Using Transparent Assignments to Promote Equitable Opportunities for Student Success

Mary-Ann Winkelmes

Underrepresented, first-generation and low-income students comprise the new majority of incoming college students. They are currently half as likely to graduate from college as their white and Asian peers -- a devastating statistic. This workshop offers faculty and administrators sustainable, evidence-based strategies to combat this inequity. A 2016 AAC&U publication identifies transparent, problem-centered instruction as a replicable intervention that significantly enhances students' success, with greater gains for historically underserved students [Winkelmes et al, Peer Review, Spring 2016]. This workshop briefly reviews the findings and then offers opportunities for teachers and administrators to apply transparent principles to promote equitable opportunities for student success in their own settings in two main contexts: 1) at the level of course instruction, and 2) at the programmatic, institutional and/or consortial level. Participants will leave with draft plans for using transparent strategies to promote equitable opportunities for student success in their courses and institutions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research on Learning</th>
<th>Implications for Assignments</th>
<th>Possible Applications</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Elbow, Jaschik/Davidson, Mazur, Ambrose, Bergstahler Gregorc, Kolb | • Varied / flexible formats are inclusive appeal equitably to student strengths  
• Low stakes for greater creativity / risk | 1 |
| AAC&U HIPs, Bass, Bloom, Colomb, Felder, Perry | • Build critical thinking skills in intentional sequence  
• Provide a compass, set expectations  
• Target feedback to phase, don't overwhelm | 2 |
| Doyle, Felder, Tanner, Winkelmes | • Specify relevant knowledge/skills, criteria  
• Encourage self-monitoring | 3 |
| Fiske/Light, Tanner | • Provide annotated examples of successful work w/ criteria applied, before students begin work. | 4 |
| Aronson, Dweck, Fisk, Light, Schnabel, Spitzer, Steele, Treisman Yeager/Walton, Vygosky | • Structure and require peer instruction, feedback; positive attribution activities | 5 |
| Finley/McNair, Winkelmes et al., Yeager, Walton | • Explicate purpose, task, criteria before  
• Explicate applicability, relevance;  
• Engage students in applying shared criteria to increase belonging. | 6 |
Two-question online survey

1. In your experience, what are the top 2 or 3 most significant barriers to students' successful completion of assignments or projects in your course(s)? (Please list. No need for complete sentences.)

2. Please briefly list a strategy or two that you have found to be effective in helping students to complete assignments/projects in your course(s) successfully.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Your challenges</th>
<th>Your strategies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Preparation</strong></td>
<td>Provide good and bad examples of academic work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of critical thinking skills</td>
<td>Group activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack organizational skills/experience</td>
<td>Explain/discuss assignment tasks and relevance in class</td>
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<tr>
<td>Don’t follow/understand directions</td>
<td>Discuss examples in class; apply a rubric to examples</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t understand expectations</td>
<td>Practice skills in class before working independently</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lack writing/research skills</td>
<td>Discuss assignments in class</td>
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<tr>
<td>Don’t ask questions in class</td>
<td>Students practice skills in class by beginning</td>
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<tr>
<td>Don’t seek help out of class</td>
<td>assignments in class</td>
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<tr>
<td>Don’t recognize need help</td>
<td>Rubrics</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pre-scaffold assignments with review activities, study skills</td>
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<td>Group critique activities</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Motivation</strong></td>
<td>Offer opportunities to revise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overwhelmed</td>
<td>Show how the assignments are applicable to their jobs and current events</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t see relevance of assignment</td>
<td>Extra credit to use writing ctr and help resources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of academic and emotional resilience</td>
<td>Make instructions/materials easily accessible</td>
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<tr>
<td>Learning styles don’t match course methods</td>
<td>One-on-one meetings outside class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t own: feel disengaged</td>
<td>Share data on how class grades are improving after hard work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low self-confidence</td>
<td>Make assignments count toward grade more clearly</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Time management</strong></td>
<td>scaffolded assignments (broken into discrete steps); checklists</td>
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<tr>
<td>Procrastination</td>
<td>Reminders via Remind app</td>
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<tr>
<td>Don’t recognize time needed</td>
<td>Discuss learning process</td>
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<tr>
<td>Little planning experience</td>
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<tr>
<td>Competing commitments</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Bibliography:


Elbow, Peter. “High Stakes and Low Stakes in Assigning and Responding to Writing.” New Directions for Teaching and Learning, no. 69, (Spring 1997).


