Intentional Assignment Design: Aligning Assignments with Learning Outcomes and Teaching Activities

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Where is your team right now?

Pick the stage that best fits your project (share your # in the chat):

1. Defining — clarifying the problem and learning outcomes
2. Designing — drafting outcomes, assignments, or rubrics
3. Refining — drafts exist; working on alignment and assessment
4. Piloting — implementing with students now
5. Scaling — sustainability and campus buy-in

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Learning Outcomes

1. Examine Fink's Integrated Course Design model to move from content-centered to learning-centered assignment design
2. Evaluate assignment–rubric alignment using the performance descriptors of an AAC&U VALUE rubric
3. Plan backward design initiatives on campus using evidence-based practices

Part 1
Situating the Conversation

Why are we here, and why does it matter now?



Is a College Education Still Worth It?

It's the question almost every parent in America is asking these days. The answer is: Yes. Think that's just us tooting our own horn? Look at the data. Because the case for higher education is a case for humanity.

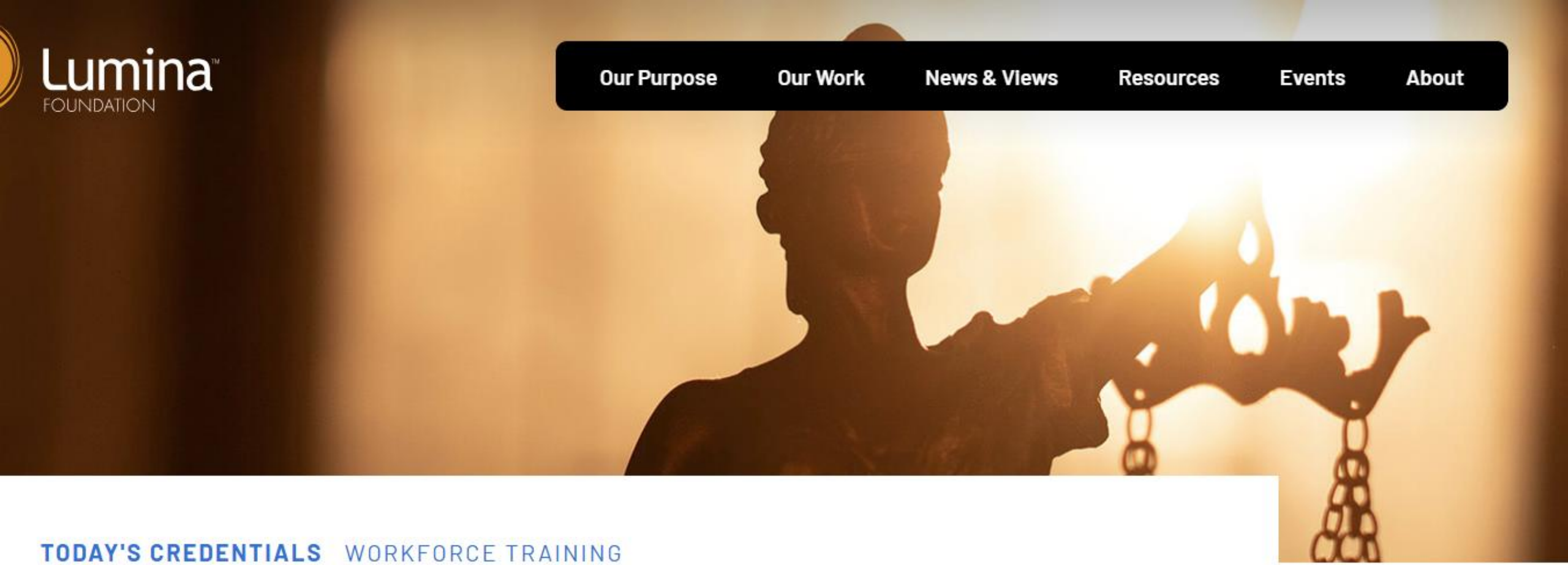
By Jonathan Riggs | Illustrations by Erik Carter
February 10, 2026

Listen Share

College is for other people — rich people. People who know exactly what they want to be when they grow up. People in the movies, maybe.

