

G2C Case Study: VSU (Valdosta State University) Cultural Transformation: The Unforeseen Journey from Then to Now

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When facing adversity at the institutional level, many faculty find it hard to be innovative and optimistic, which can hinder the institutional transformation that is needed to adapt to changes in the higher education landscape. The challenges facing Valdosta State University (VSU) are not unique to comprehensive universities; through our self-reflections our goal is to become more responsive and adaptive to future challenges, and by sharing our experiences we hope that other institutions can learn from our past. This case study provides an overview of the cultural transformation that is taking place at an institution to build momentum toward student success, stakeholder buy-in, identity development, and a plan for continued growth.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM AND OPPORTUNITIES

Periods of upheaval can lead to low morale and reduced buy-in from stakeholders, which can adversely affect a university's ability to move forward. In the fall of 2015, VSU experienced administrative turnover, budget reductions, reduction in force, and low retention rates. As a result, a task force composed of faculty, staff, and administrators from units across the institution was commissioned by the interim president to develop ideas that would increase student success as measured by retention and graduation rates. While this task force pursued change in a variety of areas including advising, pedagogy and curriculum, and student support services, which had the potential to transform institutional culture, under the leadership of a second interim president only the top three options were pursued: enhance the existing student support portal, transition to a professional advisor model, and participate in the Gateways to Completion (G2C) initiative, which is the focus of this case study.

The task force, with some input from departments, identified large enrollment courses with relatively high DFWI rates to participate in G2C because of the potential to positively impact a large number of students. Several courses with the highest DFWI rates were excluded because the large enrollment criterion was not met; all the selected courses were part of the required Core Curriculum and taught by disciplines in the College of Arts and Sciences. Unfortunately, a rumor spread that this college was being targeted because it was primarily responsible for VSU's low retention rate, which then created the challenge of obtaining and/or sustaining buy-in of the stakeholders who were being asked to participate in G2C.

This problem created the incentive that led to numerous opportunities for the G2C liaisons to interact directly with stakeholders to clarify the focus of the G2C initiative, which facilitated the growth of a culture of collaboration between faculty, administrators, and the G2C liaisons. It also presented opportunities for the G2C liaisons to interact with other local and national G2C liaisons (both faculty and administrators), members of the University System of Georgia leadership team, and the founder and staff of the Gardner Institute. These interactions were invaluable in helping the VSU G2C liaisons identify problems and then develop and implement plausible solutions. As a result, five courses from five separate disciplines were redesigned by nine faculty. These faculty worked with the G2C liaisons to

assess trends related to student success in their courses and to develop course redesign strategies that would target areas in which students historically had not been as successful.

APPROACH

A multi-faceted approach has been used throughout VSU's participation with G2C, following the central tenet that organizational transformation is ongoing. We continue to modify our processes to affect institutional transformation by linking our actions to the strategic plan, incorporating self-reflection, and being adaptable. When VSU first began the G2C initiative, it was a university-wide task force that chose courses in History, English, Biology, Math, and Chemistry because they were large enrollment core and introductory classes with significant DFWI rates, and as such, they had the potential to positively impact the greatest number of students. At that point, the G2C liaisons who were members of the university task force reached out to the dean, department heads, and faculty who taught these courses and requested participation. While the faculty were student-centered, we faced limited expansion of these efforts in the departments. To make greater inroads into changing faculty culture and strengthening institutional transformation, in summer 2019 a retreat was held to support and reinvigorate the faculty who were leading course redesign. During this process a common course redesign and assessment plan that could be used for general education as well as major specific courses was developed. Also, at this time, the role of G2C liaison became the responsibility of the General Education Coordinator, and since the development of the Center for Excellence in Learning and Teaching (CELT) was established, G2C liaisons have relied on our strong collaborative ties with the CELT director to strengthen communication and support for faculty across campus. Currently, we are in the process of connecting course innovation, redesign, and assessment to general education assessment in order to institutionalize this process.

OUTCOMES

VSU has participated in G2C for five years, and throughout this time there have been significant changes to how VSU has approached student retention and success. It was through actions of the task force that led to important redesign and reorganization within the university, some of which stemmed directly from the G2C initiative, and others that grew out of related conversations and actions of stakeholders across campus. Prior to the G2C initiative there was not a centralized movement that focused on student success. However, from groundwork was formed by the task force, VSU created the Division of Student Success that helps to connect the strengths of Academic Affairs and Student Affairs to form new collaborations across campus. Until this point the focus of the G2C initiative had been intertwined with institutional cultural transformation, and while the indirect connection to what was happening at VSU could be identified, the question of what was the direct impact of the G2C initiative on VSU has to be addressed. The answer to this question can be summarized into four categories: course innovation, campus engagement, assessment, and faculty development.

Course Innovation

As a result of the efforts of the G2C course committee chairs, several course innovations were developed. These course innovations were implemented, periodically, in G2C courses over the past five years. With limited data, there have been several positive results identified anecdotally regarding these course innovations that include reduced DFWI rates, which have been shared with the G2C faculty members' departments. There are also plans to develop opportunities for the sharing of these course innovations more broadly within the VSU community and beyond.

