Myron L. Pope, Ed. D.
Leadership Philosophy for Student Affairs

Higher education has always been and continues to be a door of opportunity for those who are able to successfully navigate and complete it as college graduates. Recently, the opportunities have been expanded for a vast array of individuals from varying backgrounds. This access has allowed these students to be able to achieve an aspect of the American Dream that has been unattainable for people from their respective backgrounds in prior generations. However, this expanded access has not come with equal success. Disparities in learning permeate higher education in this country. Students from less prepared and less represented socioeconomic backgrounds consistently are challenged in their ability to realize fully the benefits of a college degree.

Additionally, the expectations by society on higher education have heightened over the past few decades as the value of higher education is questioned at levels never seen before. Perceptions of the learning experience and applicable skills attained during collegiate matriculation are consistently negative. Higher education must endeavor to embrace these differences, and prepare the students who graduate to be engaged, lifelong learners and effective citizens. The Association of American Colleges & Universities (AAC&U) (2002) stated that the goals of higher education learning should prepare students to be “intentional learners who can adapt to new environments, integrate knowledge from difference sources and continue learning throughout their lives” (p. xi). They further state that this type of learning is transformative. Students who are educated in this fashion are able to be lifelong learners who are leaders in any
environment that they encounter. This transformative learning cannot take place in the classroom alone. A truly transformative education subjects students to opportunities for intentional learning through the formal academic curriculum, student life, collaborative co-curricular programming, community-based, and global experiences. Divisions of Student Affairs (DSA) play a critical role in providing students with learning and measurable student learning outcomes that complement the learning that takes place inside of the classroom. It is critical that the personnel in these DSA understand and embrace this reality, while also ensuring that the conditions exist to ensure that development, implementation, and assessment of these experiences takes place.

Leadership of Student Affairs is important to the division in achieving its goals. The goals of the division are very clear in that we should focus on student learning/development and success. However, without effective leadership and a clear understanding of how to achieve these goals, institutions will be left with a void in the complementary student learning and development paradigm. Please allow me to articulate to you my philosophy of leadership for Student Affairs through the presentation of several characteristics that I believe to be critical in establishing such a successful DSA.

Creating a collaborative environment in a DSA is important in achieving the goals of student learning and success mentioned previously. Collaboration is important in the work of student affairs’ professionals. This collaboration must take place across departments, for instance collaboration between wellness, counseling, and student health to promote student health. This collaboration must take place across divisions also in efforts such as work with Academic Affairs to ensure that co-curricular learning
opportunities are developed and assessed. Additionally, it is important that collaboration take place outside of the institution also. To achieve the learning goals of students, the DSA must collaborate with business, industry, and nonprofits to expand on career exploration/internships, service learning opportunities, and global and cultural experiences that will help students in their development. This collaborative mindset starts with the Vice President of Student Affairs. The individual in this role should be at the forefront of developing, cultivating, and expanding relationships with internal and external constituents to ensure that these goals are achieved. Likewise, it is imperative that this leader permits members of the DSA to be collaborative. Student affairs’ professionals understand the nature of their work, and they understand the needs of students from each of their respective areas. Allowing them to engage with constituents internal and external to the institution is critical to being a truly collaborative organization. Outreach is essential to the success of a DSA and its goals.

A commitment to excellence is a second characteristic that should be embraced in a successful leadership philosophy for a DSA. An organization that is stagnant quickly becomes irrelevant. Innovation and creativity should be at the center of the work that is performed to shape a dynamic learning environment for students. Allowing personnel in the DSA to engage in activities and learning opportunities to witness best practices is critical, while rewarding those who are able to design innovative practices, programs, and services to enhance the learning environment. A focus on continuous quality improvement in their work should be the norm, and it should be at the forefront of the DSA strategic and operational plans. Excellence should be the goal, and the leadership should exemplify and articulate this in their work also. As we are in a
dynamic and ever changing environment within and outside of higher education, we
must be nimble in responding to and in many cases, getting ahead of the proverbial
curve of change. That comes through a commitment to the leadership promoting a
culture of excellence.

