Enhancing student learning with academic and student affairs collaboration

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As the student affairs profession developed, expanded, and specialized over the last century, a disconnect occurred between student affairs professionals and academics. Despite that separation, the literature on student affairs in higher education supports the need for movement towards collaboration and integration of academic affairs and student affairs—the curricular and the co-curricular. Making the collaboration successful, however, is not without its challenges. A review finds proven partnerships supporting collaboration, including first-year experience programs, learning communities, student life, and service learning. The article investigates how each partnership area contributes to the academic success of the community college student.

Introduction

During the early years of postsecondary education, student affairs work was accomplished by academic faculty and administrators (Colwell, 2006). However, as the student affairs profession developed, expanded, and specialized over the last century, a disconnect between it and academics appeared (Kezar, 2003). Despite the separation, the literature on student affairs in higher education (Bourassa & Kruger, 2001; Dale & Drake, 2005; Kezar, 2001; Martin & Samels, 2001) shows movement towards collaboration and integration of academic affairs and student affairs—the curricular

and the co-curricular. The major focus of the collaboration is to integrate the academic, experiential, and practical, then ultimately, retain students through to completion of their educational goals (Blake, 2007). Schuh (1999) aptly stated "the failure of colleges to establish links between students' out-of-classroom experiences and their academic endeavors has impeded not only students' overall personal development but also the quality of their academic experience" (p. 85).

Several obstacles to successful academic and student affairs partnerships include cultural distinctions in administration, faculty, and services staff; the historical separation between curricular and co-curricular instruction; the perceived second-class status of student affairs in relation to the academic mission; and differing views on student learning (Bourassa & Kruger, 2001). To overcome these barriers and increase student success, student affairs professionals, academic faculty, and administrators must develop collaborative partnerships that share values, goals, and a commitment to comprehensive and seamless educational environments.

Discussion

With its emphasis on blended learning experiences, "the community college sector is leading the way in the formation of strong, vibrant student and academic affairs partnerships as well as collaborative efforts with external constituencies in the development and advancement of educational outcomes" (Bourassa & Kruger, 2001, p. 15). These positive partnerships lead to several benefits. The institutional culture becomes one of shared mission and values (Colwell, 2006), student learning becomes more personal (Jacoby, 1999), the institution itself becomes more collegial and accountable for student learning outcomes (Kezar, 2001), and student success and student learning become the primary foci of the entire institution (Dale & Drake, 2005).

Collaborative academic and student affairs partnerships that effectively support student learning produce a variety of models with common and unique outcomes. Proven partnerships include first-year experience programs, learning communities, student life, and service learning (Bourassa & Kruger, 2001; Dale & Drake, 2005; Jacoby, 1999). But, what exactly do these partnerships look like? What are the essential ingredients? The following sections of the article will add practical examples and refine the proven partnerships so that college staff can make more

informed decisions about their relevance and application to the community college.

First-year experience programs

Nevitt Sanford initially introduced the first-year student education program nearly fifty years ago, arguing students needed to be challenged and supported to succeed in college (Upcraft, Gardner, Barefoot, & Associates, 2005). Prior to 1960, the attitude toward student success was one of sink-or-swim, but since then, "higher education has engaged in a massive social experiment of providing access to higher education that at its worst included anyone who could fog a mirror and had a demonstrable pulse" (Upcraft et al., 2005, pp. 1–2). Decades later, first-year students still are more likely to fail, or be low achievers, than any other student group (Keup, 2006; Swing & Skipper, 2007).

First-year experience (FYE) programs were developed to address the lack of academic success of students in the first year of college (Crissman Ishler & Upcraft, 2005; Hunter & Murray, 2007; Keup, 2006). However, it was not until the 1980s that a concerted effort was made to involve all institutional stakeholders and tie specific initiatives to the retention of first-year college students (Barefoot, 2005; Upcraft et al., 2005). The initiatives include orientations, first-year seminars, and supplemental instruction (Rhodes & Carifio, 1999).

Orientation programs

Offered by over 95% of American colleges and universities, orientation serves as a primary foundational component of FYE programs (Barefoot, 2005; Crissman Ishler & Upcraft, 2005), allowing new students to make critical connections to a variety of institutional offerings from academic to student support services. In addition, focusing orientation design on the changing community college demographics and including more academic activities—testing, advising, and scheduling—ensure quality delivery to students (Barefoot, 2005; Benjamin, Earnest, Gruenewald, & Arthur, 2007).

