Not taught in graduate school: increasing student affairs’ sphere of influence
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Introduction

Your campus is starting a new initiative. You have the knowledge and experience, but you do not get asked to participate. Student affairs and learner support professionals often find themselves at the perimeter of campus dialogues. What keeps them from realizing their potential on their campuses? How do we understand and impact organizational culture and help reshape it for the greater good? This chapter will help identify practical strategies to enlarge your sphere of influence on your campus, no matter what your position.

For some time higher education has been under increased scrutiny (American Association for Higher Education et al., 1998; Keeling, 2006). As a variety of stakeholders examine the college experience more closely, questions of greater accountability have brought attention towards learning (National Leadership Council for Liberal Education and America’s Promise, 2007).

How does this context affect student affairs and learner support professionals? This is an unprecedented time of opportunity, in which the work of student affairs and other learner support areas and the current needs of higher education have become even more explicit and aligned. Institutions are asking: ‘What do we want our students to know, value, and be able to do?’ What can student affairs and other learner support areas do to advance these questions and become a bigger part of the dialogue? What new knowledge, skills and frameworks are needed to serve most effectively the holistic learning needs of our students? As professionals who support student learning both inside and outside the classroom, we need to put tool in hand, knowledge in head and wisdom in heart to help us help our institutions carry out clearly defined missions, goals and objectives (Brown, 2004a). All members of our learner support professions need to be able to enlarge and enhance their spheres of influence, regardless of position, on any type of campus.
However, what is required to move from this rhetoric to reality? What are the specific tools and guides? What are the specific barriers that keep these professionals from realizing their potential on their campuses? How do they shore up more ‘political capital’ to make change happen? How do they combine their shared strengths to operate out of a much broader base of influence? How do they understand and impact organizational culture and reshape it for the greater good?

This chapter will raise key questions and identify practical strategies to help professionals who support student learning increase their spheres of influence, with an emphasis on visioning, assessing situations within the campus context, making strategic alliances and implementing a strategy.

**Visioning**

In order to increase your sphere of influence, you will first need to develop an understanding and realistic picture of what an ideal role for you on your campus might look like, given your current position, area of responsibilities and campus climate. What are high but realistic goals for your area? If you were going to wave a magic wand, what would you like your ideal role on your campus to be? What initiatives do you want to be more involved in?

**Example: visioning the ideal**

One example of an initiative resulting from this type of visioning is the ‘YourPlan’ career program at Mount Holyoke College (MHC). Career centres have high aspirations to help students, but students do not always take the best advantage of their programs and services. There are many concerns about this lack of student engagement, which may lead to:

- limited self-awareness about their competences and values
- difficulty translating their college educations to the world outside the classroom
- not performing to their potential in application processes.

Mount Holyoke addresses these issues head-on by envisioning and implementing the ‘YourPlan’ program, a theory-based, developmental, four-year career curriculum that is cumulative, comprehensive, understandable and scalable (Brown, 2002, 2004b; Brown et al., 2007). The curriculum outlines expected career learning goals for each class year, and identifies specific tasks to help students achieve them.
Organizational resources, personnel and policies have been aligned towards the program, which is used as a springboard to deepen collaborations with key stakeholders (e.g. faculty, class deans and other student affairs staff). This program represents a full translation of theory to practice, and reflects a deep understanding of MHC’s institutional culture and most pressing priorities. It allows the careers service office to fulfill its mission in ways that all stakeholders value, with a sustainable student services model. It also provides a concrete way to connect individual, mostly autonomous, programs/units into a more coherent whole.

**Assessing your situation within the campus context**

To make real progress towards your vision, you must have a clear sense of your situation within the campus context. To do this you must assess the campus culture, define campus priorities and manage your own situation.

