

## QUESTION #5:

# HOW DO I SUPPORT DIFFERENT EXPECTATIONS OF ADMINISTRATION, DEPARTMENTS, FACULTY, STUDENTS, AND SPECIAL UNITS?

*A conversation with Sylvia Mioduski*

Directing a Learning Assistance Center requires many talents. At the very least you are expected to be a visionary, a manager, a coordinator, an instructor, a budget analyst, a counselor, an advisor, sometimes, even a clairvoyant. Everyone has an idea about how you should run the LAC, what it should offer, and what students should be expected to accomplish. Before you focus on others' expectations, be sure you are clear about your own expectations. What is the primary mission of your unit? What do you hope to accomplish? Why? Armed with this information, you can then begin to get to "know your audience." Who are the individuals and the groups who have a stake in the LAC on your campus? What are their expectations? Why do they view the LAC as they do? You will need to be able to answer these questions in order to both support their varying expectations while, at the same time, maintaining credibility with and for the students you serve.

One of the first steps you must take is to commit time for learning about your campus

community. A tactical error many of us in learning support programs make is deciding that we must focus 100% of our time on service delivery and dismissing as "I just don't have time" the need to read, plan, and think about where we're headed and why. This is something that you must do whether you are new to your position or a seasoned veteran. When you "do your homework" and know the key factors about your campus, its culture, and its future direction, it allows you to formulate questions and strategize more effectively. Familiarize yourself with the mission statement and the strategic plan for your institution. How does your unit fit? What questions does it raise that you might want to pursue with your administrators? What do various groups think about the LAC? Are they supportive? Do they view it as strictly remedial? Do they see it as a resource for all students or only certain groups of students? Do they see it as a resource for faculty and staff? What is the history of the LAC on your campus?

### *What do you think drives these expectations?*

Oh, a multitude of factors! It might be political. Perhaps there are issues related to business/industry. Financial implications—available budget and the demand for services—are often a major factor. Sometimes expectations are driven by personal experience, either one's own or that of constituents who tell us about their experience. It could be the division your unit sits in. Student Affairs and Aca-

demetic Affairs each have their own distinct culture and ways of doing business. And make it a point to understand the relationship between the institution and your state legislature. How your lawmakers view higher education and the state's role in funding or creating and implementing policy can have a major impact on the LAC.

### *How do I get this information?*

Ask! Set up individual meetings, attend staff/faculty meetings, use surveys, and visit

with student groups.

### *How do I know whom I really need to meet? And how do I orchestrate these meetings?*

My personal bias is that you ultimately want to meet as many administrators, faculty, program directors, staff, and representatives from student leadership as you can. And you want to involve as many of your staff as possible and appropriate. Begin by making a list of the key players. Here are some examples.

**Your President.** You really need to understand this individual's vision for your institution and the way that vision relates to students. Read examples of key reports, presentations to your governing board, faculty senate, community leaders, etc. If your President has a homepage, visit it regularly. This is someone you eventually need to meet. Depending on the size of your campus and/or the avail-

ability of time in his/her schedule, getting an appointment may take a while. But, get an appointment or invite him/her to the center!

**Your Provost.** Many campuses have an individual who is the chief academic officer or provost. This person is charged with providing direction and guidance for the institution's academic programs. The LAC is charged with providing academic support whether the unit reports organizationally in Academic Affairs or Student Affairs. It will be important for you to know what the Provost believes about academic support programs because he is a direct link to the College Deans.

**College Deans.** This is a vastly under-

rated group of administrators, in my opinion. We consider them to be very busy and truly uninterested in the work that we do. But on many campuses, individual colleges are a forceful presence. This underscores, again, the importance of understanding your campus culture and campus politics. Deans are often in a position to advocate on behalf of the LAC, particularly regarding budget and space. If they know who you are and how the LAC helps their students—retention and persistence are important terms to incorporate into discussions with them—they will be more inclined to offer support.

