, so focus on content activities where students can interact with each other. The key to blended courses is the integration of the in-person and online content. There cannot be too much integration! Ensure that one modality of the course carries into and impacts the other modality. Be careful not to make the online part of the course just a place where students submit assignments or get their resources; it should be an active and engaging learning environment as well. Additionally, mapping out the flow of online and in-person activities might help illustrate the balance of each modality. Lastly, build in transparency about what this modality is and its purpose for students. Not all students will understand the concept of a blended course, so outline why the course is in this modality and what it means for them.

Implementation: Weaving Digital and Physical Learning Spaces

Successful implementation requires more than just adopting new technology or tools. Mapping out the connective tissue of learning objectives for each module, ensuring that online and in-person components are integrated with rather than existing in isolation is essential. This alignment created a seamless learning experience, where online resources supported in-class activities and vice versa. Ask yourself, "how can I connect the dots." The goal is not simply to repeat the asynchronous content in another format.

Establishing clear expectations for participation in both modalities to foster meaningful student engagement is necessary. Online discussions require thoughtful contributions, while in-person sessions focus on hands-on activities reinforcing key concepts. In intentionally structuring these connection points of the course, students understood the value of both learning environments and remained actively involved throughout the semester.

Institutional resources play a crucial role in teaching success. Collaborating with UCF's Center for Distributed Learning (CDL) to refine course design and Webcourses@UCF for seamless multi-modal content delivery transforms teaching approach. Instructional designers can assist faculty to articulate their vision for a blended course by focusing on clearly defined and aligned learning objectives, activities, and assessment strategies. With a pedagogical approach, designers help faculty develop a coherent strategy for integrating online and face-to-face components, including integrating which activities and technologies are best for each modality. Faculty can also engage in a Quality Blended Review with their instructional designer which focuses on basic tenets of effective blended course design. Peer collaboration can also be invaluable, and seeking feedback from colleagues who have previously implemented mixed-mode courses can broaden your teaching horizons. As they say, "it takes an academic village… and probably a few extra cups of coffee."

Blending Brilliance: Chronicles of the 2024 Truman Award Winner

Effective teaching requires not only well-designed instructional strategies but also a commitment to evaluating impact. In blended courses, prioritize assessment as a means to measure student engagement, comprehension, and overall learning outcomes. Assessment is critical to understanding the effectiveness of any teaching innovation. To gauge student learning in my mixed-mode course, use a combination of formative and summative assessments. Frequent low-stakes quizzes encouraged continuous engagement with online content, while in-class application exercises measured students' ability to synthesize information.

One can also gather qualitative feedback through anonymous surveys at mid-semester and end-of-term. Students overwhelmingly appreciated the flexibility of the course structure, citing the ability to revisit lecture content online and engage in deeper discussions during in-person sessions. Many do not get that opportunity to connect with peers, even in a large lecture hall. Performance analytics from Webcourses@UCF provided additional insight, showing increased participation and higher retention of course material compared to previous course iterations.

It's all about the blend!

Blended learning isn't just splitting instruction between online and in-person modalities; it is about crafting cohesive, intentional, and connected experience that maximizes student success. This experience reinforced my belief that technology should not replace human connections but enhance it.

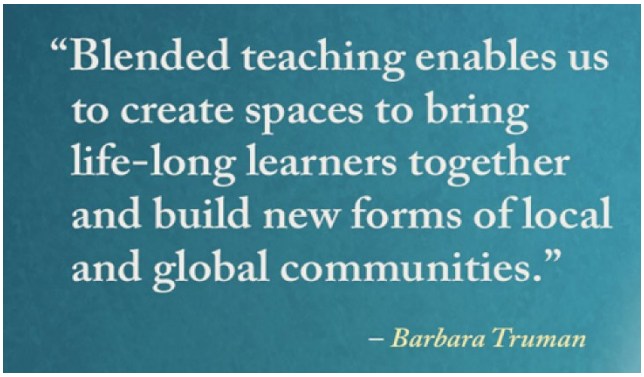
Effectively blending virtual and brick-and-mortar components creates a robust learning environment that maximizes the strengths of both modalities. The physical classroom provides irreplaceable face-to-face interactions, immediate feedback, and hands-on activities that build community and deepen understanding. Meanwhile, virtual space offers flexibility, self-paced learning opportunities, and digital tools that enhance engagement and accessibility. When thoughtfully integrated, these elements complement each other - classroom discussions can extend into online forums, digital resources can prepare students for in-person activities, and virtual collaboration tools can bridge the gap between class sessions. This intentional fusion creates a more adaptable and comprehensive educational experience.

When executed effectively, virtual and face-to-face components work symbiotically, creating a seamless learning experience. Online activities prepare students for meaningful classroom discussions, while in-person interactions spark digital collaborations. This intentional integration enhances student engagement, deepens understanding, and provides multiple pathways for mastering course content.

Excellence Awaits: Apply Now for the 2025 Barbara Truman Award for Excellence in Blended Teaching

Barbara Truman pioneered blended learning through systematic approaches emphasizing faculty development, quality course design, student readiness, and data-driven assessment. Her work established standards for balancing technology with effective pedagogy in UCF's distance learning programs. When she was the Director of Course Development and Web Services, she emphasized that the future was in the successful blend of the online and brick and mortar learning spaces.

Faculty Focus



The Barbara Truman Award for Excellence in Online and Blended Teaching was created in her honor and recognizes faculty who successfully navigate these challenges. It highlights instructors integrating technology, engagement strategies, and innovative course design to enhance student learning outcomes. Faculty members who receive this recognition demonstrate a commitment to best practices in online and blended education, making their courses more effective and accessible.

The recipient receives a $1,000 travel award to share their expertise at professional conferences. Winners can proudly display a digital badge in their course and have the opportunity to showcase their innovative teaching approaches through a CDL-produced video, inspiring others to advance the art of blended instruction. Plus, recipients are celebrated across campus and receive a distinctive trophy commemorating their achievement in advancing the art of blended instruction!

This year's award window opens on March 17 and will close on March 31. The course section relevant to the submission must meet all the following criteria: it should be either a single (M) or limited attendance (RS) course taught from Fall 2021 onward, and the course must hold a Quality designation.

If you have any questions about the award, please reach out to Susan Jardaneh (Susan.Jardaneh@ucf.edu) We are hopeful some of the tips below will not only get the award on your radar but inspire your already amazing teaching practices. We hope to see your applications this spring demonstrating how you innovate in blending the virtual and brick and mortar sections of your blended course.

Faculty who apply should not only demonstrate effective teaching strategies but also show a commitment to continuous course improvement and student engagement. The application process allows one to reflect on their teaching methods, gather evidence of student success, and share best practices with the broader academic community. We hope to see your applications this spring demonstrating how you innovate in blending the virtual and brick and mortar sections of your blended course. Questions? Please reach out to your instructional designer!

D, F, and W Grades: Limits of Democratic Model

Houman Sadri

Houman Sadri is Associate Professor of Political Science where he' s been since 1995. He earned a PhD from the University of Virginia and completed a fellowship at the Hoover Institute of Stanford University. His area of specialization is international affairs focused on the politics of the Caspian Sea and Persian Gulf states.

From Democratic Parenting to Teaching

Soon after the birth of my children, I took a "Democratic Parenting" (DP) class which did wonders for raising my kids to grow up and become successful young adults. For their sake, I learned to be a more effective and supportive parent who provides acceptable and pre-determined options to them along with a carrot and stick strategy. These methods avoided the typical mental, emotional, and physical pressures that many parents often experienced. Of course, parents love their kids, but they often try to nurture them with the same or similar authoritarian methods by which their parents raised them. Traditional methods of rearing children fail to meet contemporary parents' often unrealistic expectations because they were not developed for the current family environment, which is significantly different than the one in which our parents raised us.

Utilizing DP techniques prevented me from killing the creative abilities and critical thinking of my children. That was especially true when they behaved in unexpected, unacceptable, or even unsafe manners. It also provided my kids with a sense that they have choices and that there are consequences for their choices in life. Of course, as they felt happy and content, our home also enjoyed a more peaceful environment along with a sense of order.

DP Techniques & Teaching

Benefiting from my home and family experience, I have also incorporated the DP techniques into my methods of teaching and mentoring students for years. Therefore, the number of students' research and writing assignments have steadily increased in my classes and so has the number of their assessments from quizzes to exams. For all practical purposes, I have been pleased with the results of employing DP technique in all my classes until the COVID-19 Crisis began.

In the post-COVID era, I noticed something remarkable. My classes very generously allow my students to drop their lowest scores in each assignment and assessment category. Yet, a small but statistically significant percentage simply do not use the class opportunities to increase their total scores to pass the course or secure a good final grade. This development has led to a gradual increase in the number of "D, F, and W," grades especially in my online classes.

Frankly, that finding shocked me, because I have always enjoyed excellent students' evaluation and comments. However, I began to feel that I was failing a few students who were not doing as well as they could, despite the opportunities that my courses have offered. In the official class evaluations and our class weekly anonymous surveys, they appreciated our course flexibility and their numerous opportunities to do well. However, they also reported that they didn't do as well as they wanted to.

While re-examining Canvas Gradebook for each term, I noticed that a few students had usually gone below the radar and earned low scores, but I assumed that they were professional and would eventually use other class opportunities. Some must have also withdrawn from the course, as the final UCF Registrar Class Roster eventually showed. Unfortunately, the official withdrawal information is not available to faculty till the end of the term when we report final grades.

