Student Learning Outcomes Alignment through Academic and Student Affairs Partnerships

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Susan Platt & Sharlene Sayegh

A significant challenge facing university campuses is how to develop the "whole student" whose entire curricular and co-curricular experience aligns with the achievement of the campus mission and learning outcomes. To accomplish this task, we truly need to consider the entire campus as a learning environment with curricular/co-curricular experiences equally vital for student success (Keeling, 2006). But what are we actually doing as institutions to embrace these concepts? Are we merely saying the word "partnership" but still operating in silos? What are the bridges that can link Academic and Student Affairs and result in strategic partnerships?

As the campus assessment leaders in Academic Affairs and Student Affairs at our institution, we believe it is crucial to engage in reflective conversations with each other and colleagues about these questions to overcome common misperceptions and develop healthy partnerships focused on success of the whole student. It is imperative to create a strategic plan to strengthen collaborations across divisions and provide students with impactful, powerful learning experiences to meet institutional learning outcomes (ILOs).

Classic literature guides our collaborative efforts in the area of student learning outcomes, including *Learning Reconsidered 2* (Keeling, 2006), ACPA's *The Student Learning Imperative* (1996), AAC&U's *Greater Expectations* (2002), and Tagg's *The Learning Paradigm* (2003). Adrianna Kezar's work describing characteristics of "highly collaborative campuses" (2006) has also influenced our collaborative model. In each of these works, the authors emphasize the importance of top institutional leaders who embrace curricular and co-curricular partnerships for student success. We are indeed fortunate that this is the case on our campus, as it has enabled us to establish vital and sustainable partnerships between Academic and Student Affairs that can only get better through time and effort.
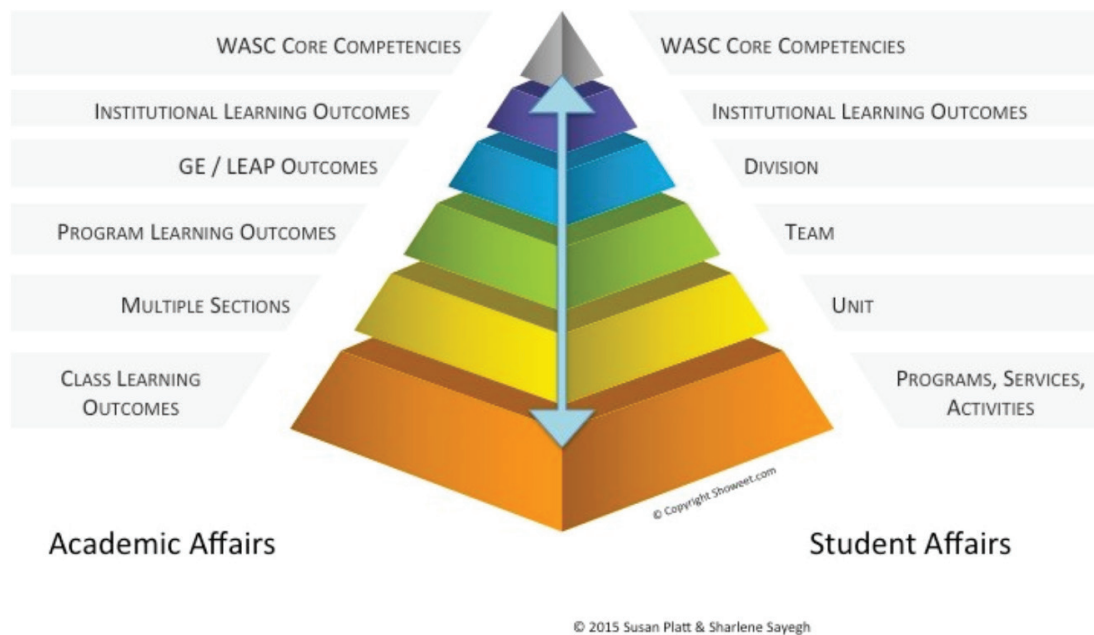
How can Academic and Student Affairs Collaborate to Develop Levels of Student Learning Outcomes?

To collaboratively develop levels of learning outcomes, we first needed to conceptualize how our divisions approach student learning outcomes at multiple levels. We wanted to understand where opportunities might exist through an Academic Affairs/Student Affairs collaboration in which we take equal responsibility for student learning. We then developed a model in which we scaffolded the respective levels of learning outcomes:

Figure 1: Academic/Student Affairs: Learning Outcomes Alignment

Though this model helped us visually, we were not satisfied that it captured the full potential of our collaborations. We needed to create a forward-thinking plan with details of shared responsibilities that could provide students with learning opportunities for achieving ILOs.