**Campus Faculty.** Faculty can be among your strongest allies in encouraging students to utilize the LAC. And they are an excellent resource in marketing the LAC to other faculty. A growing number of centers are using a faculty liaison model similar to the one developed at Paradise Valley Community College in Phoenix, AZ. Faculty liaisons facilitate two-way communication between the LAC and departments external to it. Among their responsibilities are providing information about the LAC to peers and in department/division/college meetings, looking at instructional support issues for students regarding LAC services, and providing input and feedback regarding new LAC policies and procedures. In this model, faculty becomes an integral part of the LAC staff.

**Directors of Other Campus Programs.** These individuals have a variety of titles including Assistant Dean, Director, Associate/Assistant Director, Coordinator, etc. They are responsible for directing programs/services such as athletics, disability services, residence

life, Student Support Services, Honors, multicultural offices, technology centers, grants offices, Freshman Year Experience programs, Orientation, etc. They are often your peers, the ones you will interact with on a regular basis. Talk with them about their experience with the LAC, existing collaborations, or the potential for new ones. Identify the resources you might collectively share.

**Campus Staff.** If faculty are among the strongest allies, staff are positioned right next to them! Remember that staff members are often the ones who have the most frequent and on-going contact with students. They are the ones who likely do many of the referrals to the LAC so it is critical that their information is accurate and up-to-date. Offer to meet with them individually or attend one of their staff meetings, or do a short presentation on a key learning assistance strategy. Frank Christ suggests that everyone needs time management!

And, of course, students. What are the needs of the students you serve? How do you know this? If you are grant funded, you will need to become very familiar with the criteria approved for selecting participants. If you are institutionally funded, criteria may have already been established. Or you may have an opportunity to set the criteria. Also, find out about student leadership opportunities on your campus and then create opportunities to learn about their needs. Again, participating in their meetings, scheduling separate time to meet with them, offering workshops on topics of interest to the group are ways to learn more about the students and to engender their support for the LAC.

*These meetings will certainly give me a wealth of information. But, how do I balance everyone's needs and expectations?*

Again, go back to the mission of your institution. Whether your LAC is funded by the institution or by a grant, whatever you do has to fit within that framework. You want to insure that you maintain credibility with your

students. That means quality and consistency in service delivery, that service is available when you say it will be, and that students are treated equitably.

*Are there certain times of the year or semester when I should make contacts?*

This is a good point. You need an annual plan. Whom do you need to visit annually? Each semester or quarter? Whom, in addition to your staff, do you need to meet with regu-

larly throughout the year? Depending on the size of your campus and the breadth of your services, are there some groups that you might cycle through every 2-3 semesters?

*Is it better to hold these meetings at the LAC or in individuals' offices?*

Whenever possible, get people into your center. Remember that most of us retain a much greater percentage of the information we can see and feel. Let them see where tutoring happens, experience the actual environment you have created. It is always useful to have

administrators see a live demonstration of the ways in which you have expended the allocated funds! However, you also want to be sensitive to the needs of the individuals you meet with. Time or circumstances may dictate a variety of meeting locales.

*Your advice is sound and I really appreciate it but it sounds, well . . . overwhelming. How am I going to do all of this?*

One day at a time! Remember, you are going to need time to structure a plan of action with appropriate timelines. Those of us who have been working in the field for a number of years didn't start with everything in place. As

a matter of fact, some of us—myself included—learned many of these lessons by trial and error. Use resources including many of the references included in this monograph. More important, perhaps, is knowing that the contribu-

tors of these conversations are real people who have experience similar to yours and that they are still active as mentors and resources who

are available to you. Know that you do not have to be alone in this process!

### ADDITIONAL READINGS

Martin, D. C., & Blanc, R. (1980). The learning center's role in retention: Integrating student support services with departmental instruction. *Journal of Developmental & Remedial Education*, (4), 2-4.

Shaw, G. (1994). Multiple dimensions of academic support: One learning center's response to learning diversity. In R. Lemelin (Ed.), *Issues in access to higher education*. Portland, ME: University of Southern Maine, 14-16.

Xenakis, F. S. (1979). Learning assistance support system for disadvantaged nursing students. In G. Enright (Ed.), *Multicultural diversity and learning*. Twelfth annual proceedings of the Western College Reading Association, Vol. XII, Los Angeles, 128-132.

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