

Small Group Instructional Diagnosis

A very effective strategy for gathering information in a timely manner is to set aside 30 minutes of class time to do a small group instructional diagnosis. This involves the following steps:

1. Invite a trusted colleague or someone from CTE to conduct the diagnosis session during your class time. Talk about your goals for the course and questions that are of interest to you about which you would like to get student feedback.
2. The facilitator works with the class without you present and begins by explaining that you have requested this feedback.
3. Students spend about five minutes working in small groups of three or four to respond to the questions:
 - a. What is the most helpful/useful thing the instructor is doing in the class?
 - b. What is causing the biggest problem for students in the class?
 - c. What suggestions do you have that could alleviate the problems?
4. After the small group discussion, the facilitator reconvenes the whole class and begins the debriefing process. While one student takes notes, each group is invited to give one of their responses to the three points listed in #3. The facilitator writes these on the board or an overhead. Then the next group is invited to do the same and so on until groups have no new comments to add.
5. In the course of #4, the facilitator is free to probe further or check with the group as a whole about the validity or feasibility of some of the comments offered.
6. The facilitator then takes the notes and ideas offered by the class, summarizes them and discusses them with the instructor.
7. The instructor takes the next class opportunity to thank the students and give them a summary of what was discussed and what he or she can or cannot do and why. It is important that the students feel they have been listened to.

This process has been instrumental in defusing a lot of problems early in the semester. It is a good idea to check with the students again later more informally to be sure their concerns are being met.