At least that's what San Diego native Julie Pelaez thought.

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TODAY'S CREDENTIALS WORKFORCE TRAINING

The degree isn't dead, but it's on trial

Courtney Brown • March 24, 2026

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ECONOMY

'Panicking': Why recent college grads are struggling to find jobs

JULY 13, 2025 · 6:00 AM ET

HEARD ON WEEKEND EDITION SUNDAY

Scott Horsley

4-Minute Listen + PLAYLIST TRANSCRIPT ···



Unemployment among young college graduates outpaces overall US joblessness rate



Morehouse College students line up before the school's commencement ceremonies in Atlanta on May 19, 2024. (AP Photo/Brynn Anderson, File)

BY CHRISTOPHER RUGABER
Updated 3:02 PM EDT, June 26, 2025

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Share

What do Students Themselves Say?

- 36.5% say career advancement is their primary reason for college — but a similar share name intellectual and personal growth, purpose, and identity
- Applied, high-impact experiences — internships, service-learning, mentorship — are what students link to the greatest gains in well-being and growth
- First-generation and lower-income students are more likely to prioritize personal growth over career preparation

Source: AAC&U & LearningWell Coalition, *What Students Value in College* (2026)

Higher education is inherently valuable.



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We know higher education is valuable, how can we help *others* see it?

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Students don't experience our mission statements. They experience our assignments (content and learning activities).

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The Elephant in the Room: Artificial Intelligence (AI)

How do we help students *learn* in this new context?

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We're going to present you with a series of statements.

For each statement, a Zoom poll will appear on your screen. Choose the option that best matches how much you AGREE or DISAGREE:

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Somewhere in the middle
- Agree
- Strongly agree

Feel free to also land somewhere in the middle!

Anticipation Guide







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Anticipation Guide: 1

Employers and the public question the value of higher education because we do not clearly show what students gain by earning a degree.