For me, these developments illustrated the limitations of the DP technique in teaching and mentoring. There was no reason to change the entire course structure, because it worked for most students who were enjoying the class system, learning process, and were performing well. Nevertheless, there were a few students who were not doing their best. To minimize this group who could potentially earn D, F, or W grades, I consulted with the fine staff of FCTL, my WebCourse Designer, and a few colleagues to find an appropriate remedy for the challenge.

The common denominator of most suggestions was that there are limits to the application of the Democratic Model to the classroom structure. It does not work for all students, since some require much closer monitoring, frequent communications, and even more encouraging messages than others.

Current Class Structure:
As mentioned, my classes have gradually increased the number of students' options for both assignments and assessments. Nowadays, the final grade of each student consists of completing 6 (out of 12 discussions each covering one reading module). With a minimum required 1,000 words each (most students write in the range of 1,500 to 2,000), Discussion Postings are divided into 4 interrelated sections with detailed instructions for each part to blunt the impact of AI. Each posting is worth a maximum of 5 points as explained by the grading rubric. There are also 9 quizzes, each covering one module. Students are expected to take at least 3 of the 9 quizzes, each worth 10 points. Plus, there are 2 Midterm exams each covering 3 reading modules, comprising about a third of our extensive course readings. Each midterm is worth 20 points. As it is the last course evaluation, students are expected to take the Final Exam (worth 20 points), based on the UCF Final Exam Schedule. Besides these course requirements, students have the option of a 5-point extra credit assignment at the end of the term in Module 12 if they find it helpful to bump their total scores to a higher grade.

The Challenge
I have always treated my students as professionals who should choose which Posting, Quiz, and/or Midterm Exam to complete based on their personal and professional obligations. Since COVID, however, a few students simply refused to take any assignments or assessments until the term's end. Unfortunately, they deprive themselves of all course opportunities to improve their research, writing, and exam-taking skills to secure a good grade. Experience showed that by delaying assignments to the end, they did not have time to improve their grade with the remaining course requirements.

New Course Requirements

1. In response to the new challenge mentioned, I made 6 major modifications to my classes:
   I made all assignments and assessments of Modules 1-4 required for students without exception. That means that by the end of Module 4, each student has already completed 3 Postings, 3 Quizzes, and Midterm Exam 1. This way, even if they do not earn high scores on these assignments, they can improve their future scores with my help.
2. Students who fail to complete any of Modules 1-4 assignments automatically go on the "Disengaged List," which eventually leads to penalty points against their final grade. My students' weekly anonymous surveys, emails to me, and course evaluations suggest that no one wants to be on the List. Thus, I hardly have anyone on the List.
3. My classes still maintain the assignment flexibility that students like. However, that flexibility is now only granted for Modules 5 through 11 (Module 12 contains the required Final Exam in addition to the Optional Extra Credit assignment).
4. Each week, I download Canvas grade book scores into my own Excel grade sheets to monitor students' progress. Unfortunately, Canvas statistics tend to be misleading and unreliable, especially as far as my generous dropping the lowest scores are concerned. Canvas statistics make students feel insecure about their records when there is no reason for them to worry, because I monitor their progress myself and communicate with them.
5. I used to wait for students to contact me when they needed help to improve their scores. Nowadays, I contact each student who earns a low score in any assignment myself and ask for an explanation of their less than expected performance. Plus, I require those who are in serious trouble to visit me during my

regular office hours to go over their assignments, so they learn from this process. For the online student, I follow the same process via required Zoom or Conference calls.

6. The result of the modifications has been fewer students falling into "D, F, and W" range.

Frankly, I wish that I didn't have to lessen the flexibility of my course structure, because we must teach our students to behave like professionals and learn to balance their personal and professional obligations to succeed even during their residency at UCF. I am glad that most of the students are still happy with our course flexibility during Modules 5 to 11. Nevertheless, a few high-performing students have asked why I decreased the fully optional nature of my courses, since they have always monitored themselves to secure excellent grades.

I do not know the sociological and psychological reasons for those few students who require a more rigid course structure to perform better. I say that because I didn't have many options in my college classes, most of which had only one midterm, one long paper, and one final exam. Thus, I knew even making a few mistakes in one of those three course requirements would preclude securing a good grade in that class. When I became a teacher, I decided to ensure that my students have many options to succeed even if they had a longer learning curve.

Getting ready for an early retirement from UCF, I will remember little successes like this experience fondly and hope to share them with colleagues so that they may benefit from my learning experience too. I want to return the favor and leave fond memories of my service at our growing school.

From Theory to Practice: Weaving NACE Competencies into Higher Education's DNA

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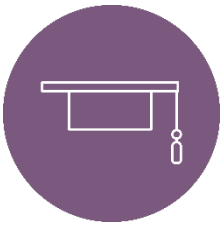
The NACE Edge: Transforming Students into Professionals



The career readiness of college graduates is an important issue in higher education, in the labor market, and in the public arena. A recent Student Voice survey of over 3,000 undergraduate students from Inside Higher Ed and College Pulse found that 98% of respondents believe that professors should have some level of involvement in their career planning, whether it be helping them explore careers, develop career skills, prepare for internships, develop resumes, or connect classroom learning to career pathways (Flaherty, 2023). Students 'top three priorities for going to college are "growing their knowledge in a subject area they're passionate about (49 percent), growing their knowledge in a variety of other subject areas (42 percent) and developing specific skills needed for their careers (41 percent)" (Flaherty, 2023).

This tracks with a recent study of over 6,000 faculty members conducted by the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) in collaboration with American Association of Colleges and Universities and the Society for Experiential Education on faculty attitudes and behaviors toward career readiness in the classroom, which found 92% of faculty members had been asked for career advice by students in their disciplinary area (Gray, 2024).

Yet, "career readiness" can be difficult to define in higher education, making it complicated for leaders to measure the career readiness of today's graduates.

Through a task force of college career services and HR/staffing professionals, NACE has developed a definition for "Career Readiness" based on extensive research among employers, and identified eight competencies associated with career readiness (NACE, n.d.):

1. Critical Thinking
2. Communication
3. Leadership
4. Equity & Inclusion
5. Teamwork
6. Technology
7. Career & Self-Development
8. Professionalism

The Career Services department at UCF launched a successful champion program, working with over 100 faculty to embed a NACE Syllabus Statement and career readiness activities into their curriculum. This program ran from summer 2020 through fall 2021 and has served as the foundation to creating a campus wide culture of career readiness at UCF. Today, the work continues with a revamped Course Designation system to identify career-ready courses and instructor training on NACE, career exploration, and other Career Services tools and resources.

Aligning curriculum with career readiness learning outcomes helps students connect their classroom experiences to their career and educational goals, equipping them with essential workplace skills no matter which path they choose to pursue. Efforts to infuse career development into curricula positively impact student retention, well-being, and placements into jobs and graduate programs.

Career Alchemy: Where NACE Meets Next-Gen Learning

Higher education institutions are increasingly embracing the integration of career readiness competencies into academic curricula, guided by the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE, 2024). By embedding essential skills of Critical Thinking, Communication, Leadership, Equity & Inclusion, Teamwork, Technology, Career & Self-Development, and Professionalism, faculty can craft dynamic learning experiences that resonate with students and prepare them for the evolving workforce (Seemiller & Grace, 2019).

In today's classrooms, students bring unique characteristics that reshape teaching and learning. As digital natives who seamlessly blend physical and virtual experiences, Gen Z especially exhibits a preference for visual and

interactive content, shorter learning segments, and clear connections between coursework and career opportunities (Pearson Education, 2023; Mohr & Mohr, 2023). This generation's pragmatic approach to education, valuing real-world scenarios and hands-on learning, aligns with NACE's competencies, making today's classroom an ideal framework for fostering career readiness.

Mental health awareness and work-life balance feature prominently in Gen Z's educational expectations. The American College Health Association (2023) reports that this generation shows unprecedented openness about mental health challenges. Blended learning environments can support this awareness by offering flexible submission deadlines, providing multiple pathways for participation, and incorporating well-being check-ins through both digital and in-person channels.

Communication patterns among Gen Z learners necessitate a reimagining of traditional classroom interaction. Research by Microsoft Education (2024) indicates that while these students excel at virtual collaboration, they may require additional support developing traditional professional communication skills. Effective blended learning designs can bridge this gap by combining synchronous in-person presentations with asynchronous digital collaboration tools, helping students develop versatile communication abilities across multiple modalities.

Learning designs that reflect today's student values, such as multimedia content, personalization, and flexibility, enhance career preparedness. Research indicates that mental health awareness and work-life balance are priorities for today's learners, further underscoring the need for flexible deadlines, and diverse participation methods. (American College Health Association, 2023; Microsoft Education, 2024).

Strategies for embedding NACE competencies include:

1. **Crafting Flexible Learning Pathways:** Integrate synchronous and asynchronous elements, video, recordings, varied content delivery, and diverse assessments to meet personalized learning needs (Sakdiyakorn et al., 2021; Pearson Education, 2023). Tools like ThingLink can be leveraged at UCF to create interactive and immersive learning experiences that enhance student engagement.
2. **Harnessing Technology Purposefully:** Utilize industry-standard digital tools, multimedia resources, and interactive assessments that reflect professional environments (Hernandez-de-Menendez et al., 2020; Microsoft Education, 2024). For example, VMock provides AI-driven resume feedback and career readiness insights, helping students refine their job application materials.
3. **Building Community and Collaboration:** Foster teamwork, mentorship, and peer interaction through digital platforms and in-person experiences (Schweiger & Ladwig, 2018; American College Health Association, 2023). Platforms like Yellowdig create opportunities for students to engage in meaningful discussions, strengthening their collaborative and communication skills.
4. **Developing Authentic Assessments:** Implement portfolio-based projects, real-world simulations, and industry-relevant tasks to build practical skills (Jones-Roberts & McNulty, 2024; Mohr & Mohr, 2023). An innovative approach at UCF includes using 360 video with Insta360 cameras to design immersive, experiential assessments that simulate real-world work environments.

