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Caring About Students—The Work of Student Affairs

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Abstract

As resources have become tighter, campus leaders must make tough decisions about priorities. Many people value the out-of-classroom experience, but there is a cost to staffing and providing these opportunities and resources. Some argue that technology will change education so completely that campuses as we know them today will become extinct. Student affairs has an important role to play in this time of turbulence and transition by providing information about the student experience in general and about the students on our individual campuses. Student affairs leaders need to speak continually about the importance of caring about students and their experiences, and they must find ways to partner with others who share their concerns.

In April 2013 I had the privilege of attending the year-end banquet for our Division of Housing and Food Service, and one of the speeches given by the students was especially powerful. This student who had served as a resident assistant (RA) for a couple of years began by explaining what RAs did in a way that had the entire room laughing and nodding in rueful agreement. She then became serious as she referenced a bomb threat we had early in the year and the care RAs showed for their students. She talked about the listening ears, the comforting shoulders, and the helping hands provided at all hours of the day and night, all year long by the people in that room. She thanked her colleagues, students who took the time to care for other students and were willing to take on the responsibility of helping others be successful. Some of them will become student affairs professionals and carry that experience forward as they choose a career of caring for students.

In department after department, across colleges and universities of all sizes and types, people like those RAs work to make a difference for the students on their campuses. Working with groups and individuals, they try to find ways to solve problems, provide guidance, or hold students accountable when things go wrong. They care about the experiences each student has. That is the work of student affairs, and that has not changed since I served as an RA 35 years ago.

The number of changes in the years between my university experiences and those of students today are too numerous to mention, but the work of student affairs staff members is still critical. This article will discuss the role of student affairs in the continual changing campus environment and the ways students affairs can make a positive difference in the lives of students through acts of caring.

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Student Affairs: Changes Over Time

When I started college, there was no summer orientation experience for the average student, and my mother did in fact drive me to campus and drop me off. She made the 1,000 mile round-trip between San Antonio, Texas, and Norman, Oklahoma, on Saturday. It never occurred to either of us that she might stay the weekend and go shopping for the things my dorm room needed. That meant I had 4 days on my own with nothing scheduled until classes started. The only reason I had someone to eat meals with was that my roommate did not know anyone either.

It is still possible for a student to have this experience, but the systems and processes have changed significantly in 40 years. Some parents' only choice may be to send their child alone or drop them off, but most campuses plan for parents to have some part in the move-in process. Orientations happen in the summer with information to help students start off well. Students can choose to ignore them, but there are opportunities to interact with others throughout the opening weeks. If students live in the residence halls, the RAs are expected to work diligently to pull people out of their rooms and help them feel comfortable in crowds of strangers. University administrators understand that the transition to a campus community is a critical part of student success; and significant time, attention, and resources are now devoted to making this experience a positive one.

Over time, the field of student affairs has grown, developed, and become more specialized and more professional. As a group we have had the most direct contact with the widest number of students; therefore, we have been in the best place to see the changes in our student populations. Most importantly, student affairs has worked to react to and anticipate students' changing needs. In my experience, services for students with disabilities, minority student programs, gender and sexuality programs, programs for students who are older than 25, and most recently veterans' support programs began in student affairs. I also know of divisions of student affairs in which staff members saw academic needs that were not being addressed and created programs to meet those needs. One of our strengths as a profession is our ability to be flexible and responsive. It can be frustrating when those programs, now fully developed and flourishing, are then moved to other divisions. However, I appreciate the perspective of one dean of students who understood that sometimes her office functioned as an incubator in service to the campus community.

Today resources have become tighter and campus leaders must make tough decisions about priorities. Many people value the out-of-classroom experience, but there is a cost to staffing and providing these opportunities and resources. Some argue that technology will change education so completely that campuses as we know them today will become extinct. What is the role of student affairs in this changing environment? How can we help people understand the importance of our role and of the out-of-classroom experience in American higher education?

Individuals Matter

Recently a group of vice presidents of student affairs was asked to tell a story of a turning point in their lives that in some way brought them to their current positions. Person after person told wonderful stories about points in their lives that connected in some way to the present, and many of these stories took place during their undergraduate years. One vice president told of being a younger than average undergraduate far away from family, knowing no one. He was there early before classes started and was so shy that he would not go to the dining hall to eat; he lived on food his mother had packed for him. When classes started and he had to venture out, a member of the housekeeping staff in the student union noticed him—a thin, lost-looking

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young man—and struck up a conversation. The next morning when he came into the union, she was looking for him and handed him a burrito she had brought from home. For the rest of that semester she fed him with burritos, but more with kindness and care, and helped him make it through that tough transition. He credits his staying at that school, where he is now vice president for student affairs, to this woman. He had no idea what department she worked for and he did not care.

It is a familiar, if rueful, joke among student affairs professionals that our families do not understand what we do. On campus we are often seen only as the fun-and-games people or the equivalent of the high school vice principal, that is, the one who administers discipline. We have both of those roles, and they are important, but they minimize the complexity of the work we do.

