Enhancing the first year student experience through academic and professional staff collegiality. A Practice Report

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Abstract

Collegiality among academic and professional university staff is a vital component in any effective initiative in the First Year Experience. Development of a new First Year Advisor Network at Murdoch University in Perth, Australia created some challenges in how best to communicate and collaborate with existing university staff, in order to achieve the common goal of how best to support student transition and retention. This Practice Report describes the initiatives undertaken by the First Year Advisors at Murdoch University in order to improve communication between staff, enhance collegiality and to ensure successful enhancements in the First Year Experience.

Introduction

It is widely recognised that developing collegiality among academic and professional university staff enables higher education institutions to support students more effectively (Gable, Mostert & Tonelson, 2004; Johnson, 1990), and is therefore essential for enhancing the first-year student experience (Barth, 1990; Srivastava, 2002). Collegiality can be defined as shared responsibility in a group endeavour through the cooperative interaction or collaboration between colleagues (Webster's College Dictionary, 1997). It is an active and shared practice, involving a significant sense of responsibility among staff members who share a common goal. Creating collegial communities in educational settings is a complex and challenging practice because it requires staff to engage in "culture formation" (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998) – a process that takes time and, naturally, has its attendant tensions. This dynamic can be seen as an act of integration and adaptation (Fullan, 2007; Zepke & Leach, 2005) as new university staff, for instance, seek to weave their roles into the existing academic and professional fabric of their institution.

Recent changes in Australian higher education have led to increased participation in the university sector and therefore a greater need for transitional support (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent & Scales, 2008). As a result, many Australian universities now employ dedicated staff working solely within the First Year Experience (FYE) setting. It has been suggested that FYE staff constitute a "third-tier" within the university structure (K. Wilson, personal communication, 3 February 2011), in that this group does not fit neatly into the existing categories of academic or professional staff, due to the nature of the work in which they are involved. Importantly, FYE staff members are in a unique position to enhance collegiality among staff who are directly involved in the first-year experience. For example, FYE staff can help to bridge the gap that exists between students and academic staff. They can also help remove or reduce the "silo effect" — that working-in-isolation of each other — that often exists among different discipline areas, or among different campus support services, at many institutions.

Since the inception of the First Year Advisor Network (FYAN) at Murdoch University (MU) in 2011, School-based First Year Advisors (FYAs) have sought to integrate themselves within the university and their respective Schools. They have sought to encourage and enhance collegial relationships among academic staff within the first-year level of their Schools and among professional staff in key support areas across the university. This Practice Report outlines the steps that have been taken by the FYAs at MU to foster collegiality among the wider university community, with the ultimate aim of increasing first-year student engagement and success.

Establishment of a First Year Advisor Network

The FYAN was established with the specific aim of supporting first year student transition and retention at MU (Box, Callan, Geddes, Kemp & Wojcieszek, 2012). FYAs are individually located within Schools, but form a University-wide network, thus providing focused School cohort support, as well as increased "connectedness" to the wider university community (Lizzio, 2006). FYAs support first year students through

many initiatives, including, but not limited to: an open door policy for students; coordination of School-based Orientation sessions; telephoning students reported as potentially "at-risk" by academic staff; in addition to designing and implementing various university-wide first year programs (see Box et al., 2012 and Kemp, Lefroy & Callan, 2013 for detailed descriptions of all FYAN initiatives).

The implementation of the new FYA roles, and the university-wide FYAN, presented challenges with regards to "fitting in" to an established cultural environment with pre-existing communication networks and values. In fact, Lizzio's (2006) *Five Senses of Success*: *connectedness*, *capability*, *purpose*, *resourcefulness*, all set within a sense of *culture*, became an important framework, not just for developing first year student initiatives, but also as a reference for establishing and sustaining a functioning FYAN across the university (Box et al., 2012; Burnett & Larmar, 2011). Indeed, integral to the process of developing collaborative and collegial environments among staff is the establishment of effective and varied communication networks and the sharing of common goals (Shah, 2011). With the establishment of the FYAN, there was the need to build collegiality with staff by communicating who the FYAs were, what the FYAs did and, most importantly, the goals of the FYAN.

