

STAFF DEVELOPMENT

What University Student Affairs Staff Members Can Learn from their Two Year College Colleagues

by Marie Nock

Staff development in community colleges is known by many names: program development; professional development; staff, program, and organizational development; the teaching/learning center; or training and development. Most often the populations served are the faculty and staff. In the best programs, the needs of all employee groups are addressed, and full-time and adjunct staff members enjoy access to a full range of personnel development opportunities.

Florida provided national leadership in the early 1970s for staff development initiatives after the Florida legislature required community colleges to allocate an amount equivalent to 2 percent of their previous year's operating budget to support personnel development activities. Other states with notable staff and program development initiatives include California, Kentucky, Texas, Kansas, and Illinois.

As the gap between student needs and institutional cultures widens, two- and four-year colleges must allocate adequate resources for and pay more attention to staff development. A staff development program provides a systematic way for colleges to provide for the training and development needs of various employee groups, either individually or collectively, and to help employees function more effectively on a day-to-day basis and acquire new skills for future assignments.

Although many organizational options exist, the two strategies that seem to work best in community colleges and that have the greatest potential to benefit colleges and universities are:

1. Establish a Learning Center or Staff Development Center, staffed by full-time administrators who have staff development as their sole responsibility. A college advisory committee links the center to the various employee groups and divisions or areas of the college. The center offers training programs throughout the year, using internal resources and external consultants; offers reimbursement for additional graduate work; and funds travel related to professional development. The budget for this program is a percentage, usually between 1.55 percent and 3 percent, of the overall operating budget of the college.

2. Provide a member of the college community with release time, usually 20 percent to 40 percent of their assigned work time, to serve as

staff development coordinator. Appoint or elect a staff development committee to identify the staff development needs of all segments of the college community, and design and implement programs to meet these needs. Establish staff development days during which faculty and staff members are free to take part in the activities planned by the staff development committee.

Whichever option is selected, community colleges have learned that successful staff development programs must have five ingredients:

- The program must be aligned with the institution's mission and goals, and must serve to better prepare employees to meet the goals.
- Program participants must be recognized and rewarded for completing staff development programs and using the knowledge gained to improve programs, services, and individual performance.
- Programs must be of high quality, address real needs, and prepare participants to function more effectively when they return to the classroom or their offices.
- The administration, the faculty, and the classified and support staffs must view the program as providing needed services.
- The college must hire committed staff members, provide them with an adequate budget, establish appropriate expectations and support, and set up the staff development program at a location that offers high visibility and easy access.

The student services staff has unique development needs, which can be identified through a variety of nationally-used or campus-specific instruments. Since the thesis of this monograph is that two- and four-year institutions will become more and more similar in the years to come, colleges and universities can jump-start staff development programs by building on the needs analysis surveys conducted at community colleges, which have identified the following major training requirements for student affairs staff members in the next decade.

Customer Service Skills: All student affairs staff members need to enhance their ability to provide helpful, timely services to students, faculty, and others in the college community, whether these customers come to the college or call on the telephone. Learning to deal with difficult people is part of this training, but the primary emphasis should be on quality service to internal and external customers.

Supervisory Skills: Effective supervision is too important to be left to chance. Without training in performance management, personnel policies and procedures, communication and team building, supervisors are often left to supervise as they see fit. This can be costly to the institution in terms

of lost productivity, declining morale, and the time spent dealing with grievances and lawsuits.

Dealing with difference: America's multiculturalism is nowhere more apparent in higher education than in the community college. Some staff members need training to master the finer points of dealing with gender, ethnic, and cultural differences. By helping institutions create a climate where all students, staff, and faculty feel valued and by making it possible for managers to spend less time dealing with grievances and lawsuits, this training pays for itself many times over.

Teaching Skills: Often the Student Life Skills or College Success courses are the domain of the student affairs department. Staff members who teach these courses may need training in developing a syllabus, planning lessons, enhancing their instructional skills, evaluating students, responding to student learning styles, providing and receiving classroom feedback, or teaching the adult learner. Even veteran faculty members need workshops to maintain their edge in the classroom.

Orientation: The best time to structure expectations for new employees and to transmit institutional mission and values is when new staff members begin their employment. Orientation programs must consist of much more than providing a list of fringe benefits. Partnerships can be established between the human resources office and the student affairs office for the development of a stimulating orientation process for newly hired student affairs staff.

Technology Training: An institution's investment in technology is wasted without ongoing training and evaluation. The staff needs to learn how to use the software licensed by their institution, how to access main-frame data, use the e-mail system, access information through the Internet, develop web pages, and conduct web-based research. Staff development programs provide initial training, follow-up training, and ongoing training for student affairs staff members.

Grant Writing: Equipping an entire student affairs staff with grant writing skills provides a training opportunity that more than pays for itself. With budgets tightening each year, knowing how to locate sources of revenue is a critical survival skill for student affairs practitioners, one that a staff development office can help them acquire.

Professional Effectiveness: To be effective, student affairs staff members need training in the following areas: time management, presentation techniques, guidelines for conducting effective meetings, problem solving and decision making strategies, and conflict resolution techniques. Many staff development programs contract with the student affairs staff to provide workshops in these areas for faculty and staff members, thus creating

a partnership that benefits both the student affairs department and the college as a whole.

Personal Effectiveness: An unhappy, stressed-out staff is an ineffective staff. Because community colleges have learned that employees and institutions benefit from personal effectiveness training in the areas of stress management, wellness, financial planning, and retirement planning, a percentage of their staff development resources is allocated to such functions. This benefits the institution through reduced health care claims, increased productivity, and the fiscal fitness of staff members.

Process Consultation and Facilitation: Because of the role that the student affairs department plays in many organizations, faculty and staff members assume that its professional employees are skilled consultants, mediators, and group facilitators. If practitioners do not have these skills, both they and the college lose important opportunities to create partnerships that benefit everyone. Once again, a staff development program that provides student affairs practitioners with opportunities to develop their consulting, mediating, or group facilitating skills enhances the ability of the institution to respond to faculty and student needs.

Being an Agent of Change: With appropriate skills, student affairs administrators have the potential to be effective internal agents of change. To fulfill this role, they need to develop abilities in strategic planning, operational planning, re-engineering, managing internal changes, and delineating institutional visions.

Historically, universities have seen staff development in terms of travel to conferences or seminars. This perspective addresses some staff development requirements, but it does not offer a systematic way of addressing them or a cost-effective approach to changing the institution. Colleges and universities would do well to follow the lead of community colleges and create strong staff development programs that can bridge the gaps that exist between what is and what is needed, and provide faculty and staff members with tools they will need in the future. The wave of the future in staff development includes developing consortia of two- and four-year institutions to design and deliver integrated staff development programs, sophisticated teleconferencing resources, and web based in-service training opportunities, in addition to the programs and services currently offered.

Whatever approach is taken, colleges and universities need to understand that staff development programs have helped community colleges retain their competitive edge for over 20 years and have the potential to provide a similar service in colleges and universities.