Discussion Outline
For DRAFT

Report of Insights from Employee Focus Groups
Los Angeles Mission College
April 17, 2014

Background

A team of student affairs professionals from CSU, Northridge was invited by President Monte Perez and Vice President Joe Ramirez to assist the L.A. Mission College in gathering information from students and employees about student services at L.A. Mission and about various aspects of campus climate. The catalyst for this request was a desire to acquire deeper insights that could be helpful to LAMC leadership in responding to various proposed corrective actions identified in the 2013 reaccreditation report of findings.

- Following an initial campus visit to LAMC by CSUN AVP Shelley Ruelas-Bischoff and VP William Watkins, focus group questions were developed in consultation with VP Ramirez.

- Employees from the departments/offices of Admissions and Records, Athletics, Counseling, Assessment, ASO/Student Activities, Disabled Students Programs and Services, Extended Opportunity Programs and Services, and Student Support Services were invited to participate in one of four focus groups conducted on March 7, 2014.

- Interviews with students have yet to be determined.

Procedures

- Each focus group was conducted by two members of the Student Affairs leadership team at CSU Northridge, including:
  - David Crandall, General Manager, Associated Students, Inc.
  - Dwayne Cantrell, Director of Student Outreach and Recruitment.
  - Lili Vidal, Director of Financial Aid and Scholarships.
  - William Watkins, Vice President for Student Affairs

- Interviews were conducted in a private conference room in the Culinary Arts Institute Building. Interviews lasted over one hour; two interviews were tape recorded and two were not.
Participants were assured that their comments would not be individually attributed. They were also informed that a written report of our insights would be provided to President Perez and Vice President Ramirez.

The interview protocol is attached.

**Insights**

According to John Schuh and Lee Upcraft, focus groups “...work best when the purpose of the assessment is to learn about the perceptions, beliefs, or opinions of the students or others who use campus facilities, services, or programs.” The purpose of this document is to begin to outline staff insights, focusing on key themes, so that they can be used with existing perceptions and data to provide campus leadership with clearer insights as to opportunities for strategic change.

At the outset, we wish to note that staff seemed genuinely appreciative to have an opportunity to share their observations and concerns, particularly with outside colleagues who work in the field of Student Affairs. Some described the opportunity as “therapeutic.” At the same time, there was a sense on the part of some that prior input appears not to have resulted in change and some expressed reservations about being candid, stating that employees who speak out experience repercussions.

The first question posed was intended to create an opportunity for employees to speak freely and positively about working at LAMC and serving students.

**Question 1:** What makes you passionate about working at Mission College...about serving our students and/or community? What aspects of your work are you most proud of as it relates to providing services to students?

If the individuals with whom we spoke are indicative of the typical LAMC employee, the campus is truly blessed to have employees who care deeply about LAMC students. The staff expressed passion about

a. Helping students graduate and move on to the next experience
b. Solving problems with and for students
c. Students succeed here
d. Serving our community well
e. Changing students’ lives

We found that many employees believe they make a difference in the outcomes of the students they serve. Many expressed a commitment to going above and beyond because they have experienced the same challenges and opportunities as the students they serve. They believe they can genuinely relate to their students. All employees expressed an increasingly clearer sense that students must have concrete goals and that their efforts should be devoted to the achievement of those goals.
At the same time, there was an inescapable sense of frustration about the impact of reductions in funding/staff. Employees did not tend to talk about institutional pride or the overarching things done collectively as an institution to impact student success and campus service to the community.

Employee passion also seemed muted by what was reported as frequent changes in campus and district leadership and ever-shifting priorities. High/competing demands as related to work responsibilities appear to have resulted in a misalignment between allocation of work time (paperwork processing) and the needs of students (drop in visits, advising time, etc). Responses to the next question gave some indication of how employees believe they would spend their time differently.

**Question 2: If you had more time to work with students when they are in your departments, what more could you provide them with regard to services?**

Employees answered this question in part by way of identifying the areas where sufficient time/resources are not available to provide the range of services needed by students, including:

a. Learning disabilities assessments, clinical counseling services, international student orientation
b. Career development & job placement services
c. Student life opportunities (leadership development, service learning, event planning, etc.).

In addition to identifying the kinds of services that could be provided, staff discussed how work processes might be changed.

a. More time for processing paperwork (time not interrupted by student visitors and callers)
b. More one-on-one or small group work with students in advising, support and training. Time to develop comprehensive educational plans
c. More work with students on development (life, event planning, advocacy and leadership development)

Related recommendations included:

a. Campus would benefit by facilitating “cross department/division” understanding of functions, resources and needs. Collegial relations exist, however there is an expressed desire to learn more about other departments’ processes in order to use their time (and students’ time) more efficiently and streamline pathways for students.

b. Leadership should support best practices, stand in solidarity with polices that are implemented, and be more transparent/ engage staff more frequently with problem solving efforts.
c. Educating student on how/when to take care of university business processes.