Initial strategies for enhancing collegiality

The effectiveness of the FYA roles, and the FYAN at large, would be largely dependent on the ability of the network to foster positive communication and collegiality with academic and professional staff. Upon commencement, FYAs completed two weeks of intensive professional training conducted by a wide variety of university staff and some private providers (Box et al., 2012). An important aspect of the training involved FYAs meeting key professional staff, not only to learn about their function within the wider university community, but also to enable critical early networking opportunities. The initial training also focussed heavily on effective communicative skills with students, which were also applicable to among-staff communication. Although FYAs belong to a university-wide network, having discipline-specific individual FYAs was crucial for building relationships among relevant School-based staff. Indeed, individual FYAs made concerted efforts to get to know academic and professional staff within their respective Schools, and to communicate the reasons for, and the importance of, the new FYAN. In addition, the FYAN tailored the *RightNow* database (*RightNow* Technologies Inc., 1997-2011) to log details of all student interactions (Callan, Kemp & Wojcieszek, 2012) and this technology enabled the production of specific data reports for School Deans, School Managers and other key academic staff within Schools, summarising FYA activities and at-risk student data. The FYAN also maintained strong connections with support service staff across all campuses. For example, the Uni*Edge* transition program involved collaboration between FYAs and support service staff for both the development and the delivery of the program, and this was essential in order for the program to meet its key objectives (Lefroy, Wojcieszek, MacPherson & Lake, 2014). In addition, support service staff were regularly invited to FYAN Meetings to share ideas and discuss how to best work together to support first year students.

Feedback from university staff: Survey 1

In mid-2012, all university staff were invited to participate in an online survey regarding the effectiveness of the FYAN in the 1.5 years since initial implementation. The questions asked in the survey are provided in Appendix 1. Ethics Approval was obtained for the survey from the Murdoch University Ethics Committee (Approval Number: 2012/091). An advertisement for the survey was circulated as a link in the weekly *Staff News and Events* email. A total of 110 staff completed the survey in 2012 (a response rate of 5.5%). Overall, staff agreed that FYAs were having a "very positive" or "positive" effect on various indicators of student engagement; however, a number of staff responded that they were "unable to comment" on how effective FYAs had been (Figure 1). It was therefore clear that knowledge of the FYA initiatives and their success among the wider university community needed to improve.

Analysis of the written qualitative responses from the staff survey identified three key areas of strength: (1) FYAs helped to reduce the workload of time-poor academics; (2) FYAs had specific training and were well integrated with the university support service networks; and (3) FYAs were able to act as intermediaries between academics, professional staff and students, to support those students deemed at-risk.

> The FYAs have been a fantastic resource in helping reduce the demands placed on Unit Coordinators, directing students to various support services offered by the university, and encouraging them to increase contact with the teaching staff (First Year Unit Coordinator).

> FYAs have taken up a lot of the pastoral care work that would otherwise be required of me, and hence would often not get done due to the number of students (usually about 400-450). It is great that I can deal with the special cases and issues that arise, knowing that a lot of other pastoral care work is being done for me by the FYAs. I see the FYAs as a crucial part of the team that contributes to delivering "my" unit (First Year Unit Coordinator).

> A devoted person in this role is essential to improve the first year experience, increase retention rates and reduce workload of academics (Academic Staff Member).

Although the survey results and feedback were generally positive, there did appear to be a lack of clarity among some staff about exactly what the FYA role involved and why the role was an important one at MU.

> More clarity regarding the kinds of issues/questions that FYAs are able to address (Student Administration staff member).

> One danger that I perceive for FYAs is that they may end up encouraging some students to stay at Murdoch who may not be suited to University (First Year Unit Coordinator).

In fact, when asked "Are there any suggestions you have in regards to enhancing the effectiveness of the current First Year Advisor role?", multiple responses from staff welcomed increased communication among FYAs and university staff, and some even provided specific suggestions for how this could be achieved:

> Having a meeting/forum with FYAs where first year unit coordinators etc. meet with FYAs to discuss process,

issues arising etc. (First Year Unit Coordinator).

Informed initiatives to enhance collegiality: University-wide strategies

The staff survey responses encouraged the FYAN to strategise and develop a number of initiatives to improve communication with staff. A key issue emerging from the survey was a lack of understanding among some colleagues about what the FYA role comprised. It was hoped that clearer, more consistent information from the FYAs would enable the network to liaise more effectively with staff. The FYAN decided that a whole-of-network approach should be implemented in order to deliver a singular and detailed message concerning what the FYAs do. The first and most integral network strategy involved the formation of a specific sub-group of four

FYAs: the Fostering Positive Communications (FPC) group. The FPC group met regularly to discuss effective communication strategies that would improve collaboration and Table 1 describes some of the key initiatives employed.

