An early challenge faced by every Student Affairs division that begins to assess student learning is to “work at the right level”—to do learning assessments that have a high degree of specificity and reliability along with the necessary feasibility and practicality.

It’s best to focus initial assessments of learning at the level of a specific activity—a particular, individual, well-defined learning experience. The more specific and precisely described, the better; the more detailed and clear the learning outcome, the easier it will be to assess it, and the fewer uncertainties there will be when interpreting the assessment results.

Think of an activity as a very specific learning event that has a clearly defined intended outcome. Examples of such events may be Vikes Nation ambassadors engaging with a guest speaker’s presentation on leadership and teamwork, Indigenous students learning Coast Salish protocol prior to meeting with an INAF Elder, student employees participating in one particular bookstore training on customer service, or students interacting with a representative in the Office of the Registrar to request a transcript. These activities are not the only learning experiences within a program; a program usually includes several (or many) activities designed to achieve its goals—and a complex department may offer several different programs. Student counselling, for example, might include individual counselling/psychotherapy (a program), group counselling (another program), and outreach services (a third program). Each program might include several different activities—stress management, healthy relationships, and personal resiliency might all be specific activities within the outreach program.
A program then consists of numerous activities or events; it is the next level “up” from an activity or event. Programs may be complex, and their complexity may make it hard to assess the learning they intend to produce directly. But programs should also have clearly defined outcomes—which may often be assessed by aggregating the assessments of the activities within the program. Using our earlier example, it would be hard to assess the learning outcomes of the outreach program provided by the Counselling Center because there are several different activities, and different students might participate in them, and the activities might be offered at very different times, with different purposes. Better results always come from activity-level learning assessments.