

Pennsylvania College of Technology: Student Affairs Site Visit

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Background

The Pennsylvania College of Technology was originally founded in 1941 as the Williamsport Technical Institute. It became Williamsport Area Community College in 1965 following the passage of the Community College Act. Through these changes, the institution grew and developed, while retaining its devotion to practical experience and sense of community. The institution's community college roots have remained prevalent through its transition to the Pennsylvania College of Technology, now an affiliate of The Pennsylvania State University. This historical foundation not only affects how student affairs is practiced at Penn College, but it also provides a basis for the unique relationship between academic and student affairs at the institution, as well as how the college interacts with its surrounding community.

Penn College, set on a 124-acre campus in Williamsport, Pa., provides a rare opportunity for students to integrate their in-class and out-of-class experiences. For instance, culinary students can work in the on-campus restaurant, and early childhood education students can get hands-on experience at the on-campus daycare. This gives students the chance to utilize the knowledge and information they learn in the classroom and apply it to everyday work. This not only strengthens the unique partnership between academic and student affairs, but it also helps the institution remain true to its community college foundation by focusing on applied and practical skills. Recently, the field of student affairs has put forth a renewed focus on educating the whole student and is pushing for collaboration across the institution to reach this goal. While other institutions may still be struggling with ways to meet this challenge, we found that Penn College had successfully instituted some of these initiatives before this even became a hot topic.

Current Challenges

Although its community college foundation has many benefits, Penn College also faces a

unique combination of challenges. The college's two- and four-year programs coupled with a near-open admissions policy attract a broad range of students with varying backgrounds and academic abilities. More than half of the nearly 6,500-member student body comes from North Central Pennsylvania, and only ten percent are out-of-state students, which present challenges when it comes to recruiting and retaining a diverse population of students and faculty. The student body is nearly two-thirds male, and only seven percent is made up of underrepresented groups. Although campus officials said hate-related crimes are not a problem, they acknowledged that students who come from a non-diverse state such as Pennsylvania, and have grown up in blue-collar communities, often have a narrow view on the world. There are a handful of student groups with a diversity focus; however, student affairs professionals we met with said they hope new initiatives, such as living-learning communities, will create more integration.

Like their peers at other institutions, student affairs professionals at Penn College are busy grappling with many challenges including the H1N1 outbreak, combating alcohol abuse issues, and deciphering the reauthorization of the federal Higher Education Act. To deal with issues related to student safety and alcohol, Penn College launched an Impaired Student Recovery Area. The center has staff on call 24 hours to care for and monitor students who are not intoxicated enough to be hospitalized, but are not in condition to go back to their residence hall alone. This service costs students \$100. However, if a student self admits himself or herself, they are free from judicial action. Officials noted that this gives Penn College some additional liability, but every decision comes with liability. As Ward Caldwell, the chief student affairs officer, explained, it is best to make decisions based on overall student benefit, rather than liability and fear of legal action.

Penn College officials are also exploring ways to reduce tobacco use among students at the institution. According to a recent student body survey, roughly 30 percent of students at Penn College smoke, nearly double the national average. To further explore this issue, college officials are considering asking a question about tobacco use on an upcoming residence life survey. There are some minor problems with students smoking in non-designated areas, the police chief told us, but a bigger issue is whether the designated smoking areas known as “smoke shacks” outside of residence halls are actually encouraging tobacco use because students see them as social circles.

Several Penn College officials we met with also spoke of the complexity of student issues and mental health needs. On the day we visited, the Special Assistant for Student Affairs and Student Development, Elliot Strickland, told us of an ongoing saga with a student who was routinely threatening to harm herself, and had a history of roping other students into having a similar mindset. Just a few weeks earlier, he said, a student had died in an off-campus apartment of a heroin overdose.

