



Student Affairs, Boards, and Rebuilding the

Public Trust

BY KEVIN KRUGER

HIGHER EDUCATION PUNDITS OFTEN PRODUCE LISTS OF the top 10 potentially tricky topics and issues they believe campus leaders, especially board members, should have on their radar screens in the coming academic year. Those lists will often include sexual assault, alcohol and other drug-abuse prevention, violence prevention, student retention, mental-health concerns—the list could go on and on. What board members should recognize about such a litany is that those responsibilities usually fall to student affairs professionals.



TAKEAWAYS

- 1** Student affairs is moving the needle in many important areas where colleges and universities must make progress in order to retain—and, in some cases, regain—the public trust.
- 2** Student affairs today encompasses student learning and success; campus culture; health, wellness, and safety; career development; compliance and regulatory responsibilities; and leadership development.
- 3** Robust and comprehensive student services and student affairs programs are central to the universal mission of student success, retention, and graduation, and boards must engage with and support the work of student affairs officers.

From my vantage point as head of the international association of student affairs administrators, including student affairs so prominently in those lists makes sense and is appropriate. Our areas of expertise are most often where the rubber meets the road with regard to student engagement and where institutions receive the most negative press. But, I also believe it is healthy to broaden the discussion of student affairs beyond immediate, pressing issues and potential vulnerabilities to include strengths and opportunities that should be top-of-mind for board members.

My association, NASPA—Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education, recently released a survey of more than 860 chief student affairs officers and found that 12 percent of their time is spent responding to crises, which, conversely, means 88 percent of their

time is spent on *something other than a crisis*. That is important to note, because I believe that the vast majority of boards tend to ask questions of and hear presentations from their chief student affairs officer when the institution is facing a crisis.

I encourage board members to expand their awareness of our field and the experience and perspective that their student affairs administrators bring. With a portfolio that includes student learning and success; campus culture; health, wellness, and safety; career development; compliance and regulatory responsibilities; and leadership development, the chief student affairs officer should be a vital resource as boards think through and formalize the short-term and long-term vision and goals of the institution.

The Higher Education and Student Affairs Landscape

The past decade has ushered in an era of skepticism about the value and purpose of academe. Gone are the days in which

say higher education institutions need to change to better serve the needs of today's students. At this point, only about half (49 percent) of U.S. adults see evidence that such change is actually happening."

While that may sound startling, the survey has a silver lining: 58 percent of those aged 18–34 "see evidence that higher education institutions are changing to better meet the needs of today's students." That means many college-aged students are seeing necessary change occur and, based on the wording of the question, are seeing that change within student affairs offerings. We have an opportunity to transition those students and graduates into evangelists for the work we do across campuses and convince their parents, grandparents, and potentially their employers (those aged 50 to 64 and those older than 64) of our intentions. Currently, just 42 percent of participants in those two demographics see evidence of our efforts at transformation.

Our graduates are also providing us with

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colleges and universities were viewed as homes for sages and havens for students; boards and administrators face new challenges in the form of calls for greater transparency both on their campuses and from their various publics. The critiques of higher education aren't going to go away, but student affairs is moving the needle in many important areas where colleges and universities must make progress in order to retain—or in some cases, regain—public trust.

For example, our society is increasingly questioning the value of higher education and outcomes for our graduates. Gallup survey results released in April of this year showed that Americans still value college degrees, with "more than nine in 10 (94 percent) saying a postsecondary degree or credential is at least somewhat important and 70 percent saying it is very important." Those results were tempered with the findings that "most—89 percent—

some stark responses to questions related to their satisfaction in their chosen careers and how well we prepare them for employment. A Pew Research Center report issued earlier this year on "The Rising Cost of Not Going to College" stated that 83 percent of those with bachelor's degrees believe they have seen a return on what they and their family paid for their degree, yet "half of all college graduates say gaining more work experience while they were undergraduates would have helped their chances to get the job they wanted."

Further, that experience is not enough. The 2014 Gallup-Purdue Index Report found, "if graduates had an internship or job in college where they were able to apply what they were learning in the classroom, were actively involved in extracurricular activities and organizations, and worked on projects that took a semester or more to complete, their odds of being engaged at work doubled."



But what should we do with all this data? Brandon Busteded, executive director of Gallup Education, puts it into perspective for board members. “We have found that employee ‘satisfaction’ tells us nothing about overall performance in a job,” Busteded said. “What matters is whether you are emotionally engaged in your work. Gallup studies show a clear linkage between being an emotionally engaged student during college and being engaged in work later—and the factors that are most important to long-term career and life success are fundamentally ‘student affairs’ in nature. Students who feel their professors cared about them as a person, had a professor who made them excited about learning, had a mentor during their time in college, and were extremely involved in extracurricular activities are many times more likely to be engaged in their work and thriving later in life.”

It’s one thing to have these experiences, but many students aren’t sure how to present them in a way that may give them a leg up in the hiring process, and most employers aren’t sure how to value them. Eric Reich, president and co-founder of Campus Labs, is currently partnering with institutions of higher education to develop a practical companion to the traditional transcript. As Reich explains, “Like a traditional transcript, a co-curricular transcript archives the college experience, but instead of course-based grades, it aggregates a student’s participation, achievements, and the resultant outcomes and skills they develop.” These transcripts allow graduates to showcase their complete college experience and reflect their personal and emotional growth, not just academic achievements.

