Speaker 1: The Missouri State Journal, a weekly program, keeping you in touch with Missouri State University.

Nicki Donnelson: Higher education institutions continually need to innovate, to recruit and retain students and to make it more accessible to more people. Sometimes this is new programming, scholarships and resources. Other times it is re-imagining curriculum and standards. I'm Nicki Donnelson, today on the Missouri State Journal, Dr. Brooke Whisenhunt is my guest. She is a professor of psychology at Missouri State University. She's here to tell me about how the intro to psychology course was restructured in 2012, to better educate students and improve learning outcomes. It had 167 students in each of the 18 sections, making it a lecture class with very little opportunity for feedback or other assessments.

Brooke Whisenhu...: We had two concerns with that traditional class. The one was general learning, like were our students actually learning very much? And the other concern we had was, what is the rate of students that are actually successful in the class? And we call that the DFW rate. So what percent of students are getting a D an F or withdrawing from the class? Our DFW rate in our traditional psych 121 class, and we've been collecting data for many years, is around 25%. So, that did not seem very acceptable for us to think that one out of four of our students was basically not succeeding in the class. In terms of learning outcomes we had traditionally given a pre and post-test, every intro class, to just test how much knowledge do you have when you come in the door and how much knowledge do you have when you leave. And on average, they were answering about 11 questions correctly when they walked in the door and only 14 correctly after 16 weeks of our best instructional assistance.

Nicki Donnelson: This motivated Missouri State and especially members of the psychology department to propose a major change.

Brooke Whisenhu...: Every in-state institution in Missouri, had to choose one class to redesign, using NCat as a model and to assist them in making that change over time. For Missouri State, we decided as a team, the five faculty members that we wanted to put forth intro psychology, to be able to redesign it. And that's what we ended up doing. So we were the one institution in the state that tackled intro psychology, and we hired a new coordinator for our whole intro psych program, Christie Cathey and she brought in fresh ideas that I think has kept the redesign new, and we always try something different each semester. So, she's been really great addition to the team.

Nicki Donnelson: The team worked for a year and a half to re-imagine the general education psychology course. And while she notes that you might think it seems counter-intuitive, they have seen major improvements.

Brooke Whisenhu...: We actually increased the size from 167 to 330. It is blended in the sense that we meet once a week in person, and then they are required to do online work during the off day. Students are required to do their work prior to coming to class. So, if we're covering chapter one, they're supposed to do all of their work and required assignments in chapter one before they get there, so that we can spend that time doing different activities. And we also use the data from their homework assignments they do to inform us as to what do they need us to cover in class.

So every section of intro psychology has a primary faculty member lead, also a senior learning assistant, which is often a graduate assistant and then also five to seven undergraduate learning assistants. So we started an entire new program for undergraduate learning assistants, where they take a class, called teaching of psychology, and then they help us in our intro psychology class, make that class more personal and help out with the large number of students that we have. So the very first semester increased those learning outcomes by 60%. We've had semesters where it's been as high as an 85% increase, but it has been very consistent since then. We have never had a semester where we've gone back and had those lower learning outcomes.

The DFW rate was interesting. It started off equally as high, so we didn't dent it. And we were very disappointed. And then over the course of the semesters, it actually started to gradually come down. And it has been very consistently around 10% now, but we also wrote a paper about how we actually think this took a culture change with the traditional class. They would drop a class because they would find out from their buddy that someone else was teaching it and offering more extra credit, maybe not having as many chapters. And since we standardized this, if you drop my class in intro psychology this semester, you're going to take the same class next semester with the same requirements. And our withdrawal rate has really, really dropped since then.

One of the things we knew about core success was, one of the predictors is whether or not you feel like your instructor cared about you. And so we've been really diligent about how can we personalize this? How can we make our students recognize that we do care? And so I think that's a key ingredient, is not thinking about this as a class factory, but thinking about every individual student and how could you help them in a way still keeping in mind that you have a lot of them.

Nicki Donnelson: That was Dr. Brooke Whisenhunt, I'm Nicki Donnelson for the Missouri State Journal.

Speaker 1: For more information, contact the office of university communications at (417) 836-6397.