# Defining and Implementing Academic Rigor: A 5-Year Update

**Dr. Andria Schwegler, Associate Professor of Psychology, Texas A&M University-Central Texas**

## Welcoming Newcomers to the Conversation

Though academic rigor is widely used to describe a positive characteristic of educational programs, it has been hard to define. Some have recommended abandoning the term, but its persistence in the lexicon demands clarifying its meaning. Grounded in research in education and cognitive psychology, academic rigor is defined as “*intentionally crafted and sequenced learning activities and interactions that are supported by research and provide students the opportunity to create and demonstrate their own understanding or interpretation of information and support it with evidence”* (Schwegler, 2019a, p. 16). It is an ongoing process of setting the conditions to promote learning in the learning context; it is not a static artifact, and it cannot be substituted with the preexisting qualities students bring with them.

## Checking-In on Impact

Five years after its publication, a review of its applications reveals that the definition has been leveraged by those in higher education seeking to improve teaching and learning. Applications range from local conversations about teaching philosophies, distinguishing teacher and student responsibilities, and assessment practices to broader conversations at other institutions about program standards, equitable teaching, universal design, and institution accreditation. These applications provide examples regarding how the definition may be meaningfully used to address needs at other institutions.

## Applying Concepts for Continuous Improvement

Beyond these examples, additional work is needed in applying the definition to challenges teachers and learners continue to face. The definition may be usefully extended to bolstering the efficacy of co-curricular support, faculty-student engagement of content, the scholarship of teaching and learning, uses of assessment data, and professional development planning (Schwegler, 2019b; Schwegler, 2019c).

## Inviting Critical Review and Revision

Through an application, review, and revision process not only will the conditions in the learning context be improved to promote learning, the definition of academic rigor itself can be improved as well. Examples of applications, limitations, research, and revisions are welcomed: schwegler@tamuct.edu

## References

### Schwegler, A. F. (2019a). Academic rigor: A comprehensive definition. Quality Matters. <https://www.qualitymatters.org/qa-resources/resource-center/articles-resources/academic-rigor-white-paper-part-one>

### Schwegler, A. F. (2019b). Contextualizing academic rigor. Quality Matters. <https://www.qualitymatters.org/index.php/qa-resources/resource-center/articles-resources/academic-rigor-white-paper-part-two>

### Schwegler, A. F. (2019c). Aligning institutional processes to support academic rigor. Quality Matters. <https://www.qualitymatters.org/index.php/qa-resources/resource-center/articles-resources/academic-rigor-white-paper-part-three>