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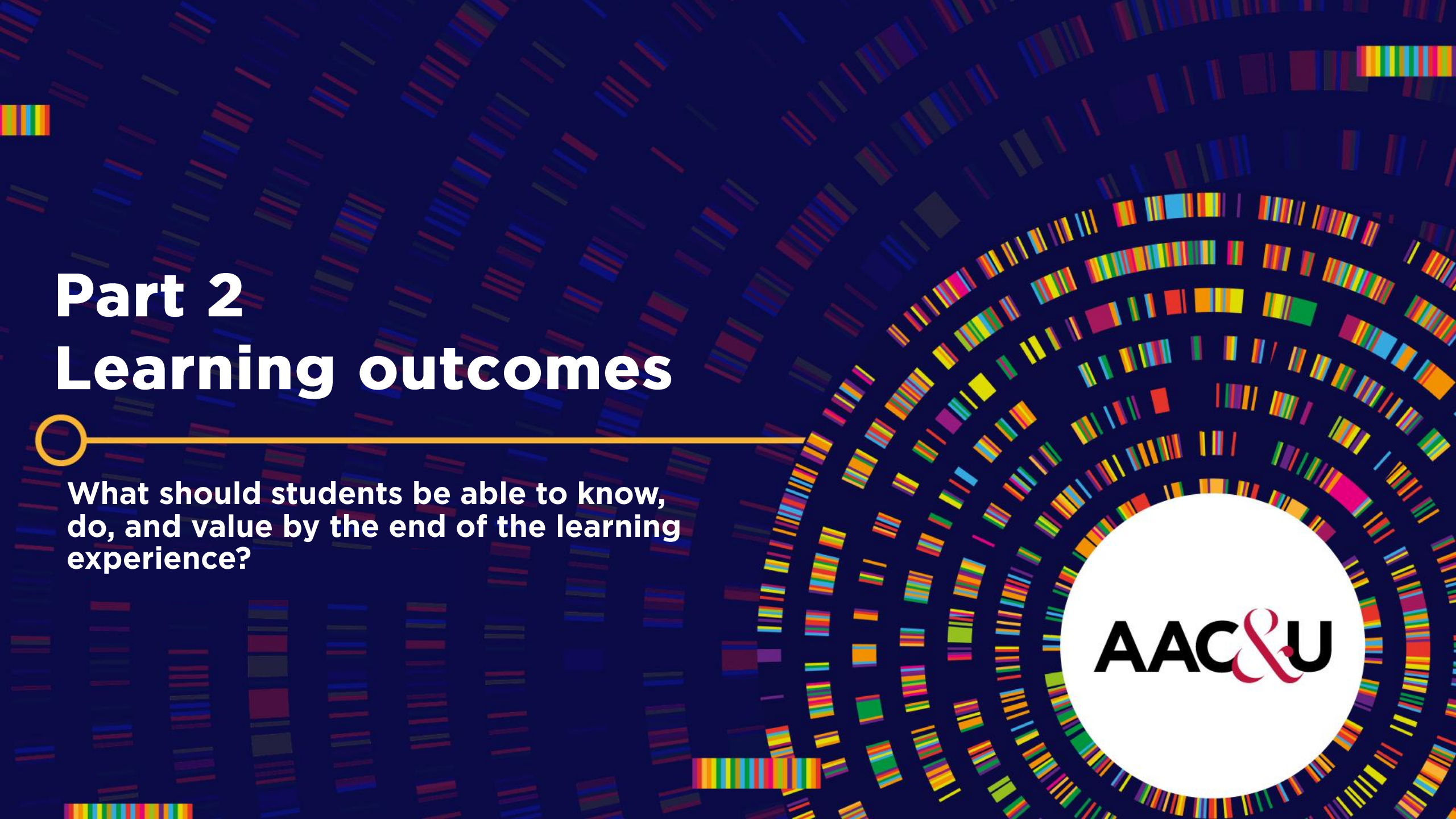
Reflection & Share

- How do you approach the assignment design process?

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Part 2
Learning outcomes

What should students be able to know, do, and value by the end of the learning experience?



