

# The Unwritten Rules:

## Decode Your Assignments and Decipher What's Expected of You

### Did you know?

- UNLV researchers demonstrated in a national study that transparency around academic assignments enhances students' success at statistically significant levels, with even greater gains for historically underserved students. [Winkelmes et al., [Peer Review 2016](#)]
- When faculty make the purpose, tasks and criteria of an academic assignment clear before students begin to work on it, students are more likely to experience greater academic success with that assignment, developing the knowledge, disposition, and skills necessary to succeed both at school and in life (in comparison to when students experience less clarity around purpose, tasks and criteria for their academic work). [Winkelmes et al., [Peer Review 2016](#)]
- For UNLV students, benefits also included a significantly higher rate of retention (returning to college each fall term) up to two years after experiencing transparent instruction. [Gianoutsos and Winkelmes, 2016; Winkelmes, Calkins, Yu, forthcoming 2018].
- 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, [Science, 18 March, 2011](#)].
- 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, [Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, 38, 2 \(2002\)](#)].

### 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?)
- **Multiple real-world examples of successful work, discussed in class**  
(What's good/better/best about these examples? Use the checklist to identify the successful parts.)

Aronson, J., Fried, C., & Good, C. "Reducing the effects of stereotype threat on African American college students by shaping theories of intelligence." *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 38 (2002): 113–125.

Gianoutsos, Daniel and Mary-Ann Winkelmes. "Navigating with Transparency." *Proceedings of the Pennsylvania Association of Developmental Educators* (Spring, 2016).

Walton, G. M., & Cohen, G. L. "A brief social-belonging intervention improves academic and health outcomes among minority students." *Science* 331 (2011): 1447–51.

Winkelmes, Mary-Ann, Matthew Bernacki, Jeffrey Butler, Michelle Zochowski, Jennifer Golanics, Kati Harriss Weavil. "A Teaching Intervention that Increases Underserved College Students' Success." *Peer Review* (Winter/Spring 2016).

Winkelmes, M.A., Calkins, C. and Yu, K. "Transparent instruction boosts first-year undergraduate students' confidence, belonging and retention." (forthcoming 2018)

