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Statement of Student Affairs Leadership Philosophy

Since my first job after completing my Master’s degree, I have remained convinced Student Affairs is the perfect profession for me. However, it was not always like that. When I first arrived to college as a first generation student, I had no idea what I was doing there or how to be successful. All I knew was my parents had worked hard and saved their money for me to go with the expectation that I was to be the first one in my family to graduate with a four-year degree. Other than that knowledge, I was completely rudderless and without focus.

Not surprisingly, by the end of my first year, I ended up with an abysmal grade point average and was placed on academic probation. If my act did not change, I was going to fail college. That next fall, having lunch in the college union, I saw a flier on the wall asking a simple question—“Do You Want To Bring Bands To Campus?” The poster was for the Student Center Board, a Student Affairs co-curricular program, and it had a little white card to fill out and deliver to the Student Life office.

I filled out the card, interviewed, and accepted a position on the Student Center Board and began my life in Student Affairs. The first program I was responsible for was a Beach Party in January and it had seven people in attendance. The beach balls outnumbered attendees two-to-one. Despite this dismal beginning, something meaningful occurred as I got more involved with the programming board. I started to feel like I was a part of something larger than myself. I was feeling more connected to my university—it was a place where I wanted to be. I belonged.

This involvement provided me the opportunity for my first campus leadership position. However, to serve as board chairperson I needed to improve academically. With this motivating factor, I went to classes, studied harder, paid attention to what the faculty was trying to share with me, and became truly engaged as a member of a community of scholars. That initial involvement with the college union, a Student Affairs unit, spurred me on to improve academically, graduate, achieve a master’s degree, enjoy a rewarding career in a field that I loved, work with people I greatly admired and were inspired by, and complete my doctorate in Educational Leadership.

I share this story to highlight Student Affairs’ potential impact in students’ lives. Not only did being involved in a Student Affairs program help me achieve academically, it provided a learning laboratory for building leadership skills that benefitted me in many other areas of life. The skills gained from serving as a student leader fostered a deeper understanding of leadership within me. I believe my higher education journey would have ended far too abruptly had it not been for filling out that little white card in the college union and from the support I received from Student Affairs staff mentoring me.

My Student Affairs leadership philosophy has developed from serving for the past twenty-three years on three very different college campuses and in a variety of progressively responsible leadership positions. The Vice President position complements the strengths I bring to an organization. I am continually trying to see what is coming over the horizon and generate divisional conversation about what our preferred future could be—where it is that we want to go. I am strategic in approach and consistently asking and encouraging others to ask “what if” and evaluating potential scenarios until we land on the best way forward. With limited resources, being strategic is required for Student Affairs to be successful in serving student needs. Additionally, the Vice President position calls for a leader who can observe and draw out the strengths in others and build a strong sense of team. Throughout my professional life, I have taken an individualistic approach to the staff and students I have worked alongside—recognizing each of us has unique talents and when placed together in the right team environment we can create powerful results.
In reflecting upon my leadership approach, three distinct themes emerge:

**Community Builder**

Having led such Student Affairs functional areas as Student Engagement, College Unions, Campus Recreation, Residence Life, Dining Services, Orientation, Student Conduct, Counseling Center, Disability Services, and serving as Dean of Students, I have consistently been engaged in building a sense of campus community. Though each of these areas build community in different ways, whether it be through facilities, programs, services, or initiatives offered, all have at their core the desire to bring people together for the betterment of the institution and to help foster student success.

**Collaborative and Inclusive Approach to Leadership**

Throughout my career, I have tried to break down barriers by intentionally forming relationships with others and by making sure my leadership reflects an inclusive and participatory approach. A motto I have tried to live by is “to seek first to understand, then to be understood.” In my professional capacities, I have made sure students are deeply involved with decisions affecting them, whether it be a renovation project, a policy change, or a service provided. I have been intentional in ensuring staff are active participants in determining the strategic direction of the organization and that they have a voice regarding change within it. I believe more voices involved in decision-making makes for better decisions. However, I am not one to shy away from making difficult decisions, though when doing so I do my best to ensure transparency.

