# A Redeeming Obligation for Christian Administrators: Advocating for Student Affairs-Academic Affairs Collaborations

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Abstract

The larger purpose of a Christian college education is to guide students towards developing a love for God and neighbor. One way to articulate such a vision is to focus on the development of the whole person as student. A practical method for this holistic education is to promote and practice student affairs-academic affairs collaborations. As such, Christian administrators have a unique obligation to promote a culture of collaboration on their campuses. While partnerships are healthy for student success, they serve an additional purpose in Christian higher education: a redeeming purpose. This paper will address this redemptive opportunity for administrators by outlining the background of student affairs-academic affairs partnerships, situate collaboration in a Christian worldview, offer qualitative interview context on current triumphs and challenges of collaboration from the field, and propose four unique recommendations for policies and practices that administrators can use to help them fulfill the call to collaborate.

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Introduction

Scholarship on college student success has long promoted the development of the "whole" student. This holistic approach to education is outlined in the ample body of literature on student development, transition, success, retention, and similar research threads (e.g., Astin, 1984; Baxter Magolda, 2004; Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Kuh & Pike, 2005; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). However, the current landscape of higher education does not exhibit a picture of practice aligning with many of the recommendations offered through this body of knowledge. In fact, many argue that colleges and universities are split into silos, or divided into very loosely-coupled parts that rarely interact. One of the most recognizable areas of fragmentation is between student affairs and academic affairs divisions. Since the early 20th century, these two divided domains have united only on an ad hoc basis and typically under administrative mandate (Brown, 1990).

Collaborative efforts have arisen at several institutions in attempts to promote holistic college experiences (Kellogg, 1999) and seamless learning environments (Keeling, 2009). O'Conner (2012), however, finds that "academic and student affairs may be collaborating less, and the lack of such collaboration may be impacting the students' holistic experiences" (p. 2). The push for more collaboration, while a noble effort in secular institutions, should be an obligatory practice for Christian administrators due to their calling toward a higher standard. Addressing efforts to educate the whole student through collaboration is clearly not a modern concern or one reserved solely for Christian institutions, but it is a valuable and necessary goal for Christian higher education because of its redemptive capacities.

This paper addresses this redemptive opportunity for administrators by first offering a general context for collaboration. Detail will then be presented as to why partnerships are important and how they play roles in student development, specifically in relation to holistic success. The next section positions collaboration within a Christian worldview. Reasons for why Christian colleges should partake in collaboration beyond mere student success, along with how it helps institutions better fulfill their Christian missions, are discussed. The third section presents voices of current Christian administrators detailing what they find to be advantageous and challenging about the practice. In the final section, four unique recommendations will be proposed for policies and practices, which could be used by administrators as a part of fulfilling their obligations to advocate for collaboration.

## Offering Context: Student Affairs-Academic Affairs Partnerships

As evidenced by the diverse arrays of classes offered and the variety of programs promoting various forms of social, emotional, spiritual, mental, or physical development, student support is clearly present across entire campuses. However, this support should be a more cooperative effort among the individuals who are experts in their particular roles of student success. While there are indeed poor examples of collaboration (see Eaker &Sells, 2007; Magolda, 2007), appropriate implementation through the support of wise senior leadership from both divisions would allow for a more well-rounded approach to educating. O'Halloran (2007) offers a summation of evidence in noting how partnerships between academic and student affairs may be especially effective in promoting student success by seamlessly connecting: (1) in- and out-of-class experiences; (2) cognitive and affective learning goals; and (3) intellectual, social, and emotional learning processes (Banta & Kuh, 1998; Blimling & Whitt, 1999; Brady, 1999; Engstrom & Tinto, 2000; Grace, 2002; Kellogg, 1999; Newton & Smith, 1996; Schroeder, 1999; Schuh & Whitt, 1999). Likewise, Schroeder, DiTiberio, and Kalsbeek (1989) posit that partnerships between student affairs and faculty "may no longer be simply a desirable option, but, rather, an absolute necessity" for colleges to ensure students are seeing adequate levels of success (p. 19).

