

## DEVELOPMENTALLY SPEAKING:

### A Practitioner's Guide to a Learning-Centered Co-Curricular Activities Program

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*Student affairs professionals are faced with the challenge of focusing on student learning. Through the implementation of a co-curricular activities program (CAP) model, described in this article, universities can develop a structured approach to programming that is based on students' developmental needs. This formalized co-curricular model provides a framework for campus wide programming that is grounded in theory, goals, and objectives.*

In 1994, the American College Personnel Association (ACPA) challenged student affairs professionals to create student affairs divisions that focus on student learning. Historically, student affairs practitioners have created these learning opportunities through programs in intramurals, student organizations, student services, residence halls, out-of-class involvement with faculty, peer interaction, and employment. A review of the literature (Andreas & Schuh, 1999; Barr & Tagg, 1995) has revealed a shift from this more traditional approach to a more structured design in learning and student development. Kuh, Schuh, & Whitt (1991) define learning from the student development perspective as follows:

the process in which an individual undergoes a number of changes toward more complex behavior that results from mastering the increasingly demanding challenges of life. These changes toward more complex behavior often culminate in the individual's transforming to a higher developmental position which results in his/her viewing people, events, and things in a fundamentally different way. (pp. 13 -14)

Learning in its broadest sense can be defined as those activities and programs that challenge students and afford them the opportunity to grow. The National Association of State Universities and Land Grant Colleges acknowledged the student affairs approach to learning in their 1997 report:

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As we understand the term, learning is not something reserved for classrooms or degree programs. It is available to every member of the academic community, whether in the classroom or the administration building, the laboratory or the library, the residence halls or the performing arts center.... Learning is available to all and all serve learning. (p. 17)

Individuals are changed by the experience of higher education. It is the job of the student affairs professional to ensure that the change is positive and lasting. Pascarella and Upcraft (1999) state that "learning-oriented student affairs divisions are places where staff are experts on students and their learning, as well as the environments in which the learning takes place" (p. 79). Student affairs divisions provide programs to meet academic needs as well as emotional, physical, spiritual, and occupational needs.

Institutions of higher education and specifically student affairs divisions are at a crossroads. Many schools across the country are faced with the question of whether or not to teach the whole individual through formal models with a learning centered approach to education or to outsource their services. In *Student Learning as Student Affairs Work: Responding to our Imperative* (1999), Elizabeth J. Whitt posed the following question: "How do we go about creating and maintaining learning-oriented student affairs divisions?" (p. x). In answer to this question, a co-curricular activities program (CAP) model that allows the practitioner to use a learning centered approach to student development for the traditional aged student is needed. This article describes such a model.

A co-curricular student activities program is specifically designed to address intended student outcomes and is presented in a manner that expands educational opportunities, encourages personal development, improves academic skills, and enhances the health and lifestyle of all members of the university community. Only through the coordinated efforts of a variety of programs will students experience growth and development and learning in a wide array of areas.

### Co-Curricular Activities Program (CAP)

The CAP model provides guidance for the student affairs practitioner in developing learning environments that nurture student involvement in a variety of creative ways. This approach requires the support of administrators who are experienced facilitators of cognitive, psychosocial, and moral development and who possess strong theoretical knowledge. The following fundamental conditions characterized by the student development approach (Blimling & Miltenberger, 1995) were used to guide the design of the model:

- A belief that individuals develop in stages that are sequential, cumulative, increasingly complex, and qualitatively different.
- Acceptance of the belief that it is the student who is primarily responsible for this development.
- A belief that the role of student affairs staff is to assist students in accomplishing goals that they have set for themselves.
- A recognition that one must consider the development of the whole individual: intellectually, physically, emotionally, and spiritually. (p.55)

The CAP model embraces these fundamental conditions and provides a framework for developing learning environments. To develop the CAP model, Diamond's (1998) *Designing and Assessing Courses and Curricula: A Practical Guide* was used because of its use of goals, objectives, and curriculum design which enable student affairs professionals to show the effectiveness of its programming. "The initial goal of the design phase is to develop the 'ideal' course or curriculum" (Diamond, p. 18).

