

UNDERGRADUATE LEARNING CONTRACT

Sponsor: Office of Academic Affairs and Undergraduate Committee for Academic Policy (UCAP)

Contact: Provost/Executive Vice President for Academic Affairs

Category: Academic

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Implementation History: This policy was approved by the president in June of 2017 upon the recommendation of the college Senate and the Committee on Undergraduate Studies and Policies (CUSP) and supersedes the Learning Contract Study and Undergraduate Students Policy of March 2012 (originally approved September 1972). Previously revised: October 1980; April 1990; February 1996; February 2002. Previously Revised: October 1980; April 1990; February 1996; February 2002.

Keywords: Learning Contract, Learning Outcomes, Formative Assessment, Learning Activities, Methods and Criteria for Evaluation

Background Information: This policy was revised to align with the new course catalog initiative and current academic restructuring. It was initially rewritten as part of the Catalog Policy Retreat held in May 2016. CUSP revised it further beginning in September 2016. The revisions to the version of the 2011 policy were made concurrently with revisions to the policy on undergraduate student evaluation and grading. Both sets of revisions were prompted by the president in May 2011, upon advice from the college Senate and CUSP, to eliminate narrative contract evaluations.

The current version of this policy delineates more explicit expectations about statements of learning outcomes and formative assessment than earlier versions.

Purpose

This policy establishes principles that guide the design of effective learning contracts. specifies the content of learning contracts, details the relationship of learning contracts to other documents such as the course information document in the university catalog, and explains the process for faculty and university review of learning contracts.

Empire State University is committed to the following principles:

- The purpose and needs of students are at the center of effective learning contracts.
- Learning occurs in varied ways, places and modes.
- Learning preferences may differ by individual students.

Undergraduate students at SUNY Empire pursue their educations through a series of learning contracts. Well-designed learning contracts lay the foundation for student success by aligning learning outcomes and activities, allowing for timely and meaningful formative assessment, and identifying specific methods and criteria for evaluation. Faculty guide and encourage students to develop self-assessment skills by engaging with them throughout the length of the learning contract.

Definitions

Learning Contract: Refers to the document that outlines the responsibilities of students and faculty in the learning process. The learning contract provides specific information about what will be studied, how it will be studied and how the student will be evaluated. Learning contracts are required for all modes of study, e.g., one-to-one,

online and blended, and are written either after consultation with the student or as a pre-structured plan for study.

Course: Refers to a study, regardless of modality, created by a mentor with or without the assistance of an instructional designer. Although the learning contract for a course might allow for flexibility within specific assignments, the course itself contains learning outcomes, learning activities and the academic criteria for evaluating completed assignments that are predetermined by faculty.

Totally Individualized Study (TIS): Refers to a study created for and with a student in response to a student's particular interests, goals and learning needs. A TIS may afford the student the opportunity to help devise the study's learning objectives/outcomes and/or learning activities in dialog with a faculty member.

A further note on these definitions: Good pedagogy typically includes flexibility and responsiveness to individual student needs; thus, the distinction between courses and Totally Individualized Studies is often a question of degree. None of what follows is meant to construct a hierarchy of value or a rigid, unworkable distinction among the university's academic offerings.

Elements of the Learning Contract

- **Dates of the study** – the beginning and end dates of the enrollment term.
- **Applied learning** – an indication whether or not the study meets the SUNY criteria for applied learning.
- **Definition of the study** – title, amount of credit, level of credit, liberal arts/nonliberal arts designation, role in meeting SUNY general education requirements, mentor/instructor.
- **Course description** – the description of a course listed in the university catalog. This element is not required in a TIS learning contract.
- **Purpose** – if the course is not listed in the catalog, and therefore does not have a course description, the purpose describes the scope and objectives of the study.
- **Learning outcome** – a learning outcome is a statement that defines the expected result of a curriculum, course, lesson or activity in terms of how students will be able to demonstrate their new knowledge and skills.
- **Learning activities** – a description of the activities and modes of learning to be pursued during the study. This description normally includes an outline of specific learning activities such as readings, writing assignments, creative work, research, laboratory study, etc., as well as a bibliography of required and optional readings, films, etc.
- **Methods and criteria for evaluation** – an explicit statement of the methods and criteria for evaluation to be employed by the mentor that informs the student about how he or she will be evaluated in relation to the expected learning outcomes. The criteria for evaluation are the standards by which the student's performance will be judged. Criteria should be consistent with the level of the study. The criteria should establish the minimum standard for the award of credit. The student must satisfy the requirements and evaluative criteria in order to receive credit for the course.
- **Plan for formative assessment** – a description of the expected time frame for completion of learning activities throughout the term of enrollment and for developmental feedback on learning activities from the instructor. The plan outlines the mutual commitments of

student and instructor with regard to communication and course engagement.

Statements

The learning contract communicates an individual faculty member's academic judgment regarding the particular texts, assignments, methods of evaluation, and content that are appropriate in order to address the course's learning outcomes and description as listed in the university catalog, as well as any additional outcomes determined by student interests and/or faculty expertise.

The university catalog includes Course Information Documents which represent agreement among faculty members who have exercised their collective academic judgment regarding a course's description, learning outcomes, credits, level, general education status and other related information.

Ideally, learning contracts should be submitted no later than two weeks before the term begins. Exceptions may occur according to the timing of registration and in the case of a TIS. The learning contract for a TIS should be submitted no more than four weeks after the start date of the enrollment term. Deans are responsible for ensuring their timely submission.

Learning contracts can be amended to reflect changing student goals and learning needs throughout the study. Changes to the learning contract are documented and entered into the university records through the learning contract amendment process.

Cross Registration

For study taken through cross registration at another institution, the learning contract documents the name of the other institution, the course title and number, and the minimum acceptable grade for the credit award by Empire State University. (See the Empire State University policy on cross registration at other institutions (<http://www.sunyempire.edu/policies/?search=cid%3D37035>) for additional information.)

Developing Learning Contracts

The faculty member who teaches a course in the catalog or collaborates with a student to create a TIS is responsible for developing the learning contract. This responsibility includes identifying readings, planning learning activities and assignments, and providing a method and criteria for formative assessment and summative evaluation. Faculty determine the appropriate learning sequence to achieve common outcomes in the course catalog. Further, faculty may design additional learning outcomes based on student needs and their scholarly expertise. Faculty guiding a student in a TIS customize sections of the learning contract according to student expectations and their knowledge of the subject area.

Review of learning contracts takes a variety of forms:

Department chairs review learning contracts for completeness and compliance with the university's Learning Contract Policy and to ensure clarity, ADA compliance and academic quality.

It is the responsibility of the faculty member who generated the learning contract to periodically review and as necessary update it. During development and revision, learning contracts will commonly benefit from peer review for alignment, as well as clarity.

Curriculum review of catalog courses: For revision of learning outcomes in the catalog, refer to Course Catalog/Cross Listing Policy for

Undergraduates (<http://www.sunyempire.edu/policies/?search=cid%3D109961>).

Applicable Legislation and Regulations

The Middle States Commission on Higher Education evaluates institutions in relation to seven standards for accreditation. Standard five requires that an institution provide students with a set of clearly stated educational goals that are related to student experiences and its institutional mission. Standard five also requires that an institution provide for organized and systematic assessments.

Related References, Policies, Procedures, Forms and Appendices

- Course Catalog/Cross Listing Policy for Undergraduates
- Middle States Commission on Higher Education, Standards for Accreditation and Requirements of Affiliation (revised edition, 2015)