

It's all about college culture

By Kay McClenney and Arleen Arnsparger, Published January 18, 2013

*The following is an excerpt from the book *Students Speak: Are We Listening?* by Kay McClenney and Arleen Arnsparger. It is available for purchase at the AACC Bookstore.*

A truly remarkable thing happens when you visit a college campus for the first time and begin encountering people. You run into security officers in the parking lot, maintenance workers and other staff as you look for your destination, faculty and staff in both formal and informal settings. You meet students—sometimes driving your car from the airport or checking you in at the hotel, sometimes in the student center or the restroom, and then in a focus group session.

What happens in very short order is that the culture of the college becomes strikingly evident. Organizational culture—often defined as “the way we do things around here”—is a multi-faceted thing, of course. Five desirable dimensions emerge from a decade of our listening tours in American community colleges.

A culture of connection. Some community colleges clearly have established a culture of connection in which relationships are valued and intentionally nurtured. The counterpoint appears to be a culture of alienation, in which students and others experience themselves as set apart, left out, unaccompanied on the educational journey.

A culture of high expectations. Vincent Tinto, distinguished professor at Syracuse University and long-time scholar of student retention, often and correctly observes that “no one rises to low expectations.” There could be no clearer lesson from students than that. While they say they appreciate the times the college works with them to manage their competing priorities (a sick child, a job shift change), they also clearly know when faculty and others hold low expectations for their performance. And they hate it.

A culture of potential. Quickly evident to a careful listener is the language that college faculty and staff use to describe their students. The language is never neutral. Typically it tends toward descriptions either of student deficiencies or of student assets, students as victims or students as heroes.

A culture of collaboration. As is often noted in the literature on student retention and success, students are whole human beings. They do not have an academic division and a student services division in their heads; neither, for that matter, do they have a reading department and a psychology department. They are both thinking and emotional beings.

Colleges that are listening to their students are finding that collaboration across divisions and disciplines, and integration of academic support with instruction, serves students well. Further, the value of student-to-student collaboration figures strongly in effective teaching and learning, and colleges listening to their students are making collaborative learning a hallmark of their institutions.

A culture of evidence and inquiry. Student focus groups and interviews are but one of several important tools for learning about students and figuring out how the college can more effectively support their learning and progression. Further, gathering data, whether from cohort tracking or engagement surveys or program evaluation or other sources, is but the first step. Data quality is important, of course. But the truly transformational opportunities come when the people of the college are broadly engaged in understanding the data, using the data to paint an honest picture of their students’ educational experiences, and then applying the data in redesigning those experiences for better results. We can’t get better at what we’re not willing to look at.

McClenney is director of the Center for Community College Student Engagement (CCCSE) at the University of Texas at Austin. Arnsparger is project manager of the Initiative on Student Success at CCCSE.