The Skills Symphony: Orchestrating Career Success Across Disciplines

Developing Soft Skills for Today's Workforce: UCF's Integrated Business Program

The College of Business Administration at the University of Central Florida (UCF) is accredited by the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB), a global nonprofit organization dedicated to advancing the quality of business education. AACSB's mission is "to elevate the quality and impact of business skills globally" (AACSB, 2025), and its vision is to create a positive societal impact through business education (AACSB, 2025). At UCF's College of Business Administration, we strive to build "the next generation business school" by fostering an engaged culture that "challenges us to step outside our comfort zones while balancing rigor with relevance, encouraging innovative thinking and

acting, and promoting scale, connectivity, innovation, and effectiveness" (Jarley, 2023, p. 1). In support of UCF's broader mission, vision, and goals, the College maximizes the potential of its students, faculty, and staff through innovative thinking and applied knowledge. This approach equips learners to thrive in ever-changing professional settings. As part of this strategic vision, the College encourages students to move beyond their comfort zones, embrace lifelong learning, and become career-ready professionals sought after by employers.

Integrated Business Program

A prime example of the College's commitment to dynamic, skill-focused education is the Integrated Business (IB) program. The IB program's mission is to provide high-quality, hands-on business education for UCF students, with an emphasis on soft skills development, and to produce well-rounded, multidisciplinary graduates capable of excelling in diverse roles.

The IB program comprises eight core courses, each pairing two of the following eight soft skills learning objectives: Problem Solving, Teamwork, Written Communication, Creativity and Innovation, Oral Communication, Professionalism and Integrity, Leadership, and Critical Thinking. By the end of the program, students are expected to demonstrate competency in each skill area. The core courses include Data Driven Decision Making, Applied Business Technologies, Essentials of Human Resources, Management, Integrated Business Foundations, Integrated Marketing & Sales, Managing Small Business Finance, Business Climate Analysis, and Project Management.

Across these courses, students refine their mastery of the eight learning objectives. The curriculum aligns with the National Career Readiness Standards, ensuring that graduates are truly career ready. It also supports AACSB's mission of advancing quality business education and aligns with UCF's commitment to "unleashing the potential within every individual; enriching the human experience through inclusion, discovery, and innovation; and propelling broad-based prosperity for the many communities we serve" (University of Central Florida, n.d.). The IB program boasts high job placement rates and competitive starting salaries, reflecting its success in preparing students for contemporary business challenges.

Justice Served: Embedding Professional Skills in Criminal Studies

Academic coursework and out-of-class experiences are the most critical [important?] opportunities during which college students learn and develop career competencies. During such engagements students can develop soft skills that come with working on real-life projects related to their major's careers (time management, teamwork, professional etiquette, leadership, and more). Oftentimes, it is not the lack of proficiencies in the competencies on the part of the students. It is the ability to communicate those competencies to potential employers. (So, it is important to explain how the work students are already doing connects to the career readiness competencies valued by employers. To bring awareness of how to translate their experiences to the NACE competencies, I insert the Syllabus statement, a comprehensive description of career readiness competencies, and examples of achieving these competencies during the academic career. I then add a sentence or two to a particular assignment's instructions and the reflection they do at the end of the class or as a part of a larger project.

For example, a transdisciplinary assignment demonstrates an innovative, creative, and meaningful way to promote the transfer of learning into successful employment. After testing my intra-course collaborative idea with another instructor at my department, I explored the idea of integrating and enhancing an international/intercultural educational experience for my students. During the Covid-19 times in lieu of the study abroad experience for the local students and inability to arrive at the USA institution for international students, I tested a collaborative online project between students from different colleges, departments, majors, academic standing, and countries. I partnered up with Dr. Conroy from the School of Politics, Security, and International Affairs (College of Sciences), and we have collaborated ever since, modifying our projects each semester.

The collaborative transdisciplinary assignment provides students with a broader context than what they were set to learn in their respective courses, as well as aims to increase the development of transferable skills for remote work and prepare students for interprofessional teamwork. It incorporates ten NACE competencies (soft and remote working skills) in scaffolded assignments so students can gradually learn and develop these as they proceed with their projects. An opportunity to mentor international students is presented to local students, and an opportunity for less stressful adaptation to a new country and educational system was offered to international students. Local students learn about the academic interests of international students, brainstorm how these interests can be used when addressing the justice system's issues and get experience in working with individuals from various cultural backgrounds. Additionally, the assignment encourages the students to use individual's strength for a common goal, balance collaborative and individual work, and weather difficulties of scheduling[2] or lack of contribution by some of the team members.

In the last few semesters, there were seven cohorts. The first cohort was comprised of students from 23 majors and 21 different countries. The second cohort – the students from 15 majors and 10 different countries. Third – 22 and 19, fourth – 15 and 13, fifth – 19 and 16, the sixth - 18 majors and 12 countries respectively. The current cohort has students from 18 majors and 7 countries. The assignment instructions are modified each semester based on the past students' feedback and our own self-reflection. Final project formats also differ for each cohort (research websites vs research posters vs video presentations).

To show how graduates from various fields (business, computer science, communication, etc.) work on a common issue, we offer a Zoom meeting where we bring guest speakers. For example, we had a Meta employee leading a team of professionals who worked on combatting criminal activities on the Meta platform (HT and child safety were part of her assignment). The speaker (team's leader) was based in Ireland with many team members located in the US and other countries. We had a news anchor sharing knowledge about what it takes to hear a 1-minute TV news segment on human trafficking coverage, and with that showing how a different major (journalism) contributes to the fight. Additionally, we invited various speakers who work in the criminal justice system and non-government agencies for the panel. They presented students with what it takes to detect, investigate, prosecute crime, and assist survivors, as well as discussed prevention ideas for various age groups and the possibilities of students' involvement.

The assignment can be easily replicated/adapted within Criminal Justice or other disciplines. It can be used for required courses and elective courses (I used it in both). The instructors can adapt the content requirements and/or the logistics of the assignment. It can be a short-term class assignment; for example, law/legal/cj students and language studies students can be presented with a court case where one or more of the participants require(s) services from an interpreter. Or it can be a semester-long project; for example, in a creative writing course, students can write a scenario for a documentary produced by the film course students.

Here are a few comments from students:

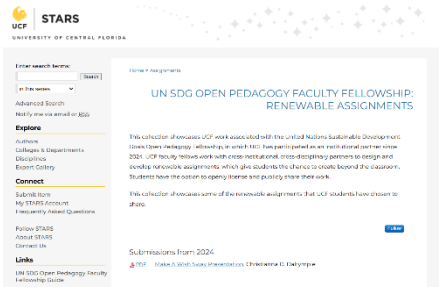
- "The collaborative project was the most realistic college assignment/experiment I have ever had. It felt like a legitimate work project, so I hope for the benefit of your future students that project continues on."
- "I would say that the group project was the most interesting and helpful assignment."
- "I am shocked, but the collaboration project was my favorite, and in some ways, it made learning fun."
- "The group project was quite interesting in the sense being an online only student and actually having the ability to meet some other students in the course. Nobody truly enjoys doing a group project but honestly my group was amazing, and we have all become friends. So, thank you for introducing me to them this semester. They surely helped this semester go by easier knowing we had someone in our corner that we could talk with when in most online classes you would never get to speak or even see the other students."

The Human Factor: Skills that Transform Lives

My course design begins with explicit mapping of NACE competencies to learning objectives and assignments. This intentional alignment ensures students understand the professional relevance of their coursework while developing essential workplace skills. Digital literacy initiatives, including LinkedIn Learning assignments and artificial intelligence education, prepare students for evolving technological demands. Particularly significant is the focus on ethical AI use, addressing both academic integrity and future workplace applications.

High-Impact Practices (HIPs) serve as natural vehicles for competency development. Service-Leaning projects cultivate teamwork and communication skills, while undergraduate research enhances critical thinking and leadership capabilities (Kuh, 2008). I have students create digital presentations on platforms like MS Sway to enable students to demonstrate technological proficiency while developing professional communication skills. I have them complete the LinkedIn Learning Course on how to use Sway so that it can be added to their CV / Resumes and teach them how to use the platform to create multimedia presentations.

An innovative approach I started using last semester combined the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UN SDGs) with NACE competencies through Open Educational Resources (OER) creation. This integration accomplishes multiple objectives: students develop equity and inclusion awareness through global sustainability engagement and how that related to course learning objectives, while simultaneously building professional digital citizenship through Creative Commons content sharing. Students were able to share their Sways through UCF STARS and share with the sites they did their Service-Learning projects with.



Buerkle et al. (2023) propose restructuring higher education teaching around seven condensed UN Sustainable Development Goals, which notably align with NACE competencies valued by Gen Z learners - particularly critical thinking, equity and inclusion, teamwork, and professionalism. The study emphasizes the shift from traditional knowledge transfer to interactive, project-based learning that incorporates real-world sustainability challenges across disciplines, fostering innovation and global collaboration - competencies that Gen Z students particularly value in their professional development. Importantly, this cross-disciplinary approach encourages students to develop digital proficiency and leadership skills through autonomous learning and international partnerships, though the authors caution that institutions must carefully balance implementing these changes with faculty workload and wellbeing considerations.

