Three years ago, when I was picking up my daughter at pre-school I ran into Lynn Kuzma. While we were both wiping noses and stuffing backpacks, she proposed a new EYE course on Thoreau. She had already recruited two other faculty—Terry Theodose and Kent Ryden—and she thought I could fill out the group. I was already teaching an EYE course on race, but it wasn’t particularly successful. The result was EYE 117, Thoreau: Nature, Society, and Self.

Was the course successful? It certainly seemed to be; it clearly felt successful. After taking a group of students on a three-day backcountry expedition, I literally cried. Students also seemed to be elated, if a little more subdued in their expressions of joy. They also produced art, did a small research project with the help of the library, bonded with each other on out-of-class excursions, and seemed to learn something about the history, politics, and ecology of New England in the nineteenth century from the teaching faculty as well as guest lecturers.

Last summer, an opportunity arose for Lynn Kuzma and me to study our course outcomes in a more systematic way. We presented our results at the 23rd International Conference on The First-Year Experience. In our research presentation, we tried to do three things. We wanted to introduce our course to an international audience of university faculty and staff, and embed it within the context of USM’s approach to general education reform. Second, we wanted to study and offer preliminary conclusions about how effective the EYE program has been in two areas: student retention and engagement. Finally, we wanted to study how effective our particular approach—namely, using outdoor educational experiences—was in increasing student retention.

Our conclusions were provisional. Based upon the data that we saw, we didn’t see substantive improvements in retention or engagement. On the latter issue, engagement, our conclusions seemed to match those of a much larger study conducted by Penn State and presented at the conference. On the impact of outdoor education, our findings were similarly dispiriting. Outdoor experiences seemed to have little effect upon student persistence. That said, our results were highly provisional. We were working with a tiny sample size and comparing data from EYE and other 100-level classes.

Despite its limits, data-driven outcomes based research did raise fundamental philosophical questions about the relationship between what we do within the classroom and retention. Recent efforts by the university to address the problem of student persistence structurally seem to be finally paying off. But my own individual experience brought home the point that USM is not responsible for every student outcome, but rather, to make resources and people available to students. What I learned in EYE through close-knit interaction with students in the woods is who my students were through the veil of posed apathy and indifference. We reached out to them as faculty and through student mentors, but some simply couldn’t sit at their computers and complete assignments. That they left becomes a statistical black eye as we labor to raise our rates of student persistence to levels comparable to our peers, but as a lived experienced we encounter something different. So I would conclude, based upon my own limited study, that USM must do data-driven self-study, but also remember that there is a limit to what numbers can tell us.