

Rethinking Partnerships on a Decentralized Campus

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Overview of a Decentralized Model

Decentralization is an effective approach for structuring campus learning and success centers. McShane & Von Glinow (2007) describe decentralization as “an organizational model where decision authority and power are dispersed among units rather than held by a single small group of administrators” (p. 237). A decentralized structure will look different for each campus; it may consist of multiple locations, administrators, budgets and reporting lines, and/or services. There are unique challenges and benefits to this model. Learning center professionals can capitalize on the benefits of decentralization while minimizing the challenges by using effective strategies focused on communication and partnerships.

Since the campus context plays a major role in a decentralized learning center, examples from the experiences of the staff at one learning center illustrate the navigation process of coordinating academic support efforts. The subject institution is a Midwestern public research I institution, with a long-standing history of decentralization. Its ten colleges/schools serve nearly 40,000 students who represent various domestic and international origins. Colleges and schools have a high level of autonomy in areas including admissions, learning support, and advising. Departmental independence was so entrenched in campus culture that university leaders did not systematically increase coordination and collaboration across campus until the Fall 2013 semester, when they implemented a university-wide core curriculum. Around this same time, the campus learning center, which had reported to a single college since its launch in 1972, began reporting to the provost’s office instead. After 40 years of operating within the tradition of autonomy and

decentralization, the center's administrators suddenly charged with a new challenge—establishing coordination among all of the institution's undergraduate academic success and support programs.

Challenges in a Decentralized Model

When coordinating academic support resources on a decentralized campus, there may be several challenges. Professionals might consider assessing overall effectiveness of services provided across the campus to best understand challenges and strengths of the individual units and the combined efforts. Differences between programs, duplication of resources, and communication difficulties brought about by the decentralized model often highlight the need for increased coordination and collaboration among university partners.

Inconsistencies between programs may make it difficult for students to navigate and enjoy a seamless experience. When auditing campus resources, staff may find discipline-specific help centers/labs, tutoring programs for specific student populations, programs offering support available to all students, and multiple academic departments with some type of listing of private tutors. Resources could have different definitions and titles for tutors. Academic support facilitators could include professional tutors/retired faculty, graduate teaching assistants, alumni, undergraduate peer tutors, and small group session leaders. Some tutors may be paid, some may set their own rates, and others might be volunteers or members of a student organization service. There likely also may be inconsistencies in policies, procedures, and expectations for both tutors and the students they serve. Likewise, tutor selection, training and evaluation may vary greatly by resource. Some resources may be structured to count informal, one-on-one conversations as training while others may require a semester long course to be eligible for a position. Resource centers may be structured with widely different administrative protocols. For example, on a subject campus, not all programs may collect attendance and session data, and those who do often lack electronic record of the data. Along with attendance, each resource may have different evaluation and assessment processes and requirements. The audit of resources on a subject campus could

reveal many administrative inconsistencies because of differences in each coordinating professional's position and job requirements (faculty, staff, full-time, part-time, contract length, etc.).

In addition to organizational inconsistencies, decentralization and lack of coordination often results in a duplication of resources (Balk, 2012). Many of the resources may support the same courses, usually at the 100- & 200-level. Such a duplication of course offerings was found on the subject campus can result in a few courses with numerous (3-5+) options for students while other courses with a similar need for support provided no options. This type of inconsistency of service becomes especially challenging for students who pass lower level courses with the support of many resources only to progress to upper level courses with no resource support. Another area of duplication may be staffing. These analogous programs require administrators to manage them, resulting in a university budget with allowances for multiple positions of similar description. Additionally, multiple tutor selection processes can create potential competition between programs in the recruitment of strong tutor candidates and result in duplicated efforts for professional and student staffs. According to Balk, various types of duplication lead to programs that are not maximizing support offerings, fiscal resources, and human resources.

Lastly, decentralization creates several challenges that may impede the success of students using campus resources. The subject campus's audit also may expose how few people (parents, faculty and staff) are aware of offered programs. Informal feedback and narratives from both students and advisors frequently highlighted frustrations in finding resources. Most advertising focused on individual resources. Students reported an ongoing confusion and frustration to understand the various services offered within the different resources, which courses were supported at which center, and keeping track of the various locations, hours of operation. Unfortunately, students all too often choose to do nothing and "consult no one" (L. Smith, 2003, p 18). Rather than provide a seamless support system and integrative experience, decentralization can result in students who are both frustrated and unable to find critical academic support.

Benefits of a Decentralized Model

Decentralization does have benefits, which learning center administrators may preserve through coordination (rather than reorganization and centralization). One benefit is the ability to provide students multiple academic support options, such as individual, small group, “study hall,” “appointment only,” and “walk-in.” Students, in turn, may explore and choose which approach might best meet their needs, goals, and schedules.

In addition to coordination of services, additional benefits are often related to two major groups of resources: “help centers” and programs for “specialized academic assistance.” Help centers may have especially strong discipline faculty and advisor “buy-in” because they typically specialize in a specific area and knowledge base rooted in discipline-specific practices/pedagogy. Many help centers have staff serving in some role that connect the classroom content, assignment expectations, and exam materials to out-of-class support.

Specialized academic assistance programs also benefit from a decentralized model. Most specialized programs offer academic resources that cater to specific student populations’ needs and experiences. On a subject campus, several specialized programs may base their course offerings on a set plan of study/requirements for their students. Others may have course offerings that respond to student requests and/or needs based on previous failure/success rates. Specialized programs often have funding tied to specific initiatives and measurements, such as retention, completion, and graduation rates. Having resources targeted for specific student populations can be helpful when evaluating the impact of interventions with students to assist them in meeting those measurements or funding requirements.

