The Transformational Role of Student Affairs
Dear reader,

Thank you for downloading this eBook! The EvoLLLution has always worked to shine a light on parts of the institution that play a critical but quiet role in its success, and for this eBook we wanted to really highlight the work that happens in Student Affairs offices across the country.

Though Student Affairs is obviously essential to every campus—and every leader you ask will tell you that—few actually understand the work that happen in these offices. Fewer still recognize the awesome impact these units have on the success of learners and the institution as a whole.

Student Affairs offer more than pizza parties. They are the lifeblood of institutional culture, which plays a major role in supporting year-over-year retention, credential attainment and even alumni engagement. After all, the experience a student has on-campus will surely shape their perspective of the value of that institution after they leave.

Resourcing Student Affairs appropriately to ensure they can play this role has to be a priority for every senior institutional executive.

Through this eBook, you’ll learn how different institutions are leveraging and scaling Student Affairs to support their institutional growth and learner success.

Hopefully it gives you a broader understanding of this space!

Sincerely,

Amrit Ahluwalia
Editor-in-Chief, The EvoLLLution
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Defining the Role

Every institution, whether or not it is explicitly stated in its mission statement, is focused on retention, and student affairs departments are front runners in leading the initiatives and procedures to retain students. Take the Office of Student Life, for example. On the surface, students, faculty and staff may only see Student Life as the fun department or the activities department. Student Life allocates valuable time, money and resources to creating environments in which students can build relationships, develop a sense of self, a place in the community and bring students and faculty together within co-curricular activities.

One area of focus for TRIO Programs is first-generation college students who, according to The Clay Center for Young Healthy Minds, often face psychological, financial, academic and social challenges. Additionally, one in three first generation college students leave their institution within the first three years. By identifying the needs and challenges of first-generation college students, TRIO can develop support systems and campus events to promote healthy relationships and promote campus connectedness to retain students.

This sense of belonging and appreciation drives student engagement. If a student can see themselves spending time with others in the community, attend well-intended campus events and develop deeply rooted connections, they will want to stay the course and finish their degree. Relationships in themselves promote retention. When you build relationships with peers, staff and faculty, the possibilities for success are exponentially greater.

Challenges

One challenge Student Affairs departments face at a commuter school like mine is the misconception or misunderstanding each Student Affairs department’s operations. Many students do not know that events, counselling, tutoring and other services are free. Students, faculty and staff may not see or understand the value of the services departments provide. Student Affairs departments have to spend valuable time on dismantling stereotypes and educate students, faculty and staff on the importance of support services.
Another challenge is commuter schools unable to rely on housing departments, fraternity and sorority life and athletics to captivate students; we therefore face a barrier to engagement. Without a captivated audience, Student Affairs must be critical in creating programs and services that appeal students enough to either stay on campus or drive back to campus.

A third challenge is department funding. As a whole, Student Affairs departments depend on state appropriations. In the state of Oklahoma, for example, state appropriations are reliant on a volatile oil industry. As a community college, our mission statement focuses on access to education. As tuition costs continue to increase nationwide, our focus on a quality education at an affordable cost has to be consistent.

### Active Engagement Benefits

Some of our time is spent on educating students on the importance of our work, and some of our time is spent on educating staff and faculty on the importance of our work through our programs, counselling, student conduct issues and so much more.

Part of our job is to develop ways in which we convey our purpose to co-workers who are not aware of what we do. For example, student conduct is vital to student success and retention. Student conduct should not be a punitive but an educational, developmental process that supports and encourages growth. Another example is developing mindful support systems for students who are not progressing academically or otherwise. For academic advising, lower advisor-to-advisee ratios allow advisors to develop meaningful relationships with students and make connections between academic success and personal ambitions.

Students who are treated as students as opposed to just another meeting or ID number will be able to have a greater sense of belonging on campus. The sense of connectedness with a staff member intrinsically creates a connectedness with the college or university. Whether through all staff meetings, trainings, HR newsletters or open houses, this information needs to be shared with everyone on campus.

