My Personal Philosophy of Student Affairs

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When viewed in the context of an entire university, student affairs departments are really the lifeblood of what shapes a college student’s experience. I firmly believe that a student gains more from college outside of the classroom than he/she does within it. The self-growth that occurs through extracurricular activities and other interactions has to be cultivated. Student affairs professionals are the cultivators.

It takes a certain kind of person to enter into the profession of student affairs. To truly embrace the mission of an institution of higher education, which often focuses on academics and learning, and initiate into that mission students’ personal growth is a challenge. Student affairs professionals often must fight to keep the programs they have, and work harder to justify expenses when compared to departments that are more academic in nature. Those working in the field need to believe in what they do in order to have the passion to keep fighting for it. I believe I have that passion.

I chose to enter into student affairs because I have a passion to see students succeed. This started very early for me during my undergraduate years. As a sophomore, I was a peer mentor, assisting first-year students with their transition to college living. By my junior year, I was leading the program because the advisors saw how much I wanted to be involved in helping students. My senior year I practically lived in the advising office, between running the peer mentor program, giving tours and meeting with prospective students and their families, and assisting where I could with First-Year Testing, Counseling and Placement (FYTCAP) activities.

I also climbed the ranks of a professional student organization. Starting as a general member, becoming secretary, and eventually being elected president, I wanted to assist others to grow professionally. This leadership position allowed me to make the organization more
beneficial for its membership and provide them with skills that would help them succeed in their
chosen careers. It was after these experiences that I realized I needed to enter into a field working
with students.

Student affairs as a profession, allows me the opportunity to feel like I am making a
difference in the life of a student. As I mentioned earlier, students’ growth occurs in many arenas
during college. To know that I assisted a student to grow in a way that can impact the rest of
his/her life is rewarding to me. Whether that be picking the right college, the right major,
choosing activities to participate in, or becoming an independent adult, the choices a student
makes during college are crucial to their development.

As I enter into this field, there is one main guiding principle that I hold strong to:
empower students. I believe this is the most beneficial thing one can do for students at this
juncture in their lives. Many students come to college, and are experiencing independence for the
first time. For some, it is a scary experience. For others, they take advantage of the independence
and go to extremes. Many others, struggle to find the happy medium. I see student affairs
professionals as instrumental in guiding them toward the middle ground, and this can be
achieved through empowerment.

Students must be given the opportunity to start making decisions for themselves. I often
draw the analogy of college being a confusing place for students, almost like being lost in a
forest. They need a path to follow, but first they must find the path. I see myself as the arrow that
points them in the direction they need to go. Not as the person who will hold their hand to lead
them through, choosing which way to go at each fork in the road; but rather as the signs along
the way that they can choose to follow if they desire to do so. College becomes their personal
journey, making their own choices. Understanding that certain standards must be followed,
students should be given the flexibility to explore on their own, knowing there is support for them whichever path they choose.

To effectively empower students, one must also maintain an unconditional positive regard. Though this concept is born out of counseling theory, I feel it applies very well when working with students. Given that many students are experiencing independence for the first time when they come to college, they will often be confused when faced with choices. As a student affairs professional, it is important to support the students, regardless of the choices they make. Some students may be struggling with their choice of major and want to change to a program they have a strong passion for, but it may be in complete opposition to what their parents wish for them. For some students, this may be the first time they ever disagree with their parents on an issue. My role in this situation would be to work with the student to make the decision that is best for him/her. Whether that be opposing the parents or not is not important. What is important is showing the student that regardless of the decision he/she makes, someone will be there to support the choice.

While adhering to these principles, I would define my role as a student affairs professional as a mentor. A mentor can encompass many different roles when dealing with students and I see myself taking on each depending on the situation. A mentor can be an educator, a resource, an adviser, a friend, or a role model. In the realm of academic advising, I can envision instances where each of these would be applicable.

- It is the duty of an adviser to educate students on the requirements needed to graduate with a certain major. This may come in the form of workshops, orientation sessions, or one-on-one counseling.
• Providing resources to students is a daily function of academic advisers. In conjunction with being an educator, advisers often have the answers that a student needs. Being able to tell students where to go for assistance gives them the power to act, but provides them with the means to do so on their own.

• An adviser works as such when asked what courses to take to fulfill requirements. Recommending courses to a student versus telling a student what to take embraces the concept of empowerment, while remaining in the advising role.

• Advisers become friends when they can talk to the student as another human being. Staff and faculty often draw a line between the professional they are and the student that enters their office. In student affairs, this line can afford to be blurred some. Showing students that staff are people too can help to build rapport and gain trust, allowing the student the opportunity to open up with personal concerns if need be.

• And finally, an adviser is a role model. Sharing personal experiences of their own undergraduate careers, advisers can demonstrate that it is possible to graduate when all else seems lost. They can give hope and inspire students. And they can set positive examples when it comes to meeting deadlines and following through on commitments.

Combined, the above roles create a professional whom students can feel comfortable with and seek out for support; a person whom they can look up to and be honest with; a mentor.

As a mentor, it is important to keep the students first in all I do. Oftentimes, it is easy to lose sight of why one is in student affairs. The pressure of deadlines, budget restrictions, work to be done, and not enough time to complete it all, can overwhelm the desire to serve students. Without students, there would be no colleges and universities. Without anyone to teach and help
As I enter into the professional world, I will try to maintain my view of a student-centered university. Though it may be difficult at times, I will work hard to acknowledge my students for the contributions they give. Small tokens of appreciation, even if just a card to say thank you, can go a long way in supporting a student and his/her ideas. I will strive to work with my students, not for them, creating a partnership between the institution and the student body. I will take the time to get to know my students. Providing students with a sense of caring will show them that they are not just a number, no matter how large the institution. And I will seek out diverse student groups so as to make sure everyone’s concerns are being addressed.

If I can fulfill my goals listed above, I feel that I will be a positive mentor for my students, and reflect a positive image of a student affairs professional. And to maintain my positive image, I will do whatever it takes to sustain my passion for serving students and helping them to succeed throughout my career.