

Andrews University
Department of Higher Education Administration

Reflection Paper

A final course project
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By

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Introduction

Throughout the course of the semester, the topics covered in this course have been instrumental in presenting various aspects of Christian leadership based on ethical principals and standards founded in a Christ-centered approach. We explored the various facets of student development including their spiritual, mental, physical, social, and emotional dimensions. More specifically, we explored the role of student affairs professionals in seeing this great work to fruition, while acquiring tools to overcome challenges that are inevitable when working within higher education. Amongst these tools, we accomplished one of the main goals of the course- to develop an awareness that serves as a foundation for professional practice. This awareness incorporates knowledge of the self, the college student population, the college environmental settings, the student personnel, and the competencies and skills of the profession.

Knowledge of the Self

At the core of understanding ourselves lies the most important step in developing the awareness that serves as our foundation. Finding our meaning and purpose is fundamental to uncovering what motivates us to perform at our highest potential, as well as zest for learning. As God-fearing individuals, we have a responsibility to God first. We must develop a relationship with Christ in which we are open to His guidance and direction. Ultimately, we must understand that we are held to a different standard than those who have no fear of the Lord. That standard is God's unique calling for us to be different- obedient to Him and exemplifying excellence in all we do. God expects nothing but our best efforts as we interact with both employees and students, ensuring we represent Him well in all we set forth to accomplish.

In order to successfully achieve excellence, we must understand where our strengths lie, as well as areas in need of improvement. In identifying our strengths, we can hone in on the skills we know will make us a great asset and invaluable resource to the teams we support. Conversely, understanding our limitations will make us rely on Jesus and keep us humble as we continuously aim to better ourselves. At the core of all of our efforts, we should always strive to provide our students and those we work with an unparalleled level of service. Every opportunity we have can be used to exemplify Christ's character, ultimately helping us fulfill our purpose of helping students affirm their faith and seek truth for themselves. This is not a task we ought to take lightly.

The process of self-knowledge requires constant self-reflection that seeks to improve our spiritual health, growth, and continuous development. This self-reflection process should be adapted into our daily routine, ensuring to consult God for guidance, knowledge, and wisdom where we are lacking. He promises in His Word, "If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you," James 1:5 (New International Version). It is through our own process of self-reflection and self-knowledge that we can successfully guide our students to become critical thinkers and truth-seekers capable of seeking God wholeheartedly on their own. Our purpose, as a faith-based institution, ought to be ensuring our education is founded on the redemption model- a model ultimately leading students to their salvation.

The College Student Population

As student affairs professionals, we not only have a responsibility to develop our self-knowledge and engage in self-reflection, we must also understand the students we work with and serve. As globalization has become a trending topic within higher

education, we must understand its impact on the changing student demographics that have recently emerged. Non-traditional students have become the new norm as access to higher education has continuously increased.

The Department of Education increased student access to postsecondary education by relieving some of the negative impacts of student loan debt. The Obama Administration expanded loan repayment options and Pell grants, making student debt more affordable (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.). According to the Department of Education, this is the largest investment in postsecondary education since the GI Bill of Rights was passed in 1944, both of which have changed the course of higher education in terms of increasing access and helping to reshape the norm.

With increased access on a national scale, we have noted there is no longer a set of parameters by which postsecondary students can be defined. As cited by Fishman, Ludgate, & Tutak (2017), 44% or more of college students are over the age of 24, 30% are part-time students, 26% are full-time employees, 28% take care of dependents, 52% are first-generation college students, and 42% are minorities, and 18% are non-native English speakers. (McNair, Albertine, Cooper, McDonald, & Major, 2016). Those who were once the minority are now the majority.

