Notes in Brief

Assessment has assumed an increasingly prominent place in academic and student affairs practice. Yet, in smaller student affairs departments with limited staffing and resources, how might a department identify the resources or time to thoroughly assess student learning outcomes? This Notes in Brief details the partnership between the University of South Carolina's Higher Education and Student Affairs Master's Program course EDHE 839: Assessment in Higher Education and the Gamecock Gateway program, a residential bridge pathway and access program for first time college students between the University of South Carolina and Midlands Technical College. Authors present the rationale for the partnership, its essential components, the impact the learning outcomes assessment made on the program's success rates, and the takeaways both the graduate instructor and graduate students gained from the hands-on assessment practice. Such work is a model for efficient, effective assessment practice with impacts on undergraduate and graduate student learning.

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Practical Collaborations for Positive Impact

Assessment has become essential to the successful practice of both higher education academic and student affairs programs (Bresciani, Zelna, & Anderson, 2004). Administrators demand data to enact programmatic growth or change (Banta & Blaich, 2010; Maki, 2010). Yet, institutional resources to provide these data continue to shrink. How can a small student affairs department find the resources required to gather meaningful programmatic data that can support and guide effective practice? The answer in our case was found just across the Horseshoe—our campus commons.

Thanks to a partnership between practicing and emerging student affairs professionals, the University of South Carolina's Gamecock Gateway residential bridge program gained data that spurred an array of program enhancements. Ultimately, these enhancements boosted fall-to-spring semester student continuation rates from 86% to 95% in a single academic year. Further, the partnership utilized existing university resources to develop a "win-win" situation in which undergraduate students' experiences were enhanced while graduate students developed knowledge and skills supporting the application of assessment techniques.

About Gamecock Gateway

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Gamecock Gateway, jointly initiated by the presidents of the University of South Carolina (USC) and Midlands Technical College (MTC), launched in the 2012-2013 academic year. The program's focus was squarely fixed on enhancing access to a USC degree and innovating pipelines between community colleges and senior institutions. Students who initially applied for freshman admission into the university but fell just below acceptance thresholds are considered for invitation into the program. After one academic year in the program, students may seamlessly transfer into the university if they complete three requirements: (1) achieve at least 30 transferrable credit hours through MTC; (2) achieve a 2.25 transferable GPA or higher (recognizing that some USC academic programs may require a higher GPA); and (3) remain in good conduct and financial standing at both institutions.

The outcome of this unique assessment partnership between practicing and emerging student affairs practitioners had significant implications for all involved.

Gamecock Gateway students benefit from both the smaller academic environment at MTC and the large resources and opportunities found at South Carolina's flagship research university. Through the program, students commit to full-time enrollment at MTC and on-campus residency at USC. As a MTC student, Gamecock Gateway students have comprehensive access to MTC resources, including those that support academic, personal, and professional success. At USC, students reside in one centralized, on-campus living and learning community, and ride the USC-to-MTC shuttle designed specifically for their daily journey to the two MTC campuses that house Gateway cohorts. As with MTC resources, students receive access to USC resources that support academic, personal, and professional success.

Foundations of the Collaboration

As the 2012-2013 inaugural year of the Gamecock Gateway program drew to a close, the Gamecock Gateway leadership team realized their need for a deeper understanding of the inaugural cohort's perspectives on the program and the nature of their connection with the university. Further, this understanding was required for program modifications and anticipated by senior administration at both institutions. The Gamecock Gateway leadership team included one program staff member at the university and two at the community college. None of the three could take time from already over-crowded schedules to spearhead a programmatic assessment. In addition, their close connection to the Gamecock Gateway students throughout the year created strong rapport, but significantly lessened the likelihood of gathering honest, unbiased student feedback. Gamecock Gateway needed external support to better explore the student experience and to collect valid data.

USC faculty, who were redeveloping a graduate-level course in higher education assessment, had a complementary goal. The time had come to move emerging student affairs professionals from undertaking smaller, in-class assessment projects to immersed participation in a real world program assessment. In this approach, all students would attempt various assessment strategies under a common pedagogical umbrella. Thus, a collaboration was born. The Gamecock Gateway leadership team agreed to partner with the faculty members and students of the graduate assessment class to identify Gamecock Gateway student learning outcomes. Utilizing an authentic and holistic program assessment strategy, the students then investigated the program's effectiveness in meeting these outcomes.