**Understanding your campus culture**

One of the first and most important things to do is to deepen your understanding of your campus culture. Campus culture is incredibly powerful and very difficult to alter. What does your institution value? How do people interact? What symbols does the campus use to define its culture? What stories are told over and over again as a means to help others learn what your campus is like? What are the key themes and messages that are communicated on your admissions page or in a letter from your president? Culture is sometimes hard to define unless someone transgresses it. What is one thing a person can do at your institution that would trip a cultural landmine? How are significant conflicts resolved within the campus community? What are the ‘unspoken’ rules?

Although there are many different models for assessing organizational culture, Bolman and Deal (1991) suggest four frames for examining organizational issues and context: structural, political, human resources and symbolic. Of particular importance to considering culture is the symbolic frame through which organizational icons, symbols, stories, ceremonies, rituals and even common language are analysed and better understood.

**Example: understanding campus culture**

One learning experience about campus culture occurred early in Scott’s tenure at MHC, when the Career Development Center (CDC) undertook the piloting of
an electronic student portfolio. Although it was a powerful pedagogical tool with great promise, the CDC was not the right office at the right time to introduce this initiative. First, such a large initiative would have much deeper buy-in if it was ‘co-sponsored’ by a faculty member or academic administrative unit. Second, the institution did not feel urgency around the specific issues the portfolio was designed to address. Several key lessons were learned from this experience. To effect significant change beyond one’s own unit and influence broader institutional priorities, understanding and appreciating institutional culture is paramount. Examining issues and opportunities from different organizational frames is a good way to gain this increased knowledge. Understanding how boundary-crossing ideas best germinate and gain traction on campus, knowing how to leverage carefully cultivated relationships and constantly representing the student affairs perspective in important campus dialogues are necessary actions of influential student affairs leaders, but they are difficult to achieve without a deep understanding and appreciation of cultural context.

Defining campus priorities

All of our own work has importance to us, but what matters most are the activities that conform to what the institution fundamentally needs from our offices. What is your institution’s latest strategic document and how does your work connect to this directly? What keeps your president and/or your boss up at night? What does your institution’s ‘best self’ look like? What are the barriers to this ideal and what is your specific role in realizing it? What are the roles of learner support professionals in helping to improve the quality of education for students and advance the goals of the larger institution?

Example: aligning with campus priorities

Most higher education institutions have strategic plans with defined strategic directions or specific vision elements. At Saint Louis University, strategic areas of influence (vision elements) which support the president’s vision of being the ‘nation’s finest Catholic university’ (Saint Louis University, 2008) include:

- a reputation of distinction
- a vibrant urban location
- a culture of high performance
- an affinity for the University’s mission
- a global perspective.
Recognizing that opportunities and resources are largely dependent upon alignment, the Student Development division has aggressively pursued initiatives that directly and indirectly support these elements. An example of a Student Development initiative that supports the ‘vibrant urban location’ element of the University’s vision would be the Grand Centre partnership, a collaborative with midtown St. Louis businesses and civic leaders that supports the arts district and promotes student engagement in the fine arts. Another would be an emerging student and academic affairs initiative, a ‘centre of excellence’ which will align service learning, servant leadership (leading by supporting others), community outreach/volunteerism and social justice pursuits into an integrated structure. The reality is that both of these initiatives have achieved greater support and notoriety because of their strong connection to and alignment with defined campus priorities.

Managing your situation

To be effective on campus, student affairs and other support professionals must engage in realistic self-appraisal. How are they regarded on their campuses? Why are they regarded in this way? How are you personally perceived on your campus? What are your perceived/actual strengths and weaknesses? How do you know? What problem(s) do you solve or contribute to solving for the institution? What do others on your campus think is the most important thing that you do? What are the issues that motivate the most influential ‘players’ on your campus? Recruitment? Retention? Development? Do you know of other comparable institutions that can be invoked to your advantage (competitive comparisons)? Are there benchmark data that people on your campus pay attention to and circulate widely?

Managing your situation means doing ordinary things, such as returning your phones calls and answering e-mails, extraordinarily well, and leading with ‘yes’ as often as possible when you field requests. Other ways to manage your campus situation well are through organizational efficacy, supervision, knowing your audience and contributing to the successful management of campus life issues.

