

Bridging the Gap: Staff and Faculty Perception of Collaboration Between Student Services and Academic Affairs

Mr. Macklin Gipson, Executive Director of University College,
Mississippi Valley State University

Ms. Jennie Walts, Director of Faculty Development,
Calhoun Community College

Ms. Nikki Williams, Academic Assistant Chair, Science Department,
Purdue Global

Ms. Jennie Walts, Director of Faculty Development,
Calhoun Community College

Institutions of higher learning play an important role in shaping the future of their students. While the mission of each institution may vary, there is a shared purpose: to empower students with the knowledge, skills, and opportunities needed to achieve personal and professional success.

For students to attain academic success, it requires more than just academic excellence. The holistic needs of students—including academic and career preparation, mental health, financial support, and a sense of belonging—demand that institutions operate as a unified system rather than isolated entities. Every employee of an institution, including faculty, academic advisors, student services staff, and administrators, plays a vital role in a student’s success. Unfortunately, there are many silos that exist in higher education that limit collaboration and reduce the effectiveness of support services designed to help students navigate their educational pathway. By integrating academic, student, and administrative services, institutions can create cohesive support systems that address the many challenges faced by students today.

This study will investigate how employees at three distinct higher education institutions perceive their roles in student success. The

significance of this study lies in its potential to gain an understanding of employee perceptions regarding their contribution to student success and identify best practices to foster connections that strengthen student success efforts. Insights gained may lead to opportunities for institutions to influence employee collaboration that results in a supportive educational environment.

The following questions will be addressed:

1. How do institutions build the bridge between student services and academic affairs?
2. Do all employees understand the role they play in student success?
3. What relationship, if any, exists between faculty and staff willingness to participate in collaborative efforts and the perceived impact of that collaboration on student success?
4. What best practices have higher education institutions implemented to enhance student success, and how do these practices contribute to a student’s sense of belonging to the institution while fostering collaborative efforts between institutions and students to ensure success?

In order to answer our questions, we reviewed the research and deployed a survey that

collected data from three different higher education institutions. These institutions are Calhoun Community College, which is a two-year community college located in Tanner, Alabama. The average annual enrollment is 9,000 students per semester between three campuses. Calhoun has 425 employees. There are 161 full-time faculty and approximately 125 adjunct faculty; Mississippi Valley State University, a 4-year state Historical Black University located in Itta Bena, Mississippi. Mississippi Valley has 2,300 students per semester. The institution has 379 total employees which include 79 Full Time Faculty and 50 Adjunct Faculty. Purdue Global University is an 100% online University. The average annual enrollment is 37,000 per semester. Purdue Global employs 290 full-time faculty and 2,086 adjunct faculty. There are 351 full-time staff and 60 part-time staff. There are also 116 federal student workers.

Institutional leaders, especially those in student affairs departments, must be strategic with program planning and understand the changing student demographic and social trends. Student diversity exists in many categories, including “sex, race, ethnicity, sexuality, and socioeconomic status” (McClellan & Stringer, 2009, p. 82). Such diversity requires student affairs professionals to be equipped to handle issues that may not have affected students in the past. Many students may require additional support, and student affairs professionals must be prepared to help with services, such as tutoring, counseling, and financial aid (McClellan & Stringer, 2009). Some students may face economic challenges due to low-income wages, while others may require colleges and universities to invest in multi-lingual professionals and teachers who can help English Language Learners (ELL). For students with disabilities, institutional leaders must ensure that facilities are accessible, support staff is identified, and resources, such as websites, brochures, and other printed materials, meet the needs of the visually impaired (McClellan & Stringer, 2009). Being able to meet these diverse needs may result in costs for institutions, so it is imperative that

school leaders be strategic in meeting the changing needs of the student body.

According to Dadgar et al. (2013), a key strategy to support student success and institutional effectiveness is to integrate academic affairs and student services departments. This approach “involves incorporating academic advising, career planning, and tutoring into the instructional framework, aiming to make support services a component of the learning experience” (p. 3). These efforts help to expand resources and normalize their usage removing stigmas which are critical for student success. For example, faculty can encourage students to utilize these services by making them aware that they exist and how to access them. “Institutions that have successfully bridged these areas focus on creating seamless support systems that enhance both academic and personal development” (p. 3). This ensures that all students, including those who struggle with non-academic issues, are supported.