Concurrently, presidents and chancellors are being asked to produce graduates with the relevant skills that employers say they are looking for in their new hires. One such skill set was developed by the Business-Higher Education Forum and outlined “21st-century skills” expected from college graduates. This list included critical thinking, analytical reasoning, and ability to work in multicultural teams. Those skills may get their academic grounding in the classroom, but they are

all attributes that chief student affairs officers are tasked with developing in our students through out-of-classroom experiences.

We are also hearing calls from the business community to help with the rocky transitions some of our alumni make into the real world once they land their dream jobs. No campus professional is better positioned to help students plan for the next stage of their lives and educate the public on what successful matriculation into life after college looks like than the chief student affairs officer. Student affairs experts are tasked with adapting academic accomplishments into practical skills through offerings like financial literacy and career-development programming. Those programs take into account the experiences students bring with them to college, accumulate while they are there, and aspire to when they leave.

To dig deeper into the work that student affairs professionals are undertaking to create “emotionally engaged” students and alumni, boards should ask for presentations on how their institution’s chief student affairs officer and his or her team are working to:

- Deliver practical, real-life experiences to students to grow and refine their leadership skills.
- Create awareness of new ideas and experiences so that students graduate with interpersonal and intercultural skills.
- Provide access to where student learning occurs best—across a campus and when connecting classroom and co-curricular experiences.

Too often presentations to the board regarding student outcomes are restricted to the academic side of the house. Boards should encourage their chief student affairs officer to share his or her companion metrics and examples of student engagement and success that he or she is responsible for leading. Student affairs experts are becoming quite sophisticated in data collection and the ways in which they, too, can describe the value they bring to the campus and give concrete examples of how they contribute to the institution’s strategic plan. They are more than just party planners and shoulders for students

to cry on. Boards should ask to hear how they are meeting the complex social, emotional, and, in conjunction with the faculty, academic needs of today’s students.

Avoiding Student Affairs Crises

It’s also important for boards to think through the fact that 12 percent of student affairs officers’ time is focused on dealing with crises, most often related to the health and safety of students in their care. Below is a list of presentations that boards should request, and questions they should ask, of their administrators—specifically their chief student affairs officer—to ensure they are up-to-date on compliance and aligned with best practices from across the industry:

- Does our institution understand, and has it implemented, the most recent guidance from the U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Civil Rights on Title IX and the recently reauthorized Violence Against Women Act? How are leaders at our college or university learning from the experiences of our peers in these key areas?
- Has the campus developed crisis protocols should something go wrong, and have those protocols been tested? Can we address the issues we most fear, like campus shootings, and those we are statistically most likely to face, including mental-health issues and acts of racial, ethnic, and sexual violence?
- Is the institution working to employ a range of harm-reduction approaches, including peer education, to address issues like binge drinking, suicide, and illicit and prescription drug use/abuse?
- Is the institution creating a campus culture that is inclusive and tolerant of the views of others? And what responsibilities does it have to foster the safe and respectful airing of differences of opinion?
- How are student affairs measures for academic and social performance being included in the institution’s metrics for identifying and assisting students most at risk of dropping out or needing additional services? Student affairs should be the backbone of retention efforts for at-risk students.

The Work of the Student Affairs Committee

The title and work of the student affairs committee is often linked with academic affairs as well as other areas such as research, diversity, workforce development, athletics, technology, and campus safety. Regardless of committee name, the committee's work is to think of student interests with each issue discussed, fee approved, survey analyzed, capital project considered, curriculum reviewed, master plan presented, and policy set.

Placing a priority on students requires an understanding among student affairs committee members of the specific student needs and characteristics at a particular institution, along with its organization, actions, and responses to those students. A place to begin would be student demographics such as age, gender, race, geographic origin, family educational history, socioeconomic status, and academic preparation prior to entering

college. It is useful to understand how these demographics have changed at the institution over the years. What are projections for the future? Even more important are rates of persistence (retention) from year to year and the percentage of students who graduate in four to six years.

Many institutions set specific measures to inform themselves and the board about performance. Such metrics play an important role in a board's ability to assess and demonstrate institutional success toward achieving goals. Student affairs

committees will find it useful to understand the goals and metrics that will be used to gauge progress on retention and graduation rates, the number of veterans or low-income students enrolled and graduat-

ing, and standardized test scores for the entering freshmen class. All of these relate to educational quality. Reviewing the predetermined metrics on a regular basis provides an opportunity to discuss strategy with administrators and fellow board members. Such factors begin to explain the necessity of particular programs and services as well as the resource allocation needed to help students succeed.

Committee members should also familiarize themselves with their institution's official mission statement and how it is supported

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by the student affairs division's strategic plan and key performance indicators. Planning from a strategic perspective ensures the alignment of resource allocation, decision making, policy development, and

staffing with the goals set forth to advance the mission. Knowing where the student affairs organization intends to be in the future will allow committee members to assist administrators in achieving that end. The committee will very likely be part of approving some decisions that move things in the chosen direction.

