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Valuing the Student Voice: Understanding and Responding to Student Concerns

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1. **Presentation Title:** Valuing the Student Voice: Understanding and Responding to Student Concerns
2. **Presenter Information/BIO:**

Craig Hlavac is the Associate Dean of the Liberal Arts (Arts, Humanities, Social & Behavioral Sciences) at Southern Connecticut State University. Prior to his current position, Dr. Hlavac served as the interim Associate Dean for the School of Arts and Sciences for two years, and before that was Associate Professor and Chair of the Music Department. He received Bachelor of Arts in Music and Bachelor of Science in Music Education degrees from the University of Connecticut, a Master of Music degree from Yale University, and an Ed.D. in Educational Leadership from the University of Hartford. A frequent educational leadership clinician and presenter, Dr. Hlavac has delivered presentations throughout the country. Dr. Hlavac is also an advisory board member for *The Department Chair*, the premier academic department chair journal. Dr. Hlavac's research interests focus on the impacts of the organizational mission on the decision-making of educational leaders, the use of organizational and departmental missions to prioritize decision-making, and the utility of mission-based management in the administration of the contemporary university.

Sarah Gossman is a senior at Southern Connecticut State University majoring in history with minors in English literature and social media. She is a member of the Honors College, and defended her honors thesis entitled "Student Led Activism for Curricular Change in Higher Education: An Examination of General Education Requirements and the Student Voice Historically from the 1930s to Today." Sarah also serves as the President of the Student Government Association and has had a variety of experiences as a student leader. In Student Government, she serves on the Undergraduate Curriculum Forum Committee, the Liberal Education Program Committee, and a newly formed General Education Task Force to advocate for the student voice on curricular issues on campus. Prior to President, Sarah served as the Vice President of the Board of Academic Experience, working closely with deans and department chairs on improving the overall student and academic experience. Sarah also served as an Orientation Ambassador and works in the office of Student Conduct and Civic Responsibility.

3. **Disciplines:** Education, Leadership, Management, Higher Education Administration
4. **Presentation Theme:** Leadership & Management; Operating the Department
5. **Presentation Type:** Interactive Workshop (105 minutes)
6. **Abstract:**

Many higher education institutions unintentionally make it challenging for students to raise concerns. Students often feel intimidated by faculty and administrators, yet most grievance processes require students to take the initiative to voice a concern. Adding stress is the lack of clarity of these processes, which can make students feel disconnected and uncertain where to turn. To alleviate the stress of students, alternative perspectives must be considered. This session will provide participants with practical strategies for developing processes that respect the student voice and encourage students to bring forward their concerns. Group discussions and scenario-based breakout sessions will be included.

7. **Keywords:** student voice, self-advocacy, student/faculty communication, conflict resolution
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9. **Presentation Information:**

While the roles and responsibilities of the academic department chair are numerous, perhaps the most important is ensuring students are receiving high-quality instruction and an excellent experience. Unfortunately, with course schedules, budget management, staff oversight, and many other tasks, it can be surprisingly easy to overlook the students. However, even the most student-centric departments will have student complaints, and department chairs are often uncertain what to do when a student comes forward, as well as how to develop a culture in which students feel comfortable voicing their concerns. In a recent survey of community college chairs, respondents reported the need for training in handling student concerns as the most pressing (Paape et al., 2021, p. 46). This presentation will provide participants with an overview of relevant research regarding the student voice, ideas for encouraging student self-advocacy, and strategies for chairpersons on responding to student concerns.

Despite the multiple definitions of the *student voice*, scholars agree it is powerful - students just need to know how to “harness that power” (Seale, 2010, p. 997). Unfortunately, educating students on how to raise a concern within a classroom setting is often overlooked, and thus students are left to navigate uncomfortable situations on their own. Although the literature reflects the student voice should be highly valued in higher education, it also indicates that students are frequently misunderstood and misrepresented. These issues impact students by creating “lack of information” and “poor communication.” (Seale, p. 1004). When the students are overlooked, they do not feel like they can develop meaningful relationships with faculty. This can have significant impacts on student success, academic performance, and student retention.

Academic leaders must accept the responsibility of encouraging student feedback through the development of clear, accessible policies and procedures that motivate students to come forward when a concern arises. This session will provide practical guidance for chairs and academic leaders on how to develop such processes while considering and valuing the student perspective. The workshop will be organized in the following manner:

- Introductions – presenters and participants - (5 min)
- Directed small group discussion (10 min)
- Presentation of research regarding the student voice (10 min)
- Contextualizing the research for the academic leader (10 min)
- Real-life student experiences and considerations for responses (15 min)
- Practical strategies for department chairs (10 min)
- Networking Break (5-10 min)
- Scenarios: Presenters will develop 3-4 scenarios that illustrate student concerns within a given context. Participants will be assigned to small groups (in breakout rooms) and asked to develop responses. (15min)
- Group discussion: Each group will have an opportunity to report out their responses to each scenario for comments (15 min)
- Q & A (10 min)

Participants will be encouraged to ask questions and provide their insights throughout the workshop.

References:

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Paape, J. E., Miller, M. T., Grover K. S., & Morris, A. A. (2021). Department Chair Training: Priorities, Needs, and Preferences. *Community College Enterprise*, SP 21, 38-53.

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