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A Model for the Effective Delivery of Student Services in Academic Schools and Departments

Introduction

After World War II, the need for student services such as housing, financial aid, job placement and career development, health and counseling services grew rapidly. This growth in services stemmed not only from increasing numbers of students attending college, but also from the diversity among those students. Veterans were coming to college who were older and who had different needs for services than did the recent high school graduate. In addition to an increased demand for services university administrators also faced a faculty who were rapidly narrowing their role and who no longer considered the delivery of such services to students their responsibility. Thus, most campuses developed student affairs units that were separate from academic schools and departments. This centralized approach persists on most campuses.

Today, however, the conditions that led to this arrangement are changing. Under increased economic pressure, faculty members are somewhat more inclined toward student advising and recruiting responsibilities. This broadening of responsibilities supports the aspirations of many student affairs personnel who have themselves attained credentials as educators.

In fact, contemporary factors have prompted efforts to align student service more closely with academic units to improve retention rates and more effectively utilize faculty, among other programmatic concerns.

Several approaches have been taken. The University of Pennsylvania

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and the University of Oregon, for example, have placed their student affairs units under their academic affairs officer. The University of Cincinnati and the University of Minnesota have decentralized and placed certain essential student services into the academic units themselves. Other universities such as Oregon State have developed student affairs staff with academic standing. In articulating student services with academic units, four major conditions have to be dealt with realistically on most campuses. First, student affairs does not have line authority over academic units, although it administers specific student services that directly affect academic units, such as financial aid, admissions, personal counseling, and career advisement. Since student affairs and the academic units serve separate and autonomous functions, there is a tendency to compete, perhaps to resist one another, rather than to cooperate. In this regard, USC is typical of many universities in administrative pattern as well as in political reality. It faces a typical quandary: how can student services be delivered to academic units when the student affairs division does not have line authority in those units?

Second, in most universities student services resources are scattered throughout academic departments and schools as well as in student affairs units. Coordination of these resources is limited, if not lacking. In some cases, efforts overlap; in others, resources are shockingly underutilized.

Third, there are significant differences among academic units in educational philosophy, orientation of faculty toward students, unit size, student body composition, student needs, and relative power on campus. For example, some units serve only professional students with curricula that are highly structured and reflect highly defined learning objectives; other units serve large numbers of undergraduate students with undeclared or ill-defined majors.

Finally, concern for nonacademic needs of students is unfocused in most academic departments. The nonacademic and academic lives of students are disparate, if not divorced.

These observations lead to the conclusion that, for proper management, student affairs activities require an organizational structure that places responsibility for meeting student needs on both the academic unit and the division of student affairs, that links central services to the academic units, that accommodates differences among academic units, and that coordinates academic units so that general policy and programming can be established and central resources optimally utilized.

Traditionally, student affairs organizations do not meet these criteria, since they are organized centrally and independently of academic units. Further, they are frequently organized functionally by student service. Although functional organization has the advantage of improved effi-

ciency through specialized delivery, it often fails to meet the unique needs of students in specific academic units. Thus, university admissions, financial aid, and counseling offices exist almost apart from academic schools and departments.

The Hub-Spoke Model

At USC, an effective alternative to such centralized or bureaucratic structure has been to establish a student affairs locus in each academic unit. In the spring of 1973, the academic deans unanimously endorsed a plan to identify student affairs personnel in each of their units who would be coordinated by the vice-president for student affairs. The title most frequently applied to these personnel was assistant dean for student affairs. The student affairs organization was changed from a centralized, bureaucratic structure to a "hub-spoke" arrangement, which connected student affairs more closely to the academic units.

Implementation

Although the "hub-spoke" arrangement represented an elegant conceptual solution to the problem of aligning student services and academic units at USC, there were many practical problems in implementing it.

Academic deans had their own difficulties with budget and personnel, and were highly suspicious of an intrusion into their units by central administration. The central student affairs staff, understandably suspicious and concerned about the impact of this model on their operations, needed assurances that ultimately it would assist them in meeting their stated objectives, even if limited resources would be assigned to this arrangement.