Example: organizational efficacy

Having your organizational area operate at maximum efficiency is something all exemplary leaders hope to achieve. At Mount Holyoke College, the Career Development Center determined that the best way to achieve efficacy as a unit was to ensure that it aligned tightly with academic mission. Career Center staff introduced a new organizational framework that identified three learning outcomes
(Brown, 2002). This helped the Center, which was somewhat organizationally fragmented, to work more effectively. From the identified outcomes, the staff had a new lens through which to re-examine the organizational structure of the Center. Significant changes were made that increased Center efficiencies and staff ability to anticipate and respond to pressing institutional priorities. The Career Center became a much more prominent office on campus, and is now better able to negotiate and chart a path that fulfills its educational mission in an organizationally sustainable manner. With a more efficient structure in place, the talented staff have demonstrated a strong commitment to working with students and are better able to understand how their efforts fit within the larger institutional picture.

**Example: supervision**

Managing your situation well involves effective supervision of staff. Supervision is one of the most critical aspects of effective organizations (Janosik et al., 2003). An effective approach to supervision and professional development is to create a shared vision of organizational success, develop collective goals and harness your staff’s individual and collective contributions towards those goals. Colgate University utilizes a performance evaluation process to appraise staff performance over the previous year, and to help staff develop clear, high, assessable goals connected to the larger objectives of the institution. The performance evaluation process helps staff develop workload efficiencies to accommodate any new responsibilities, and identify ways to manage shifting priorities (including reducing, eliminating and postponing projects); staff members must develop goals and plans to increase their desired skills, balance internal priorities with external demands and keep them tied to that which intrinsically motivates them. Some of the most important traits of a good manager are to establish a shared vision, connect staff to those collective goals and provide the individual support and guidance to help them be successful.

**Example: know your audience**

At Mount Holyoke College, the career centre adopted an ‘educational entrepreneurial’ approach; the staff were encouraged to have the ‘hearts of educators, but the minds of entrepreneurs’ (Brown, 2006, 28). A goal was to develop a deep understanding of the various constituents and stakeholders. There were competing and multiple priorities, as well as a need for more explicit feedback about how these different constituents and stakeholders defined success for the office. An external review was conducted to get honest and unvarnished assessment. Focus groups were also
held, in which non- and low-frequency users of services were asked questions about their perceptions and what they specifically needed from the Career Center. Additionally, a faculty survey was used to gain impressions of the Career Center, determine what myths existed and learn more about what specific initiatives faculty found valuable. For example, through speaking with faculty (Brown, 2006), Career Center staff discovered that many faculty were bothered by how career services staff used the word ‘learning’ when communicating with others about programs and services. Once this issue was identified and understood, career service staff began using other words with similar meaning in their communications and interactions with faculty. This simple action helped improve faculty perceptions about the Career Center.

**Example: campus life issues**

Using the concept of self-appraisal in the context of examining an important campus issue, student affairs professionals at one institution decided to facilitate a new men’s discussion group. The group was formed in response to a sexual assault incident, which had created a great deal of divisiveness within the campus community. Student affairs professionals volunteered to be some of the first members of this group, helping to increase membership among staff, faculty and students and to shape the group’s discussions and activities. The group provided an opportunity for men from several generations to engage in frank discussions about how the negative consequences of male socialization have manifested in themselves, their families and society. This is just one small example of how student affairs can take a campus leadership role and provide a nuanced approach to a difficult issue – in this case, with a population that is difficult to reach.