Evidence suggests this comprehensive strategy effectively prepares students for professional success. Recent employer surveys indicate 91% prioritize critical thinking skills in recent graduates, while 85% value Service-Learning experience (NACE, 2024). By intentionally weaving career competencies throughout the curriculum, educators create robust pathways to professional success while maintaining academic rigor and disciplinary depth.

Vital Signs of Success: NACE Competencies in BioMed Education

Building 21st Century Skills into the Biomedical Sciences courses I teach takes time and effort. When I develop a course or new assignment, I consider 21st Century **learning skills**. In the sciences, the learning skills are the most popular 21st Century skills that are taught in courses. These skills include **Critical thinking, Creativity, Collaboration, and Communication**. These 21st Century skills correlate with the NACE competencies of **Critical Thinking, Adaptability, Leadership/Professionalism, Teamwork,** and **Communication**. In order to accomplish this goal in my courses, I developed active learning assignments such as escape rooms, case-based learning exercises, or a competition-based learning curriculum that required at least three of the four learning skills, if not all four.

One example is an in-person or virtual Escape Room. Escape Rooms encourage groups to work together, use critical thinking skills and effectively communicate with each other while working together on puzzles, riddles, and thought-provoking questions. When students work in online groups to complete a virtual escape room, students develop key NACE competencies and 21st Century skills such as critical thinking, teamwork, and digital technology proficiency.

Another example of helping students build 21st Century learning skills is case-based learning (CBL). CBL has proven to be an effective method for enhancing student engagement and retention of course information by requiring students to work collaboratively to solve real-world problems. This method not only improves students' understanding of core concepts, but also helps develop their critical thinking, problem-solving, communication, and teamwork building skills.

Competition-Based Learning can foster innovation, creativity, critical thinking, communication, and collaboration with a team. By participating in competition-based learning, students can gain a deeper understanding of the course material and industry standards as well as the skills needed to succeed in a competitive environment similar to what they might encounter in industry.

In order to help students in a changing work environment, I am encouraging students to learn how to use artificial intelligence (AI) in order to increase their AI Literacy. To help students increase their AI Literacy, I adopt the process of expanding all my active learning exercises including competition-based learning to include opportunities for them to use AI in their course workflow.

"Being a problem solver," "Thinking outside the box," "Working well with others," and "Effectively communicating with others" are common phrases that industry executives, researchers, residency directors, and hospital administrators use when discussing the need of future employees to have developed the skills of critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, and communication before they start work in their chosen field. As a Biomedical Sciences educator, it is important to develop group assignments and active learning exercises that help students further develop NACE competencies to help the students prepare in securing a spot in professional school, graduate school, or even employment right after they graduate.

Skills in Bloom: Growing Tomorrow's Professionals

As you can see, faculty across disciplines play a pivotal role in preparing career-ready graduates. Business students demonstrate leadership and teamwork through case competitions. Criminal justice majors enhance communication and equity awareness through community engagement projects. Bio Med students build professionalism and technical competencies through clinical simulations. In psychology, students conducting research develop critical thinking and technology skills while analyzing data.

This interdisciplinary approach yields measurable results. According to NACE (2024), employers report 87% higher satisfaction with graduates who experienced integrated career competency development. Moreover, students who engage with NACE competencies across multiple courses show 35% higher job placement rates within six months of graduation. Beyond employment metrics, this integration enriches academic outcomes. Faculty report increased student engagement when connecting course content to career competencies. For example, incorporating AI literacy and ethical considerations into assignments has led to deeper disciplinary understanding while building critical technology competencies.

The framework proposed by Buerkle et al. (2023) for implementing sustainable development goals in higher education naturally aligns with NACE career competencies through its emphasis on leadership, innovation, and cross-cultural collaboration. Both frameworks prioritize developing professional skills through real-world applications, with particular focus on critical thinking, teamwork, and inclusive practices that prepare students for future employment while addressing global challenges. The future of higher education demands this holistic approach. As industries evolve rapidly, our responsibility extends beyond subject matter expertise to cultivating

adaptable professionals. By weaving NACE competencies into our teaching DNA, we don't just prepare students for their first job, we equip them for career longevity and professional growth.

Plug, Play, Succeed: Digital Integration of Career Competencies

The digital transformation of higher education presents unique opportunities for seamlessly integrating career readiness into the classroom experience. Through Canvas, instructors can create a dynamic learning environment that naturally incorporates NACE competencies into their existing course structure. Here's how faculty can leverage various digital tools to enhance career preparation while maintaining robust academic standards.

Reimagining the First-Week CS Module Integration

The traditional first-week module can serve as more than just an orientation to course expectations and financial aid requirements. By thoughtfully integrating Career Services resources, this initial touchpoint becomes a powerful catalyst for career development. Consider transforming the standard financial aid activity into a dual-purpose engagement that introduces students to both financial literacy and career planning. For instance, while students complete their FAFSA verification, they can simultaneously engage with a Career Services module that introduces NACE competencies through interactive self-assessments.

This integrated approach helps students draw meaningful connections between their academic journey and professional aspirations from day one. The module can include reflection prompts that encourage students to contemplate how their financial decisions align with their career goals, effectively combining practical needs with professional development. Canvas's automatic completion tracking ensures student engagement while providing valuable data on career resource utilization.

Leveraging LinkedIn Learning for Skill Development

LinkedIn Learning's Canvas integration offers a powerful platform for systematic skill development aligned with NACE competencies. Rather than treating LinkedIn Learning as an optional resource, faculty can intentionally weave it into their course design. Begin by mapping specific LinkedIn Learning courses to each NACE competency relevant to your subject area. For example, a business communication course might pair LinkedIn Learning's "Strategic Thinking" course with critical thinking competency development, while "Communicating with Confidence" supports the communication competency.

Create curated playlists that align with specific learning outcomes, ensuring students develop professional skills alongside academic knowledge. These playlists can be integrated into weekly modules, with completion certificates serving as evidence of competency development. Design assignments that require students to apply concepts from LinkedIn Learning courses to real-world scenarios or course projects, reinforcing the connection between professional development and academic achievement.

Innovative Assessment Strategies

Modern assessment strategies should reflect the digital landscape students will encounter in their professional lives. Start by having students create a GitHub portfolio – an increasingly important tool across various industries. This portfolio becomes a living document of their competency development, where students can showcase code, projects, writing samples, and other artifacts that demonstrate their career readiness.

Structure assessments to naturally incorporate NACE competencies through authentic tasks. For instance, implement peer review activities that develop teamwork and collaboration skills while providing valuable feedback. Create problem-based learning scenarios that integrate multiple competencies, such as a group project that requires critical thinking, communication, and technology skills. Design rubrics that explicitly reference NACE competencies and their indicators, helping students understand how their academic work translates to professional capabilities.

Digital badges and micro-credentials can be awarded through Canvas for achieving specific competency milestones. These credentials become part of students' professional portfolios, providing tangible evidence of skill development for future employers. Additionally, implement industry-standard tools like Agile project management boards or professional communication platforms to simulate real-world work environments.

Aligning Learning Outcomes with Career Competencies

Effective integration of NACE competencies requires intentional alignment with course learning outcomes. Begin by reviewing your existing learning outcomes and identifying natural connections to career competencies. For example, a research assignment's learning outcome might already align with critical thinking and communication competencies – make these connections explicit in your course documentation.

- Modify module objectives to include career competency language, helping students understand the professional relevance of their academic work. For instance, instead of simply stating "Students will analyze data," expand it to "Students will demonstrate critical thinking by analyzing data and making evidence-based recommendations." This approach helps students recognize how their coursework develops professional capabilities.
- Create a competency progression map with CDL graphics that shows how different assignments and activities build career readiness throughout the semester. Use Canvas's outcomes feature to track competency development, providing students with visible progress indicators. Design milestone assignments that require students to synthesize multiple competencies, demonstrating their growing professional capabilities.
- Consider implementing competency-based grading options that allow students to track their development in specific professional areas alongside their academic performance. This might include separate rubric categories for professional skills or optional advanced assignments that target specific competencies students wish to develop further.

Through thoughtful integration of these digital tools and strategies, faculty can create a learning environment that naturally develops career competencies alongside academic knowledge. This approach not only enhances student engagement but also better prepares them for professional success while maintaining the academic rigor of their coursework.

The NACE-Powered Path Forward

In Sum, with a mindful orchestra of Faculty Center for Teaching and Learning, Instructional Design, and the plethora of resources available through Career Services, and the Center for Distributed Learning, incorporating NACE competencies into UCF courses has never been more accessible or innovative.

Through thoughtful digital integration and alignment with student learning preferences, faculty can effectively bridge the gap between academic achievement and professional success, developing graduates who are not only academically accomplished but also adaptable, innovative, and career-ready (Cavanagh et al., 2020; Chen et al., 2022; Kuh, 2008; Pew Research Center, 2023).

For integration assistance please reach out to your instructional designer and / or career services.

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On Pessimism and Why Students are Smarter than Professors

Sandra Sousa

Sandra Sousa is Associate Professor in the Modern Languages and Literatures Department, where she teaches Portuguese language, Lusophone and Latin American Studies. Her research interests include colonialism and post- colonialism; Portuguese colonial literature; race relations in Mozambique; war, dictatorship and violence in contemporary Portuguese and Luso-African literature; and feminine writing in Portuguese, Brazilian and African literature.