Functional Areas

There are nine functional areas within the Division of Student Affairs: Residence Life, Health Services, Athletics, Academic Support Services, Student Activities, Counseling, Career, and Disability Services, and University Police. All play an integral role in developing the holistic graduate of Penn College.

Most institutions that serve a majority of associate-degree seeking students do not have residence halls; however, at Penn College, about 25 percent of students live on campus. Brian Johnson, Director of Residence Life, explained that the college is hoping to increase that number with the construction of Dauphin Hall, a new, traditional residence hall that will accommodate about 250 students and is slated to open for the 2010-11 academic year. Although currently

residence life has more of a social focus, the college hopes to introduce a more academic focus with the implementation of living-learning communities, possibly for students studying plastics, auto mechanics, health sciences, or for students involved with leadership or Greek life. This will continue to facilitate the already strong relationship between academic and student affairs. The unique difficulty with residence life at Penn College as it stands now is that there are no traditional residence halls; it is all apartment/suite living. Students have their own personal entrances, a set up which does not foster social interaction. Dauphin Hall will be the first to stray from that model and will provide new opportunities and challenges for Residence Life.

Student Activities covers a vast array of activities such as orientation, Greek Life, community service, cultural programming, parent/family weekend, leadership, and community partnerships. Although there are a few student organizations, at Penn College, that focus on advocacy or social aspects of campus, the majority of student organizations are related to an academic department or program. There are only two people working in Student Activities, and both seem to be constantly busy finding new ways to serve students as best they can.

In many institutions, counseling services, career services, and disability services, would likely be individual departmental units. However, at Penn College, they all fall under the same umbrella, a structure built on its community college foundation. As Director of Counseling, Career and Disability Services, Jennifer McLean said she works hard, often more than 40 hours a week, to make sure all students' needs are met. The increasing amount of students seeking help for mental health issues, career counseling, disability accommodations and everything in between, has put an undue amount of pressure on her office. The five faculty counselors are finding themselves wearing many hats on a daily basis. All the different roles these employees are responsible for cuts into the amount of time and resources they can spend on each student,

and raises issues of confidentiality.

McLean's staff is seeing an influx of students with more complex needs, including those seeking help or treatment for depression and anxiety. There also seems to be a disconnect between issues that are brought up by students in counseling and issues that are part of public discourse on campus. Because Penn College has such a homogenous student body, issues such as sexual assault have been brought forward in counseling sessions, but are rarely reported to residence life or campus police, she said. In the same manner, students questioning their sexuality are often a topic in counseling, but Penn College does not have an established LGBTQ community on campus. Although the student body is not very diverse, several college officials said hate crimes and race-related issues do not seem to be very prevalent.

Because of its technical focus, Career Services at Penn College seems to differ from career services offered at other four-year institutions for several reasons. First, faculty are more open to collaboration since they have worked in the field prior to becoming teachers. So, as compared to traditional colleges, Penn College does not put as strong an emphasis on higher degrees as much as work experience. Second, the college has long-standing relationships with large employers, which benefits job-seeking students after graduation. Because students are entering highly specialized fields, McLean said career counselors often have to help the student decide between five or six job offers. She finds great joy in this process, especially when students come in thinking they cannot succeed in college, but also admits it does instill a bit of arrogance in some students. Specialized outreach programs, like those for high school girls interested in science, also help Penn College with its recruitment strategy and foster a better relationship with the surrounding community, she said.

Admissions at Penn College is also unique when compared to other four-year institutions,

and although it does not fall under the umbrella of student affairs, it plays an integral role when understanding the student body. With the exception of some programs that have specific requirements, Penn College has an open enrollment policy. While this policy promotes open access, it also means that the college spends a significant amount of resources on remedial classes to prepare students for college-level work, said Dennis Correll, Associate Dean for Admissions and Financial Aid. The soured economy has also encouraged more students to seek opportunities in higher education, including adults, which make up nearly 20% of the student population at Penn College. While it is challenging to engage adult students who have other personal obligations, such as children or work, it is also rewarding to see so many of them attend or return to school to improve their lives, officials noted.