Shushok and Sriram (2010) likewise highlight collaborations as beneficial to student development, contending, "Partnerships between student and academic affairs best align the mission of the institution with the personal mission of the student, thus leading to a stronger bond between the two and a promotion of student success" (p. 76). However, this pathway to student success is not an easy one to traverse. Soden and Storm (2012) note co-curricular priorities "can feel like diversions. And yet institutional life…demands constant commitment to the whole" student (p. 154). If administrators wish to champion the cause of collaboration, they must commit to developing this "whole" student. Friesen and Soderquist-Togami (2008) see this necessity in articulating, "A powerful way to invigorate Christian student learning on college campuses is to promote collaboration…in new and creative ways that capitalize on each profession's strengths" (p. 117).

As cross-campus partnerships surely invite challenge, it is important to put the onus on upper-level administrators (i.e., Directors, Deans, Vice Presidents, Provosts). Although the bulk of this work will not come from

these individuals—it will surely come from the faculty and staff working in tandem—the motivations should emerge from the top. Administrators serve as sites of wisdom for faculty or staff as they participate in the partnership process. This shared wisdom and support from campus leadership is an essential component for fruitful partnerships (Magolda, 2005; Morales, 2007; Ozaki & Hornak, 2014; Whitt, Nesheim, Guentzel, Kellogg, McDonald, & Wells, 2008). In a discussion on faculty and co-curricular educators, Ream and Glanzer (2013) suggest both groups need to work together to provide students with the kind of education a Christian university is charged with cultivating. In other words, in order to cultivate, direct, order, and enrich the loves of students in the context of their most important relationships and human practices, faculty and student affairs staff must find ways to partner in their work to address the larger goal of Christian higher education.

## Getting Specific: Collaboration Within a Christian Worldview

Although O'Halloran (2007) argues that the primary reason for collaboration is student learning, Christian colleges have an additional motive. Christian higher education, note Ream and Glanzer (2013), "comes closest to fulfilling its mission when the curricular and the co-curricular…work in an integrated fashion to cultivate the whole being of all community members" (p. 98). The mission, or end, for Christian universities is to cultivate a love for God and a love for neighbor. Therefore, the charge for promoting academic affairs-student affairs partnerships is likewise. Ostrander (2012) articulates Christian education as a workshop in intentional and robust Christian living. In this sense, bridging the gap of knowing and doing—the in-class and out-of-class experience—helps guide a Christian institution towards its overarching telos of fostering a love for God and neighbor.

If educating the whole student—heart, mind, body, and soul—is a call for the Christian institution, these partnerships are a starting point in more seamlessly merging these responsibilities. Finding feasible ways to connect the curricular and co-curricular allows students to engage in their education in ways that shape them as whole, as opposed to splintered, persons (Hindman's, 2012). Specifically, Hindman notes, "'Splintered lives' (are) a powerful and troubling image for the lives of students," and to address them students must have "opportunit[ies] to imagine possibilities for who they may become, given the talents and gifts they possess. They must be able to see themselves as having a place in a larger story which gives meaning and shape to life" (p. 172). This

"larger story" is the Christian narrative of creation, fall, redemption, and restoration. While collaboration, as demonstrated, is beneficial for student success, it is a good thing for student success in a Christian institution when perceived and planned from the perspective of this story. Labors of redemption are augmented and enhanced for students when they imagine the larger vision of their academic discipline and where it stands in relation to the larger vision of their life. Hence, holistic development from collaboration can be argued to enhance the redemption process for students. Additionally, redemption efforts are seen when administrators collaborate in attempts to redeem the important work accomplished for and with students.

Trudeau and Herrmann (2014), through an extensive review of literature and practices, insightfully capture the vision of Ernest Boyer in regard to collaborative work. The authors note how his work "inspired many advances in American higher education, and he remains a model for those who see the collegiate experience as a holistic venture in which students are developed and prepared to live fulfilled lives" (p. 71). Trudeau and Herrmann highlight the specificity and importance of collaboration in a Christian college by suggesting:

> This hope is perhaps even more compelling for those of us operating within the context of Christian higher education as we seek to joyfully embrace our responsibility to partner with Christ in his redemption of the creation. We do not just educate students for jobs or for relevant service or even to live fulfilled lives. Rather, in the words of Wolterstorff, Joldersma, and Stronks (2004), we "educate for shalom." We educate with the hope of both motivating and empowering our students to participate with Christ in the reweaving of the fabric of his creation. Needless to say, such an important vision requires that we employ all of the resources available to us in the education of whole persons. A vital element of Christian higher education is the integrative process in which faith and learning, and consequently the curriculum and co-curriculum, cooperate in full partnership to accomplish this goal. (p. 71)

The authors capture the essence of why collaboration is imperative for Christian higher education. The holistic development of students allows for greater understandings of their roles in Christ's redemptive process

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and a better awareness of where they fit in the "larger story."