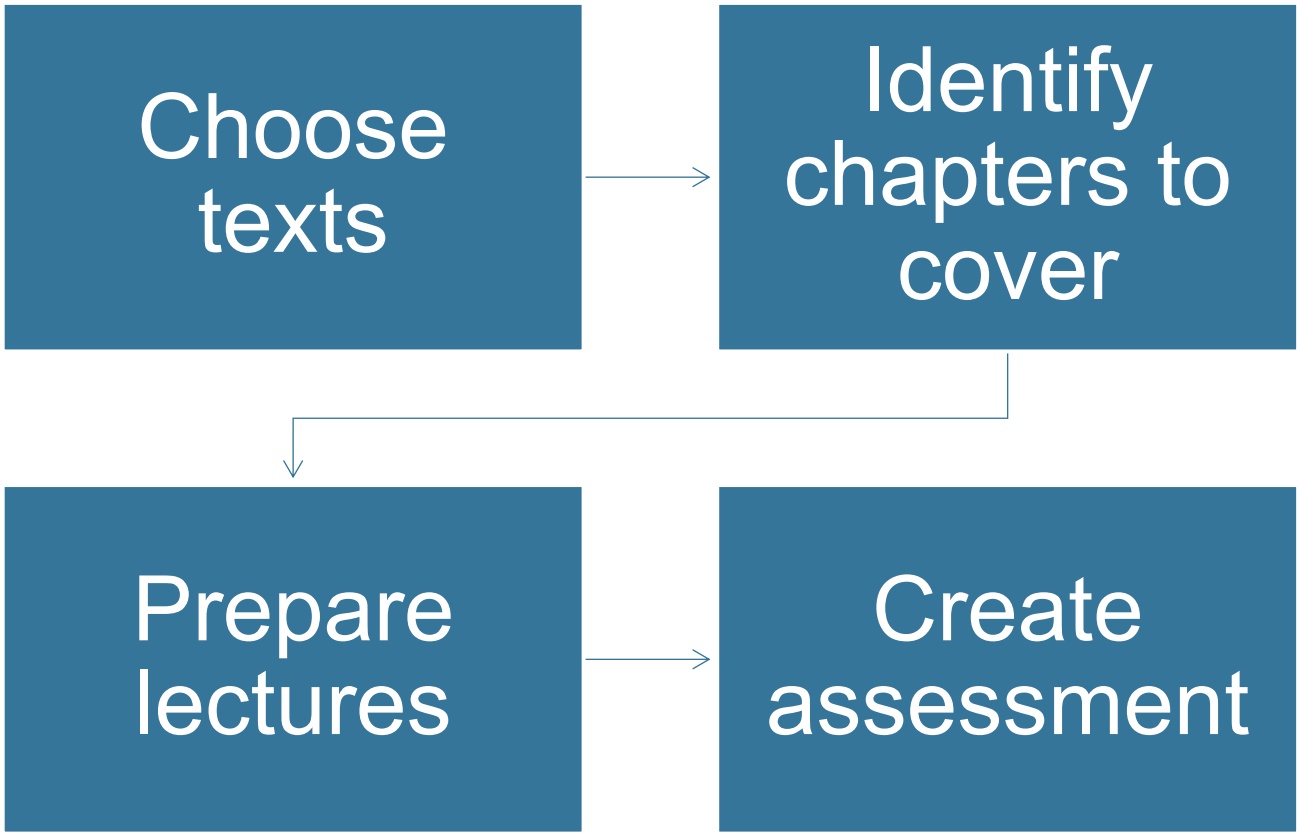
Anticipation Guide: 2

Learning outcomes are only a required part of the syllabus; they don't impact my course planning.

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A Common Approach to Course Design

Content-centered or “list of topics” approach



Dee Fink, 2013

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Backward Course Design

Identify the desired results	• As a result of taking your course, what will students know, be able to do, or value?
Determine acceptable evidence	• How will you know if students achieved the desired results?
Plan learning experiences	• How will you engage students to achieve the results?
Assess and enhance	• How will you improve the course for next time?

Wiggins & McTighe, 1998

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Plan with the End in Mind

Build in interaction, relevance, meaning, & clarity throughout to drive motivation.



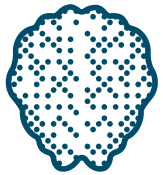
Outcomes

What knowledge, skills, and attitudes do you want your students to develop?



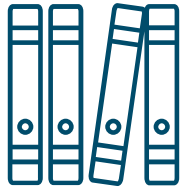
Assessments

What evidence will you gather that demonstrates they have achieved these outcomes?



Activities

What learning activities and content will help them be successful on these assessments?



