

Learning Commons/Student Academic Support Working Group

The Learning Commons/Student Academic Support Group met 5 times over the course of the winter of 2012-2013.

Participants in this group included: Darrin Good, Deborah Goodwin, Eric Vrooman, Dan Mollner, Jane Lalim, Margo Druschel, Kate Knutson, Andrew Grace, Julie Johnson, Laurie Bickett, Scott Bur, Becky Fremo, Alisa Rosenthal and Paula O'Loughlin

The charge of the work group was: would we enhance our academic support services for students if we connected them more intentionally and if so, how should we do it?

As part of this charge, we addressed the following questions in whole and in part:

- What do we consider student academic support services?
- What are other colleges doing or not regarding academic support services and integration/co-location?
- What would be the benefits or advantages for our students of more intentional connections between our student academic support services?
- Are there ways in which students would not be best served by connecting our academic support services?
- Provision of which student academic support services would make the most sense to be more connected to each other and why?
- For which student academic support services is connection to other such units least beneficial for students?
- What levels of connections would be most useful for students, that is would a shared website be enough to make a tangible difference in enhancing what we provide or is co-location necessary?
- If we were to co-locate our academic support services into one center, what would be the mission and goals of this center?
- What would be the space requirements if we did go for co-location?
- What would be the preferred locations both long and short-term and why?
- What would be the timeline you envision?

What are Academic Support Services at Gustavus or to put it another way, who and what should be part of this conversation?

Our preliminary list of academic support programs at Gustavus was:

- ELL/MLL
- Disabilities Services

- Peer Mentoring/Subject tutoring
- Fellowships
- Academic Advising-advising/registration
- Academic Advising-academic support
- Study Abroad Advising
- Career Development
- Post-grad mentoring
- Pre-professional Advising
- Reference Librarians
- Department Office hour spaces (Ex: Math)
- Testing Service
- Registrar
- Undergrad research
- Fellowships
- Technology help
- Pre-professional Advising
- FTS
- Writing Center
- Exam prep (LSAT, MCAT, GRE)
- Academic support- study strategies, test taking, etc.
- Diversity Center

Best Practices

We began by reviewing how academic support services are configured at 19 peer and aspirant institutions. Group members were also asked to find out how another school (they had a connection with such as alma maters, etc.) offered their academic support resources and where they were located. This exercise added to our set of possible models the following institutions: University of Iowa, MSU-Mankato, Emory, Willamette, Kenyon, St Lawrence, Carleton, Beloit, Linfield, Hamline, Augsburg, University of Oregon, Fitchburg State, UMass-Amherst, Minnesota-Morris, Smith, St Thomas, Macalester, Concordia-Fargo/Moorhead, St. John's. (Notes on these are provided in the working group meeting minutes.)

Most of these institutions bring together academic support services in some fashion or another but there was no clear pattern as to which ones go together or where located. After a great deal of discussion and some follow-up conversation with leaders at a few institutions of similar size and selectivity, our takeaways from this research were four:

1. Collaboration and Connections across academic support functions often with co-location as well are a common but not universal practice across a variety of kinds of higher education institutions.

2. As far as we could tell, no school had all of the academic support services listed above in one single monolithic center. Most schools had brought together some subset of the academic support services into one or two centers.
3. The configuration of what works together and how is really dependent on the needs, goals and culture of the school. Thus, if we do decide to bring academic support functions more closely together, we should do it in a way that fits Gustavus culture. For example, as several members of the committee noted, if we were to create a center for academic support, it should be inclusive and community building, not dividing. Thus, it should include both enrichment activities like fellowships and undergraduate research as well as support for those who are facing academic challenges.
4. We also realized that some of the academic support programs initially on our list should be removed as potential partners for a variety of reasons. The following academic support offices and programs were eliminated as potential participants in this venture:
 - FTS (run out of Provost's office and director's office)
 - Internships (they are integrated in their own CSL office)
 - Careers (they are integrated in their own CSL office)
 - Registrar (too big)
 - Study Abroad (already situated in CICE)

If Gustavus were to try to bring some or all of these services together, how would such a move benefit and/or advantage students and others?