The fragmentation of campus displays a human expression of fallenness as fitting in with the Christian metanarrative. This can be particularly seen in the intentional separation from "others" (Cook, Eaker, Ghering, & Sells, 2007) by both faculty and staff in often avoiding one another. Partnerships, though, can be a source of living out a Christian institution's mission of cultivating students' love of God by demonstrating efforts of redemption on behalf of administration and faculty. Furthermore, the development of certain virtues can be seen as a result. Creativity, love of learning, and teamwork (Peterson & Seligman, 2004), to name a few, are virtues which can be exemplified in this collaborative work.

A brief hypothetical example might look like a business course partnering with a student activities service center. Students learn the theory and practice of business from their instructor, which might be supplemented by a visiting staff member to speak on the process and reflection of service-learning. A final assessment might bring out the virtue of creativity in designing a business consulting project with a non-profit organization in the community. A love of learning could further be developed by students participating in experiences which would allow them to apply their academic coursework in real-life situations with legitimate impacts on community agencies. Teamwork might be practiced in a group approach to such projects, with each member doing their share and holding one another accountable. Though just one example of how collaborations address virtue development in students, there are numerous other possibilities for faculty and student affairs partnerships in which virtue development, as a part of holistic student development, can play a central role.

Ream and Glanzer (2013) articulate the divide among these two divisions as forcing "students to navigate an institution which appears to house independent nation-states requiring them to learn a new language each time they cross a border" (p. 96). If the road to whole-student development is not easily navigated, students might not experience the desired impact of holistic formation. Additionally, if administrators avoid addressing collaborations, they are missing what Trudeau and Herrmann (2014) would call a high and worthy calling, or the effort to "fully integrate the curricular and co-curricular experiences of students within the context of faith/learning integration to the glory of God" (p. 71). The authors continue in suggesting that Boyer's (1987) proposition

to see "academic and nonacademic functions as related" (Trudeau & Herrmann, 2014, p. 293) is an example of using integrative language equivalent to the long-held faith/learning integration that is foundational in Christian higher education (Holmes, 1987).

## Administrative Voices on Collaboration

Several qualitative interviews conducted by Perry Glanzer and Todd Ream for their book Christianity and Moral Identity in Higher Education (2009) were analyzed for reoccurring themes around the concept of curricular and co-curricular collaboration efforts. The interviews, conducted at multiple CCCU institutions, including Eastern Mennonite University, Xavier University, Calvin College, Bethel University, George Fox University, St. Thomas University, Seattle Pacific University, and St. Olaf University, represent the voices of many different administrators—Provosts, Chaplains, and Deans of Students—to list a few. Although these interviews were structured around questions of moral education at the selected institutions, many illustrations of collaboration were revealed. The present analysis focuses on three institutions—Calvin, Bethel, and George Fox—and insight from three different administrators at each location is offered. This set of campuses and respective administrators was utilized as they specifically addressed the benefits and challenges of collaboration. While collaboration was also discussed in other interviews, this sample offered the most salient detail for the collaborative process, as opposed to mere examples of where collaboration was happening.

One administrator at Bethel University mentioned, "faculty have been very responsive, for the most part, to working with student development." In referencing the institutional covenant, he noted that faculty and staff might approach interpretations of certain elements differently. However, by declaring, "What it boils down to is, what are the values that we hold most dear?" this administrator recognized that a shared value of students learning to love God can bring two different "silos" of an institution together. It is this type of faith that Heie and Sargent (2012) recognize in noting that "in Christian higher education . . . our faith can provide coherence that overcomes the disciplinary sprawl and fragmentation of the modern university" (p. 244). Nevertheless, even though this administrator felt valued and accepted by the faculty, challenges did not simply disappear. He stressed, "I feel like we have very, very good faculty here, and I feel like we are in partnership, but we are not always in agreement. I guess that's the best way to put that." While disagreements

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might arise, as in differing interpretations of certain elements of the institutional covenant, shared values regarding  students developing a love for God demonstrate the significance of partnerships.