Tanner, Kimberly B. “Promoting Student Metacognition.” CBE Life Sciences Education 11, 2 (June 4, 2012): 113-120.


http://www.unlv.edu/provost/teachingandlearning
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Music in Andrew Lloyd Webber’s 
The Phantom of the Opera

Argument: Andrew Lloyd Webber’s orchestration relies on conventional Western styles of musical phrasing and instrumentation. It exploits the natural tendencies of music to correspond with the ebb and flow of emotions, and allows the music to reflect the mood and/or tone of a scene, thereby making the musical accessible to a large general audience.

1) Introduction
   a. The popularity of Phantom and its music
   b. Possible reasons: story, spectacle, characters’ success mainly comes from orchestration

2) Critics of Andre Lloyd Webber’s music
   a. What reviewers criticize
   b. Why the are wrong

3) Why the music does deserve praise
   a. Tactics of Western music that Lloyd Webber uses
   b. Exploits the natural tendencies of musical phrasing
   c. Orchestrates the numbers with instruments commonly associated with different moods
   d. Relies on recurring themes, bringing back melodies associated in audience’s memories with certain character roles and types.
   e. In scenes with romantic implications, couples orchestration with rhythm of the lyrics to amplify sensuous overtones and transmit amatory expectations.

[Outline continues]

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Guide for Preparing Your Paper

What is your topic? What position will you take on that topic?

What are the major primary and secondary sources essential to this topic? List full citations

What main pieces of evidence will support your idea(s) about the topic?

What are possible counterarguments? What evidence might support these?

What are some possible ways to refute counterarguments? What evidence can be used?

What problems or questions do you have?
### 2. Build students’ critical thinking skills in an intentional sequence

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Synthesis</th>
<th>Analysis</th>
<th>Application</th>
<th>Knowledge</th>
<th>Bloom’s Levels of Educational Objectives</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- use old ideas to create new</td>
<td>- recognize trends, significance, implications of ideas</td>
<td>- use information, methods, convert</td>
<td>- knowledge of facts and concepts, mastery of subject material</td>
<td>- Knowledge: Comprehension, Application, Analysis, Synthesis, Evaluation</td>
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<td>- Skills: Remember, Understand, Apply, Analyze, Evaluate</td>
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<td>- Assignment Cues: Is, Define, Be, Describe, Explain, Contrast, Predict, Summarize, Detail, Solve, Create, Evaluate</td>
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<td>- Performance Indicators: Use, Define, Explain, Illustrate, Argue, Evaluate, Synthesize, Compare, Deduce</td>
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<td>- Content Area: Economics, Social Science, Business, Technology, Science, Math, Humanities, Fine Arts</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

### Assignments for a sample business course

This chart indicates how each required assignment for the course helps you practice the disciplinary skills needed for passing the course.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assignment</th>
<th>Use of Information</th>
<th>Communication Oral or Written</th>
<th>Literature Analysis</th>
<th>Problem Solving</th>
<th>Oral Presentation</th>
<th>Written Report</th>
<th>Group Environment</th>
<th>Business/Professional Behavior</th>
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</tbody>
</table>

* From American Association of Colleges and Schools of Business “Assurance of Learning Standards,” in Eligibility Procedures and Accreditation Standards...

* From Benjamin Bloom, Taxonomy of Educational Objectives.

* From Hart Research Associates, If It Takes More than a Major Employer Priorities for College Learning and Student Success, April 2013.
3. Specify criteria and encourage students’ self-monitoring

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Core assessment criteria for essays</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Addressing the question set</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The relevance of the content of the essay to the question or title</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Developing argument</td>
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<tr>
<td>The construction of a coherent and convincing set of reasons or evidence to support a particular point of view, following an analytical chain of reasoning and providing an explanation for the material included.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Critical evaluation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understanding the value, significance, strengths, and weaknesses of the material, evidence, and arguments presented</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Using assessment criteria to support student learning</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4. Provide annotated example of successful work, before students begin working

Carol Augspurger, School of Integrative Biology, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign
Used by permission of Carol Augspurger.

