

Launching an Interdisciplinary Network for Understanding Student Engagement (INFUSE)

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Note for readers outside of the USA: The term faculty refers to academic staff

Project Overview

The Interdisciplinary Network for Understanding Student Engagement (INFUSE) began in the spring of 2015 at Central Michigan University (CMU). CMU is a mid-size, public research university located in Mount Pleasant, Michigan USA. More than 20,000 full-time students are enrolled on campus, and over 7,000 enrolled online at 60 locations worldwide. The Dean of the College of Education and Human Services wanted to put together a team of faculty from each department within the College to focus on teaching and learning. Faculty members from five departments (Counseling and Special Education; Educational Leadership; Human Environment Studies; Recreation, Parks, and Leisure Services; and Teacher Education and Professional Development) initially met and brainstormed ideas to pursue. A focus for the project was identified by the end of the spring, 2015 semester, and the team began exploring the student engagement literature. The project team spent the 2015-2016 academic year examining resources and attending conferences to gain an understanding of the field. Each team member attended a conference and reported back regarding the results of interesting sessions and potential speakers to consider using in the future. As the information was coming in, the team began forming a professional development plan to implement in the fall of 2016. A highlight of the plan was instituting a speaker series with one speaker each semester for the 2016-2017 academic year. Each invited speaker visited for an entire day to provide a keynote luncheon, two break-out sessions, and engagement opportunities with students. Plans include building a repository of effective strategies that can be utilized across the lifespan of a student, speaker events and follow-up activities to engage faculty in prolonged study of student engagement techniques.

Introduction

A report of the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE, 2007) data provided by the vice-provost spurred the team in a direction to explore student engagement and create a model for recognition of effective practices that are already occurring within the college, to examine ways to increase student engagement throughout the college. As the team began its work, a review of the faculty-student engagement literature provided a foundation for the project. Faculty members can increase student engagement by interacting with students on course-related topics, and by putting value-enriching, educational experiences into their teaching (Umbach & Wawrzynski, 2005). By being engaged themselves, and using consistent approaches to grading and discipline, engagement has been seen to increase (Bryson & Hand, 2007).

Although engagement ultimately rests in the students' hands, faculty must design a purposeful course that helps promote interaction, participation, and communication through utilizing technology in online learning environments (Robinson & Hullinger,

2008; Chen, Lambert & Guidry, 2010) and transforming this into the classroom with continuous and active encouragement with social interactions (Cotton & Wilson, 2006). Increasing engagement can also include incorporating an appropriate and deliberate technology aspect. Student engagement and outcomes have shown a positive relationship with web-based learning (Chen, Lambert, & Guidry, 2010), and with online learning communities that create new interactions and participation (Robinson & Hullinger, 2008).

Some argue that in-class interactions have the best effect on student engagement (Umbach & Wawrzynski, 2005), but other studies have shown that faculty who interact with students in informal levels, outside of the classroom, have been given high remarks by students (Cox & Orehovec, 2007). Either way, these interactions are being looked at as a key approach to achieving increased engagement. Research states that increasing the informal interactions also has led to increases in course value, academic efforts, and institutional satisfaction (Cotton & Wilson, 2006). These outside of the classroom interactions and relationships are showing a positive impact on grades (Cox & Orehovec, 2007), and curriculum should focus on increasing student-faculty interaction on readings and content (Robinson & Hullinger, 2008). Programs should aim to increase interactions, both in and out of the classroom (Cotton & Wilson, 2006).

Project Outline

The INFUSE project started with an open-ended charge to enhance the teaching and learning environment within the college. The Dean attended a national level speaker presentation focusing on student engagement and wanted to reinforce this emphasis within the college. Afterwards, the Dean reached out to a number of individual faculty to garner support for this effort. Wisely, the Dean did not give a narrow, pre-defined charge; rather gave a blank slate with some financial resources.

Howe and Dunn (2017) chronicle the journey of a student engagement program and share that there are often implementation challenges in the early stages of these efforts. This was the case with INFUSE as, initially, the team floundered without a clear path; however, this proved to be a powerful, organic opportunity to coalesce around an idea that was meaningful to all involved. Engaging students was important regardless of discipline, format of the course (traditional, non-traditional, face-to-face, or online) or level of the content (undergraduate or graduate). The group made the decision to expand the focus to explore ways to engage students both in and out of the classroom.

As the team began to lay out action steps, a few guiding principles became clear. First, the project did not want to send a message that faculty in the college were deficient in regard to student engagement. Actually, quite the opposite was the case; with many colleagues demonstrating exceptional educational practices as evidenced by a number of them achieving university-wide teaching awards. This awareness led to the second principle; honoring the skills within the college and “mining” the faculty to understand their effective practices with the goal of “cross-fertilizing” ideas across departments. Third, collecting and creating a base of resources was important so ideas and

exemplars could be shared widely with colleagues. Lastly, INFUSE did not want to duplicate resources offered through the university-wide teaching and learning support center, so the project design intentionally focused on items that could be cumulative to existing efforts and resources.

