



# Time for an ACADEMIC LABOR CHECKUP

By Leonard Geddes

The time has come for students to do a self-evaluation of their academic labor. Believe it or not, students have been in class for about six weeks. If you are on a semester schedule, this means that a third of the semester is already in the books! By this time, each student is on a path toward either academic success or academic failure. *But do they know which path they are traveling?*

You can help students determine which path they are traveling based on the types of academic labor they are currently doing. No need to wait until midterms to kick things into gear; you can help students course correct now!

## Micro versus Macro Academic Labor

In my forthcoming book, tentatively titled *Avoiding Transition Traps: How to Successfully Transition Students into College*, I share examples of students entering college with an

incomplete set of academic work skills. These promising students are adept at *microlaboring*, which is a type of mental labor that prioritizes content accumulation at the expense of conceptual understanding. These students often miss the big-picture elements of their course, regardless of how much they study. Examples of microlabor include:

- Attending class
- Taking notes
- Reviewing notes
- Highlighting notes
- Reading material
- Reviewing study guides

These are also the types of activities that in-class educators and learning assistance professionals encourage, and the types of features that show up on most of our data reports. It's tempting to conclude that weaker students aren't doing enough microlabor tasks. Successful students, however, unknowingly tap a higher set of labor skills: they *macrolabor*.

Macrolabor comprises academic work that creates coherence across courses, and it generates the type of meaningful learning that educators are seeking to ascertain through their assessments. It's the missing mental labor that struggling students don't do.

Students who macrolabor tend to extract more meaningful information from class, study more productively, and score much higher than their peers. The following list includes some essential macrolabor activities:

- Comparing and contrasting concepts
- Examining how class material connects to the course learning outcome(s)
- Forecasting how future concepts or methods may appear in a future state
- Developing concrete metaphors for abstract material
- Assessing the informational ingredients needed to produce the learning outcome(s)
- Assessing and adjusting thinking modes to match the cognitive requirements

The bottom line is that if students do the wrong type of labor, then they won't learn or perform well. But if they do the right types of labor, then success is certain. If you are looking for ways to determine the types of labor your students are doing, then you can use the Academic Labor Checklist to discover the missing types of labor. 



Leonard Geddes is founder of The LearnWell Projects, an academic success organization devoted to making learning more visible, manageable, and effective. His work leverages metacognition research to optimize student learning, enhance faculty instruction, and improve institutional outcomes. Leonard provides workshops and trainings for colleges and universities throughout North America.

# ACADEMIC LABOR CHECKLIST

## Are you working smarter or harder?

Which of the lists below apply to you?

### Microlabor

- Attending class
- Taking notes
- Reviewing notes
- Highlighting notes
- Reading material
- Reviewing study guides

### Macrolabor

- Comparing and contrasting concepts
- Examining how class material connects to the course learning outcome(s)
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