How to reduce free-riding?

A checklist to support the design of group projects

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Reducing free-riding is an important challenge for educators who use group projects. This checklist offers course coordinators practical advice on how free-riding in group projects can be reduced while keeping students satisfied.[1]

I recommend to reduce free-riding by focusing on five group project characteristics that can be adjusted relatively easily. See the bold text in the table below (right column) for the specific advice (i.e., students' preferred levels):

Relative importance of characteristics for students

Characteristic	Expected effect on free-riding	Student preferences
Team formation approach	Self-selection and assignment based on schedule availability and motivation are expected to lead to less free-riding than random assignment	• **Self-selection[2]** • Random assignment[3] • **Assignment based on schedule availability and motivation**
Number of peer process evaluations	The use of (multiple) peer evaluations is expected to lead to less free-riding	• 0 peer process evaluations • **1 peer process evaluation** • **2 peer process evaluations**
Team size	A small(er) team size is expected to lead to less free-riding	• **2 students** • **3 students[4]** • 4 students
Type of grade	A divided grade is expected to lead to less free-riding than a common grade	• **Common grade[5]** • Divided grade
Method to handle free-riding	The two-card system and member expulsion are expected to lead to less free-riding than a conversation with the coordinator (no sanction)	• **Conversation with the coordinator (no sanction)[6]** • Member expulsion • **Two-card system**

Note: Common practice and rules can differ between faculties. The above recommendations particularly hold for large bachelor one and two university courses in which students have to complete a group project that consists of several group assignments – with writing an academic (research) paper as the main task.

Benning (2022)

1 The advice is based on the educational literature, rules / common practice at the Erasmus School of Economics, and students' preferences (Benning, 2022). 2 Note that students find self-selection even more important in case of high stakes (Benning, 2022). 3 Although less preferred by students and probably less effective in reducing free-riding, random assignment can be useful if working together in a diverse team is one of the (key) learning goals of the course in question. 4 Note that students prefer a team size of three students in case of high stakes (i.e., when the group project counts for 100% towards the final grade of the course) (Benning, 2022). 5 A common grade is preferred by students but is not expected to (optimally) reduce free-riding. 6 A conversation with the coordinator is preferred by students but is not expected to (optimally) reduce free-riding.

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