

SUMMARY

QEP Topic Selection Focus Group 1

November 24, 2009

ACADEMIC ADVISING

- There is a clear need for students to have strong relationships – relationships that are often missing the first couple of years – with their academic advisors; more specifically, a *mentoring* component is essential.
- Although automation of advising would certainly make things easier for both students and advisors – in terms of course selection, etc. – (automation – i.e., *Degree Works* – that will be in place within one year), there are some potential problems with such automation. Indeed, one of the frustrations aired by some advisors is in students' failure to take advantage of the opportunities available in the current system. Perhaps, then, there should be greater emphasis placed on the collaborative and interactive nature or character of advising; students often drop and/or add courses without ever consulting their advisors.
- Perhaps there should be different “levels” of advising: e.g., freshman advisors.
- *Mentoring* is clearly at the heart of academic advising, especially in light of the fact that so many students come to CBU as “undecided” with respect to their major. Moreover, there is a need to mentor the mentors; this would obviously fall under *faculty development*. There is currently no training for advisors, nor is there any sort of advisor's “handbook.”
- Alumni participants were quite surprised at the number of problems cited by other participants in relation to academic advising – especially student participants, all of whom expressed a clear dissatisfaction with their overall experience(s) with various advisors – and suggested that perhaps mentoring was more prevalent in years past. In years past, the advisor's signature was required before changes could be made in a student's schedule. They – alumni and students – also spoke quite favorably of an emphasis on a mentoring component to advising, and no limiting advising to faculty members.
- How, then, to go about measuring or assessing the effectiveness of this topic in relation to Improving or enhancing student learning? In an effort to improve the overall quality and effectiveness of advising, perhaps advisors ought to be evaluated, which would make it possible to note certain trends that may exist; all in attendance agreed with this suggestion. One participant suggested incorporating group advising at certain points, if only to provide an opportunity for students to get to know their advisors and other students in their major.
- Concern was expressed with respect to *assessing* the extent to which improved academic advising enhances student learning. In response, some pointed to the need to tailor assessment-related questions in such a manner that the actual assessment piece would be easier and more useful/effective. As an example, advisors – in the kind of mentoring role conceived in this conversation – would assist students in seeing the value of *all* courses in their academic career – not simply ones in their major – and how the various “parts” are, in actual point of fact, indispensable in relation to the “whole.”
- Most obviously, *retention* was seen as an especially important means of assessment, as well as rates of dropped courses, etc. Both anecdotal and statistical evidence would be needed.

- What is the greatest asset of a CBU education? The consensus of this focus group was that it is the individual attention given to each and every student, and the strong relationships that often develop when quality advising is seen as integral to our mission. The alumni strongly agreed with this point and, in citing it as one of the main “selling points” of a CBU education, suggested that students often don’t appreciate this on the “front end.”
- That one-on-one academic advising is both *available* and *valuable* is something that could obviously be assessed, but it would require advisor training. From an empirical point of view, many students “flee” early on in their academic careers, and perhaps an emphasis on quality advising would assist in retaining some/many of these students, and also help them to achieve academic success (with a view to professional fulfillment and success).

FIRST YEAR EXPERIENCE

- The clear advantage of selecting this as CBU’s QEP topic would be the opportunity it affords to identify, assist, and retain “at risk” students, including those with various learning disabilities – not simply those with low GPAs – in an effort to prevent them from “falling through the cracks.”
- The consensus among the student participants was that the current Freshman Orientation Program is fairly “useless,” since it does not really address critical issues like the importance of academic advising, student services, using the Writing Center, etc. Perhaps a FYE program could be tied to the FOP. In defense of the current FOP, however, one student participant referred both to the challenges and inherent value of Peer Counselors, and suggested that, perhaps, the FOP should be expanded beyond 8-weeks, which could include a more fully developed Peer Counseling program.
- Another student participant spoke very candidly about the fact that, if not for the strong Honors Program and the relationships they developed there, they would not have remained at CBU. This student went on to suggest that we make every effort to “improve community,” since it is this *sense of community* that, alone, is responsible for their decision to remain at CBU.
- A recommendation was made to use the Honors Program as a kind of “model” that might be extended – in the form of *learning communities* – to reach out to “at risk” students. With respect to assessment, this would obviously – or, at least, ideally – assist with *retention*, and address the apparent “dissonance” that often exists between student expectations and the reality of college life; assessment should occur both at the beginning and at the end of the academic year.
- A suggestion was made by a faculty participant that the second semester of academic advising could serve as part of the “target group” – this could be mandatory for some but open to others; this is the point at which students are often most “at risk” (in a number of respects).
- The question regarding the number/percentage of students who have actually committed to CBU by June or July was raised. The response: The group of “late deciders” was identified as a “*big problem*” and becomes a significant issue with respect to those who decide later to matriculate; this clearly needs to be addressed.

SERVICE LEARNING

- One alumni representative cited a clear correlation between employees who have had service learning-type experiences and the overall quality of the employee(s); they are much more goal-oriented and work especially well in teams/groups. In light of the fact that we must compete with other institutions for students, service learning should be the “hallmark” of CBU and what sets it apart. Indeed, many CBU alumni remain in Memphis.
- Although most of the participants were convinced that service learning should be an essential component of a CBU education – given its relationship to our mission and vision (“enter to learn, leave to serve”) – potential problems with incorporating it into our curriculum were cited. Thus, perhaps it should be incorporated in a First Year Experience program.
- Moreover, one student participant made reference to the number of students who already work full-time – and thus live the lives of adults – and several participants agreed that making service learning mandatory seemed counter-intuitive. Still, if we *call* ourselves “Lasallian” then we need to *be* Lasallian. Furthermore, selecting service learning as our QEP topic would both allow for the entire CBU community to be involved – including alumni – and also serve to strengthen our community. In sum, service learning is “transformational learning.”
- How, then, would we measure and/or assess the extent to which adding a service learning component to our curriculum has actually improved or enhanced student learning? One suggested that we make service learning mandatory only for first-year students and develop outcomes that would take this into account, including whether they continue to pursue service opportunities and even internships that reflect this transformation in their attitudes and practices. Another suggested that we use student reflections as a means of evaluating overall change(s) in values, dispositions, etc.
- On the other hand, selecting this topic would obviously leave out those in Graduate and Professional Studies, perhaps serving to increase the divide – whether real or perceived – that already exists between day and evening students.
- In the end, some who, towards the beginning of the conversation, had seen incorporating a mandatory service learning component as problematic had “repented,” and spoke of the importance of our actually *being* who we say we are as an institution in the Lasallian tradition.