Although Penn College is a specialized institution, that does not mean that students come exactly knowing what they want to do, and often change majors. Also due to the school's technical focus, Penn College does not have many direct competitors besides schools such as Thaddeus Stevens College of Technology in Lancaster, Pa. With tuition and fees at more than \$12,000 annually for in-state students, Correll said the institution loses some students to less expensive community colleges.

The school enrolls many first-generation students who may have severely questioned their ability to graduate high school, let alone succeed in higher education. Not all of them do succeed. The college graduates about 46% percent of the students who enroll, a rate similar to peer institutions, and the one-year retention rate is roughly 64%. However, for the students who do graduate, it is a priceless reward for all those involved: the student, the faculty, and the student's parents. McLean said, "Most of our students were ignored during public schooling. So most of them come believing they'll never succeed, and then you jump to commencement and

they're walking out with their degree. That's definitely rewarding.”

College Mission and the Future

Despite the challenges faced by Penn College, its outlook remains strong. The institution seeks to establish its mission through a multitude of services. Those services can be grouped into three overarching outcomes: professional/career preparedness, intellectual growth, and personal development. The Division of Student Affairs compliments and fosters these desired outcomes by way of the programs each functional area implements, and the division's success can be greatly attributed to the academic culture of the institution. Both the leadership of Penn College, as well as the student body, contributes in creating this academic culture. This is evident through the consistent emphasis for hands-on experiential learning.

Many colleges and majors will form student organizations simply to develop their leadership, team building, time management, and job-readiness skills, such as learning how to create an effective resume and improving interview skills. These student organizations also play an integral role in on-campus projects. Construction students, for instance, have improved the infrastructure on campus and built new roads. Of the more than 50 student organizations, the purpose for many, we were told, was purely academic and related to the students' field of study.

Another area of Student Affairs that contributes to the mission of the institution is Career Services. Penn College prides itself on producing skilled graduates ready to enter the workforce. The institution strives to respond to the needs of employers by providing its students with academic and educational programming. In this constantly changing economy, experience is essential and thus experiential learning is one of the core values of the institution. Career Services seeks to compliment that institutional value by aiding students in the search for internships, and providing them learning opportunities through cooperation with industry,

business, government, other educational institutions, and companies abroad. Through services such as resume critiquing, interviewing skills workshops, job search assistance, and graduate school preparation workshops, Career Services works to ensure student achievement. Career Services can claim many successes; it is one of the areas of student affairs that works most closely with the student body in ensuring that the institution's mission is being executed.

Student Activities works with a large number of students and can also claim many accomplishments. Through student organizations, Penn College students are able to develop their teambuilding and leadership skills as well as their interpersonal skills and time management abilities. Penn College hopes to offer opportunities for students to develop intellectually, ethically, socially, culturally and personally while providing an environment that fosters lifelong learning, creativity, and respect for difference. All of these attributes prove to be essential for academic and career success, and participation and leadership in almost any student organization on campus can help foster these characteristics. Student Activities also runs a program known as the Student Enrichment Activity (SEA). The SEA is a program available for co-curricular education, and functions by request of faculty who desire outside facilitation on specified topics. SEA will schedule classroom visits and present on subjects such as leadership, academic support, and career planning, and it also provides materials for Penn College students to be able to learn about a campus programs and services available for their usage.

The institution desires opportunities for students to gain skills and knowledge, and this is done through rigorous academic programs. In addition, the institution also aims to help students develop personally, socially, mentally, and ethically. The Division of Student Affairs facilitates this growth, and it seeks to make responsible, productive leaders in society through a living-learning environment and by placing an emphasis on holistic student development. Student

Affairs complements the institutions mission in each facet of work, and the success of this division can directly be attributed to the culture of the student body and also to the mutually collaborative relationship between the divisions of the college.