

Mid-Level Academic Leaders: Transforming Dilemmas into Decisions

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Brief Biography for: Dr. Marcia A. Gellin

Marcia A. Gellin received her Ed.D. from the University at Buffalo in 1983, and a Master of Science degree in Nursing from Boston University in 1973. She has over 30 years of experience in Nursing Education and administration, at the baccalaureate and associate degree levels. Dr. Gellin is an author, clinical specialist in Maternal/Child Nursing, educator and administrator. Within the past two years, she has served as Interim Associate Vice-President for Allied Health at the college. Currently, Dr. Gellin is an Asst. Academic Dean for Liberal Arts at Erie Community College in Buffalo, N.Y.

Brief Biography for: Mary A. Beard

Mary A. Beard received her Master of Education degree in 1976 from the State University of New York at Buffalo. She has over 20 years of experience in education at the college level. Currently, Ms. Beard is an Assistant Academic Dean for Liberal Arts at Erie Community College in Buffalo, New York.

Introduction/Background/Former Organizational Structure

Erie Community College (ECC) is a tri-campus college in Western New York. Before 1995 the three campuses operated as independent colleges with an Academic Dean as the Chief Academic Officer on each campus, and Assistant Academic Deans (AADs) reporting to the Academic Dean.

In 1995 the college reorganized using the “one college concept.” Three campuses would now operate as one college. This was a difficult task, given that each campus had its own method of leadership and operation.

The college was charged by Middle States in 2000 with developing an effective organizational structure involving committees and taskforces that linked comprehensive interrelated planning and outcomes assessment to a shared governance process. It was also charged with developing an institutional system of governance that clearly defined the roles of institutional constituencies in policy development and decision making. The plan was called Governance and Planning (GAP). Under this plan, the oversight committee is composed of the president of the college and the Board of Trustees, the Organization/Governance and College Council, the Operational/Taskforce, Middle States Coordinators and Campus Council committees. (Erie Community College, 2000)

Literature Review

Academic administrators are stewards of academic program integrity and as such are responsible for ensuring existence of a clear academic vision. They transform dilemmas into decisions by cultivating academic integrity, helping faculty comprehend and negotiate their relationship between their departments and the larger college, and encouraging them to lead lives of campus citizenship and professional advancement (Liberal Education, 2003). The AADs are responsible for making the vision “real and meaningful” for faculty and students.

Conceptual knowledge or understanding is the ability to conceptualize the leadership role of mid-level college administrators, who need to understand leadership from a conceptual or cognitive point of view (Jackson & Gmelch, 2003). At ECC, leadership training is provided college-wide through the Center for Teaching, Learning and Assessment. In addition, the AADs collectively attended a regional Leadership Training Conference, not only for educators and administrators, but also for professionals in business and industry.

Academic leaders create learning environments that include cultural awareness, acceptance of multiple intelligences and ways of knowing, strategic thinking, engagement, and a sense of collective identity, as collaborators in developing knowledge and active investigators in practice. They are skilled facilitators who encourage interdisciplinary collaboration, collective responsibility, cultural change, and an interest in the public good. They lead via partnerships and teams in systems that are web-like and non-hierarchical (Amey, 1998).

Leadership is not about being right or having the right vision and goals; it is rather, a process of learning to be effective and to achieve worthy goals and objectives with full and enthusiastic support of faculty, staff, and community organization (Drumm, 2004).

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to describe how Mid-Level Administrators continued to manage and support their departments as they developed new curricula, conducted Program Review, collaborated on the General Education mandate, and initiated Outcomes Assessment, amid major changes in the Organizational Structure of the college. The Academic Standards Committee, whose membership included all of the AADs, provided a forum for the discussion and resolution of all academic issues as they arose.

New Organizational Structure

The new organizational structure at ECC was designed to fully implement the “one college concept”. The Academic Dean position was permanently deleted from the college and a new upper-level leadership position was created on each campus, whose title would become the Associate Vice President of Academic Affairs. As a result, many

of the responsibilities from the Academic Dean position shifted to the AADs on each campus. Simultaneously, the college was experiencing a growth in enrollment and an increase in the areas of management.

There are currently six mid-level administrators at ECC called Assistant Academic Deans, who are responsible for managing all academic departments at the college. The AADs are expected to maintain their integrity and professionalism, while they are solving problems concerning irate faculty, angry parents, students and each bargaining unit. How do administrators change these dilemmas that occur on a daily basis into positive outcomes? Strategies developed by the AADs at Erie Community College will address this question.

Under the new organizational structure, “the one college concept”, new strategies for decision making in Curriculum Development, Academic Standards, Program Review, SUNY General Education, and Institutional Outcomes Assessment were developed and implemented.

Curriculum Development

The curriculum development process before 1995 was campus-based, with a campus committee made up of faculty and administrators who were responsible for developing programs and courses for the campus. There were minor problems with curriculum proposals not reaching the New York State Education Department (NYSED) in a timely fashion, and it would sometimes take longer than anticipated to receive NYSED approval for the proposal.

