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Bridging the Divide: Collaborative Practice Between Faculty and Student Services Staff—Findings from a Doctoral Study

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Abstract

Research has shown that collaboration between faculty and student services is essential for the development of a quality student experience (Kezar, 2005). First-year collaborations are designed to support the incoming student and provide a springboard/safety net; however, they often exist on the periphery of the academic experience (Barefoot & Gardner, 2003) and continue to be secondary add-ons.

A multiple-site case study across three post-secondary institutions in British Columbia utilized interviews and focus groups comprised of 10 administrators, 13 faculty, and 13 staff. Using organizational theory (Schein, 2004; Tierney, 1988) and critical theory (Foucault, 1982), the research investigated successes and failures of cross-divisional collaboration between faculty and student services. The critical approach studied developing culture, governance structures and policies, job descriptions, institutional divisions, reporting lines, and marginalized voices. These historical patterns of meaning reflected on the current structures and cultural infrastructure at each site where organizational barriers, role confusion, lack of knowledge, lack of time, and lack of connection were highlighted.

The four major themes that emerged from the study were: (a) informational issues around awareness and definitions, as well as territorial awareness and models for training; (b) environmental issues including history, resources (time and money as well as human), roles, and responsibilities; (c) relationship development that focuses on trust, connection, power, and leadership; and (d) structural issues involving governance structures, reporting structures, and silos.

Keywords: faculty, student services, leadership, power, collaboration, relationships, student experience, governance.

Literature Review

Collaboration is not a new concept in today's higher education. For example, Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) questioned the viability of individual silos of previous historical organizational structures (see also Frost et al., 2010; Kezar, 2009; Magolda, 2010; Schmidt & Kaufman, 2005) that focused on the transfer and assimilation of information as opposed to an integrated campus-wide approach to learning.

If undergraduate education is to be enhanced, faculty members, joined by academic and student service administrators, must devise ways to deliver undergraduate education that is as comprehensive and integrated as the ways that students learn. Supporting an integrated approach to higher education necessitates an institution-wide frame of reference that requires a "great deal of work to build common assumptions about the needed direction or need for change" (Kezar, 2014, p. 33). Collaboration is more than cooperation and sharing timelines, reporting on programs, or aligning calendars (Keeling, 2006). Collaboration on a college campus is a partnership among functional areas that develops initiatives that support the institution's mission and achieve greater efficiency (Kezar & Lester, 2009). A collaborative university brings people together from different perspectives and environments and is primarily about "extending the possibilities for research, opening up new avenues for learning and furthering a multiplicity of aims within the academy" (Walsh & Kahn, 2009, p. 5). Collaboration and shared responsibility deliver services and programs in a seamless, meaningful, integrated way that contributes significantly to student success and institutional strategic goals, missions, and objectives. First-year programs are examples of shared purpose that can benefit both faculty/staff and the institution as a whole.

The historical context suggests an urgent need exists to re-evaluate the isolated structures that support students by changing the organizational design and cultural influence that isolate

academic and student services (Boyer, 1987). The model of central and coordinated partnerships embraced by Canadian Student Services (Fisher, 2011) was highlighted in *Achieving Student Success: Effective Student Services in Canadian Higher Education* (Cox & Strange, 2010). Unfortunately, here lies the crux of the issue: although the research highlighting the benefits of collaborative initiatives between staff and faculty is well documented, this work is primarily ad hoc initiatives that do not always produce sustainable programming (Banta & Kuh, 1998; Bourassa & Kruger, 2001). According to Bourassa and Kruger (2001), the roadblocks to creating and sustaining these partnerships:

have been seen as cultural differences, the historical separation between formal curriculum and informal curriculum, the perception of student affairs as an ancillary function to the academic mission, and competing assumptions about the nature of student learning (p. 9).

Such assumptions challenged how institutions respond to collaborative initiatives, and in the process, have damaged institutional relationships and networks. We must continue to encourage partnerships and teamwork that searches for common ground and mutual goals (Purkey & Siegel, 2003), and consider successes and failures as a collective responsibility.

Significance of the Research

The culture of higher education encourages competition, even though many of the current points of concern within higher education are interconnected and can be successfully addressed with an open and collaborative delivery model. As campuses continue to grow and diversify, increasing issues of power and privilege negate collaboration between faculty and student services staff. This study brought the perpetuation of old patterns to the table, listening to the language being used, as well as the word choices and beliefs conveyed about collaborative initiatives. The

voices highlighted “differences in aims; professional language and cultures; unwarranted assumptions; and genuine or perceived power relations” (Walsh & Kahn, 2009, p. 10). Highlighting these different cultures and diverse perspectives provided opportunities for cross-divisional dialogue “that aims to develop trust and mutual understanding among groups defined by their different social identities” (Arcellus, 2011, p. 71). The study bridged organizational structures, role boundaries, and power structures that may have been unquestioned and reinforced through formal and informal structures (Walsh & Kahn, 2009).