What exactly is student affairs? Defining it as a division on an organizational chart does not help because organizational design is idiosyncratic to the campus, its leaders, and circumstances. A financial aid counselor is doing student affairs work whether the Office of Financial Aid is located in student affairs, academic affairs, or enrollment management. It is possible to define it based on a certain course of study, but people find their way to student affairs from many routes, so that does not help us either. Does it work to define student affairs based on an ethic of care for students? That does not help us in the discussion of resource allocation. The reality is that there are people all across campus doing work that can be defined as student affairs work regardless of where they fit into an organizational chart. From academic advisors and athletic coaches, to the graduate school and the police department, colleges and universities are filled with people who define their positions in terms of student support.

At one institution where I worked there was a faculty member in the hard sciences who on occasion expressed great frustration and disdain for the sorority and fraternity experience on campus. From his perspective, students who were involved in these organizations were always poorer students for the experience. Based on his experience with this one group of students, my colleague had developed a disdain for most, if not all, of the work of student affairs and did not hesitate to tell me of his concerns. He had not been involved in student activities as a student and did not see any value in a large part of the work we do. For a while we both had offices in the same building. One day I stopped at his open door to visit and noticed well-worn copies of murder mysteries by Dorothy L. Sayers and Marjorie Allingham. I asked why he kept them at his office. He said they were two of his favorite authors. He continued by saying that his courses were tough, and students were often tired and stressed, so he often loaned them a mystery novel suggesting they read it and take a break from academics for a few hours. He had spent his undergraduate student years in the lab, and while he did not have much appreciation for the entire out-of-class experience or much of the work that we do, he clearly cared about students and appreciated the importance of taking a mental break. I understood then that we started from a common place, even if we lived it differently on a daily basis.

We often talk about students as members of groups—students with disabilities, veteran students, entering students—the ways we aggregate students are nearly endless. Yet we know, of course, that each member of each group is an individual who arrives on our campus with unique histories and challenges. It is an acknowledgement of this individual reality that helps us work to create an organization that has an ethic of care. Carol Gilligan (2011) defined *ethics of care*

> as an ethic grounded in voice and relationships, in the importance of everyone having a voice, being listened to carefully (in their own right and on their own terms) and heard with respect. An ethics of care directs our attention to the need for responsiveness in relationships (paying attention, listening, responding) and to the costs of losing connection with oneself or with others. (para. 4)

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Individuals matter in relationship with each other. Those relationships can support students in finding their unique voices as individual staff members listen with care to individual students.

Years ago, a student came to me to share a story. Her friends did not understand why she was "making such a big deal" about her situation. She had begun to doubt herself and her values. In the telling of her story to someone who did not diminish her experience, she was able to determine a way to respond to the circumstances in a very positive way. In Gilligan's terms, she was given the opportunity to have her own voice, and she was heard with respect. An individual's experience matters. An individual to hear that experience mattered.

Making a Difference

I have worked at the full range of universities: a large public national research university, small regional private religiously affiliated universities, and a regional public institution in transition. In my opinion, the mission of the university does make a difference, but what makes the most difference in the student experience is the size of the institution. I believe there are two primary factors that account for this difference.

Employee-to-Student Ratio

First is employee-to-student ratio. We pay attention to student-faculty ratio, and most campuses work to keep the lowest faculty-to-student ratio they can afford. We understand that small classes work best for the most complex material. We know that access to faculty is important for students, and we need enough faculty members to be able to support student academic needs. Conversely, we are expected to spend as little as possible on administrative support. While there is merit to this way of prioritizing, there are disadvantages. On smaller campuses, faculty members are expected to engage with students as academic advisors, and often they are active advisors for student organizations. On a smaller campus, the housekeeping and facilities staff members know students and alert faculty and student affairs staff when they have concerns. In my experience on smaller campuses, a significant majority of the staff was engaged with students on some level and paid attention to their welfare.

On large complex campuses, students who do not live on campus can go for 4 years without having significant interaction with a university staff member. Even if assigned an advisor, the interaction can be perfunctory if the advisor's caseload is too large to allow the time to get to know students. Large campuses often have specialized programs to meet individual needs, and staff members are able to interact with large numbers of students. But we always know we work with the extremes—student leaders or students in trouble in some way—and no matter how hard we try, we cannot reach everyone. We need to find ways to engage more members of the community in reaching out to students.

As one example, the Office of the Dean of Students at The University of Texas at Austin held a daylong student veterans symposium. This symposium brought together researchers, service providers, student veterans, and faculty and staff members to consider many of the different experiences of veterans as students on campus. It highlighted ways faculty and staff could support student veterans and provided information about resources available across the entire campus. One attendee was the chair of the Faculty Council. She then brought the director of student veterans services to speak to the members of the Faculty Council. Both of these actions increased the likelihood that individual participants in the symposium and

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the Faculty Council will be more willing to reach out to student veterans and that they will be more effective when they do so.