Therefore, we thought about where we could most easily find common ground, and realized that we should focus on our Institutional Learning Outcomes and work backwards from these to provide students with learning opportunities both in and out of the classroom. We chose two upon which to focus: "critically and ethically engaged in global and local issues," and "knowledgeable and respectful of the diversity of individuals, groups, and cultures." We simplified these to read as "global engagement" and "diversity awareness." Next, we wanted to take our model and create shared learning outcomes at each level for these two broad institutional outcomes. To develop these, the two of us held a series of working lunches and revised a set of learning outcomes until we felt comfortable that they were stated in measurable terms. Thus, we ended up with the following:

Scaffolded Learning Outcomes for Global Engagement
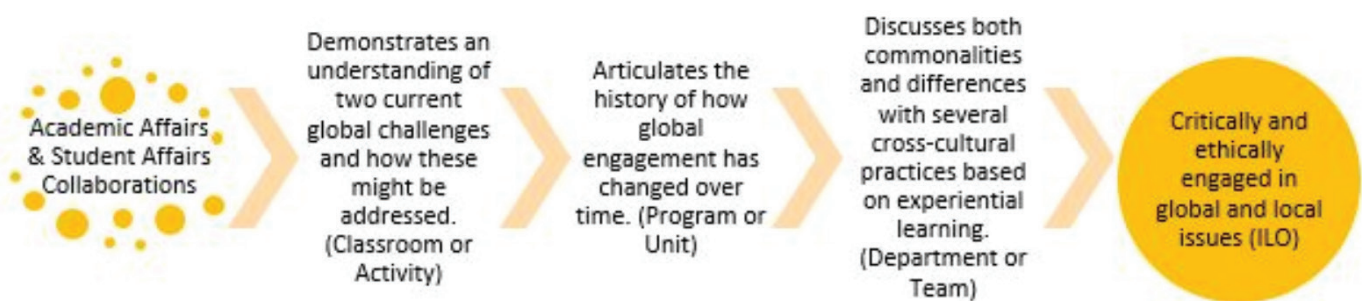
Figure 2. Academic Affairs and Student Affairs Collaborative Learning Outcomes for Global Engagement
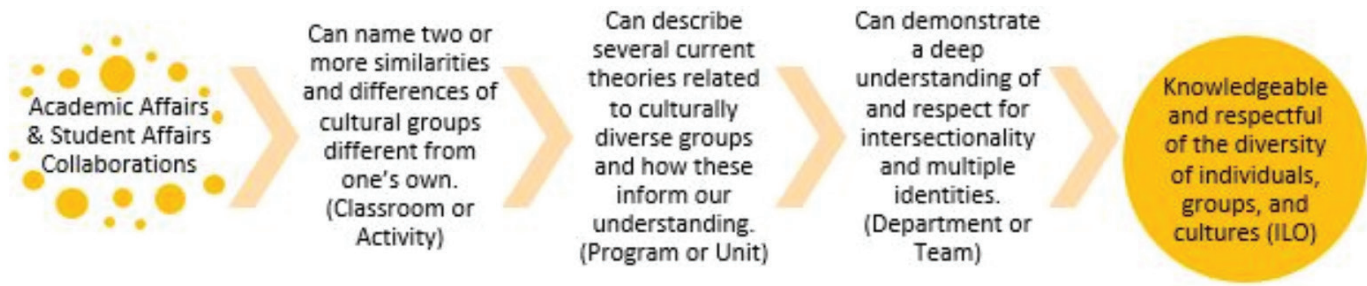
Figure 3: Academic Affairs and Student Affairs Collaborative Learning Outcomes for Diversity Awareness

Next Steps: Inventory of Learning Opportunities and Curricular/Co-Curricular Mapping with Outcomes

Thus, we have four levels of stated learning outcomes for global engagement and diversity awareness percolating through the curriculum and co-curriculum. As a next step, we are creating an inventory of learning opportunities in courses, programs, and departments in Academic Affairs, and activities, programs, and services at the individual, unit, and team levels in Student Affairs that feature these broad outcomes. Then we will take our collective inventory and create a curricular/co-curricular map that looks something like this:

Learning Opportunities	Outcome 1	Outcome 2	Outcome 3	Outcome 4
Classroom X				
Program X				
Department X				
Activity X				
Unit X				
Team X				

Once we list actual learning opportunities in the left column and see which outcomes they align with, we can readily get a visual that tells us where the gaps are so we can make adjustments as necessary. Of course, the list of learning opportunities will be much more extensive than this illustration shows. Moreover, the essential part of our map is the ability to identify where we can bridge the curricular with the co-curricular, and offer a vast richness to student learning experiences that might not currently exist. We will continue to follow our strategic assessment plan. We will collect large-scale survey data from the CIRP Freshman Survey, NSSE, and Diverse Learning Environments to establish a baseline of knowledge concerning global engagement and diversity awareness.

In Sum

Creating bridges between Academic and Student Affairs takes time, but has the great benefit of engaging students in rich and diverse learning opportunities to achieve institutional learning outcomes. We are convinced that through purposeful planning and persistence, it is possible to create an optimal campus learning environment that could not exist otherwise.

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Susan Platt is a WASC Assessment Leadership Alumnus from Cohort V.

**Sharlene Sayegh is a WASC Assessment Leadership Alumnus from Cohort III.*

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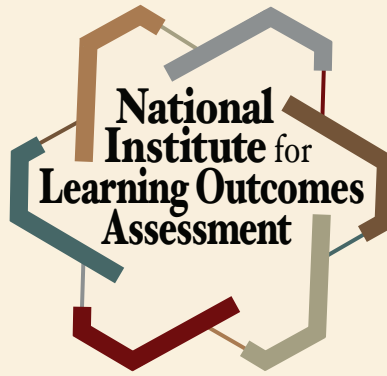
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