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Experiential Research and Practical Application: A Case of Student Affairs Partnering with Academic Affairs

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Learning occurs everywhere. Jernstadt (2004) suggests learning occurs on a continuum comprised of knowledge, recognition, application, and extrapolation (as cited in Keeling, 2006). "In our need to put things into categories, we have classified some parts of higher education as curricular, and other parts as co-curricular, but students just call it college" (Keeling & Associates, 2006, p. vii). *Learning Reconsidered* argued for the integrated use of higher education's resources in the education and preparation of the whole student. One of the most critical elements required to accomplish this was the creation or enhancement of strong, collaborative working relationships among academic and student affairs educators (Steffes & Keeling, 2006, p. 69).

The concepts of "learning," "personal development," and "student development" are inextricably intertwined and inseparable. Higher education traditionally has organized its activities into "academic affairs" (learning, curriculum, classrooms, cognitive development) and "student affairs" (co-curriculum, student activities, residential life, affective or personal development). However, this dichotomy has little relevance to post-college life, where the quality of one's job performance, family life, and community activities are all highly dependent on cognitive and affective skills (American College Personnel Association, 1996, para. 6).



making. In doing so, it requires students to take their knowledge from their research coursework and apply it to real-world dynamics at colleges and universities. The "methods" component of the course includes survey methodology and quantitative research, with a particular focus on topics and concerns that are germane to higher education contexts. The course also covers various assessment issues, such as outcomes assessment, program evaluation, benchmarking, and enrollment

Issues and Methods of Applied Inquiry in Higher Education (or "Applied Inquiry" for short) is a required course in the [Bowling Green State University \(BGSU\)](#) Higher Education Administration doctoral program, which started in 1990. The primary goal of this course is to provide students with an understanding of the ways in which assessment and evaluation can and should be used to inform institutional decision making. In doing so, it requires students to take their knowledge from their research coursework and apply it to real-world dynamics at colleges and universities. The "methods" component of the course includes survey methodology and quantitative research, with a particular focus on topics and concerns that are germane to higher education contexts. The course also covers various assessment issues, such as outcomes assessment, program evaluation, benchmarking, and enrollment

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management.

The final project provides students an opportunity to help student affairs (and other) units, which do not have the time, expertise, and/or resources, to conduct the assessment on their own. Thus, an important step in this process is for the course instructor and client to discuss the intended project and ensure that students are able to complete the project effectively within a single semester. This project is innovative in that it brings together academic affairs (through a doctoral course) and student affairs (through a number of units and offices) into a unique and mutually beneficial relationship. The demand for assessment and evaluation has increased rapidly, and assessment has often become decentralized so that student affairs units are asked to provide evidence for their effectiveness and efforts toward improvement. Doctoral students in the higher education administration program bring knowledge from their coursework as well as considerable full-time experience as higher education practitioners before their doctoral training. In many cases, the assessments that students conduct simply would not happen in the absence of this course. Because these projects do not require any direct financial resources, this program seems quite impervious to budget cutbacks of any kind. In fact, reductions in financial or human resources in student affairs units might actually promote the use of these projects, which provide meaningful services to their clients at no cost.

To provide a better understanding of these projects, we discuss an example shared from a project conducted by the two nominating doctoral students (Sherry Early and David Sleasman). This project sought to assess the campus climate for diversity at Bowling Green State University (BGSU). BGSU, which was founded in 1910, is a large, rural, public university with a student population of 17,706. BGSU is classified by the Carnegie Foundation as a research university with high research activity. BGSU is predominantly a White institution (78%) with the majority of students coming from the state of Ohio (87%).



The following research questions guided this study:

1. Does faculty foster an inclusive campus environment at BGSU's main campus?
2. Does staff foster an inclusive campus environment at BGSU's main campus?
3. What are student perceptions of the campus climate on BGSU's main campus?
4. Are there within-college effects that yield long-term implications for much later in life?

The students were charged with the creation, dissemination, collection, synthesis, and presentation of findings both in class and to the Student Affairs Committee. The study was conducted in conjunction with CampusLabs for the Division of Student Affairs (DSA) and the Office of Multicultural Affairs (OMA). The researchers distributed a 155-question survey with items related to inclusion, environment, perceptions, interactions, and experiences to a random sample of undergraduate students attending BGSU's main campus. Questions were designed to measure students' perceptions of campus climate as it pertained to faculty, staff, and other students.

Some of the key findings included (a) White students reported larger gains in understanding of diversity issues during college than did Black students and students from "other" races, (b) the vast majority of students feel that the classroom environment is welcoming and inclusive, (c) a non-trivial proportion of students reported experiencing discrimination (the most common of which was race-based) and/or harassment (the most common of which was gender-related), and (d) a majority of students reported hearing offensive language on campus.

Implications for BGSU, the DSA, and OMA were shared with our constituents. Those



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implications included ensuring faculty, administrators, and staff share with students when to recognize and how to report discriminatory behavior and encouraging cross-cultural dialogues and programming for students on a regular basis. One of the collaborators, Chris Bullins stated:

I could not be more pleased with the partnership that resulted from the completion of this study. David and Sherry were not only passionate individuals concerning this topic, but they were also exemplar scholars and practitioners as they engaged in this process. The unique synergy between the Higher Education and Student Affairs academic unit and the Division of Student Affairs allowed these individuals to assess a topic that ultimately impacts the entire University (C. Bullins, personal communication, December 17, 2012).



The need for collaborative endeavors between student and academic affairs prompted discussions related to professional development and further research on the positive impact of successful seamless partnerships. The capacity to collaborate with other professionals is central to our success, and responsible student affairs programs will focus on professional development resources on improvements in the skills, attitudes, and knowledge necessary for effective collaboration (Borrego, Forrest, & Fried, 2006, p. 63).

Image Citations

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