Developing the larger picture of shared goals highlighted the need for new models that were dependent on a new way of thinking. Creating new ways of seeing and overcoming ingrained patterns of behaviour would support the intrinsic value of faculty and student service staff collaboration. Highlighting commonalities and exposing differences across disciplinary, service, administrative, and student boundaries could create new possibilities that support collaborative partnerships.

Global Forces

Parkin and Baldwin (2008) suggested that low persistence levels can relate to lower individual prosperity over time, which exacerbates social inequities and quality of life that ultimately are reflected in costs to society. As the government, society, and higher education more fully recognize the overall negative impact of low student persistence, as well as the current expectation that students “succeed in a system that wasn’t designed for them” (Glauser, 2018, para. 1), first-year programming -- with a focus on providing conditions and environments that support student persistence and success -- are attracting attention.

First-year programs are campus support programs that are structured to help today’s diverse non-regular student population that have different challenges and expectations than in

previous generations (Glauser, 2018). These programs are staffed by peer advisers who recommend simple things like finding affordable food, selling books, and introductions to hubs of student engagement (Glauser, 2018). Struggling students also may find help in counselling centres offering mindfulness workshops; writing centres helping with writing skills and essay construction, and math centres providing hands-on support.

As institutions of higher education attempt to implement these diverse seamless learning environments, cross-institutional partnerships become an integral piece of the puzzle. However, this diversification of learning environments has been hampered by operational barriers or non-existent communications between academic affairs and student affairs. This lack of collaborative vision and lack of interconnectivity between faculty and student services may adversely affect new student populations.

Research Purpose and Questions

The purpose of this research was to analyze cross-divisional collaborations between faculty and student services as they aspire to build broad-based partnerships and integrative educational experiences for students. This research identified and examined the participant perceptions of first-year initiatives and how participant relationships may have promoted or hindered collaborative practice. The study also explored the potential disparities between stakeholder ideologies; defined who gained and held power; and recognized organizational/cultural impact on the development of successful collaborative initiatives. The data was pulled from discussions around the following three questions:

1. How do power and stakeholder beliefs, perspectives, and experiences impact first-year programs in higher education?

2. What are the experiences -- commonalities, and differences -- between faculty and staff involved in first-year programming?
3. What organizational factors (e.g., campus culture) affect the development of first-year partnerships between staff and faculty?

Theoretical Framework

Two theoretical frameworks -- organizational theory and critical theory -- were used to explore the historical evolution of higher education in the development of current organizational structures and cultures. The critical theoretical framework looked at the separations between faculty (curriculum) and staff (co-curriculum). Drawing on the work of Fendler (1999), the critical theory provided a theoretical frame that allowed for an analysis of changes for improved social relationships between faculty and staff. The critical approach studied culture, governance structures and policies, job descriptions, institutional divisions/reporting lines, and the marginalized voices. As historical patterns of meaning created the current structures and cultural infrastructures, the research allowed for discussions that highlighted how institutions evolved into current structures. The research analyzed cultural assumptions with conversations expanding awareness beyond isolated divisions and leading to shared understanding, goals, and objectives.

This study used critical theory to examine the historical journey of three universities -- a mid-sized regional university, a community college, and an institute of technology -- and their different institutional perspectives; the power attached to decision making at each institution; and the impact of their unique organizational structures and subcultures that enhance/impede collaboration. The present study also used organizational theory to understand how collaboration between faculty and staff is situated in a long history of organizational context and cultures.

Critical Theory (CT) has its origins in the Frankfurt School that emerged in the 1930s, which included scholars such as Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, Herbert Marcuse, and Jurgen Habermas. Horkheimer describes CT as a theory that liberates people from the circumstances that enslave them (Ewert, 1991), which requires digging beneath the surface of social life and uncovering the assumptions that have been created and shaped by social, political, cultural, and economic forces that have formed over time into social structures that are accepted as real.

Critical Theory is explanatory, practical, and normative: “It must explain what is wrong with current social reality, identify the actors to change it, and provide both clear norms for criticism and achievable, practical goals for social transformation” (Bohman, 2010, p. 3). Critical Theory enables the research to examine current assumptions that have been constructed by history (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2005), and exposed power relationships that can create “psychic prisons that prevent seeing old problems in a new light” (Bolman & Deal, 1997, p. 5). Critical Theory was used to peel away the layers of institutional development and departmental fragmentation and expose the relationships between faculty and staff while also providing directive suggestions for new collaborative partnerships.