Ability to Form Partnerships

The second factor related to size is the ability to form partnerships. On a small campus, it is easier for individuals to interact both on work projects and informally. When we know our colleagues as individuals, we learn not only their talents and skills, but we know what interests them. Therefore, we can naturally form partnerships and develop programs that meet student needs. Using my chemistry colleague as an example, on a large campus it would be very unlikely that I would have had the opportunity to have learned about his interest in women mystery writers from the 20s and 30s or had a glimpse into his care for students. On a large campus I might never have met so many of his students who saw him as one of their favorite professors—tough but caring. All I would have known was his professed disdain for student affairs work. There would have been no opportunity to develop any partnership with him, and partnerships across our universities are more important than ever.

Goldsmith's (2003) study of more than 200 "high-potential" leaders focused on leaders of the future. "The results clearly portrayed this individual as someone skilled at building partnerships inside and outside the organization" (p. 3). He went on to say that a "great challenge for the leader of the future is breaking down boundaries. The successful leader of the future will be able to share people, capital and ideas across the organization" (Goldsmith, 2003, p. 4).

It seems to me student affairs has an important role to play during this time of change and tight resources. We have information about the student experience in general and about the students on our individual campuses. This information is essential for the discussions of campus priorities. However, while I do believe that student affairs traditionally has had a special role in caring for the welfare of our students, I do not believe we are the only ones with that role. Acting as if we are the only ones who care about students is as counter-productive as bemoaning the fact that some of our academic colleagues do not understand the value of our work. Our willingness to develop partnerships across campus will be crucial to student success and to our ability to garner the resources necessary to do our work.

> We like the name partnership. It suggests the basic idea—men and women coming together to accomplish the leadership tasks—they create a shared vision, they work together to build commitment, and maintain alignment with the vision, and they use the skills and energies of all partners to handle change and deal with adaptive challenges. (Moxley & Alexander, 2003, p. 75)

Who are the men and women on your campus who can come together to create a shared vision about a specific issue or problem? Who has the skills and energies needed to support the creation of a new program or service? Even more importantly, who are the people on your campus who care about student success? Their titles do not matter. If they care about students, they are someone with whom to work. As we work across campus boundaries to develop partnerships, our colleagues will learn more about our programs and services and we will learn more about their ideas. Together we can identify resources and opportunities to make a difference for students on our campuses.

On my own campus we are now putting a new emphasis on our 4-year graduation rate. This means examining everything that might have an impact on timely graduation: messages about graduation at orientation, registration processes, academic advising, rules and procedures that support or hinder students, etc.

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It also has created a willingness to ask questions we have not asked before and to try new ways of doing things. It has also meant new organizational structures, new committees and, as a result, new opportunities for partnerships. I know we are not the only ones going through such a process. Student affairs staff ignore such discussions at our peril. We have a role in this conversation and important information to share.

Ways to Connect

As mentioned above, individuals matter, and it does not matter the size of the campus, one of our challenges is connecting with as many different students and student constituencies as possible. Students experience a caring organization through the people they meet. At the University of Texas at San Antonio (UTSA), we created the UTSA Listens program. The program has three components—using the call center to call sophomores, partnering with the Student Government Association to survey random students, and the Listening Booth— all of them designed to give UTSA staff a chance to listen to students. The Listening Booth is the most visible. Once a week during the semester and at major campus events, staff members from across the campus spend time at a table and invite students to come talk. And they do. Students stop and talk about both good experiences and bad, university concerns and personal issues; the topics vary. But everyone who stops is glad to have someone to talk to and to have the experience of being listened to. A side benefit is that staff members love the opportunity to hear student stories.

As a new vice president at a major research university, I wanted to make a special effort to meet students across campus and to find ways to hear their stories. So I used new and not-so-new methods. The new method used social media to connect with students virtually and in person. Every other week during the fall and spring semesters, departments across the division of student affairs used Twitter and Facebook to share invitations to join me in different campus locations for conversation. And students came, curious about me, with issues to talk about or just to see if it was for real. The not-so-new method was to travel across campus to student meeting after student meeting. I told every student group I met of my goal to meet all 50,000 students on campus. It always got a laugh, but it signaled my intent and it encouraged students at one meeting to invite me to another. After a short, busy 9 months, I have a reputation for being visible and for caring about the student experience, and I have learned a lot about that student experience on my new campus.

The Future

It does not matter what departments and programs are in one's division of student affairs. Nor does it matter whether one's campus is public or private, large or small. What matters is what one does each day—namely, to care for the students. Caring for students means paying attention to their changing needs and finding creative ways to learn about those needs and to support students. Caring for students means speaking up for the programs that make a difference in students' lives, whether someone else's program or one's own. Caring for students means understanding that there are multiple ways to define and support student success. Caring for students means becoming full partners in the work of the university, and if that means going the extra mile to make partnerships work, so be it. Education will change over time, resources will ebb and flow, organizational charts will be designed and redesigned and the details will look different 40 years from now, but some things will not change. Year after year, the people of student affairs will care about students.

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