**Making strategic alliances**

Who are the key players with formal or informal influence on campus? What is the organizational chart that does not appear on paper? What relationships have you developed that enable you to participate in important campus discussions? How are you working on connecting your work to the work of others? What are the opportunities to collaborate across difference? Who are some possible early adopters of more innovative, cross-boundary initiatives? What are some structures that you could facilitate which would create ways for people to connect? Making strategic alliances can be fostered by using the Socratic method to engage potential allies more deeply, as well as making efforts to create mutually beneficial collaborations.
Use the Socratic method

Often, student affairs and other student learner support professionals seek out allies on their campuses for the purpose of advancing a particular idea or initiative. This, in and of itself, is perfectly appropriate, but the seeking out of allies often ends up looking to others like the selling of your particular idea or solution, as opposed to genuinely working together with others to solve a problem or advance an idea. A softer approach, which often works better, is the use of what is typically thought of as a pedagogical technique called the Socratic method (Dye, 1996; Samples, 1998). Using the Socratic method, you would pose some thoughtful questions (as opposed to answers!) to your key stakeholders and partners.

You ask others a series of thoughtful, provocative and structured questions designed to take them down a particular path which further explores or examines the idea or initiative you are interested in pursuing. Through your questions, you are asking others to share their ideas, which is decidedly different from simply giving them your opinion or attempting to sell them your particular plan. Before you have suggested a possible answer or posited a particular approach to advancing the idea, you have more actively involved your potential allies. It is helpful to have studied real or imagined cases to test your own hypotheses, but the Socratic method is a technique that may allow you to engage in a more open dialogue with your colleagues, stakeholders and partners.

Ask key constituents (e.g. athletics staff, department assistants, student supervisors, the dean of students, trustees and other professionals) to provide advice on big projects, not only to strengthen ideas and allow opportunities for refinement and increased buy-in but also to leverage influence and, in some cases, resources to assist with program implementation. Also, you may want to consider proposing a pilot phase(s) before full implementation is to occur, as a means of gaining provisional support to move ahead with an idea. Avoid the ‘all or nothing’ proposition.

Collaborate

Example: learner support services collaboration

An example of learner support professionals collaborating can be seen when campus library professionals provide outreach support to their campus career centre (Hollister, 2005). The librarians at the University of Buffalo (UB) reached out to careers professionals who taught courses, helping their students develop career-related information literacy. The librarians demonstrated their value by providing tours of the UB libraries, and created ‘library liaisons’ to be a point of contact for the careers office. Librarians held information surgeries in the Career Center, and helped the
Center strengthen its own library with better information management and by weeding out-of-date resources. Additionally, the librarians helped the Career Center staff rethink their web presence, and even helped them think through their physical office redesign. This arrangement was mutually beneficial to both parties. Both departments served as resource and referral agents for each other, reaching more students.

**Example: faculty collaboration**

Faculty are obviously a key constituency group, and we need to work with them by understanding their needs and priorities, thereby enabling us to develop student affairs strategies that reflect these realities, including programming, resources and communication, and to develop critical relationships (Brown and Roseborough, 2007).

1  *Program planning and outreach.* At Mount Holyoke, a science faculty liaison program was developed by the Career Development Centre, which assigned a staff member to be the point of contact for every department and ensured that a direct line of communication was in place to enable the sharing of resources and joint planning of programs. Additionally, student affairs staff collaborated on an integrative program to help students reflect on their aggregate experiences, culminating in a banquet with faculty, class boards and class deans. Discussion panels were also planned, with topics that included how to use the disciplinary knowledge and skills of a particular subject outside classroom settings, providing career services resources for faculty and helping faculty think about how the learning outcomes from their courses could be applied to the world outside. At the University of Maryland, a faculty resource directory was developed; this was a highly successful tool for identifying faculty willing to engage in a variety of out-of-class experiences. Programs were scheduled strategically around the demands of faculty, to increase participation. An academic achievement banquet was also held, to which students invited their faculty for a semi-formal evening program. At Indiana University, first-year residents hosted a faculty fellow for weekly formal and informal visits. Other academic–student affairs collaboration opportunities have included first-year seminars, learning communities, common intellectual experiences, community-based learning, undergraduate research and capstone experiences (to help students integrate various aspects of their
education and experiences, including culminating seminars, large synthesis papers and/or qualifying examinations).

