Program Theory Applied Example

A theory-based program is one that is intentionally designed to address a certain problem or achieve a certain goal. Theory-based programs can be contrasted with less intentional programs that are often conceived with little thought as to 1) what changes are desired in students' knowledge, attitudes, skills, and behaviors, and 2) how such changes can be reasonably facilitated (i.e., program theory).

Major student affairs organizations like ACPA and NASPA make it clear that intentional, theory-based programs are the expectation). Toward this end, we provide a simple framework to guide student affairs practitioners in the development such programs.

Step 1: Articulate the Problem

Building an theory-based program begins by clearly articulating problem you are trying to address or the goal you are trying to achieve. These problems/goals should be meaningful to stakeholders.

- *Example: The university is concerned about increased alcohol-related hospitalizations due to a culture of binge-drinking on campus. Thus, our goal is to encourage students to drink more responsibly.*

Step 2: Identify Plausible Causes and Solutions

Once you have a clear problem or goal in mind, the next step is to consult relevant theory and empirical research to learn more about the underlying causes of the problem and theory-based solutions/strategies given those underlying causes.

- *Example: Researchers describe two primary motivations for drinking: internal/psychological factors (e.g., to increase positive affective states or reduce negative affective states) as well as external/social factors (e.g., social camaraderie and to avoid social exclusion). Given these causes of drinking, some effective interventions include programs that: build resilience to peer pressure, address inaccurately perceived social norms around drinking, and have students reflect on their distorted alcohol-expectancy beliefs (beliefs about the internal and external benefits of drinking). Conversely, there is little evidence that common interventions such as teaching students refusal skills, clarifying values, rewriting policies, increasing knowledge, using peer education, and employing scare tactics are effective.*

Step 3: Select a Course of Action

There is likely more than one theory that has garnered empirical support, which is advantageous as it indicates more than one approach to designing a program to meet the intended SLO. Thus, the next step is to select a reasonable course of action given what you

know about your specific institutional context (e.g., the unique needs of your students, resource constraints, institutional priorities, etc.)

- *Example: The results of an on-campus survey showed that students at our university believe their peers drink much more heavily than they actually do. This aligns with the research on alcohol-related social norms. Additionally, due to budget cuts we have limited resources to devote to an alcohol intervention. It appears, however, that many of the successful interventions in the literature geared towards changing social norms do not require extensive resources. Thus, given previous assessment results and budget constraints, we have decided to develop an intervention to change students' perceptions about social norms related to alcohol.*

Step 4: Develop an Intentional Program

Once you have decided on a course of action (i.e., what you're going to do), the next step is to figure out how to do it. In other words, while theory may provide an outline for your program, it is up to you to fill in the details. A good starting point is to look for intervention studies, or empirical research articles where practitioners describe a particular theory-based intervention and evaluate its effectiveness. It may also be helpful to consult the literature on how students learn (learning theory) and/or how attitudes and behaviors are changed (persuasion theory). Additionally, there is extensive literature on evidence-based pedagogical techniques that can be particularly useful for educational or co-curricular programs.

- *Example: In one study, a media campaign designed to change students' perceptions of the amount of binge drinking on campus showed a nearly 20% drop in the number of students who perceived binge drinking as the norm, and a nearly 10% decrease in self-reported binge drinking. Drawing heavily from this intervention, we have decided to implement a similar campaign. We will post advertisements in the popular campus "Potty Mouth" publication, draw large chalk messages in the quad, recruit students to hand out flyers, and use social media polls and hashtags to start a campus-wide conversation.*

Step 5: Evaluate Program Effectiveness

Once you've built and implemented an theory-based program, the next step is to evaluate its effectiveness. If you find that your program is ineffective, it may be an indication that 1) the theory/research you pulled from in Step 2 is wrong or does not generalize to your population of students, 2) the course of action you selected in Step 3 is inappropriate given your specific context, or 3) the particular methods you employed in Step 4 were ineffective or insufficient. Once you've identified where the breakdown occurred, the final step is to make intentional, theory-based changes to the program based on this information.

- *Example: We used a pre-post design to evaluate the effectiveness of our program and found that although students reported more accurate perceptions of social norms*

related to drinking, their self-reported binge drinking did not decrease. This points to a breakdown in the fundamental hypothesis underlying our program--that by changing perceptions of social norms we should see changes in behavior (see Step 2). Moving forward, we would like to explore the possibility of adding a component to the program that focuses on changing students' attitudes towards alcohol. This modification is based on the Theory of Reasoned Action which states that a person's behavioral intentions are a function of the subjective norms they hold about a behavior and their attitudes toward that behavior.