The college established a College Wide Curriculum Committee (CWCC) in the late 1990's. The mission of the committee was to collaboratively study and recommend new courses, new certificate programs and new degree programs. The CWCC consists of eight members from across the three campuses. There are four faculty members appointed by the Faculty Federation (Faculty Bargaining Union), and four members from the college appointed by the College President. There are also several Ex-Officio members from across the college including all six AADs. They are responsible for reviewing the proposal, providing supporting documentation, or responding to the academic unit with suggested revisions. In addition, the committee makes recommendations related to curriculum policy and procedures, as well as the development, implementation, evaluation and further exploration of proposed courses and programs of study.

Under the new structure, curriculum proposals are forwarded from the CWCC to the Executive Vice President, who needs to support the proposals which are sent to the state for approval. This process allows for ample turn around time from the college to the approving body (Erie Community College, Curriculum Handbook, 2004).

Academic Standards Committee

There have been communication problems by college faculty, staff and administration during the transition to the new organizational structure. The Academic Standards Committee closed the gap concerning policy and procedural issues. This committee is chaired by one of the AADs, and members are selected from a cross section of the college. The purpose of this committee is to ensure consistent academic standards across campuses. This committee meets on a monthly basis.

The objectives of the committee are to determine and monitor a consistent policy of acceptance or rejection of applications/petitions for readmission after academic dismissal, to standardize all forms and procedures relating to academic standards across campuses and to review and make appropriate decisions based on established criteria developed by the committee and communicated to the appropriate offices. (Erie Community College, Governance & Planning, 2002)

Program Review

Program Review under the separate campus structure was completed by each department on the campus. When the college reorganized, a procedure was implemented to review programs as a unit, meaning the three Social Science Departments now complete the program review as one document developed collaboratively with information from each department.

In the late 1990's, it was difficult trying to gather data from three different campuses, bringing the faculty together to complete the program review, and obtaining a consensus for the final document. With the development of the GAP Program Review Committee the charge was to develop a process that leads to program improvement and parallels program accreditations reviews; assess Developmental Education/General Education courses and student personal and social growth components as part of the review process; and budget and allocate resources based on department program review outcomes. The objectives include continuous improvement of academic programs, and the creation and integration of planning, assessment, and budget.

This process has been implemented for the past several years, with academic units working together. The data is obtained from the Institutional Research Office. The Department Chairs from each campus complete the final document, along with an Action Plan that is submitted to the state.

General Education

In 1998, the State University of New York (SUNY) Board of Trustees identified the mandatory General Education knowledge and skill areas for the existing sixty-four (64) SUNY institutions. Beginning with students admitted in Fall 2002, all graduates for SUNY Colleges and Universities are now required to have satisfied the course

requirements for competency in each of the ten knowledge areas, and two skills areas. This charge by SUNY had a major impact on the Liberal Arts Division of the college.

In order to complete this mandatory directive by the (SUNY) Board of Trustees, the college needed “buy-in” from the faculty to select courses and develop a rubric for each area. The AADs facilitated the establishment of a General Education Sub-Committee, chaired by a faculty member, whose role was to collaboratively develop an internal process with faculty college-wide, to review and approve potential Gen Ed courses.

The General Education Sub-Committee, made up of faculty and Assistant Deans, was charged with: (1) finalizing and distributing a SUNY approved General Education course list completed by the faculty; (2) updating the course list as necessary; (3) integrating ECC approved courses into internal degree audits and advisement processes; and (4) reviewing and revising internal and external course transfer processes and articulation agreements. The objectives include continuous improvement of educational programs at ECC, and to remain consistent with SUNY/SED rules and regulations (Erie Community College, College Catalog, 2004).

Institutional Outcomes Assessment

Outcomes assessment requires an approach that comes from administration and is embraced by the faculty members. Without this collaboration, progress would be limited (Weinstein, 2006).

In the summer of 2001, an Outcomes Assessment Plan was developed to focus on strategies for the institution. Six focus teams were established, Alternative Revenue, Curriculum, Economies and Efficiencies, Facilities, Support Services, and Technology. The teams were assigned faculty, staff, and administrators from the college. The charge for the teams at that time was to create a 10-15 year vision and plan in each of the six focus areas, in order to fulfill the overall purpose of the college, and be consistent with the mission and values. The teams were to create strategies and action plans to address the vision and purpose of each area, with projections of their financial impact.

The three key strategies which were identified for the future include: (1) Provide an integrated, automated, one stop support service using technology and other methods to ensure a “24-7” service to all students; (2) Become client centered – putting students first in all decisions; and (3) Develop a shared vision for support services – build a consensus among staff, customers and partners for the future (Erie Community College, 2001).

Summary

The six Assistant Academic Deans (2 per campus) were and continue to be at the forefront of each one of the areas listed in this paper. They are educated in leadership, critical thinking and management skills. Although “putting out daily fires” is part of their

job, the Assistant Academic Deans prefer to focus on transforming challenging dilemmas into positive decisions.

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