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Collaborating for Professional Development

Jillian A. Martin

Collaborations in higher education often focus on creating opportunities to promote student learning and development (Brower & Inkelas, 2010; Jacoby, 1999; Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt, & Associates, 2010). While student learning is the chief concern of institutions of higher education, institutional leaders should also focus on the professional development of personnel, namely faculty and student affairs administrators, who are responsible for student learning in the classroom and co-curriculum. Institutional leaders can use professional development to transform the historically insular work of academic and student affairs into a collaborative enterprise.

In promoting a holistic learning-centered environment, there should be collaborative opportunities for academic and student affairs professionals to learn within institutions of higher education (Brower & Inkelas, 2007; Cueso, n.d.; Hureska, 2013). This learning will not only bridge the cultural and knowledge gap between academic and student affairs, but will also promote organizational learning and development for the institution (Cueso, n.d.; Kezar, 2005; Milam, 2005). Traditionally, this learning occurs through professional socialization and development that is often separate for academic and student affairs professionals.

Historically, professional development in academic affairs focused on knowledge generation and dissemination within particular academic disciplines (Cueso, n.d.; Gaff & Simpson, 1994; Lieberman, 2005). The lack of faculty community, as well as the need for increased student learning and retention on campuses, resulted in the creation of centers for teaching and learning at institutions around the country (Lieberman, 2005). The structure and programs of these centers may differ, but they serve many purposes for the professional development of faculty: to introduce faculty to new pedagogies, teach them about innovations in technology, help them understand their role in facilitating student learning, and help them understand student learning in the context of university life (Lieberman, 2005; Pchenitchnaia, 2007). Some institutions may not have a designated center, but may have designated staff or faculty members who are committed to promoting faculty development on their campus (McKee, Johnson, Ritchie, & Tew, 2013).

Professional development in student affairs evolved from the first gatherings of deans of men and women (Bresciani et al., 2010; Gerda, 2006).

Jillian A. Martin, Doctoral Student in the College Student Affairs Administration Ph.D. Program & Doctoral Intern for Assessment with the Department of University Housing, University of Georgia

These first gatherings served both as a means to create a shared understanding of the burgeoning student affairs field (then called student personnel work) and to communicate student affairs work in different institutional contexts (Bresciani et al., 2010; Gerda, 2006). However, professional development has not had the universal enactment as espoused, relying mostly on the individual to take personal responsibility for seeking out opportunities (Janosik, Carpenter, & Creamer, 2006). Professional development in student affairs focuses on general topics within the field or specialized topics related to functional areas (Schwartz & Bryan, 1998). In addition to encouraging knowledge sharing and dissemination, professional development in student affairs encourages the use of this knowledge to develop a professional identity and directly inform student affairs practice (Carpenter, 2003; Schwartz & Bryan, 1998). When collaboration is part of professional development efforts, there is a focus on the formation of academic and student affairs partnerships to create out-of-class engagement opportunities that complement the in-class student experience (Borrego, Forrest & Fried, 2006; Carpenter, 2003; Cueso, n.d.; Schwartz & Bryan, 1998).

By providing joint professional development for academic and student affairs professionals, institutional leaders can bring holistic and intentional coordination to institutional efforts. In this article, I provide a framework for developing collaboration for professional development between academic and student service units that work on campus to promote better teaching and learning. This collaboration can fill a void of professional development for academic and student affairs, promote knowledge sharing between academic and student affairs units, and provide a foundation for collaborative work in creating learning-centered environments that promote student success and holistic development.

Fostering a Collaborative Environment

Traditionally, academic and student affairs units function in organizational silos resulting in duplication of efforts, inefficient resource use, and failure to integrate students' learning environment (Kezar & Lester, 2009; Kuh, 1996). Inherent in each unit are subtle differences that result in cultural barriers or cultural knowledge deficiencies that could work against collaboration (Cueso, n.d.; Kezar & Lester, 2009). Institutional leaders and professionals engaged in collaborative work should be aware of these barriers and deficiencies and use collaboration as a means to diminish the historical insular work of academic and student affairs.

Chief in creating collaboration for professional development between academic and student affairs is the buy-in from unit leaders to foster a collaborative environment (Kezar & Lester, 2009). Institutional leaders should champion the creation of a collaborative working group made up of faculty development specialists, student affairs professionals, and faculty to assess the professional development needs for academic and student affairs professionals. From this collaborative working group, academic and student affairs would share the responsibility for identifying knowledge deficiencies, creating a curriculum for professional development and developing outcomes for the participants and the program.

Creating Buy-in and Collaboration Champions

Academic and student affairs professionals who want to create the collaboration should seek the support of their direct supervisors and unit leaders in this collaboration. This support has a dual role: creating leadership buy-in for the collaboration and creating champions for the collaboration who have leadership and political power (Kezar & Lester, 2009). Institutional leaders can provide insight to the creation of the collaboration, appropriate delivery methods for professional development collaborations, and possible topics for professional development. In

addition, these leaders can use their informal and formal networks to champion this opportunity across campus. Academic and student affairs professionals creating this collaboration should use this step in the collaborative process to ensure they have a good understanding of the political and cultural climate of the campus, particularly that of their respective unit leaders (Kezar & Lester, 2009). This understanding should be used to frame initial conversations with institutional leaders about creating a collaboration for professional development for academic and student affairs. In addition, there should be a direct link between the mission, vision, strategic plan, and educational philosophy of the respective units for this type of collaboration to work. Furthermore, institutions should create a language around the collaboration and further buy-in for the units involved (Kezar & Lester, 2009).