To begin with the ideal curriculum for student affairs, a review of the literature was conducted along with student assessment to determine the traditional-aged students' developmental needs. Once these needs were established for each academic year, goals and objectives were set. The goals and objectives provide the framework for programs and learning centered activities for the division. Each of the academic years has been structured to address specific developmental needs with the knowledge that development is dependent on individual differences and is a continual process that may not be accomplished in a set time frame. Assessment is conducted to determine whether or not programs and activities are meeting the defined educational goals and objectives.

### **CAP Freshman Year Curriculum**

The first year of a student's college career often determines the success of that student. Approximately one third of an institution's freshman class will drop out (Upcraft & Gardner, 1989). The challenge of the freshman year is to equip students with the right skills to be successful to increase retention. Students, regardless of academic curriculum or chance of obtaining a degree, should be afforded the opportunity for growth and development early in the college experience.

A freshman-year curriculum that is full of prerequisites to success in the classroom must also include prerequisites to success outside of the classroom. The CAP model is designed to afford traditional-aged freshman students the opportunity to begin a journey along a learning continuum of adult

development. The CAP model focuses first on identity development. The goal of identity development is to provide programming and activities that will enable students to develop a sense of self and to determine who they are and who they will be. Students will explore their personal values system, review career options, and begin to develop the critical thinking skills necessary to intelligently make decisions. Through the programs and activities provided students will accomplish the following objectives: to be able to defend, question, abandon, or reevaluate their present attitudes, beliefs, and values; to be able to examine the world of work, understand the abilities needed for various occupations, organize knowledge about themselves and the different career choices, and implement a vocational decision; and to be able to demonstrate skillful, responsible thinking that facilitates good judgment.

The second area of concentration of the freshman year involves an understanding of students' well-being which enables them to learn, comprehend, and apply the principles of wellness to their lives. The goal of wellness is to develop and balance the understanding and appreciation of the social, physical, emotional, educational, occupational, and spiritual components of a student that are essential to an integrated personality. Through the programs and activities provided, students will be able to recognize the six components that are present in an integrated personality, will be able to develop an understanding and appreciation of the theory of wellness, and will be able to demonstrate proficiency in the personal application of each of the six components of the wellness model.

Lastly the freshman year curriculum will include a component that involves an understanding of what it means to be a member of the university community and the responsibility of being a student. The goal of university citizenship is to provide an opportunity for students to accept individual responsibility, to participate in university activities, and to develop a commitment to the university experience. Students will be introduced to the values that are present in an institution of higher learning and will demonstrate involvement in departmental, college and university wide curricula, programs, and activities.

### *CAP Sophomore Year Curriculum*

When students begin their sophomore year, they have experienced a tremendous amount of growth and development in the areas of identity, wellness, and university citizenship. The next stage or level of development for sophomore students is to move beyond a world governed only by concern for their own welfare to a wider perspective of others in their college community. Blimling and Miltenberger (1995) posited that students in their sophomore year should feel somewhat more comfortable with their environment and should have established a positive peer support group. They have successfully remained in college and have identified themselves as college students. High

school is far behind them as they feel more confident in their abilities and more secure in what lies ahead. The three content areas in the sophomore year require students to begin interacting with others and are dependent on the fact that during their first year they have begun to develop their identity and an understanding of their responsibilities at the university. The sophomore year focuses on developing communication skills, reasoning, and interdependence.

Communication development affords students the opportunity to develop both verbal and non verbal skills. Programs provided will help students learn to formulate and convey their ideas and information to a variety of audiences using both verbal and nonverbal methods. Communication development will also allow the students to successfully relate and interact on a personal level with friends, groups, intimates, and others from different backgrounds and experiences.

The goal of reasoning development in the sophomore year is that students will be able to draw inferences or conclusions through deductive reasoning and through the understanding of moral and ethical issues. Students will be challenged to defend, question, abandon, and reevaluate their own attitudes, beliefs, and values. This ability to draw inferences will allow students to demonstrate responsible thinking and good judgment. It will also allow students to think critically about their career choices and what the needed skills and abilities are for their chosen field.

