

Working Smarter, Not Harder: Running the Academy by the Numbers

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INTRODUCTION

In July 2014, Dr. Columbus began her first job as a community college administrator. She was one of three Associate Deans, and the only external hire of that group. Dr. Columbus was hired by a new Executive Dean, Dr. Shawnda Floyd, who was also a recent, external hire. Every other mid-level or senior-level administrator at the college had at least 15 years' experience.

This new opportunity excited and concerned both professionals. They understood they were outsiders entering a culture that valued longevity and loyalty. They understood their weaknesses and strengths as independent professionals. However, in order for Dr. Floyd to be an effective Executive Dean they needed to quickly build trust between each other and to assimilate their strengths and weaknesses.

Dr. Columbus was a former computer programmer and an experienced administrator at public four-year institution. At her prior institutions, she successfully integrated quality online course design standards and also established a Distance Learning Office. She is well-versed in policy, regulation, assessments, and data-based decisions. These experiences, fueled by her love of cutting-edge technology, research, and analytics often produce unusual and innovative solutions.

Dr. Floyd was an experienced litigator from the public and private sector. Prior career experience as a Deputy Attorney General, but also as an English Department Chair sharpened her relational and organizational skills, and made her a natural leader, easily navigating culture, conflict, and change.

Their initial strategy meeting took place off campus. This is where Dr. Floyd shared her vision and Dr. Columbus shared her strengths and the value she added to the team. At that time, Dr. Columbus presented Smart Growth: Running the Academy by the Numbers (Advisory Board Company, 2012). As a result of that first meeting, a very organic and intuitive work relationship developed. In seamless fashion, Dr. Columbus' technology, quantitative data, and data-based decision-making expertise merged with Dr. Floyd's adeptness at navigating community college politics, activating change agents, and transformational leadership.

The following will detail how using strategies from the Advisory Board Company (2012) report, in conjunction with these administrators' strengths, sparked a movement for data-based decision-making within a Liberal Arts division. In fact, Liberal Arts faculty members are currently revising curriculum and redesigning pedagogy because of data. This work has established precedent and proved to be a best practice to model within the college, the district, and the county.

FRAMEWORK

The Advisory Board Company (2012) authors present four levers related to maximizing instructional capacity – scheduling classrooms, allocating instructors, structuring the curriculum, and redesigning pedagogy. The authors present 40 potential solutions for addressing inefficiencies in each area. Each area requires various levels of commitment from multiple divisions or departments within an institution.

Due to the degree of influence, power, and authority, these two administrators chose to focus on two areas: scheduling classrooms and allocating instructors.

According to the Advisory Board Company (2012) report, building optimal class schedules addresses four common inefficiencies –

1. Empty classrooms
2. Number of special type of rooms do not meet demand
3. Certain times of days have too many courses scheduled
4. Used rooms are rarely full

Similar to the section on building optimal class schedules, the authors also presented four common inefficiencies related to allocating instructors. While helpful, the common inefficiencies presented in the Advisory Board Company (2012) report identified issues outside of the scope of Drs. Columbus and Floyds' divisional context. So, it was quickly determined that they would need to focus on the following four inefficiencies instead:

- Inequitable workload within disciplines
- Inequitable number of sections across disciplines
- Too many low enrolled sections
- Too many cancellations at certain times of the days

METHODS AND RESULTS

To address the aforementioned inefficiencies, they focused on three functions of their office:

1. Planning the Course Schedule
2. Room Capacity and Utilization
3. Equitable Instructor Load

Planning the Course Schedule. Initially course schedules were planned based on prior practices. Instructors submitted their desired schedule to the office then, the courses were added to the schedule. As a result, most of the courses were scheduled during prime time and some courses were overscheduled. Prime time, in this document, refer to class periods Monday through Thursday between 9:00 am and 12:30 pm. Towards the end of registration, a high percentage of low-enrolled courses were canceled, other courses were consolidated, and some courses were added late. To cure these inefficiencies, Drs. Columbus and Floyd developed a more strategic approach.

Today the course schedule is built based on enrollment trends, prior course demands, success rates, and retention. This practice ensures a course schedule that meets student demands and instructional capacity. This semester (Spring 2017), 70% of the courses that were offered at prime time were at 90% of course capacity. With capacity being at an all-time high, Drs. Columbus and Floyd were able to discuss structuring curriculum and redesigning pedagogy through eight-week and hybrid course options. Hence, while the strategic approach to scheduling produced near course capacity during peak times, it also provided an opportunity for innovation.

Room Capacity and Utilization. Initially rooms were scheduled based on instructor preference and prior assignments. As a result of this practice combined with the aforementioned course scheduling practice, there were often courses without rooms the week before classes started, instructors with schedules

running from building to building, and small classes scheduled in large rooms. Again, Drs. Columbus and Floyd saw a need and developed a more strategic approach.

Today rooms are assigned based on room capacity, course capacity, prior enrollment, and instructional strategies in the course. The structured process enables: instructors to be scheduled in the same room for back-to-back classes, classes to be assigned to rooms in advance of their start date, and room capacity to meet course capacity. It also provides an explanation and justification for additional rooms, furniture, and technology.

Equitable Instructor Load. Initially course coordinators were responsible for ensuring that the different type of courses (e.g. night, online, day, and weekend) were assigned equally to full-time instructors based on preference and equity. As with most colleges, some of the disciplines were able to accomplish this goal while others struggled. The goal was challenging because of both personality conflicts and affinities, as well as, budgetary constraints.

Today Drs. Columbus and Floyd manage instructor load by examining enrollment trends, budget constraints, and workload trends. This process ensures that all full-time instructors receive an extra-service contract, improves employee morale, and facilitates efficient budget management. In short, the process improved relationships between colleagues and provided a data-based justification and reasoning for new funds requests for faculty, furniture, and instructional technology.

CONCLUSION

In 2014, two outsiders joined a well-established community college. They came with a distinct vision and commitment to integrate data-based decision-making at the division level. By focusing first on making data-based decisions in classroom assignments, and then with instructor workload, they were able to establish trust and learn more about the staff and faculty they support. In a little less than three years, they are not only impacting classroom and instruction, they are also impacting curriculum and pedagogy at the college. Their ideas and innovation as implemented have positioned them to expand their policies and practices to other divisions, and participate in related discussions across the region.

WORKS CITED

Advisory Board Company (2012). *Smart Growth: Running the Academy by the Numbers*. Washington, DC