With the awareness that Gustavus is not interested in making change for the sake of making change, the group next weighed in on what specific advantages or benefits bringing academic support functions together would offer students and others. The group's answers are below:

- Trust and referrals (Students would be less likely to bypass referrals because they would not know where to go and who to see.).
- Staff would develop rapport with each other and thus be more like to refer students they were working with to each other's services.
- Advising/disabilities are in desperate need of more space right now. Getting them more space even if connected to other programs would allow them to do more for students.
- More intentional connections between academic support units would enhance students' knowledge of them.
- It would probably be more accessible overall not to have things like writing services and tutoring spread all over campus.
- It would certainly be more efficient for students not to have things like writing services and tutoring spread all over campus at night.
- During orientation, students go so many places and don't remember what is where. A one-stop shop would eliminate that.
- Quiet room for testing for Disabilities.

- Enhanced knowledge of co-located academic support services for office staff as well as faculty would likely lead to greater collaboration across programs.
- Visibility of shared space would likely enhance faculty advisors' knowledge of what is provided in these areas. Thus they would be able to provide more accurate advice on where to turn for help.
- Students will use academic support services to excel not just to survive.
- Current residence hall lounge programming while good has reached its space constraints.
- Less fragmentation of services for individual students. Students right now have no incentive or reason to traipse from one office to another for help so they don't.
- Centralization and co-location would benefit all in terms of bringing more traffic into the programs.
- In an era of 'helicopter parents' worried about their youngsters, having a single centralized academic support space admissions can show off would likely benefit admissions and retention.
- All programs involved would learn more about each other's services and practices and might likely incubate some exciting new programming to support students.
- Peer mentoring and subject tutoring could be connected to other opportunities and right now they are isolated in departments.
- Community is one of our core values as is academic excellence and a shared space for academic support would illustrate the connections we see between the two.
- Faculty and Staff would engage these programs and services more intentionally just like they do with the Diversity Center now.
- It would ease the sense of students that if they need academic help, they are somehow deficient. All resources would be equally prominent, not just ones for those needing assistance.
- For ELL/MLL students, a single co-located academic support center would just be a heck of a lot easier to know where to go.
- More anonymity for students needing accommodations . Thus, they would be less reluctant to search out services.
- Greater safety for students. Current set-up has students in multiple fairly empty buildings after hours.
- There could potentially be internship and professional opportunities—more created for students, more space for graduate interns—to help run the academic support programs.
- A co-located academic support center if it had shared common space might serve as a venue for intellectual discussions among students, faculty and staff.
- There would be more consistency across academic support programs regardless of changing personnel because there would be more awareness and accountability to each other.
- Better communication among academic support programs' staff would likely lead to better programs for students.
- There could be opportunities for leadership and peer assistance programs (ex. ELL mentoring)—for students who are not finding opportunities elsewhere.
- There has been interest in test preparation services and we could provide them as a value added.

- Such an academic support center would likely create greater awareness among FTS faculty and streamlining of FTS visits.
- More efficient use of resources and human capital
- Potentially more students accessing all available resources.
- More cross-training and synergies among academic support services overall.
- A space for the intellectual life of the mind
- Consistency for what students are provided in terms of academic support services as staff change.
- Safety.
- Better space for all our needs—shared common and private areas so could interchange depending on staff needs.
- Connections to enrichment activities like undergrad research.
- Students would seek out help sooner rather than later because they would be more aware of the resources
- Increased usage of our adaptive and assistive technologies because there would be less stigma going to the office.
- Would eliminate the stigma of accommodations and academic help. They would be reframed like undergraduate research as opportunities.
- Show faculty better what is available in each area.
- Students would be enabled to become more excellent.
- Enrichment opportunities such as fellowships and undergraduate research would be more widely disseminated so more students would have the opportunity to apply for them.