In addition, the globalization and internationalization of higher education has had a significant impact on how higher education is being redefined and delivered. This has also greatly contributed to the expansion of higher education across national borders. Globalization is defined as the process by which business and organizations develop international influence or start operating on a national scale, according to Dictionary.com (n.d.). Similarly, internationalization is defined as an approach to designing services that

are easily adaptable to different cultures and languages (businessdictionary.com, n.d.). To that end, advances in technology have helped significantly in the development of higher education across cultures and borders. In addition to the new norm of students, increases in an international population of students has also been observed (The Wall Street Journal, n.d.). While this has benefited institutions of higher education financially, it is also a defining factor in terms of how higher education is being reshaped and the student body is changing.

As a result of these various changes to our student population, institutions of higher education must understand the unique set of need these students present, and take an active approach to providing the necessary tools for students to succeed. This calls for an in-depth look into what student success entails and defining the parameters by which we can assess our progress and student outcomes.

Defining Student Success

Student success measures will vary across types of institutions. A single definition of student does not exist across all colleges and universities, however, student success is generally accepted as students entering higher education and leaving with a degree. However, more attention must be given to the process between this start and end point. To this regard, it is critical for institutions to analyze their student population, determine the needs of said students, and create a plan of action to see them succeed. Put simply, this process is critical to the development of our students, as well as a great responsibility to educational leaders. In faith-based institutions of higher education, defining student success is two-fold. Part of the redemption plan is ensuring students complete their studies in order to help secure a future both in this earth and the earth to come. As

educational leaders, defining student success, in both regards requires an intentional approach that incorporates both academic and spiritual learning.

Creating a Strategic Plan

An intentional approach to student success requires clearly defined objectives that align with the institutions mission, which should align with the student population we serve. To this end, perhaps the single most important feat an institution can accomplish is creating a strategic plan that aligns with these needs and seeing it to its completion. A strategic plan should be intentional, directed, and realistic. A clear commitment to the institution's mission should be interwoven throughout all efforts. An institution's mission ought to capture the essence of the institution, describe why it was founded, whom it serves, and what it is seeking to accomplish (McLennan & Stringer, 2016, p. 25-47). This ultimately summarizes the institution's core and purpose, making it the guiding force behind all aspects of decision-making. This is the first step in creating an effective strategic plan in terms of student success.

Specific examples of strategies (programs, initiatives, or changes) should be clearly defined and demonstrate a clear alignment with the institution's mission. Emphasis should be placed on which departments, as well as specific roles (individuals), are responsible for the various efforts and should be clearly defined. These strategies should always be executed with students' needs as the foundation. Therefore, it is critical for educational leaders to stay abreast of current trends, literature, best practices, and effective strategies that have proven to be helpful with similar student populations. Strategies must be research-based, at an institutional level, as well as nationally.

In addition, assessment and evaluation tools must be implemented in order to determine these various efforts' effectiveness, or lack thereof. Assessment and evaluation are an integral part of the process, and the criteria by which the institution can continuously monitor its progress. Monitoring progress (assessment and evaluation) is ultimately what should determine which efforts are worth our resources. This is one of the key components of an intentional approach, allowing us to be proactive versus reactive. Educational leaders must make data-driven decisions. The data will demonstrate the institution's strengths, as well as areas in need of improvement, providing opportunities for institutions to better serve its students. This approach provides an institution the opportunity to auto-assess and holds it accountable to the accrediting bodies that give it credibility. Accrediting bodies will dissect and examine an institution's strategic plan to ensure the institution accomplishes what it states it will. This adds to why the strategic plan is so critical to the operation of an institution of higher education.

Facilitating Learning Outside of the Classroom

Student affairs professionals are generally held responsible for creating a culture of learning outside of the classroom. To this end, it is important to focus on developing the student holistically, and creating opportunities for growth and development that are not solely based on academics. There are several areas student affairs professionals and educational leaders can explore and benefit from as they aim to fulfill this task. Student affairs professionals and educational leaders can benefit greatly from understanding the institution's role within the community, as well as the community's influence on the institution. While the location of the institution cannot readily be changed, the surrounding community can be used as opportunities for students to learn, engage, and

develop civic responsibility. Surrounding communities can offer partnerships for student internships and employment, as well as volunteer opportunities for public services. This type of civic engagement can help students apply what they are learning in the classroom to the everyday interactions they will experience once they launch into their respective fields. This can be helpful in developing soft skills such as communication, work ethic, time-management, teamwork, problem solving, and many others that are critical to the overall success of an individual. This is also a great opportunity to expose students to individuals from various backgrounds. This exposure to diversity will equip our students with the necessary skills to thrive in this global market.

