

SUMMARY

QEP Topic Selection Focus Group 3

December 4, 2009

ACADEMIC ADVISING

- When asked about the current state of academic advising, participants suggested that it is “uneven” and “erratic,” and that there is a real need for training advisors – *all* advisors. A need was seen for providing advisors with some kind of advising handbook or manual that would touch on the various *types* of advising (i.e., prescriptive, developmental, academic-centered). (One of the participants has actually published on the subject of academic advising, which would obviously be of tremendous assistance, should we select this as our QEP topic. This individual was awarded a *2010 National Advising Association Administrators’ Institute Scholarship*.)
- There is a real need for *training* for all advisors, and also for both advisors and advisees to have a clear sense of the expectations each should have of the other.
- Advantages of choosing academic advising as our QEP topic include helping students to understand career options, recognize the skills and knowledge they are gaining in their academic program(s) – in *all* of their courses, not just those in their major(s) – and potentially serve to create more intentional and motivated students.
- There was general agreement that the advising system needs more *structure*. A formalized *mentoring* component was seen as essential; many students lack a strong support system, and stronger advising could certainly assist with what is often missing.
- One faculty participant spoke of the need for some type of advising *orientation* for new academic advisors that would address, among other things, clearly defined resources for assistance with advising and, at the very least, some kind of advising *handbook* or *manual*.
- Student participants spoke of their overall dissatisfaction with their experience(s) of advising – one has had *four advisors* to this point – as well as the need for graduate school advising, preparation for graduate schools, developing a resume, career options, networking skills, etc. Indeed, one alumni participant stated that their advisor seemed not to know what s/he was doing (especially in relation to scheduling courses, course availability and rotation, etc.). In short, neither advisors nor advisees seem to understand what their respective roles are.
- One student participant suggested that evening students are completely “at sea” when it comes to advising, and that (again) advisors often seem not to know what they are doing. Thus, a strong case was made for improved academic advising, on both personal and professional levels. As advisors, we must be asking what we want for our advisees to know by the time they leave CBU. In sum, perhaps we should think more broadly about advising, and envision and adopt a more *developmental* approach to academic advising.
- It was suggested that we expand academic advising to include librarians and administrators.
- How to go about measuring the extent to which academic advising has, in fact, improved student learning? Whereas one participant suggested that the information gained would be primarily “anecdotal” in nature, others spoke of retention, longevity with a single advisor, greater stability within majors (which is often compromised when a student goes through multiple advisors), a smoother and more efficient registration process, improved graduation rates, students graduating in (e.g.) four rather than six years, and overall student satisfaction.

- In closing, mention was made of CBU's recently-acquired *Degree Works* program, and the potential that exists – by way of this program – for assisting with advising. Moreover, selecting academic advising as our QEP topic would help all concerned and involved take advantage of potential programs, scholarships, etc., and to see their potential more fully realized on behalf of our students.

FIRST YEAR EXPERIENCE

- An oft-repeated statement relates to the level of preparation our students have when they arrive at CBU; to be sure, many students lack the requisite academic skills to succeed, and information literacy could conceivably be an important piece of a first year program.
- One participant “intuitively” favors FYE as our chosen QEP topic, as there is a need to teach our students how to learn, and to understand the sorts of academic and behavioral expectations that exist for CBU students. Furthermore, plagiarism cases have risen sharply, and this is clearly tied to ethical considerations and standards, helping students to develop disciplined habits and practices that will feed into their careers, and also identifying and assisting “at risk” students; this is all, quite obviously, very Lasallian.
- A FYE program could provide the foot-in-the-door to developing learning communities and fostering a much greater sense of community; this would surely help with retention as well.
- One alumni participant spoke of the potential danger(s) of an IDS-type “re-incarnation” which, according to this former student, was an unmitigated disaster (!).
- On a more cautionary note, student and faculty participants spoke of the need to be sensitive to the different levels of student preparedness, in order to prevent those who are better prepared from becoming bored.
- How to go about measuring the extent to which a FYE program has, in fact, improved overall student learning? Retention rates between the first and second years, the percentage of freshmen (or first year students) who fail courses, the numbers of students who have received final grades of “FA” versus “F” (tied to the disciplined habits and practices spoken of earlier), beginning and end of the semester surveys measuring student satisfaction, GPAs (measured against a control group), and graduation rates.
- Additionally, it was suggested that perhaps the Peer Counselor program should be evaluated and re-vamped, as it should assist students in changing attitudes about learning, college life, study habits, and establishing priorities.
- Although we do have certain resources in place to assist our students, it was agreed that, on the whole, student services could – and should – be expanded, designed, and equipped to do much more to assist those students struggling with various and sundry issues, deficiencies, and challenges – on academic, personal, and professional (work-related) levels.
- Finally, several participants noted the natural connections that exist between academic advising and a FYE program, and the possibility of incorporating the best of both topics into a single QEP.