First-year seminars

As part of American higher education for over a hundred years, first-year seminars are one of the most researched environmental influences affecting new students (Crissman Ishler & Upcraft, 2005). The first-year seminar, offered by over 60% of community colleges, is the most commonly used curricular initiative directed at new students (Barefoot, 2005). Regardless of the seminar topic—

study skills, time management, or critical thinking—the goal is to provide students with the skills to navigate successfully the higher education system (Hunter & Linder, 2005; Siegel, 2005).

Supplemental instruction

Also known as peer mentoring or peer-assisted study, supplemental instruction "is a validated initiative that targets traditionally difficult introductory classes—those with high failure or withdrawal rates" (Hunter & Murray, 2007, p. 33). Such a program—used in higher education for over 25 years (Martin & Hurley, 2005)—is found at over 30% of community colleges (Barefoot, 2005). By thinking in terms of high-risk courses versus high-risk students, supplemental instruction helps most students succeed without individually identifying those most in need of assistance. Furthermore, because the efforts often are ad hoc—where faculty and advisors identify and team around paired classes or a specific gateway course—the need to develop a formal program or budget line is not a hindrance to action.

An FYE program in action

Academic Peer Instruction (API)—LaGuardia Community College's proven supplemental instruction program—began in 1993. *Four Pillars* serves as the foundation of this successful collaboration between academic and student affairs:

- supervisors—leadership, oversight, and support for the other three pillars;

- student leaders—the critical processes for hiring and training instructional leaders;

- faculty—well-versed on and supportive of the program; and

- college administration—necessary for overall institutional support and funding for the program (Zaritsky & Toce, 2006).

From the LaGuardia Community College (2010) website, it is easy to see the positive effect on community college student success for those participating in the program. Between 1993 and 2008, API served nearly 8,500 students in 706 classes with an average annual grade differential of 1.02—one letter grade higher than those students not participating.

Learning communities

One of the earliest learning communities was established by Alexander Meiklejohn at the University of Wisconsin in 1927, integrating general education and the first two years of undergraduate studies into a single

curricular program (Gabelnick, MacGregor, Matthews, & Smith, 1990; Meiklejohn, 1932; Shapiro & Levine, 1999). Due to controversy and a declining economy, the University of Wisconsin Experimental College closed in 1931 (Smith, MacGregor, Matthews, & Gabelnick, 2004). The concept of learning communities lay dormant until the 1960s and 1970s when universities and community colleges expanded rapidly, and innovations in education were widespread (O'Banion, 1997; Smith et al., 2004). Meiklejohn's curricular structure and John Dewey's theories of teaching were the foundations for the new learning communities (Shapiro & Levine, 1999).

The goal of learning communities is to provide students with curriculum that is connected and relevant, allowing intellectual interaction with faculty and fellow students, and typically involving the restructuring of student time, credit, and learning experiences (Gabelnick et al., 1990). Researchers (Levine & Shapiro, 2000; Smith et al., 2004) have identified three models of student learning communities: subgroups within unmodified courses, linked or clustered courses, and team-taught learning communities.

Subgroups within unmodified courses

Two or three courses, taught without modification, become learning communities when subgroups of students in them enroll in an additional course focused on making connections between the courses. As the simplest and most efficient form of learning communities, models of this type include freshman interest groups and federated learning communities (Shapiro & Levine, 1999; Smith et al., 2004).

Linked or clustered courses

Linked courses consist of two discrete courses, typically a combination of skills-based and content-based courses, in which a small number of students enroll as a cohort (Lenning & Ebbers, 1999; Smith et al., 2004). Clustered courses, an expanded form of linked ones, consist of three or more discrete courses which may be common freshman or sophomore level classes with large and small enrollments (Smith et al., 2004). Students enroll by choice as part of the cohort, and the learning community courses often make up most of the course load for the term (Lenning & Ebbers, 1999).

Team-taught learning communities

Team-taught learning communi-

ties are the most complex because the model completely integrates two or more courses around a theme, using a single syllabus and extended class time (Shapiro & Levine, 1999). Referred to as coordinated or integrated studies programs, students register for the program rather than individual courses. In addition to the class sessions, students attend seminars to delve more deeply into textbooks or additional readings (Smith et al., 2004). Faculty teaching in a team-taught learning community requires an exceptional commitment to collaboration, team teaching, and providing an intellectually stimulating experience for students (Shapiro & Levine, 1999).