Importantly, the group attended unit coordinator and support staff meetings, leading to greater clarification of the nature of the FYAN and fruitful discussions about how best to work together. In addition, in 2012, the FPC group organised a forum that saw a panel of FYAs, in addition to the Network Manager, available to provide information about the FYA role and initiatives and to answer any questions that arose from academic staff. Twelve first-year unit coordinators attended the forum and from all reports it was a successful way to engage with staff and

Table 1: *A summary of key FPC initiatives*	
Initiative	**Emphasis**
Pre-semester or early-in-the-semester meetings with Foundation Unit and Core Unit coordinators and tutors	FPC members attended Foundation Unit tutor meetings; School-based FYAs met with Core Unit coordinators and tutors from their Schools in tutor meetings or individually with coordinators. FYAs re-iterated the role of the FYAN, clarified the use of the 'At-risk reporting system' (Callan et al., 2012), distributed the FYA booklet, answered questions and discussed ideas coordinators/tutors had to collaborate with FYAN and effectively support students in-need.
Early-in-the-semester meetings with key professional support staff	FPC members met with staff from key university support offices: the Student Learning Centre (academic skills support); Equity and Social Inclusion; Counselling; the Student Centre (Admissions and Fees); Scholarships; Library. FYAs clarified the role of the FYAN, answered questions and discussed how the FYAN could work with each office to effectively support students in-need.
Booklet: *First Year Advisors: Roles and Responsibilities*	Describes FYA role; outlines types of FYA-student contact; describes student phone call/email 'Outreach' campaigns; describes how FYAs act as first port-of-call for students in need of support services; lists university-wide events that FYAs design and run; offers "At-risk reporting" instructions for academic staff.

break down any confusion regarding the FYA role. Furthermore, a very important strategy to emerge out of the forum was the FPC group's production of an information booklet for academic staff entitled, *First Year Advisors: Roles and Responsibilities* (see Table 1). This booklet was made available to the FYAN to disseminate among staff, whenever it was deemed appropriate.

Informed initiatives to enhance collegiality: School-based strategies

In addition to the university-wide initiatives employed by the FYA network to improve communication and increase collegiality, there have been many strategies implemented within each of MU's eight individual Schools. Indeed, one of the most important techniques utilised by FYAs was to show strong interest in their own School and staff by fully immersing themselves in the unique culture of that School. The establishment of "FYA pods", as a result of the merging of MU Schools (reduction from 14 to 8 Schools in 2013), has meant that up to three FYAs are now located together in each School. This change has enhanced the visibility and presence of FYAs within Schools. FYA-coordination of the School Orientation sessions, personal introductions to all key staff, and participation in key School committees, such as School Boards, Teaching and Learning Committees and Course Committees (other members include Deans, Academic Chairs, Unit Coordinators, Tutors and Administrative Support Staff), have highlighted that the FYAs are an integral part of a School's student support team. FYAs have also attended many of the formal School-based events (e.g., School retreats, staff games days and MU *Open*

Day). However, some of the most simple yet effective ways in which collegiality has been enhanced has been through FYAs attending regular lunches and morning teas in the School tea rooms and frequently participating in "corridor chit chat". Much has been gained from these informal meetings, and the more the FYAs have networked with their School staff (especially in social settings), the closer the bonds have become among them. In fact, FYAs from some Schools were recently approached by academic staff during the development of new first year units at MU, acknowledging FYAs' expertise in the FYE and in-depth knowledge of the student perspective. FYAs have also modified the database-informed reports being distributed within Schools to reflect the feedback received from School Deans and other academic staff. Importantly, strong collaboration with university-wide support service staff has also continued, especially in light of changes to the format and delivery of the Uni*Edge* transition program (Lefroy et al., 2014). Overall, the FYAN has sought to improve communication among staff in order to work together to enhance student engagement.