To deal with these concerns the vice-president for student affairs approached each dean individually. His approach was simply to ask what are your problems and what help do you need to solve them? He did not offer services or suggestions at this stage, but rather simply assessed needs. After meeting with each dean several common problems emerged. First, the deans were greatly concerned about retaining students. Many, particularly those in the professional schools, were especially concerned about academic and financial pressures on their students. Second, several deans were concerned about the development of external regulations and procedures which affected, for example, their student record keeping systems. They needed help staying abreast of those regulations and interpreting them. Third, they identified problems in working with central staff in such critical areas as admissions and financial aid. If they had a

person responsible for these functions, these persons frequently felt isolated from the central staff. There was a consensus that services were not being optimally delivered to their students. And they did not feel they could influence policies that affected their students interests.

After reviewing these concerns, the vice-president determined that the division of student affairs should continue to be a primary delivery unit but should also become a resource for the academic units, which in turn could give additional attention to working directly with students. The next step, therefore, was to return to each dean with the "hub-spoke" proposal to negotiate an assistant dean position in each unit. The vice-president prepared for these discussions by first securing three full-time equivalents from the president. In some units such positions already existed, and only slight changes in position descriptions were necessary. New positions were created in a few instances. In others, existing positions accommodated the new functions. In one small school, a faculty member became a part-time coordinator for selected student life functions. In all but the latter unit, the personnel in these positions were full-time. Thus, with a modest investment by deans and the vice-president in new positions, the model was implemented. Once he had negotiated positions with each dean, the vice-president went before the council of deans and asked for a resolution supporting the concept on a comprehensive basis, knowing of course that it would be approved.

The authority of the academic dean was underscored from the outset and reaffirmed as the program evolved. The dean and vice-president participated together in developing position descriptions, personnel selection, and evaluation of both personnel and programs that were built into the hub-spoke organization. Feedback was not only welcomed—it was urgently sought, often at the expense of already cramped schedules.

Thus, a slow and deliberate process was undertaken to implement the model. The needs of individual deans were assessed and analyzed; individual arrangements were negotiated with each unit; and, finally, a resolution was approved supporting this approach by the council of deans. In order for the approach to succeed it had to be accepted universally and approved at this level.

The Assistant Deans Committee

Although the vice-president for student affairs participates in their evaluation, selection, and position development, the assistant deans report to academic deans in their respective academic units, not to the vice-president. The assistant deans constitute a university-wide committee chaired by the vice-president for student affairs. This committee or-

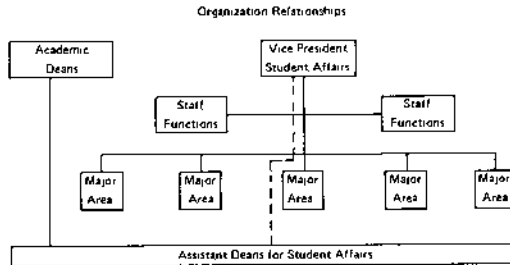


FIG. 1. Relationship of Assistant Deans to Student Affairs Division

ganically links academic units with the student affairs division, and, among the assistant deans themselves, it provides a context for the development of university-wide policies and programs (Fig. 1).

The committee of assistant deans meets biweekly. They organize themselves into small work groups and utilize line directors as primary resources; they freely share successes and failures with one another, and the help received is both supportive and practical. This benefit is evident in the broadening professional awareness of various participants, who find the meetings a source of professional enrichment as well as practical information. Financial aid requirements, consultation skills, and