Recently, the Faculty Center for Teaching and Learning and the Division of Digital Learning at our university collaborated to host the first conference on "Teaching & Learning with AI." Approximately 500 colleagues from across the country and around the world joined UCF faculty for what was described as a successful conference. Plans are already in motion for another rendition next year. I had the opportunity to attend and present at the conference, and I must confess that I was among the 2% who expressed reservations amidst the general enthusiasm. Please don't get me wrong; I'm not opposed to technology. However, when I contemplate the existential implications of embracing AI as we currently are, I can't help but feel demotivated, helpless, and even disheartened. I am fully aware that I won't win this battle, and adaptability is a trait I possess (it's been a significant part of my life during my twenty-two years in the US). Nevertheless, I can't shake the thought that in our pursuit of "immortality," the "erasure of mistakes/errors," and "improved quality of life" as arguments for embracing the "world of thinking machines," we are rapidly and somewhat paradoxically hurtling into the abyss—the annihilation of the human race. It's true that I can't escape my Portuguese genetic code, and I tend to be a natural pessimist. However, I'd like to see myself more as a realist with a strong underpinning of humanism. I care deeply about our mission as educators, prioritizing it over the self-serving pursuit of being on the cutting edge of the latest technology solely for self-gain, such as receiving grants, promotions, admiration, and achieving success, whatever that may mean in the academic context.

After my dull and unsuccessful presentation at the conference, where I endeavored to raise my colleagues' awareness about the social, economic, gender, racial, and existential implications of embracing AI in Academia, and where I commended the students for not utilizing it, I was suddenly, shockingly, and profoundly affected by nearly an entire class submitting assignments generated by AI. You can only imagine the pain and sense of helplessness I felt at that moment. Subsequently, I realized that this occurrence served to confirm the suspicions I had articulated at the conference. Yes, AI is here to stay, but at what cost?

In my perspective, the cost is excessively high. It's too high for us to embrace willingly, so we prefer to ignore it, navigate around it, and adapt. We would rather disregard real societal issues and embark on a voyage into the unknown, which is essentially the dictatorship of AI, a realm where we would forfeit our capacity to utilize the most crucial organ in our bodies: our brains. When students opt to forego reading, writing, and thinking in favor of completing their work in two minutes with the assistance of a machine, they risk diminishing their cognitive faculties. If we merely accept and endorse work that all looks identical, pretending that our students have magically become superstars where errors are non-existent, and we no longer need to aid them in their growth, then our own intellectual faculties become atrophied, and our growth as human beings also stops. A society that places an excessive emphasis on monetary wealth will eventually devolve into an empty shell and ultimately fade away. Its citizens won't flourish; or if they do, it will be a hollow kind of thriving, marked by apathy, ignorance, and a profound sense of emptiness. Isn't that already happening? I firmly believe that we already have ample evidence of this.

So, I decided to confront my students with nine examples of their work from that week. I took screenshots of these examples and opened a discussion forum on AI. I asked them a couple of questions and requested that they identify, from the nine anonymous examples, which ones they thought were produced by AI and which ones were not. The answers ranged from just one to a few to all. Even the students themselves couldn't tell. I realized that no one will be able to tell, and as a result, we will have students who are either perceived as perfect geniuses or the opposite. However, what struck me as ironic was that 99% of them could see the consequences of using AI in their academic work, yet they continue to use it. I can't blame them. They are simply doing what humans do when they exist in an educational system, in particular, and a society, in general, that demands them to be and do everything, selling them the message that they can achieve anything. Like AI, it's a dangerous message, one that leads students, and not just them, to believe that they are losers when they've only made some progress and will only do something in their lives. Self-esteem will drop like flies on a torrid day, and then, we know what happens.

I will leave you here with some of the students' comments: "I am deeply concerned by AI. Not just as an academic nightmare, but also its uses as 'deepfake' software—there is currently an epidemic of AI being used to create pornographic images of women who never posed for such things"; "Another thing that gives me nightmares about AI is the idea of it being used to create fake research. Scientific racism is a huge problem, and as AI doesn't have to follow any sort of moral code like real researchers do, they can just create whatever they want and have it be believed"; "many people could lose touch talking to real human beings"; "It has no place in education"; "AI detracts from learning and growth" ; "This accessibility to artificial intelligence tools, without running the risk of sounding too overdramatic, really does challenge human intelligence in dangerous ways. The brain, like any muscle without exercise, will only atrophy when neglected" ; "In a classroom setting particularly, AI can end up being a crutch that allows students to disengage with the material intended to deepen our understanding of certain topics and still produce work resembling that of a student who has engaged with the material" ; "Even the job market in the future will be strain…" ; "Something I was thinking about AI is that it's causing extra work on professors and their pay isn't increasing despite the extra work."

We are not at risk of being unambitious. One of the dangers is suicide. The epidemic of mental health, which we were discussing so effusively until the latest hot topic emerged in our academic lives, is going to be even greater. We seem to be turning a blind eye to this issue, driven by the belief that a conventional life is no longer sufficient. In my opinion, students are becoming more discerning, but we are not providing them with other—better and healthier—alternatives.

It's Not Easy Being Green: From Silver to Gold, Expanding UCF's Sustainability Vision Through Cross-Disciplinary Integration

Devon Bazata, Martha Hubertz, Carlos Valdez, & Richard Plate

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Martha Hubertz is a social psychologist and Associate Lecturer in the Psychology Department. She teaches social psychology and several diversity courses as well as research methods. Dr. Hubertz has been recognized on numerous occasions for her innovative approaches to teaching.

Richard Plate is Associate Lecturer in Sustainability and Environmental Science. He teaches courses in environmental science, environmental ethics and politics, marine resource management, and writing. He authors numerous articles on the human dimensions of natural resource management and has co-authored a textbook on sustainability. His research focuses on how people learn and make decisions about complex social-ecological systems.

What began as an interdisciplinary faculty learning community through the Faculty Center for Teaching and Learning (FCTL) has evolved into a comprehensive mission to transform how UCF approaches sustainability education. Initially, the FCTL community focused on fostering dialogue and sharing best practices among faculty members across disciplines. However, it was student feedback that truly propelled the initiative forward. Students highlighted the importance of integrating sustainability into all aspects of university life, revealing that environmental sustainability represents just one facet of a multifaceted challenge encompassing poverty, health, inequality, and other UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

This realization has imbued our efforts with a particular urgency, especially given UCF's current Silver STARS rating from the Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education (AASHE) and our institutional goal of achieving Gold status. The journey from an FCTL learning community to a university-wide movement underscores UCF's commitment to fostering a sustainable future.

Recognizing the interconnected nature of the SDGs, our initiatives aim not only to address environmental concerns but also to tackle broader socio-economic issues. By integrating these goals into the curriculum and campus operations, UCF is empowering students, faculty, and the broader community to become proactive agents of change.

Faculty Focus

The Evolution of Sustainability at UCF: From Early Burns to Modern Innovation
UCF's commitment to sustainability has been a journey of innovation, adaptation, and dedicated effort. Our path began with initiatives like the Early Burn Farms, laying a strong foundation for the advanced sustainable practices we see today. This evolution underscores UCF's unwavering dedication to environmental stewardship and highlights our ability to innovate and adapt.

Early Beginnings: The Early Burn Farms
The Early Burn Farms represent UCF's initial foray into sustainability. These pioneering efforts focused on sustainable agriculture, land management, and education about environmental responsibility. The lessons learned and practices developed during this period were instrumental in shaping UCF's sustainability ethos.

Mid-Evolution: Broadening the Scope
As awareness and understanding of environmental issues grew, so did UCF's initiatives. Efforts expanded beyond agriculture to include energy conservation, waste reduction, and sustainable transportation. Key projects included campus-wide recycling programs, energy-efficient buildings, and partnerships with local organizations to promote sustainability across the community.

Modern Innovation: Solar Farm and Beyond
Today, UCF stands at the forefront of sustainable innovation. Our solar farm is a testament to this progress. It not only provides a significant portion of the campus's energy needs but also serves as a living laboratory for students and researchers. Other cutting-edge initiatives include:

- **Green Building Initiatives**: With LEED-certified buildings and a focus on eco-friendly architecture, UCF sets a standard for sustainable campus infrastructure.
- **Water Conservation Programs**: Advanced irrigation systems and water reuse initiatives help minimize water usage and preserve local resources.
- **Renewable Energy Projects**: Beyond solar, UCF is researching offshore wind technology, aiming to increase production of renewable energy.
- **Solar Panel Research:** Current research on solar panels taking place at UCF, places the university at the forefront of sustainable innovation.

Commitment to Education and Research
UCF's journey isn't just about implementing sustainable practices; it's also about fostering a culture of sustainability. This includes:

- **Sustainability Education**: Integrating sustainability into curricula across disciplines would ensure that all students graduate with an understanding of environmental issues. UCF offers:
    - **Courses on Sustainable Cities and Communities**: Courses like these give students hands-on experience in planning sustainable urban developments.
    - **Sustainability and Environmental Science Programs**: Comprehensive programs that cover everything from conservation biology to sustainable resource management.
    - **Specialized Workshops and Seminars**: UCF regularly hosts events that bring experts in sustainability to share knowledge and inspire students.
- **Research Initiatives**: UCF actively promotes research in sustainability, providing funding and support for projects that seek innovative solutions to environmental challenges.
- **Research Grants**: The university offers grants specifically for sustainability research, encouraging innovative solutions to environmental problems.
- **Interdisciplinary Projects**: Collaborative research efforts between different departments to address complex sustainability issues from multiple angles.

