TEMPLE UNIVERSITY
Center for the Advancement of Teaching

Alternative Assessments

Many instructors assume that the only way to assess students in an online course is through a formal exam. This just isn't the case. Although exams offer some benefits—they're usually easy to grade and they can assess basic skills and content knowledge—they don't do a great job of measuring most of the significant learning goals we want our students to pursue. As with in-person teaching, the best way to come up with assessments is to start with the course's learning goals. Faculty members should ask themselves: what evidence would I need to see to determine if students have reached these goals? Assessments should be designed to elicit that evidence.

We also know that assessments—particularly shorter, more frequent, and varied assessments—can serve a valuable *formative* function, as well as a summative one. Authentic assessments can help students solidify concepts and skills, becoming a part of the students' learning experience. On the other hand, a single high-stakes exam at the end of the semester can cause undue stress without the benefit of effectively measuring deeper learning.

Here are some ideas for creating alternative assessments in an online environment:

- **Capitalize on students' facility with technology**. Have them video themselves presenting the solution to a problem set and explaining how they found the answer. Ask students to add to a class VoiceThread with resources that show they know how to find and critically analyze relevant information. Ask students to collaborate on a co-authored journal article using a shared google doc.
- **Allow students to self-assess and engage in peer review and revision when possible**. When teachers provide students opportunities to practice evaluating themselves and to give and receive feedback with peers, this more authentically replicates the kind of work we want them to be able to do when they leave our courses. It also teaches valuable metacognitive skills, which can help students succeed throughout their time in university. You can do this online by using the tools available in Canvas. Have students upload images for peer critique or share their paper with a peer for feedback. Have students do a presentation in VoiceThread that other students can comment on.
- **Use a variety of assessments to try to capture a more comprehensive and accurate representation of student learning**. You might use quizzes to check for understanding of readings, short answer questions to let students show their work, research papers to see if students can engage in an intellectual debate, and oral presentations that ask students to teach their peers about what they learned in writing their research papers. All of these can be done in an online course without too much difficulty.