Another Bethel administrator discussed a similar awareness of collaboration on campus:

> Let me just mention one area where I think faculty and student life have really shown some wonderful collaboration–our campus counseling center. The folks that staff that are almost exclusively our psychology faculty members. Most of the faculty members who have counseling skills in psych serve in the counseling center as part of their job. So there is this strong sense that they are valued by student life, they make a great contribution to student life, there's partnerships there that are pretty important.

Although the positive components of collaboration are acknowledged, this administrator also recognized that "one of the biggest tensions that exists on Christian college campuses can be between Bible faculty and campus ministry staff."  Again, as Magolda (2005) stresses, partnerships are not easy. In fact, leaning into the tensions mentioned by these administrators might be the first step towards successful collaboration. Administrators, and faculty, should realize that "simply getting along is insufficient. Partners must become more comfortable with difference and conflict, recognizing that, in the end, avoiding conflict does more harm than good" (Magolda, 2005, p. 21).

This tension was similarly seen in the faculty's negative perception of student life by an administrator at Calvin College. Due to turnover in a Dean position, staff morale was low and faculty interaction with student life was limited. Morales (2007) reverberates this need for solid administrative leadership support in the discussion on top-down commitment. However, a different administrator at Calvin perceived the atmosphere of collaboration in quite an opposing way, noting:

> The student life division is constantly working on [collaboration], because of our commitment to the whole-person formation as done outside the classroom and we want our work to be both echoes and shadows of that conversation in the classroom. We work closely here. Calvin is fortunate to have a long tradition of an academic and student life division collaboration.

The obligation of partnerships, to develop the "whole person" in promoting a love for God, is clearly seen in this administrator's approach to collaboration. A third Bethel administrator spoke to the effort of addressing the fallenness of a fragmented campus through a focus on relationships between staff and faculty, noting the importance of doing "so to help think about how we can cross the lines between classroom and co-curricular kinds of things, let's do that first on a relationship level." This is also a great demonstration of how collaboration is a way of participating in redemption.

One George Fox administrator identified a reality of the partnership struggle: "I don't think that we're ever going to win all faculty to the cause that we need to be true partners in this effort. Student life has been talking about that for a long time and will be for longer." However, partnering faculty are seen by this administrator as supporting the larger ends of the institution:

> We're all on the same page in terms of thinking character is central to what we're doing, that's what makes a place like Fox unique. That's as important, the academic piece is critical but we want people to go out to be ethical businesspersons and not just people who know how to be good businesspersons.

After detailing collaborative projects such as a living-learning community, a spiritual life committee, and an academic center, the administrator noted that, though "there is a relatively good relationship with faculty from my perspective," there is much room for improvement.

Another administrator from George Fox recognized the tension between academics and student life, but does not let that stop him from trying to form partnerships. He stressed the importance of the connection with faculty that "plays into, obviously, the development of that student, not just academically but also in developing the whole person, we talk about that a lot. What does that look like and how do we help that student." A third George Fox administrator also acknowledged the struggle of staff and faculty partnerships. He claimed salient reasons such as student affairs professionals often lacking doctorates or not being viewed as equal players in the game. With faculty often categorizing these practitioners as young, unmarried, and lacking families, a prejudice between the divisions caused a "sort of power game that faculty will play in reference to student life."

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Though the struggles many of these administrators experienced or perceived were particularly noticeable, the benefits of collaboration in regard to the mission of Christian education were likewise evident. Holistic development, striving for shared values, and developing moral character were all reasons voiced by these administrators as appropriate to forming campus partnerships in a Christian context. The redeeming obligation of administrators to advocate for collaboration is evident in one Calvin administrator's idea of "being a good neighbor for the sake of, again, God's kingdom." Through a Christian worldview, collaboration becomes much more than an effort for student success from administrators. It becomes an opportunity to participate in the larger story of redemption, for the administrators, the students, and the faculty and staff involved. The efforts to make such an obligation feasible, though, are not without hardships. Rocky relationships, disagreements on the benefits of partnering, and negative perceptions of "the others" were seen as notable challenges. Therefore, specific practices and policies must be applied if Christian administrators wish to do this successfully.