Looking Forward
UCF's sustainability journey is ongoing. Future plans include expanding renewable energy projects, enhancing green spaces, and continuing to lead by example in the fight against climate change. Our evolution reflects not just a history of commitment but a future of possibility.

Current Initiatives
In addition to the projects mentioned, UCF is actively engaged in several key sustainability initiatives:

- Learning by Leading (LXL) Program: Launched in 2019, this program helps students develop leadership skills by managing student teams to execute sustainability projects under the guidance of a staff mentor.
- Knights Helping Knights Pantry (aka Knights Pantry): This began as a grassroots program in 2009 to provide UCF students in need with food and other necessities. Today, with the support of community partners and fresh produce from UCF's Arboretum garden, the Knights Pantry allows students to pick up toiletries, clothing, and up to five food items per day.
- **Sustainable Transportation**: UCF supports alternative transportation options such as bike-sharing programs, electric vehicle charging stations, and public transportation passes for students and staff.
- **Sustainability in Dining**: Dining services focus on local sourcing, waste reduction, and composting programs to create a more sustainable food system on campus. Dining Services are also working to make UCF a Fair Trade-designated campus.

Current Context and Challenges

UCF's STARS Rating
The Sustainability Tracking, Assessment & Rating System (STARS) is a transparent, self-reporting framework for colleges and universities to measure their sustainability performance. UCF is currently rated Silver, based on its most recent 2024 report submission. The university's score increased from 47.16 in 2021 to 56.49 in 2024. UCF aims to advance to a Gold rating by 2027, which requires a score of at least 65. As you can see in our last STARS report, UCF was rated very low in the academic areas, primarily in both curriculum and research.

There are four main areas in this category that UCF scored very low on:

Academic Courses	Complete	3.02 / 14.00
Learning Outcomes	Complete	0.23 / 8.00
Sustainability Literacy Assessment	Not Pursuing	0.00 / 4.00
Incentives for Developing Courses	Not Pursuing	0.00 / 2.00

With scores of 3.02/14.00 in Academic Courses and 0.23/8.00 in Learning Outcomes, we recognize the need to enhance sustainability education across disciplines. Our faculty group is actively working to address these gaps through curriculum development and cross-disciplinary collaboration. These scores also reflect a failure to capture the work that many faculty are already doing to address sustainability in the classroom. In many cases, faculty are teaching about issues such as poverty and hunger reduction, promoting human health and well-being, and reducing inequalities without realizing that these topics are central to sustainability. More on this below. To address the gaps in UCF's academic integration of sustainability, Hubertz conducted a comprehensive student

survey (N = 935) in Fall 2023 to understand how students engage with sustainability concepts and identify opportunities for curricular enhancement. We will discuss some of that data here.

Expanding the Sustainability Conversation at UCF: Beyond Environmental Concerns

In recent years, the conversation around sustainability at UCF has evolved significantly, moving beyond traditional environmental concerns to encompass broader social, economic, and health-related challenges as outlined in the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Through the collaborative efforts of an interdisciplinary faculty group that emerged from an FCTL learning community, UCF is working to reshape how we approach sustainability in higher education, making it easier for faculty to incorporate sustainability into their coursework across the disciplines.

Understanding the Full Scope of Sustainability

While environmental sustainability remains crucial, our faculty group recognizes that addressing global challenges requires a more comprehensive approach. The UN SDGs provide a framework that encompasses critical issues such as poverty reduction, health equity, and reducing inequalities—elements that are fundamental to creating a truly sustainable future.

Bridging Perspectives: How Student Demographics Shape Sustainability Education

Recent survey data from Fall 2023 reveals a compelling story about how diverse student populations at UCF engage with sustainability concepts. With nearly 15% of respondents being first-generation college students and over 26% transfer students, the data illuminates how different life experiences shape understanding of and engagement with sustainability principles.

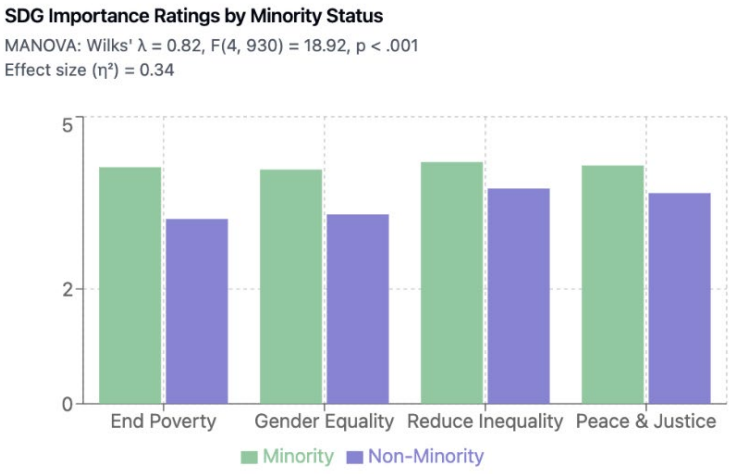
Our first-generation students, balancing work and studies, bring a pragmatic perspective to sustainability discussions. These students consistently demonstrate higher engagement with economic aspects of sustainability, with 42% rating economic sustainability as “extremely important” compared to the overall average of 37.32%. Their emphasis on practical applications suggests a keen awareness of how sustainability principles intersect with real-world challenges and opportunities.

Transfer students, drawing from their varied educational and often professional backgrounds, show particularly strong engagement with corporate sustainability initiatives. Their heightened familiarity with workplace sustainability practices (34% reporting “moderate familiarity” compared to 29.22% overall) enriches classroom discussions and peer learning opportunities. This practical knowledge proves invaluable in connecting theoretical concepts with real-world applications.

Importantly, our diverse student population—with 41.94% identifying as members of minority groups and 6.60% as international students—brings crucial perspectives to discussions of environmental justice and social sustainability. These students consistently emphasize the interconnected nature of environmental health, social equity, and economic opportunity, with minority students particularly likely to rank environmental justice as a top priority.

These insights suggest the need for a nuanced approach to sustainability education—one that acknowledges and builds upon the varied experiences and perspectives our students bring to the classroom. By integrating these diverse viewpoints into our curriculum across the disciplines, we strengthen our ability to prepare students for the complex challenges they’ll face in their future careers and communities.

Student Well-being at an R1 HSI: Redefining Sustainability Through Diversity and Cultural Competency



As one of the nation's largest R1 Hispanic Serving Institutions, UCF's approach to sustainability must reflect and respond to our uniquely diverse student population. The Fall 2023 survey (N = 935) reveals how our institutional identity shapes both the challenges we face and the opportunities we must create meaningful change in sustainability education and practice.

Our position as an R1 HSI demands a culturally competent approach to sustainability education. Non-English primary language speakers demonstrate significantly higher awareness of global sustainability challenges ($M = 4.2$, $SD = 0.7$) compared to their peers ($M = 3.8$, $SD = 0.8$), $t(908) = 4.12$, $p < .001$, bringing valuable international perspectives to sustainability discussions. This global awareness, combined with strong local community engagement from our transfer students ($\chi2(4) = 13.24$, $p < .001$), creates opportunities for rich, multi-faceted approaches to sustainability education.

The Face of UCF: Our Diverse Student Community

UCF's identity as an R1 HSI is reflected in our vibrant student demographics, with 25.24% of our students identifying as Hispanic/Latino/a/x and 41.94% as minority group members. This diversity extends beyond ethnicity—our student body includes 14.77% first-generation college students, 26.24% transfer students, and 22.56% students from non-English speaking households. This rich tapestry of backgrounds and experiences creates both unique challenges and extraordinary opportunities for sustainability initiatives.

The socioeconomic landscape of our student population further illustrates the complexity of our institutional identity. While 45.90% of our students identify as middle class, significant portions come from lower middle class (16.09%) and lower class (3.67%) backgrounds. Nearly half of our students (44.84%) work while attending school, with 17.47% working 20-40 hours per week and 3.41% working more than 40 hours. These statistics paint a picture of a student body balancing multiple responsibilities and facing diverse challenges, and the need for ways to incorporate sustainable practices into their daily lived experience.

Cultural Perspectives on Sustainability

Our Hispanic/Latino/a/x students demonstrate significantly different approaches to sustainability compared to their peers. They show higher emphasis on community resilience ($M = 4.3$, $SD = 0.7$) compared to non-Hispanic students ($M = 3.8$, $SD = 0.9$), $t(908) = 4.56$, $p < .001$, and place stronger focus on family economic sustainability. This cultural perspective often translates into a more holistic view of sustainability that encompasses family, community, and environmental concerns. First-generation students bring another vital perspective to our sustainability dialogue. These students rate economic sustainability significantly higher in importance (42% compared to 37.32% overall, $t(908) = 3.89$, $p < .001$) and show greater interest in practical applications of

sustainability principles. Their experiences remind us that sustainability must address immediate economic and social needs alongside longer-term environmental concerns.

Basic Needs Security: A Foundation for Success

Perhaps most critically, our research reveals that 32% of UCF students report some level of food insecurity, with rates significantly higher among first-generation students (38%, $p < .001$) and working students (36%, $p < .002$). This food insecurity correlates significantly with reduced academic performance ($r = -.38$, $p < .001$), highlighting the intrinsic connection between basic needs security and academic success.

**The QR code above will take you to a file you can download, customize, and share with students as a class announcement.*

Housing insecurity emerges as a related concern, affecting 28% of our students and showing strong correlation with food insecurity ($r = .45$, $p < .001$). Transfer students in particular report higher rates of housing concerns (34%, $p < .001$), suggesting a need for targeted support during transition periods.