Critical Theory can address a number of long-standing discussions with regard to faculty and staff collaborations. Critical theory helped analyze relationships using values and beliefs as a necessary part of the inquiry and was used to look at power structures and allowed the research to peel away their layers of complexity to understand what was going on. The theory asks why something was represented in a certain way, considers what had been harmed, and what could be restored?

Critical theorists and postmodernists believe that “social structures equate to the domination and marginalization of some groups by others” (Hatch & Cunliffe, 2006, p. 102).

Using a lens of ‘power’ enabled this study to explore governance and hierarchical structures as they applied to the voices being heard within the three institutions being examined, as well as the impact of these structures on the development of the collaborative practice between staff and faculty. According to Levin (2009), “Institutional governance is on the one hand what shapes institutional behaviours, and on the other hand, what defines the character of the institution” (p. 47). As demographic and socio-political changes continue to evolve in higher education, critical theory can provide an opportunity for reconstructing collaborative practices by articulating the key themes in the development of alternative critical approaches for faculty and staff transitions to more successful first-year collaborations.

However, it must be noted that the limitations and critiques of critical theory also may point to potential distortions with regard to the validity of interpretation since participants in the study may not have the same assumptions about knowledge and thereby hold different interpretations that may or may not be equally valid. Hence, the research incorporated organizational theory, to examine the social units within the three institutions; how they are structured to meet a need; or pursue a collective goal. With a focus on commonalities rather than differences, the study addressed the “misunderstandings, mistrust, disrespect, conflict, disdain and antagonism” (Arcellus, 2011, p. 65) that have developed through historical differences.

This juxtaposition of critical and organizational theories is crucial for the reflective processes required for analyzing the subcultures of student services and faculty. In each division, subcultures have their own values and norms, which are distinct from the institution as a whole. This overlay highlights the culture, power, and equity that have created disjointed practices that have prevented collaborations from reaching their full potential and created divisive splits and negative interpretations between colleagues (Tierney, 2008). While critical theory helps with

social construction, organizational culture highlights the impact of structural and cultural impediments within the institution. According to Fendler (1999), “The task of critical research in education is to provide theoretical mechanisms that allow for radical change in social relations” (p. 169). This awareness helps create a better understanding across disciplines that showcase the opportunities to be found in interdisciplinary collaboration.

Using first-year programming to focus on collaboration and applying critical and organizational theoretical frameworks, this research studied successful/unsuccessful collaborations between faculty and staff. The focus was on “explain[ing] what is wrong with current social reality, identify[ing] the actors to change it, and provid[ing] both clear norms for criticism and achievable, practical goals for social transformation” (Bohman, 2010, p. 3). This research reviewed contexts that included: competing demands for dollars, loss of control, power issues, evidence of differing cultures, potentially limited resources, disengagement, the need for administrative support, and improved communications that enhance collegiality and mutual respect.

Qualitative Research: Multiple Case Design

This comparative multi-case study bound together with a collection of three sites that were not uniform across their different campuses, cultures, and history, although they do share common programming and institutional characteristics (Stake 2006). These sites were chosen because of their disparate provincial mandates that arguably create a different focus and culture. A comparative multi-case study examines in detail a “collection of people, activities, policies, strengths or problems or relationships” (Stake, 2006, p. vi). Each site has its own culture, organizational structure, problems, relationships, and stories. The three sites examined in the present study are all institutes of higher education with different strategic plans; a diversity of

students; and similar, but different experiences. The decision to use a comparative multi-case study recognizes the complex role played by organizational cultures and subcultures. Each institution within this study has evolved from its Canadian, post-World War 2 educational direction, and its specific focus created by provincial needs and funding. As these institutions of higher learning have developed, their ways of interacting and their structural differentiated ways of developing partnerships and collaborations.

Table 1.

Multiple Case Study Design

	Site 3	Site 2	Site 1
Structure/Type	Public Polytechnic Institution	Degree-granting College	Public Regional University
Established	1960	1994	1974
Purpose	Serve the success of learners and employers	Commit to enhancing the skills, knowledge, and values of life-long learners	Measure its success by the successes of its graduates
Student population	18,000 full-time 30,000 part-time	21,000 full- and part-time	14,849 full- and part-time
Faculty/Staff Demographic	1,800 full-time faculty and staff 600 part-time faculty and staff		722 faculty full- and part-time 699 staff and administrators
Institutional First-year Program	Individual Programs.	Individual Programs	Individual Programs
International First-year Programming	Yes—limited	Yes	Yes
Isolated Departmental First-year Programming	Yes	Yes	Yes

Data Collection

Table 2.
Demographic of Participants

Participants	Site A	Site B	Site C
Administrator	6	2	2
Staff	6	5	3
Faculty	5	5	3

Note: This table provides the number of research participants from each site.

