The Academic Praxome

May 11, 2014 by David Dirlam

Three years ago Virginia Wesleyan College underwent a major reform framed as moving to a four-by-four curriculum (four, four-credit courses per term). Since this involved adding one credit to most courses, the faculty course designers were asked to describe the enhancements that would justify the additional credit. Part of this description was a 13-item checklist of "enhancements" that was not too far from George Kuh's list of "High Impact Practices." Recently, when a college committee deliberated on a five-year assessment plan they came up with the elegant solution to keeping personnel and course assessment separate that was described in my October posting on "Impact Measures using LONs and PIPs." That posting indicated that we needed to "further develop the [13-item] checklist created in 2010 into a more comprehensive list of PIPs."

After numerous workdays pouring over a list of over 60 "signature assignments" collected from our faculty by our Center for Innovative Teaching and Engage Learning (INTEL), I have arrived at a solution—the "Academic Praxome." If Instead of trying to list each practice separately, the academic praxome is based on 6 dimensions. In my first draft I used 4 options within each dimension. Since any one, all, or none of the options can be used in a course, each of these dimensions makes 65 possibilities. But since, any possibility from one dimension can be combined with any possibility from any other dimension there are altogether 65^6 options or 75 billion in all. Each of our 13 enhancements or George Kuh's 10 High Impact Practices is a single pattern. Seventy-five billion greatly enriches the potential for studying educational impact and mapping curricula. For sure, my original draft will change with use, but the higher education assessment community is no stranger to adapting ideas to local institutional use. So here are my first draft dimensions:

A. Location: Small Room (faculty office, dorm, carrel), Classroom, Lab or Studio, Other On Campus, Off-campus (field, internship, or cultural event).

B. People Present: One-on-One, Small Group, Whole class, General college or public.

C. Instructor Role: Mentor or Guide, Discussion Leader, Present / Lecture, Observe.

D. Student Resources: Instructor or experts, Objects or materials, Computers or other equipment, Other People.

E. Student Preparation: Read, Write, Analyze data or text, Collaborate or discuss.

F. Student Goals: Remember, Present, Project or Portfolio Entry, Discovery or Innovation.