Advocacy of students is a third characteristic that I believe is important in student
affairs’ leadership. The very nature of the work of student affairs necessitates the focus
of the DSA on being advocates of students. The Vice President of Student Affairs is
often referred to as the Chief/Senior Student Affairs’ Officer. Therefore, the DSA must
understand, embrace, and advocate for students in every aspect of their campus
experience. From their initial arrival through the graduation, DSA provide nurturing and
developmental learning experiences that help students to grow as they matriculate
through college. Having a true sense of national trends, the demographics of your
current students, and certainly environmental (national, regional, local, financial, etc.)
concerns is important. Engagement in professional development and education is
important for professionals in DSA so that they are well informed of the critical issues
that impact student success. By understanding and developing individual and collective
strategies for helping them to cope with academic, financial, personal, and social
problems, the DSA can be a true advocate for students. Further, it is important that
DSA personnel not only solve problems for students, but empower them to find
solutions for their problems. Engaging them in a true culture of shared governance is a
major aspect of this process, as students need to be encouraged and supported in
creating their environment. Finally, as mentioned previously, this work in many ways is
done in collaboration with a variety of partners with DSA personnel providing the
appropriate best practices and theoretical/practical understandings of student development to the conversation to ensure that successful advocacy is achieved.

A commitment to diversity and inclusion is another characteristic that is important in a viable philosophy of student affairs’ leadership. Student demographics are changing rapidly, even here in Oklahoma. Institutions of higher education that neglect this reality will be challenged in recruiting and retaining students in the future. Creating environments that acknowledge, embrace, and celebrate diversity and inclusion are critical. Educating the DSA personnel and other campus constituents of these changes is critical in achieving this goal. Also, working with the office of human resources to ensure that policies are in place to do broad outreach to diverse candidates is critical in ensuring the DSA applicant pool has individuals who represent the students who are matriculating at the institution. Institutions of higher education must be purveyors of educational opportunity and equity, and DSA contribute significantly in these institutions creating these environments.

A commitment to resource acquisition is important to DSA. Finding efficiencies and having a clear focus on strategic direction should be a priority in public higher education considering our current circumstances. We need to think about how our efforts contribute to the achievement of our educational goals at all times, and eliminate those things that do not necessarily contribute to these goals. Aligning the DSA efforts with institutional goals is important also to ensure that there is no duplication and excess in operations. However, when these efficiencies have been achieved and reallocated, additional resources may be needed. Leadership in the DSA must be able to share stories and data to ensure that new resources are acquired to expand the work
that is critical to the strategic goals of the institution. The DSA leadership must be committed to effectively communicating the story of the division to all constituents so that they understand the status of the area and are willing to support it. This storytelling includes advocacy during the budget development process on campus as the leadership articulates what is going on in the DSA, as well as grantsmanship, fundraising and friend-raising through external relationships.

Finally, servant leadership should be a characteristic of a successful DSA. A commitment to serving others first is critical in the work of student affairs’ leaders. Servant leadership will require that DSA leadership be committed to listening, consensus building, ethical decision making, building and maintaining community. Serving students, serving the campus, and serving a broader base of constituents is important. The VPSA should model this behavior and work to support direct reports and others in this manner. Setting the expectation with members of the DSA, and constantly recruiting individuals who fit with this mindset when opportunities are available are important in solidifying this type of culture. A constant focus on making the organization a better place requires an ethos of uncompromising commitment to serving others, collaborating, sharing of information, extending empathy, and focusing on respectful conflict resolution when it arises.

Education is the great equalizer. It provides individuals with an opportunity to access a higher quality of life for themselves and their families upon the completion of their college degree. Those who are able to successfully achieve it are better citizens and leaders, and they contribute significantly to their communities. However, the higher educational learning experience must be intentional and meaningful to ensure that the
graduates achieve these developmental and learning milestones. We must create environments that are conducive to students to learn/develop both inside and out of the classroom, and this learning experience must be collaboratively developed, maintained, and assessed. The creation of such environments from the DSA perspective begins with a leader whose principles are aligned with the ones that I have mentioned here. I hope that I will be able to further articulate my student affairs' leadership philosophy with you.