Feedback from university staff: Survey 2

The FYAN conducted a follow up survey in mid-2013. This survey used the same questions as in the previous year, with the addition of one new open-ended question: *Moving forward into 2014 and beyond, how do you think the First Year Advisor Network can best support students and staff at Murdoch University?* Numerous improvements in staff feedback were noted when collating the results from the second survey. The response rate increased slightly from 5.5% in 2012 (110 respondents) to 6.6% in 2013 (132
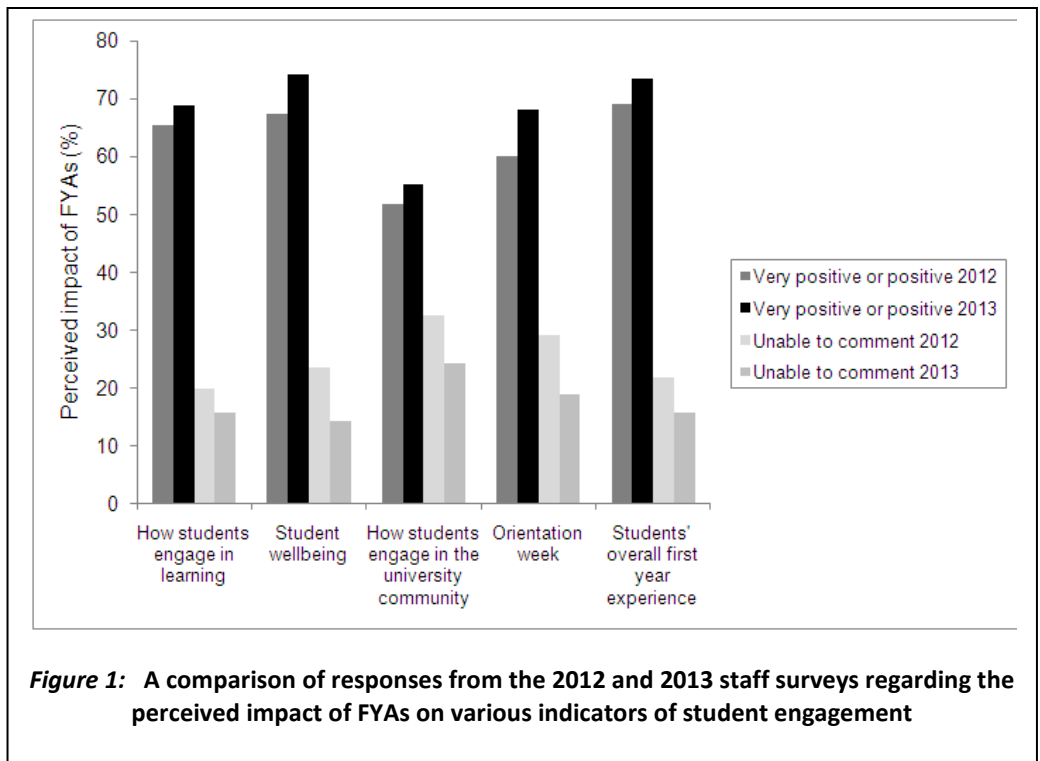
respondents). The survey found that 99% of respondents were aware that MU had FYAs, compared to the 91% awareness obtained in the first survey. When asked *What affect have the First Year Advisors had on your appreciation of the issues surrounding first year student transition?* only 18.5% responded that this had "increased a lot" in 2012; however, in the 2013 survey, this figure rose to 33.6%. In addition, in 2013, a greater proportion of staff agreed that FYAs had "very positive" or "positive" effects on various facets of student engagement, while fewer staff reported that they were "unable to comment", demonstrating that communication among staff had improved since the 2012 survey (see Figure 1).

Staff also continued to provide very positive written feedback in light of the

FYA roles and initiatives. Importantly, some open-ended feedback demonstrated how concerted efforts to increase communication and collaboration among staff, were having tangible results:

> [FYAs] are advocates for students, and as supportive and approachable advisors can make the difference between a student remaining in a course or deciding to withdraw. They significantly ease the workload of academics, especially academic chairs, and bring First Year issues to the attention of key groups in the School such as the Learning and Teaching Committee (First Year Unit Coordinator).

> [FYAs] are invaluable as intermediaries between students and unit tutors/coordinators. For example, if a student is doing poorly in a unit, rather

Figure 1: **A comparison of responses from the 2012 and 2013 staff surveys regarding the perceived impact of FYAs on various indicators of student engagement**

than automatically assume he/she is 'at risk', I will talk to the FYA. If the student is already known to the FYA, we can develop a strategy for the student. If not, the FYA will contact the student. If the FYA is already in contact with a student, she will refer the student to me to discuss study strategies, for example, often before I have become aware that there is a problem. Having a FYA has reduced my workload without diminishing my awareness of student issues (First Year Unit Coordinator).

Concluding remarks

In summary, a reflective, collegial approach is of paramount importance if staff are to effectively support students in their first year of study. The development of collegiality among FYAs and other university staff has involved establishing and building relationships, delivering clear information to staff and students about the nature of the FYA role, and ensuring that opportunities for communication remain open. These strategies have led to an acceptance from academic and professional staff and have ultimately helped to inform the development of the role, especially through improvements to FYA initiatives, leading to a greater impact on the first year student experience. The FYAN recognises that no process, or system, is perfect and accordingly, has actively encouraged all staff, both academic and professional, to contribute ideas to the FYAN, in order to generate the best outcomes for first year students. Feedback from staff surveys has provided an anonymous forum for staff to voice any concerns, as well as any suggestions for improvement. In fact, it is worth noting that a significant number of staff have called for the FYA network to be expanded in order to also support students beyond their first year of study. This highlights that

staff value the FYAN and the support afforded to first year students, and think that many of the FYA initiatives would be helpful to all undergraduate students. In conclusion, the establishment of networks and collaborative communities takes time, but is essential if we are to enhance the first year student experience.

Acknowledgements

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