



Academic and Student Affairs Sides of the House: Can We Have an Open Concept Learning Design?

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Lately I have been thinking about the language that we use in higher education that distracts us from the purpose of student learning and creates an artificial separation. I frequently hear the metaphor “side of the house” as in the academic side of the house and the student affairs side of the house, as if we (all of us in higher education) should maintain separation in the student’s house, their whole college experience. Are we imposing artificial, and maybe even unconscious, barriers that prevent students from integrating their experiences, getting timely resources, and preparing for a fulfilling life after graduation?

Learning at the Institution

Almost all of higher education institutions today have a set of learning outcomes or objectives (Humphreys, 2016). They address skills related to communication (written, oral, interpersonal), critical thinking, ethical decision making, applying learning, diversity and inclusion, social/civic responsibility, lifelong learning, teamwork, etc. Development in those areas is not limited to the classroom experience: they can occur in student leadership experiences, in employment, in study abroad, and many other opportunities. In a recent study (Hart Research Associates, 2015), employers, unfortunately, were not particularly confident that recent graduates were well prepared in many of those skill areas. I do not think, though, that employers care which “side of the house” students gained these skills, but they do value applied learning experiences. In that same study, recent graduates were also asked about their preparedness. While graduates were more confident than the employers about their preparedness, a third to a half or more did not feel well prepared in areas we say are important.

Historically, we believed that learning took place in the four walls of a classroom, and faculty were in charge of imparting knowledge. The cocurricular was not considered a learning environment and may not have been valued as part of the college experience. In addition, academic affairs and student affairs competed for resources. We acted as independent contractors focusing on our locus of control and a relatively short-term mindset (semester, academic year). My hope is that we are entering a new structure where we recognize that learning can take place everywhere, we are all educators, and we are all responsible for assessing and documenting student learning. This new open design would promote campus collaboration, thus decreasing the competition for resources and renewing the focus on student learning and success as a holistic experience. We would be focusing on preparing students, over an extended time, to be prepared to contribute to society, be gainfully employed, and continue to grow and learn throughout their lives.

Viewpoint

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Call to Action

How do we create an open concept learning design that removes barriers for the student? Here are a few practical, actionable steps we can take.

1. We need to understand what the other does. Many faculty may not understand the depth and breadth of student affairs. Staff may not know what and how faculty teach. We need to take steps to be partners in teaching and learning. Reach out to each other.
2. We need to put student learning at the forefront of what we do. That includes defining and promoting the university statements about learning outcomes and integrating those ideals into what we do on a daily basis. We need to overtly and frequently remind students why learning is important and what activities promote that learning.
3. We need to engage students in their own learning. As staff, are we asking students to integrate what they have learned in class to their cocurricular experiences and vice versa? As faculty, are we seeking learning examples from the cocurricular?
4. In student affairs, we need to focus on learning, applying appropriate pedagogies, and documenting learning. We need to step up to the challenge.

What does that mean for the assessment methods? Here are my suggestions to be better about assessing and documenting student learning.

1. We need to work together to develop a comprehensive assessment strategy to assess student learning on campus. Assessment is everyone's job.
2. We need to map curricular and cocurricular experiences to the institution outcomes and develop appropriate assessment strategies.
3. We need to find ways to integrate data in a meaningful and manageable way that contains both academic and cocurricular data for more complex and thorough analysis.
4. We need to be better at reporting and using results for the improvement of student learning.
5. We need to increase our knowledge and skills around multiple assessment methods.

Overall, we need to move away from sides of the house to create an open concept design where students can see and engage in multiple learning and support experiences at one time. We need to decrease the barriers that exist that have allowed academic affairs and student affairs to operate in silos when it comes to assessing student learning. Let's do better to work together for the benefit of the student's house.

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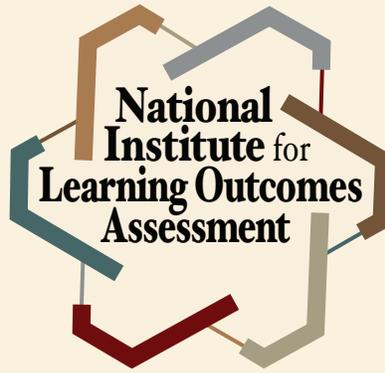
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References

Hart Research Associates. (2015). *Optimistic about the future, but how well prepared? College students views on college learning and career success*. Washington, DC: Author.

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