

Student services teams with faculty for added value

By SUSAN SALVADOR

For a little more than a decade, community colleges have been gradually integrating co-curricular programming into academics, seeing the results of this marriage through improved student success, increased faculty involvement and more highly motivated staff.

At Monroe Community College (MCC) in New York, faculty are increasingly aware of how student services can help them, and our staff members are finding ways to reach out to faculty with innovative ideas. Take, for example, a presentation during the fall semester on string theory with author and theoretical physicist Brian Greene. Our engineering science department teamed with the Campus Activities Board (CAB) student organization for the co-curricular activity that offered a learning experience outside the classroom.

The result of the collaboration between student and academic services is the value that is added to students—the educational benefit and the stronger connection between coursework and campus life.

More recently, a humanities honors course on the “nature of experience” joined with CAB to bring the ancient Buddhist art of sand painting to MCC. Student leaders from the course and CAB made sure everyone who attended had a successful learning experience.

While Tibetan monks created a gorgeous piece of art with sand (called a mandala), students from the course worked with students from CAB to create a mandala they had designed. Visitors also joined in tapping grains of sand onto the smaller mandala.

These jointly planned partnerships combine knowledge acquisition and experiential learning to promote more complex outcomes.

I examined some widely accepted ideas about conventional teaching and learning in a publication I co-authored, “Learning Reconsidered: A Campus-Wide Focus on the Student Experience,” published by the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators.

Among the 16 recommendations for campus-wide implementation, the publication recommended that all colleges and universities should commit

to the intentional review and strengthening of every institutional structure and resource that can support transformative learning.

MCC’s grassroots movement started in the 1990s when we examined whether we were providing educationally purposeful co-curricular activities. We reviewed our program offerings and the intended outcomes and found areas where we could improve our goal.

The co-curricular transcript is a great example. Over the past four years, we have adapted the co-curricular transcript to be a more evaluative tool that helps students set and achieve goals. It also serves as a student assessment model, measuring personal and social growth outside the classroom.

Evaluations are completed by students and professional staff before and after the students’ co-curricular experience. Together they identify the students’ desired growth in leadership, communication and management skills and then develop realistic goals. Students and staff assess change

and development as well as participate in a reflective analysis.

This analysis establishes a learning mechanism for soft-skills development.

The evaluative process allows the staff to work directly with students on specific skills and helps guide them on their educational path. The transcript organizes and formalizes students’ growth and learning outside the classroom.

The students’ skills are documented and signed by a professional staff member. The signed transcript verifies that the student has accomplished well-defined goals, and it can give the student a competitive edge when applying to four-year colleges and universities or to a prospective employer.

Our partnerships extend into other areas of the student services department. We have developed innovative programming in our counseling and advising center in collaboration with health services to benefit faculty. The two offices offer a workshop on the challenges that some students bring with them to class. The 50-minute lunchtime program is conducted several times a year on both of the college’s campuses and is designed to help faculty better understand students’ personal problems and manage their behaviors inside the classroom.

Our counseling staff also created a program for times when an instructor is unexpectedly unable to teach. During that class time, counseling staff give presentations to the students. Faculty can select from a portfolio of study

skills, personal growth and career planning workshops, choosing an appropriate topic for their students.

Students receive valuable information at a time when they are already scheduled to be in class, faculty has a backup plan and staff has an effective method for students to attend the workshops. Last year more than 3,000 students participated.

Our ideas continue to flow and evolve, and opportunities for collaboration are expanding. Water from a Stone for Sudan is one recent innovative partnership that reaches beyond our college walls. The student-run Holocaust Genocide Studies Project partners with other college clubs and organizations, such as the Phi Theta Kappa honor society, to bring speakers and raise funds for a student-initiated project to bring clean drinking water to Sudan.

We have made many changes in how we do our work and how we affect students’ educational experience at MCC. Most of the changes are subtle and well-received by students, faculty and staff participants. But we are not stopping here. We will re-examine our programming by continually asking ourselves if the ideas we generate provide our students with educationally-purposeful activities, in which learning occurs collaboratively.

The most exciting outcome for us has been the changing climate and culture from the bottom up. There is a strong commitment from staff and faculty to collaborate and to give students great learning opportunities. After all, it is all about the students.

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