INTRODUCTION (4-5 paragraphs)
Both extrinsic and intrinsic factors affect the relative population size of species of small mammals in local habitats. Extrinsic factors may include the amount of food availability (Bell 1989), presence of competing species (Holt et al. 1995), and the presence of predators (Batzli and Lin 2001). Intrinsic factors may relate to their diet and food preferences (Heskie 2004), competitive ability (Holt et al. 1995), and body shape (Hoffmeister 1989) that affects their speed and agility in escaping predators. Differences in these factors are expected to result in varying population sizes of species of small mammals among local habitats. Understanding the factors that affect a species’ population size is important because it allows us to predict how changes in the environment will affect its population dynamics and the community structure.

Augspurger et al. (2007) found that the relative population sizes of small mammals differed in successional old fields of contrasting age. Specifically, their four years of live trapping showed that voles have a large population in a field abandoned one year ago, while shrews have a larger population size in a field

Sample Glossary Entry: apse.

in a Christian church, semicircular area at the end of the nave beyond the transept or choir

Insert label here:
Artist’s or architect’s name, title of work, materials used in the work, original location of the work, current location of the work, URL, date accessed [your first and last name]

EXAMPLE:
Plan of a cathedral.
Record your responses to the following questions either in the spaces below or on separate sheet(s) of paper.

Read the paper through once, rather quickly, without pausing to write comments. Then put the paper aside and answer the following questions without looking back. (If you can’t answer the question, write “I don’t know.”)

1. What single feature of the paper stands out to you as a reader?
2. What do you think is the writer’s main point?
3. Was there anything in the paper that seemed confusing to you? (If so, explain briefly).

Now reread the paper, making any comments in the margins you feel would be helpful. Try to comment on development and organization of ideas: Do you understand the points the writer is trying to make? Do ideas seem well-connected?

5. Is there any place where the writer needs to support an idea with more concrete details or explanation? If so, where?
6. How well does the writer make transitions between main points? How clearly does the writer connect main ideas?

4. Underline the thesis statement. Is it clearly stated? If not, what seems confusing?

2. List at least two ways in which the essay could be improved.

8. List at least two things you like about the paper.

9. What would you like to know more about? What questions do you still have?

10. Ask of the essay “so what?” after you finish reading. Write a sentence or two paraphrasing the point of the paper, answering the question, “in what way(s) is this interesting, surprising, intriguing, etc.?” If the paper lacks a “so what,” point that out and discuss the possibilities.

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http://bokcenter.harvard.edu/peer-response-sheet
6. Explicate purpose, task(s), and criteria for students’ work in advance

**Criteria for Success:**

**Task:**

**Knowledge:**

- [ ] [ ] [ ]

**Skills:**

**Purpose:**

**Due Date:**

**Assignment Name:**

**School:**

**Shelf:**

The purpose of this assignment is to help you practice the following skills that will be essential to your success in this course in school or in the field. In order to be successful, you must...

Mary Ann Winkelmes
Principal Investigator

http://www.unlv.edu/provost/teachingandlearning

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SAMPLE A

1. Select a professional in your prospective academic discipline and/or career field that is considered an expert in an area in which

2. Secure an interview with the professional for a date and time that

3. Prepare 8-10 questions to ask the professional about their

4. Conduct a 20-30 minute face-to-face interview to gather

5. Prepare a 400-500 word reflection paper in which you address the

6. Submit the typed and formatted final reflection paper to your instructor.

7. a. What are the questions you will have?

   b. What do you believe helped you learn about your

   c. What, if anything, do you think is most interesting?

   d. What other questions would you have?

Following Items:

a. What other courses are available?

b. What are the prerequisites for this course?

c. What is the credit value of this course?

EXAMPLES: Less Transparent

Sample B

Find and simplify the second derivative of the given function.

\[
\frac{d}{dx} \left( x^2 - 3x + 1 \right)
\]
Criteria for success: Please see the attached rubric.

Adapted from AAC&U VALUE Rubric

www.aacu.org/value-rubrics

EXAMPE: More Transparent

http://www.unlv.edu/provost/teachingandlearning

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mary-ann.winkelmes@unlv.edu
Recent Findings: Transparency in Learning and Teaching in Higher Education

A 2015 study (Winkelmes, et al., (Peer Review, Winter 2016) identified transparent teaching about problem-centered learning as an easily replicable teaching method that produces learning benefits already linked with students' success. This simple, replicable teaching intervention demonstrably enhanced the success of first-generation, low-income and underrepresented college students in multiple ways at statistically significant levels, with a medium-to-large sized magnitude of effect. The results offer implications for how faculty and educational developers can help their institutions to right the inequities in college students' educational experiences across the country by contributing to efforts to increase underserved students' success, especially in their first year of college (when the greatest numbers drop out).