Administrator Interviews: The semi-structured interviews enabled the research to incorporate relationships, history, and interdependencies at each specific institution.

Semi-Structured Focus Groups: These semi-structured focus groups obtained qualitative data from a range of people across several groups (e.g., faculty and staff). The focus groups brought together small groups of people (3–6) to gather opinions and understand participants’ perceptions, feelings, and thinking on collaborative initiatives.

At two institutions, three focus groups were scheduled that ranged from 1.5-2 hours in duration. The third institution combined its faculty and staff for the two focus groups. The first two focus groups were divided into faculty participants and staff participants. This method was supported by Arcellus (2008), who suggested using three focus groups designed to initially incorporate intragroup dialogue (likeminded), with the third focus group incorporating intergroup (diverse perspectives) dialogue.

Analysis

The data was collected in multiple forms, including administration interviews, student service focus groups, faculty focus groups and combined focus groups. Through analysis, the data was developed into themes and classified into major/minor, unexpected, and hard to classify. Layering and connecting themes and variables increased the rigor of the study, which increased its complexity and interconnections (Creswell, 2008). The themes developed a complex picture of the problem, involving multiple perspectives and multiple factors, and projected a larger emerging picture (Creswell, 2008).

Step 1: The themes from the administrator interviews were: institutional histories; the challenge of collaborative initiatives, personal relationships, effective communication and intentional integration of departments, hierarchical divides, collective agreements and governing boards.

Step 2. The themes from the faculty and staff focus groups were: institutional awareness, strategies, and training for collaboration, fragmentation, duplication of services, culture, resources, role responsibilities, trust, and connection. This understanding of commonalities and differences of faculty and staff perspective then informed the process in the third focus groups with Site 1 and 2. The themes that emerged here were governance, hierarchy, power, roles and responsibilities, and organizational structure.

Step 3. Theory Influence in Analysis

The theoretical influences for the coding emerged when the organizational culture was described by the administrator interviews and re-emerged in the faculty and student service interviews—both spoke of the organizational barriers, role confusion, lack of knowledge, lack of time, and lack of connection. In the combined focus groups of faculty and student services, the researcher was mindful of the power potentially influencing the discussions (e.g., staff not feeling comfortable to

speak with faculty listening); however, this was not evident in the focus groups as each participant did share their ideas and perspectives. The issues of power consistently came out in the conversations relating to funding and allocation of resources along with job responsibilities and areas.

Step 4. Following the establishment of the major themes, a comparative table was created that mapped out the research questions, the literature, the theoretical connections (e.g., organizational structure, culture, power) to the research analysis (e.g., quotes were selected that demonstrated a particular theme). These comparative tables (akin to mind maps) were used to find any connections between the schools and connect the data to the literature and theoretical frameworks.

Findings

Reviewing the present study data, four threads emerged. Within each major theme, the analysis brought together similar sub-themes/codes as detailed in Table 3.

Table 3.
Discussion Threads Common to all three Sites

Informational	Awareness and definition—What is collaboration? Who is at the table, and what do they bring?
	How do we improve models/strategies/training? Territorial awareness
Environmental	History
	Individualistic culture
	Resources (time & money)
	Resources (human)
	Roles and responsibilities

Relationship	Trust, connection, communication, inclusivity, leadership Power—using collaboration as a personal stepping-stone for success How do we communicate and connect to understand each other? Who can teach?
Structural	Governance structures Reporting structures Silos Availability of administrators Space allocation

Informational - What is Collaboration

Within the major theme of Informational, the strongest sub-theme was Improving Collaboration, where the codes included roles and responsibilities; evolution of student services from service to supporter of student development; understanding definitions of collaboration; different models of collaboration, and strategies/training for successful collaboration were placed.

Collaboration was the focus of this research, and multiple interpretations of what this word meant were evident across the three sites concerning both definition and practice. For example, descriptions of *collaboration* ranged from “everyone wants to have their opinion heard and getting a bee in their bonnet if they feel they haven’t been heard” (Staff 3, Site Two) to “people feeling pushed, and some felt left out, and some people who were pushing were doing it for their own reasons, not necessarily for the good of the whole” (Staff 5, Site One), and Faculty 2, Site Three felt they just weren’t asked: “I want to talk about retention, no one has come to me, not asked. A lot of people could be asked but aren’t. I suppose workload could be an issue.” This lack of a clear

definition, poor communication, and a sense of being left out created a lot of apprehensions that impacted the willingness of colleagues to participate.