The programs and services that make up a student affairs division will vary with each institution. The student affairs committee is charged with overseeing policies and practices that cover areas within the institution that impact student life. Typically, those will include student activities, Greek life, residence halls, the student union, physical health and wellness, mental-health counseling, campus safety, spiritual life, career and workforce development, student conduct, new-student orientation, recruitment, student government, veterans affairs, child

care, disability services, admissions and records, intramural sports and recreation, financial aid, cultural diversity, and special programs for student cohorts such as low-income and first-generation students.

The student affairs committee should hold those charged with administering all student affairs programs, including intercollegiate athletics, accountable to high standards. In doing so, the committee and board are following the same oversight role they perform regarding fiscal integrity and educational quality.

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—excerpted from The Student Affairs Committee, by Shannon Ellis (AGB Press, 2012)

Boards must move from worrying, without context, about lists like the one above to focusing instead on the ways in which their campuses are addressing these critically important issues with data and best practices. There isn't a one-size-fits-all approach for student affairs, and each board should work with its institution's chief student affairs officer to winnow its college's or university's list to a manageable to-do list that reflects the

specific needs of its students.

For example, Frank R. Lamas, vice president for student affairs at California State University at Fresno, has shared that he is instituting a number of wellness programs and expanding the university's care teams to address mental-health needs among the student body. At a previous institution, he put in place a relationship-violence prevention program. While the needs of each campus are different

because of variations in mission, populations served, and institutional type, the chief student affairs officer will have the pulse of his or her campus and can provide insights.

Additional Considerations for Board Members

Finally, I am increasingly recommending that boards consult their chief student affairs officer in two other areas. First,

board members are tasked, in part, with maintaining the image and reputation of the institution and fostering goodwill in the community. Chief student affairs officers are distinctly qualified to help their boards do so, since such a large portion of their portfolio includes fostering and maintaining positive town-gown relations. If a board isn't employing student affairs officials in building community support, then it isn't engaging those on the campus who have the strongest relationships in the broader community.

Colleges and universities with successful civic-engagement efforts have inextricably linked community service to the core mission of the institution. For example, service learning can be promoted as a means of enabling students to develop leadership skills at institutions where professional preparation is a priority, and as an opportunity to foster a commitment to social justice at faith-based institutions.

Yet, student affairs professionals don't just oversee volunteer and community opportunities across the campus. They also play a pivotal role in advancing the

democracy through the preparation of citizens. While that responsibility is shared among faculty members, administrators, policy makers, and community leaders, student affairs leadership is crucial to institutionalizing civic learning and democratic engagement.

Second, campuses are continuing to expand offerings to include online and digital instruction. The anecdotes of my peers and the data being collected nationally show that student affairs professionals are successfully connecting with online students and that such students welcome that outreach.

Many of our member institutions' online programs grew organically from traditional academic units' responses to what their students wanted or as experiments from institutions willing to innovate. Today, those programs are teaching "traditional" students—technology natives who expect an elegant interface and self-service resources. Traditional residential students are increasingly incorporating online and hybrid classes into their programs. The online environment is both familiar and comfortable to them, and they too appreciate the flexibility online education allows them—including the

career-related programs are but a few examples of ways in which many campuses are retooling traditional student services to meet the needs of online learners. Such student service supports are crucial to the degree progress and persistence of this new and emerging student demographic.

Chief student affairs officers oversee the learning opportunities that complement, support, and enhance the classroom environment. Those opportunities play a vital role in retaining students and providing them with the opportunities and skills that ultimately make them employable and satisfied alumni.

In short, based on our focus areas and how we fit into the success of an institution, student affairs deserves boards' time and attention—and not just when bad news arises—because it is an integral part of the campus experience. As Lamas, of California State University at Fresno, has stated, "It's our responsibility to meet the needs of all of our students especially as their needs change. We will adapt our profession as we always have, because, after all, we're in it for the students."

Robust and comprehensive student services and student affairs programs will continue to be central to the universal

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ability to incorporate internships, study abroad, and undergraduate research opportunities without slowing academic progress.

As one vice president of online learning at a large research institution noted in a NASPA survey, "[Our students are] just one click away from going somewhere else; they aren't in town with a lease, so we need to be very responsive." And, for that reason, we must pay attention to their wants and needs. The chief student affairs officer needs board support and sufficient resources to build relationships with such students. Online orientation programming, coaching services that provide one-on-one support, one-stop resources for online learning portals, and

mission of student success, retention, and graduation. Boards can significantly help those of us in student affairs to rebuild public trust and meet our student-focused goals by engaging with and supporting our vitally important work. ■

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T'SHIP LINKS: Arthur Levine and Diane R. Dean, "5 Ways Today's Students Are Radically Changing Our Colleges." November/December 2013. George D. Kuh, "Four Ways Boards Can Help Students Succeed." November/December 2011.

OTHER RESOURCE: Shannon Ellis, *The Student Affairs Committee* (AGB Press, 2011).

