

Signature Assignments: Definitions and Characteristics

What is a signature assignment?

Typically, a signature assignment is one that has been adopted by program faculty to assess program-level learning outcomes. A signature assignment is a tool that allows us to find out if our students have learned what we want them to learn. It is given in all sections of a course each time the course is offered.

Signature assignments are not “shared” or “common assignments.” Rather, a signature assignment is an assignment, task, activity, project or exam that has been purposefully created to elicit specific learning outcomes and to collect direct evidence of student learning across different courses or sections and across time. Signature assignments are templates that faculty contextualize to fit their particular course content.

A signature assignment

- is a generic task, problem, case, or project that can be tailored or contextualized to align with a particular course/discipline,
- is well-aligned with the learning outcome(s),
- is authentic in terms of process and content,
- may address a ‘real-world’ application, and
- may include reflection on learning (Driscoll, 2011).

Signature assignments require students to demonstrate and apply their proficiency in one or more key learning outcomes. This often means synthesizing, analyzing, and applying cumulative knowledge and skills through problem- or inquiry-based assignments or projects. Signature assignments may also follow a theme across curricular and co-curricular experiences tied to the institutional mission or features of the surrounding community, allowing students to apply their growing knowledge and abilities to meaningful questions over time. At some institutions, all signature assignments must include specific components, such as a “real-world” application, reflective writing, or collaborative work. (AAC&U, nd)

Reflection, or metacognition, is the process of reflecting on and directing one’s own thinking. Reflections can be built into assignment design:

1. ask students to assess the task
2. train students to self-assess and peer assess
3. provide performance criteria (the rubric) (University of Hawaii at Manoa, nd).

“A ‘signature assignment’ is that assignment or exam that best displays the knowledge or skills essential to the objectives of a course. Other coursework should build toward the completion of the course ‘signature’ assignment. Think of a signature assignment as a milestone in the student’s progress toward fulfilling the program objectives. Ideally, signature assignments are the types of works that students and professors would most like to present to others as evidence of accomplishment (i.e., work they would like to sign and have signed)” (California Lutheran University, nd).

Why Create Signature Assignments?

Signature assignments:

- engage students in their learning,
- enable programs, including general education, to collect common data across course sections for program assessment and review,
- establish that learning outcomes are being met, in general education and/or capstone level courses,
- foster curricular alignment, and
- develop student' self-reflection (metacognitive) abilities.

Ensure that valued learning outcomes are elicited through student work (Moman & Johnson, 2014).

Signature assignments make aggregation of results across sections possible.

Creating a Signature Assignment

Faculty collaborative create an assignment template that is designed to elicit the identified learning outcomes. The signature assignment is used to collect evidence for one or more learning outcomes. A shared template allows for the aggregation of results (the key to program assessment) across courses or sections and across time. Shared assignment elements make aggregation possible.

Creating signature assignments requires substantial levels of intentionality. This includes:

- careful planning of course sequencing,
- careful planning of embedded assignments,
- collaborative development of assignments and rubrics designed to elicit and evaluate identified student learning outcomes (Ewell, 2014).

Faculty teaching courses or sections in which the signature assignment is used contextualize it to fit their particular course content. The essential, agreed-upon elements of the assignment are constant across courses/sections and time, but the details are “contextualized” to fit specific course content.

A poorly designed assignment leads to poor student performance; conversely, a good assignment helps students to succeed.

The basic elements of a signature assignment template include:

1. The assignment should specify the central task to be undertaken to demonstrate achievement of the identified learning outcomes. For example, an assignment designed to elicit analytical ability might require comparing and contrasting two or more arguments or points of view on a particular topic.
2. The assignment should indicate how the required task is to be undertaken and the results communicated to the identified audience. For example, an assignment in the area of quantitative literacy might require verbal argument as well as mathematical equations.
3. The assignment should indicate how extensive or evidential the response should be. Students need to know, for example, the required number of pages, the number of examples, required, and other parameters. An assignment related to communication fluency and information literacy might require two or more examples, two or more languages or media, appropriate citations, and other elements to be demonstrated (Ewell, 2013; Hutchings, Jankowski, & Schultz, 2016).

Steps to create a signature assignment

- Identify target outcomes and courses using the curriculum map (these are givens for Gen Ed).
- Develop or modify an evaluation tool (e.g., a rubric, an observation evaluation matrix). For Gen Ed, UMKC has adopted the AAC&U’s VALUE rubrics.

- Discuss and agree on the major components and guidelines for the signature assignment, such as the type of assignment. Questions to consider:
 - a) What is the most important purpose in the assignment?
 - b) What do you want to see from students?
 - c) What is the difference between a strong performance and a less developed one?
 - d) How is this assignment related to other assignments in the course and in courses that precede or follow it? (Hutchings, Jankowski, & Schultz, 2016).

- Develop a generic assignment, a template to use across courses/sections. The signature assignment template consists of shared elements:
 - a) Task, purpose, and audience
 - b) Learning outcomes
 - c) Format and technical requirements – directions for students
 - d) Rubric(s)/scoring criteria

- Additional characteristics for good assignment design:
 - a) Whenever possible, use an authentic performance task – i.e., one based on real-world or disciplinary tasks;
 - b) Integrate student reflection and self-assessment (and, possible peer assessment);
 - c) Scaffold learning experiences leading to the signature assignment and include process steps.

- Modify the assignment to fit specific course context.

- Collect data on student achievement of the learning outcomes

- Use information to improve the program if needed.

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