Building community using staff-student partnerships - a case study and framework

Authors: Susan Smith and Dan Axson, University of Sussex

Context

This case illustrates how a staff-student partnership approach was adopted to better understand staff and students' expectations of community within one department at the University of Sussex Business School. The project is an example of a staff-student partnership designed to co-create a defined outcome, that is enhancing feelings of community within the department. A short and concise project, it ran for a period of four weeks during the autumn of 2020.

The team consisted of four students and five members of faculty along with the School’s academic developer, learning technologist and student academic success advisor, and was facilitated by the Associate Dean. The staff members were invited to join due to their roles as programme directors, education lead and Head of Department. Students applied to work on the project via the University’s established student partnership scheme (Sussex Connectors). This helped to promote authenticity and ensure a diverse range of experience and backgrounds in the project team.

The partnership process

Prior staff-student partnership work had led to the development of an initial framework to help steer the partnership process. However, this was the first time it had been applied to a partnership with a defined outcome rather than ones with defined outputs, for example new assessment criteria. The uncertainty around what would emerge offered exciting possibilities but also risks around potential failure to deliver any output.

Figure 1: The value aligned partnership process

Source: Smith, Axson, Akhyani, Amautu & Stanimirova (2021)
Problematising

Values developed at this stage: Authenticity for participation and co-creation, reciprocity in the process, and inclusivity within the group.

‘The atmosphere was that of trust, cooperation and inclusivity. When we had meetings with members of our department, it was an incredibly inclusive and friendly atmosphere where everyone has a say and all ideas were considered.’ (Student quote)

Initially we set the context for the project identifying why it is important and what it sought to achieve. NSS data helped to frame the discussion highlighting ongoing dissatisfaction expressed by students in relation to course community. At this stage it was important to foster a trust relationship and break down any hierarchies so that students felt free to fully contribute.

Listening

Values developed at this stage: Empowerment to ensure that participants were able to voice their opinions and feel heard by others.

This step involved actively listening to all perspectives on what community meant to members of the team. This enabled us to build back to a common understanding in the context of the department. Students felt strongly that a departmental community was important to them, in contrast to the focus on course community driven by the NSS. The students undertook a wider consultation with their peers to ensure that a broad range of viewpoints were included.

Creating

Values developed at this stage: Community within the group and responsibility for the outcomes of the project.

The creating phase involved breaking into smaller groups and using a Padlet board, building on each others’ ideas using the ‘yes, and’ technique. This enabled us to generate a range of potential ideas for deeper discussion.

Implementing

The two ideas that were both considered viable and implementable by the group were to develop a newsletter and to run a debate. At this point the students took the lead on the project although up to this point the balance of leadership had gradually moved. Following some additional research, the proposal for the ‘Jubilee Times’ was presented to the group and the students moved from being partners to becoming the editorial board. Staff took on an advisory role providing suggestions to the editorial board when consulted. The board have recently put a call out for new members to take up post in the new academic year.

The second lockdown in late 2020 prevented the debate being taken forward, however we have high hopes to be able to develop this idea during 2021-22.
Evaluation

‘The cooperation between students and staff was a fantastic concept and I do believe that this was a success, as it did result in a newly founded and slick new newsletter being made for the department.’ Student quote

The evaluation of staff-student partnerships can be undertaken at many levels including institutional, departmental, staff and student outcomes. The initial evaluation of the project was against the student role descriptors, other outcomes will emerge through the NSS, the sustainability of the newsletter and the engagement with it over time.

Conclusion

Through adopting the partnership process framework, staff who are unfamiliar with staff-student partnerships can facilitate the co-creation process to achieve either a defined outcome or a defined output. In addition to ensuring partnership values are embedded in co-creation activity, the framework helps to set expectations for those involved at the start of the process. It also remains sufficiently flexible to increase focus on specific phases or to expand the timeframe of the partnership.

References