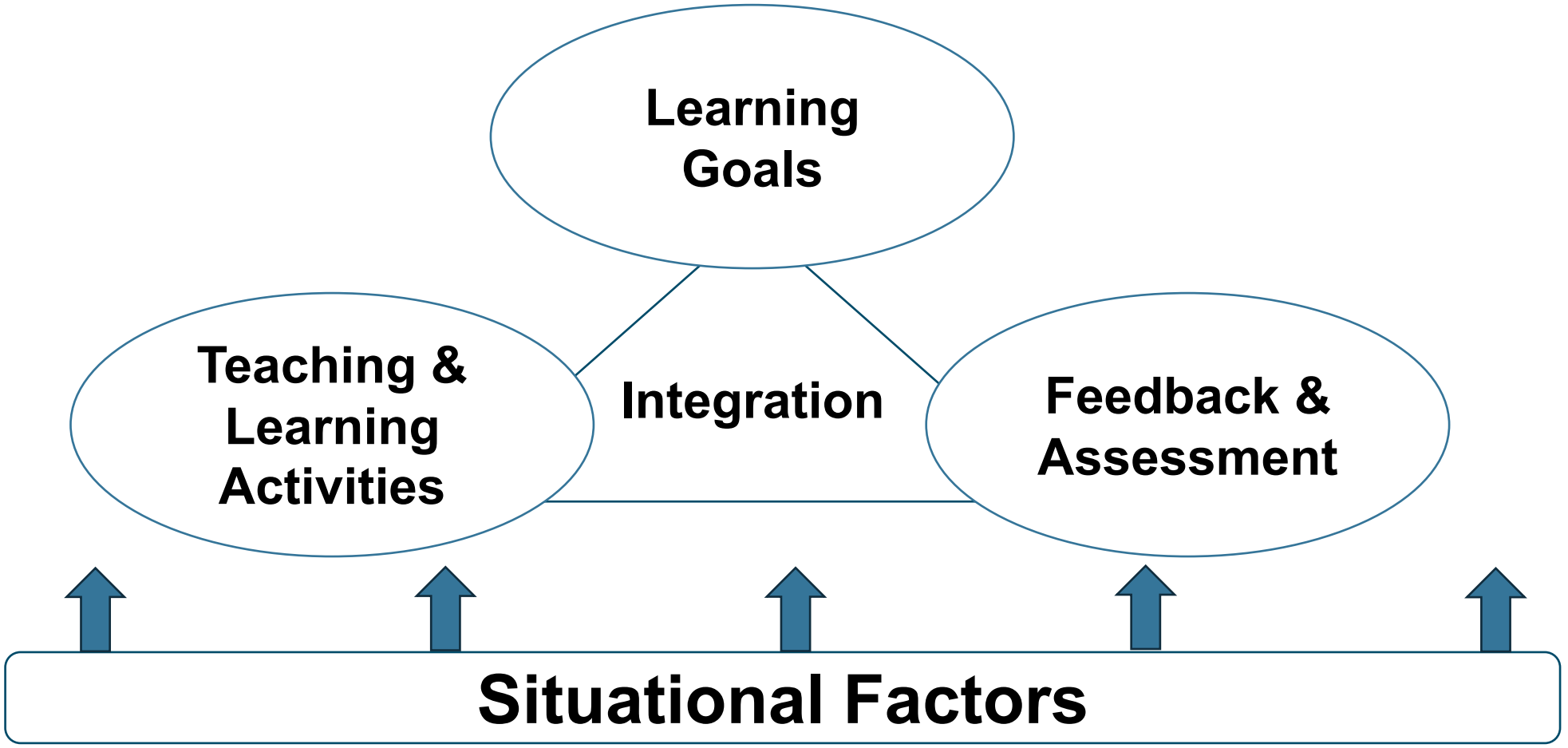
Content

What content will provide students with the information they need to engage in your learning activities?

This is an iterative process!

