Utah State University Connections Instructor Description

Purpose and Background of Connections Course
Philosophy
The Association of American Colleges and Universities has identified first-year experience (FYE) courses—such as USU 1010 Connections—as a high-impact educational practice. Connections instructors often provide the first interaction incoming students have with a college professor. They will serve as the students’ first college mentor. Students in this FYE course come from various academic and cultural backgrounds. The advice and guidance of their first USU instructor/mentor can go a long way in easing the transition for these students. Furthermore, students who make academic and social connections during the first three weeks of their university experience are more likely to persist and succeed in earning a four-year degree.

Administration
The Connections course is administrated by the Provost’s Office. It is an academic course with appropriate rigor. Course content and structure are planned by the Connections Faculty Committee, which is a sub-committee of the General Education sub-committee, which reports to the Educational Policies Committee. The Connections Faculty Committee consists of lecturers and professors who have taught the course, as well as representatives from the Provost’s Office and Student Achievement Collaborative (see http://www.usu.edu/connections/committee for a list of committee members).

Instructor Qualifications and Characteristics
It is expected that Connections instructors:

- Have the support of their supervisor(s).
- Be an enthusiastic proponent of Utah State University.
- Articulate Utah State University’s General Education Mission and the development of citizen scholars.
- Embrace the Connections course objectives and curriculum.
- Assist students in becoming “intentional learners” through teaching the objectives.
- Model intentional learning in their own teaching and learning processes.
- Have a student-centered educational philosophy.
- Use engaging pedagogy that involves students in the learning process.
- Develop in- and out-of-classroom rapport with students.
- Serve as a mentor during the students’ first and second semesters. It is estimated that most instructors will average one hour of mentor-related activities per week throughout the fall and spring semesters.
- Provide targeted and specific outreach to at-risk students as coordinated by the Office of Student Retention & Completion.
- Commit to attend all training and professional development for Connections instructors.
- Be detail-oriented in meeting deadlines and tracking expenditures.
- Provide regular feedback and reports regarding mentoring and outreach experiences.
Benefits of Being a Connections Instructor

- President Cockett has made clear that teaching this course should be classified as evidence of teaching excellence in the promotion and tenure binder. It is not considered “service.”
  - A supporting document will be provided to add to the promotion and tenure binder.
- Fun, engaging instruction for even the most seasoned faculty or staff member.
- Opportunity to teach and mentor new students as they transition to college life.
- Connection with instructors from a variety of disciplines and the opportunity to engage within a campus-wide community of educators who are committed to intentional learning.
- Extra service compensation ($3,500 – over two semesters) via payroll deposit.
- The addition of portable vocabulary, values, and teaching strategies that will augment teaching within the discipline, particularly general education courses.

USU 1010 University Connections Objectives
The Connections objectives have been framed as three big questions that students should be able to answer at the end of the course. In referencing assignments, workshops, and activities back to the big questions, we focus on the "whys" and "hows" of a university education. The intention is to help students become "intentional learners" who understand how to get the most out of their education and how to address challenges that affect college students.

The Big Ideas of Connections
Why am I here?
- What is an educated person? How does an educated person contribute to his or her community?
- What role does general education play in educating a person?
- What role does the major play in educating a person?

How do I best engage myself in the process of becoming an educated person?
- What does an intentional student look like?
- What competencies do I need to develop in order to succeed?
- What resources are available to help me succeed?

How do I become a fully engaged member of the university community?
- What opportunities are there for me to have fun and to become more invested in the university community? (clubs and organizations)
- What is a learning community, and how do I go about building one?
Connections Training & Preparation

Training
Training sessions are led by the Connections Faculty Committee. These trainings are mandatory. Discussions, collegiality, and content of the trainings cannot be duplicated in a non-group setting, so exceptions to the mandatory training dates will not be made. See http://www.usu.edu/connections/instructors for specific training dates and times.

Class and Syllabus Preparation
The Connections course is unique in that most of the curriculum is set by the Connections Faculty Committee. Instructors are given course objectives and common assignments to assure continuity of instruction across the Connections curriculum. This includes specific curriculum items that make up approximately 70% of class time. This is referred to as “required material.” Additionally, the instructor has the flexibility to customize the remaining course material (approximately 5 hours of class time). This is referred to as “supplemental material.” It is important to note that all course material (required and supplemental) must meet the course objectives. A basic schedule and syllabus is provided, and instructors customize their course using software within Canvas.

Course preparation includes the following:
- Reading Becoming a Learner (Matthew Sanders) and incorporating its themes into class experiences, discussions, and course objectives.
- Reading the Connections Reader: a compilation of selected readings that will be used to support the curriculum, class discussions, and assignments.
- Developing teaching strategies that will resonate with new students and meet the objectives of the course (suggestions, resources, and lesson plans are provided). Experienced instructor mentors are a good resource to help new instructors develop and clarify solid teaching strategies for the Connections course.
- Completing the course syllabus and schedule templates for the section and outlining how activities meet the course objectives.
- Customizing Canvas section with due dates, instructor information, and any other features that are specific to the section (additional Canvas training is available through CIDJ).
- Collaborating with assigned student peer mentor to determine ways they can effectively contribute to the course. Please see the section below for more about the peer mentor.
- Communicating with students prior to Wednesday, August 19. This communication should provide students with an introduction of their instructor. It should also provide reminders and information about the course. Instructors should give students the opportunity to ask questions prior to the beginning of the course. Responses should be accurate and timely.
Instructor Resources

Connections Reader
A compilation of selected readings that will be used to support the curriculum, class discussions, and assignments.

Peer Mentor
Each Connections class is assigned a student peer mentor. The purpose of the peer mentor is to provide additional support to new students as they transition into the college experience. Instructors can rely on peer mentors as a valuable source of student input. While they can help the instructor plan and even lead portions of the course, they are not responsible to teach or grade the course. The instructor is paid extra service compensation and it is not appropriate to expect the peer mentor to do the job of the instructor.

Training Manual
Each instructor will receive a training manual. The purpose of the manual is to: outline course objectives; describe course assignments; and provide resources and curriculum teaching ideas. Several online resources can also be found at www.usu.edu/connections under the instructor link.

Student Bluebook
Each student receives a student bluebook at orientation. This book outlines the traditions and history of being an Aggie. It also familiarizes students with the many services available to them while they are Aggies. A digital copy of this will be available on the instructor website in June, and instructors can request a hard copy if desired.

Paper or Copy Assistance
If needed, instructors can make copies in the Connections office, TSC 105. The Connections office can also provide paper if the instructor wants to use a photocopier in his or her home department.

Budget
Instructors are given $10 for each student to provide lunch and activities for their class. All classes receive free Aggie Ice Cream as well. Specific information about university spending guidelines will be given in training.

During Connections
Connections instructors stay with their students for the entirety of the course, accompanying them to workshops, walking with them from point to point, and spending time getting to know the students. The schedule is designed so instructors can check in with their office in the morning, at lunch, and in the afternoon with the exception of one lunch that is spent together as a class. It is not appropriate for the instructor to leave students during workshops or other presentations. It is important for the instructor to hear what the students hear so that they can answer questions and help the students process what has been taught.