Building a Sustainable Future at UCF Based on Student Concerns

As we work toward improving our STARS rating and expanding sustainability initiatives, our institutional identity as an R1 HSI provides both direction and purpose. The diversity of our student body demands that we address sustainability through multiple cultural lenses, consider economic impacts alongside environmental concerns, and ensure that our initiatives support student well-being holistically. Data collected in Fall ' 23 revealed significant disparities in both environmental concerns and sustainability engagement patterns between minority (41.94%) and non-minority students. Multivariate analyses demonstrated that minority students reported higher levels of environmental and social justice concerns (Wilks' $\lambda = 0.84$, $F(4, 930) = 22.46$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = 0.36$) but lower rates of engagement in sustainability behaviors (Wilks' $\lambda = 0.88$, $F(4, 930) = 18.92$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = 0.32$).

Specifically, minority students showed heightened awareness of environmental problems (78.4% vs 71.2%), economic inequality (82.3% vs 68.5%), and social justice issues (84.6% vs 70.2%), but reported lower participation in sustainability practices such as recycling (62.4% vs 68.8%) and sustainable transportation use (45.2% vs 52.8%).

Chi-square analyses revealed significant disparities in access to sustainability resources ($\chi^2(1) = 24.86$, $p < .001$) and program participation ($\chi^2(1) = 19.42$, $p < .001$). Age emerged as a significant moderator, with older students showing progressively higher levels of environmental concern ($r = 0.34$, $p < .001$) and sustainability engagement ($r = 0.31$, $p < .001$) regardless of minority status.

These findings highlight the complex intersection of social justice and environmental sustainability in higher education, suggesting that while minority students demonstrate higher environmental awareness, structural barriers may impede their participation in sustainability initiatives. Results indicate a critical need for more inclusive and equitable approaches to campus sustainability programs that address both environmental and social justice concerns.

Effective sustainability education at UCF must begin with addressing basic needs security. Only then can we fully engage students in broader sustainability initiatives. This understanding has led to the development of integrated support services and curriculum design that recognize the interconnected nature of personal, economic, and environmental sustainability.

Looking forward, UCF's position as an R1 HSI offers unique opportunities to develop sustainability initiatives that serve as models for other institutions. By embracing our diversity and addressing the full spectrum of sustainability challenges our students face, we can create more effective and inclusive approaches to sustainability education. We must first support our students in the sustainability-based challenges they face in their lived experiences, followed by the ways in which we interweave sustainability content in our curriculum

across the disciplines. Our success in this endeavor will not only benefit our students but also contribute to the broader dialogue about sustainability in higher education.

Integrating Career Readiness and Sustainable Development: A Cross-Disciplinary Framework

Established in 1956, the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) connects more than 17,000 career professionals dedicated to preparing college students for successful careers. NACE's mission is to "empower and connect the community of professionals who support, develop, and employ the college-educated workforce," with core values of community, integrity, innovation, impact, and belonging (National Association of Colleges and Employers, n.d.). This mission aligns with the United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, a universal framework adopted in 2015 by all United Nations Member States. At the heart of this agenda are the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), aimed at promoting peace and prosperity for people and the planet, now and in the future (United Nations, n.d.).

Higher education institutions today hold the potential to serve as sustainability laboratories, influencing both current and future generations, yet this opportunity remains largely unrealized (Kohl et al., 2022). The role of higher education in supporting the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals has primarily been limited to offering training, supplying evidence for sustainability needs, and serving as a source of policy information (Kohl et al., 2022). Current frameworks in the literature for incorporating sustainability into higher education lack an interdisciplinary focus (Michael, 2020). We believe that integrating the eight (NACE) Career Readiness Competencies with the 17 United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) offers a compelling framework for cross-disciplinary education. Through careful analysis of student engagement patterns and learning outcomes, clear alignments emerge between professional competencies and global sustainability objectives. For example, Career and self-development competencies naturally align with SDG 4 (Quality Education) and SDG 8 (Decent Work), manifesting differently across disciplines. Business students develop career portfolios incorporating sustainability initiatives, while engineering students engage in renewable energy projects. Humanities students, through reflective writing on personal sustainability goals, demonstrate the versatility of this competency across fields.

Communication skills, particularly crucial for SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals), find expression through diverse academic activities. Communications students develop sustainability campaigns, while science majors practice technical writing on environmental impacts. Education students translate these skills into environmental education lesson planning, demonstrating the adaptability of sustainability communication across disciplines.

Critical thinking, aligned with SDG 9 (Industry & Innovation) and SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities), emerges strongly in quantitative fields. Mathematics students analyze climate patterns, while urban planning students engage in sustainable city design. Psychology students apply these skills to behavior change strategies, highlighting the interdisciplinary nature of sustainability problem-solving.

The equity and inclusion competency, corresponding to SDG 5 (Gender Equality) and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities), proves particularly impactful in social sciences. Statistical analysis reveals significant student interest in environmental justice ($\chi 2(4) = 11.34$, $p < .001$), with sociology students examining case studies and public policy students analyzing climate impact disparities.

Leadership development, connected to SDG 16 (Peace, Justice & Strong Institutions), shows strong results across management-oriented disciplines. Political science students engage in sustainability policy development, while hospitality students tackle sustainable event planning challenges. Business students particularly value workplace sustainability initiatives ($M = 4.2$, $SD = 0.7$).

Professionalism, linked to SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption & Production), finds natural applications in business-oriented disciplines. Accounting students conduct environmental cost analyses, while marketing students develop

ethical advertising campaigns. These applications demonstrate how professional skills directly support sustainability objectives.

Technological competency, supporting SDG 9 and SDG 11, shows particularly strong engagement among STEM majors ($r = .48$, $p < .001$). Computer engineering students develop smart city technologies, while digital media students create sustainability visualizations, demonstrating the essential role of technology in advancing sustainability goals.

Teamwork is crucial for students to learn to interact and collaborate with others, aligning with SDG 4 (Quality Education) and SDG 5 (Gender Equality). For example, business and engineering students develop team solutions for real clients, as seen in capstone projects.

Disciplinary Applications and Outcomes

Recent data reveal distinct patterns of engagement across academic disciplines. Arts and humanities students show significant interest in sustainability-focused creative expression ($t(908) = 3.78$, $p < .001$). STEM fields demonstrate strong engagement with technical solutions, while business students emphasize practical workplace applications. Health sciences students significantly prioritize preventive approaches to environmental health ($t(908) = 4.12$, $p < .001$).

This framework suggests that sustainability education most effectively engages students when aligned with both career competencies and discipline-specific applications. The data supports a flexible, integrated approach that maintains academic rigor while preparing students for sustainability challenges in their chosen fields.

The Nexus of Career Readiness and Sustainability Education: Evidence from a Comprehensive Student Survey

A Fall 2023 survey of University of Central Florida students ($N = 935$) reveals compelling evidence of the synergy between sustainability education and career readiness competencies. Analysis demonstrates significant correlations between students' sustainability awareness and their development of crucial professional skills defined by the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE). Students with higher sustainability literacy showed notably stronger self-reported ratings across multiple NACE competencies, particularly in critical thinking and global/intercultural fluency ($r = .45$, $p < .001$).

Career Competencies Through a Sustainability Lens

The relationship between sustainability engagement and career readiness manifests strongly across several key competencies. In critical thinking and problem-solving, students who rated sustainability as "very important" or "extremely important" ($n = 367$) demonstrated significantly higher problem-solving capabilities compared to their peers ($t(908) = 4.32$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.48$). This group showed sophisticated analytical skills, with 43.54% recognizing the need for systematic environmental solutions and 32.93% advocating for structural changes.

Professional development correlations proved particularly strong among transfer students ($r = .52$, $p < .001$). These students demonstrated an enhanced ability to connect sustainability principles with workplace applications, suggesting that diverse educational experiences may strengthen the sustainability-professionalism nexus.

Global and intercultural fluency emerged as a distinctive strength among international students, who comprised 6.60% of respondents. These students rated sustainability importance significantly higher ($M = 4.2$, $SD = 0.8$) than their domestic counterparts ($M = 3.8$, $SD = 0.9$), $t(908) = 3.45$, $p < .002$. Similarly, minority students (41.94% of respondents) showed markedly higher engagement with global sustainability initiatives ($t(908) = 3.78$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.45$).

Career Sector Preferences and Sustainability Priorities

Career aspirations significantly influenced students' sustainability perspectives. Non-profit sector aspirants (15.73%) demonstrated notably higher valuations of social justice ($M = 4.3$, $SD = 0.7$) compared to other sectors (M

= 3.8, SD = 0.9), t(908) = 4.12, p < .001. Government-focused students (12.96%) showed stronger support for policy-based solutions (M = 4.1, SD = 0.8) over market-based approaches (M = 3.6, SD = 0.9), t(908) = 3.89, p < .001.

The majority pursuing for-profit careers (59.36%) emphasized technological solutions (M = 4.0, SD = 0.8) compared to alternative approaches (M = 3.5, SD = 0.9), t(908) = 4.23, p < .001. This group also showed significantly higher ratings of economic sustainability importance ($\chi 2(4) = 11.34$, p < .001).

Professional Development and Work Experience

Employment status emerged as a crucial factor in sustainability engagement. Working students (44.84%) showed significantly higher ratings of practical sustainability applications (M = 4.2, SD = 0.7) versus theoretical understanding (M = 3.7, SD = 0.8), t(908) = 4.56, p < .001. The correlation between hours worked and sustainability engagement strengthened with increased work commitment, from part-time (r = .32, p < .001) to full-time (r = .45, p < .001) to extended hours (r = .51, p < .001).