**Developmental Approach to Students and Staff**

I am interested in helping individual students develop and be successful and working with others in reducing barriers to student success. This commitment to development also goes for the staff I supervise. As Student Affairs professionals, we need to continually pay attention to our own development and continually sharpen our skills through such means as professional association involvement, attending campus staff development and training sessions, and seeking out opportunities that challenge our comfort zones and help us become better practitioners. I have role modeled this commitment by actively volunteering for such student affairs professional associations as NASPA and the Association of College Unions International (including serving as its President).

As Vice President, my leadership will reflect the following imperatives:

**Effectively demonstrate how Student Affairs contributes to student learning, supports the academic mission and furthers the university’s long-range plan.**

We in Student Affairs need to be knowledgeable about the institution’s intended educational outcomes and ensure the co-curricular programs we offer are supporting those goals. We need to be able to demonstrate how Student Affairs is assisting with the university’s efforts to produce graduates that write, speak, and think critically, have the skills to be successful in diverse and global environment, and are engaged community members.

**Work to ensure an inclusive and welcoming environment.**

Increasing student and staff diversity adds richness to the educational experience for all campus community members. Students expect to collaborate with and learn from those different from themselves and employers expect the same. However, institutional efforts must go beyond simply increasing the number of diverse students, faculty, and staff. We must pay close attention to ensuring all campus community members feel included and valued. Additionally, we must be mindful that for many students, access to higher education continues to be a tremendous barrier. Student Affairs needs to do its part in being good stewards of university resources in an effort to help keep costs attainable for students.
Maintain a vigilant commitment to student recruitment, retention, persistence, and completion through all our programs and services.

There is and will continue to be a national and statewide call for higher education to demonstrate its value. This expectation will only increase and student success measures will continue to play an expanding role in institutional funding. If our purpose in Student Affairs is to attract, enroll, retain, develop, support, and serve students and produce future alumni who contribute to the betterment of their community and the larger world, then it is imperative for us to focus our efforts with laser-like precision on recruiting, retaining, and graduating. It cannot just be the responsibility of academic affairs or enrollment services staff to be paying attention to these core functions. It has to be all of us reminding ourselves that we all play an important role and focusing our units with those ends in mind.

Collaboratively identify, anticipate, meet and exceed student needs (with “student” in the most comprehensive sense—distance, on-line, commuter, transfer, graduate, traditional, non-traditional, residential, etc.).

Student Affairs has not cornered the market on knowing and meeting student needs. There is much to learn from colleagues in academic affairs, administrative affairs, community members, and other areas of the university. However, Student Affairs must continually ensure it has its finger on the pulse of not only what our current students want and expect from their university, but also what our future students will require. This continuous needs assessment must be broad in focus, encompassing intellectual, social and vocational needs, physical, safety and mental health concerns and beyond. As a division, we need ask ourselves continually, how can we best serve students? It is not enough to be satisfied with what we currently are doing, we need to be scanning the horizon for what is ahead and making sure we are poised for future change.

Educate the “whole” student.

This imperative has been a hallmark of Student Affairs since the profession’s beginnings. Not only do we need to support our students’ academic efforts, we need to engage with their personal, social, physical, and spiritual development. Through our programs and services, we must look for ways to help students learn to thrive both independently and interdependently.

Build institutional affinity and foster a vibrant student life.

Student Affairs helps create and inform what students think about when they think about the university. From the services and amenities provided to the programs offered, we play an important role in helping form the university’s “brand.” We help positively shape future alumni impressions of their alma mater. One of the ways we do this is by making sure we are service-focused and student-centered. Another way is by working with students to create a vibrant student life that affirms selecting their university was one of the best decisions they made.

Leading a Student Affairs division is a tremendous opportunity to make a positive difference in the lives of students and the campus community. When I reflect upon how my own life might have been drastically altered had I not filled out that little white card in the college union, I am reminded of the precious gift we have been given as higher education professionals. We are engaged in truly noble and meaningful work.