Reflections on our Collective Impact

Vicki Wise is the new Associate Director for Teaching, Learning, and Assessment in OAI. Prior to this role she was the Director for Assessment in Enrollment Management and Student Affairs, here at PSU.

Congratulations to all graduates, and to the faculty and staff who each play an important role in ensuring student success. As educators, this is the time of year we reflect back on students’ successes and challenges in our classrooms and programs. What did we learn about the successes of our students? What did we learn about students’ challenges? In this newsletter, and future ones too, we will feature success stories shared by faculty, staff, and students alike.

PSU’s Positive Impact on Student’s Lives

In this article, Virginia Martin, Assistant Director in PSU’s Women’s Resource Center, highlights a student’s success story.

Alex was a volunteer Student Support Specialist who worked at the front desk in the Women’s Resource Center (WRC) for the 2014/2015 academic year. She was an honors freshman with a double major in History and Spanish. Prior to the start of her first year, Alex had relocated to Portland for school and was living on her own for the first time. During her first term at the WRC, Alex was timid and shy; however, her dedication to serving at the WRC was unwavering.

During the beginning of Alex’s volunteer experience, she faced a multitude of challenges that affected her confidence level in interacting with students that would come into the WRC. Alex identified that she was unfamiliar with navigating the higher education system and was doing so with very little local support. This magnified the pressure that she felt in working with students who were also in need of support.

Although Alex experienced tremendous discomfort during her first term, the Leadership in Action Program in the WRC was a supportive and safe space for her to develop, grow, and explore. With each term that Alex returned as a Student Support Specialist, her confidence grew in herself and in her ability to support students like herself. During winter term at the WRC, she began to engage in the Women of Color Action Team and worked on her identity as a woman of color and strengthening access to her own power. By spring term, she was leading WRC outreach events in front of large classrooms and worked to provide awareness to other students of the resources available at the WRC. Alex stated,

“I am more confident in knowing how to talk to people about what they need and helping them find resources either in the Center or somewhere else on campus. It’s become a source of pride for me to see how much I’ve grown in that regard and I don’t think I would have been as involved with the campus community if I hadn’t volunteered.”

Alex experience reflects a similar narrative that resonates with student’s campus wide: The importance of community and knowing that there is a place where you belong. Spaces on campus that work to promote connection and understanding, healthy relationships, and community engagement are incredibly necessary to our campus climate, and these support student success retention. When asked what she would like to say to other PSU students, Alex said,

“If I were to say something to someone that was like me, it would be to get involved in the community. Even if you are nervous, just go for it!”
Faculty Reflections on Student Success

In this issue, we feature excerpts from a Q & A process with Vicki Reitenauer, Instructor, Women Gender and Sexuality Studies at PSU.

What were the greatest achievements/accomplishments you (your program) made in helping students be successful and engaged?

Vicki: Over the past several years, we in Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies (WGSS) have worked to strengthen the scaffolding and alignment in our upper-division required coursework, and those efforts continued this year. Among the revisions we've made to the program has been the development of a "Feminist Methodologies" course to ground our students' research initiatives and provide a foundation for their work in "Senior Seminar," in which students produce a significant research paper or project. In addition, we have strengthened our required practicum experience and the experiential learning seminar which accompanies the practicum so that students may engage individually and collectively in robust critical reflection on their feminist praxis in ways that make transformative learning possible.

What were some unexpected challenges your students (your program) encountered this year, if any?

Creating this realigned curriculum has resulted in the development of a cohort in the senior year—an outcome that we didn't foresee when we began our curricular redesign process. This development has had both positive and negative impacts among our students and within our program. On the high side, our students now have greater opportunities to build and experience community among their class colleagues because of their contact with each other within the group throughout the senior year. On the other hand, because our students are now moving through the upper-division coursework in tandem, conflicts that arise in one setting often get reproduced and reenacted in other settings (including spaces like the Queer Resource Center and the Women's Resource Center). Instructors may or may not know the history and context around these conflicts, impacting the faculty member's capacity to facilitate productive resolution. It has become an object lesson for us to be actively experiencing the same set of challenges in the community of our program that we encourage students to observe, analyze, and engage with in our world.

How did your students (you and your program) face these challenges?

On the program level, our Curriculum Committee is studying cohort dynamics as we continue to unroll the curricular changes we've undertaken. We are looking explicitly at ways that we can assist our students to engage in integrative learning around their experiences both inside our program and out, and, to that end, a team of WGSS faculty members, along with the directors of the Queer Resource Center and the Women's Resource Center, will attend AAC&U's Summer Institute on Integrative Learning and the Departments to design interventions in the intersection of the curricular and co-curricular spaces our students occupy. With our students, we have encouraged ever-deeper levels of reflection-on-practice, particularly in our practicum seminar, inviting students to critically engage with their experiences and to analyze their own responsibilities as members of both the learning communities at PSU of which they are a part and the greater communities within which they operate.

What suggestions do you have for others (students, faculty or staff) who might encounter similar challenges?

We have found that understanding the context at work in the situation is essential to framing a productive response to these challenges. Additionally, we know that relationship is key: the relationships that our students have to each other, to faculty and staff, and to the coursework and projects they gather around; the relationships that faculty have to each other, to the material we teach, and to the desired outcomes we strive for in the program; and the relationships that exist between the curricular and co-curricular spaces in which we operate. Insisting on the importance of reflective practice as essential parts of our work—as critical elements of students' intellectual engagement, as well as necessary components of individual pedagogical practice and of our collective curricular design and assessment processes—helps us to design meaningful and fruitful mechanisms for learning, teaching, and assessment. It takes an investment of time and energy—things that can seem to be in short supply given the demands on all of us at PSU—to prioritize this, but we in WGSS are finding that it brings an integrity to our efforts to work together, and with our students, in this way.