**Launching an Interdisciplinary Network for Understanding Student Engagement (INFUSE)**

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**Summary**

The Interdisciplinary Network for Understanding Student Engagement (INFUSE) began in the Spring of 2015 with a request from the Dean to put together a team of faculty from each department within the College of Education and Human Services to focus on teaching and learning. Faculty members from five departments (Educational Leadership; Human Environment Studies; Recreation, Parks, and Leisure Services; Counseling and Special Education; and Teacher Education and Professional Development) initially met and brainstormed ideas to pursue. 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 and examine ways to increase student engagement throughout the college. A focus for the project was identified by the end of the Spring, 2015 semester and the team began exploring the student engagement literature. We 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.

**Description of Project**

The INFUSE project started with an open-ended charge to enhance the teaching and learning environment within our college. Our Dean attended a national level speaker presentation focusing on student engagement, and wanted to reinforce this emphasis within our college. The Dean reached out to a number of individual faculty to garner support for this effort. Wisely, the Dean did not give us a narrow, pre-defined charge, rather gave us a blank slate with some financial resources. Initially, we floundered without a clear path; however, this proved to be a powerful, organic opportunity for us 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 our thinking to explore ways to engage students both in and out of the classroom.

As we began to lay out action steps, a few guiding principles became clear. First, we did not want to send a message that faculty in our 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 us to our second principle; honoring the skills within the college and “mining” our faculty to understand their effective practices with the goal of “cross-fertilizing” ideas across departments. Third, we wanted to collect and create a base of resources we could share with our colleagues. Lastly, we did not want to duplicate resources offered through our university-wide teaching and learning support center, so we intentionally focused on items that could be cumulative to existing efforts and resources. Collectively, we decided that it was important to spend our first-year learning. We attended regional, national, and international conferences to build individual and workgroup knowledge of what student engagement looked like in collegiate environments, and identifying potential speakers for an ongoing upcoming speaker series we hoped to develop. Each INFUSE member also reviewed the student engagement literature, broadening our own understanding and annotating a series of articles to develop an information repository within the college. Lastly, we made a concerted effort to participate in as many related events on our own campus to reinforce our 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, we presented our initial ideas at a regional teaching and learning conference to introduce our plans. This presentation garnered valuable feedback informing our next steps. We also presented to our faculty and staff at the annual, college-wide meeting to create a buzz about INFUSE. We were careful not to ask anything of faculty, but rather wanted introduce and increase awareness of the upcoming events. Faculty were informed that in the future, INFUSE members would be visiting department meetings to talk about our initiatives and ask for their assistance.

One idea that emerged from our survey of local/regional/national/international student engagement sources was to develop a speaker series. Our Dean clearly stated that it was more cost effective for us to invite resources to campus, as compared to sending a few our individual faculty to various conferences/workshops. With this in mind, we intentionality sought to create a welcoming environment 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. We engaged the services of the college event planner to ensure a polished final presentation, with increased logistical coordination. Our 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, we consciously decided to expand our focus to include strategies both in and out of the classroom. Consequently, we developed a timeline emphasizing student engagement across the student lifespan (prospective high school students through ten year alumni), with the goal of creating a website resource for our 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 our plan, and to solicit exemplars of items for the website. The pairs included a faculty member from the department being visited, as well a college faculty member from outside of the department to decrease the odds of the initiative being dismissed by close colleagues. In the meetings, we asked each faculty to identify activities they were doing to engage students across the lifespan. We also solicited nominations for individuals we could subsequently interview to further to 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 our college since its inception, both financially and organizationally. The impact of our efforts, however, extend across the university to other programs and colleges interested in supporting student engagement efforts and activities. We have started slow and small, and the information that we have gathered represents formative assessment of our effectiveness and impact. 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. We 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 our efforts, we received support from honors program to host a student forum with our speaker, and this will lead to future initiatives related to student engagement.

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

We have received accolades for web based content that describes the “touchpoints” that the different departments have within our college to reach out to prospective, current, and alumni students to keep them engaged in our programs. This work in progress has been touted by our Dean as an example of the work that our faculty does to increase student engagement across the lifespan of our students and graduates.

Programs not affiliated with our college found out about our efforts, and have actively tried to join the INFUSE group to support our efforts. This project began as a support mechanism for the college, and once we feel that we have met our initial goals, we will be open to expanding membership of the group to others outside of our college. Finally, we presented our project at a regional conference sponsored by our faculty development center. This presentation was well attended, and the content was well received by our colleagues. We have had numerous overtures from peers across the university and the region about our efforts, with requests for updates on our project as they become available.

**Reflections on the project and lessons learned**

As we reflect on our work to-date, we have learned important lessons to guide our ongoing efforts as we share with others looking to enhance student engagement. With our open-ended initial charge, we worked diligently to clarify the focus of our project. This included tolerating the sometimes uncomfortable transition from individual ideas to group ownership of mutual goals. Because teaching and learning outcomes varied across the departments represented (e.g., level, location, content, practitioner or scholar-focused), our 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, we recommended developing group working agreements, that were mutually created and revisited often, to guide our transformative work. These agreements, listed below, served as reminders of our group goals and expectations, and were subsequently implemented guide our 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, we learned that pre-planning and facilitation are critical to ensure that both the content and logistics kept moving forward in our group sessions: this was the responsibility of our two co-facilitators. We were 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 our Dean for brief but regular face-to-face meetings. Supported with documentation of our progress, we 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, we 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 our ongoing conversations and dissemination of our “lessons learned”, and these findings was woven into our work to benefit all local stakeholders, as well as our colleagues extant the college.

As we moved forward on developing the online resource repository, we faced some challenges when we were 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, we decided to create this repository within our existing learning management system. We seek to share our work at new faculty orientation and continue to foster a richly cross-joined system in the college: this is the way we do business and it matters.

**Follow up and plans**

To ensure that we were being careful stewards of allocated funds, the committee developed a budget proposal detailing which projects we 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 our 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 our interdisciplinary emphasis on faculty development. To meet these goals, we will continue the speaker series (discussed above) 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 our college.

Additionally, the committee has developed a repository of student engagement strategies. This is to provide a “one stop shop” for faculty in our college to share the different methods and materials that they utilize to engage students across the lifespan of our 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, we are looking at ways to extend the impact of this committee. 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, we are 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 our specific efforts, and have them count for the reappointment, promotion and tenure process.

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

**References**

National Survey of Student Engagement. (2007). *The college student report*. Bloomington, IN: Center for Postsecondary Research, Indiana University School of Education.