

THE NISOD PAPERS



An occasional publication dedicated to topics of interest to community and technical college educators.

Silos to Bridges: Creating Avenues for Collaboration

A growing body of research supports the idea that when student development and academic affairs units collaborate retention rates increase and students graduate at higher rates (Martin & Samels, 2001). This can be seen when student affairs counselors and advisers engage and partner with their academic counterparts (Coll & Stewart, 2008). At the same time, although they are trained in their academic disciplines, faculty members need assistance helping their students face non-academic challenges. As students bring their total selves (i.e., social, emotional, relational, physical, vocational, and financial) into the classroom, institutions must address those challenges in a holistic manner by drawing on the expertise of student development staff and faculty members.

Despite this combined knowledge, silos of responsibilities are common at many colleges. Often, staff members in silos (i.e., offices, units, departments) view their operations as self-sufficient and independent of the other units, even those located in close physical proximity. For example, a Department of Residence Life might function independently and without any purposeful collaborations with academic colleagues who serve the same students at the same institution. Rather than constructing or ignoring the silos that predominate in higher education, we can build bridges that encourage “collisions”—collegial collaborations that connect our students with resources that increase their chances of success. These collisions can lead to strong collaborative and emotional support that enhance academic success, school-life integration, and campus engagement (Rivard, 2014).

This article provides an overview of one practical initiative the authors implemented to build bridges for collaboration between student affairs and faculty members.

The Basic Framework

Our collaborative project began with the premise that students bring academic and non-academic issues to the classroom. In the authors’ experience, faculty often needed assistance connecting students with appropriate non-academic interventions.

Rather than just lecture faculty, counselors, and advisers about available resources, the authors created the interactive and introspective “Classroom Challenges Recognition” (CCR) initiative. Over the course of two semesters (Fall 2014 and Spring 2015), there were five one-hour long workshops for

counselors, advisers, and liberal arts faculty on their campus.

Prior to the first CCR workshop, people began hearing about the upcoming events through emails, meeting announcements, and word of mouth. With the support and promotion from the two deans and the campus president, people saw that CCR was important, not only in words, but in action. The deans, and occasionally the campus president, participated in the workshops.

Workshop Objectives and Process for Each Workshop

- Presented and discussed difficult academic and non-academic classroom situations;
- Promoted collaborative brainstorming about solutions, questions, and challenges facing faculty, advisers, and students; and
- Shared appropriate procedures and strategies for referring students to counselors, advisers, tutors, peer mentors, deans, or other useful points of contact.

At least one faculty member and one student affairs professional shared the lead role at each workshop, which modeled an authentic camaraderie and effective way to build bridges.

Scenario-Based Training

Scenario-based training with well-crafted scenarios provided an effective opportunity to explore, question, share, and learn about faculty issues and interventional resources.

Each workshop consisted of three or four scenarios based on actual student crises on campus. The scenarios were intentionally brief, usually a single short paragraph. Counselors and faculty chose the topics, which covered academic and non-academic challenges, and crafted the wording. Each workshop participant received a typed copy of the scenarios. They collaborated in small groups, which consisted of student affairs staff, faculty, and administrators, and shared what they would do in each situation. Animated conversations always followed the small group discussions. Afterwards, student affairs staff provided a wrap-up by sharing appropriate responses and resources.

Scenario Example

One scenario that engendered a great deal of conversation addressed domestic violence. Here is the wording used in the workshop.

A young female student enters the classroom late. She appears to

have several bruises on her face and wrists. She also appears to be quietly crying. The other students continuously glance at her while you are teaching. The student does not speak a word. She waits until the room is empty at the end of the class and approaches you.

What would you do?

Comments About Scenario Analysis

Issues such as domestic violence served as lessons about the topic at hand and teaching opportunities concerning interventional strategies. During the process, student affairs staff saw and heard what faculty experienced. Faculty gained a better understanding of what to do, what not do, and what resources were available.

Most faculty do not have the background or training to deal with such non-academic/personal issues. The domestic violence workshop scenario conversation helped shed light on how good intentions, executed poorly, could have grave consequences for students. Without such conversations, how do faculty learn about campus and community resources? How do they learn about appropriate intervention procedures?

Each scenario took about 15 to 20 minutes from introduction to conclusion. After the conclusion of the workshops, animated and collegial conversations continued.

Where to Go From Here

The first step in achieving collaboration is to examine your institutional culture. If silos do exist, what steps do you need to take to replace them with bridges? Be careful to avoid the finger-pointing game; even if you point at the correct entity, what good does that do? If it gets a conversation started, great. If all it does is remove a reason for action, you need to dig deeper.

Ask campus leaders to join in the partnership in a concerted effort to tear down silos. Then, allow the discussions to percolate. Explore the issues students face on your campus. From there, formulate collaborative engagements between units, which will lead to sturdy bridges where silos were once the norm. Always maintain focus on what your colleagues and students need to do to enhance student success.

When the authors started CCR, they created what their colleagues needed, and it worked. During the two semesters of the project, the campus took positive steps toward developing harmonious interdepartmental conversations.

Collaboration is a joint effort that involves listening, sharing, questioning, brainstorming, planning, and implementation. When key players from academic affairs and student development come together at a collaborative program's inception, they can develop clearly shared objectives. Determining distinct outcomes early in such collaborations helps reduce power struggles that may point to silo-based thinking.

Silos do not deconstruct on their own. Collaborative relationships require cross-departmental leadership. Although essential, it is insufficient when faculty ask to partner with student affairs if the respective deans and department heads do not support these efforts. Student affairs staff will not be able to establish joint

efforts with faculty when student affairs leaders are not supportive. For silos to come down, leaders must respond to calls for constructive collaboration as a way to increase the power of a teaching and learning community.

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