



Facilitating Student Goal Setting:¹ Strategies That Work

UDL 3.0 Consideration 6.1: [Set meaningful goals](#) — Practice setting challenging and authentic goals that capture the vision and complexity of learning.

What is it?

Setting meaningful goals refers to the practice of establishing clear, challenging, and motivating targets that guide learning and development. Rather than simply assigning tasks or hoping students will "do their best," meaningful goal setting involves helping students articulate specific, measurable outcomes that connect to their personal values and future aspirations. When students set goals that are big enough to capture the complexity of what they're learning yet specific enough to be actionable, they develop the executive function skills necessary for lifelong learning.

A student might initially say, "I want to improve my writing." Through meaningful goal setting, this becomes "I will write three discussion posts each week that include specific examples from the readings and connect course concepts to my nursing practice, so I can better communicate patient care plans." The goal transforms from vague intention to specific, personal, and professionally relevant action.

Common types of meaningful goals

While goals can take many forms, the following approaches help students develop both academic skills and self-regulation:

- **Learning goals:** Focus on skill development and knowledge acquisition (e.g., "Master statistical analysis techniques to evaluate research in my field").
- **Performance goals:** Target specific, measurable outcomes (e.g., "Complete all assignments 24 hours before the deadline to allow time for review").
- **Process goals:** Emphasize strategies and behaviors (e.g., "Spend 30 minutes after each class connecting new concepts to previous learning").
- **Personal connection goals:** Link course content to individual interests and career aspirations (e.g., "Apply course theories to understand leadership challenges in my workplace").

¹ Content developed with AI, based on [the CAST UDL Guidelines™](#), scholarly sources, and web resources. Icons courtesy of [Flaticon.com](#) contributors.

Why do it?

Traditional education often assumes students naturally know how to set effective goals for themselves. However, research consistently shows that:

- **Students achieve significantly higher performance:** Those who set specific, challenging goals for themselves outperform students told to simply "do their best" by substantial margins.
- **Goal setting builds essential life skills:** Students develop self-regulation, time management, and strategic thinking abilities they'll use throughout their careers.
- **Motivation increases dramatically:** When students connect learning to their personal values and future aspirations, engagement and persistence improve.
- **Metacognitive awareness develops:** Students become more conscious of their learning processes and better able to monitor their progress.
- **Transfer of learning improves:** Goals help students see connections between course content and real-world applications, making knowledge more useful and memorable.
- **Self-efficacy grows:** Successfully achieving goals builds confidence and willingness to tackle increasingly challenging tasks.

How to do it

Supporting students in setting meaningful goals requires intentional design across three key areas: goal development processes, scaffolding and support systems, and progress monitoring.

Goal development processes

Meaningful goal setting is a collaborative process that helps students transform vague intentions into specific, personally relevant targets.

- **Use guided discovery questions:** Rather than telling students what their goals should be, ask questions that help them discover effective goals: "What specific outcome would make you feel proud of your learning in this course?" or "How does mastering this content connect to your career aspirations?"
- **Provide goal-setting frameworks:** Teach students to create goals using structures like SMART-ER criteria (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Time-bound, Exciting, Reviewed) while emphasizing personal significance and connections to course content.
- **Model the goal-setting process:** Share your own learning or professional goals with students, demonstrating how you make them specific, challenging, and personally meaningful (e.g., "My

goal this semester is to incorporate three new active learning strategies into each class session to improve student engagement").

- **Facilitate peer goal sharing:** Create structured opportunities for students to discuss their goals with classmates, refine their thinking, and build accountability partnerships that support mutual success.

Scaffolding and support systems

Students need explicit instruction and ongoing support to develop effective goal-setting skills.

- **Teach goal-setting as a learnable skill:** Dedicate time to explaining the difference between goals and wishes, demonstrating how to write effective goals, and providing practice opportunities with low-stakes assignments.
- **Provide goal-setting templates and checklists:** Offer structured frameworks that guide students through identifying their primary goal, explaining why it matters personally, defining success indicators, planning action steps, anticipating challenges, and scheduling progress reviews.
- **Create regular check-in systems:** Establish weekly progress touchpoints through brief surveys, discussion forum posts, or one-on-one conversations that help students reflect on their progress and adjust their approaches when needed.
- **Build self-efficacy systematically:** Provide early success experiences, share examples of how past students achieved similar goals, and break complex goals into manageable milestones that build confidence over time.

Progress monitoring and adjustment

Effective goal setting requires ongoing attention to progress and willingness to adapt when circumstances change.

- **Establish clear progress indicators:** Help students identify specific, observable evidence that they're making progress toward their goals, such as completion of action steps, quality improvements in their work, or feedback from peers and instructors.
- **Normalize goal adjustment:** Teach students that modifying goals based on new learning or changing circumstances is a sign of growth, not failure. Provide frameworks for evaluating when and how to adjust goals while maintaining appropriate challenge levels.
- **Celebrate progress and achievement:** Regularly acknowledge student progress, not just their final achievements. Share success stories and help students recognize how their goal-setting skills are developing and transferring to other areas of their lives.

- **Connect goals to feedback:** Use student goals to provide more targeted, meaningful feedback on their work and help them see how their efforts connect to their desired outcomes.

Summary

Setting meaningful goals enhances learning by helping students develop the executive function skills necessary for academic success and lifelong achievement. Rather than replacing course objectives, meaningful goal setting helps students personalize their learning experience and develop self-regulation skills they'll use throughout their careers.

The goal isn't to control what students want to achieve, but to teach them how to transform their aspirations into specific, actionable plans that connect course content to their personal and professional development.

Resources

Anthropic. (2025). Claude Opus 4.5 [Large language model]. <https://claude.ai/>

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