An Interview with Dr. Michael Flory, Senior Research Scientist

Dr. Michael Flory became an education researcher because he wanted to make a difference. In this interview, he shares how he first became interested in education research and came to recognize and prove relationships between student success rates on the ACT exam and on workforce readiness exams.

Q: What made you want to become a researcher?

A: I wanted to make a difference. My two passions have always been science and education. I love the idea of bringing them together—using scientific approaches to inform education choices—to improve the lives of students and teachers. Using good information can help get the job done better, faster, and less expensively. And, since it is research, there is always the allure of possibly finding something that no one has discovered before.

Q: Through your work, what is the most interesting/unexpected/important finding you have discovered?

A: About five years ago, I looked at the relationship between student success rates on the ACT exam and on workforce readiness exams. It turned out there was a very strong likelihood that a student would meet state benchmarks on either both exams or neither exam, with students rarely meeting benchmarks on just one or the other. This actually suggested that the exams were probably testing the same underlying traits, more than suggesting that college readiness is the same as career readiness. The work also showed that students taking certain career pathways struggled with the ACT exam regardless of their success in their courses.

Q: What is your favorite/least favorite part of research?

A: My favorite part is talking with the people we do the research for, trying to determine the most useful questions. I like staring at spreadsheets and numbers as much as the next person, but I'm not doing the research for myself. My least favorite part is probably the waiting. Research takes a while because all the steps require significant input and time—getting the data, scheduling meetings, funding cycles, review cycles, publishing cycles. They are all necessary, but they require careful planning to make sure the information is still useful when the project is done.

Q: If you were not a researcher, what would you do for a living?

A: I've always wanted to be a roadie for a traveling Broadway musical. I'm not sure it would quite make a "living," especially for a family of four, but that would be exciting for a year or two. Alternatively, in college, my guidance counselor suggested after a series of tests that I should be a science teacher, scientist, or priest. So who knows?