

The Key to Discovering and Enhancing Student Learning

The Insight

If academic programs are composed of courses, then the most valid and authentic program evaluations will consist of course-level measures of student learning.”

Implications

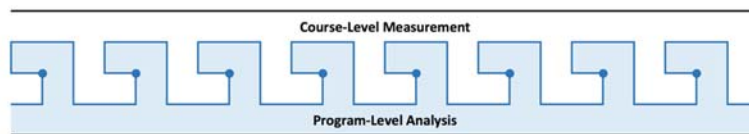
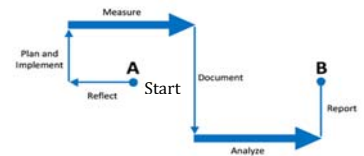
Aggregated course-level evidence should be used to inform the processes of discovering and improving student learning in our academic programs.

The way that we view a process impacts the manner in which we perform it.

I do not plan to assess General Education at Ferris, at least not in the way that most people think about it. Over the past thirty years, the “A” word has slowly lost its effectiveness due in part to the way that the process has been visualized. How we view a process impacts the manner in which we perform it. A quick search for “assessment process” on Google will return hundreds of images like the one to the right (OK, maybe not with a slash through it). I have two issues with illustrating the process in this manner. First, it implies that we never get anywhere; no matter what you do, you end up where you started. While this can be interpreted as continuous improvement, it also implies a certain amount of futility. This sense of futility can lead to frustration, burn-out, and unsustainability. Moreover, the cycle model tends to focus on the aggregation of data (LOTS of data). Preliminary data is used to plan to get even more data. Many programs and institutions are swimming in data, but have made meager improvements in student learning. My second issue with the traditional model is that courses and programs are often disconnected; each program or course is in its own cycle and no interaction between them is acknowledged. If academic programs are composed of courses, then the most valid and authentic program evaluations will consist of course-level measures of student learning.



I would like to offer an alternate model for the process of discovering and enhancing student learning (shown to the right). As we try to enhance student learning - moving from point “A” to point “B” - the first thing that we need to do is step back. We need to take the time to purposefully reflect upon the current state of our students’ learning at the program level. While reflection of programmatic results is arguably the most important step in this process, it is currently undervalued. Based upon these deliberations, new plans need to be made and implemented at the course level. In order to provide a programmatic context, the impact of these changes need to be documented across the program’s courses. An analysis of these data can then provide an estimate of the student learning at the program level. Tracking these estimates over time (point A → B → C → etc.) can give a fairly robust indication of enhanced student learning. As this pathway is reiterated over time, a pattern of measurement emerges. I call this the key (the Greek key) to discovering and enhancing student learning.



This is what I mean when I say that General Education will not be assessed. We are not going to run in circles collecting data to evaluate instructors, courses, or departments. Instead, we are going to take the time together to reflect upon and discuss the current state of student learning in our General Education program. In this process, we will discover new ideas, approaches and strategies from each other. We can then make and measure any changes in pedagogy that we wish at the course level. The aggregated impact of all these course modifications will be used to estimate the enhancement of student learning at the program level. In my next installment, we will discuss how the interlocking spirals of course-level measures and program-level analysis will be operationalized in the new General Education program.