Academic Level and Workplace Priorities

First-year students (41.45%) prioritized community engagement (M = 4.2, SD = 0.7) and employee incentives (M = 4.0, SD = 0.8), while upper-level students (32.29%) emphasized employee incentives (M = 4.3, SD = 0.7) and sustainable office practices (M = 4.1, SD = 0.8). This shift in priorities proved statistically significant ($F(3, 906) = 8.45$, p < .001, $\eta 2 = .12$), suggesting an evolution in professional perspective as students progress academically.

Implications and Future Directions

The data strongly supports the intentional integration of sustainability concepts with career preparation ($F(2, 907) = 12.34$, p < .001, $\eta 2 = .15$). These findings suggest the need for experiential learning opportunities explicitly aligned with NACE competencies, targeted programming for different career sectors, and expanded community engagement initiatives.

*Note: All statistical analyses were conducted using SPSS 27.0. Effect sizes were calculated using Cohen's d for t-tests and partial eta-squared (η2) for ANOVAs.**

Recommended Teaching Strategies

To enhance the educational experience and better prepare students for their future careers, several recommended teaching strategies have been identified. These strategies focus on explicitly connecting career competencies to course objectives, promoting cross-disciplinary projects, integrating industry partnerships, and implementing robust assessment strategies.

To begin with, educators are encouraged to include NACE competencies in their learning objectives. This includes developing assignments that build specific career skills and creating rubrics that incorporate both sustainability and professional standards. NACE Career Readiness Competencies and UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have several key alignments.

The following table provides a few examples of these connections but is not meant to be an exhaustive list:

NACE Competency	SDG with Specific Targets and Indicators	Connections
Critical Thinking/Problem Solving	SDG 13 Climate Action Target 13.1 Strengthen resilience and adaptive capacity to climate-related hazards and natural disasters in all countries Indicator 13.1.3: Proportion of local governments that adopt and implement disaster risk strategies in line with national disaster risk strategies.	Students analyze complex environmental data and develop solutions with local applications.
Leadership	SDG 17 Partnerships for the Goals Target 17.16: Enhance global partnership for sustainable development Indicator 17.16.1: Progress in multi-stakeholder development frameworks	Leading cross-sector collaborations and resource management
Digital Technology	SDG 9 Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure Target 9.C: Increase access to information technology Indicator 9.C.1: Population covered by mobile networks	Leveraging technology for sustainable infrastructure solutions
Global/Intercultural Literacy	SDG 10: Reduced Inequalities Target 10.2: Promote social, economic, and political inclusion Indicator 10.2.1: Population below 50% if the median income by age, sex, and disability	Cross-cultural communication and inclusive practices
Professionalism	SDG 8 Decent Work and Economic Growth Target 8.6: Reduce youth unemployment Indicator 8.6.1: Youth not in education, employment, or training	Professional development and ethical workplace practices

These alignments help students develop career skills while addressing global sustainability challenges. This explicit connection helps students understand the relevance of their coursework to their future careers. To narrow this even further, key alignments between NACE competencies and specific UN SDG targets/indicators can be broken down into the following specifics:

1. Leadership → SDG 17.16
   - Target: Enhance global partnership for sustainable development
   - Indicator 17.16.1: Progress in multi-stakeholder development frameworks
   - NACE Connection: Leading cross-sector collaborations and resource management
2. Digital Technology → SDG 9.C
   - Target: Increase access to information technology
   - Indicator 9.C.1: Population covered by mobile networks
   - NACE Connection: Leveraging technology for sustainable infrastructure solutions
3. Global/Intercultural Fluency → SDG 10.2
   - Target: Promote social, economic, political inclusion
   - Indicator 10.2.1: Population below median income by age, sex, disability
   - NACE Connection: Cross-cultural communication and inclusive practices
4. Professionalism → SDG 8.6
   - Target: Reduce youth unemployment
   - Indicator 8.6.1: Youth not in education, employment, or training
   - NACE Connection: Professional development and ethical workplace practices

Cross-disciplinary projects are another vital strategy. By partnering with faculty across departments, educators can develop joint renewable assignments that address multiple UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and create opportunities for diverse student collaboration. This approach not only broadens students' perspectives but also fosters innovative solutions to complex problems.

Integrating industry partnerships is also crucial. By connecting with sustainability professionals and developing applied projects with community partners, educators can create internship opportunities focused on sustainability. These partnerships provide students with practical experience and a clearer understanding of the real-world applications of their studies.

Lastly, effective assessment strategies are essential. Educators should measure both content knowledge and career skill development, track longitudinal outcomes across programs, and assess the impact on student career preparation. This comprehensive approach ensures that educational programs are effectively preparing students for modern workplace demands.

Teaching Sustainability: A Cross-Disciplinary Approach
Our research highlights significant correlations between sustainability engagement and career readiness across disciplines. Students who demonstrate higher sustainability awareness score significantly better on professional development measures ($t(908) = 3.89$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.42$).

Successful cross-disciplinary approaches to teaching sustainability include various innovative strategies across different fields. In the Arts & Humanities, cultural sustainability projects link SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities) with creative expression, while environmental storytelling connects SDG 13 (Climate Action) with communication skills. In STEM fields, technical solutions address SDG 9 (Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure) through data analysis projects measuring SDG progress. In Business & Management, integrating ESG frameworks support SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) and sustainable business modeling connects theory with practice.

Future Directions
Looking ahead, the integration of sustainability education with career readiness presents numerous opportunities. In terms of curriculum development, there is potential for creating sustainability certificates across disciplines, developing career-focused sustainability modules, and integrating sustainability into existing courses.

Research opportunities abound, with possibilities for assessing learning outcomes, tracking career placement and success, and evaluating teaching strategies. Community engagement is also a key area for growth, with potential for partnership development with local organizations, service-learning opportunities, and professional networking events.

Transforming Sustainability Education at UCF
Our path forward includes innovative educational practices, cutting-edge research, and community engagement, all designed to embed sustainability into the fabric of university life. As we work toward achieving a Gold STARS rating, our focus extends beyond improving metrics to creating meaningful change in how sustainability is taught and understood at UCF.

Technology Integration
- Virtual reality sustainability simulations
- Smart campus energy management systems
- Digital tools for measuring environmental impact

Research Applications
- Cross-disciplinary sustainability projects
- Community-based participatory research
- Industry partnerships advancing sustainable practices

By intentionally connecting sustainability education to career readiness across disciplines, we can better prepare students for future workplace demands while advancing institutional sustainability goals.

Looking Forward: A More Comprehensive Approach
As we work toward UCF's Gold STARS rating, faculty have unique opportunities to enhance sustainability education while supporting student success. Our data suggests that integrating sustainability across disciplines not only improves learning outcomes ($F(2, 907) = 12.34$, $p < .001$, $\eta 2 = .15$) but also better prepares students for professional success.

By integrating sustainability principles across disciplines and highlighting their connection to social justice, economic equality, and human well-being, we aim to prepare students to address the complex challenges of our time. What we are finding is that students' concerns are more about access to food and housing than UCF's solar farms. So how do we balance the scales?

Next steps include:

1. Developing a sustainability course designation process
2. Creating faculty development opportunities like this one
3. Establishing assessment protocols aligned with STARS criteria
4. Building cross-disciplinary sustainability partnerships

**Note: Statistical analyses conducted using SPSS 27.0. Effect sizes calculated using Cohen's d for t-tests and partial eta-squared (η2) for ANOVAs.*

Moving Forward: Recommendations for Faculty
Based on our findings, we recommend several strategies for enhancing sustainability education:

First, we recommend integrating SDGs with Course Objectives (it is easier than you might think!). For many courses, faculty can map their existing content to relevant SDGs, ideally using specific SDG targets and indicators. In other courses, faculty can develop new assignments with explicit connections to sustainability, thereby helping students understand how course content connects to real-world problems. Second, faculty can build community connections to leverage in their courses. Service-learning opportunities and industry aligned projects are great ways to prepare students for employment and make positive change in our community. Such opportunities also encourage students to take action. The SDG framework is also an excellent way to network with other faculty to make cross-disciplinary connections. UCF's Arboretum and Sustainability Initiatives and Faculty Center for Teaching and Learning are working to help faculty coordinate their efforts to incorporate sustainability. Third, faculty can leverage technology so that integrating sustainability becomes a way to foster student engagement. For example, Our World in Data offer a multitude of visualization tools using data related to SDG indicators. Databases of assignments related to SDGs are available, and UCF will have its own set of SDG-related resources coming out soon. And finally, faculty should assess the impact of their sustainability integration efforts. This can be in the form of graded class assessments to gauge students' understanding of sustainability or student surveys to see how students are receiving the sustainability-related content.

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Acknowledgements:

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Submissions
The *Faculty Focus* is a publication for all instructors at the University of Central Florida. This includes full-time and part-time faculty and teaching assistants at all UCF campuses. Its purpose is to provide an exchange of ideas on teaching and learning for the University's community of teachers and scholars. It is envisioned that this publication will inspire more dialogue among faculty whether in hallway discussions, departmental meetings, or in written articles. This represents an opportunity for faculty members to reach their peers throughout the growing UCF community. The *Faculty Focus* invites you to contribute your ideas on teaching and learning in a short essay. See the guidelines for submission online at https://fctl.ucf.edu/teaching-resources/faculty-focus/. Please send your submissions to fctl@ucf.edu.

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