2 **Resources and communications.** Student affairs and other support professionals can help develop materials to assist faculty in their role advising students on non-academic matters. Providing data on student activity to give faculty a fuller appreciation of their students’ experiences is one possible example. Another would be to communicate directly with faculty through monthly faculty meeting notes. Hosting an orientation for new faculty, as well as all department assistants (who are often the key to reaching faculty!), might be another way to build a faculty alliance.

3 **Relationships.** On any campus, individual relationships with faculty are key, and many initiatives become successful because they are supported by these important relationships. Student affairs and other learner support professionals can invest much time personally cultivating these relationships, attending faculty meetings, writing personal notes recognizing faculty accomplishments, showing up at faculty events when possible, serving on committees/teams or even creating a faculty ‘Facebook’ website with links to identify their interests. Lastly, some personal relationships may be developed through other avenues and common interests (e.g. kids, dogs, hobbies, volunteer work, etc.).

**Implementing a strategy**

Once you have envisioned your ideal place on your campus, you must implement your strategy by connecting with priorities and provide evidence of success.

**Connecting with priorities**

Ensure that your program goals and your assessment strategy are aligned with your institution’s strategic goals and assessment plan. Serve on key committees and other teams. Identify the key processes and functions in your area and create a plan for continuous improvement. Begin in earnest to develop relationships with others across the institution. Be prepared to potentially give up something and extend yourself and your area into endeavours that might not have otherwise been priorities (e.g. what is on the board of trustees’ agenda?).
Example: develop a new program
At Saint Louis University, Student Development staff have developed a new social entrepreneurship program. The concept of this program became of interest as a means to support socially responsible student ventures, which help solve social problems and support non-profit organizations’ interests. This program initiative developed quickly and gained the necessary resource support because it is so clearly university-mission-driven and strongly aligned with the priorities of two major University entities: the Student Development division and the School of Business, which has a prominent business entrepreneurship program. Often good ideas like this one go nowhere fast because they are not strongly attached to the institution’s priorities.

Provide evidence of success
In this time of greater accountability, it is essential that we report facts and avoid making assumptions. It is important to promote the use of trend and comparative data, and to use this information to set ‘stretch’ goals. Moreover, it is a good idea to share important information from your area systematically with others on campus. Student affairs research must reflect the complexity of learning and be presented in ways that matter to key stakeholders (Brown et al., 1998). National surveys such as the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) and those conducted through the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) provide campus life data that are meaningful and potentially boundary-crossing. The Council for the Advancement of Standards (CAS) has created helpful frameworks for assessing learning development outcomes (CAS, 2006) as well, including a survey of existing qualitative and quantitative measures of learning outcomes. Lastly, Brown and Greene (2006) are developing the Wisdom Development Scale to measure integrative learning outcomes such as self-knowledge, emotional management, altruism, inspirational engagement, life skills, life knowledge, judgement and willingness to learn.

Example: impact analysis
The MHC career office tracks student traffic usage with a card swipe (which records day, time of day, class year, major and ethnicity), aggregates ‘satisfaction’ data about the career office obtained from larger institutional assessments and continually evaluates its workshops. Additionally, the office is in the process of assessing the career learning outcomes developed to provide the evidence that
the institution values. These outcomes were derived after a thorough review of the organizational mission, which supported the institutional mission.

A summary of practical considerations

1  Do not assume that things have to be done the way they have always been done. Consider context and look at issues from the viewpoint of multiple frames – for example structural, political, human resources and symbolic (Bolman and Deal, 1991). Align your goals/objectives (including assessment strategy) and initiatives with those of the University and your division (National Institute for Standards and Technology: Baldrige National Quality Program, 2008). Emphasize what is most critical to accomplishing the goals of the university and your division. When you are developing an idea or proposal, remember that you are not the audience, others are! Identify key processes, functions or other areas in the university which may be directly or indirectly impacted by your goals and initiatives. Mitigate by working out potential solutions with those most affected in advance of submitting your proposal or recommendation. Ask yourself: can you help solve a problem for them? Make them allies, not foes. Consider using pilot phases as a way of working towards comprehensive implementation. Be prepared to back up your recommendations with facts and avoid making assumptions that you can’t defend. Overgeneralizing data is a common error and one that may significantly impact your credibility as an objective professional.