Collaboration among staff and faculty plays a pivotal role in this process. Limited communication and collaboration can impede productivity (Ikpur, 2023). When departments work within silos, not only may there be an overlap in tasks performed, but a mentality that creates a separation of groups. Successful integration relies on fostering a campus-wide culture of shared responsibility for student success. Initiatives such as including support services staff in governance councils and cross-functional work groups demonstrate the importance of this collaboration (Dadgar et al., 2013). In addition, professional development opportunities that overlap with traditional job duties enable instructional and support staff to align their strategies and goals, promoting a cohesive approach to student engagement and retention. Incentives for participation in such programs may further encourage collaboration and the sharing of best practices. As Ozaki and Hornak (2014) asserted, “achieving excellence in student affairs requires collaboration and innovation, particularly in two-year institutions” (p. 82).

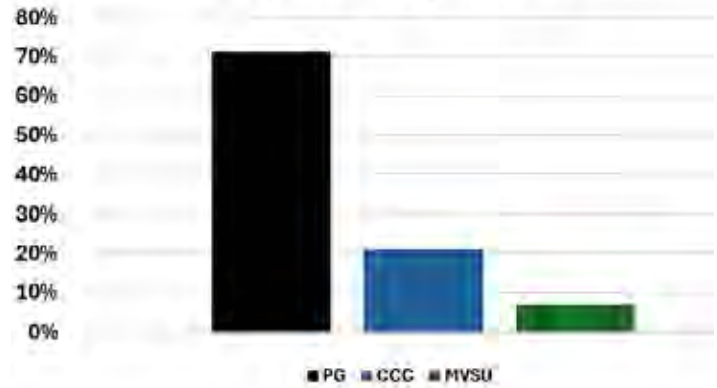
The willingness of faculty and staff to engage in these collaborative efforts directly impacts their effectiveness. Institutions that prioritize integration often see increased engagement in professional development, the establishment of shared goals, and the implementation of mutually agreed-upon strategies (Dadgar et al., 2013). These efforts underscore the importance of creating environments where student success is not only a shared responsibility but also a measurable outcome of collective efforts (Ozaki & Hornak, 2014).

Importantly, such integration significantly contributes to students' sense of belonging. Services that are required and accessible to all students help foster a culture where seeking help is seen as a part of success rather than failure. For example, at Chaffey College, organizing student success centers by topic rather than by developmental level ensures all students feel welcomed and supported. This strategy eliminates the stigma around seeking help and promotes a culture of inclusive excellence, leading to increased student engagement and higher rates of success (Dadgar et al., 2013, p. 5). "Integrating academic and social support strategies helps students meet rigorous academic standards, further reinforcing their sense of belonging and institutional commitment" (Ozaki & Hornak, 2014, p. 82). In addition, peer coaches who represent the diversity of the student demographics can help bring a sense of belonging (Hoyt, 2021).

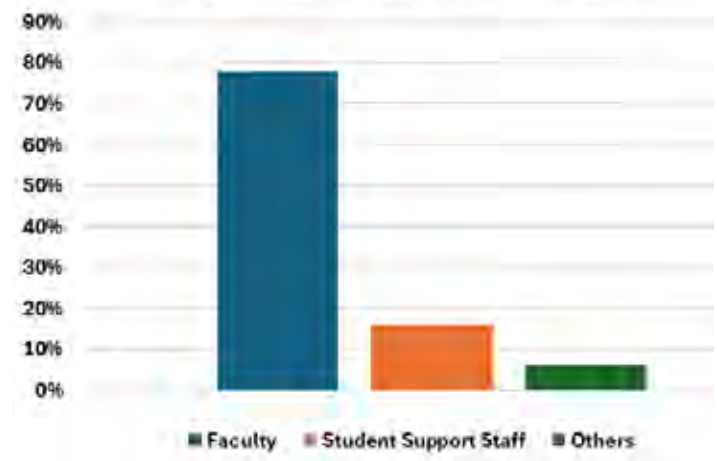
In summary, the integration of student services and academic affairs is more than an operational strategy; it is a transformative approach that enhances the whole student experience, cultivates a culture of collaboration, and ultimately strengthens the school's mission of accessible and equitable education.

