

Team Intervention
**DEVELOPMENT OF A MULTICULTURAL STUDENT SERVICES CENTER AT
WESTERN UNIVERSITY**

Nancy Diener
University of Minnesota-Duluth
Copyright © 2006 Nancy Diener

Western University, a mid-sized coordinate campus of a major public university, has several administrative units, including Academic Affairs, under which all the colleges operate; Financial Administration, responsible for the business and facilities functions; and the Office of Student Life, responsible for a number of units that provide, in a myriad of ways, student support.

The Office of Student Life (OSL) is headed by a Vice Chancellor, and each unit within OSL has a director who reports to the Vice Chancellor directly and also works collaboratively through a management team called Group Leaders. Group Leaders function much more like the US Senate than the US House of Representatives. The size of the unit alone does not influence the representation at the Group Leaders' table. There is one director for each unit sitting in the Group Leaders' meeting chambers. Some of the units are units of one, with only one professional staff person assigned, while others have sufficient staffing to support a sturdy, multi-tiered hierarchy within the unit.

Within OSL are such student service departments as Financial Aid, Admissions, the Registrar, Career Services, Auxiliary Services, Freshman Year Program, Academic Support Services, Student Tutoring Center, Fitness and Recreational Sports, and a rather loose grouping of fundamentally like-minded units that promote cultural, ethnic, international, disability, and gay/lesbian student services. It is this latter group of units within OSL on which this case focuses. Included in this group are International Student Services; Latino, Chicano, Hispanic Student Services; Southeast Asian Student Services; Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender (GLBT) Student Services; and Disability Services. With the exception of the Disability Services unit, all units have one professional staff person assigned, with very part-time clerical assistance provided from another unit. The Disability Services unit employs four professional staff, one clerical and three technical employees. These units, while housed randomly around campus as space permits, informally share many common goals in their work. A large component of their work is devoted to student services, and they commonly serve as campus-wide resource staff for their particular ethnic, cultural, disability, or sexual orientation identified groups. They have done some collaborative programming and frequently join forces for awareness and advocacy efforts.

At Western University, the Office of Student Life has been involved in strategic planning and has identified as a priority the need to formalize the collaborative structure of these units for the betterment of the WU campus. To this end, there has been a decision to create a Multicultural Student Services Center at WU. The Center would house all the professional units listed above, as well as the student cultural resource areas and the peer advising functions.

Due to the recent construction of a new library at WU, there is vacated space that is, under the WU strategic plan initiative, being renovated to help ameliorate the severe and critical shortage of space for faculty offices, student organizations, day care, and computer labs. It is under this plan that some of the vacated space will be renovated to house the Multicultural Student Services Center. This series of campus construction projects has presented a unique opportunity to create, from scratch, the Multicultural Student Services Center in a centralized space that can be designed and renovated specifically for the needs of the new center. Project completion is scheduled for the upcoming summer (six months hence), with staff occupancy taking place either in September before Fall semester, or January prior to Spring semester.

Thus, a new working team is being created within OSL. Collectively, the new team is culturally diverse. A variety of occupational operating norms is represented throughout the six individual units. These six units will be merging operations in approximately 9-12 months. They will occupy shared professional and student space. The individual units have worked together on a single-event basis but have had liberal autonomy of operation, with each individual unit reporting directly to the Vice-Chancellor of OSL. The new working team will number 9 professional staff, 1-2 clerical staff, and 3-8 auxiliary technical staff. The auxiliary technical staff consists primarily of sign language interpreters, some full-time benefited, some hourly, whose numbers will fluctuate based on student need, and who will be participating largely in whole unit functions, less so in daily or weekly decision making. Operationally, the core of the new team will be the professional staff.

This is a group of highly independent professionals, as illustrated by their proven success in running their respective departments single-handedly. They are, as a group, committed to student success and less interested in spending significant (and precious) time on processes and paperwork. They appear to have an abiding respect for each other and consider themselves to be colleagues and friends.

However, the move towards creating the new team has not been without difficulty or conflict. While the respective missions are decidedly similar in intention, there are different structures that support and carry out their missions. For example, Disability Services is a unit that operates under federal and state mandates to provide services to students with documented disabilities. The other units do not have the strength of federal and state laws to validate the need for their work. Clearly, this operational difference has budgetary ramifications, comparing services that **MUST** be provided with those that **SHOULD** be provided.

Another constant is that each unit is highly dependent on a set of cultural competencies and behaviors that are appropriate for their specific student population. These norms are not the same across units, leading to significant discrepancy in operating processes from one unit to another.

Further, there are significant challenges to the notion of moving into one space and taking on a new concept. The group has experienced some conflict with the notion of being on the same page with regard to buying into the multicultural model. This conflict arose as a result of units having different responses to immediate crises and concerns.

One of the units has been displaced due to the construction that will ultimately culminate in new space for all six units to be housed together. This unit, which has the largest number of professional staff, now finds itself scattered around the campus rather than housed as a unit. The current space allocated to them is roughly half of what they formerly held and is predominately shared, rather than private space, leading to concerns about compliance with data privacy regulations.

While this space was originally planned to be temporary for part of a semester and one summer (4-5 months), it has been determined that it will be the only space this unit will have until the new, renovated location is completed—another 12-15 months from now—for a total of nearly two years in temporary space. The larger group did not recognize the stress that this unit was operating under until it appeared that there might be some interim space almost immediately available in which to begin to establish the Multicultural Center. The displaced unit believed this new space would become theirs, at least in the short term, since they had been operating in clearly inadequate space. They put forth a plan outlining how the space would be allocated for their staff only, since all the other units still maintained their original professional and private space.

This was not well received by the rest of the units, who saw their actions as a direct contradiction to the philosophy of the Multicultural Center. They believed that this unit was demonstrating, by their assumptions about their perceived entitlement to the space, that they did not truly want to work together with the other units and did not support the mission and vision of the Multicultural Center. The unit in question, in fact, did not feel that way but was operating on a crisis/survival level, when the rest of the units were on a visioning level. It took some time for the group to understand the nature of the conflict. After a meeting invoking Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, the group came to a better understanding of the origins of the conflict. Maslow's theory would support the notion that the group experiencing stress as a result of space issues is operating on the level of physiological and/or safety and security needs, while the other units are operating on a higher level of affiliation needs.

The outcome of this episode was, in fact, positive. The units came to realize that there were perhaps many assumptions and differences in expectations and perceptions that could likely affect the success of the Multicultural Center. It was at the initial resolution of this issue that the group proposed to have an outside OD consultant retained to assist them in making the transition.

They approached the Vice Chancellor, who agreed to entertain a proposal to establish a process for making the transition to the Multicultural Center concept.