



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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Strategic Integration of Student Support Services

Every campus has a multitude of programs that support the success of students with various skills and interests. When examining how to achieve student success in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is important to consider how to integrate these student support services with instruction. This integration must be done while keeping in mind the definition of developmental education: “The integration of courses and support services guided by the principles of adult development and learning” (Saddlemire, 1976, Boylan, 1999, Boylan and Bonham, 2014). Through this integration, students can be offered the most effective path forward for their development into successful college students.

Achieving Strategic Integration

An important point to keep in mind when considering how to achieve strategic integration of student support services is that every college is different. Each higher education institution has its own culture, practices, and traditions. When considering various methods of achieving strategic integration, it is important to understand the historical context of these services on a given campus, as well as how to improve the current campus culture to increase student success, retention, and persistence rates.

Understanding the campus mission statement is paramount to fulfilling it. The same can be said for the campus vision statement, goals, and initiatives as they are laid out in the college’s strategic plan. It is crucial that the guiding principles in these documents are closely followed. By fully understanding these documents and their intent, a strategy can be developed that adheres to the college vision for students in the classroom and for staff engaged in and serving on committees.

Creating Collaborative Relationships

One way to achieve strategic integration is to build bridges between “the two houses” that make up every campus: Academic and student services. Historically, these two entities have not communicated well, if at all. A good place to start creating collaborations is in programs where there is a history of cooperation or a willingness to work together on curricular or other changes. Retention strategies developed jointly by academic and student affairs result in more comprehensive and effective retention programs (Stodt and Klepper, 1987). While the institutional interest is to increase the proportion of students who graduate, the students’ interest is to

complete a degree, often without regard to the college or university in which it is earned (Tinto, 2017). Retrospective reports from alumni consistently reveal that their most significant and memorable learning experiences occurred outside the classroom (Marchese, 1990; Murphy, 1986). With this in mind, a priority should be put on the factors that enhance the total college experience. These elements include course options, micro-credentialing and degree opportunities, and vocational learning choices.

Build Campus Community

Building campus community is more important today than ever before in the history of higher education. Campuses are more diverse, with students from a variety of backgrounds making up campus populations. This necessitates the need for considering new, innovative ways to make the cogs in the campus machine work. COVID-19 taught college administrators, faculty, and staff many lessons about the importance of campus connections being seamless. One way to achieve this sense of connectivity is by embracing the changes that will carry the campus culture into the latter half of the century. Bridging the historical, persistent gap between academic and student affairs will build campus community and help underrepresented students find their niche on campus. This niche may be a campus organization, a co-curricular course, the Student Government Association, or an intramural team, and is an important facet in the total campus experience. Academic affairs and student affairs need to realize their respective educational objectives (American College Personnel Association, 1994). If the goal is to educate the whole person, then student affairs will exist to support academic affairs’ institutional mission.

Students supporting other students is a necessity in building campus community. One method to achieve this is by encouraging learning communities, as well as the creation of study groups. Learning communities, the concept and the phrase, have been around in one form or another for many years. Learning communities are academic groups similar to study groups that connect students with peers, making the curriculum more coherent and relevant to students’ needs. These learning groups must be more than clusters of linked classes; the involved faculty members must work together to create an integrated educational experience, collaborating on learning outcomes, content, readings, assignments, and assessments. Learning communities are especially important for first-generation and nontraditional students. These students may believe in a pull-yourself-

up-by-the-bootstraps, I-can-do-it-myself mindset, but for many such students, that is a recipe for failure.

While 2021 might seem a little late to discuss what learning communities are, they are present on different campuses in many different forms. Learning communities have moved into the mainstream in the last decade. Colleges and universities are facing intensifying pressure to ensure that as many students as possible fully succeed, and to shrink if not eliminate gaps in attainment by different racial and socioeconomic groups. Learning community interactions can offer students additional support outside of the traditional or digital classroom (Lederman, 2020).