The last developmental skill acquired in the sophomore year is that of interdependence. Interdependence is the integration of independence with the recognition that collaborating and cooperating with others is needed and valuable. Through programs offered students will recognize the importance of synergistic relationships based on mutual trust and open communication.

### *CAP Junior Year Curriculum*

The junior year is an exploratory year for students. At this point the students are more comfortable in their environment because they have successfully existed within the framework of the university. "Their identity and self-concept at this point are tied to the college. Students are more confident in their abilities to cope with the new environment and more secure in what lies ahead and what they have already accomplished" (Blimling & Miltenberger, 1995, p. 163). They are now ready to give back to the university and become actively involved. Astin (1984) posited that the quality and quantity of student involvement in programs designed for them are directly proportional to the amount of learning and personal development produced. Involvement has a positive and measurable impact on student development and student learning. All of the junior year activities are designed to fully involve the students in their environment, community, and chosen career. Participation in the CAP

activities prepares students for the challenges they will meet during their college career and for the challenges they will face in the future. The goals and objectives of the junior year set forth the parameters for these challenges. The three content areas of the junior year: transformational leadership, civic virtue, and career awareness are experiential in nature and lead the students to activities that require their participation and commitment.

Programs centered on the development of leadership skills expose students to different leadership and organizational theories. Once students have learned the theories they will then serve as leaders in organizations, community involvement projects, and peer mentoring opportunities. While participating in these leadership experiences students will learn to make appropriate decisions and will learn interpersonal skills.

The goal of civic virtue in the junior year is to instill an understanding of values and commitments of a democracy, a community, and a campus. Students will actively take part in activities that benefit the community and campus. They will develop a lifelong commitment to responsible citizenship and will understand the value of being actively engaged in their community.

The last content area of the junior year is career awareness. In this developmental area students are once again actively engaged in the learning process by participating in intern programs, cooperative programs, and career research. Students will assess their academic training, personality, abilities, and interests to determine the career course they will pursue. It is at this point that the students become aware of the opportunities provided for them in their chosen profession.

### *CAP Senior Year Curriculum*

The final period of the undergraduate experience is a critical time of transition as students face the exciting challenge of preparing for their future as well as facing the fear of losing their basic security and identity. The previous college years revolved around the university community as the students fully integrated themselves and became college students. Gardner and Van der Veer (1998) describe the senior year experience as a variety of initiatives in the academic and co-curricular domain that serve to promote and enhance greater learning and satisfaction and a more successful transition for college students during the final term of the baccalaureate educational experience.

Traditionally, colleges and universities have overlooked the senior year experience (Gardner & Van der Veer, 1998). The undergraduate experience should involve a series of challenges that influence development beginning in the first year and continuing through graduation. CAP provides challenging experiences to students that lead to a fundamental change in their perceptions of people, events, and perspectives. This change prepares them for the

corporate world that values not only an individual's knowledge but also factors such as empathy, social responsibility, interpersonal relationships, problem solving abilities, and flexibility. The years preceding the senior year, as well as the experiences gained in the senior year, foster the non-cognitive skills needed to become successful beyond the college experience. During the senior year, students will develop an appreciation for the performing arts, current affairs, popular culture, and human culture. Students begin to look beyond themselves and their current environment to the world at large.

This comprehension of a larger picture leads students to begin self-evaluation, the second content area of the senior year. Through the experiences provided in the senior year, students will begin to integrate and apply content knowledge to real-world situations. They will begin to make life style decisions, which will impact their choices through adulthood. Decisions about where to live, what type of family situation to choose, and what values to incorporate will become the primary issues for students.

Along with lifestyle decisions students will synthesize their university experiences and begin understanding the occupational expectations for their chosen career. Career plans will be formulated and decisions on where to work and what job to do will be made during this time. At this point the programs and services provided will also teach students how to present themselves professionally and how to be successful in their chosen career.

Unique to the senior year is a capstone experience that is in addition to the content areas. An effective capstone course is a supplement to the senior year curriculum, which helps to prepare students for transition during and after the senior year. Gardner and Van der Veer (1998) describe the aim of the capstone course as an experience that ties the four or more years of college together as well as preparing the student for the next phase of life.