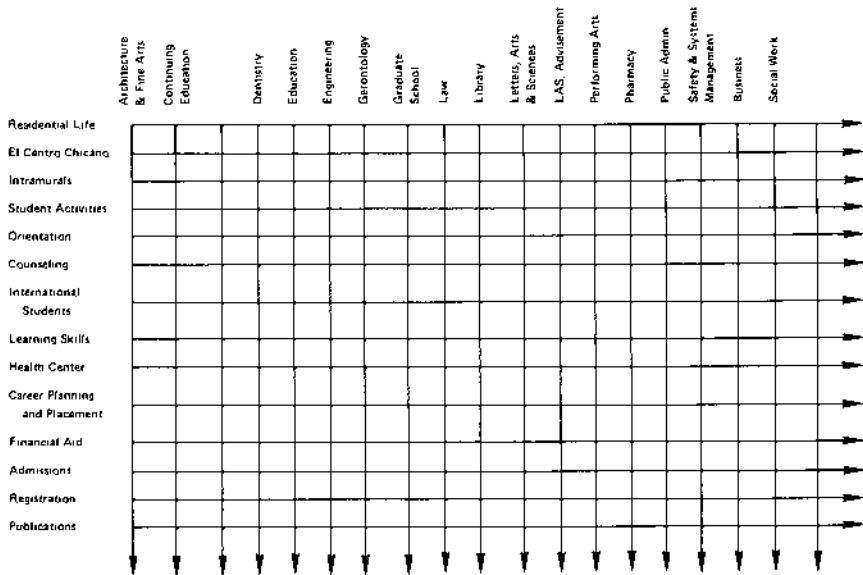


FIG. 2. The Hub-Spoke Model: Interfaces among Academic Departments and Student Affairs Functions

counselor-client contract development are among subject areas typically considered in workshops.

This model clearly illustrates the structure and value of the matrix organization used in a number of similar settings [2, p. 183]. In contrast to traditional bureaucracies or hierarchical organizations with formal authority relationships, a matrix organization is characterized by a system of collaboration in which members address mutual problems and help one another solve them by discussion and reciprocation rather than by authority and directive. Thus, a member of an academic unit and another from the student affairs division may work together to solve a problem, neither exerting nor being controlled by any hierarchical power. Figure 2 illustrates these interfaces between the student services functional units and the academic units in the hub-spoke model.

The Role of the Assistant Dean

The assistant dean is a "boundary position" and becomes a linking pin between the academic unit and the student affairs division [3]. The role may vary from unit to unit as circumstances require, but the assistant dean is essentially responsible for student related programming and problem solving. At the same time, the expertise of student affairs division specialists and the support and perspective of assistant deans from other academic units are available to the assistant deans in need of such help.

The assistant dean becomes a *focus for students* in the academic unit; they can approach this individual with any problem they see fit to share. If necessary or appropriate, the assistant dean becomes a *referral agent*, directing students to the resources needed to solve their problem. Frequently, those resources are available in the student affairs division. The important value here is immediacy: the student is not left milling around the academic unit looking for assistance; the assistant dean is prepared to help.

A third role for the assistant dean is that of *project manager* [1]. Various programs are developed and coordinated, which adapt the expertise of the student affairs functional units to solve problems unique to the academic department. For example, an assistant dean might develop a student leadership program with students from his or her academic unit and staff representatives from the campus student activities office.

In some cases, the assistant dean also assumes primary responsibility for selected administrative functions in the academic unit to include admissions and financial aid in professional schools, academic advising and field work coordination, and some aspects of career advisement and placement.

In this alternative to straight line control, the advantage in delivering student services to more than one academic unit can readily be seen. Further, the model capitalizes upon the greatest personnel resource on the campus, the faculty itself, supported by knowledgeable student affairs specialists, to meet student needs and to extend the learning environment beyond the classroom.

Illustrations

A number of examples illustrate how the model functions.

1. Admissions follow-up of newly admitted students
2. Married students rap group sponsored by the assistant dean of the law center
3. Modular class scheduling decentralized in the school of business administration
4. An ongoing task force working to improve services to a large student body of international students
5. Review and listing of inadequate teaching spaces
6. The development of criteria to be used by academic deans to evaluate faculty participation in student life.

More expansive examples are an advisement program developed in the school of dentistry and an orientation program developed for the entire university.

Application of the Hub-Spoke Model to the School of Dentistry

Dental students have special needs. Like other professional students, they have competed vigorously as undergraduates for admission; they are goal-oriented, with specialized training in the life sciences. Their time is exclusively spent in professional activities, and they have unique financial and personal problems. Therefore, they draw heavily upon certain student services, such as financial aid and counseling, and rarely upon others, such as special events programming and recreational facilities.

The hub-spoke model ideally meets the concerns of these students. A faculty advisement system developed at the school of dentistry illustrates the approach. The assistant dean, serving as a project manager, first identified the need for a nonevaluative, more supportive and collegial relationship between students and faculty. In consultation with the director of the university counseling center and a staff psychiatrist, an adviser program was established. A profile of faculty adviser responsibilities was

developed and faculty members likely to be effective in the role were identified. The program was initiated with the incoming freshman class. Following an evaluation that showed positive benefits, it was extended to the remaining classes.