The researchers from each institution completed the Institutional Review Board (IRB) process to obtain permission to send out surveys through Survey Monkey to faculty and student services staff at their respective institutions. A total of 246 people responded to the survey.

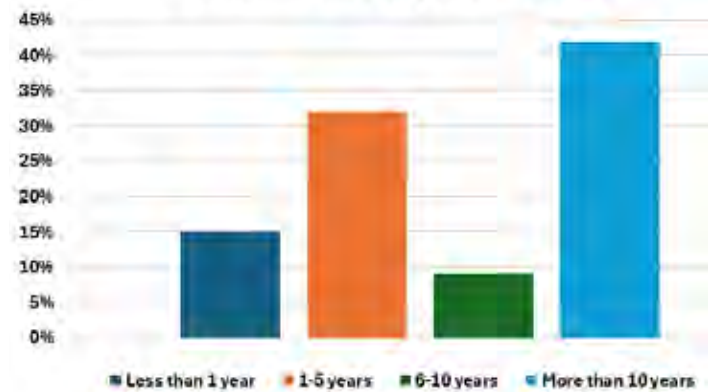
Response Rate by institution



Response Rate by Job Classification



Response Rate by years of service



Additional demographic information gathered included the respondent's employment status (full-time or part-time) and their respective department. To learn more about our respondents' thoughts and opinions on the collaboration

between student services and academic affairs, the following Likert scale questions were asked:

Academic affairs and student services collaborate effectively to support student success—42% agreed with this statement; 26% were neutral; 19% strongly agreed; 11% disagreed; and 2.4% strongly disagreed.

There is clear communication between academic affairs and student services working together to identify and address student challenges—35% agreed with this statement; 35% were neutral; 15% strongly agreed; 10% disagreed; and 4.4% strongly disagreed.

Academic affairs and student services work together to identify and address student challenges—39% agreed with this statement; 31% were neutral; 15% strongly agreed; 12% disagreed; and 2.8% strongly disagreed.

I feel supported by academic affairs/student services in my role—38% agreed with this statement; 28% were neutral; 21% strongly agreed; 9.8% disagreed and 3% strongly disagreed.

I believe that collaboration between academic affairs and student services is essential for student success—27% agreed with this statement; 8% were neutral; 62% strongly agreed; .4% disagreed; and 2% strongly disagreed.

I believe that academic affairs and student services are willing to work together to support students and their success—41% agreed with this statement; 24% were neutral; 32% strongly agreed; 1.6% disagreed; and 2% strongly disagreed.

A series of open-ended questions were asked to identify areas of strengths and areas for improvement in collaboration between academic affairs and student affairs. Effective collaboration between academic affairs and student services is crucial for fostering student success in higher education. When analyzing the results of our survey, respondents highlighted various collaboration strategies adopted at their respective institutions. Below is a summary of responses that identify the

ways that academic affairs and student services staff work together to create a supportive academic environment.

Communication—A predominant theme emerging from the survey responses is the importance of regular meetings and clear communication channels between academic affairs and student services. Multiple respondents emphasized that these practices not only improve departmental relationships but also directly benefit students. Regular meetings facilitate the sharing of updates and insights, allowing both departments to stay aligned on student needs and institutional goals. In addition, respondents noted that consistent email updates and interdepartmental referrals have proven effective in keeping all parties informed. These communication strategies encourage a proactive approach to student issues, enabling staff to address concerns promptly and collaboratively. By establishing routine communication protocols, institutions can create a seamless support network for students navigating their academic journeys.