An analysis of the research data shows that collaboration requires more than just developing common goals, language, and assumptions. The researcher explored the obstacles that “have been seen as cultural differences; the historical separation between formal curriculum and informal curriculum; the perception of staff as an ancillary function to the academic mission; and competing assumptions about the nature of student learning (Bourassa & Kruger, 2001, p. 9) To be successful, “we need to define *collaboration* and create an environment in which it is rewarded” and we need to “appeal to something everyone shares” (Administrator 1, Site Three), which makes everyone feel that they are an important part of the initiative. Faculty 4, Site One expressed that “collaborations do happen, but moving forward requires time and resources, and takes time to foster new relationships”; Staff 1, Site Two suggested that “collaborations only happen when there is a crisis”; and Staff 2, Site Three felt that “it is hard to work together with different goals, and a lack of awareness.” Consistently, throughout the data, concerns existed as to a lack of process that would support collaborative initiatives and the need for formal structures and clear goals and definitions.

Small collaborations work due mainly to the relationships that people have developed over time. In developing larger institutional collaborations the leaderships must provide a transparent vision that reflects the strategic plans and learning outcomes of each organization. This research highlighted three schools, three strategic plans, and three cultures all focused on student success – the same ... but also very different. These differences were apparent between the individual institutions but also within each of the institutions. If leadership allows departments to choose individualized efforts, the results leads to disjointed efforts. A corporate culture that reinforces a

discipline of execution – focus on changing people’s beliefs and behaviors so that they produce results, not just ideas, plans, and strategies – provides a shift toward a results-oriented culture (Daft, 2007). Leadership must provide opportunities for cross functional skill sets and cross-unit interpersonal networks that identify with the organization as a whole. Collaboration creates solid opportunities – but good outcomes take time to build relationships.

Environmental

The major theme of Environmental included sub-themes/codes of institutional historical evolution, the current culture of faculty, current culture of staff, resources (time and funding); power was evident in this theme through the influence of directives that created power imbalances, resource imbalances and concerns about who made impactful decisions. Environmental data included: (a) the evolution of roles and role confusion; (b) departmental responsibilities; (c) the impact of culture; and (d) the placement of resources (time and money).

Administrator 1, Site Three suggested that: “Culturally, we just haven’t been doing it, and one of the big challenges in any post-secondary is a large amount of history -- the way it has always been.” This necessary cultural shift is difficult, especially with respect to faculty “who do not have an experiential background that enables them to think that faculty and staff could work as a team, and they lack an understanding of what Student Services does” (Staff 3, Site Two). According to Ahern (2008), “The disparity between faculty and student service cultures is clearly having a deleterious effect on partnerships between the two” (p. 89). Often, staff and faculty roles are perceived as very different, with staff having a secondary role in the institution. Research participants tended to understand the need for collaboration but felt that an overarching belief existed that faculty work had nothing to do with student services work, so there was no point in faculty and staff working together. Participants also recognized that an understanding of the

complexities and scope of each other's work was lacking, and they also were concerned about making the necessary cultural shifts - the difficult tasks of negotiating meaning, social relations, knowledge, and value (Kezar, 2005) -- although, at the same time, they recognized the potential benefits and value of faculty and staff understanding each other's roles and responsibilities.

Staff 3, Site Two, suggested that: "All of this is hard because we are so diverse." Also, "We need to show positive change and that student services make a difference to student lives" (Staff 1, Site Three). It became clear that, in general, the participants felt that student services must be able to show its value and have benchmarks to track progress. We know our students are not here for first-year programs, but a student's experience at an institution of higher learning is enriched and supported through the support that student services provides -- through work experience support, disability support, and mental health support -- and it becomes another kind of valuable purpose by helping a student stay at the institution and continue their learning experience (Administrator 6, Site One).

At the three site connections, relationships suffered between student services and faculty arose due to (a) decreasing levels of funding; (b) increasing roles and responsibilities; (c) increasing complexities of student issues; and (d) an increasing level of accountability (Arcellus, 2011). As resources for educational areas not close to the marketplace diminished, programs designed to support the well-being of students also diminished (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004). Additionally, Staff 1, Site Three, and Staff 3, Site Three commented on a lack of training (due to lack of funding), a lack of knowledge between groups, and a lack of connection that ultimately led to a lack of trust.

Consistent themes reflected the "expectation to do more work (while holding on for dear life), and an inability to find the time for collaboration" (Faculty 1, Site Three). Faculty 3, Site

Three expressed “having excellent intentions but being pulled in different directions,” and Staff 4, Site One spoke about “more work on each person, doing so much more. We don’t have time to collaborate.” Staff 1, Site Two commented that “more often than not, there is not even a willingness to cooperate.”