All faculty advisers participated in special training sessions conducted by the student affairs division consultants, where the role of adviser was discussed, potential student encounters demonstrated in role-playing, and information provided on how to identify and refer students with psychological problems. Finally, the assistant dean and the consultants evaluated the complete program through questionnaires administered to students and participating faculty. This program illustrates many of the strengths of the hub-spoke model. First, the effort was initiated within the academic unit by the assistant dean and tailored to the unique needs and characteristics of the dental school environment. Second, central student affairs personnel were optimally utilized by the school in designing, implementing, and evaluating the project—but without dominating it. In the process, school of dentistry faculty perceived themselves as the primary source of support for students, which was the objective of the project.

Application of the Hub-Spoke Model to Orientation Programs

A second example is a new approach to student orientation. Student orientation programs usually introduce students to the social and cultural life of the campus while also explaining the mechanics of matriculation. When the hub-spoke model was implemented, USC had a large summer orientation program for parents and students, a week-long new student program in the fall, and a shorter orientation for students entering in mid-year conducted by the student affairs division, quite isolated from academic units.

Upon implementation of the hub-spoke model, a number of changes took place. The new job descriptions of the assistant deans, developed jointly by academic deans and the vice-president of student affairs, suggested that the assistant deans promote the interests of the students from their units through such programs as orientation. A dramatic increase was seen in academic participation in new student orientation programs. Perhaps more importantly, the academic units showed greater interest and effort in providing better departmental orientations as well as in strengthening student services in general.

In a number of cases, departmental and university programs have been integrated. For example, instead of developing autonomous but essentially duplicative materials, many units used centrally produced student

handbooks, community guides, and mental-physical health rosters. The academic units and the student affairs division have joined efforts in developing schedules, program content, and publicity.

Perhaps the most important result is intensified concern of academic units for their students and improved student understanding and contact with the department. While considerable lip service had been given to student-departmental contacts, little had been done previously to facilitate it. The development of an integrated orientation program was an important step in this direction.

Evaluation and Summary

As would be expected of any major new program, the hub-spoke model has been closely scrutinized. Academic deans are concerned that funds allocated for "nonacademic" purposes yield definite and visible benefits for students and the departments; student affairs personnel look for evidence of overall improvement in the delivery of services to students and the enrichment of the student environment.

Through a major evaluation in 1975 and other more informal assessments, these findings have emerged. All assistant deans continued after two years to elicit support from their academic deans. Seventy-one percent of the assistant deans felt that the program fostered greater understanding of student services within the internal structure of their academic units and of how the student affairs division functioned in their delivery. The assistant deans characterized the mutual support of the assistant deans group and the sharing of successes and failures as beneficial, and found access to and use of central student affairs resources open and ready. There is a perceived increase in the level of trust, which characterizes relationships between student affairs and academic departments. Students' response to new professional school student orientation programs have improved with such student affairs-school project development. And there has been an increase in the percentage of admitted students who matriculate at the university, which is believed to be in part the result of assistant dean follow-up efforts.

The most important indices perhaps are the expansion of the model to academic units not previously represented, greater numbers of participants in group activities from several academic schools and departments, and the increased use of the model for communication and problem-solving by nonstudent affairs administrators. As the position of assistant dean has become recognized, many have found it to be an important communication link to the faculty, both because of the structure of the model and because it is an asset in helping busy academic deans handle

vital student interests and needs. The assistant deans have contributed heavily in the areas of financial aid problem solving, recruitment, and advisement.

The effectiveness of the model is in large part attributable to the style with which it was implemented. Careful preparation was necessary in gaining the support of academic deans, central administration, and student affairs personnel. The entire process was enhanced by an understanding of participatory decision making and administration. The participatory approach to management engenders the trust essential in bringing disparate and autonomous administrative units into a system of collaboration and cooperation. Both the student and the institution are winners.

A final caveat is to acknowledge that organizational schemes are not cure-alls for institutional problems. Rather, organizations built on clear principles of interchange and mutual problem solving can enhance the teaching and learning environment in ways not even anticipated by such enlightened, if obvious, collaboration.

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