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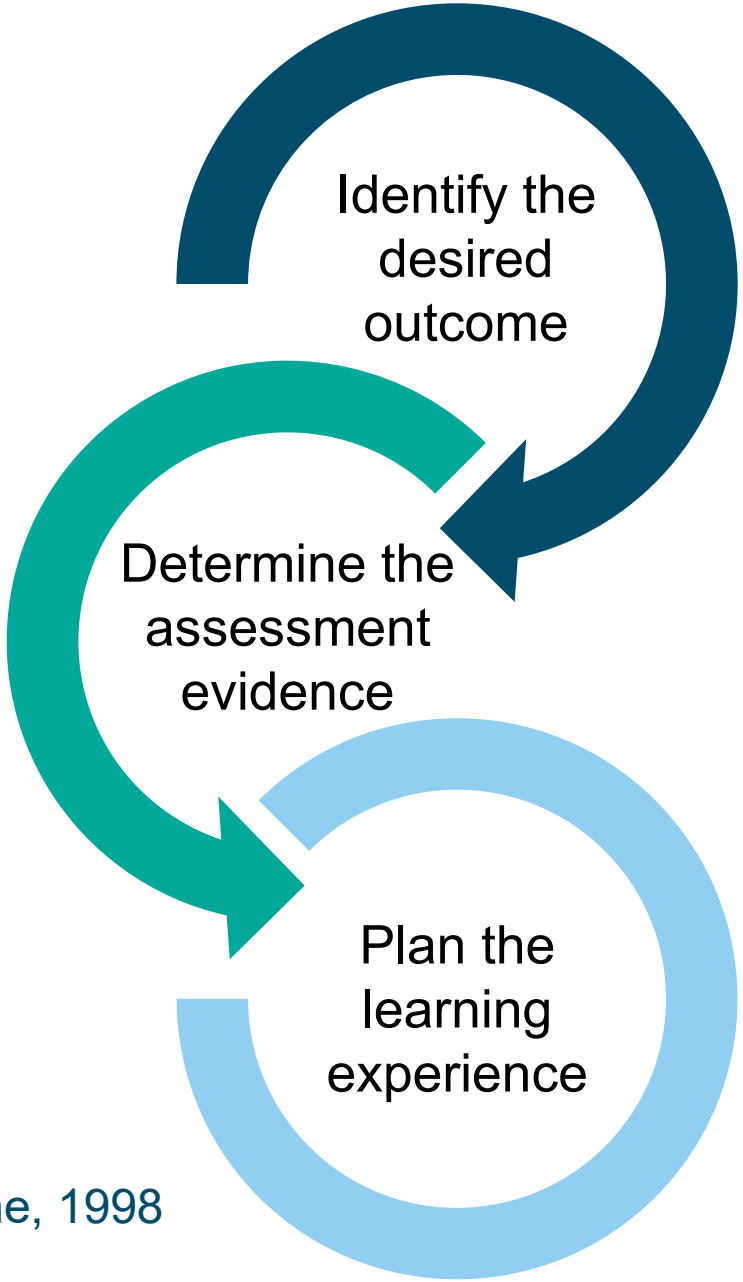
Criteria of Integrated Course Design



Dee Fink, *Integrated Course Design*, IDEA Paper #42

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Intentional assignment design starts with clear, measurable learning outcomes.



Wiggins & McTighe, 1998

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How should students be different by the end?

What can *we* do along the way to make this happen?

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Alignment Check

Think about an assignment you would like to redesign:

- What is the goal of the assignment? How is this assignment going to change your students by the end of the course?
- Does this assignment align with the learning outcome?

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Part 3
Assessment & Rubrics

What evidence best tells your story?
What questions should we ask?

When students fall short – what does it mean?

Think about an assignment; the results come back and students didn't demonstrate the skills you were assessing. What happened?

- Did they not learn it?
- Did they never get the opportunity to learn it?
- Did we measure the skill we intend to?

Only an aligned assignment lets you tell the difference.