SERVICE LEARNING

- One student participant stated that they secured their current job largely because of an internship they enjoyed at CBU. However, others cautioned that internships, though very important, are not the same as service learning – thus the need to define our terms clearly.
- There was a consensus that “service learning” is poorly understood at CBU and that, far from being restricted to volunteering to serve the poor, it could and should enhance a student’s understanding of and appreciation for not only a particular course, but also the kind of degree CBU offers; service learning is also obviously tied closely to our institutional mission.
- Whereas faculty participants pointed to the inevitable problems we might encounter – in terms of faculty resistance to the incorporation of a service learning component into our curriculum – others suggested that this is perhaps the best reason to implement it.
- Following up on the previous remarks, one alumni participant noted that, when they attended CBU, there were *learning communities*, and stated that they were “saved” by their particular learning community. Moreover, this individual confessed that they remember no student services support, no academic advising to speak of, and “never set foot in the library” in their four years at CBU. This person bemoaned these facts and wishes that much more would have been in place on the “front end.” However, they gained the “tools” they needed to succeed in the world – with respect to leadership and management – through their service learning experience(s). To emphasize further what was already stated, this individual acknowledged that, quite honestly, “service learning is why I am here today.”
- Again, the question arose, “How narrowly are we going to *define* service learning?” It was agreed that we would need to define “service learning” *very clearly* for all sorts of reasons, not the least of which is the need for faculty support and also the desire to avoid the sort of debacle that was IDS . . . (*This proved to be a recurring theme throughout all three focus groups.*) Moreover, it seems a much better “fit” for some courses than others, and making it a requirement for *all* courses and/or programs could prove problematic and counterproductive.
- A few of the participants suggested the possibility of a single, two-semester course that would incorporate components of *all three topics*: academic advising, FYE, and service learning. (It is worth noting that the faculty participants did *not* respond favorably to this suggestion . . .)
- Finally, how will we measure the extent to which the incorporation of a service learning component into the curriculum has, in fact, enhanced and/or improved student learning? One participant suggested the value of using a more course-based definition, wherein we measure how well students apply course-related information to real-life, practical experience(s). Another participant suggested that the methods of evaluation would vary, depending on the discipline, particular course, etc.
- An administrator cautioned against and raised a strong concern with choosing service learning as our QEP topic, in light of the fact that so many of our students work – many of them full-time – while others are single mothers/parents, which would obviously make an already complicated and challenging schedule even more difficult and unmanageable. Thus, would the possible losses outweigh the potential gains?
- In response, some participants argued that we want our students to be introduced to the importance and value of service, especially since we are a Lasallian institution. This being the case, it was suggested that we could measure “attitudinal changes” over time in our students; to do so, we would need to broaden our understanding of “learning.”

- In order for this to succeed – i.e., incorporating a service learning component into CBU’s curriculum (as being at the heart of our QEP) – faculty members must be educated on the meaning and value of service learning and support its implementation and incorporation into the curriculum. Otherwise, we are sure to be reminded of the failures associated with IDS. Above all, students must come to understand that a CBU education is about “more than academics; there must be value opportunities.”
- As participants were leaving, one alumni representative affirmed the importance of all three topics for CBU, but also stated: “What was *clearly* evident to me is that we don’t have a quality advising system in place here, and that is *critical* to *every student*.” (*Note to Arthur, Frederico, Frank, and Jack: this alumni representative was Mr. Dick Gadomski, one of CBU’s Trustees. Of course, his identity will remain anonymous to those outside of this “circle of advisors.”*)