At-Risk Student Identification—Another critical area of collaboration identified in the survey is the use of reporting systems designed to identify and support at-risk students. Several respondents highlighted the effectiveness of these systems in fostering cooperation between departments. By sharing data on student performance and engagement, academic affairs can alert student services to individuals who may require additional support.

This collaborative effort allows for timely interventions, ensuring that at-risk students receive the resources and guidance they need to succeed. The integration of reporting systems not only enhances the identification process but also strengthens the relationship between academic and student services by creating a shared responsibility for student outcomes.

Committee Involvement—Committees that include members from both academic affairs and student services were frequently mentioned as

a valuable strategy for promoting collaboration. Respondents noted that these committees serve as platforms for discussing shared challenges and developing joint initiatives that benefit students. By bringing together diverse perspectives, these committees can create comprehensive strategies that address both academic and extra-curricular needs. The repeated emphasis on committee involvement highlights the effectiveness of structured collaboration in tackling complex issues faced by students, fostering a more holistic approach to student support.

Success Coaching—Collaboration with success coaches also emerged as a significant theme in the survey results. Respondents pointed out that success coaches play a pivotal role in supporting students by organizing resources and providing guidance. The partnership between academic affairs and student services in this context is particularly beneficial, as it allows for a coordinated approach to student development. Success coaches, equipped with insights from both departments, can effectively guide students through challenges, ensuring they have access to the necessary tools for academic achievement. This collaboration not only enhances individual student experiences but also contributes to broader institutional goals related to retention and graduation rates.

The survey results underscore the importance of collaboration between academic affairs and student services in promoting student success. Through effective communication, targeted identification of at-risk students, committee involvement, and the role of success coaches, institutions can create a robust support system that addresses the diverse needs of their student populations. As colleges and universities continue to navigate the complexities of modern education, fostering these collaborative practices will be essential for enhancing student outcomes and ensuring a thriving academic community.

Based on the survey, an examination of the relationship between academic and student affairs reveals several key areas where improved

collaboration could enhance student success. The survey responses highlight significant gaps in current practices while pointing toward promising solutions.

Communication—Communication emerges as the foundation for bridging these areas. Staff and faculty report confusion about role definitions and responsibilities, creating potential gaps in student support. Establishing clear protocols for information sharing and defining specific responsibilities would help eliminate redundancy and ensure no student needs go unaddressed.

Collaboration Between Academic Advising and Faculty—The disconnect between faculty and academic advisors represents a concerning challenge. Without proper coordination, early warning signs of student struggles may go unnoticed until problems escalate. Implementing regular touch-points between faculty and advisors would create a more robust early alert system, allowing for timely interventions when students show signs of academic difficulty.

Professional Development—Professional development between all areas needs to be addressed. Faculty and student services staff are often unaware of what each area does. This creates uncertainty and a lack of understanding. Creating comprehensive training programs would help academic staff better understand and utilize student services, enabling them to make more informed referrals. This knowledge would position faculty as effective first-line resources for connecting students with appropriate support services.

Technology Integration—Technology integration offers promising solutions for improving collaboration. Current siloed systems hamper information sharing and coordinated support efforts. Implementing shared databases and tracking systems would facilitate better communication about student needs and ensure consistent support across both academic and student affairs domains.

In comparing the survey results to the research, there are many similarities and a few differences.

The essence of these similarities and differences are discussed below:

The Integration of Academic Affairs and Student Services: Comparing Research and Practice—The relationship between research findings and practitioner experiences regarding academic affairs and student services integration reveals both alignment and gaps in understanding how these collaborations function in higher education settings. While both sources emphasize the fundamental importance of integration for student success, they approach the topic from different perspectives and highlight varying aspects of implementation.

Alignment in Core Principles—Both the research literature and survey results strongly suggest that collaboration between academic affairs and student services is essential for student success. Dadgar et al. (2013) discuss the importance of creating “seamless support systems,” which parallels the survey respondents’ focus on establishing clear communication channels and integrated support networks. This alignment suggests that theoretical frameworks are successfully translating into practical applications at institutions.

