

# Creating Alliances between Academic and Student Affairs: The Human Dimension

*Joe Cuseo*

Professor Emeritus, Psychology, Marymount California University  
Educational Advisor, AVID *for* Higher Education

Recommended strategies for promoting collaboration between Academic and Student Affairs often focus on organizational and structural alliances. However, collaboration may also be promoted through processes that promote positive interpersonal interactions and harmonious working relationships between faculty and student development professionals. The strategies discussed herein are organized into three key categories: (a) human relations and networking, (b) altruistic acts of courtesy and goodwill, and (c) personal validation, recognition, and reward.

The strategies are offered to student development professionals because, historically, they have shown greater interest in, and commitment to, building cross-functional partnerships with Academic Affairs and creating a “seamless” learning experience for undergraduate students (Blake, 1996; Kuh, 1996)

## Human Relations and Networking Strategies

**Reach out to faculty by getting to know them on an individual basis.** For instance, consider invite a faculty member, or a small group of faculty, to lunch. If this is done on a regular basis, it may be possible for every faculty member to receive a personal invitation from a student development professional at some point during the academic year. Both Marchese (1995) and Schroeder (2005) argue that one of the major challenges to developing collaborative partnerships between academic and student affairs is that their work is segregated into “functional silos,” which limits the quantity and quality of interpersonal communication between members of these two important divisions. Obviously, interpersonal contact must take place before collaboration can take place, and if interpersonal contact occurs under pleasant and personable circumstances, collaboration is more likely to occur.

**Show interest in the *professional and scholarly* interests of faculty.** Consider inviting faculty to make presentations on their work at student development meetings or retreats. Becoming familiar with the areas of expertise and scholarly interests of faculty may allow student development professionals to identify faculty members whose work connects with, or implications for, the co-curriculum. These faculty could be invited to engage in collaborative, mutually-productive projects, such as research studies or grant proposals. For example, an anthropologist or sociologist might be interested in research involving observational or naturalistic studies of student behavior on campus, the results of which may enable Office of Student Affairs to assess the frequency and forms of student involvement on campus, or the frequency and nature of students’ intercultural interactions.

**Become familiar with faculty members’ *avocational* interests.** If student development professionals become familiar with faculty members’ hobbies or recreational pursuits, they may be able to selectively target and recruit faculty for co-curricular partnerships relating to their

personal interests (e.g., a bicycling professor may be interested in sponsoring a student cycling club). Taking interest in faculty members' professional or personal interests may also increase faculty interest in the work of and priorities of student development professionals. As Dale Carnegie (1936) articulated it so artfully in his classic book, *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, "You can make more friends in two months by becoming interested in other people than you can in two years by trying to get other people interested in you."

**Extend a special welcome to new faculty.** Research suggests that first impressions are powerful and can set the tone for future interactions (Demarais & White, 2004). Faculty priorities and habits are often shaped by their first experiences in academe; once these priorities and habits are established, they tend to persist throughout the faculty member's career. If a new faculty member has a positive initial interaction with a student development professional, it may have long-lasting impact on the faculty member's attitude toward and involvement with the co-curriculum. I am a living example of a faculty member whose career path was altered by a student development professional who befriended me when I assumed my first, full-time faculty position after graduate school. He got me interested in student life outside the classroom and he persuaded me to shepherd a first-year experience course through the curriculum committee. He later asked me to teach the course and help co-direct it, which I did. Now, more than a quarter of a century later, I'm still directing an FYE course and continue to engage in scholarly pursuits relating to the first-year experience and students in transition. I have all of this to thank (or blame!) on a student development professional who went out of his way to welcome me and take a personal interest in me as a new faculty member. With some conscious forethought, student development professionals may be able to replicate my experience with other new faculty, increasing the likelihood that faculty collaboration happens intentionally, not randomly or serendipitously.

When new faculty are hired to replace departing or retiring faculty, this may be a golden opportunity to begin tilting faculty culture on campus in a direction that promotes closer working relationship with student affairs professionals, particularly if the latter are given some time during new-faculty orientation to promote faculty awareness of, and interest in, the co-curriculum.

## Altruistic Acts of Courtesy and Goodwill

**Build an interpersonal foundation for potential alliances by doing unexpected favors for faculty.** Consider: (a) helping students form study groups for their courses, (b) passing along articles that may be of interest to faculty, and (c) inviting faculty to conferences that address issues relevant to both faculty and student development professionals (e.g., first-year experience conferences).

**Show interest in courses taught by faculty and ask them about co-curricular experiences they think could reinforce or augment their course objectives.** Not only is this a good human relations practice, it's also an effective educational practice because learning as much as possible about the academic curriculum enables student development professionals to forge closer

connections with the co-curriculum. This suggestion may be implemented systematically and efficiently through a division of labor, whereby different academic departments are assigned different student development professionals to act as liaisons or “connection agents”—whose charge is to look for opportunities to connect the department’s course offerings with co-curricular programs.

**Equip faculty with *templates* or *models* that could be used as in-class exercises or out-of-class course assignments to connect their course with co-curricular programming.** These templates could be included as part of a practical, ready-to-use source book or resource guide constructed by student development professionals for faculty. The source book could be offered to veteran faculty members under the auspices of faculty development and it may be delivered proactively to new faculty during new-faculty orientation.

**Participate in faculty-sponsored events.** Student development professionals could attend faculty lecture series or faculty development workshops that have implications for student learning. They might also volunteer to visit with, or serve on, faculty committees and task forces to work on issues that have implications for student life outside the classroom. If student development professionals participate in faculty-organized activities, faculty may be more likely to reciprocate and participate in co-curricular activities organized by student development professionals.

### Personal Validation, Recognition, & Reward

***Acknowledge faculty for their contributions to student life.*** Acknowledgement can be done informally by sending faculty members personal thank-you notes for their participation in co-curricular experiences and by incentivizing faculty participation (e.g., free meals shared with students on campus). More formal acknowledgement may be provided by writing a letter of commendation to the faculty member’s department chair or academic dean for inclusion in the faculty member’s personnel file or professional portfolio. For faculty who have made particularly significant or extensive contributions to student life, they might be publically with “student service awards” at graduation, convocation, or a student awards ceremony.

**Lobby for faculty retention-and-promotion systems that reward faculty for their contributions to student life.** Some faculty may be interested in contributing to student life outside the classroom, but are reluctant to do so because their involvement will not make a whit of difference for their professional advancement and job security. In fact, faculty who become involved with student development may do so at the risk of impeding their own professional advancement because it subtracts time from professional responsibilities that “really count” in the faculty promotion-and-tenure process (e.g., research). Student development professionals can help support faculty and promote their involvement in the co-curriculum by encouraging high-level administrators to adopt rank-and-promotion policies that reward, rather than ignore (or penalize) faculty for their contributions to student life outside the classroom.

## References

- Blake, E. S. (1996). The yin and yang of student learning in college. *About Campus*, 1(4), pp. 4-9.
- Carnegie, D. (1936). *How to win friends and influence people*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Demarais, A., & White, V. (2004). *First impressions: What you don't know about how others see you*. New York: Bantam Dell.
- Kuh, G. D. (1996). Guiding principles for creating seamless learning environments for undergraduates. *Journal of College Student Development*, 37, 135-138
- Marchese, T. (1995). It's the system, stupid. *Change*, 27(3), p. 4.
- Schroeder, C. C. (2005). Collaborative partnerships between academic and student affairs. In M. L. Upcraft, J. N. Gardner, B. O. Barefoot, & Associates, *Challenging and supporting the first-year student* (pp. 204-220). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.