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# RISE

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## The R.I.S.E. Guide to Talking with Students about Rigor

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### Introduction

We hope that the Rigor R.I.S.E. Guides have provided you with useful resources and tips to enhance rigor in your courses. In addition to implementing various teaching strategies, we also recommend that you discuss rigor with your students. You may be asking yourself: Why should I discuss this topic with my students? College students already know what rigor is, don't they?

Since we know that students often perceive and understand things differently than their instructors, we should not assume that students and instructors define rigor in the same way.

Take a moment to think about how your students define academic rigor. What words or phrases do students normally use to talk about a challenging/hard course?

Now, ask yourself the same questions. How do you define academic rigor? What words or phrases do you use to talk about a challenging/hard course?

If you believe that you and your students would provide different answers to these questions, you are exactly right!

Research has found that students' ideas of rigor differ greatly from their instructors. Based on several sources of student data, [Draeger, del Prado Hill, & Mahler](#) (2015) found that "...students explained academic rigor in terms of workload, grading standards, level of difficulty, level of interest, and perceived relevance to future goals" (p. 215). You may notice that there is no mention of higher-order thinking, deep learning or high expectations, key elements of the R.I.S.E. definition and most instructors' definition of rigor.

Thus, a class discussion focused on rigor is a great way to ensure that you and your students are on the same page regarding rigor, including all expectations associated with it, in your course.

## Explanation

A class discussion about rigor could take an in-person, on-line, or hybrid format, and each format would help achieve the main objective of the discussion – ensure that everyone has the same understanding of what rigor means for the course. It is important to set aside dedicated class time for such a discussion. If you are planning a discussion about rigor in your course and would like some guidance, below are some tips to help you prepare.

1. Begin with student definitions.
  - Consider beginning your discussion by asking students for their definitions of rigor using open-ended questions such as, "How do you define a hard/challenging course?" or "What ideas or phrases come to mind when you hear the words academic rigor?" Beginning with student definitions allows students to voice their thoughts and see themselves as active participants in this important conversation.
2. Address student definitions.
  - As students share their definitions, make a list of common themes, and when appropriate, explain the "why" for each theme in your course. For example, if a common theme is a "large/heavy workload," explain the reason for and benefits of the heavy workload in your course. This step is important because it gives you an opportunity to help students understand the rationale behind your pedagogical decisions for the course.
3. Provide students with YOUR definition of rigor.
  - Like the previous step, this step is crucial because it gives you the opportunity to explain what rigor looks like in your course. Try to ensure that students fully understand your definition and what it means for them in the course.
4. Explain the importance and benefits of rigor.
  - A good way to end your discussion is to explain the advantages of rigor in all courses. Focus on the basic idea that *"It takes some form of challenge or stress to build strength."* To help students understand this concept, try using one of the following examples:
    - a. Refer to going through a hard time (mentally, emotionally, relationally) and coming out stronger for it.
    - b. Progressive Overload (adding more weight/challenge incrementally) to make one stronger or more fit.

- c. The process of making metal swords, bricks, pottery, glass, etc. – Need to heat to very high levels to make items strong and durable.

While these tips are helpful, the most important point is that you discuss rigor with your students and that everyone has a common understanding of what it means for your course.

If you have any questions or wish to discuss this strategy in more depth, please contact your [R.I.S.E. scholar](#) or the Learning Academy.

## Let's plan!

Using the information above and the questions below, consider how you could plan a rigor-focused discussion with your students. Remember that the goal is to ensure that students fully understand the course definition of rigor, which helps them better understand all elements of the course (e.g., course materials, organization, assessments, pedagogical strategies, etc.).

1. What is the format of the discussion - in-person, on-line, or hybrid? Why did you choose this format? Are there any disadvantages to choosing this format? If so, how will you address these challenges?
2. How will you introduce this discussion topic to the students?
3. How will you solicit student definitions of rigor? What questions/prompts will you use? Consider whether students should generate their definitions individually or in groups, before class or during class.
4. How will you respond to students' definitions and ideas regarding rigor? Consider examples that you might use or statistical data that you could share about common student perceptions such as heavy workload and picky grading.
5. How will you present your definition? What examples will you use to make sure that students understand the definition and the impact that it will have on their learning experience?
6. How will you explain the importance and benefits of rigor in your course? What examples will you use to help students understand that academic rigor is both necessary and beneficial?

We hope that the information on this strategy encouraged you to include discussions about rigor in your courses as a way to improve student learning outcomes. If you have any questions or wish to receive feedback on your ideas for the practice activity, please contact your [R.I.S.E. scholar](#) or the Learning Academy.

## References

Draeger, J., del Prado Hill, P., & Mahler, R. (2015). Developing a student conception of academic rigor. *Innovative Higher Education, 40*, 215–228. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10755-014-9308-1>

Wyse, S., & Soneral, P. (2018). "Is this class hard?" Defining and analyzing academic rigor from a learner's perspective. *CBE—Life Sciences Education, 17*(4), ar591-14. <https://doi.org/10.1187/cbe.17-12-0278>