The Path to Programmatic Assessment

The mixed method data collected by the graduate students, when analyzed and interpreted, revealed insights that both affirmed and advanced the Gamecock Gateway leadership team's understanding of the Gamecock Gateway student experience.

In January 2013, the Gamecock Gateway leadership team members provided an introductory presentation of the program to students and faculty associated with the assessment class. The assessment undertaking began with a consideration of student learning outcomes from comparable residential bridge programs at other universities. Surprisingly, few comparable programs publicized their student learning outcomes. In fact, very little was found on the history, processes, or outcomes of comparable programs. Thus, the program vision and mission served as the springboard for the graduate students' creation of three Gamecock Gateway student learning outcomes: (a) adjust to academic transitions by effectively using USC and MTC support services; (b) develop a sense of community with fellow Gamecock Gateway and USC students, faculty, and personnel and develop a sense of identity as both a MTC student and incoming USC student; and (c) identify relevant USC resources, processes, and procedures related to campus involvement.

With learning outcomes in hand, the graduate students then systematically developed and implemented quantitative and qualitative tools to assess the extent to which Gamecock Gateway students achieved these outcomes at academic year's end. Students divided into four groups, each with a unique focus: (a) a student focus group team, (b) a student survey team, (c) a Resident Mentor interview team, and (d) a Gamecock Gateway tutoring interview team. A fifth team was dedicated to the creation of an assessment designed to track student engagement in on- and off-campus communities. The graduate assessment students then presented their findings and recommendations at The First Annual Gamecock Gateway Assessment Conference held in April 2013.

Assessment Partnership Outcomes

The outcome of this unique assessment partnership between practicing and emerging student affairs practitioners had significant implications for all involved. Highlighted below are implications for the Gamecock Gateway students and for the graduate students who honed their assessment skills through their engagement with the Gamecock Gateway program.

Gamecock Gateway students. The mixed method data collected by the graduate students, when analyzed and interpreted, revealed insights that both affirmed and advanced the Gamecock Gateway leadership team's understanding of the Gamecock Gateway student experience. Some findings were anticipated (e.g., "Mandatory 8 am classes at MTC are a bad idea!"), while others were not (e.g., "I feel awkward when my new USC friends see that my student identification card doesn't look like theirs"). All contributed to an understanding of not only quantifiable programmatic outcomes, such as number of credits earned, but also to a deep understanding of the lived experiences of the Gamecock Gateway students who represented a type of transfer student never before seen on the USC campus. Additionally, data analyses provided the external justification necessary to implement several program enhancements. A few key enhancements include the addition of a summer orientation program that integrated USC and MTC new student orientations for Gamecock Gateway students, and using former Gamecock Gateway students (now fully admitted USC students) as Gamecock Gateway resident mentors.

Graduate students. Students enrolled in the graduate-level assessment course achieved two key professional outcomes. First, they gained hands-on practice in grappling with the real world of assessment processes. Their efforts resulted in their need to make decisions about how to gather trustworthy data, and how to interpret these data knowing that their explanations held short- and long-term consequences for all involved with the Gamecock Gateway program. Second, the unique learning context of the Gamecock Gateway program allowed them to explore and assess learning environments at both a two-year and four-year institution, strengthening their understanding of the complexity and the criticality of this transfer pipeline. This deepened understanding will serve them well as they consider career options throughout their professional lives.

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Conclusion

Partnerships like the one we present in this paper can enhance both the graduate and undergraduate student experience while meeting institutional needs and a moral commitment to effective assessment and program analysis. This partnership, as we discovered, necessitated (a) vulnerability from course and program leadership, (b) a shared expectation of transparency and action from the reviewers and the program under review, and (c) an authentic willingness to partner between academic and student affairs entities. The collaboration between the graduate students and faculty and the inaugural Gamecock Gateway program students and leadership team provided enhancements that increased student success and ultimately motivated a doubling of enrollment in the 2014-15 academic year. We believe this win-win strategy is one that others can apply on their own campuses as assessment becomes a constant campus companion.

References

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