In 2014-2015 a group of 7 Minority Serving Institutions launched a pilot project that included 1180 students and 35 faculty. Tia McNair and Ashley Finley at the Association of American Colleges & Universities (AAC&U) led the project in partnership with Mary-Ann Winklmes at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas' Transparency in Learning and Teaching in Higher Education Project (TILT Higher Ed), with funding from TG Philanthropy. The main research goal was to study how faculty transparency about the design and problem-centered nature of student assignments would affect students’ learning experiences and the quality of students’ work. Faculty received training on how to make two take-home assignments in a course more transparent (accessible) and problem-centered (relevant) for students, and each instructor taught a control group and an intervention group of the same course in the same term. Results were measured via online surveys about students’ learning experiences before and after each course, and direct assessment of students’ work. Students who received more transparency reported gains in three areas that are important predictors of students’ success: academic confidence, sense of belonging, and mastery of the skills that employers value most when hiring. While the benefits for all students in the aggregate who received more transparency were statistically significant, the benefits for first-generation, low-income and underrepresented students were greater, with a medium-to-large sized magnitude of effect. Important studies have already connected academic confidence and sense of belonging with students’ greater persistence and higher grades (Walton and Cohen 2011, Aronson et al 2002, Paunesku et al 2015), and recent national surveys identify the skills that employers value most when hiring new employees (Hart 2015 and 2013).

A simultaneous study of 1,143 University of Nevada, Las Vegas (UNLV) students’ retention rates indicated that increases to academic confidence, sense of belonging and perceived mastery of employer-valued skills were indeed followed by greater persistence: 90.2% of UNLV undergraduates in more transparent introductory-level courses returned to complete the fall term of the subsequent academic year, in contrast to the average retention rate of 74.1% for first-time, full-time, first-year students.

TILT Higher Ed and the AAC&U continue to promote transparency and problem-centered learning. TILT Higher Ed participants include more than 25,000 students in hundreds of courses at 40 higher education institutions in the U.S. and five other countries.

End of Term: Skills, Confidence, and Belonging - Less vs. More Transparent Courses, First Generation Students

End of Term: Skills, Confidence, and Belonging - Less vs. More Transparent Courses, First Generation Students

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Amount of Transparency</th>
<th>Employer-valued Skills</th>
<th>Academic Confidence</th>
<th>Sense of Belonging</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>More Transparent: mean perceived transparency = 3.3 \pm 4</td>
<td>More Transparent: mean = 3.3 \pm 4</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

KEY:
- N: number of students responding
- 95% confidence intervals
- ES: effect size (Hedges' g)**
- Less Transparent: mean perceived transparency = 3.3 \pm 4
- More Transparent: mean = 3.3 \pm 4

** Effect sizes of 0.25 standard deviations or larger are “substantively important.” (US Dept of Ed, What Works Clearinghouse Procedures and Standards Handbook version 3.0, Web. March, 2014, p. 23.)

Publications and information about the Transparency in Learning and Teaching Project are at: www.unlv.edu/provost/teachingandlearning

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mary-ann.winkelmes@unlv.edu
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The Unwritten Rules:
Decode Your Assignments and
Decipher What’s Expected of You

Background
An inclusive learning environment benefits all students and offers more equitable learning opportunities for underserved students. Research on student learning links college students' academic confidence and sense of belonging with higher GPAs, persistence and retention rates (Walton and Cohen 2011). In addition, college students increased their test scores when supported by a system that advocated the belief that intelligence is not fixed but rather malleable. A year later, these students were 80% less likely to drop out of college (Aronson et al 2002).

WHAT STUDENTS CAN DO:

Before you begin working on an assignment or class activity, ask the instructor to help you understand the following. (Bring this document to help frame the conversation.)

Purpose
- Skills you’ll practice by doing this assignment
- Content knowledge you’ll gain from doing this assignment
- How you can use these in your life beyond the context of this course, in and beyond college

Task
- What to do
- How to do it (Are there recommended steps? What roadblocks/mistakes should you avoid?)

Criteria
- Checklist (Are you on the right track? How to know you’re doing what’s expected?)
- Annotated examples of successful work
  (What’s good about these examples? Use the checklist to identify the successful parts.)


