

CREATING AND SHARING KNOWLEDGE THROUGH COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

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Abstract

Building a community around a shared learning interest is not a new or innovative concept. However, collective learning and information sharing can bring new perspectives and improved practices to a professional organization in need of wider member participation. Communities of Practice in the context of College Access and Success Programs provide community members with additional resources, tools, and research findings to improve student services and outcomes.

Introduction

Creating a community in which members can share knowledge enhances the quality of services to students. Practitioners benefit by receiving timely and specific knowledge that is needed to better advise and motivate students. Whether seeking research-based practices or logistical information, the over-burdened college access and success professional can benefit through engagement in a community of peers who share a common interest. A Community of Practice can simultaneously engage such professionals in promoting research endeavors, implementing research-based practices, and creating opportunities to have robust discussions on what is most beneficial to their students and programs. Learning that happens in a community of practice is not separate from professional context and identity. In this essay, I share how my experience as a student shaped my professional life and how a Community of Practice can be a way to improve our work by presenting benefits of a community of practice for college access and success professionals.

My Experience

Communities of Practice can have a profound and direct impact on student success. Research shows that a study abroad experience, for example, can make a significant impact on first-generation students. As I recall the most

meaningful co-curricular opportunity of my undergraduate experience, I know now how fortunate I was to participate in a study abroad program in London for 12 weeks. As a Pell Grant recipient in the 1980's, I was part of a small number of low-income, first-generation students who studied abroad. Living and learning in London was the ultimate academic and collegiate experience of my undergraduate years. I learned living history and political science from students and professors from South Africa, Iraq, Iran, and Saudi Arabia. We took day trips to Oxford, Windsor Castle, and Parliament, and weekend trips to Scotland and Amsterdam. At the end of three months, I was forever changed. And my new world perspective provided a global foundation for future work, professional confidence, and personal perspectives.

Empirical evidence validates my positive study abroad experience translating to success during my college years and beyond. Studying abroad is a type of transformational experience that has a strong, positive impact on student college academic performance and graduation. This rings true for me. I finished my undergraduate studies with high academic performance in my last semester, and successfully transitioned to my professional life with more confidence and a greater understanding of the world. I now am passionate about providing international study opportunities to other Pell-eligible and first-generation students.

My positive experience with international education, validated by research on its benefits, now drives my personal interest in being part of a community of practice that promotes the value of studying abroad, and provides a roadmap to make it happen. College Access and Success practitioners connected to an International Education Community of Practice, for example, can significantly increase opportunities for participation in activities that greatly benefit students. Other communities of practice can be developed based on interests driven by subjective preferences, and yet substantiated by empirical evidence on its benefits.

Knowing the powerful impact of co-curricular experiences such as study abroad, what can be done to expand these opportunities to more low-income, first generation students? Most critical is that College Access and Success staff have timely, useful, and accurate information to share with and motivate students to participate in international experiences. There are a myriad of technical and logistical questions to be answered, and staff need reliable and current sources of information to encourage a student's initial commitment and to take the initial steps in this complex process. The most helpful information will be based on sound practices that have been subject to research and evaluation processes. Each student situation is unique, and some students may require additional support, particularly with families reluctant to support their students traveling beyond the United States.

What is a Community of Practice?

As the name implies, Communities of Practice are created to support daily practice through exchange and dialogue with other college access and success professionals. Sharing a craft and/or a profession forms the basis for a group to evolve naturally because of the members' common interest in a particular domain or area. While the technical support and content knowledge are clearly important, the learning process is reinforced through networking, dialogue and sharing of effective practices, and thereby helping each other grow personally and professionally (Wenger, 1999). The concept of academic and professional learning communities has been used for years by K-12 schools to improve teaching and learning. To better support College Access and Success staff in their daily practice, Communities of Practice can be formed around different topics. Below, I discuss benefits of community of practice for college access and success professionals, and how I went about creating a community of practice.

Benefits of Communities of Practice

In the College Access and Success profession, our common interest is college degree attainment for low-income, first-generation students and other student groups underrepresented in higher education. To achieve this common goal, critical interim steps, such as secondary school success and college enrollment and persistence, must be supported. Yet, even with a robust training

curriculum for College Access and Success staff, there are gaps in knowledge about effective practices. When staff participates in learning communities where information and experiences are shared, they simultaneously increase their own knowledge base and engage with a supporting community.

Timely Information on Demand. A basic function of a Community of Practice is to disseminate timely information for College Access and Success professionals to provide better advising to secondary school students on topics such as early college planning, financial aid, academic support, and the critical transition from high school to college. Financial aid processes change every year, and these updates are critical to receiving the most financial support possible. For college success staff, information and resources on topics, such as personal identity, social justice, engagement in undergraduate research, and other high-impact experiences, can support their efforts to increase college retention. Communities of Practice facilitate information sharing from practice and closing gaps in knowledge. This additional source of professional learning improves the overall competency of staff as they seek to support students to graduation.

While it may be true all information needed already exists on the Internet, the benefit of access to relevant information when planning a complex task can make a critical difference. When visiting a new city, getting timely and accurate information about a particular activity is priceless. As a stranger to a new location, it would take considerable effort and time to personally find all the information about restaurants, activities, hotels, etc. A clear, tangible benefit of a Community of Practice is the mapping of information in a way that is readily available and easily accessible for college access and success professionals. Reflecting back to my London experience as a student, I would have benefitted from the support of a well-informed advisor as I was preparing for my study abroad experience.