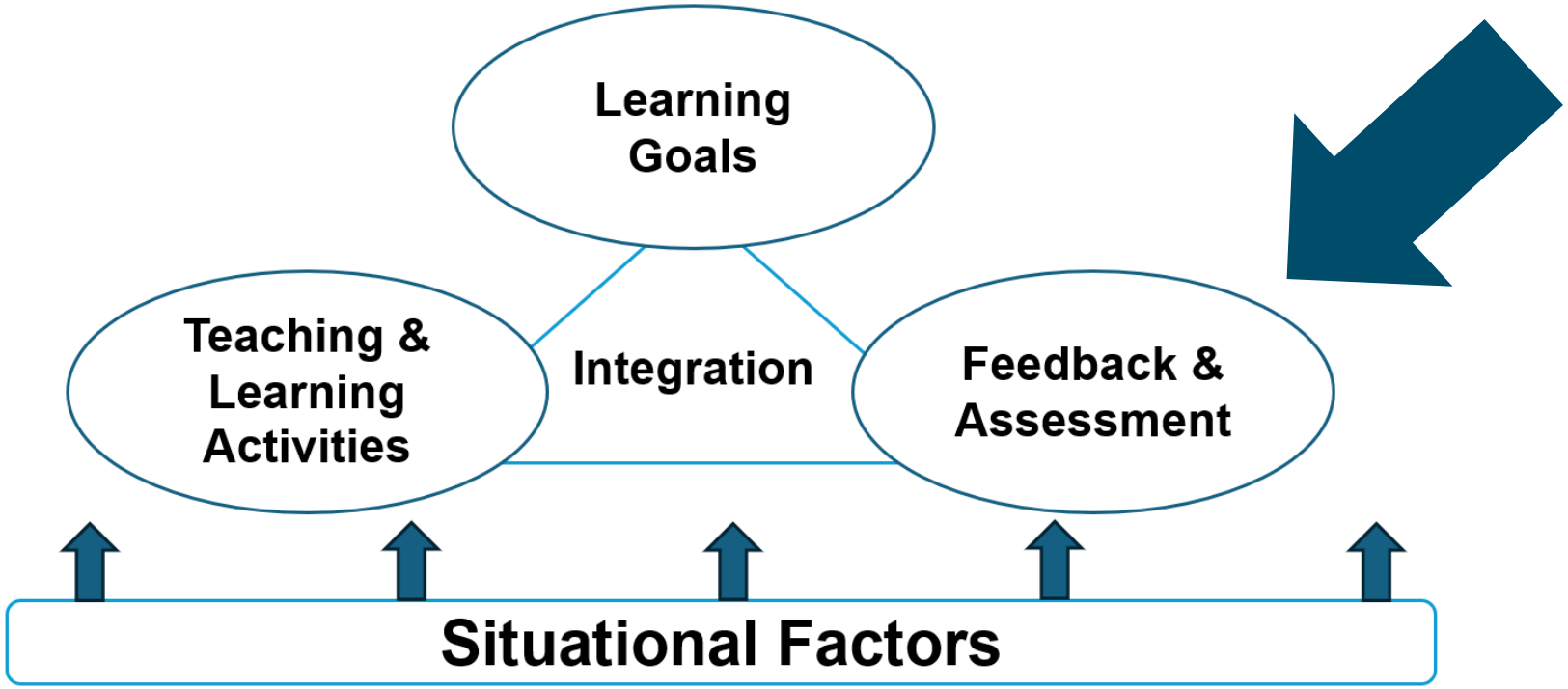
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"For classroom assessment to generate **meaningful information**, all aspects of the classroom experience must **align** pedagogically: course outcomes, course content, the learners themselves, the instructional and performance contexts, and the pedagogical strategies used."

(McConnell & Doolittle, 2017)

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Assessment is an Essential Part of Learning



Assessment can tell us about student learning at the:

- **course level**
- **program level**
- **institution level**

Dee Fink, *Integrated Course Design*, IDEA Paper #42

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Evaluation Approaches

Grading

- Goal: evaluate individual students' learning/performance.
- Often incorporates criteria that are not direct measures of learning (e.g., attendance, participation, effort).
- Course-specific.
- Often focused on correctness and completion.
- Feedback is intended for the student.

Assessment

- Goal: understand/improve student learning.
- Focus is on a cohort or specific group of students to determine whether learning goals are being achieved.
- Spans learning across multiple courses.
- Often focused on evidence of skills, knowledge, or behaviors.
- Feedback is intended for the assessment team, program, and institution.

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Rubrics

Articulate expectations of learning that guide our judgments of student work, what we do in the classroom, and how our students learn and grow.

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CRITICAL THINKING VALUE RUBRIC

For more information, please contact value@aacu.org

The VALUE rubrics were developed by teams of faculty experts representing colleges and universities across the United States through a process that examined many existing campus rubrics and related documents for each learning outcome and incorporated additional feedback from faculty. The rubrics articulate fundamental criteria for each learning outcome, with performance descriptors demonstrating progressively more sophisticated levels of attainment. The rubrics are intended for institutional-level use in evaluating and discussing student learning, not for grading. The core expectations articulated in all 16 of the VALUE rubrics can and should be translated into the language of individual campuses, disciplines, and even courses. The utility of the VALUE rubrics is to position learning at all undergraduate levels within a basic framework of expectations such that evidence of learning can by shared nationally through a common dialog and understanding of student success.

