The following activity begins the whole-school conversation about increasing academic rigor in all content classrooms. The exercise is timed so conversations can remain focused and moving. The activity outcome is to reach consensus on schoolwide and departmental definitions of academic rigor. The schoolwide definition is derived in approximately 25 minutes with added time for group discussion and debrief. The departmental definition may require 30–60 minutes of group discussion. Depending on the richness of the discussion, this activity can be accomplished in one or several sessions.

Begin this activity by saying:

We are going to use an activity to define a term that should have a schoolwide common and agreed-upon definition: academic rigor. Let’s begin by reflecting on what we mean in this school when we say “academic rigor.”

This activity can be used as you work with your faculty members or the broader community to illustrate the need for conversation and agreement about increasing academic rigor.

This is an individual and timed activity. You will need a sheet of paper. In the next two minutes, write your definition of “academic rigor.”

Watch the time and at the end of two minutes announce:

Stop writing. Now, pair up with the person to your left. Combine your definitions so you have a written definition for “academic rigor” that both of you can live with.

Watch the time and at the end of three minutes announce:

Stop writing. Each pair should now take their definition and join another pair. You will now have four minutes to combine the two definitions. Remember that the result MUST be a written definition that all can live with.

Watch the time and after four minutes announce:

Stop writing. Each foursome should now take their definition and join with another foursome and, once again, discuss and combine your work into one written definition.
Group size will determine whether or not regrouping to form one definition is manageable. If the number of participants is manageable enough to regroup, discuss, and write one definition, ask a volunteer to write it on chart paper to share with the staff. Ask for a reader so all participants can listen carefully and reflect on the following elements as you hear the definition:

- Are all stakeholders included (e.g., students, parents, etc.)?
- Are the concepts and words in the definition understandable to a person without ties to the school?
- Are there major concepts or phrases that you wish had been included?

However, if the number in the writing groups has reached a size unmanageable for discussion and consensus (25 members or more), it may be difficult to continue this process until one definition is reached; therefore, you may want to stop the process and engage in a group discussion around the resulting three or four definitions that have been developed. Have a volunteer from each group write the group’s definition on chart paper and hang it on the wall. Ask for a reader from each group. Ask all participants to listen carefully to each definition as it is read aloud. The participants will be asked to debrief the activity by identifying each of the following elements:

- What are the concepts, phrases, or words common to all the definitions?
- What are the major differences in the definitions?
- Are there concepts or phrases in one definition that you wish had been in your group’s definition?
- Are the concepts and words in the definition understandable to a person without ties to the school?

**Departmental Teams**

Continue the discussion activity of defining “academic rigor” in departmental teams. Ask each department to meet, discuss the general definition(s) of “academic rigor” and the concepts and phrases in the final definition. Each department should craft a consensus definition in their content area: mathematics, language arts, physical education, etc. Introduce the idea of applying the “person on the street” standard to the understandability of each definition—in other words, you should expect the average person on the street to understand the definition. Discuss why understandability is crucial in communicating with members of the school community around reform efforts.

The result of this activity should be a rich discussion of academic rigor and content standards. Here are some points to infuse if they do not surface:

- Instruction includes high-level questions and thinking
- Teachers focus on what students know and are able to do
- Students create, develop, and publicly exhibit work
- All students are held to the same high standards
- Students and teachers use rubrics to evaluate work
- Teachers facilitate discussions
- All stakeholders understand the language used in the definition
- Students value the tasks assigned to them
- Students believe that they are capable of high-level work.
Each department should now put its definition into practice. Probe teacher attitudes regarding the moral imperative as well as a federal mandate to educate all the children in the school’s “subgroups” and discuss the **behaviors that are observed in a rigorous classroom**. Discussion-starters may include the following questions:

- What behaviors have you identified that tell you that the curriculum is rigorous?
- What are the behaviors that show high levels of student mastery?
- What are the behaviors that demonstrate skillful teaching?
- What are the behaviors that demonstrate engaged students?

**Introduce the departmental activity with a consensus discussion on the observed teacher and student behaviors in a rigorous content class.**

*In the next few minutes in your departmental groups:*

- List five or more appropriate teacher behaviors that you would see in an academically rigorous middle level or high school classroom in your department.
- List five or more student behaviors that you would see in an academically rigorous classroom in your department.

*By consensus, finalize the departmental definition of academic rigor in your content area, list the observed teacher behaviors in these classrooms and list the observed student behaviors in these classrooms.*

**Make this information available to the numeracy team, administrative team, or the leadership team to assist in effective schoolwide monitoring and program evaluation.**

*This material is adapted from the Breaking Ranks II: Strategies for Leading High School Reform™ and Breaking Ranks in the Middle: Strategies for Leading Middle Level Reform™ training modules.*