Different Approaches to Implementation—The research literature emphasizes broad structural integration, focusing on incorporating services like academic advising and tutoring directly into the instructional framework. In contrast, the survey results reveal a more granular, process-oriented approach, highlighting specific actions like regular meetings, email updates, and reporting systems. This difference suggests that while research provides the theoretical foundation for integration, institutions have developed more detailed, practical methods for implementation.

Divergent Focus on Student Engagement—An interesting divergence appears in how each source addresses student engagement. The research literature emphasizes creating environments where support service usage is normalized and destigmatized, particularly highlighting

examples like Chaffey College’s topic-based success centers. The survey results, however, focus more on identifying and supporting at-risk students, suggesting a more targeted approach to student support in practice.

Collaborative Structures—Both sources discuss formal collaborative structures, but with different emphases. The research literature focuses on governance councils and cross-functional work groups, while the survey results highlight committee involvement and success coaching. This difference might indicate an evolution in how institutions structure their collaborative efforts, with success coaching emerging as a more recent development in practice.

Implications for Practice—The comparison reveals that while research provides valuable frameworks for integration, institutions have developed specific, practical mechanisms for implementation that may not be fully captured in the literature. This suggests an opportunity for future research to examine these emerging practices, particularly around success coaching and communication protocols.

Future Directions—This analysis indicates a need for closer alignment between research and practice, particularly in documenting and evaluating the effectiveness of specific collaborative mechanisms. Future studies might benefit from examining how theoretical frameworks translate into daily operational practices and measuring the impact of various implementation strategies on student success outcomes.

This comparative analysis demonstrates that while research and practice align on fundamental principles, there are opportunities to bridge gaps between theoretical frameworks and practical implementation. Understanding these differences can help institutions develop more effective integration strategies that combine research-based principles with practical, proven methods of collaboration.

Based on this research study, the following are recommendations for best practices that apply to all institution types:

Enhance Interdepartmental Collaboration and Communication—Focus on removing silos by increasing interdepartmental involvement and communication across an institution. This can be done through emails, newsletters, committee involvement, related professional development, and institutional-wide meetings to ensure roles, goals, and policies are conveyed effectively while fostering collaborations between departments.

Strengthen Support Resources for Students—Provide comprehensive resources to aid in supporting students, such as tutoring, mental health counseling, emergency financial assistance, and career services assistance. In addition, implement training for faculty and staff on these resources along with incentives for participation.

Leverage Technology for Student Support—Integrate technological tools like shared databases or alert systems to ensure faculty and staff can work together to support students.

Promote Peer Coaching to Enhance Student Belonging—Utilize peer coaches who reflect the student population to foster a sense of belonging.

In conclusion, institutional leaders must be intentional in creating a collaborative and integrated approach among employees in academic and student support roles to create a culture of shared responsibility for student success across the institution. By enhancing interdepartmental collaboration and communication, strengthening support resources, leveraging technology, and promoting peer coaching, institutions can create a cohesive environment that fosters connections that support the diverse needs of students. These recommendations can help institutions improve student outcomes and foster a sense of belonging for students.

Works Cited

- Ozaki, C. C., & Hornak, A. M. (2014). Excellence within student affairs: Understanding the practice of integrating academic and student affairs. *New Directions for Community Colleges*, 2014(166), 79–84. <https://doi.org/10.1002/cc.20104>
- Dadgar, M., Nodine, T., Bracco, K. R., & Venezia, A. (2013). Integrating student supports and academics. San Francisco, CA: WestEd.
- Hoyt, J. E. (2021). Student connections: The critical role of student affairs and academic support services in retention efforts. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice*, 25(3), 152102512199150. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1521025121991502>
- Ikpuri, E. O. (2023). Rethinking collaboration: Breaking silos between academic and student affairs to foster collegial culture (Publication No. 30989826) [Doctoral dissertation, Barry University]. ProQuest One Academic.
- McClellan, G. & Stringer, J. (2009). The handbook of student affairs administration. (4th ed.). Wiley Publishers.

Authors may be contacted:

jennie.walts@calhoun.edu

P.O. Box 2216

Decatur, AL 35609