Campus Engagement

G2C has expanded its campus engagement through the participation of one of the G2C liaisons on the Student Success Council and the Faculty Success Council. These councils, which are designed to address issues related to the success of students and faculty, respectively, are composed of leadership and stakeholders from units across the institution and are able to address issues and opportunities at VSU. Serving on these councils ensures that innovations, comments, and concerns generated by the G2C course committee chairs or the steering committee are brought to the attention of the councils and are also taken into account by the councils as they develop and implement solutions.

Assessment

In the fall of 2018, the membership of the G2C steering committee was expanded to include members outside of Academic Affairs and was given the charge to identify the G2C course strategies and innovations that were working and that could be applied to all courses at VSU. This resulted in a renewed focus on how curriculum and pedagogy were assessed at VSU. In collaboration with the Director of Institutional Effectiveness and the Associate Provost for Academic Programs and Services, the G2C liaisons revised the existing Core Curriculum assessment plan and report templates so that they can be used to assess pedagogical and curriculum innovation in any course at VSU, and as such they are a potential springboard for the development of a multi-purpose data and assessment repository for institutional-related reporting. These revised forms will be piloted, revised, and fully implemented as a part of related general education revisions at VSU.

Faculty development

During the summer of 2019, G2C faculty were able to participate in a retreat that was developed by the VSU G2C liaisons and the Director of the CELT. The retreat was designed to encourage G2C faculty to continue their efforts in addressing student success and retention at VSU through the evaluation of what they had already accomplished, planning for what they would like to accomplish in the future, and the identification of strategies that would facilitate the implementation and sharing of their plan with faculty in their department. Faculty who participated in the retreat found that the retreat reinvigorated their commitment to address barriers to student success and identify ways to increase buy-in from their departmental colleagues. Finding ways to continue to offer this retreat, and other retreats that are designed to engage faculty and support their development in collaboration with CELT are being explored.

PLANS FOR CONTINUATION AND EXPANSION

We believe that the actions over the past five years have enabled VSU to set a course that will lead to increased student success at VSU. While we started a collaborative process, there are still areas that need to be addressed and hurdles to overcome. There is still some hesitancy amongst stakeholders to fully engage because of questions and concerns related to ownership and uncertainty about intentions or effectiveness of these initiatives. Over the last two years we began to expand the course redesign and assessments into other courses within the general education curriculum at VSU, which led to the participation of the stakeholders in the Institute on General Education and Assessment (IGEA). At this institute a plan was developed that focused on collaboratively re-defining what general education is at VSU and that will be shared with the university at large this upcoming year. CELT will continue to develop opportunities for the continued learning of faculty across campus who seek to better understand curriculum and pedagogical issues related to student retention and success. CELT is also creating opportunities for faculty and staff collaborations through the identification of faculty fellows who will help train interested faculty and staff and who will develop templates of strategies that can be utilized at the institutional level to continue to address student retention and success.

LESSONS LEARNED AND POTENTIAL IMPLICATIONS

The lessons learned throughout our participation with G2C re-enforce the idea that there are cornerstone practices that when followed are more likely to lead to innovation within and transformation of the institution, thus leading to the success of its stakeholders. First, clear communication of the values and goals of the institution is required for institutional transformation. When communication is weak or mistrust is present, processes of change are sluggish, and stakeholders can become frustrated and disengaged, which can lead to stagnation or to the duplication of efforts and wasted resources. Second, trust and respect between and among stakeholders at all levels are needed to increase engagement and reduce fragmentation. VSU's initial participation with G2C was during a challenging period in VSU's history when administrative turnover was high and there was faculty angst due to reductions in force, which led to mistrust of administration and the misperception that required participation was punitive. In addition, the reduction in force directly impacted innovative and productive faculty, which led to low morale and decreased faculty engagement within departments. All of these conditions resulted in reduced engagement of core faculty and slow expansion of participation and engagement within departments. Institutional transformation is a slow process. The greatest value of some initiatives is that they lay the foundation upon which the university can build; while the exact name of an initiative may not be remembered in the future, the impact is far reaching. VSU's G2C is this type of initiative, because while it grew out of a time characterized by disorganization, frustration, and disenchantment, it was an integral part of the institution's transition to the current environment that includes a supportive administration, increased engagement at all levels, renewed hope, and the presence of new opportunities.

CONCLUSION

Cultural transformation is not an easy task nor is it a quick fix. Coming through a darker period in VSU's history to the present, with a student-centered administration that values faculty and staff, in which silos are being removed, participation and engagement is increasing across campus, communication is strong, and trust is being restored; it has been a difficult but necessary journey. The institutional culture within VSU is changing to a collective focus on the success of our students. Because we, as an institution, have a clearer understanding of our purpose and a clearer idea of where we want to go, we will continue our journey of transformation that started five years ago with G2C.