

## **Student Services Response to “Shaping Our Future” The Draft Academic Plan for VIU**

This brief is a product of an energetic conversation involving representatives from all areas of Student Services. A review of the Draft Academic Plan, Shaping Our Future, has illuminated the strong need for a collaboratively produced and well considered Student Services Plan that honors VIU values and that is informed by Student Services best practices and models from elsewhere.

As a small component of a larger complex document, the existing observations regarding Student Services are understandably limited. A more thorough and complex review is called for. It is therefore appropriate to include in the Draft Academic Plan only the broadest statements concerning the need to make a stronger investment in Student Services at VIU and an endorsement of the need for a Student Services Plan as a discrete element of the integrative planning process. At this time no further comment concerning the organization of the area is appropriate.

Student Services at VIU wish to thank those who took obvious efforts to put together a sweeping appraisal of potential change across the institution. We want to underscore the observation that there is a “critical imbalance at VIU between the amount of funding allocated for instructional programs and that amount allocated for academic and student support services” (P.77). A high percentage of VIU students come to the institution under-prepared. Many are first generation post secondary attendees. The Plan emphasizes that the growth in scope and complexity of academic programs has not been accompanied by parallel resource allocation in academic and student support services (p.4). The potential for service innovation that would minimize students “falling through the cracks” and increase student retention rates is significant.

### **Mission, Values and Vision Statement – students first**

The strongest evidence of VIU’s uniqueness as an institution is reflected in the NSSE results. That students enjoyed a strong sense of connection with faculty, with peers and with the institution as a community, resonated deeply at VIU. Given that the quality of our engagement with students has been our strongest felt value at Malaspina, now VIU, and given that it has been celebrated as a distinguishing characteristic of VIU, Student Services would like to see the centrality of students retained in the proposed vision and values statements.

### **Student Services- intrinsically involved in the learning experience**

In no area of the institution is the “unconventional” nature of the student community better understood than in Student Services (P. 33). The Draft Academic Plan acknowledges that working, mature and part-time students are at greater risk of attrition and thus require greater supports to persist. Student Services is tasked with supporting students to acquire skills for academic success, but is not adequately resourced to do so. VIU students’ first contacts with the institution are with Student Services as they explore options and arrive upon program choices. They continue to draw upon Student Services to address barriers to their success and they transition into the workforce with the support of Student Services. Student Services is the singular constant in the learning experience of VIU students.

### **Academic Support Services - more coherent, more unified, not less**

Among Student Services, there is a strong interest in promoting the most coherent, well articulated delivery of services possible. We are intrinsic participants in instruction and the development of the

whole student. Transformative learning occurs in physiological, social, emotional, cognitive, spiritual and developmental dimensions within the active context of students' lives. As educators, student services professionals collaborate to provide integrated experiences that facilitate student learning in a variety of dimensions and support and empower students as they reach their personal and academic goals. In all areas, we continuously collaborate with instructors to support student success and extend learning. As Ernest Boyer put it, "We need scholars who not only skillfully explore the frontiers of knowledge, but also integrate ideas, connect thought to action, and inspire students. The very complexity of modern life requires more, not less, information; more not less, participation" (1990, P.77).

The current draft document's distinction between Academic and Non Academic Student Services is difficult to validate. Disability Services fosters the engagement of students with their subjects through collaboration with faculty to identify appropriate accommodations but was listed as a non academic support. Likewise, the Campus Career Centre is listed as a non academic support yet it delivered 220 credit hours of coursework last year, most of which was mandatory program requirements. Financial Aid and Awards, vital to the participation of a large number of VIU students, is left off of both lists all together. Student Housing and Food Services, areas not part of Student Services at VIU, are arbitrarily included. Every area of Student Services is engaged in the academic development of students. The distinction between Academic and Non Academic Services is problematic because there is a lack of understanding of the work done in the discrete areas; it engenders competitive and distributive debate, rather than collaborative and integrative dialogue.

Likewise, the Draft Academic Plan segregates First Nations Student Services and assigns to it the whole scope of Student Services within a separate structure that includes advising, counseling as well as other services. First Nations Student Services offers an imperative resource for supporting Aboriginal students in their pursuit of higher learning at VIU. From a First Nations context, student support and learning are indivisible. The academic success of Aboriginal students is enhanced when the physical, emotional, spiritual, and intellectual well-being of each student is considered and supported, yet the draft document proposes to reverse that trend within Student Services. First Nations Student Services has been an integral part of the success of Indigenous students because they have been able to connect students with the larger academic community and with supportive resources. Student Services are very conscious that it is impossible for any one staff member to hold all of the answers for a student. Our most celebrated moments have been when we have worked together to generate strong outcomes for groups of students and for individuals.

Our strongest interest is to further develop our sense of connection and collaboration in the service of student engagement and success. Dividing Student Services into the suggested divisions prevents connections, and would likely generate redundancies and increase administrative complexity. Were these recommendations implemented, costs would likely increase while service delivery would deteriorate. Ultimately, students would be less well served.

### **Student Services Plan – a more thoughtful analysis**

A thoughtfully prepared Student Services Plan would draw upon our own successes, be informed by research and be informed by best practices and other models. Student Services structures and reporting lines are properly under the Vice President Academic's office.

There is a demonstrable need, as a result of discussions within the integrative planning process, for a review and strategic plan for Student Services. It is a timely opportunity as other service plans are going

forward concurrent with the integrated planning process. In concert with similar initiatives across the institution, Student Services will advance our own internal review and strategic planning process at this time.

**References:**

Boyer, Ernest. (1990) *Scholarship Reconsidered: Priorities of the Professoriate*. Menlo Park, CA. The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. Retrieved, April 14, 2010 from <http://www.pnc.edu/te/FACCOMM/BoyersScholarshipReconsidered.pdf>

Fullan, M. (1999). *Change Forces, The Sequel*. Toronto: Falmer Press.