## Moving Forward: Practices and Policy Recommendations

Though a variety of tactics are available in current literature for cultivating partnerships between student affairs and academic affairs, four feasible practices are offered.

## Reflecting on the Moral Elements of Identities

Cook, Ghering, and Lewis (2007) state, "Recognizing that institutions of higher education are complex systems and not simply aggregations of their parts is the first and most essential step in building successful and sustained academic affairs and student affairs partnerships" (p. 5). While these scholars offer great practical insight into collaboration, Christian administrators attempting to promote collaboration should start with a different—and most essential—first step: a recognition of who they are as administrators. Glanzer (2013) highlights how this first step might be difficult in suggesting that "one of the major ways moral conflict occurs is when the moral elements of one of our identities clashes with the moral elements of another identity" (p. 182). Avoiding collaboration might arise from a distorted understanding of what it means to be a good administrator. Personnel conflicts, meetings, or jumping bureaucratic hurdles can easily become the tunnel vision within an administrative position. However, identifying who one is such a culture of collaboration. However, identifying who one is as an administrator and as a

redemptive agent in Christ's redeeming work is a vital place of starting the collaborative process. Heie and Sargent (2012) note how "stresses and frustrations of academic duties can drown out inspirations" (p. 242). These inspirations can enhance the moral imagination of administrators regarding collaboration and can help them refocus on the "whys" of their vocations. Being a "good administrator," and therefore also an advocate for collaboration, starts with first knowing who one is. In this sense, the administrative identity cannot be caught up in the minutiae of administrative tasks—though those tasks are indeed very important—but must apply to the larger vision of administrative work. Cho and Sriram (2016) stress the importance of an institutional collaborative culture for the success of partnerships. However, reflecting on identities and the moral commitments of those identities is important to practice prior to embarking on creating such a culture of collaboration.

## Using Ethical and Faith Lenses

Shapiro and Stefkovich (2016) suggest the utilization of certain ethical lenses in the process of educational leadership decision making: the ethic of justice, the ethic of critique, the ethic of care, and the ethic of the profession. While all lenses are helpful in making decisions, the ethic of the profession—or professional standards, as it is often phrased—is the current focus. NASPA and ACPA, two of the largest student affairs associations, present "collaboration" as a competency for professional practice. In addition, "Representation of Professional Competencies" is outlined in the NASPA Standards of Professional Practice (1990). Therefore, collaboration in the development of "integrated learning opportunities" (NASPA & ACPA, 2015, p. 32) is approached by these associations as a professional ethic. While it is noble to adhere to these ethics from the perspective of student affairs staff and administration, a further understanding of ethics is needed for the Christian administrator. King (2012), in discussing the four ethical lenses above, posits, "If we exercise our faith, relying on our personal relationship with Jesus and the working out of this relationship in community, we realize these ethical lenses are not fully sufficient for a community of faith" (p. 201). Therefore, as King (2012) would suggest, certain "faith lenses" are also needed from the Christian administrator. In regard specifically to collaboration, three faith lenses are helpful to consider: respect, responsibility, and stewardship. The first, respect, is beneficial to exercise in regard to current institutional practices and the current work of faculty and student affairs staff. Administrators should not attempt to

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overhaul a system to incorporate collaboration overnight. Respecting the time and effort of the campus community is an important early step in developing a collaborative campus culture. Recognizing, encouraging, and praising areas where partnerships are already happening, if at all, can be uplifting for those involved. The second, responsibility, is important for the administrator to recognize regarding where collaboration might be possible. Forcing a staff or faculty member into a partnership would not be responsible or healthy, especially if their courses or programs did not connect to one another. Responsibility can also be practiced in an administrator's sense of responsibility , as previously discussed, to educating the "whole student."  Seeing this charge as a Christian responsibility in their vocation could help administrators approach collaboration with more motivation.