A learning community in action

Lane Community College in Eugene, Oregon, offers several learning communities in which students take common courses as members of a cohort. These linked or clustered courses may be centered on a theme, such as politics and the environment, or a career goal such as health occupations. Learning communities at Lane have also grown to include cohorts for first-year student athletes and women in transition (McGrail, 2010). Students have responded positively to the linked courses and additional support, indicating the learning

community helped them connect with other students (3.27 on a 4.0 scale) and inspired them to learn (3.18 on a 4.0 scale) (Lane Community College, 2009). Overall, 88% of learning community students would recommend a learning community experience to other new college students (Lane Community College, 2009).

Student life

Increasing student engagement in *and* out of the classroom, *student life* has long been shown to foster more effective student learning (Nesheim et al., 2007; Schroeder, 1999); but only recently has research focused on how effective partnership programs between student and academic affairs enhance student learning at community colleges. "A whole new mindset is needed to capitalize on the interrelatedness of the in-and-out-of-class influences on student learning and the functional interconnectedness of academic and student affairs" (Terenzini and Pascarelli, 1994, as cited in Nesheim et al., 2007, p. 32).

Both the 2009 Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE) and the Survey of Entering Student Engagement (SENSE) emphasized the importance of engaging students within the first semester. Successfully completing the first semester improves student retention and

attainment of personal and academic goals such as graduation and employment. But retention is only a part of the solution. Improving student success requires effective collaboration between student affairs and academic faculty so that students "feel engaged, supported and challenged by their courses" (Bueschel, 2009, p. 5). Partnership programs allow for enhanced interaction between students and faculty (Nesheim et al., 2007). Three areas address the importance of student life and, in turn, facilitate student learning and retention: campus involvement, academic engagement, and interactions with faculty and other students.

Campus involvement

Programs providing curricular and non-curricular opportunities create a "seamless learning environment and foster student engagement" (Nesheim et al., 2007, p. 437). Cornell and Mosley (2006) noted that successful programs build relationships with the community, while Schroeder (1999) noted that campus involvement "fostered higher levels of educational attainment for students in historically underrepresented groups" (p. 13).

Academic engagement

High-impact learning has been championed as a best practice

for educators seeking to improve student engagement (Kuh, 2008; Schroeder, 1999). Students receiving frequent feedback from an instructor or advisor develop new ways of thinking. Internships, field study, and learning opportunities that respond to the learning styles of new students (Schroeder, 1999) all promote engagement that increases the odds students will connect with the learning environment (Kuh, 2008).

Interactions with faculty and other students

When academics and student services work to influence how students learn, rather than focusing only on what they learn, the result can be powerful and long lasting (Nesheim et al., 2007). Access to instructors increases student confidence and the likelihood students will receive the necessary advising so essential to maintaining their access to campus services and assistance. Peer support also increases when assigned collaborative projects encourage contact with other students outside the classroom (Upcraft et al., 2005).

Student life in action

Research shows that student life programs are active on community college campuses across the country, but three programs in

particular exhibit great promise for benchmarking. Community colleges as diverse as Delgado Community College (2010) in Louisiana, Erie Community College (2010) in New York, and Edmonds Community College (2010) in Washington, understand the connection between academic success and student engagement. Student Life Centers have opened on these campuses, providing opportunities to expand classroom learning by linking students with co-curricular activities, leadership programs, lectures, and support services—all geared to encourage students to stay involved, engage with peers, and discover new ways to define learning.

Service learning

The concept of civic engagement and community service has a long history in higher education (Hutchison, 2005). In the early 1900s, John Dewey and Jane Addams recognized that civic responsibility and community involvement were necessary parts of a true democracy (Longo, 1974). In the early 1960s, civic engagement and community service became more broadly recognized as service learning. According to the National Service Learning Clearinghouse (2009), there are many different interpretations of service learning as well as varying objectives and contexts. However, a core concept within multiple interpretations is that service learning combines service objectives with learning objectives, changing both the recipient and the provider of the service (Hutchison, 2001; Weglarz & Seybert, 2004). Service learning is accomplished by combining service tasks with structured opportunities, linking the task to self-reflection, self-discovery, and the acquisition and comprehension of values, skills, and knowledge content (National Service Learning Clearinghouse, 2009).