Determining the Foundation for Collaboration

After creating the initial buy-in and identifying campus champions for this collaboration, academic and student affairs professionals seeking to create a joint professional development program should continue to engage in conversation with campus personnel about the needs that a joint professional development curriculum could serve. With an understanding of the cultural climate at the institution, the professionals looking to engage in this collaboration should determine the appropriate political channels to discuss the professional needs of the campus informally. In setting, the foundation for the collaboration, professionals looking to create this opportunity should work on creating connecting points for professional development between academic and student affairs (Kezar & Lester, 2009). These connecting points should emerge from the similarities and differences of the professional development needs for academic and student affairs professionals. By soliciting the support and buy-in of institutional leaders, fostering champions for the professional development, and determining the foundation for

collaboration, professionals foster the sense of collaboration and the need for professional development collaboration on their campus. Following this process, professionals should begin to work formally to institute a joint professional development curriculum for academic and student affairs professionals.

Determining the Professional Development Curriculum

After fostering the collaborative environment, professionals should work to form a collaborative working group made up of faculty development specialists, student affairs professionals, and other professional development and training staff to determine a joint professional development curriculum. From this collaborative working group, academic and student affairs would share the responsibility for identifying knowledge deficiencies, creating a curriculum for professional development and developing outcomes for the participants and the program.

Formal Needs Assessment

The first task of the collaborative working group is to identify the shared professional development needs for faculty and student affairs professionals through a formal needs assessment. The working group should use existing knowledge, such as mission and vision statements, institutional values, educational purpose, institutional research data, annual reporting and strategic planning documents, and assessment and accreditation information to identify institutional knowledge deficiencies (Kezar & Lester, 2009; Milam, 2005). These knowledge deficiencies would inform the creation of a formal needs assessment that addresses professional and organizational learning needs that a professional development curriculum could address.

For example, nationally, there are efforts to create more intentional campus response to sexual assault (White House Task Force to Protect Students From Sexual Assault, 2014). As a

result, many institutions are examining their own campus policies on sexual assault and how they can do a better job of responding. This is an incredible opportunity for the creation of joint professional development sessions that focus on educating academic and student affairs professionals about sexual assault, campus expectations for response, and the individual's responsibilities in reporting sexual assault. There is also an opportunity for campuses to identify those within the campus' social network who can provide additional perspectives about this content area or in identifying off-campus facilitators if needed.

After completing the formal needs assessment, the collaborative working group should use the results of the formal needs assessment to determine the topic areas and delivery methods of a professional development curriculum. In the previous example, the topic area was based on a national context but other examples of topic areas may be in the state/local context (e.g., impact of state's defunding of higher education) or in the institutional context (e.g., general education curriculum changes). In any of these contexts, the collaborative working group can deliver material that meets the professional development needs of academic and student affairs professionals. When coordinating the sessions, it is just as important to attend to the delivery methods for the professional development curriculum as it is to determine the topic for the sessions. This premise supports how adults learn. Merriam and Bierema (2013) offered three primary tenets of transformative adult learning: self-directed learning, critical reflection, and learning through experience. Since professional development is a form of adult learning, the collaborative working group should consider these tenets in the creation of delivery methods for the professional development curriculum (Cranton, 1996).

Determining Outcomes & Assessment Strategies

The final step in creating the professional development curriculum is determining the outcomes and assessment strategies for the collaboration. Outcome development and assessment are essential to demonstrating the effectiveness of curriculum, programs, and services for students (Banta & Kuh, 1998; Brower & Inkelas, 2007; Keeling, 2004). Developing outcomes for faculty, student affairs staff, and institutions as well as assessing those outcomes are important considerations for developing professional development collaboration between academic and student affairs (Brower & Inkelas, 2007). Similar to the approaches in developing the collaborative team and content area, academic and student affairs approach assessment differently based on their culture and needs (Banta & Kuh, 1998). The collaborative working group in consultation with institutional leaders should first identify what they want professionals to learn from participating in the professional development sessions and how that learning can be operationalized (Bonfiglio, Hanson Short, Fried, Roberts, & Skinner, 2006; Brower & Inkelas, 2007). How learning is operationalized determines the assessment strategies of the outcomes. For example, an outcome for a professional development session on campus response to sexual assault could focus on articulating a campus response and the role of campus responders. The collaborative working group should also consider how the professional development sessions contribute to the overall institutional environment of the campus. In essence, the creation of institutional outcomes based on the collaboration is operationalized and provides the context for why the collaboration is successful (Brower & Inkelas, 2007).

Using assessment strategies, the collaborative working group should determine the evolution of the program based on the needs of the academic and student affairs professionals engaged in the professional development curriculum. The collaborative working group can

increase the frequency and reach of the program to academic and student affairs professionals by treating this collaboration as a pilot program.

Conclusion

Professional development for academic and student affairs can occur within an institutional setting and, in turn, promote knowledge sharing. Professional development for academic and student affairs include the common purpose of creating student-centered learning environments (Cueso, n.d.; Lieberman, 2005; Schwartz & Bryan, 1998). Furthermore, this development can occur through formal opportunities and informal networks that help to provide a holistic view of the professional (Cranton, 1996; Fenwick, 2008; Kezar & Lester, 2009). However, inherent in academic and student affairs units are subtle differences that result in cultural barriers or cultural knowledge deficiencies that could work against collaboration (Cueso, n.d; Kezar & Lester, 2009). The topics and delivery methods of professional development opportunities may differ based on the varying interests, needs, and schedules of faculty and student affairs professionals. Finding connecting points on campuses where there is already a lack of collaboration may be difficult at the first juncture. These challenges are not insurmountable but provide an excellent area of collaboration for academic and student affairs. Joint professional development for academic and student affairs is an overlooked opportunity for collaboration in higher education. By learning together, institutions can advance institutional priorities and create holistic learning-centered environments for the entire university community.

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