The third faith lens, stewardship, applies to an administrator's use of time and resources. In short, this lens is the effort of ensuring these things, as belonging to God, are being utilized in an attempt to glorify God and promote the Christian mission of the institution. Although numerous other virtues might be important to practice or could be practiced as a result of working to establish a collaborative culture, these three provide a salient starting point for using "faith lenses" to complement "ethical lenses." One must remember practicing these virtues in this context does not necessarily translate into embodying them in other contexts. These three faith lenses manifest themselves in a third administrative consideration—rewarding faculty.

### Rewarding the Faculty

One of the more difficult challenges of being an advocate for collaboration is the current reward structure for faculty. Dependent upon institutional type, the classic tripartite of teaching, research, and service is hardly uniform. However, even when advertised as three equal areas, that truth can be difficult to see. In regard to specific policy, if an administrator is going to uphold the task of creating a culture of collaboration, faculty reward structures must be addressed. While the mission of "educating the whole student" may be on their minds, faculty simply do not have the time to take on additional projects, especially if they are not rewarded for such efforts. Soden and Storm (2012) note, "Faculty are seldom rewarded for the risks they take in teaching or for the ways in which they encourage students to think outside the norms of the academy" (p. 155). Incentives such as course load reductions, recognition on campus for their efforts, or a release from certain service

requirements are potential areas to reward faculty for collaboration. Though a policy change in this area might be difficult, Morales's (2007) suggestion for top-down commitment proves crucial in fostering collaboration. Addressing faculty rewards in promoting partnerships would be unrealistic without extensive administrative support. Faculty, however, are only half of the equation for successful partnerships.

## Evaluating Student Affairs Professionals

If student affairs practitioners likewise desire to be involved, and if a truly collaborative culture is going to be established, these staff members need to be evaluated according to their efforts to partner with faculty on programs and projects. NASPA (2016) has an existing competency to address collaboration, as mentioned above, and if the motivation for partnerships is going to be lively, these professionals should be held to a standard of participation and contribution. This practice might include listing collaboration on job descriptions, training staff on the inherent differences in student affairs and faculty (Caruso, 2007), or developing an orientation for both new student affairs staff and faculty to learn about partnership practices.

Perhaps a partnership fair, allowing faculty to meet with staff from different departments in order to discuss ways to promote holistic development together, could be established to cross institutional boundaries. Student affairs staff could hear from faculty about what they are doing in the classroom and faculty could hear from staff about programs which could be implemented to integrate learning and development. Staff members could, essentially, market their programs to faculty in efforts to find partners. With this last illustration as an example, administrators will clearly need to tap their moral imaginations in thinking about how certain efforts might promote collaboration. In attempting initiatives such as these, administrators will be creating student life cultures that embody and value collaborative mindsets when designing programs, resulting in positive steps toward campus cultures that do the same.

## Conclusions

The purpose of a Christian education is to guide students toward developing a love for God and neighbor. A healthy vehicle for articulating such a vision is to focus on the development of the student as a whole person. A practical method for this holistic education is to practice

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collaboration between student affairs and academic affairs. Therefore, Christian administrators have an obligation to promote a culture of collaboration on their campuses. Trudeau and Herrmann (2014) emphasize the opportunity of Christian colleges to partake in this call by highlighting the ideal environment for integration to flourish. The immense opportunities to collaborate exist, but it is on the shoulders of administrators to decide if they will take up this challenge.

Administration is not easy, and although there are numerous other initiatives competing for available time and resources, deciding to pursue a collaborative campus culture is an important, purpose-driven decision. Trudeau and Herrmann (2014) highlight that the changes necessary to adopt a collaborative culture are apparent in Christian higher education for two reasons:

> First, the integrative climate intended to meaningfully unite faith and learning is very conducive to building connections between the curriculum and the co-curriculum. Second, the whole-person focus inherent in a Christian conception of education implies a total or complete approach including every aspect of a student's experience. (p. 65)

While partnerships are healthy for student success, they serve an additional purpose in Christian higher education, a redeeming purpose. Learning through the struggles voiced by current administrators and the recommendations outlined above, Christian administrators ought to be the biggest champions of collaborations between student affairs and academic affairs.

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