Collectively, team members decided that it was important to spend the first-year learning. This included attending regional, national, and international conferences to build individual and workgroup knowledge of what student engagement looked like in collegiate environments, while identifying potential speakers for an ongoing upcoming speaker series to be developed. Each INFUSE member also reviewed the student engagement literature, which broadened team understanding, by annotating a series of articles to develop an information repository within the college. Lastly, INFUSE members made a concerted effort to participate in as many related events on campus to reinforce the goal of accessing the many “local” resources.

After this immersion, a few ideas emerged which translated into tangible action steps that would support a culture of student engagement. First, the team presented the project’s initial ideas at a regional teaching and learning conference to introduce preliminary plans. This presentation garnered valuable feedback that informed the next steps. Presentations were also provided to college faculty and staff at the annual, college wide meeting to create a buzz about INFUSE. The team was careful not to ask anything of faculty, but rather wanted to introduce and increase awareness of the upcoming events. Faculty were informed that in the future, INFUSE members would visit department meetings to talk about planned initiatives, and ask for their assistance.

One idea that emerged from the survey of local/regional/national/international student engagement sources was to develop a speaker series. The Dean clearly stated that it was more cost effective to invite resources to campus, as compared to sending a few individual faculty to various conferences/workshops. With this in mind, the team intentionality sought to create a welcoming environment for colleagues through personalized faculty invitations, while creating an elegant event that was more than a workshop. The size of the event was kept small (40 or less), and had a sit down, plated lunch that afforded a more social environment. INFUSE engaged the services of the college event planner to ensure a polished final presentation, with increased logistical coordination. These efforts resulted in securing one speaker each semester, each providing a keynote and a series of break-out sessions for faculty and students. Evaluations from these events were positive and provided suggestions for future improvement.

In thinking about student engagement, the team consciously decided to expand the focus to include strategies both in and out of the classroom. Consequently, a timeline was developed emphasizing student engagement across the student lifespan (prospective high school students through ten-year alumni), with the goal of creating a website resource for the college detailing strategies that faculty were already implementing. To obtain materials for the website, INFUSE members individually contributed the ways they engaged students, but members also went in pairs to attend

department meetings to introduce the plan, and to solicit exemplars of items for the website. The pairs included a faculty member from the department being visited, as well as a college faculty member from outside of the department to decrease the odds of the initiative being dismissed by close colleagues. In the meetings, faculty members were asked to identify activities they were doing to engage students across the lifespan. The project team also solicited nominations for individuals who could be subsequently interviewed to further understand these strategies utilized, and the impact on student engagement.

The INFUSE team followed up these departmental meetings by interviewing the nominated individuals, as well as those within the college who had previously received university wide teaching awards. In these interviews, faculty discussed both practical strategies as well as philosophical approaches to engaging students at various points in the students' lifespan. These strategies were then highlighted for inclusion in the resource repository.

Evidence of Effectiveness and Impacts

This program has been supported by the college since its inception, both financially and organizationally. The impact of the efforts, however, extend across the university to other programs and colleges interested in supporting student engagement efforts and activities. The team's commitment to sustainability, led to intentionality in starting slow and small. The information that the team gathered represents formative assessment of the effectiveness and impact in this important initial time of development. Members of the INFUSE group did an early exploration of research related to student engagement, and this formed the basis for further exploration at conferences. The team assembled a list of speakers that represented the INFUSE perspective and invited established experts to campus and present sessions related to student engagement with faculty and administrative staff, as well as pre-service teacher candidates and honors students. For these efforts, INFUSE received support from the honors program to host a student forum with the speaker, leading to future initiatives related to student engagement.

Through semi-structured interviews faculty identified by their peers as exemplars that actively and effectively engage students, team members have begun the process of assembling a snapshot of how these interactions with their students in and out of the classroom. These individuals have shown a strong willingness to share their perspectives, and their responses are being categorized to identify common touch points across the student lifespan. The INFUSE team has seen a positive shift towards support and acceptance of the INFUSE initiatives across the college from colleagues that initially viewed the programs as suspect from an organizational and financial perspective. Many people that were once visibly closed to the efforts have opened, and have been not only supportive, but have actively engaged in presentations and inquiries.

The project team has received accolades for web-based content that describes the "touchpoints" that the different departments have within the college to reach out to

prospective, current, and alumni students to keep them engaged in collegiate programs. This work in progress has been touted by the Dean as an example of the work that faculty do to increase student engagement across the lifespan of students and graduates.

Programs not affiliated with the college found out about these efforts and have actively tried to join the INFUSE group to support programmatic initiatives. This project began as a support mechanism for the college, and once the initial project goals have been achieved, INFUSE will be open to expanding membership of the group to others outside of the college. Finally, the team presented the project at a regional conference sponsored by CMU's faculty development center and at a national teaching and learning conference. These presentations were well attended, and the content was well received by colleagues. Additionally, the team has had numerous overtures from peers across the university and the region about the initiatives, with requests for updates on the project as they become available.