On the flip side, it is just as important to listen to all members of the campus community. Students, administrative assistants, custodial staff and student leaders have specific experience and knowledge on campus, and it is important for directors and upper administration to actively listen to the voices of those that the polices impact most. Everyone is a stakeholder in student success. The more we know about the services and functions of Student Affairs departments, the more we are able to accurately articulate their importance and necessity to our students and staff. This in turn drives enrollment, retains students and ultimately allows students to complete their degree.
Empowering Student Affairs

Campus engagement with the community provides a solid foundation for socioeconomic growth. When students, faculty and staff value the importance of pipeline initiatives that extends into the community, we create pathways that ultimately lead to educational enrichment. Student Affairs departments are key players in supporting this initiative through interactions with high schools at recruiting events/college fairs and the Upward Bound TRIO program, businesses at job fairs and non-profits for service learning.

When campus administrators recognize, value and appreciate the work that Student Affairs professionals do on a daily basis, staff’s mental health and a sense of purpose can be significantly increased. A welcoming and appreciative work environment retains employees. A college or university that invests time, resources and money into its staff is not only investing in its employees’ success but ultimately students’ success. When staff is well trained, developed and confident, they pour that into their students.

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Meeting Evolving Student Engagement Needs with Student Affairs

Brit Katz | Interim Vice Chancellor of Student Affairs, University of South Carolina Upstate

Students evolve; they will continue to evolve. Research confirms students’ out-of-classroom experiences contribute to retention, graduation, and satisfaction with their alma mater. Student Affairs divisions creatively provide internships, leadership development, soft skills/social skillsets augmentation, community service and service-learning, teamwork, fraternity and sorority networks, and intercultural understanding. And, yes, we usually orchestrate the concerts, intramural sports, Homecoming Weeks, and senior class parties. But it’s “not your parents’ college anymore;” tuition and fees require that Student Affairs educators emphasize learning as well as living.

Studies note that college students need – more than want—the myriad of programs and services generated from Student Affairs. Campus Counseling Centers and Health Centers report record percentages of students seeking their professionals. For many first-generation students, university licensed and certified physicians, nurses, and psychotherapists are the first health care providers they’ve known. Intercultural Affairs offices ensure that minority communities become visible and embraced by the whole: African-American, Asian-American, Latina/Latino/LatinX/Hispanic, LGBTQ+, international students and scholars, and our disabled students. Contemporary career education administrators prepare mock interviews, dress-for-success seminars, and sample resumes. Recreation centers supplement their traditional treadmill training with nutrition classes, fitness taught in a different language, or personal training. Each student selects her, his, or their experiences like they choose items in a cafeteria—no two selections are necessarily the same and every student grows into mature adulthood at a different pace.

In this regard, Student Affairs is essential to the entire higher education enterprise.

Challenges

In the national student affairs associations, the themes include: shrinking budgets, increased numbers of students with severe psychological disorders, unfunded mandates from state and federal governments, political divisions, incivility in discourse, student financial distress, and COVID. The workloads are made unattractive by lower salaries and benefits. On numerous campuses, student affairs educators perceive their work as expendable and tertiary to faculty and senior administrators. It is no surprise that a larger number of professionals leave Student Affairs rather than commit to a lengthy career in the field.
Active Engagement Benefits

Institutions cannot increase enrollment without a deliberate partnership involving Enrollment Management and Student Affairs. The retention of admitted students begins before new students arrive on campus. Admissions recruit students, then transition them carefully into Student Affairs led New Student Orientation periods. During orientation—a formal period of icebreakers, social events, training periods, campus tours, and class registrations—new students become more comfortable with the setting, with peers, with faculty and staff, and with campus traditions. In 2021, these initial periods are as crucial as ever; the current national cohort of students is the loneliest, most anxious, and most depressed of any set of teenagers to attend college. Student Affairs is aware and focused upon their health and satisfaction.

