FAQ: How do you form student teams?

ALEXCANDRA COSO STRONG: So I would have to say forming student teams is one of the hardest pedagogical challenges we face at Olin. Every instructor has had good experiences with some models and not so good experiences with others. And those models are usually different per instructor. So we really think about a couple of key things with team selection, one of which is, when does the course take place? Is it a first, second or third year course? Or is it for our fourth year students? How long are students on teams? Is this a short, two-week project, or an entire semester project? What type of project is it? Is it client based? Is it more about students really digging into content? And lastly, what is the size of the team? Is it a pair, or is it a large team? And so you'll see that different faculty will take different perspectives on what to do next. So it could be that they help form the selection by asking lots of questions of our students, getting an idea of their interests, trying to understand, do they want to learn something in particular on this project? Are there students they don't want to necessarily work with? Or are there students they really want to work with? So we'll ask lots of questions. And then the faculty members will try to put together a team that will be most effective. Alternatively, they can have the students select teams, which happens mostly in the upper level courses and is typically partnered with some sort of scaffolded activity in class to gage students' interest and help them form the most effective teams.

FAQ: How do you grade team projects?

STRONG: So at Olin, faculty approach grading team projects from different perspectives.
Here's how I typically do it. I try to focus on three main things, the first of which is that I don't
make an assumption that students know how to work on teams coming into my class. So I
create some sort of activities to help them think about giving each other feedback, really
creating a team agreement up front, or something similar. The second thing is that when I
grade the final project, I try to come up with a systematic way of presenting my subjective
feedback. So I break it down in a form of a rubric, and try to be able to focus in on targeted
areas that the students know about ahead of time that I'll be giving them feedback on. And
lastly, I try to get input from the students themselves. So through something like a peer and
self-assessment, or individual meetings with students, I try to understand what they thought
they did well, what they could improve on, and also how did their team members do? And how
did the overall project go? And then I bring all this together to try to come up with a final grade
or assessment for a particular project or team.

FAQ: What does team teaching look like at Olin?

STRONG: So at Olin College, there are a lot of different flavors of team teaching, from co-
teaching with one other instructor, to many other instructors. So let me give you an example of
what this might look like. In the context of our first year, first semester courses, we have a

course called modeling and simulation. In this course, we have three modules of projects that range from pharmacokinetics to mechanics. And we have usually four teaching, members of the teaching team. So these different members bring their disciplinary backgrounds that might be, for example, mechanics, or something in the health or biomedical space. So they may be leading from one of the disciplinary perspectives on a module, but it's actually the whole team that works together to think of the activities, to lead sessions in the auditorium, to interact and support the students as they work on their problems. And this is one of the big values of team teaching, is at the end of the day, it's allowing us to bring together people's different perspectives, backgrounds to create an experience that's really rich for our students.

FAQ: Once faculty members start at Olin, what kind of training and support do they receive?

STRONG: So it may not surprise you to know that when new faculty come to Olin, we treat the design of their first year experience very similar to how we treat the design of our students' learning experiences. So with the faculty, we want to think about, how do we scaffold their first few months at Olin, such that they can build self-efficacy and confidence in their teaching, and ultimately design learning experiences for students. So let me give you an example. So when I started at Olin three years ago, I was a co-instructor in Design and Nature. In this course I began the very first week just trying to learn, understand. Who are my students? What are the types of activities we're designing? What are the potential pitfalls I might fall into? And then over the course of the term, after observing my co-instructors and asking lots of questions, I started to really lead my own experiences with the students, giving them feedback

based on my previous experiences, and ultimately helping in the design of the activities for the

class. So at the end of the semester, I had a lot more confident in what I would be doing

moving forward, and the experiences I designed.

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