

Learning Dimension Feedback California State University-San Marcos

Dear Brian, Linda, Charles, Maureen, Andrew, Debbie, Erin, Joan, Valerie, Sahar, Mohammad, Kyle, Moukhlis, Linda, and Mark,

I have read your excellent report on the Learning Dimension and want to offer some feedback to you. First, let me say that I happen to think this may be the most important Dimension among the nine, so I'm really glad you "stayed with it" until you completed the report.

Early in your report, you acknowledge the need to differentiate among requirements, goals, and outcomes. I agree completely. There is overlap among these concepts, but there are also subtle differences. I'm curious about your requirements and whether these are mandated by the state or just at the institutional level. In terms of your alcohol requirement: Are students only required to participate in a class or workshop, or are they also required to pass a test of knowledge about alcohol issues? What are your goals for this requirement – that students understand the risks of alcohol abuse or that their understanding actually changes their behavior? If the desired outcome is behavior change, is there any way to measure that?

The Computer requirement sounds like both a goal and a desired outcome. Is there a test of proficiency through which you can determine whether this "learning outcome" has been met?

The example outcomes you list are good ones, but very specific. Many institutions have more global learning outcomes, such as improvement in writing, oral communication, technology, math proficiency, etc. Often these are measured at the "program" level – meaning that the individual student is not the "unit of analysis," but rather all students collectively.

Our former colleague, Randy Swing, used to do this kind of assessment when he was director of assessment at Appalachian State University. Each year he would take one major learning outcome – speaking, writing, technology (and two others that I can't remember). He devised a method for assessment of one outcome per year for first-year students and upper-level students, and the results were reported in aggregate. He would start over in year 6 with the first outcome. I don't know how common or uncommon this assessment method was, but I think it was a good way to measure student improvement on certain specific desired outcomes through the undergraduate years.

In terms of measuring engagement, the NSSE is probably the best way to measure student perceptions of engagement, but also I think the campus would benefit by intentional sharing among instructors (both full-time and part-time) of what works to engage students. I like all your ideas for ways you might improve this aspect of the new student experience.

In terms of measuring course outcomes across sections of a particular first-year course, this may be one area in which you experience "pushback" from faculty. However, from the students' standpoint, we don't want to make first-year success simply "the luck of the draw" – specifically whose class you end up in. We believe there needs to be some consistency in expected outcomes in basic first-year courses and a reasonable metric for assigning grades. The goal would be to achieve a balance between instructor autonomy and fairness to students – both in terms of what material will be covered in a certain class section and how grades will be assigned.

In determining root causes of poor student performance in developmental courses, how did you arrive at your list? Was this the result of your committee's work or have you undertaken an institution-wide analysis of student performance in these courses? Only one item on your list surprises me, and that's the last one. Do you know for sure that adjuncts are not doing a good job in teaching developmental courses, or is that what you are hearing anecdotally? If that's really true, then you should definitely raise this issue with academic leaders because these students desperately need excellent instruction.

I don't see any narrative that describes how the institution currently places students. I note that you indicate a "very low/none" score on placing good students into more challenging or "honors" level courses and I note that you don't currently have an honors program. I hope you'll consider discussing such a program for possible implementation to keep your best students at San Marcos.

Very honestly, it is the rare institution that documents student learning out of class, although students are actually learning all the time – perhaps not what we want them to learn, however. Your student affairs professionals may want to think more intentionally about what kinds of learning outcomes can be achieved through out-of-class activities (e.g., communication skills, leadership development, conflict resolution, exposure to diversity, experiences in civic engagement). I note that you are offering service learning opportunities and documenting student learning from those activities. I'm glad to note that retention improvements have resulted from learning communities. How has "learning" been different (or better) for students in learning communities?

You have many excellent suggested action items. Some, of course, are very specific and perhaps could be accomplished with no additional resources. You will want to go through the list and "triage" these – what needs to happen first, second, and so forth. In these days of tightening budgets, I hope you will find the resources that you need to implement these changes. And again, I hope that many of them won't require additional dollars.

Thank you for your terrific work on this report. Don't hesitate to let me know if you have any questions about my comments.

Best wishes!

Betsy

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