

SUMMARY

QEP Topic Selection Focus Group 2

December 3, 2009

ACADEMIC ADVISING

- Although academic advising certainly includes and involves assisting students with course selection, perhaps the most important component is that of *mentoring*, and the individual attention that is central to CBU's mission. Such mentoring could include graduate school options, employment options and opportunities, etc. Above all, the importance of assisting students in making appropriate, wise, prudent decisions in the various areas of their individual lives. The advisor ought to serve as an *advocate* for the student, which obviously involves the establishing of an important relationship in the student's life, and one that could conceivably extend into the professional realm.
- One student participant spoke of the indispensable role their advisor has played throughout their academic career at CBU, especially since they entered as "undecided." Thus, mentoring began immediately and the relationship with their advisor has continually proven to be an "invaluable" part of their overall experience.
- Everything discussed and proposed to this point highlights the need to train advisors and, thus, the need to develop a handbook for advisors.
- Student participants attested to having mixed experiences with their academic advisors: one had a very positive experience, whereas the others spoke of the extent to which their advisors – they each had had several different advisors – seemed not to know what they were doing, which was obviously very disheartening and frustrating. (One student participant brought a research paper that surveyed the variety of experiences students have had with advising in one particular school at CBU. One finding was that 30% of those surveyed said their advisors were not knowledgeable in their own field of study. Of note was the consensus of students surveyed that all advisors should receive adequate training prior to taking on advisees.)
- One of the primary advantages of selecting academic advising as our QEP topic is the potential it possesses to affect *retention*, especially with a clear mentoring component.
- How would we go about assessing the extent to which improved academic advising has enhanced overall student learning? Among the several suggestions were overall GPAs, retention rates, and graduation rates (i.e., more students graduating "on time"), concentrations of enrollment, decline and/or growth within departments, etc.
- Finally, one faculty representative highlighted the need that many freshmen have for more mentoring in, for example, the development of academic skills necessary to succeed at the collegiate level, whereas juniors and seniors need very different kinds of assistance and mentoring. Thus, there would need to be a keen awareness of and sensitivity to the various kinds of assistance offered, and what level of said assistance is most appropriately needed and offered. Again, the importance of mentoring as an essential part of advising was emphasized.

FIRST YEAR EXPERIENCE

- If we admit a number of “at risk” students – which we obviously do, and which is clearly consistent with our mission as a Lasallian university – then we would seem to have an obligation to provide these students with what they need in order to succeed at CBU (e.g., critical reading, writing, and thinking skills, math skills, time management, etc.). It was noted that this is closely tied to academic advising.
- If CBU were to select a FYE program as their QEP topic, transfer students would need to be included and involved, as CBU’s mission, vision, academic and personal/behavioral expectations, etc. are unique and essential, and must be understood and embraced as such. Thus, the importance of defining clearly the constituency of “first year” students (i.e., first year in college or first year at CBU?).
- One clear advantage of a FYE program is the fact that it reinforces our Lasallian mission in preparing students for life at CBU (and beyond). However – it was emphasized – we want to go out of our way to avoid another “IDS debacle.”
- One person suggested that this type of program could provide a great entrance into the kind of *learning communities* that CBU – under our new President’s leadership – envisions in the very near future. (We would need to specify whether this will be, e.g., dorm-based, commuter-based, discipline-based, etc.). Perhaps such a program could involve “discipline” groups (e.g., ACS, MAA, SPS, Beta Beta Beta). However, in order for this to work, we would need to include and involve students beyond freshmen, especially in the interest of fostering *community*.
- With respect to assessment, one faculty participant said the research reveals certain ways to measure improved student learning (e.g., levels of proficiency in a particular learning strategy, cognitive processing, memory augmentation, and various other instruments.) It was also suggested that *information literacy* could be a key component, as it is very formal and easily measured. However, as one participant noted, we would first need to collect a lot of data to see where students are at *now* – when they enter CBU – and what they most need in order to succeed; perhaps comparing cohorts.

SERVICE LEARNING

- One of the more obvious strengths of a service learning component in the curriculum is that it promotes a well-rounded learning experience and, at least from one participant’s perspective, community service is *not yet a priority* among CBU students (and faculty and staff).
- Service learning fosters one’s sense of community and social responsibility. Students need to have a keener sense of community both outside (which is often assumed) and inside (which is often ignored or neglected) of CBU, and service learning could conceivably encourage this.
- One student participant acknowledged that, as a commuter, they would have appreciated this and felt much more connected to classmates and professors had service learning opportunities been available and, perhaps, required. In addition, selecting service learning as our QEP would make more visible CBU’s motto: “Enter to learn, leave to serve.”
- On the other hand, one faculty representative pointed to the “extremely dangerous possibility” that a mandatory service learning component added to the curriculum may well present, as it could devolve or degenerate into little more than “feel good experiences” that have little to no bearing on actual student learning.

- In addition, it was noted that there are many active student groups that already have built-in service learning components. Moreover, this added service component – as a graduation requirement – could serve to detract science and engineering students from their academic requirements and, in so doing, prove counterproductive.
- In response, one student participant highlighted the “great potential” that exists were CBU to select service learning as its QEP topic, and argued concomitantly that the first two options – academic advising and first year experience – would require “major overhauls” of what is already in place. Perhaps we should think and/or speak more in terms of “applied learning.”
- Another faculty representative agreed with the previous faculty member’s concern(s), adding that a lot of our students have full-time jobs and families, and this could further increase the divide that already exists between day and evening students, a sentiment that was echoed by several other participants.
- How, then, to go about measuring the extent to which a service learning component in CBU’s curriculum has actually improved or enhanced overall student learning? One suggestion was to require critical reflection on one’s experiences as an important measuring piece, whereas another spoke of the possibility of tracking more gradual changes in students’ learning conceptions. (At the end of the day, participants really struggled to identify specific means of assessment.)
- (As the participants were leaving, one staff person remarked, “I didn’t realize how broken our advising system was,” to which a faculty member responded, “Well, if the students are saying it’s broken, it’s broken!”)