

Culture More Important Than Structure for Programs and Services Supporting Student Success

Ontario is in the midst of unprecedented growth in the postsecondary education (PSE) sector, with more students than ever pursuing college and university opportunities. These students come from diverse backgrounds and considerable resources have been dedicated to student affairs and services (SAS) programs to help them succeed.

With the growing importance of these initiatives, it is critical to examine how they are being delivered and if an ideal organizational framework exists. A new report, *Supporting Student Success: The Role of Student Services within Ontario's Postsecondary Institutions*, published by the **Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO)** says that the most important element in delivering effective student services is the institutional culture, not the structure. Institutions that develop a collaborative approach to focusing on student success, can expect more innovative and effective solutions.

Project Details

While the definition of SAS programs varies slightly by institution, they generally include student orientation, community development, counselling, health services, accessibility services, career and employment services, academic skills development and services for diverse students, which can include mature students, Aboriginal students and international students.

This study provides an overview of the formal and informal structures that exist in Ontario PSE SAS divisions and their perceived role in supporting student success. Fourteen institutions, including both colleges and universities, shared their information through interviews, focus groups and site visits. As there is very little research in this area, especially in Ontario, institutions have been forced to rely on international information to guide their policies and practices. SAS programs have been the subject of a number of recent HEQCO studies, particularly a recent series focused on 18 individual student service programs at universities and colleges throughout the province.

Findings

Although there is no “one size fits all” organizational structure for SAS, it is important that these services have a voice at the senior administration level to ensure they are ingrained in the overall vision of the institution. Many SAS staff said that faculty do not understand the role of their program or initiative in supporting student success. By engaging in town hall style meetings and other collaborative initiatives, many institutions have begun to open communication, promote partnerships and encourage innovation between faculty and staff.

Another important partner in delivering effective SAS programs is the students themselves. Institutions that seek student input and volunteers to help develop and implement programming appear to benefit greatly through positive relationships with student government and increased participation in mentoring and leadership programs.

As student demographics change, the need for support programs and services continues to grow and government funding is often available to provide assistance. However, it is critical that any programming driven by government support is integrated into an institution's overall vision, particularly for one-time or short-term funds. Otherwise, decisions may be made that reflect only a "moment in time" and not long-term goals.

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