A collaborative dive into educational data

Alverno alumnae become pros at self-assessment. From day one, faculty push students to reach their fullest potential and that requires constant analysis of their performance.

It’s heartening to know that Alverno faculty practice what they preach—so much so that the School of Education is one of only three in the country to participate in an in-depth project to look at how data is used to improve curriculum and assess student performance.

This national research project, sponsored by the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (AACTE) and led by the University of Washington, highlights effective uses of data by innovative teacher education programs.

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“There’s been a lot of talk nationwide around teacher quality and how good is good enough to teach our kids,” says Alverno Associate Professor Desiree Pointer-Mace. “We want to make sure teachers are really good, so how do we design programs to understand the progress that students are making?”

Combining collaboration and data

Data, Pointer-Mace says, provides evidence-based answers to these questions, and Alverno uses data in very unique ways. Many teacher education programs determine their progress primarily through the use of quantitative data, such as grade points and test scores. Alverno, which doesn’t provide letter grades, instead focuses on qualitative feedback that is linked to explicit criteria and assessment outcomes.

The School of Education has been gathering and analyzing student learning data for more than 40 years, since it reformed its curriculum in the 1970s. At that time, college leadership reached out to organizational leaders in the Milwaukee area to determine which key abilities were most valued. Those discussions led to the abilities-based curriculum that alumnae are so familiar with and which sets Alverno apart in the academic world.

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Alverno’s other key differentiator is its focus on collaboration. Collaboration isn’t merely encouraged, it is expected. And time is set aside for it.

“It all goes back to Sister Joel Read carving out time within the workweek
for collaboration,” says Pat Luebke, assistant professor in the School of Education.

For example, no classes are held on Friday afternoons, so that this time can be used for cross-disciplinary meetings, ability-focused discussions and all-faculty workshops. Alverno also holds faculty institutes three times per year, during which faculty discuss ways to advance the curriculum and to respond to emerging issues and challenges. In addition, the School of Education meets weekly to assess data and their curriculum, and they use technology extensively to share and assess data.

“Using data helps us step away from our own biases. Each person has her own experiences, and we all look at something from our perspective,” Luebke says. “Data doesn’t necessarily answer questions. Instead it helps raise the questions that need to be asked.”

The institution-wide emphasis on collaboration was a primary reason Alverno was chosen to participate in the AACTE program. Last summer, Pointer-Mace and Luebke were part of a writing workshop in which they helped develop materials that would give teacher education programs practical strategies for using program outcome data to improve their practice. In March, Pointer-Mace and Luebke presented “Creating Organizational Supports for Collaborative Inquiry,” which provided practical applications based on Alverno’s methods, at the AACTE annual meeting in Atlanta.

**Increased responsiveness to changing requirements**

The ongoing conversations among Alverno faculty helps them respond quickly to changes in teacher requirements. For example, when the Wisconsin Foundations for Reading test went into effect in January 2014, the School of Education was able to quickly backward map the curriculum to ensure that all the content in the test was covered within the Alverno program.

Similarly, this August, the edTPA test will be mandatory for teacher nationwide. The edTPA is the first standards-based assessment to become nationally available in the United States.

Pointer-Mace notes that while other tests focus on whether a teacher candidate knows the subject matter, they don’t show whether that person can explain information effectively to children. edTPA requires plans for instruction, rationale for those plans, videos of instruction and reflection and
assessment to determine if the plans are effective.

“Students have described the edTPA as ‘so Alverno’ because it will determine if someone is ready for the rigors of teaching by seeing them teach rather than looking solely at whether they know the material,” she says.

Not surprisingly, Alverno was one of the pilot schools for the program. As such, faculty were able to implement the test a full year in advance of the requirement, giving them a leg up when compared to other teacher education programs.

“This test gives us a new set of data to examine and to determine how well we’re preparing first-year teachers,” Pointer-Mace says.

The Alverno emphasis on data and collaboration certainly appears to be working. Luebke was recently visited by a former student who is now a special education teacher. She is proud of her Alverno education because although she’s only in her first year of teaching, she is already being looked at as someone other teachers can go to.

“In K-12 classrooms, teachers are expected to use data to assess students,” Luebke says. “The more we, at Alverno, can model the use of data, the more it becomes part of our students’ practice when they begin teaching.”

~Heidi Jeter