Role confusion, declining revenues, and increased work-loads all contribute to the breaking down of trust, with departments working their own system instead of working with a central overarching plan that they can hook into. The multiple levels, functional divisions, differentiated roles and rewards are exacerbated by fragmented information and hinder collaborative partnerships.

Relationships

The major theme of Relational spoke to the sub-themes/code of trust, connection, inclusivity, individualistic culture, communications, and power. The success of any collaborative initiative had its roots in the relationship and respect that participants had for each other.

Although respect, shared values, and appreciation are required for successful collaborations, the research found trust between staff and faculty was lacking due to an absence of opportunities to actually work together consistently. Magolda and Baxter-Magolda (2011) have pointed to the importance of recognizing the tensions and challenges that create distrust amongst colleagues and the need to acknowledge these tensions and create opportunities to discuss the divergent views and beliefs around student success. Departmental silos, a lack of communication, and “new layers of administration [create] a loss of connection” (Staff 1, Site Two). “Unless we trust people, we will be unable to talk to them” (Faculty 2, Site One).

Communication is the necessary bridge: “Currently we only build relationships when there is a problem” (Staff 1, Site Two). If we don’t build relationships, how can we work together?

Seifert (2018) has highlighted the importance of building communities of practice where staff across divisions get together to share information. Faculty and staff need to create these networks to “build relationships and reinforce a sense of common purpose vision and focus on mission” (Seifert, 2018, p. 4). Participants at all three sites believed that fostering relationships was about 80% of the job. Administrator 1, Site Two thought that good relationships built strong inter-related pathways and connections for collaboration. Healthy relationships build trust and respect and enable healthy dialogue and collaboration. Collaborations between staff and faculty at all three sites were highly dependent on individual relationships. Importantly, it was noted that these relationships take time to develop, and they are crucial for any initiative that requires collaboration.

“Wherever there is differentiation – the elaboration of our differences – special attention needs to be given to dedifferentiation: developing and maintaining our commonality” (Oshrey, 1995, p.8). Relationships are essential for successful collaborations and taking the time to build that understanding and respect ultimately develops trust between the departments.

Structural

The major theme of Structural included themes around an organizational structure that included placement of administrative offices, divisional offices and student service space; governance structure and staff/faculty representation balance/voice; and physical space that allows for individuals and departments to interconnect and share ideas.

Institutions of higher learning are not intentionally designed to create space for conversation and collaborations. The study staff participants suggested that an organizational structure around first-year was lacking and that “the voices supporting first-year programming (Student Services) were limited due to hierarchical divisions and limited power” (Staff 4, Site One). According to Seifert (2018), any meaningful change certainly required the work of the front-

line employees but also strong policies and government action. Additionally, the groups recognized that collaboration had a greater chance of success when senior administration was involved: “The development of first-year partnerships has a chance of success if the department initiating the contact (Student Services) is under the responsibility of a traditionally respected deanery” (Administrator 4, Site One).

The study participants discussed hierarchy within their institutions and the impact of governance structures in creating roadblocks to developing collaborative initiatives. Two of the institutions in the present study created Vice President Students positions, whereas the third institution located the student services portfolio directly under the Vice President Academic. The schools with VP Students believed the creation of the position supported a student-centred approach to learning and the value of support services to the delivery of an excellent academic program. The third institution felt that reporting to the VP Academic kept student services close to the academic core and strengthened its position in the hierarchy of the institution. The data collected did not indicate that one of these organizational structures positively impacted governance or status of student services within the institutional community. Concerns existed at all three sites regarding the different interests competing for power and resources when key resources became scarce and regarding the decisions that had to be made about who would get what in terms of resources, time, and money (Bolman & Deal, 1997).

At the three sites, some reporting structures produced overlapping communication, but, for the most part, they were not structured that way. Faculty 5, Site One suggested that “their institution was not supporting what we need to support cross- divisionally ... reporting structures don’t produce communication ... too many committees and a waste of resources.” The intention was lacking regarding the creation of necessary spaces for collaborations, and the conversations

that were being held were not structured for collaboration: “If the institution is intentional in the commitment to student development, then set up meetings between student services and faculty affairs where there are facilitated discussions/forums around common issues and challenges” (Faculty 1, Site One). Structured conversations are needed to keep people informed.