2  Articulate performance targets and outcomes from which to measure success. Generic, non-specific measures and outcomes won’t be very influential. Answer these questions: What would success look like? How will we conclude whether we’ve achieved success? Use trend and comparative data whenever possible to provide a context for determining the significance of your own data (National Institute for Standards and Technology: Baldrige National Quality Program, 2008). Provide specific action steps that describe implementation, including a timeline of milestones. Create a communication plan that indicates how and when you will systematically share information with others on campus about your important initiatives. Become more proficient at developing budget information for new initiatives. Use a standard business proforma template – don’t invent your own. Make it straightforward and easy to understand in relation to the numbers you are presenting. Provide a clear explanation of your formula
for arriving at estimates/projections. Summarize the key points and figures that support your recommendation or the case you are making.

3 Consider the Socratic method and principled negotiation methods as a means to engage and influence others (Dye, 1996; Samples, 1998). Pose thoughtful questions as opposed to hard selling. Avoid hardwiring yourself to only one possible outcome or scenario. Negotiate interests rather than argue positions. Consider and pose scenarios to advance the dialogue. Present options for mutual gain (Fisher and Ury, 1991). Study real or imagined cases to test your hypotheses and discuss them openly with your colleagues, stakeholders and partners. Try to avoid having hidden agendas. Serve on committees and other teams (de facto campus internships) across campus as a means of extending your opportunities to influence and your overall knowledge and awareness of what is happening at the University.

4 Stay the course and be persistent about what you believe in (Collins, 2001), but acknowledge that progress happens most often a little at a time (Weick, 1984). Pick your battles and don’t ‘die on every hill’. It is possible to win a battle and lose the war. Focus on what matters most, which means you must know your priorities. Adopt a ‘small wins’ approach – a series of small but significant accomplishments may gain you more allies and allow you ultimately to achieve more than a single, large-scale endeavour (Hamrick, Evans and Schuh, 2002; Weick, 1984). Recognize that large-scale change all at one time is difficult to achieve. Break things down into achievable parts. Pursue a pattern of moderately scaled successes. Pursue a goal through a variety of activities as opposed to a single event. Pascarella and Terenzini (1991, 655) suggested: ‘Rather than seeking single large levers to pull in order to promote change, it may well be more effective to pull more levers more often.’ Also, the more integrated your efforts are with other institutional priorities, the better your chances of succeeding.

Influencing decisions and advancing initiatives requires a great many factors and skills that are all within the capabilities of student affairs or other learner support professionals. The ability and opportunity to influence involves, among other things: sound relationships; a sense of timing; an understanding of context, culture and politics; alignment with institutional priorities; institutional awareness; flexibility and adaptability; doing your homework (no shortcuts); good planning; a results orientation; persistence; and a healthy dose of humility.
Conclusion
This is an exciting time in higher education. Student affairs and learner support professionals can be hardwired into all aspects of undergraduate life from matriculation to graduation, with an opportunity to collaborate with nearly every campus constituency, including students, faculty, staff, parents and alumni. Consequently they can explicitly connect the classroom experience with the most practical and pressing needs of today, such as ethical leadership and responsible citizenship. They can also provide a direct interface between students’ education and experience, helping students to translate and deepen the hallmarks of their classroom education into the skills and competences necessary to navigate and lead in a complex world. As professionals who support students and their development, we must continually strive to create powerful learning environments for our communities of diverse students, think systematically about our roles as educators, help students reflect on their aggregate college experiences, and work effectively with all members of the higher education community towards these goals.

References