I was fortunate to attend a small, private university that was truly an international university. Yet, as a first-generation college student, I could have easily been challenged by a process that entails multiple, complex steps. The benefits I received as a student in a well-informed setting also applies to college access and success professionals. For example, if a student is interested in undergraduate research and if a professional has never worked to provide such information to students, the professional needs to find out what the basic information would be most helpful to that student. How can this information be readily available to the entire College Access and Success community of practitioners? A Community of Practice is structured to facilitate timely and relevant information sharing through communication and social media platforms.

A Sustained Advocacy for High Impact Academic Activities. One area in particular where Communities of Practice can be beneficial is encouraging students to participate in high-impact academic and co-curricular activities (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt, 2010). Studies show students engaged in such activities have significantly higher success rates than students who do not participate in such experiences. Some of these high-impact experiences include first-year seminars, learning communities, undergraduate research activities, internships, capstone courses and projects, and, as mentioned earlier, study abroad. The Communities of Practice, through their sustained engagement of College Access and Success professionals, can map and provide access to the wide array of information needed to effectively implement a high-impact service or activity.

Opportunity for Rising Leaders. The Communities of Practice also provide opportunities for potential and rising leaders, who typically do not attend national conferences, to be involved in leadership roles beyond their state and regional associations. An individual in an advisor or coordinator role would have the opportunity to become a Community of Practice chair, co-chair, or subcommittee chair and engage with constituents electronically and through social media. These leadership roles could leverage support from institutions to attend the national, state, and regional association conferences. Rising leaders can also build their professional and academic portfolio through involvement in research and evaluation practices, leading to improved project outcomes and increased legitimacy for the profession. Communities of Practice also build confidence, communication, and information sharing skills for emerging professionals.

Creating Community of Practice of TRIO Professionals

How to Create a Community of Practice. As practitioners, we have insights about our own capacity to provide substantive advice and support for students beyond basic program-prescribed services. We know our limits yet we want to do more. I have come to realize that guiding students towards and through high-impact practices such as study abroad is a journey identical to the college enrollment path. Along with other practitioners with similar interests, the International Access Community of Practice (CoP) was created to provide colleagues with resources and information on funding opportunities, necessary application and documentation, and other key resources needed to help student navigate the process. Money, aspiration, and information--the more I can provide to students, the closer we get to the finish line.

As College Access and Success professionals identify the need and benefits of a particular CoP, professional organizations, such as the Council for Opportunity in Education, can provide the structural and logistical support for practitioners across the nation to communicate and share relevant content and resources. While the International Access CoP has a specific area of focus, other Communities of Practice can be developed by practitioners who identify a particular area of interest.

Use of Annual Conference. Annual conferences provide a time and place for members of the Communities of Practice to meet, engage, share information, provide mutual support, and create a community based on shared interests. The leaders of the Communities of Practice facilitate discussion on current trends, ways to disseminate information, and ways to identify gaps in the knowledge needed to support its members. The conference meetings also reinforce the need for greater collaboration and mutual support.

Use of Electronic Communication to Sustain Engagement. Communication between meetings at national conferences is sustained through the use of electronic communication and social media. Numerous web-based tools for dissemination of information and community engagement are easy to use and free of cost. Traditional electronic methods include email listservs, electronic newsletters, shared document sites, websites, and links to resources. Communication through social media can include Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Pinterest, and Google Plus. For professionals already engaged in social media, this approach of communication will be familiar, and will focus on distinct topics that support their practice.

In the Fall of 2015, the Council for Opportunity in Education, a membership organization of college access and success professionals, implemented its first three Communities of Practice, including the International Access CoP. This CoP provides support and information to practitioners on how to guide students through the complex process of an international educational experience. As I mentioned above, the CoP utilizes electronic communication to share learning from high-impact activities and to connect professionals working on similar issues to access to timely suggestions. The STEM CoP provides a forum for effective practices on supporting underrepresented students in the sciences to undertake and succeed in the STEM fields. The Research, Evaluation and Data Use CoP serves to encourage College Access and Success practitioners to implement practices that are based on sound research and evaluation. This CoP also serves as a forum to encourage new research activity, connect with other research and evaluation communities, and identify resources and points of collaboration and dissemination of effective practices. Encouraging a culture of inquiry, assessment, and shared knowledge in the College Access and Success community can improve program effectiveness, and cultivates legitimacy in arenas where student outcomes shape education policy that drive the future of the profession.

Reflections and Conclusion

The Community of Practice model offers added value to professional organizations striving for greater membership engagement, community building, and leadership development. The development of these communities will be an organic process in which professionals respond to an unaddressed issue or tangible benefit in their practice. Ultimately, the success of the Communities of Practice will depend largely on how professional staff perceives its value. Organizations supporting College Access and Success efforts can reinforce their mission by providing professional staff with critical and timely information and support to improve their practice, leading to better outcomes for their programs.

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Dr. Oscar Felix worked for TRIO programs for 26 years and served as advisor, assistant director, and executive director for EOC, Talent Search, Upward Bound and other institutionally-funded college access programs at Colorado State University. During his tenure as Chair of the Council for Opportunity in Education Board of Directors, Communities of Practice were implemented to allow College Access and Success professionals to connect research and practice by providing a platform for discussion and discovery.

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