Backward Design
(also called "Integrated Course Design")

What is Backward Design?
To plan one's course through "Backward Design" means articulating objectives (also called "learning outcomes") as the very first part of the planning process, then considering what assessments—like exams or papers—will ensure students are meeting those goals. Only after these two steps does the instructor then decide on specific class activities and access to content. Working through each step allows the instructor to integrate each major component of the course.

Why should I use Backward Design?
Backward design helps us focus on what matters most: the changes our courses make in how our students think, act and feel. It's easy for all of us to think first of content (I'll give a lecture on X; students will read textbook Y) and to lose sight of larger goals that involve how students move forward from our classes into other courses and study, into professions, or, more broadly, into their future lives. What impact do we want to have, and can we be intentional about getting our students there?

Let's try it…
First, think broadly about what you care about most deeply in terms of student learning. You might ask yourself: "In your deepest, fondest dreams, what kind of impact would you most like to make on your students? A year or two after this course, what would you like to be true for your students that is not true for others? What is the distinctive educational impact your teaching and courses should have on students?" — L. Dee Fink's *Creating Significant Learning Experiences*, 2003

Next, as you think about more specific learning objectives, consider a full range of possibilities, like these, also form Dee Fink:

- Foundational Knowledge: What do I want my students to know?
- Application: What do I want my students to be able to do (analyze, evaluate, calculate, critique, etc.)?
- Integration: What kinds of connections do I want my student to be able to make (between my course and another, my course and the broader field, my course and their everyday lives, etc.)?
- Human Dimension: How do I want my student to grow in their understanding of themselves or others? What are personal and social stakes of my class?
- Caring: Do I hope my students come to care about something more? How might the course impact their feelings, interests, and/or values?
- Learning How to Learn: Have my students learned something about the process of learning itself that will help them in other courses and environments?

What should students know or be able to do?
(i.e. What is the learning outcome?)

1

4

How do students demonstrate what they know or can do?
(i.e. What kind of assessment?)

2

3

How do students prepare for demonstrating their knowledge or skills?
(i.e. What kinds of interactions – activities, experiences, etc.?)

3

2

How do students first engage the content they'll be using?
(i.e. How exposed to – retrieve or receive – the content?)

4

1

Student
Learning
Experience