The group then considered the opposite side of the question.

What would be the disadvantages of trying to further connect our academic support services at Gustavus?

- Right now the tutoring in the Res. Hall lounges is well-used. Would we be able to have a space big enough to provide those services?
- It would be bad if in the process of making something for the majority, we eliminated or weakened what we provide for the few (ex: ELL/MLL students).
- This cannot be done just to save resources and/or staff lines.
- If we created a shared common space, we would still need to have private space to provide confidentiality when needed for students.
- We would need to have doors on the separate areas and yet we would not want fragmentation. Could we do this?
- There's really no space for something like this right now except the CSL space or the Gustie Den.
- Could we get the resources to do the spatial arrangements right?
- This would work only if it was co-location. Virtual co-location and web-based connection really would do nothing for Gustavus students.
- It will work only if it is a high traffic campus area.

- It would need to be a space that people want to be in.
- All offices need to buy in as well as stakeholders like student government.

Overall, would we enhance our student academic support services if we brought them together and integrated them more fully?

There would be clear synergies and strengthening of the academic support we provide students if we were to co-locate and more integrate some academic support services. It likely would also lead to some resource efficiencies though how much and in what way is unclear. The success of the venture would be dependent on two things: 1) A clear and cohesive underlying vision or criteria for bringing office and programs together and 2) shared space.

What should be the decision criteria for what programs and services are in this Academic Support Center and thus what would be in it?

The next and biggest question for the group was what should be included in an Academic Support Center at Gustavus. To put all the offices and programs still in the conversation together simply because they do academic support would neither offer synergies nor create a cohesive vision. In fact, several participants felt such an arrangement would be no better than keeping things as they are. The group therefore considered the following as criteria for what offices and programs would be in:

- Universal Design
- Comprehensiveness and Synergies
- Safety as the driving force
- Link to Kendall Center
- Front-line Student Contact
- Atmosphere like writing center that is welcoming community
- Time of Day usage

Next was then what offices and programs would be brought together based on the different criteria and the case for each proposed configuration:

The Universal Design Model

If *universal design* is the deciding criterion for such a space, the work group recommends inclusion of the following:

Disability services, ELL/MLL support, Testing Center, Peer Tutoring/Subject Tutoring, Writing Center, Academic Support Aspect of Advising, Information about Fellowships and undergrad research opportunities, connections to reference librarians.

If *Comprehensiveness and Synergies* or *Atmosphere* are the deciding criteria, the work group felt the same group as *Universal Design* should be included.

Principles of Universal Design, whether applied to physical environments or academic programs, are meant to make those environments or programs usable by all people, without the need for special accommodation or adaptation. Universal Design affirms and celebrates the growing numbers of students at Gustavus with diverse abilities and backgrounds, a diversity that “creates an exciting, unsettled, and kaleidoscopic landscape...confronting the inertia of conventional college teaching,” as well as conventional notions about the “delivery” of student services (Wlodowski and Ginsberg, 1995, 283).

A new Student Learning Center at Gustavus would embrace the principles of Universal Design by offering the widest possible range of supportive services to all our students, on the grounds that those principles promote the success of a broad range of learners. We recognize that our students have multiple gifts; many also face multiple challenges. The gifted and the challenged do not, however, fit into neatly separable groups. We imagine, therefore, a Learning Center as a hub, connecting students to the Fellowships Program, Disability Services, the Writing Center, STEM tutoring programs, Multilingual Learning support, and Student-faculty Research programs. Such a center would be genuinely barrier-free: free from constricting notions of which population of students need help and which are “most likely to succeed.”

It was also felt that the offices involved in this would provide the greatest possibility for developing of synergies among staff and the sense of community that would bring all students in.

The case for the Student Safety Model

If *student safety* is the criterion, then we need to make sure the following programs which occur in the evening as well as day are connected and the center is put where people are at night: ELL/MLL support, Writing Center, Peer Tutoring/subject Tutoring, connections to reference librarians.