There are so many benefits. Within the current context of COVID and opioid deaths, Student Affairs administrators are seasoned experts in emergency response, incident/riot protocols, First Amendment rights and policies, and mediation. If no other university division is prepared for the burgeoning diversity on all campuses, then Student Affairs delivers; our offices are safe harbors for private discussions, for planning, and for generating varying responses to life's situations.

Solutions?

Since Student Affairs can be a storing silo for student data, the division must present verifiable statistics to university officers. The data will confirm the case for increasing allocated resources to Student Affairs. The current anecdotal perception is that a university will reduce the Student Affairs mission before it reduces the number of employees, programs, or services in other divisions. In some notable instances, activist student affairs educators supplied data to generate larger numbers of psychotherapists for counseling; more resources for career preparation and readiness centers; enhanced on-campus housing facilities; or better health services outreach initiatives.

A widely underused partnership is the segment of faculty supportive of student affairs and its numerous functions. An examination of the distinct differences of faculty and staff annual performance evaluations must occur to bring the two groups together. When Student Affairs leaders realize that faculty are rewarded for grant-writing, research, and publications as well as teaching, then student affairs personnel can loan themselves to co-authoring the grants, guest lecturing in classes, and drafting the published manuscripts.
Lastly, current higher education leaders recognize that federal and state governments are reducing their appropriations to universities at the same time that governments mandate additional work. Our employees must influence legislators to comprehend the harmful impact of unfunded mandates. Or, it is paramount that endowments are approved for individual departments or programs, thus protecting a steady revenue stream for treasured student affairs initiatives.

Students evolve. Student Affairs divisions will evolve with them, ready for the call to teach, to advise, and to advocate for our student communities...while we remind American higher education of the inimitable and invaluable contributions outside the classroom.

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Now more than ever, students need their institution to support their evolving needs, especially during a pandemic. The world has shifted, and everyone is forced to adapt to this new normal. Students are trying to navigate their education and careers along with their personal lives—and it’s tough to balance everything. Institutions need to show their commitment to supporting their students, and the Student Affairs department is key in executing this mission. In this interview, Vince Miller discusses the role Student Affairs play within the institution, the challenges to co-curricular engagement and how institutions can support Student Affairs divisions.

The EvoLLLution (Evo): What role do Student Affairs departments play in supporting the broader institutional mission?

Vince Miller (VM): The Student Affairs department has a direct impact on student retention and success through our important commitment to serving students outside the classroom. We deliver resources to assist with stress management, coping, resiliency, so students can better focus in class. Especially with everything going on with the global pandemic, students need that support. So, we deliver health services and wellness programs to minimize illness and the student can quickly return to being healthy. It’s important for us to provide opportunities for students to engage and connect through co-curricular programming, which helps build life skills for leadership in their community and careers. Social events are another key element for us, helping us connect the student to the identity of the institution and help solidify a sense of place and belonging among students.

Evo: What are some of the common challenges Student Affairs departments tend to face when it comes to co-curricular engagement?

VM: The biggest challenge is getting started. While we are great at delivering programs and services, we often do not intentionally connect them together to offer a pathway of co-curricular programs, which have an intentional impact on student learning and skills development. It’s difficult for departments to make these connections with other departments while delivering on their day-in, day-out programming responsibilities.
Evo: What are some best practices to overcome these obstacles?

VM: To offer students an intentionally connected co-curricular experience—a vision for what this could look like—we need to carve out shared and dedicated time for planning. I also suggest involving everyone from the teams in this planning effort. Once a unified vision is created, you will be surprised what experiences are created or collaborations are established when you get the entire group of professionals in a room working together on the solution.

This interview was edited for length and clarity.

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Modern Learner’s Expectations and How Co-curricular Activities Shape the Engagement Strategy

Ken Gassiot | Associate Vice President for Student Development, Georgia Southern University

The times we live in are indeed fulfilling and complicated. Isn’t that the understatement of the past year or two, maybe even longer? The environment for immediate convenience is a common standard, communication has become increasingly simple, but still rife with breakdowns. Achievements in science and exploration continue to advance toward what once only seemed possible in a movie. Freedom of expression is an even stronger comfort for many and an environment of rapid change is more common than ever before. Higher education is certainly no different. I remember when registering for a new semester of classes at Texas Tech involved going to a large ballroom in the Student Union with a signed course registration card from my advisor and I stood in line, mostly unphased at having to wait. I hoped I might make a new friend in line or see someone I knew. I was more concerned with getting through quickly so I could get to the themed lunch event in the dining hall.