## DRAFT Checklist for Designing a Transparent Assignment

Thank you for helping to test this DRAFT checklist. Please send your suggestions and feedback to mary-ann.winkelmes@unlv.edu

### PURPOSE:

**Skills**
- Does your purpose statement specify a skill or skill set that students will gain from doing this assignment?
- Does your purpose statement link that particular skill to the larger context of:
  - recent topics of class sessions?
  - this part of the course?
  - the whole course?
  - the major?
  - the discipline?
  - your institution's main learning outcomes?
- Does your purpose statement indicate the relevance and/or usefulness of this knowledge to the students' lives:
  - beyond the course? beyond the major? beyond college?

**Knowledge**
- Does your purpose statement specify particular content knowledge students will practice while doing the assignment?
- Does your purpose statement link that particular knowledge to examples/contexts where this skill was important in the context of:
  - recent class sessions?
  - this part of the course?
  - the whole course?
  - the major? the discipline? your institution's main learning outcomes?
- Does your statement indicate the relevance and/or usefulness of this knowledge to the students' lives:
  - beyond the course? beyond the major? beyond college?

Would this assignment benefit from segmenting it into several assignments, each one focused on a discrete set of skills that should be mastered to insure students' successful completion of the next assignment in the sequence?

### TASK:

- Does your description of the task:
  - Identify the very first thing students should do when they begin working on the assignment?
  - The very next thing they should do?
  - The next, etc.
- Does your description of the task help students to avoid wasting their time on unnecessary steps, unproductive time expenditure?
- Does your description help students to focus their time efficiently on producing the highest quality work possible in the time given?
- Would students benefit from some practice exercises (in the form of a pre-task) in class to prepare them to perform the task outside of class on the graded assignment?

### CRITERIA:

- Can students use the criteria while they are working on the assignment to determine whether they are completing the assignment efficiently and effectively?
- Do the criteria take the form of a checklist students can use to evaluate the quality of their efforts while they are working on the assignment?
- Does the checklist specify characteristics of high quality work for this assignment?
- Can you help students apply the checklist to evaluating some sample work in class, so they understand how each criterion would look in practice?
- With your guidance, can the students collaboratively annotate several examples of work to indicate where/how the work satisfies the criteria? (These annotated examples may then be shared as a reference for students to use while they work on their own assignments.)
- Would a rubric ([AAC&U VALUE examples](http://www.unlv.edu/provost/teachingandlearning)) be helpful to students for this assignment?
- Does the rubric provide an amount of information that helps students at this phase in their learning?
- Does the rubric provide an overwhelming or counterproductive amount of information for students at this phase in their learning?
- Did you provide examples of good work, annotated to identify exactly where and how this work satisfies your criteria?
- Can you provide students with examples in class so they and you can test out your criteria checklist or rubric to be sure students know how to apply the criteria to multiple examples of work, and eventually their own work?
ONLINE RESOURCES

Transparency in Learning and Teaching in Higher Education

publicly available resources: http://www.unlv.edu/provost/teachingandlearning

NILOA Assignment Library

main resources: http://www.assignmentlibrary.org/
tool kit: http://degreeprofile.org/assignment-design-work/

AAC&U VALUE Rubrics https://www.aacu.org/value-rubrics
Transparent 2nd Tuesdays at 2:00 pm (your time zone)

A transparent teaching framework can equitably promote all college students’ success. Recent research indicates that transparently designed assignments benefit college students’ learning significantly – especially that of underserved students (Winkelmes et. al. Peer Review, Winter/Spring 2016).

Get some feedback on making your own assignments more transparent. Upload any assignments you’d like to discuss with colleagues into this folder and connect here the 2nd Tuesday of each month.

I look forward to our conversation.

Sincerely,

Mary-Ann Winkelmes, Ph.D.
Coordinator of Instructional Development and Research; Associate Graduate Faculty, History Department
Office of the Provost
University of Nevada, Las Vegas
4505 S. Maryland Parkway, Mail Code 1014
Las Vegas, NV 89154-1014
Email: Mary-Ann.Winkelmes@unlv.edu
Phone: (702) 895-4832 Fax: 702-895-3455 Office: FDH 421
Senior Fellow, Association of American Colleges & Universities
Nevada Humanities Board of Trustees Member
Principal Investigator, Transparency in Learning and Teaching Project