PROGRAM TITLE

Learning Communities: Opportunities for a Shared Vision of Student Success

PROGRAM ABSTRACT

Learning communities are an effective strategy for promoting student success through collaboration between academic and student affairs. Half of the resident students at the University of Winland (UW) now participate in a living/learning community, with 70% planned for Fall, 2000. This program highlights the key concepts, strategies and lessons learned for linking and aligning students' learning experiences to ensure their academic and personal success.

BRIEF OUTLINE/DESCRIPTION OF THE PRESENTATION

A revolution in higher education is underway that demands our involvement, lest we be left behind. Recent calls for reform of higher education (Wingspread Group on Higher Education, 1993; Kellogg Commission on the Future of State and Land-Grant Universities, 1997; AAHE/ACPA/NASPA's Powerful Partnerships: A Shared Responsibility for Learning, 1998) stress the need to connect undergraduate experiences with student learning. To respond to this mandate, institutions must provide the conditions that foster "seamless" learning environments — settings that promote intentional, coherent, integrated and continuous learning. Well-developed and effective learning communities promote intentional and integrated learning because they represent performance support systems that link and align a variety of institutional resources to ensure high levels of educational attainment. The development of learning communities, however, requires new organizational behaviors on the part of individuals in academic and student affairs leadership positions — systematic and coordinated efforts that marshal and direct resources to accomplish specific learning outcomes. Forging cross-functional, collaborative partnerships to create learning communities also requires risk taking and a willingness to challenge the educational assumptions and organizational boundaries of the institution, as well as a readiness to move beyond traditional roles and "comfort zones". While student affairs practitioners are often critical of faculty member's intransigence, the reality is that significant compromise and innovative thinking is often equally as challenging for members of our own profession.

This presentation will highlight the importance of collaborative partnerships between academic and student affairs in the design and implementation of learning communities.

The presenters will briefly review the different definitions of learning communities at UW and other institutions and describe why collaborative partnerships are essential for their development. To maximize impact on student success, it is also essential that student affairs departments closely link their efforts with the institutional mission and strategic plan. The next section of the program focuses on the rapid growth of learning communities at UW in order to maximize the various aspects of student success associated with these programs – academic achievement, gains in general education outcomes, social and academic integration, retention, etc. In 1994, less than 6% of the 5000 resident students participated in a living/learning program; in 1999, over 50% of residents are involved in at least one of three different program styles – Freshman Interest Groups (FIGs), Residential Colleges and "sponsored" Learning Communities. The number of these communities has grown from 2 in 1994 to 21 in 1999, with 65 different FIG sections enrolling one-quarter of the freshman class. This dramatic growth has not come without its own set of challenges, both internal and external to the department of Residential Life and division of Student Affairs. These include program design and development in conjunction with academic colleagues not accustomed to collaboration or learning outside of the classroom environment; marketing and recruitment efforts with admissions staff who are unfamiliar with concepts and objectives; housing assignment processes not designed to accommodate these options; traditional staff selection and training methods unprepared to adjust to new staff roles and responsibilities outside the traditional approaches; the impact on existing residential communities; identifying resources and program elements relevant to learning community, etc.

A review of obstacles and constraints to collaboration will be followed by examples that illustrate effective partnerships, strategies and responses and recommendations for professionals seeking to develop these initiatives on their campuses. Outcomes associated with these programs that contribute to student success will be shared. Participants will have the opportunity to discuss issues on their campuses with presenters and the group to develop strategies and generate ideas.

OUTLINE

- Review of Current Higher Education Issues and Calls for Reform
- Learning Communities as an Effective Strategy for Enhancing Undergraduate Education
- Case Study – UW's Learning Communities
    - Integration with Institutional Mission
    - Planning Assumptions/Strategies
    - Implementation Strategies and Assessment of Outcomes
    - Challenges & Responses E. Lessons Learned
- Discuss Context at Participants' Institutions
- Question & Answer

LEARNING OUTCOMES

Participants will have the opportunity to:

- recognize the need for reform in how students learn and are taught in higher education;
- understand the role that student affairs educators can play in enhancing student learning in and out of the classroom in partnership with faculty and students;
- learn about successful approaches for integrating learning across disciplines and beyond the classroom;
- understand specific details, logistics and strategies in developing and implementing living/learning programs;
- learn ways to apply various concepts in devising a program on their own campus.

RELATIONSHIP OF THEME

This program incorporates both the need for a "shared vision" between academic and student affairs, and the need for effective strategies for enhancing student learning in the "new century." Additionally, the first issue listed in relevant topics list is "a greater emphasis on learning communities on our campuses that engage students…"

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HOW AUDIENCE MEMBERS WILL BE INVOLVED

The program will be interactive in which presenters will have share relevant, practical information, and invite audience members to present challenges or questions relevant to their own campuses for discussion by the presenters and other participants.