Today’s students are just as interested in connecting with new friends and registering for classes, but many connect with friends through Snapchat or Instagram and register online from home. Today’s colleges and universities have adapted in many ways to the changing environment to help meet student needs and shape their success. Facilities are more environmentally friendly, programs and activities are planned with changing student needs in mind; policies and governance involves SGA, task forces, commissions, and/or student regents; and technology is consistently being enhanced to facilitate student engagement, course delivery, and communication. The class of 2025 that filled our campuses this past August arrived with expectations of a more diverse student body as well as gaps in socialization due to COVID-19.

There’s no question that COVID-19 created a worldwide absence in routine socialization out of a need to combat an unknown virus and contain its spread. State governance orders, institutional policies and local/municipality regulations created major adjustments in how we socialize with one another. While I understood and respected the guidance and directives, as someone who prefers an inside/in-person dining experience for quick or full-service restaurants, it was absolute torture. I was recently in a NASPA-sponsored conversation series for vice presidents and associate vice presidents to discuss the varied ways COVID-19 was affecting campus operations this Fall. In some cases, campuses are open with relaxed regulations. In others, operational changes have been made to adjust to growing COVID-19 positive cases. For some institutions, the cautious campus operations happening now are as they were the last academic year. Some have adjusted operations due to increases in positive or close contact COVID cases.
A commonality amongst all institutions was the importance and support of vaccination as a means to control the virus spread and ensure student safety. In conversations with colleagues at universities across the country, students came back to campus with the expectation that learning and overall wellness is enhanced and strengthened with in-person classes. Some students have come back with the expectation of continuing the more cautious approaches of masking and distancing. Education is at the heart of what we all do, in and outside of the classroom. Adhering to institutional or system directives is critical, as is being sensitive to the varied needs of students.

Students in our classrooms and residence halls are bringing a wonderful diversity of learning styles, abilities, experiences and cultures. Services and programming are increasingly customized to serve those needs and shape student success. Access is growing as well to ensure students across a spectrum of demographics have the opportunity to achieve a degree. A focus on creating a welcoming space for students with special programs, mentoring, and celebrations for various affinity groups is promoted in new student orientation and throughout the academic year. Students expect these support structures at some level at most institutions. The learning and connection growing from this institutional commitment can be significant for retention.

In a recent survey (n=796) of incoming students (n=8,298) at Georgia Southern University about The Eagle Experience beginning in fall 2021 as a student success transition initiative, 84% of students reported feeling a sense of belonging because of the environment it created. 91% indicated they are aware that Georgia Southern is connecting classroom learning and experiences outside the classroom to aid in their overall success. 91% felt they know how to access resources for a successful start. These are strong indicators that students feel equipped for success and welcomed in the campus community, which sets an expectation for all within the campus community to ensure students continue feeling optimistic about their success.
According to the 2020 Beginning College Survey of Student Engagement of first-year students (n=45,268), strong indicators show that students expect to have interactions with faculty, spend a good amount of time engaging in some type of student activity, and find it important that the institution offers support for their academic needs and provide opportunities to interact socially with others from a different background. The engagement strategy for colleges and universities can vary widely based on the unique needs of its student population. The commonality and ideal destination for all institutions is to simply meet the needs of their student population. Staffing, budget, and local community resources play a large role in institutions successfully meeting this goal.

Understanding who your students are, what they need, what forms of support work best—because you know a one-size-fits-all” approach won’t work—goes a long way in graduating students. The co-curricular environment is critical to this. Students want to feel at home and a sense of belonging. What works for the 28-year-old military-affiliated student who has traveled the world may not fit the 18-year-old first-generation college student from an in-state rural community. Targeted programming designed by multiple voices is a great start and continued best practice to holistically understand the students we serve. Including students at the table is even better. Imagine that. Students gravitate to wellness programs, recreation centers, social groups and organizations, career fairs, step shows and talent competitions, athletic events, cultural celebrations, adventure trips, and gaming nights just to name a few.

