"For the great majority of students, success in college is most directly shaped by their experiences in the classroom."

- Vincent Tinto, PhD

Phil has run a successful small business for the past 20 years. He’s just been asked to teach an elective in entrepreneurial ethics at a midsize community college. His excitement, however, is tempered by a degree of nervousness. Although Phil has mentored numerous aspiring entrepreneurs over the years, he’s never taught in a classroom before. He has no idea how many students will be enrolled in his course, and he’s received very little guidance from the business department chair. Phil hopes he’ll have enough time to prepare course materials, but there are only three weeks left until the start of the term.

This hypothetical situation echoes the real-life scenario for many adjunct faculty. According to a 2014 report by the Center for Community College Student Engagement (CSSE), more than half of the courses at community colleges are taught by adjunct instructors. The CSSE also describes adjuncts as a “diverse group of professionals who bring a broad range of skills and expertise to community colleges.” Indeed, adjunct faculty can reflect a wide range, including a part-time professor hoping to get her foot in the door for a full-time appointment, a “freeway flier” instructor who teaches at multiple institutions, or a nonacademic like Phil who’s invited to teach a specialized course.
Despite the intrinsic rewards of teaching college students, adjunct faculty face a number of challenges, including:

- Lack of professional resources, such as a dedicated teaching and learning center
- Limited or no access to computers, library resources, and curriculum guidelines
- Limited or no access to an office or another private area in which to prepare lessons and meet with students
- No formal system for helpful evaluation or peer feedback
- No formal onboarding or campus orientation process

How might these factors translate into potential challenges for the students they teach?

According to research conducted by The Delphi Project, students who take a significant number of their classes from adjunct faculty graduate at a lower rate. Moreover, they’re less likely to transfer from a two-year to a four-year institution. Delphi’s research also suggests that adjunct instructors are less student-centered in their pedagogical approach. Because of their contingent status, adjuncts have fewer interactions with students outside the classroom, and they don’t spend as much time preparing for class.

Given the strong correlation between the quality of classroom instruction and student learning outcomes, the implications for student achievement are significant. Colleges need to support their non-tenured faculty—not only to ensure professional growth, but also to optimize the academic success of students. The stakes become especially high at two-year colleges, which serve the majority of first-generation students, students of color, and low-income students. These historically underrepresented learners often need more academic support than their peers to be successful in the higher education classroom. Delphi’s research makes a compelling case for colleges to invest in the professional development of their adjunct teaching faculty. While it may not be possible to allocate office space for adjuncts or assign mentoring duties to full-time tenured faculty, colleges can explore the use of new tools for strengthening classroom interactions with students.

Data-informed insights into the student learning experience can in fact improve pedagogy. An evidence-based approach can help with these specific areas:

- Aligning course objectives with expected learning outcomes
- Ensuring appropriate levels of learning are reflected in both the syllabus and course assignments

“Findings from decades of educational research point to the fact that we cannot ignore the positive impact and untapped potential of good teaching.”

- Jonathan Gyurko, PhD, Penny MacCormack, EdD, Martha M. Bless, and Jacqueline Jodl, PhD

*Brief: Data-Informed Teaching and Learning as a Dialogue for Student (and Faculty) Success*
• Implementing formative assessment techniques throughout the course to gain a pulse on students’ sense of achievement
• Using constructive formative feedback from students to adjust classroom methods for immediate impact

“Keeping students in your class and helping them succeed—not just with a good grade but with deep learning—can only happen when students are fully engaged.”

- Peg Balachowski, Associate Dean of Teaching and Learning, Everett Community College

Our comprehensive solution, Campus Labs for Teaching & Learning, supports colleges and universities in every aspect of the teaching and learning process. Course evaluation tools facilitate both summative and formative assessment, making it easier for students to share candid feedback on teaching methods. Tools to support better outcomes assessment enable faculty to have a clearer method for aligning their course objectives with divisional and institutional outcomes.

• The IDEA Feedback tool facilitates formative feedback, so faculty can act on insights inspired by student input and map their teaching throughout the term
• The Outcomes toolset can help faculty confirm that their course learning objectives, as described in their syllabus, align with divisional and institutional outcomes
• Taxonomy views within the Outcomes toolset can help faculty evaluate the clarity and consistency of their outcome statements
• Data collection tools such as Rubrics and ePortfolios provide students with meaningful feedback and also offer a more consistent and effective assessment of their work
• The Student Response System (SRS) is an easy, online way to take attendance, track participation, and conduct surveys for instant feedback

At Campus Labs, we develop integrated web-based technology and share high-impact practices through learning communities with over 1,400 two- and four-year institutions across North America and internationally. Our Campus Success consultants work collaboratively with campus staff, faculty, academic deans, and other senior administrators to provide a coordinated approach to syllabus design and curriculum development, outcomes assessment, course evaluations, and academic success.
Create a culture of shared responsibility
Just as faculty strive for the best teaching methods, students should play an active part in their own learning.

Build meaningful relationships based on trust
Whether instruction occurs online or in a classroom, faculty and students can work together to communicate openly and cultivate trust.

Measure progress, including students’ self-perceptions
Techniques like formative feedback can offer a window into the learning process.

Always communicate the larger purpose
Whether the underlying goal is a two-year degree, an opportunity to transfer to a four-year institution, or a basic desire for more knowledge, the learning process is central to success.

Spotlight: Everett Community College
In 2016, one of our Member Campuses, Everett Community College, used an IDEA impact grant to introduce an online tool for formative assessment in the classroom. Results included deeper student and instructor engagement, stronger retention, improved learning outcomes, and more opportunities for professional development. The college earned a 2017 Campus Labs Trailblazer Award and was also showcased during a DREAM 2018 session. Read the case study.