Student Life White Paper

November 9, 2009

INTRODUCTION

The college experience is more than attending classes and expanding one’s intellect. Research consistently demonstrates that participation in co-curricular activities benefits student retention rates and other educational outcomes. Moreover, research has shown that students attending a college/university develop in a variety of different ways over the course of their collegiate career. This is especially true for the traditional-aged student (18-22 years). In addition to intellectual/cognitive development, individuals grow physically, emotionally, socially and spiritually. In addition, students who have a rich college experience are prepared to pursue careers and to become productive contributors to society. Studies show that successful students are integrated both intellectually and socially into their college experience and the University must address both aspects.

Because the purpose of a college education should be holistic in nature in order to develop the whole student, the Student Life Subcommittee has defined “student life” as those experiences, programs, services and opportunities (as well as the culture/environment) which enhance and complement classroom learning. To plan for the coming decade, the committee believed it essential to gain insights from current students, alumni, faculty and staff members to ascertain what aspects of student life are believed to be of importance. By soliciting input from a wide range of groups and over 1400 individuals (by means of questionnaires, online surveys, meetings and forums), as well as reviewing recent studies and professional literature, the committee has developed initiatives which it believes are critical to the enhancement of the collegiate experience of future Washburn students.

INITIATIVES

The underlying and unifying theme resonating throughout the data is that students desire to become connected to other students, to faculty members, to the community and to the wider world. Therefore, the one over-arching theme from which the specific initiatives were drawn is to

CREATE EXPANDED AND ENRICHED INVOLVEMENT IN STUDENT LIFE

- INCREASE INVOLVEMENT IN STUDENT LIFE
  
  Data collected from all segments of the University community focus on the desirability of involving more students in more meaningful and varied ways in the co-curricular aspects of student life. “Involvement” is a term used broadly and includes a wide variety of activities, services and opportunities. Because the student body is not homogenous, it is important to recognize that “involvement”, too, must be seen in the most expansive way.
What can be done to achieve this goal?

- Expand/revamp offerings in campus facilities, particularly the Memorial Union and Mabee Library, including an extension of evening and weekend hours

- Provide increased coordination, publicity and information concerning opportunities and services

- Provide greater opportunities for students to socialize on campus

- Encourage continued development and support of the Greek community

- Offer wider range of co-curricular organizations and opportunities to meet the needs and interests of a diverse student body

- Expand resources for international students and opportunities for greater connection between US and international students

- Increase support and participation in athletic events by non-athletes

- Provide access to pertinent student services and opportunities for distance learners

- Increase activities to build school pride, spirit and participation, expanding activities (such as those during “Ichabod Welcome Week”) throughout the year

- Broaden programs and services to meet needs of a larger and more diverse student population

Recognizing that the population of students entering college in the coming decade will be increasingly diverse, the committee believes it essential for Washburn to be in a position to respond to their interests and needs. It is clear from experience and from indications in professional literature that the number of students in online courses will increase. Enrollment trends also indicate an increase in the number of transfer students from community colleges and technical schools. Helping assure the success of this diverse population will be critical to the success of the University.

What can be done to achieve this goal?

- Expand transition services for transfer students, WUTech students and non-traditional students

- Employ staff with Spanish/English skills in key areas and publish selected bilingual publications

- Focus on recruitment and retention of minority and international students

- Increase opportunities for US and international students to share cultures and develop relationships

- Increase scholarship support for study abroad
- Expand resources for online students to avail themselves of selected University resources through enhanced use of technology

- Provide a variety of campus events throughout the year (concerts, lectures, etc.)

- **PROVIDE GREATER ACCESS IN CENTRALIZED LOCATION(S) TO INFORMATION AND RESOURCES RELATED TO ACADEMIC PROGRAMS, UNIVERSITY SERVICES, ACTIVITIES AND SOCIAL SPACE**

  Survey results emphasize the need for more centralized gathering places. Students and professional staff underscore a need for spaces for socialization and recreation as well as for activities related to academic pursuits. Students surveyed express a strong desire for space, time and activities that would keep them on the campus and make it an appealing and lively place. Significant numbers of Washburn students work and/or have familial obligations, but despite time constraints, students voice strong interest in having more campus-centered services and activities available. The environment created by more centralized locations would be efficient, convenient and appealing to students. The engagement students experience in these environments would lead to better retention and academic success as well as to growth in interpersonal skills.

  **What can be done to achieve this goal?**

  - Extend hours of facilities available for food service, recreational opportunities, meeting/gathering places, tutoring, study groups, etc., particularly in the evenings and on weekends

  - Establish a “one-stop” approach to bring together all areas related to admission/enrollment

  - Consolidate academic support services in one location

  - Increase online presence and accessibility of student service areas, organizations and other student-related activities

  - Increase availability of staff beyond the traditional work day

- **INCREASE RETENTION BY CREATING A COMPREHENSIVE AND MORE COORDINATED FIRST-YEAR EXPERIENCE TO IMPROVE TRANSITION OF DIRECT MATRICULANTS, TRANSFER STUDENTS AND WUTech STUDENTS**

  Research and responses of faculty and professional staff strongly support a more expanded first year experience. Studies show that retention is improved and students experience fewer problems in transition if they have been provided thorough orientation to the University. Students responses echo this need, as well. Orientation which include both academic and social aspects of college life are supported. Given the diverse nature of the student body, orientations tailored to various identifiable student groups are deemed to be of great importance.
What can be done to achieve this goal?

