Group Projects That Don't Suck (*MSU Denver Edition*) – Logan Schuetz

Part I. Purpose

"Better structured group projects that support commuter and working students."

This guide is designed to help MSU Denver faculty build group projects that actually work in real classrooms where students are juggling jobs, family responsibilities, athletic schedules, and long commute times. Sport Management, Business, and similar applied fields rely on collaboration in the workplace, so group work matters, but only when the structure reduces chaos instead of creating it. The goal is to give faculty practical tools to prevent the classic failures we all see in our classroom settings:

- Scheduling conflicts, uneven contribution, conflict avoidance, and final products assembled at the last minute.

Part II. Why Group Projects Fail at MSU Denver

"Uneven contributions, busy schedules, no structure."

The main reasons MSU Denver group projects spiral:

- Unequal contribution patterns because groups jump into the work without defined responsibilities. Commuter students often meet asynchronously and assume someone else is "handling" tasks.
- Work and life schedules overwhelm planning, especially for students with full-time jobs, athletes, or those with multiple caregiving responsibilities. Without a clear schedule and checkpoints, work piles up.
- Lack of structure from instructors, not due to negligence but due to heavy teaching loads. If expectations, milestones, and roles aren't set early, teams drift.
- No accountability mechanisms, meaning strong students carry the work and underperformers hide. Peer evaluation too late in the semester doesn't help.
- Fear of conflict, especially among first-gen students who may be uncomfortable addressing unequal effort. This leads to simmering resentment and last-week meltdowns.

Part III. Structure First

"Team charter, role assignment, availability mapping."

This is the backbone of group success. Structure reduces roughly 90 percent of the usual problems.

- *Team Charter*: Created in week 2 or 3. This sets expectations around communication, deadlines, who is responsible for what, and how the team will handle disagreements.

• *Role Assignment*: Students must choose roles that align with strengths but can rotate or overlap. Typical project roles include:
- Project Lead (keeps the team organized)
- Researcher (collects materials, data)
- Writer/Editor (creates final draft)
- Designer/Presenter (creates slides or media)
  - Availability Mapping: Have students complete a schedule grid and agree on when and how they will meet. This solves 90 percent of the "we can never meet" problem early.

Part IV. Team Contract

"Communication norms, conflict plan, workload distribution."

The contract is the enforceable version of the charter and should be turned in for points.
Every contract should include:
• *Communication expectations*: How quickly should members respond? (24-hour reply rule is standard.) What platform will be used (GroupMe, Canvas messages, text, etc.)?
• *Conflict Resolution Steps*:
1. Address the issue privately within the group.
2. If unresolved after 48 hours, notify the professor.
3. Professor mediates or adjusts roles.
   • *Workload Distribution*: Each member documents the tasks they take responsibility for. This makes accountability measurable.
   • *Consequences*: What happens if someone repeatedly fails to contribute? A team member can be removed with documented evidence.

Part V. Peer Evaluation

"Simple scoring form, factors into grade, transparent process."

Peer evaluations are crucial and should *count* toward the grade or they have no teeth.
Effective peer evaluations include scoring categories:
• Contribution (did they complete assigned tasks?)
• Communication (responded promptly? engaged respectfully?)
• Reliability (attended meetings? submitted drafts on time?)
• Role follow-through (did they uphold the contract?)
Recommendations:
• Conduct two peer evaluations: mid-semester and final.
• Apply a multiplier if necessary. For example, if a student averages 70 percent from peers, they receive 70 percent of the team grade.
• Provide a comment section so groups can document issues early, not at the end.

Part VI. Checkpoints

"Proposal week 3, progress week 7, draft week 11, final week 15."

MSU Denver students thrive with small deadlines spread out.

    Recommended timeline:
- Week 3: Proposal submitted with team contract.
- Week 7: Mid-semester progress update or recorded check-in.
- Week 11: Draft of project components (slides, outline, or written draft).
- Week 13: Peer evaluation round one (adjust workload or roles if needed).
- Week 15: Final presentation or submission.

Why this works:
- Prevents end-of-semester chaos.
- Helps commuter students pace work.
- Allows instructor to catch disengaged students early.

Part VII. Dos and Don'ts

"Do monitor milestones. Don't ignore early conflict."

Do:
- Review progress updates to catch disengagement early.
- Provide rubric and examples up front so quality expectations are clear.
- Encourage groups to share drafts with you for quick feedback.
- Be available for short troubleshooting check-ins.

Don't:
- Do not assume groups will figure it out on their own.
- Do not wait until week 15 to address complaints.
- Do not allow "group grade for all" without peer evaluation.
- Do not permit last-minute role changes unless necessary.