On a subject campus, a main identified benefit can be the flexibility and autonomy each resource maintained by creating a support program that is most appropriate for the discipline, population, location, etc. Overall, L. Smith (2003) said that decentralization was seen as a campus strength that allows for both independence and collaboration.

Strategies to Increase Collaboration

To increase collaboration on a decentralized campus, learning center administrators have to rethink partnerships to find successful ways of coordinating efforts. The root of challenges is often lack of communication. Therefore, learning center staff must focus on increasing communication among all campus stakeholders, including but not limited to the following: creating groups for campus professionals to communicate, establishing partnerships outside of traditional academic resource areas, and unifying communication targeted to students. Coordination is a critical component of fostering intentional academic support for students within any decentralized model. Intentional partnerships across units enhance students' overall learning experience and maximize their capacity to achieve academically. When facilitating coordination, it is important to solicit students' personal and second-hand knowledge of using existing interdepartmental resources. One of the first steps in creating a more collaborative campus is establishing a setting where professionals from various colleges/schools, departments, and resources can have conversations. Establishing task groups, communities of practice, or even informal networking circles not only increases communication, but can also provide campus staff with opportunities for professional development.

On a subject campus, several groups can be created to allow professionals to network and collaborate based on job responsibilities and interest. One of these groups can be dedicated to a discussion on program overviews, best practices, and current issues faced by campus professionals involved with academic resources (B. Smith, 2011). As a result, a campus wide document outlining the rights, responsibilities, and ethics of tutoring can be established. This document creates a general foundation of consistent expectations about the role tutoring plays on campus while preserving benefits of flexibility and autonomy. Similarly, another group of professionals who offer workshops, outreach, and study skills resources can work together as a "think tank." In addition to researching evidence-based practices to improve workshops, the think tank can produce a referral guide for faculty and staff. Moreover, the staff at a subject campus's learning center can join efforts led by other areas, including

a community of practice for academic advisors focused on students on probation and a task force responsible for developing proactive interventions for at-risk students. Collaborating with academic advisors on issues around probation leads to several changes in a learning center's services and advertising; it also establishes relationships and trust with staff, opens communication lines between the learning center, campus resources, and the advising community.

Additionally, partnerships developed in unison with units charged with fostering diversity and inclusion may facilitate intentional engagement with diverse populations. For example, Harper (2012) reports that Black male completion rates are lowest among both sexes and all racial/ethnic groups in U.S. higher education. Learning center administrators should gain understanding of this reality and consider how to provide intentional outreach and support. Professionals can develop academic success initiatives aimed at fostering the success of Black males, and they also can develop a task force focused on implementing interventions for other students deemed at-risk in the context of their institution. For similar impact, learning center professionals might provide programming that exposes students to resources and provides intentional academic support. Understanding and catering to the needs of diverse populations will help develop a more keen understanding on how to meet varied learning styles and needs students possess.

Another critical step will be improving communication to students about all the academic support opportunities that the campus offers. It is important that administrators consider the student audience, its needs, and campus communication trends. Some approaches to communicating a unified voice for all partnered resources include the following:

- Creating a common logo or branding to be used on all marketing pieces
- Posting flyers and information about all academic resources in each location
- Developing a shared marketing piece, such as a brochure or flyer
- Providing coordinated outreach such as resource fair or open houses

- Hosting a centralized website that links to individuals sites
- Establishing an app to feature all of the resources

In addition to considering the student audience, administrators should also be mindful of other factors including budget, resources, seasonal timing of decision, and anticipated impact.

At a subject campus, the first step usually includes launching a web page to provide centralized information and links to all academic resources. This low-cost step (with typically high potential for in-house tech support), provides immediate impact, thus increasing awareness and simplifying referrals. Over time, the web page can evolve from a listing of resources to an interactive, searchable resource database. The page needs to be conscientiously updated to include information about private tutoring and academic consultations to provide options for courses not currently supported otherwise. In addition, learning center staff can develop an app for students to access campus resources from their mobile devices. Students can see what resources are available, download sessions or availability to their device's calendar, or utilize a map to guide them to the resource's location. The app and its features may reduce some of the challenges students face when navigating campus resources. Overall, coordinated electronic communication provides the campus with a dynamic format and had a high-impact for targeted specific student audiences while maintaining minimal budgetary and staffing needs.

Future Directions

Effective collaboration in a decentralized structure does not occur after one meeting or the creation of a shared logo. Rather, it must be an ongoing relationship among administrators and staff of each program, service, and center. Learning center administrators should continue to strengthen partnerships and improve the coordination of academic success and support programs.

Beyond initial efforts, coordination of decentralized centers can become a shared and continuous venture. Ideally, the coordinating group can work to move to a place of sharing ideas and resources, rather than compartmentalizing and competing for them.

Setting a regular review and planning meeting for each academic year, semester, and/or quarter is important in sustaining momentum and communication. As part of a larger, connected group, learning center professionals can advocate for all collaborating programs with a stronger, shared voice. For example, by standardizing data collection, administrators can continue to refine campus best practices and strengthen assessment. This data will provide a more accurate campus-wide perspective on the utilization of academic assistance programs and can serve as a valuable tool in institutional decisions. With each future collaboration effort, learning center staff and its partners can aim to use its institution's decentralized model to maximize student benefits while minimizing their challenges.

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