Service learning is the collaboration between organizations, students, and faculty members. Community-based organizations, service organizations, and private businesses partner with educational institutions and individual faculty members to develop an educational curriculum for the student. Faculty have the responsibility to construct a meaningful educational experience and provide students with ample opportunity for critical thinking and reflection through discussion and writing (Eyler & Giles, 1999; Moser & Rogers, 2005).

Critical thinking and reflection are key learning requirements of service learning. Learning in a broader context provides students with the opportunity to use developing skills and knowl-

edge in real life situations and promotes a sense of community awareness that leads to better citizenship and an enhanced awareness of civic responsibility (Cohen & Brawer, 2008; Hutchinson, 2001).

Service learning promotes greater academic learning and social justice awareness (Prentice, 2007). Participation in service learning also leads to better retention and graduation rates. In a study performed by Brevard Community College in Florida, students participating in service learning programs had higher graduation rates than those not participating (Robinson, 2007; Moser & Rogers, 2005). On campuses where students actively participate in the organization and promotion of service learning, the program flourishes (Schneider, 1998).

Service learning in action

Service learning has a substantial presence in community colleges across the nation. According to Prentice (2001), participation in such programs at community colleges increased from 31% in 1995 to nearly 50% in 2000. By 2010, the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) found over 60% of community colleges have some level of service learning in the curriculum, and an additional 30% are interested in exploring service learning opportunities. The AACC is an avid supporter of service learning initiatives and—in partnership with the Corporation for National and Community Service and its Learn and Serve America program—established the Community Colleges Broadening Horizons through Service Learning initiative. Every three years since 1994, community colleges across the nation have competed through a grant process for funding to initiate service learning activities on their campuses. Currently, 47 colleges have participated in the initiative and successfully implemented service learning opportunities (AACC, 2010a, 2010b).

Conclusions

Isolation and fragmentation, resulting from rapid growth in higher education during the last half-century, are the greatest threats to successful student learning. "Specialization often results in what is popularly described as functional silos or mine shafts...which effectively curtails communication and collaboration between areas" (Schroeder, 1999, p. 9). There are also cultural differences between student affairs professionals and academics that inhibit partnerships. According to Love and Estanek (2004), faculty tend to focus on the classroom, collegiality, reflection, and self-governance;

whereas student affairs professionals value teamwork and activity over reflection. Getting both areas to recognize the commonalities and benefits of their respective priorities continues to be a challenge for these groups as well as the administrators who lead integration efforts between the two. Effective integration occurs when academic and student affairs professionals articulate a shared vision and identify outcomes that can result from collaborative implementation (Schroeder, 1999).

While the above programs can happen through inspiration from faculty or services staff, the efforts to reduce and eliminate silos, thus creating a common purpose, require additional effort beyond the program and student outcomes. Administrators and supervisors need to develop a common vocabulary, achieve strong majority buy-in for integration, and do so through various small opportunities to bring faculty and staff together in productive activities beyond "programming" and classroom models referenced above.

An adviser speakers bureau available to classrooms; collaborations in e-advising or online success communities; ongoing classroom partnerships that mix course content with advising on career, society, and post-graduation connections; attack-

ing campus problems through connecting faculty, library staff, counselors, veterans services staff (and any other diverse grouping) around the same table to work on a problem not connected with a program or academic grouping are also extremely important to achieving a cultural shift toward integrated learning.

Some colleges, like West Shore Community College in Michigan, are in discussions to re-imagine faculty advising, including it as part of a full-time load and structuring the work through scheduled hours in the student services area, especially during peak enrollment periods. It will not be easy or automatic since contract language, the contemporary role of faculty, and already busy schedules are major hurdles to consider. By reintroducing faculty to the services area, though, and doing the same for services staff in instruction, administrators can promote integration of purpose, work, and schedules to move effectively toward cultural integration.

Even as some colleges have enjoyed success with learning communities, and others with one of the other three programs discussed, community colleges clearly offer the right ingredients to combine into integrated programs. While personalities and specializations will produce

unique strengths and variations, the research is nearly unanimous in the benefits achieved through linking formal instruction with success strategies, career and life focus, experiential application, and the act of "giving back" through service opportunities. Furthermore, students benefit from participating in the active dialogue that happens between instructional and service "learning cultures" in the classroom. The benefits of the programs were less certain prior to the advent of learning organization concepts. Now, over twenty years later, we can truly celebrate the rooting of such enhanced learning opportunities into the community college landscape.

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