Understanding what students want and need is critical to formulating an engagement approach that involves the student body and helps create that sense of belonging students crave. In 2020, we reimagined an element of our engagement approach at Georgia Southern University by changing our online student engagement platform to Presence. We continue to build out a platform that is engaging students in more opportunities than ever have before, involving academic and non-academic campus departments, and have greater access to student attendee data. This approach is helping shape more intentional decision making. I often think about this quote from American poet and civil rights activist Maya Angelou: “People will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.” All of us help students feel a connection to their college experience by being thoughtful about how we meet their expectations and engage their unique and diverse story. To me, that is the best predictive analytics model any of us need to guide and celebrate their success.

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Bringing Intentionality to the Institution to Drive Student Success

The insights of Anton Reece | President, West Kentucky Community and Technical College

Divisions like Continuing Education and Workforce Development have often been left on the periphery of the institution, developing their own programming to meet non-traditional student needs.

But these units are becoming increasingly important to the overall direction of the modern institution.

In the seventeenth episode of Illumination by Modern Campus, Anton Reece, President of West Kentucky Community and Technical College, highlighted the need to serve this growing audience of modern learners.

“There’s a critical need for a well-trained, ongoing workforce,” Reece said.

This means more lifelong learners are looking to the institution for accessible, flexible programming and services that suit their lifestyles.

Reece points out that there’s a three-prong arm to the mission of the institution: excellence in teaching and learning, champions to do success, and workforce and economic development. Creating a well-trained workforce means all three arms need to be successful.

To develop the right programming for the right learners at the right time, you need to be closely aligned with industry. For Reece, that means developing advisory councils and being proactive with hosting business symposiums.

“There’s a direct connection to business and industry,” he said.

As this need for strong partnerships emerges, employers are beginning to change their perceptions around their relationships with local colleges. They want to be tied closer to the institution to ensure that they’re needs are being met and the talent pipeline is filled with well-trained employees.

This collaboration effort is made up of education, awareness and marketing. Employers need to know that a partnership with an institution is working.
“A big thing for stakeholders is return on investment,” Reece said.

Return on investment can also be seen through Student Affair departments. Unfortunately, much like Workforce Development, Student Affairs have often been left on the sidelines.

But they don’t have to be.

“With intentionality, they’re not on the periphery, they’re central to the institution’s operations,” Reece said.

And it begins with recruitment. By leveraging the knowledge and expertise of Student Affairs, the institution can increase its retention rates.

“Having them more directly tied into the teaching and academic support are the ways in which we can ensure engagement is holistic and not scattered,” Reece said.

When a learner knows an institution cares about them, they’re more likely to persist through their educational journey to attain that credential. To adopt this student-centered approach, it requires intentionality around the work happening on the student affairs side.

“You have to be intentional in the ways you assess engagement,” Reece said.

But Student Affairs shouldn’t be solely responsible for this.

“It’s important to have all hands on deck around student engagement and retention,” Reece said.

This means leaders at the top need to model the importance of this intentionality.

“It needs to be frequently heard and reiterated, and accountability measures need to be in place,” Reece said.
To drive this change towards a more student-centric institution, a culture change needs to happen. For Reece, that means leaders need to better articulate expectations to faculty.

"The expectation is defining—or redefining—what success looks like at your college for students," he said.

This means having the right systems in place for seamless operations and leveraging the expertise of all departments.

"The divide between academic and student affairs can seem like it continues to drift apart," Reece said, "We need to come at it as equals and focus on why we're here and what we do."
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Powered by Omni CMS, DIGARC, Presence and Destiny One, the Modern Campus modern learner engagement platform enables innovative institutions to create a “learner to earner” lifecycle that engages modern learners for life.

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