Academic Learning Contracts

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Academic learning contracts are innovative ways for students at all levels to choose how they want to exhibit what they have learned. In the majority of courses, assignments are created and chosen by the instructor and offer students little control over what they do and how they can show what they have mastered in a course. All students, regardless of their interests so the same assignments and turn them in at the same time. This can become routine and boring for instructors.

Through a combination of required and optional activities, students can select activities that interest them while applying the concepts and principles of a course. The required activities address the basics of the course and give all students the same knowledge base. Optional activities are created in a variety of areas and students can choose among them based on their interests. Point value is attached to each activity. Some activities can be easier to complete than others or they can all be the same level of difficulty.

Students select the activities they want to do and then contract for a specific letter grade A, B, C. The directions state that in order to get a specific grade they must complete a specific number of point plus get (for example) at least 90% (for an A) on all activities attempted. They are required to get a certain percentage in order to receive all points.

The academic learning contract can extend the whole semester or be used for a part of it. It all depends on the goals and objectives of the course and the time available to complete the activities. Active learning activities that match course objectives are created by the instructor and are due at different times during the semester. This staggering of dates spreads things out for students and the instructor in terms of grading.

Students may choose from among many optional activities to demonstrate what they have learned. Activities may include interviews, questionnaires, art, music, modeling (3-D, flowcharting), writing, photography, video, observations, analysis, TV/film programs, poetry, graphing, research and so forth.

As part of the contract directions, all activities are accompanied by a description, specific criteria, and examples if needed. A short paragraph provides a description of the activity and its objectives and how it relates to the course. A list of specific criteria is given so that students may
follow them as they do the assignment. The criteria list also serves as a grading aid for the instructor and can be extended into a rubric if desired.

These contracts work effectively with distance education or online as well as on campus courses. For distance education courses students can upload the artifacts they produce. Even videos can be submitted easily. A portfolio system could be used and students would have a record of course products. For on campus courses, individual or group presentations could be incorporated. They also work well for students in elementary, middle, and high school.

Activities can be completed individually or collaboratively. Even with online courses, students can work together and create products or projects. A combination of individual and group projects works well because this gives students a variety of experiences.

Students are extremely receptive to being able to choose their own learning activities. They can control how they show what they have mastered in the course and complete activities that match their learning styles. When students have more control of their learning they tend to be more engaged and spend more time on task. Academic learning contracts can provide students with a more meaningful learning experience in all courses at all levels.

This presentation will present guidelines regarding how to create academic learning contracts. In addition, several examples from various subject areas will be given as handouts.