Participants at all three sites also asked many similar questions around common issues and challenges: (a) What is the core business of the institution? (b) What is specialty programming? (c) What is being funded? (d) What is the composition of the collaboration committee? (e) Who was on the committee and did they bring prestige and political clout? Staff 1, Site One expressed that: “Staff may be invited to the table but do not have a voice and don’t connect with academic affairs stakeholders, and the higher you go, the worse it gets.” Staff 5, Site Two suggested that: “We are not presented as equals— student services are secondary.” Staff 2, Site Three said that: “discussions are needed with regard to who is at the table and whether their voice is distributed across divisions.” These questions are essential and have not been answered through the organizational positioning of staff on various committees, task forces and governance boards. Answers require the leadership team to provide the direction and opportunities for collaborations. According to Faculty 4, Site Two: “There is no sense of what we are each doing and no organizational structure that would support dialogue between faculty and staff.” The faculty at all three institutions expressed their concerns about separation, the lack of cross-divisional alignment to structural and work demand barriers, and how this problematic environment encouraged them to easily fall back onto what always has been done. Faculty 1, Site One suggested that “this is a very real culture of ‘what has always been’ in the absence of leadership around holistic student development.”

Site One participants looked for intersecting paths and relationships, whereas participants at Site Two looked for ways to communicate available opportunities and different ways to collaborate. As a researcher, there was an expectation of finding a power differential between staff and faculty, but there was no sense of this in any of the focus group discussions, although it was evident in how they spoke about their roles within the institution (e.g., resources, influence). Participants from Site One and Site Two talked about power differentials when decreased funding was an issue or territorial claims were questioned. An administrator from Site Three said that “everyone was willing to share when resources are ample,” and Staff 4, Site One stated: “The teeth come out when resources are limited or someone needs to change their way of doing things. Sure, I am happy to collaborate; just don’t ask me to change anything.”

Leadership has not found ways or defined strategies how collaboration should happen. . There appears to be a willingness to collaborate between people on the ground but it requires leaderships to say we need to do that.

Conclusion

The findings of the study provided numerous examples of successful and not so successful collaborative initiatives being developed through inconsistent silo approaches that more often than not only lasted a few years. Participants described the layers of context that contributed to roadblocks to collaboration, and the potential opportunities for successful collaborations and support for first-year programming. They also expressed their uncertainty about how to proceed with a collaborative approach to supporting students, although agreement existed on the need for high-level support that would embed first-year programming in the strategic plans of each institution. Additionally, they expressed the need for developing policies and evaluation processes for new institutional initiatives, and for training for faculty and staff.

Moving forward, there is a need to analyze existing structures, institutional divisions, reporting lines, and hierarchical and governance structures that include administrative and service components. According to Seifert (2018), “Working in isolation is not a best practice for supporting student success” (p. 43). A culture that supports a shared commitment to student success enhances the development of collaborative initiatives. Due to increasing complexity and demands; budget and finance constraints; increased competition; and rapidly changing expectations and learning approaches from young learners (Magnusson, 2010), we must engage with each other to support a common goal—student success.

Implications for Practice, Policy, and Theory

A collaborative effort on first-year initiatives would be a large-scale change to the development of first-year infrastructure. The success of this substantial change relies heavily on the ability of stakeholders to understand, manage, and possibly shape a new organizational culture (Kouzes & Posner, 2006). Although subcultures with dichotomous beliefs and perspectives can provide diversity and strength, most organizational change fails due to these cultural differences and organizational fragmentations (Locke, 2006).

Kezar (2014) has pointed to the importance of the work needed to build common assumptions around the need for structural change, and 27 years earlier, Boyer (1987) argued for a change in organizational design and cultural influence that continues to isolate staff and faculty. The present study informs the direction for leadership and future research that provides ongoing value and utility. It offers insights for the development of well-defined processes that will bring people together by inviting many diverse voices to create connections that will better serve everyone. The study highlighted the complexities of developing a collaborative institution, whether it be ad hoc programming or an institutional-wide sustained initiative. Seifert (2018)

echoed the concerns of research participants who reflected on the visionaries who came and went because the political structure was not there to support the vision. Sustainable collaborative practices require strong policies and government action.

Three schools, three strategic plans, three cultures, and three diverse structural designs have created contrasting frameworks from which to build collaborative partnerships. This present research has shown that it would be difficult to develop a universal approach for developing first-year initiatives due to the different leadership styles and mandates of different sites. When asked about the collaboration, Site One mainly focused on organizational structures, governance structures, and historical evolution. Site Two focused on relationships and felt that the size of their institution enabled an overall feeling of connectedness, although growing administrative numbers were putting a strain on that connection. Site Three also focused on relationships to build successful individual programs but included organizational structures as impacting opportunities for broader institutional collaborations. These differences in culture and leadership provide different trajectories for the development of collaborative, integrated first-year programs.