Through coordination by the Student Development Office, a structured approach to programming will allow academicians and administrators to work together on presenting programs, developing services, and researching grant opportunities that will create an environment where growth and development of the student is paramount. Departments will clearly fit into a structured curriculum of events. With four undergraduate classifications, there is a very exciting and challenging weekly agenda of programming on the campus.

## **Implementation**

The implementation phase of any project is the crucial test. Can new ideas and programs be implemented with the existing resources? What does this mean to the existing programs and workload? One of the primary goals of CAP is to

rethink what higher education does in student affairs and embrace a new paradigm.

Implementing the CAP model requires a paradigm shift to learning instead of instruction. Barr and Tagg (1995) explain the paradigm shift in the following way:

The Learning Paradigm envisions the institution itself as a learner... In the Learning Paradigm, a college's purpose is not to transfer knowledge, but to create environments and experiences that bring students to discover and conduct knowledge for themselves, to make students members of communities of learners that make discoveries and solve problems. The college aims, in fact, to create a series of ever more powerful learning environments. (p. 14 –15)

The CAP model provides a goal-oriented framework for recreating the environment of student affairs to become learning environments.

The actual CAP activities are planned prior to each academic year through the various departments within the Division of Student Affairs. Departments work cooperatively with their colleagues in academic affairs to develop programs and activities. Through proper planning and assessment the programs address the needs of the students. Higher education has drawn much criticism from the public because of its lack of accountability. In general, the public questions and doubts the ability of higher education to produce graduates that have the needed skills and abilities to succeed occupationally as well as personally. Pascarella and Upcraft (1999) in *Student Learning as Student Affairs Work: Responding to our Imperative* sum up the need for assessment in the following manner: "We need to be able to show that the desired student learning occurs and that the people, curricula, programs, and services in our institutions contribute to that learning" (p. 64). The CAP model allows the student affairs practitioner to show that goals and objectives have been accomplished.

The final steps in the implementation include the recording of individual student attendance, the recognition of the student's achievement, the creation of a CAP transcript. Students are recognized for their completion of the co-curricular program and have a Co-curricular Achievement Record of their accomplishments and involvement in co-curricular activities. This co-curricular transcript is a method for formally recording the activities in which a student participates outside the classroom. The transcript gives the students an opportunity to thoughtfully plan their college experiences and relate these experiences to future outcomes.



## Conclusion

Creating and implementing a co-curricular activities program model is a monumental and much needed undertaking for higher education. To successfully revise student affairs work, Hernandez, Hogan, Hathaway and Lovell (1999) state:

This task cannot be accomplished solely by the efforts of the students and student affairs administrators. It will require a commitment from the University that will include faculty and administrative support. There is a great need to continue to work to develop liaisons and cooperation among students, faculty members, and student affairs administrators. (p. 196)

The opportunity to develop outside the classroom programming that is meaningful and complementary to the existing academic curriculum offers a number of exciting advantages. Students continue to be active, grow, and develop even when they are not sitting in the classroom, laboratory, or library. The result will be individuals who are more prepared for the challenges of this diverse world regardless of curriculum or length of time spent at the university.

The *Student Learning Imperative* calls for learning oriented student affairs organizations, which are places where the following ideals are met:

- The student affairs mission complements and reinforces the institution's mission of learning. In addition, achieving student learning – in the form of desired educational outcomes – is the primary goal of student affairs policies, services, and programs.
- Resources are allocated to foster student learning.
- Student affairs staff collaborates with colleagues in other areas of the institution to plan and foster student learning.
- Student affairs staffs are experts on students, their environments, and teaching and learning processes.
- Policies and practices are grounded in research and institutional assessment on student learning outcomes. (p. 8)

The CAP model clearly meets the five ideals that put student learning first as determined by the *Student Learning Imperative*. The future for universities that use a CAP model has been soundly determined. This future is a division of student affairs that is student learning centered, goal oriented, and accountable to the public, the students, and the university community.

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