Definition

Critical thinking is a habit of mind characterized by the comprehensive exploration of issues, ideas, artifacts, and events before accepting or formulating an opinion or conclusion.

Framing Language

This rubric is designed to be transdisciplinary, reflecting the recognition that success in all disciplines requires habits of inquiry and analysis that share common attributes. Further, research suggests that successful critical thinkers from all disciplines increasingly need to be able to apply those habits in various and changing situations encountered in all walks of life.

This rubric is designed for use with many different types of assignments and the suggestions here are not an exhaustive list of possibilities. Critical thinking can be demonstrated in assignments that require students to complete analyses of text, data, or issues. Assignments that cut across presentation mode might be especially useful in some fields. If insight into the process components of critical thinking (e.g., how information sources were evaluated regardless of whether they were included in the product) is important, assignments focused on student reflection might be especially illuminating.

Glossary

The definitions that follow were developed to clarify terms and concepts used in this rubric only.

- **Ambiguity:** Information that may be interpreted in more than one way.
- **Assumptions:** Ideas, conditions, or beliefs (often implicit or unstated) that are "taken for granted or accepted as true without proof" (Dictionary.com, 2009, para. 1; www.dictionary.reference.com/browse/assumptions).
- **Context:** The historical, ethical. political, cultural, environmental, or circumstantial settings or conditions that influence and complicate the consideration of any issues, ideas, artifacts, and events.
- **Literal meaning:** Interpretation of information exactly as stated. For example, "she was green with envy" would be interpreted to mean that her skin was green.
- **Metaphor:** Information that is (intended to be) interpreted in a non-literal way. For example, "she was green with envy" is intended to convey an intensity of emotion, not a skin color.

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Examining Alignment

How do you know whether a VALUE rubric is a good fit to measure your learning outcome and aligns with your assignment?

Look at the performance descriptors for each dimension of the rubric!

	Capstone	Milestones		Benchmark
	4	3	2	1
Evidence *Selecting and using information to investigate a point of view or conclusion*	Information is taken from source(s) with enough interpretation/evaluation to develop a comprehensive analysis or synthesis. Viewpoints of experts are questioned thoroughly.	Information is taken from source(s) with enough interpretation/evaluation to develop a coherent analysis or synthesis. Viewpoints of experts are subject to questioning.	Information is taken from source(s) with some interpretation/evaluation, but not enough to develop a coherent analysis or synthesis. Viewpoints of experts are taken as mostly fact, with little questioning.	Information is taken from source(s) without any interpretation/evaluation. Viewpoints of experts are taken as fact, without question.

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Alignment Check

Think about an assignment you would like to redesign:

- Does your assessment method align with what you want to measure?
- Can the assignment provide information about student learning beyond your course?
- Does success look different at the course, program, and/or institution level?

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Revise Your Assignment

Guiding Questions:

- Are there unspoken expectations?
- Is there busy work that can be eliminated?
- Would this assignment benefit from multiple deadlines?
- Would this assignment still work in a world with AI (real audience, visible process, transparent criteria)?

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Feeding Your Action Plan

Bring today's work into your team's Friday submission:

- **Next steps:** your redesigned assignment + an alignment audit
- **Measures:** rubric-scored student work at course, program, and institution level
- **Capacity-building:** lead a design session with colleagues
- **Challenges:** the "assessment = compliance" mindset; use today's reframe as a counterargument.

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Reflection: Three Answers for Friday

What is one:

1. One insight from today you'll share with colleagues back on campus?

2. One thing from this session that belongs in your team's Action Plan?

3. One challenge you anticipate, and the campus champions, stakeholders, or decision-makers needed to get past it?

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Questions?

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