In mid-August, William McKinney, senior advisor for regional campus affairs at Indiana University (IU), wanted to know how other higher education institutions are dealing with student hunger. In a country where a large percentage of public K-12 students gets free or reduced meals at their schools, it’s not surprising that food insecurity would be a problem in college.

McKinney posted his query to the Re-Imagining the First Year of College (RFY) online community. Community members from other institutions responded, sharing what they were doing on their campuses to deal with student hunger, and RFY staff posted resources on the topic.

By no means has this difficult problem been solved through one online conversation, but McKinney and the rest of the more than 400 community members from the 44 RFY participant institutions provided greater insight into how to tackle it, and maybe just as important, an understanding that their institution is not alone in dealing with this issue.

In 2015, AASCU institutions were invited to apply to participate in RFY, a three-year project supported by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and USA Funds. The goal of the initiative is to redesign the first year of college to ensure greater success for all students, with special emphasis on underserved students—low-income, first generation and students of color.

One of the critical resources offered to RFY participants is an online community where all team members can share their questions, resources, successes and challenges in between the times they meet in person. Corporate partners and higher education consultants are also part of the project, serving as experts to help institutions implement changes. When RFY participants first met in Austin, Texas, in February 2016, the RFY online community was ready for them.

“This is a crowdsourcing site,” says Robin Ellis, operations director of RFY. “It was built with the 44 campuses in mind and with the 25 strategies that they identified as the most challenging at their campuses, and that they want to use to reimagine the first-year experience.”

How the Community Works

After AASCU created subgroups for conversations related to the 25 strategies—which include Academic Affairs and Student Affairs Collaboration, Early Alert Systems, Faculty Incentives, Growth Mindset and Peer Mentors—association staff populated these pages with relevant resources. For example, the Growth Mindset discussion area includes a link to articles by expert Carol Dweck and a link to a mindset toolkit. Any conversations that do not fall within the site’s designated topic areas or any submitted comments can be posted in the Work Out Loud section of the site.

On the site’s homepage, the Ask an Expert section provides detailed background on all the corporate partners and consultants, and links to additional information. “As these campuses are talking about their efforts and what’s working and what’s not working, our consultants and corporate partners jump in and help,” Ellis says. “They are there to provide support for the campuses as they do this challenging work.”

By June 2016, each RFY institution was required to develop a campus plan that details how it will go about changing the first-year experience for students. The plans are broken down into...
four areas of focus—institutional intentionality, curriculum, faculty and staff, and students—and include timelines for what institutions will accomplish in each year. What are their milestones? What are the major metrics to be used to measure progress?

“Institutions traditionally have a hard time showing their business, and this is very much showing their business,” Ellis says. “Every single plan is on the site, and it’s 100 percent viewable by anyone who wants to see it.” Each institution has been assigned a consultant to help the RFY team members develop strategies to accomplish the work laid out in the campus plan.

**Member Perspective**

When they first joined the community, RFY participants were asked to create a profile. Therefore, when you click on a community member’s profile, you can see his or her bio and the contributions (posts) he or she has made. The site also uses badges, which users earn as they become more engaged in the community.

McKinney, at Indiana University, has found the RFY online community to be extremely helpful so far. He posted his question about student hunger after researching the topic at the behest of the IU board of trustees. After some initial research, he realized the national scope of the problem.

“I thought, ‘Let’s put this out to the group,’” McKinney says. “It’s great to watch the conversations and see what develops when you have a large group starting to talk. The crowdsourcing piece of it makes [RFY] unique and will help it be successful.”

Lisa Hunter, associate provost for curriculum, assessment, and academic support at Fredonia State University of New York, also appreciates the ability to crowdsource ideas and resources through the online community. Her institution is currently focusing on a growth mindset and the impact it can have on persistence and retention of college students. Through the site, she’s heard from RFY participants at other campuses with the same focus.

“We’ve gained valuable resources” from the site, Hunter says. “It shortens the time to implementation, and you can avoid some of the roadblocks by talking to someone who is on a similar path and sharing ideas back and forth. That’s just been amazing.”

K. Candis Best, founder and CEO of Learningateway, is one of the corporate partners involved in RFY. Her company has developed a platform designed to create virtual communities for institutions to offer students. The online communities are meant to help students develop a sense of belonging that will help them be more successful in college—an idea not completely foreign to what the RFY community is seeking to accomplish.

“I’ve posted a couple of articles, and where relevant, I’ve offered my assistance,” Best says. “It’s helpful to see which schools are interested in what, what kinds of questions they are posting. You can see where their focus is and what their priorities are.”

After talking to an RFY institutional participant at a recent conference, Best visited the institution to talk more in-depth about how Learningateway could help. In preparation for that meeting, she looked up the institution’s campus plan to see what it wanted to focus on to improve the first-year experience. “That allowed me to really tailor our pitch to what they’ve said they want to do with RFY,” Best says. “This is how I think we can fit in and help you advance that. Being able to offer options that are very specific to what they are looking for is very useful.”

**Moving Forward**

While the site is a critical crowdsourcing tool for the participant institutions, it’s also helpful for AASCU in ensuring it provides participants with the support they need to succeed in this important endeavor.

In the campus plans, AASCU asked institutions to identify their major risks and what resources they need. AASCU staff are coding all of this information now to identify common themes.

“We are going to study and provide information at scale on what it is to be engaged, and to be an association engaging campuses,” Ellis says. “The analytics will tell us what people are most interested in. We are only going to be able to improve from here because we will see the metrics on what’s working and what we can take out.”

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