FD 267
What Keeps First-Year Students from Getting the Help They Need?
Facilitator: Sawa Kurotani, Ph.D., University of Redlands
Number of Participants: 70 +

Timeline:

4:00-4:10pm: Session Theme and Round Robin

- Facilitator began the session by acknowledging and appreciating the exceptional turnout.
- Facilitator briefly explained how she came up with the session topic out of her own experience and frustration working with reluctant students. She further clarified her session as a “facilitated dialogue in the true sense of the term,” i.e., she was not an expert on the subject and wished all of us to learn from one another.
- Given the large size of the group, Facilitator skipped self-introductions, and instead, did a brief warm-up exercise, in which participants were asked to stand up in response to her questions re: size and type of institution they represented and professional roles they played.

4:10-4:35pm: Story-Sharing Threesome

- Facilitator referred to her own learning curb through this conference and referred to a useful “typology” she learned in Mike Dial’s (U of SC) session that morning, in which students in “pre-contemplation” stage of behavior change were categorized as “reluctant,” “resigned,” “rebellious,” and “rationalizing.” She suggested participants to consider how some of their students might fall into one or more of these categories.
- Facilitator asked participants to team up with two others, whom they met for the first time during this session. In this small group, they were asked to share each other’s experiences of failed attempts to reach out to students. They were instructed to allow everyone equal time to share and to be active and empathetic listeners.
- Facilitator observed very active discussion through the 20-minute period allocated for this activity.
4:35-5:00: Synthesizing Discussion

- Facilitator asked for a volunteer to report take-away from the threesome discussion as a way of starting the conversation. She picked up major themes emerging from that report and encouraged others to jump in.
- In the interest of staying on the schedule, Facilitator concluded the discussion at 5:00pm, despite many participants who wished to speak.

**Emerging Themes:**

Upon the session conclusion, Facilitator reviewed her notes from observation during the small group storytelling and synthesizing discussion, and identified the following themes. (She acknowledges that some details may have escaped her attention, as she didn’t have a dedicated note-taker.)

A couple of key points relate to how we, campus professionals, can do to change/be mindful of our own approach:

- **Seeing individual student** – Even if students are encountering seemingly similar challenges, a combination of factors that brought them to that place is unique for each individual student. It is easy for busy campus helping professionals to quickly refer them to others, or “just follow” the established protocol, but without understanding the underlying causes of difficulty, we can’t reach out and help them in the most effective way.
  
  ➢ Possible strategy: 1) have one-on-one meeting and really listen; 2) support groups can be effective when tailored to individual needs
  
  ➢ Possible challenge: time constraints, students’ reluctance to share their situation

- **Finding elusive students** – Students in need can be reluctant to ask for help, and even when they are encouraged to go visit offices or instructed to seek out services, they simply don’t. So, instead of waiting for them to come to our offices, many of us are going to them, or even “hunt” them down all over campus -- dorm rooms, classrooms, even cafeteria.
  
  ➢ Possible challenge: time constraints, we might still not find them, off-campus students
  
  ➢ Possible strategy: use students as teaching assistants (who know how to find fellow students and are also more approachable)
  
  ➢ While these are issues of deep concern, we did not have adequate time to explore them adequately during this session.
Other points center on challenges of working with subsets of students with unique needs and circumstances:

- **Mental health issues** – This is a pervasive issue on university campuses around the country, and the shortage of resources exacerbates difficulty. Lengthy wait for counseling service is a major problem. Some students are reluctant to accept help, even when resources are available, for fear of stigma attached.
  
  ➢ Possible challenge: this tendency may have roots in family beliefs or cultural values and can be very difficult to change.
  ➢ Possible strategy: 1) coaching students what to say (at the counseling center) so that their situation can qualify as urgent and put on priority; 2) tapping into resources in the community, e.g. faith-based counseling; 3) employ reflective listening, to ease students’ discomfort and understand fully what is underneath their reluctance.

- **Identities in transition** – Many participant comments related to issues related, either explicitly or implicitly, to shifting identities or adaptation to a new environment. Examples include first gen students, who feel at odds in an unfamiliar campus environment, students who are transitioning in terms of gender or sexuality, and veterans who are returning to school after military service.
  
  ➢ While these are issues of deep concern, we did not have time to explore them adequately during this session.

- **Working with veterans** – Challenges associated with veterans came up in relationship to mental health and identities in transition, but Facilitator felt it was a subject that deserved its own bullet point, because of its complexity and pervasiveness. Many participants worked with veterans and found it especially challenging to reach out to them.
  
  ➢ Possible strategy: have military family volunteers on campus, who understand the challenges veterans face and can help them through the transition to being students.
  ➢ While these are issues of deep concern, we did not have time to explore them adequately during this session.

- **Students with learning difference** – We ran out of time before this major topic came up in the synthesizing discussion, but Facilitator heard many teams discussing the challenges of working with students with (potential) learning difference. There may be a major issue of stigma associated with LD, and many
students are reluctant to make good use of appropriate accommodations and support services.

➢ While these are issues of deep concern, we did not have time to explore them adequately during this session.