Finding Campus Champions

By identifying campus champions who support change, progress in building connectivity between campus units can move in the right direction by providing stakeholders a say in the change process. This role will help gain stakeholder buy-in for new, innovative programs. This type of thinking can be useful as the current campus plans and initiatives are reviewed for improvement. Building bridges between all stakeholders – staff members, faculty, administration, and students – is a key component in facilitating campuswide changes. When organizing informational meetings, include student support services staff, students, and faculty in formal and informal governance councils. Select team members who support the goals you have in mind. Think about whose approval you will need to make certain changes and involve them in the process. To assist in locating and embracing new campus champions, it is essential that information about the proposed innovations be clearly communicated to the entire campus community. The easiest way for a great idea to die is if it does not gain traction with campus groups because the information was not shared equally with all possible stakeholders for additional input.

Embrace the “New Normal”

The biggest challenge to success in integrating academic and student affairs is the tendency to avoid change. Part of embracing higher education’s “new normal” will be taking successful parts of past programs and integrating them with new campus initiatives and programs to support student success. Communication on a regular basis with students is an important component of this process. Use the changes brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic for positive transformation. Schedule Zoom sessions for extra student support. Make the most of the campus technology available to faculty and students. Hold synchronous and asynchronous class meetings through Zoom or Teams, digitize forms, and go green by making fewer copies. Use Open Educational Resources to lower costs for students and ensure that all students have equal access to course materials.

A New Direction

Emerging Trends

By following the emerging trends in higher education, college administrators can keep up with the latest innovations. Though not all revisions will work on their campus, some help produce higher student success and retention numbers in a variety of course formats. Many of the changes caused by the pandemic have led to changes that are curricular and procedural on campus. This can be as simple as using new software for student forms or using email, rather than paper copies, to share files. An important trend that goes along with many campus diversity and inclusion initiatives is an increased response to globalization. In the post-pandemic world, more and more schools are continuing the trend of creating a Diversity and Inclusion Office. This trend can be seen in community colleges and universities.

Change Evolves

Success spreads as it becomes institutionalized and grows as strategic integration is incorporated. Cohesive programs in action can aid in this process. Integration of academic and student affairs might include first-year experience programs, learning communities, student life, and service learning (Bourassa and Kruger, 2001; Dale and Drake, 2005; Jacoby, 1999). Other forms of integration might include one-stop centers that house advising and career counseling, and learning centers that offer tutoring and study skill programs.

Get Stakeholder Buy-In

Stakeholder buy-in is necessary for any change to succeed. Change must start at the top. By getting buy-in from primary, secondary, and tertiary stakeholders, the approval process for creating new programs becomes easier. It is vital to show each group the benefit to making these campus cultural changes. The process to design, pilot, and implement change will go more smoothly with administrative support.

Review should be done on a regular basis, especially when creating and implementing new curriculum changes. Involve others in the review process. This can lead to a second or third round of stakeholder suggestions based on the current concept for change.

Integration Across the Curriculum

It is important to understand how strategic integration can be used in many areas around campus. Some examples include:

- A math instructor invites a career planning adviser to address the class and then discusses the types of math problems involved in various jobs.

- A writing instructor invites a financial aid officer into class to discuss the financial aid process and then has students write instructions on how to obtain financial aid.
- A writing instructor asks students to see an academic adviser and then write a report about the visit.
- Students in an integrated reading and writing class read the college mission statement and then write an example of how they have experienced the college's mission.
- Students are required to visit the campus learning center and use its resources to complete an assignment.
- A math instructor invites a learning specialist into class to talk with students about how math study skills differ from other study skills.

How Integrated Programs Work

Student success centers can house academic and career counseling, leadership development programs, and student organizations. Many states have been charged with designing developmental education courses in a way that move students into credit-bearing courses more quickly in hopes of increasing overall graduation rates. These include co-requisite courses in reading, English, and math. The delivery models that seem to afford the most success are those that combine traditional and innovative approaches to instruction. Integrating student support services with curriculum is a vital component of Strategic Integration. One should create an environment where faculty and staff are encouraged to enter into a dialogue with students. The needs of students vary greatly, so no one delivery method will fit all needs.

Every institution, campus, and program is unique and has different needs. Keep this in mind. A hungry student may have issues retaining information. Start a campus food bank to support food-insecure students. A cold student may get sick and miss class or may not have the clothes they need for a job interview to support their family to be able to continue attending class. Create a campus clothes bank to support students in these situations. Start a campus fund to support student emergencies, such as repairing a flat tire. Contact local services and coordinate community services to support all students. Different students need help in varied ways.

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