Clearly the recent budget reductions have had a crippling effect in some program areas. As such, it was very challenging for staff to share insights about challenges that were not budget related. Nonetheless they were asked,

**Question 3. Aside from the budget, what are the Student Services division's biggest challenges as they relate to assisting students?**

Reponses to this question are categorized below

a. Physical environment
   - If services were located more closely to one another, the students would have to travel less, and departments would be able to know each other's work better.
   - Need for student event and lounge space.
   - Especially smaller and single-person offices do not feel connected with other departments.
   - More outlets for students to charge devices and computer stations for students to conduct work.
   - Hope but not optimism about new building.
   - Allow for closed-to-public hours for time to complete paperwork and for training (instead of overtime. This will increase efficiency and accuracy.

b. Interdepartmental coordination and relationships
   - Incorrect information and referrals about who is responsible for what (often related to paperwork processes) leads to student run-around and frustration, and both frustration and bad feelings among and between departments. We do not know enough about one another's processes.
   - Training is needed so that Information Desk and campus operator can provide accurate information and departments can provide accurate referrals. Need a campus operator to direct calls correctly. Fall Kickoff event so everyone is on the same page.
   - Too many exceptions for individual students, contrary to policy interpretation by staff, are made by campus administration, especially on deadlines.

c. Hierarchy
   - Too many departments reporting to one person prevents access. Simple decisions are unnecessarily delayed.
   - Need an Assistant Dean of Student Services and other leadership positions. VP is pulled in too many directions.
• Perceived power struggle between certificated and classified employees.

d. Student experience
• Students suffer because they do not have mandatory orientation; specific freshman classes and Summer Bridge to deal with remediation and preparation.
• Services are inefficiently delivered without online resources, such as online applications; computer stations; use of campus monitors, and alignment of publications, web, video, timing, social media.
• Time is used inefficiently in one-on-one sessions with students instead of in group workshops.

e. Confidence in process
• General: Staff felt that they have been through a lot of these kinds of processes before and the messages are sent and received but not followed up on with action. President needs to hold a Town Hall meeting: “This is what we heard. This is what we can do.”

It will certainly come as no surprise that employees had much to share about what they can do to take on the challenges identified. Categorized below are responses to the question:

**Question 4. What do you think you can do as a member of the staff to meet/address these challenges?**

a. **Student Engagement**
• Show students various pathways to success
• Teach personal development and success to students
• Encourage more students to attend “Fall Kick-Off” (open house)
• Encourage disadvantaged, minority, and incarcerated students that they can start over to create a better life
• Refrain from sending students junk mail (so that they take important emails more seriously)
• Encourage more students to pursue their AA before transferring

b. **Campus Collaboration**
• More collaboration between student services and academic affairs
• Come together across department to discuss issues and find solutions
• Convey information to other departments about our processes and rules
• Seek out information from other departments about their processes and rules.
• Follow up with the other department when erroneous information is reported by a student coming from that other department.
• Workshops between other departments to provide referral information, cross-training and knowledge of the “other” department’s context (understanding why we do what we do and why they do what they do)

c. Professional Development/Involvement
• Sit on committees to foster creativity
• Have debriefings after major events and retreats
• Hold regular staff meetings
• Attend training or meetings that help address the challenges, like the one-time “kickoff” event

Staff expressed a high degree of interest in connecting with and learning from their fellow staff. In response to

Question 5. How can you improve your connections with key Student Services departments? For example; in the student application, students are asked what types of services/information they would like. Have you received this information and if not, would it be useful?

We learned that staff:
  a. Have not received the information from the application, but would like to.
  b. Would like equitable support across departments from “top-level” administration.
  c. Desire to fill middle leadership positions (Dean of Admissions and Registrar and Assistant Dean of Student Services) and other positions so that there is leadership available to forge department connections
  d. Establish a dialogue about best practices among different District colleges and then adopt at LAMC.
  e. Firm up understanding of and enforcement of deadlines, polices, processes, procedures, closed hours, etc. This is particularly important when it impacts more than one department.
  f. Departments need to write procedures for themselves and share with other departments.
  g. Fall Kickoff event (used to have) so everyone is on the same page
  h. Inter-departmental in-service trainings.
  i. Strengthen communication between departments.

Last there was significant input on the question:

Question 6: What kind of training would you want to help in providing exceptional customer service?

We learned:
a. Training topics:
   - Customer service.
   - Subpopulations such as veterans, disabled, foster youth, etc.
   - Multicultural understanding; how to talk to students with sensitivity to culture, life circumstances, etc.
   - Effective listening/communication
   - Dealing with difficult students.
   - Time management, prioritizing
   - The new SIS system (PeopleSoft); what it will look like, terminology, etc
   - How to interpret policies and procedures more universally and consistently, especially when they are based in law

b. Other recommendations:
   - Topic-driven workshops among pertinent departments (e.g., intersection of financial aid, units required, and foster student status), to walk through the role of each department and why each department does what it does so that all departments have contextual understanding
   - Training for information desk so they can provide accurate information and referrals.
   - Training with peers at other colleges in system to norm service