- Require a comprehensive first-year experience
- Enhance the role of Career Services within the first-year experience
- Expand university-community connections, including opportunities for service/volunteer/internship opportunities
- Establish a mentoring program between experienced students and first-year students
Appendix A Rationale for Initiatives

The Student Life Subcommittee identified the over-arching theme of increasing students’ connection to the University, to each other and to the wider world by creating expanded and enriched involvement in student life. This conclusion is substantiated and validated by the overwhelming number of responses to the surveys, comments and responses made in discussion groups and studies the Student Life Subcommittee considered. These connections must be multiple and include those among students themselves in activities, organizations and recreation, among faculty and students and among students and staff members who provide services and interact with students in all areas.

In a world growing more technological, interpersonal connections are changing and becoming more challenging. It is anticipated that this trend will continue. The data clearly indicate a desire on the part of students to maintain and to expand their opportunities to make and to maintain these connections. The impact of increasing a student’s connection with Washburn is manifold. Retention is increased, students become more engaged in their academic pursuits, alumni loyalty is enhanced leading to greater future support of the University and the Washburn experience becomes more holistic, addressing the intellectual, social, physical, spiritual and emotional aspects of individual development.

Initiatives

To address the over-arching theme of creating expanded and enriched involvement in student life, the committee focused on four initiatives which it believes will enable Washburn to respond positively. These four initiatives appeared repeatedly in the surveys and in discussions held by the committee with various groups.

- Increase involvement in student life
- Broaden Programs and Services to meet the needs of a larger and more diverse student population
- Provide greater access in centralized location(s) to information and resources related to academic programs, university services, activities and social space
• Increase retention by creating a comprehensive and more coordinated first-year experience to improve transition of direct matriculants, transfer students and WUTech students

**Justifications**

The following paragraphs provide, in general, justifications of why these initiatives emerged.

Students, as well as faculty and staff who work directly with student services, commented repeatedly that expanded opportunities should exist to enable students to participate in activities such as clubs and organizations, major-related groups and experiences, campus-wide events, Greek life, volunteer activities with the community, increased school spirit, and opportunities to bring together diverse populations such as racial and ethnic groups, international students and US students.

The committee heard consistently that better communication about available opportunities and a greater degree of coordination are badly needed. Many opportunities currently exist and students are unaware of them. Technology can aid and assist in enhancing communication and coordination, but a conscious effort needs to be made to make it a reality.

The sentiment that the University should change from an “8-5” mentality to one which meets the needs and interests of students in evenings and on weekends was expressed strongly in all groups. Students do not live on an “8-5” schedule, particularly with so many students who work and have family obligations. With the success in accomplishing the goal of the last strategic plan which focused on increasing the number of traditional students and residential students, it appears evident that the University must now respond to the needs and interests of these populations. In addition, non-residential students would benefit from more expanded access in evenings and on weekends, making the campus a focus for their out-of-class activities and further enhancing the connection between residential and non-residential students. Facilities have been designed, constructed and renovated to accomplish this in a physical manner; it is now time to do so programmatically.

All the above apply to the initiative of broadening programs and services to meet needs of a larger and more diverse student population. Demographics clearly indicate that future Washburn students will be drawn from an increasingly diverse population. As the University expands opportunities for students to establish the connections deemed to be so important by respondents, it is clear that deliberate attention should be given to meeting the needs and interests of students who have been largely underrepresented in the past.

Space, particularly in the Memorial Union and Mabee Library, was mentioned often by respondents as being critical to creating a positive environment for students both to pursue academic interests and for recreation and socialization. Such things as a centralized tutoring center, an advising center, coffee shop, a bowling alley, a theatre, and performance space (outside the Union) were among frequent comments suggesting how this space should be utilized.

The last initiative relating to increasing retention was strongly supported by the faculty and professional staff members. Interestingly, it was also a comment received from a surprising number of students.
The studies the committee reviewed also demonstrate that retention rates improve dramatically when attention is paid to the transition into college and when support is provided to students early in their experience on a college campus.

Of course, no qualitative surveys are unanimous! Among infrequent comments were sentiments that things are fine as they are, that students just want to come to class, go to work and get a job after completing a degree, that athletics, clubs, campus events and Greek life are extraneous to the goals of the University. However, these opinions were definitely in the minority. Strong and frequent comments were received, too, about parking issues, the cost and variety of food available in food service, additional scholarships, the need for up-to-date technology that works reliably (the surveys were done during the recent email and computer situation) and a more widely available textbook rental program. While these issues are important and deserve the University’s attention, it is the opinion of the committee that they are not “strategic” in nature and are better addressed administratively.

Resources

Appendix B lists the data resources the committee used to draw its conclusions. Included in the resources are several studies and the comments from the various surveys and discussion groups which were conducted. The committee wishes to express appreciation to the English Department for its assistance in surveying all students in EN 101 and EN 300, to the instructors of IS 170 and to all who responded to paper and online surveys or participated in group discussions. Such broad participation helps assure that the conclusions of the committee are indeed supported and important considerations in shaping the future direction of Washburn.

Appendix B will provided upon request.