*One Size Does Not Fit All Evaluation* – Summary

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With the increased emphasis on student engagement, success, and retention, researchers and institutional staff have been turning a more critical eye to the organizational structure and collaboration across divisions in higher education. We are at a pivotal point of time where research is beginning to take the shape of real change on campuses across the country. For example, many years of collected feedback have promoted partnerships between academic and student affairs and more integrated services are emerging to close identified gaps and barriers. Of course, to truly enact change, an institution must be willing to truly look at themselves and determine what kind of model they are communicating to students and the community. Then, they can start to determine what pieces of the student success puzzle that model is serving, and which pieces are underserving and begin to take steps toward a more effective administrative and organizational structure.

In determining the model in place at my current institution of employment, Sinclair Community College in Dayton, OH, a dominant Functional Silos structure surfaced. It must be known that the evaluation was completed under my perspective of holding a staff position in a student affairs department (Registration & Student Records) for a little over a year, as well as having been a student (completing about 30 credit hours) about 7 years ago at the institution. With regards to space and budgets, academic and student affairs departments operate independently and many are even located separately from each other in different buildings. For example, the Registration and Records department is housed two buildings away from the Academic Advising department. Both of these departments have a large staff; with 15 to 25 staff members each, and both have different needs that can help explain how separate budgets are necessary.

Sinclair’s mission is to“help individuals turn dreams into achievable goals through accessible, high quality, affordable learning opportunities”.This “high quality” promise can be achieved through this model in that “extensive professional expertise” is maintained within each autonomous department (Schuh, Jones, & Torres, 2017). For example, a student may ask me in Registration, “How do I pay my bill?” To provide high quality customer service, I feel it is my duty to know to some extent how to assist the student…but it may end with just being able to point the student in the right direction of an expert who can ensure the student’s concern is effectively and successfully met. So, in that case I may suggest the student complete a FAFSA if eligible for aid, or consider enrolling in a payment plan if having to self-pay. I’m familiar with next steps, but will still nudge that student to visit the Financial Aid or Bursar Office, respectively, for whichever path they need to clear.

Beyond physical and financial boundaries, I actually believe that Sinclair has put forth many efforts to shift to a student-centered approach while stuck in a functional silos model structurally. It makes sense that the next dominant model for Sinclair was Ethic of Care, given that Sinclair is dedicated to customer-service, high-interaction and engagement with students, and making processes as seamless and uncomplicated as possible so that students truly feel the value of a Sinclair education and experience. Recently, it was announced that plans were officially moving forward (after years of trying in the past) to architecturally redesign a “welcome” or “starting point” for the college that would also result in an integration of student/academic services in a kind of “one-stop” model. By Sinclair embracing these changes, I believe they are saying that the current model in place is not achieving the “accessible” promise of our mission to the community. For the largest urban community college located right in a busy downtown area, Sinclair knows its positioned to bring the students in, if the flow once the enter actually moves them forward, rather than side-steps them with too many misdirection’s and confusion.

As far as what happens to students who do overcome the current functional silo structure, there are many services and institution-wide initiatives to ensure that our very diverse student body has the resources and opportunities they deserve. For example, while they all are separated in true silo fashion, Sinclair provides spaces and services for students that identify as veteran, disabled, minority, pre-college, parent, etc. And while separated by walls, all professionals across campus are expected to advocate for all these students and work with each other, whether through referrals and or support in action. Student learning indeed takes place within these individual units, but Sinclair does need to keep pushing toward more innovative models if they wish to emphasize the “learning opportunities” mission promise. With the lack of collaboration even between various academic divisions, student learning exists in a very divided in or out of classroom manner. I’ve worked at a community college under a grant that sought to blur the lines of learning from in the classroom to out of the classroom services, by bringing the services directly to the students. For example, academic advisors and counselors would teach First Year Seminar courses, professionals from the Tutoring Center would engage students in a lesson in-class, and service learning/hands-on experiences were built into the curriculum on a larger scale than before. All of these pieces are currently missing from Sinclair, or at least are happening so little that an impact is not really being made in the name of high-quality student learning.

While functional silos seem to still be the norm of most colleges, as the craving for organization and administrative suitability still takes prominence, the challenges for both professionals and students can no longer be ignored. Students’ needs are shifting with every generation, and without the ability to serve them and lead them to their goals, we would become extinct. A balance must be met between lack of collaboration and “too many cooks”, between focusing so narrowly and looking so broad that specific populations are left out, and between operations/behavior that leave students on their own to figure things out themselves and coddling or handholding practices. After graduation, I still hope to be employed by Sinclair, as I see them working toward a balance that aligns with the mission they behold. Sinclair Community College has the potential to bridge the gaps of physical space to serve students more holistically, and I believe that this will be the start to keeping more students on a path that doesn’t stray, thus increasing the need for more collaboration in academic and student learning needs as well.

References

Schuh, J. H., Jones, S. R., & Torres, V. (2017). *Student services: a handbook for the profession*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.