

## **Getting Collaborative Learning to Work for You and Your Students**

One of the best ways to promote deep learning is through the use of collaborative learning. To plan for collaborative learning, ask yourself: *How can I structure the learning tasks? What kinds of groups should I form? How will I grade collaboration?* Ensure that students are actively engaged by creating a relevant task—one that helps you achieve course learning outcomes, is authentic to your discipline, and is matched to students' skills and abilities. It's also important to promote interdependency, with each student responsible to and dependent on others to succeed. And of course, you need to think through and plan each phase of the task in advance, including a plan for forming groups. The type of groups you use will vary according to your goal, the activity and how long students will remain together. Informal groups are formed quickly, randomly and work together for brief periods. Formal groups are formed to achieve a multifaceted goal such as writing a report or giving a presentation, and stay together until the task is completed.

When planning for evaluation, you need to consider individual accountability and positive group interdependence. Ask yourself: *What should be evaluated? How? Who should be involved in evaluating learning and assigning grades?* Before you become overwhelmed at the thought of grading everything, remember that not every activity needs to be graded. However, every assignment should be collected. Instead of the more traditional ABC used for formal assignments, consider giving a grade of "R" for informal assignments. "R" stands for Received, Reviewed and Recorded. In some cases, "R" grades might have a set point value, while in others "Rs" could be used to determine whether or not to raise a student's grade if s/he is on the borderline.

No matter how well thought-out, your collaborative learning task may not go as smoothly as you planned. Students may misinterpret instructions and unanticipated challenges can create roadblocks. Don't give up. Keep careful notes so you can make changes next time. Like many aspects of effective teaching, planning for collaborative learning is on-going and reiterative. To learn more, check out Barkley, Cross and Major's book, *Collaborative Learning Techniques: A Handbook for College Faculty*. To see how collaborative learning works in one professor's classroom, go to: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-0Vcf-p3--w> (6:53).

### **Submitted by:**

Judith Longfield, Ph.D.  
Georgia Southern University  
[www.georgiasouthern.edu](http://www.georgiasouthern.edu)