

Enhancing Buy-in by Increasing Student Choice

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Relevancy is a central component of my teaching philosophy. I recognize that most students enroll in my HNRS 260 course, “Access Issues in U.S. Education,” because it’s required for graduation and it fits into their schedule. I attempt to generate buy-in to the course goals by providing students the opportunity to select topics and assignments they’re interested in. Below are some strategies I’ve utilized with success or adapted over time based on student feedback.

Student Choice Assignments

In the Spring of 2021 as I moved my course fully online, I recognized that some of my assignments in previous semesters were designed for the face-to-face classroom environment, and I worried how successful they would be in an all-virtual classroom. I used that semester as an opportunity for students to explore something they were truly interested in or helped them in their majors. I converted two major course assignments into “Student Choice” assignments. At the time, I thought this provided some flexibility and consideration to students during the pandemic, but since the return to face-to-face instruction, student feedback indicated that they appreciated the opportunity to select an assignment they were interested in. Multiple students mentioned the option of choice for these assignments as an aspect of the course that helped them learn in my teaching evaluation.

Students must complete two Student Choice assignments each semester, one from the Student Choice #1 options and one from the Student Choice #2 options. The following are the titles of assignments for the spring 2023 semester:

Student Choice #1	Student Choice #2
<input type="checkbox"/> Book Talk Presentation	<input type="checkbox"/> Access at Mason: Create a Podcast Episode (Group option)
<input type="checkbox"/> Infographic (Group option)	<input type="checkbox"/> How Didn't We Talk about This!?
<input type="checkbox"/> Investigate Your School	<input type="checkbox"/> Investigate Mason Infographic
<input type="checkbox"/> Podcast Analysis	<input type="checkbox"/> Response Paper to <i>Waiting for Superman</i>
	<input type="checkbox"/> Meme Those Topics

I revise these assignments each semester based on student feedback. For example, in previous semesters, I did not have a visual product assignment for Student Choice #2. Based on students indicating their preference for those assignments, I added an infographic option as well as the new “Meme Those Topics” assignment.

I find that students are more interested in completing these assignments than when choice was not an option. Students cite the topic of the assignment, its format, or the ability to work in a

small group as their reasoning for their choice. As a grader, it makes the process more enjoyable as I see different products and explorations of learning.

Class Topics

Access is a broad lens to apply to U.S. education. This was an intentional choice in my design and over the years I use this breadth to engage students in topics they're most interested.

In the first few years of teaching HNRS 260, I led two class sessions with unassigned topics. At about the halfway point in the class, I asked students what two topics they wanted to discuss during those classes. Students generated a list and then voted. I then selected readings based on those topics. This led to diverse topics over the years including gun violence in schools, sex education, and school uniforms.

During the spring 2023 semester, I decided to go all in on the idea of topic choice. I built the syllabus topics for the first four weeks of classes. This was filled with foundational content about the history, structure, and funding of U.S. public schools. It also included the first access-based topic, textbooks. During the second week of classes, students reviewed a list of previous topics taught in the course, added their ideas to the list, and voted. Based on the students' selections, I built the remainder of the schedule.

Class Readings

To enhance the relevancy of the selected topics, and hopefully also increase engagement with the readings, some weeks I give students options for readings. For example, we'll be talking about the intersection of access issues and teachers for two classes this year. For one of those classes, students will have the choice in topics to read about:

- Same-race teachers
- Teacher quality gaps across economic lines
- Black male teachers and rural teachers
- Shifting teacher compensation to performance-based

In another class on college admissions, students can select to listen to a one-hour podcast about one of the following topics:

- Affirmative action
- DACA
- First generation college students
- Rural college students

In class we'll discuss each of these topics, but students can choose which they will examine more closely through the readings based on their personal interest.