Institutions of higher learning are not intentionally designed to create space for conversation and collaboration. Some reporting structures produce overlapping communication, but for the most part, they are not structured that way. This lack of cross-divisional alignment to structural and work demand barriers allows people to easily fall back into what has always been done. Reporting structures do not produce communication. For example, two institutions in this study created VP student positions, and the third institution located the SA portfolio directly under the VP academic. There was no inference from the data collected that either organization had a better impact on governance or status within the community. Comments regarding the VP positions asked whether or not the position held stature and whether or not it was respected. The

site that reported directly to the VP academic felt that the positioning kept student services close to the academic core and strengthened their position in the hierarchy of the institution but was concerned about the allocation of resources.

The key to having a position in the hierarchy is also having a voice at the table and an ability to connect with colleagues. Who is at the table and are their voices distributed across divisions? What happens when faculty and student affairs compete for power and resources when key resources become scarce, and decisions about who gets what in terms of resources, time and money? There are similar questions around common issues and local challenges—What is being funded; what is the composition of the collaboration committee—do they bring prestige and political clout? Are student services and academic affairs presented as equals?

This research has highlighted that there are implications that can be dealt with immediately and other implications that will take time, resources and leadership. There needs to be more focus on the initiative, the roles that we play, and the impact of the work. Dreaming bigger requires greater inter-connectedness, greater awareness, and greater leadership. As for what can be done now, referencing the work of Kezar (2014) on building connections and the results of this research, there are five key areas for attention. These include:

- 1) Positioning yourself where there is traffic—committees, boards, task forces, alumni associations.
- 2) Get people's attention.
- 3) Be relevant and accountable.
- 4) Show value—stories, success—to students as well as colleagues—possible connection with the alumni association and student union.
- 5) There is a limited window of opportunity—be prepared and act decisively.

6) Develop leaders within Student Services.

More long-term future studies might examine a) the impact of organizational structures, in particular, the lack of student affairs professionals on governance committees, task forces, and committees; b) communication strategies that enable knowledge sharing and provide access to institutional knowledge; c) institutional leadership; and d) how cultural change happens.

Institutional renewal and common vision are broad concepts that involve whole-institutional participation, considerable time, and effective leadership. However, as noted by Kuh (1996) and Kezar (2003), before these broad concepts can be developed, a common language and communication strategy must be created. Leadership must “address differences in aims, professional language and cultures; unwarranted assumptions and genuine or perceived power relations” (Walsh & Kahn, 2009, p. 10).

The success of any institutional renewal urgently requires the re-evaluation and development of organizational structures that reflect the needs of a changing culture. This renewal might include examining the lack of Student Services personnel in governance, finding ways to create opportunities for staff voices to be heard, and building structures and campus resources that support collaborative practice and integrated learning (Kezar, 2014). This renewal requires student participation that encompasses the diversity of the student body, as well as their goals and expectations. A critical reflection on organizational structures and changing cultures can provide a framework for understanding current environments that can enhance future discussions concerning knowledge development around collaborative initiatives and first-year programming.

This study has provided an opportunity for inclusive discussions on the implications for practice, policy, and research for developing collaborative initiatives. The overarching themes in the development of collaborative initiatives related to relationships, common values, positioning

of power and voice, financial and human resources, and effective leadership. Some of these concerns can be dealt with immediately, but others will take time, resources, and leadership. Overall, a need exists to be more focused on initiatives; the cultures that define us; the structures that impede us; the roles that we play; the commonality of the work; and the positive impact on student success.

The new realities of the student experience and their aspirations have dramatically exceeded what we could have experienced even a few short months ago. Although the context of the student experience is radically different, the value of providing inter-connection and an expansion of this experience is more important than ever. There is a need for institutions to be responsive to these changing forms of student engagement. Communication, connection, and collaboration across all divisions of the institution remains essential for broadening the opportunities for student experiences. Today, my question recognizes that universities have worked hard to provide the organizational structure for students to continue their education, but where is the leadership that is intentional in designing the student experience? With the absence of overarching institutional leadership the leadership for student success falls to individual departments and a disjointed approach to helping students succeed.

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Biography Jill Gibson, 2021

Dr. Jill Gibson is a retired student-affairs professional with 25 years of experience at the University of the Fraser Valley. Jill has progressive experience in planning, organizing, and delivering programs and activities that support student development, student leadership, and student success. Jill's leadership positions in higher education include Coordinator Student Events; Coordinator Assessment Services; Acting Director Assessment Services; Acting Athletic Director; Faculty/Staff Contract Administrator; Manager Housing and Student Life; and Program Manager, Continuing Studies. Her career has provided a broad canvas that supported her completion of a Master's degree from Royal Roads, and she recently completed a Doctor of Education from Simon Fraser University. The access to numerous personal stories, that depict how individuals experience their environment and their relationships, helped develop the framework for her doctoral studies. Jill continues to have a passion for finding ways to connect and collaborate through compromise, dialogue, respect, and vision.

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