

Horizontal Alignment: Advantages and Attributes

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Horizontal alignment of a course means there is consistency of student experience across teachers of the same course. Students taking the same course should be working towards the same learning outcomes, they should be challenged by the same level of rigor, and their learning progress should be measured in the same way, regardless of who is teaching the class. Alignment is important because it brings both student equity and the advantages of building a learning community. But leaving room for teacher autonomy is also important. At Bellarmine we're targeting an "80% alignment" model which brings the benefits of alignment while also supporting teacher creativity and personal teaching style. (Note: 80% is presented here as an approximate target, not a precise one.)

Advantages of Alignment

When implemented effectively, horizontal alignment can free teachers from duplicating effort while also delivering several important advantages:

Equity for Students

Horizontal alignment brings equity and fairness for students. It ensures that students taking the same course at a school have a similar experience, regardless of which teacher is teaching the course. They are working towards the same learning outcomes, and those outcomes are measured in similar ways. Additionally, aligning levels horizontally facilitates vertical alignment discussions that ensure all students are adequately prepared to advance between levels.

Teacher Innovation

Alignment allows us to get a better return on our best ideas. When our courses have more in common in terms of content and structure, it makes it easier to share ideas regarding curriculum and instruction. Discussion of new ideas becomes a part of the workflow and the alignment lowers the barriers to teachers borrowing ideas from one another. When alignment is implemented well, individual creative work is made even more valuable because it is more likely to benefit more students.

Building a Community of Learners

Alignment helps us grow as a community of learners. Course level teams not only provide a structure for the discussion of new ideas, they also make it easier for us to support each other as we implement. They also provide a ready-made support system for the onboarding of new faculty. When we are aligned and moving in the same direction, it is easier to talk strategically about curriculum and instruction and where we want to go next as a level team and as a department.

Attributes of Horizontal Alignment

An important first step toward horizontal alignment is reaching a common understanding of what alignment looks like so that expectations of teachers are clear. At Bellarmine we are targeting an alignment model that does not mean teachers are marching uniformly in lock-step with no room for individual style and creativity. It does, however, mean teachers agree to key attributes of the course:

Learning Outcomes

Teachers of the same course should agree on a core set of learning outcomes of the course. This includes both the content to be covered and the skills to be developed. The outcomes should be discussed not only at the course level but also at the unit level. Agreement on learning outcomes helps to ensure all students will be ready for the next level.

Level of Rigor

Teachers of the same course should challenge students with the same level of rigor. This begins with a common understanding of the knowledge and skills students are expected to bring to the course. But teachers should also agree on the pacing of the course, the amount of homework to assign, and the degree to which students should be challenged and supported during the semester.

Measurement of Learning

Teachers of the same course should agree on a common rubric for assessing student mastery and achievement of the team's desired learning outcomes. Together, they should design and deliver assessments that are very similar in content, rigor, and form, so that all students are measured in the same way and there is consistent meaning of grading feedback across all sections.

A Note about Course Materials

Course materials need not be identical, but they should be agreed upon by the level team in the spirit of our alignment model. For example, if a textbook is the main resource of a course then teachers should agree on the same textbook and use it in similar ways. But they may also choose to leave room in the semester to supplement individually with other materials. For a course in which a collection of primary sources is used, teachers could agree to variation (e.g. choosing different Shakespeare plays) as long as there is also agreement that the materials chosen are in alignment in terms of outcomes, rigor, and measurement of learning.

The Importance of Autonomy

Discussion of alignment often raises valid concerns regarding the preservation of teacher autonomy. It's true that aligning a course means a teacher cannot do whatever he or she wants with the course. There needs to be coordination and agreement. But even in the context of alignment, teacher autonomy is preserved in several ways.

First, decisions regarding curriculum and instruction still belong to teachers. With alignment, many of the decisions are collective, but teachers are still making those decisions based on their experience and expertise as professionals.

Second, our goal is to implement a model of alignment that is not rigid and allows room for teacher choice. A guideline of 80% alignment gives teachers the opportunity to teach favorite lessons or to try new ideas, while still giving students a common experience across all sections of the course. Further, the balance of alignment can be achieved in different ways. The Geometry Team, for example, might agree to reserve two weeks of the semester for individual teacher choice. The English 1 Team might agree to select three course novels as a team, leaving the remaining two to teacher choice, with the stipulation that the novels meet the objectives of the course.

Lastly, our model of alignment does not ask for uniformity of teaching style. The personal style and unique creativity teachers bring to the classroom make Bellarmine the special place that it is. At the same time, student achievement of learning outcomes is closely tied to the choices teachers make regarding instructional practice. So there should be an informed, shared understanding among teachers regarding how different types of instruction engage students and help to achieve outcomes.