

“Communication, Cooperation and Collaboration”¹ : The Merging and Partnering of New Student Orientation and Student Activities/Student Organizations

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This article describes how merging two previously separate units, New Student Orientation and Student Activities/Student Organizations, helped develop a true partnership between the two, strengthening both programs. By embracing the Student Affairs Division’s ideals of “Communication, Collaboration, and Cooperation” (“the three C’s,” as outlined by the Division Vice Chancellor), these units have transformed into a vibrant hub of student life and activity through a commitment to student leadership development and by sharing personnel and budgetary resources.

To advance the Vice Chancellor’s vision, the Division of Student Affairs was re-organized in the fall of 2006. It was at this time that the two offices were merged into one and moved under the Subdivision of Campus Life, which also includes the Office of the Dean of Students. This office is comprised of judicial services, parent and family programming, and the contact office where students get help with solving their problems and answering their questions.

Previously, when these two units existed under another department in Student Affairs, they were located in close physical proximity to each other. This afforded them the opportunity to discover that they had many commonalities. First, they both employed student workers to manage large portions of their work. New Student Orientation employed student orientation leaders/mentors, who helped run and lead the New Student Orientation/Mentor Program. Student Activities/Student Organizations employed student workers to help manage their office and student traffic, and to help out with student programming. Recently, they had

¹“Success Has Three Cs – Communication, Cooperation and Collaboration” was written by Melinda K. Dalgarn, Ed.D., Vice Chancellor of Student Affairs at Purdue University Calumet and was originally published in *The Talking Stick*, Volume 21, Number 7 in June 2004. *The Talking Stick* is a publication of the Association of College and University Housing Officers – International (ACUHO-I).

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started a Program Assistants Leaders (PALs) student employment initiative which trains student workers to plan and implement activities. The students learn to do everything from coming up with programming ideas, to contacting vendors, to purchasing materials, and managing events.

Secondly, when New Student Orientation had its busy times (starting in April and ending in August), Student Activities/Student Organizations had their "down time." When Student Activities/Student Organizations was busy putting on programs in the fall semester, New Student Orientation was past its busiest time. These two units naturally started helping each other during each one's down period and found that they enjoyed helping each other. They also discovered they were systemically linked. Third, they both had comprehensive student leadership training programs driven by their mutual commitment to student development.

Both units were strengthened by the merger. The new team consisted of the Director of Campus Life, who offered functional supervision to the New Student Orientation/Mentor Program, and had oversight responsibility for Student Activities/Student Organizations; a New Student Orientation/Mentor Assistant; a Student Activities/Student Organizations Assistant, and thirty student staff. The respective assistants of each unit, trained the student staff, and ran the daily operations of each unit.

The strength of the new office was its partnership, staff cross-training, and the combined knowledge base of the three full-time staff and the many student staff. Because of the specific expertise that each staff member brought from their respective areas, it was easy to develop new systems and processes that benefited both. This was accomplished by many conversations about what was working and what was not working; cooperation between staff (which meant they had to cooperate for the common good of both areas); and collaboration.

After the merger, New Student Orientation gained additional student workers to assist student questions about orientation and mentoring, to help out at events, and to help with organizational efforts. Students in both units learned to register participants for the New Student Orientation/Mentor Program and to answer related questions. The added staff helped by being immediately responsive to inquiries, which cut down the time required to return phone calls. Likewise, Student Activities/Student Organizations gained staff to help handle student questions about activities, organizations, and other university issues. Some of the New Student Orientation Leaders/Mentors also doubled as Program Assistant Leaders and vice versa.

There is also a direct link between both units because the New Student Mentor program connects new students with activities and organizations. Each new student who attends Orientation is matched with a mentor who becomes their contact for answering questions and/or solving problems. There are four events new student mentees are invited to attend. One of these events is a "get involved" module, in which students learn about the benefits of being involved in student organizations and activities. Other modules covered at the mentoring activities are time management, stress management, other success strategies, and additional transitional issues.

Both units are now housed in the same office suite that has an open floor plan. This layout helps with cross-training of professional and student staff on handling office business procedures and with handling student questions about orientation, student activities/organizations, and other miscellaneous university questions. An office manual was created that references all office procedures.

This partnership has helped these two units share staff for everything from running a new student orientation program for three hundred participants to hosting a Homecoming dance with over two hundred students and guests. It is evident that communication, cooperation, and collaboration—the cornerstone of student development and leadership—has helped to orient and connect new students to Purdue University Calumet.