These programs and services are most spread out right now and also occur mostly in the evening which put students at risk.

The case for the Front-line Student Contact Model

If *front line student contact* is the criterion, then the work group felt the following programs were most crucially connected: Writing Center, Academic Support element of Advising, ELL/MLL, Peer/Subject tutoring, Librarians (if this was in library), and Technology Services.

This configuration separates out the offices where there is the most time-intensive one on one student demand. Other offices such as Fellowships and Disabilities clearly also require one on one contact but are not simply one-on-one time.

The case for the Time of Day Models

If *time of day* is the criterion and the hours are 9 to 5, we would include: Disability Services, Fellowships, Undergrad research, Post-grad mentoring, Pre-professional advising, Academic

support part of Advising with current working hours, other elements of Advising and testing. If *evenings and weekends*, we would instead place the following in the center: Library, ELL/MLL, technological help, peer tutors/subject mentoring, writing center.

The driving force here is space needs and an awareness that some services are more likely to be used if available in the evening when students' want to use them. We can envision a split space of sorts, but things would have to be lockable.

The case for the Kendall Center connection Model

If the criteria we use is *connection to the Kendall Center*, we would include the following: Undergrad Research, Writing Center, Fellowships, Post-grad mentoring and reference librarians.

The argument for this was that the Kendall Center could be the hinge between faculty needs and student needs. The Kendall Center could provide faculty training about these services in the process.

Evaluation of Models

The Committee was asked to review minutes from all our discussions, look at the configurations at other schools and then consider the case for each of the proposals for Gustavus. We then voted and the *Universal Design* configuration was the unanimous clear first choice among all involved. It is the best fit to the Gustavus culture, offers the most synergies and thus the greatest benefit for students, could be accomplished in the short-term right now with some staff transitions that are already happening and would require potentially less space disruption. It would also address the significant concerns of the *safety* configuration.

The Committee's second choice was really a tie between the *safety* and a *time of day/split shift* model. The Committee is deeply concerned about safety but did not feel that we would accomplish much more than enhancing safety with that configuration. The time of day configuration would end up including everyone but it is a logistical night mare. It also might not communicate the message we want to send about the primacy of academics.

Timeline, Space, Buy-in, Etc.

The Committee also spent some time thinking about what this recommendation entails. It cannot and will not succeed without spatial co-location. We would need a common space and then several offices connected off it. When the library remodeling occurs at some point in the future, that would be an excellent location. Before that, however, it really needs to be in Johnson or Jackson. If CSL were to move, that would an ideal space. We also discussed other space in the student center as well and strongly encourage discussion with Student Life about sharing space with Academic Support in Jackson or on the bottom level of Johnson where the Dive is.

Another option which builds off our current set-up would be to move Counseling, give that space to ELL/MLL and writing center and re-frame Linner lounge as the communal space for this support center. That might be too snug, but it is worth considering as a short-term solution.

Another consideration that the committee discussed is time pressures. We are aware the college is likely to search for a replacement for Julie's position as soon as possible. As this report indicates, not all aspects of her current position need to be part of this Academic Support Center. Summer registration support is an essential function, for example, but it does not need to be housed in this Academic Support Center. Only aspects of Julie Johnson's current position which deal with academic support of students and advising of individuals would be included in our current configuration.

We would anticipate spending some time this spring discussing our report with stake-holder groups so that there would be buy-in.

Overall Recommendations

There would be clear synergies and strengthening of the academic support we provide students if we were to co-locate and more integrate some academic support services. It likely would also lead to some resource efficiencies though how much and in what way is unclear. Whatever the configuration that Academic Support Services takes in the future, it will be important to have regular meetings among the constituent units and cross-training among the staff. The success of the venture would be dependent on two things: 1) A clear and cohesive underlying vision or criteria for bringing office and programs together and 2) shared space.