How Informal Structures Support Students

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Agenda

- Introduction/Rationale
- Description of Sample
- Description of Methodology
- Findings
- Implications
- Next step
- Getting Involved
Rationale for Study

- Programs and services that enhance and support student learning and success have become an increasingly important component of most postsecondary institutions.

- Despite increases in administrative structures to support student success in recent decades, there is little understanding of the various ways in which student services divisions are organized formally and informally.

- The voice of SAS staff in the literature.
Research Questions

- How do student affairs and services staff perceive the organizational structures (both formal and informal) at their institution and within their division?
- How do they perceive these structures influencing their role in supporting student success?
Methodology
Data Collection

- Constructivist methodology – participants play a role in the data interpretation
- Interviews with key informant – 14 Senior Student Affairs and Services Officers one from each campus
- 3 focus groups on each campus with the direct reports and staff for total of 278 participants
Data Analysis

1. Big themes across institutions
2. Transcribed audio files
3. Two people used open codes from big themes
4. Coders met with peer debriefer and reconciled codes
5. Prepared and shared preliminary findings report with participants (member checking)
6. Developed relationships across sample
7. Today’s presentation
Sample

- Aboriginal Services
- Academic Learning Skills
- Accessibility Services
- Admissions
- Athletics and Recreation
- Career and Employment
- Cooperative Education
- Counselling Services
- Financial Aid and Services
- Health Promotion/Wellness
- Health Services
- Housing/Residence Life
- Information Systems
- Library
- Orientation
- Student Leadership and Community Development
- Registrar

- Two publically-funded education sectors: Colleges (5) and Universities (9)

- Varied geographic location, size, mandate and programming

- Eastern, Western and Northern Ontario, GTA
- Research intensive, graduate enrolment, primarily undergraduate enrolment, applied degrees, diploma, certificate programs
- Diverse communities, underrepresented populations
# Formal Organizational Structure

## Terms Used to Reference Senior Officer

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<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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<td>Student Services</td>
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<td>Student Affairs</td>
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<td>2</td>
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<td>Generic “students”</td>
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Formal Organizational Structure

SSASO’s Titles and Reporting Structure

<table>
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<tr>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AVP to Provost (VP-Academic)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Vice President to President</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vice Provost to Provost</td>
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<td>0</td>
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<tr>
<td>Vice Provost to President</td>
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<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vice President to President, dotted line to Provost (VP-Academic)</td>
<td>1</td>
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Results
Relating Imagery to Approaches to Organizational Structure

Spider Webs
Tend to be characterized by:
1. An institutional culture that is perceived as having a greater shared commitment to supporting student success
2. Synergistic, open, and advocating approaches to leadership
3. Staff who have connected the vision and mission of the division to that of the institution
Relating Imagery to Approaches to Organizational Structure

Silos
Tend to be characterized by:
1. An institutional culture that is perceived as having a less expressed shared commitment to supporting student success
2. Leadership style that sees departments more as discrete units and may be more closed
3. Staff who are less clear on the vision and mission of the division to they connect to the institution
Multiple Tensions in Approaches to Structure

- Tension between SAS division and other institutional units
  - Heightened when coupled with decentralized academic structure

- Tension within SAS division
  - Heightened when units are re-organized into SAS (ex. Registrar, Co-operative Education)

- Tension among SAS staff
  - Transactional versus transformational work
  - Collective bargaining agreements
Levers that Influence Formal and Informal SAS Structures

- Changing student demographics
- Governmental or other external initiatives and funding envelopes – largely in relation to increasing access
- Resources – student-fee funded, operating budget, auxiliary
  - can result in have/have not tension
- Physical proximity, multi-campus increases the importance of informal structures
Informal Organizational Structures

- Intentional communication strategies pay big dividends
  - Communities of practice
  - Town halls
  - Increased relationships and networks

- Collaborative ventures are the fruit of relationships
  - Improvement-oriented
  - Innovation-oriented
  - Centred on a student issue
Implications of Findings
#1: Abandon the search for the “silver bullet” structure

- Although common, such a search usually bears little longstanding fruit
- Rather, understand personalities and priorities of senior administrators
- Focus on developing a shared commitment toward student success among faculty, administration, and SAS staff
Government Initiatives

- **Annual Government Budget Directs Priorities**
  - SSASO restructure units within the division
  - Reallocate and create new senior management positions
  - Reassign the focus of staff to assist on tasks of government priority

- **Affects SAS Delivery of Services**
  - Assist changing student demographics
  - Create new programming options
  - Develop accountability measures
#2: Consider initiatives in light of institutional priorities

- Appeal in seeking government funds should be done with the caveat that such "limited time funds" may not provide a sustainable operation in the future
  - Alignment with institutional *Strategic Plan*
  - Both programming and service structure require change
  - Considers the impact on staff and student culture
  - Purposeful government allocation of funding envelopes
#3: Develop staff to be service providers AND educators

- Communities of practice both within and across functional area
- Professional competencies as a framework for staff development
- Leadership style
# 4 Informal structures enhance collaboration

- Collaboration and innovation were prevalent at institutions where:
  - Staff felt supported through both the collaborative process and end product
  - Students were seen as full partners in designing their learning
For more information,

- Check out the research study blog at: www.supportingstudentsuccess.wordpress.com
  - Sign up to receive regular updates
  - Contribute to the conversation by leaving a comment on the blog

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