Reflections and Lessons Learned

As the project team reflects on the work to-date, many important lessons have been learned to guide ongoing efforts and to share with others looking to enhance student engagement. With the initial open-ended initial charge, the team worked diligently to clarify the focus of the project. This included tolerating the, at times, uncomfortable transition from individual ideas to group ownership of mutual goals. Given teaching and learning outcomes varied across the departments represented (e.g., level, location, content, practitioner or scholar-focused), the initial focus solely on the classroom was soon transformed to a broader vision of student engagement that developed within a continuum across the student lifespan, a journey that provided opportunities for frequent and continually available faculty touchpoints. With this flexibility, the group transitioned from a confined focus of "teaching and learning," to a broader vision of continuous student engagement. With this revitalized perspective, the team recommended developing group working agreements, which were mutually created and revisited often, to guide this transformative work. These agreements, listed below, served as reminders of the group goals and expectations, and were subsequently implemented guide the team's work:

1. Establish clear, achievable and mutually-agreed upon goals.
2. Respect and accept all ideas and opinions to advance this work at a deep and substantive level.

Logistically, the team learned that pre-planning and facilitation are critical to ensure that both the content and logistics kept moving forward in group sessions: this was the responsibility of the two co-facilitators. Communication was direct and clear regarding all stake-holder's needs, and this included frequent follow up meetings with the representative in the Dean's office. Additionally, the co-facilitators met regularly with the Dean for brief and regular face-to-face meetings. Supported with documentation of progress, the team could provide updates that ensured the common vision of the INFUSE project kept moving forward.

Recognizing all participating faculty were interested in teaching and learning innovations and were concomitantly committed to increasing student engagement utilizing these innovations, the team remained vigilant and cognizant about what features of the INFUSE project would support individual members as they moved through their individual promotion process. Supporting faculty in a way to insure academic success, with increased student engagement and academic achievement became a central feature of ongoing conversations and dissemination of the “lessons learned”, and these findings were woven into the work to benefit all local stakeholders, as well as colleagues extant the college.

As the project moved forward on developing the online resource repository, the team faced some challenges when required to move from a simple, mocked-up prototype site, to an officially sanctioned, and branded university resource. This included meetings with the university’s information technology and marketing staffs to ensure compliance in branding and format. Ultimately, the team decided to create this repository within the existing learning management system. INFUSE seeks to share resources and transmit the philosophy at new faculty orientation and continue to foster a richly cross-joined system in the college: this is the way the college does business and it matters.

Dissemination and Future

To ensure that the project team were being careful stewards of allocated funds, the committee developed a budget proposal detailing which projects INFUSE hoped to see going forward that would fulfill these commitments. In addition to continued work to disseminate the INFUSE model, the committee developed plans to continue programming and provide ongoing resource development for faculty. Due to the successes, thus far, the committee was refunded for the upcoming academic year as it was deemed that there was still more work to do in this area.

The INFUSE committee has both long- and short-term projects slated for the upcoming academic year that support an interdisciplinary emphasis on faculty development. To meet these goals, the speaker series (discussed above) will continue into the fall, 2017 semester. This event will be utilized as a kick-off to re-energize faculty efforts towards student engagement for the new year. The speaker’s current book will be used as a continuation of this event and will set the stage for a faculty work group that will experiment with new strategies to engage students. This will be open to any faculty within the college.

Additionally, the project team has developed a repository of student engagement strategies. This is to provide a “one stop shop” for faculty in the college to share the different methods and materials that they utilize to engage students across the lifespan of programs. This includes pictures, graphics, written narratives, video vignettes, role plays all related to student engagement efforts. The INFUSE content will be accessible by all faculty in the college, and it is intended to be a place to collect ideas on how to engage with students at different points across the lifespan. The overarching goal for

this ongoing project is to be a “think-tank” or a place in which anyone at any point in their career can come to be infused with new ideas.

Organizationally, the project team continues to look at ways to extend the impact of this initiative. The impetus for these efforts were originated by faculty supported by the Dean. However, this work is significantly different than most other work commonly done by faculty. To gain the recognition that faculty efforts deserve, as well as to provide an increased encouragement for future faculty involvement, the team is looking at ways that the committee’s effort can be considered in the faculty reappointment, promotion, and tenure process. Departmental bylaws typically do not cover the types of activities that the committee members have engaged in. We are discussing ways to support the inclusion of the group’s specific efforts, and have them count for the reappointment, promotion and tenure process.

Last, INFUSE will operationalize programmatic efforts in future college initiatives. To provide the evidence of impact necessary to expand the impact of this program, the team is in the process of assembling a formal program evaluation which includes working with assessment staff and faculty and looking forward to implementing ideas and activities to guide both formative and summative assessments of programmatic impact.

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