Part of the redemptive approach to higher education is also ensuring we are creating opportunities for students to meet Christ, or strengthen their relationship with Him. As Christian educational leaders, we must be primarily intentional in this regard. We must provide a variety of worship services that cater to the needs of our students, and encourage our students to take active spiritual roles within the college community, as much as we promote student government roles. Our redemption approach requires us to provide students with these opportunities to continuously seek our Lord and ultimately find their meaning and purpose. In order to accomplish this successfully, it requires an integrated approach to our mission. In the same way an institution's mission should be interwoven into the fabric of the strategic plan, so must this redemptive approach to education.

The Student Personnel

In order to successfully execute a strategic plan, one of the main foci of an institution is ensuring the most qualified departments and individuals are leading

departmental efforts. This careful, successful execution requires interdepartmental collaboration, which in turn requires the careful selection and placement of highly skilled professionals within its critical roles. Therefore, every aspect of the selection, hiring, and retention process is highly important to fulfilling an institution's mission and strategic plan. An institution must take heed of this process, as it will help create a strong foundation, or (if not careful) one by which efforts will dissolve. An institution cannot afford hasty decision-making in the selection process of its employees. The ramifications of this approach will be both financially and academically detrimental. This can have a long-lasting negative impact on student outcomes, employee relations, and the overall reputation of the institution. Therefore, it is a process that requires careful attention, a healthy allocation of resources- time, financial resources, a recruiting, hiring, retention teams, as well as effective termination process. In addition, maintaining a motivated workforce is yet another critical component of effectively serving our students.

Professional Development

Maintaining a successful workforce not only entails hiring qualified individuals, but providing opportunities for continuous improvement. An institution of higher education will achieve great success in serving its students if its employees (faculty and staff alike) are adequately prepared, qualified, and offered continuous opportunities for career growth and development. Part of an institution's strategic plan should be providing opportunities for its employees to accomplish this, but it is also the responsibility of an educational leader to seek ways to stay competitive.

Student affairs professionals and educational leaders ought to seek opportunities to engage in professional development by joining organizations specific to their field,

engaging in research, and staying current with best practices. Professional organizations, in particular, serve a critical purpose in the development of required skills within the field, as well as current, pertinent information on emerging trends. This will help student affairs leaders stay competitive and in high demand. This also demonstrates commitment to profession, as well as the institution and students we serve. By continuously seeking to increase their knowledge base, institutional leaders are not only bettering themselves, but also leading by example in terms of teaching our students to engage in life-long learning.

Competencies and Skills of the Profession

Overall, the student affairs profession is interlinked in all aspects of the organization. Student affairs professionals are present in various departments including organizational, counseling, and student development. Various roles within these overarching concepts range from admissions and enrollment, to financial aid, career services, academic advising, chaplaincy, campus ministries, and many more. This sheds light on the importance of student affairs professionals within higher education. While it is not a role that has been clearly defined, this course helped uncover some of the many key functions student affairs leaders fulfill.

It is critical to also note the professional standards student affairs leaders can follow to quantify and evaluate their own performance. As ambiguity continuously permeates this sector of higher education professionals, it will become crucial for the survival of this much needed function. The set guidelines provided by the Council for the Advancement of Standards in higher education (n.d.) provide an opportunity to set this role part and add value to it. These guidelines serve a two-fold purpose: provide guidance, and help improve the quality of the profession over time. It is also important

for these guidelines to adapt as our student population continues to evolve in the upcoming years.

Taking Action!

As educators, we mustn't stay stagnant. While increased access to higher education has paved the way for many students to achieve academic success, recent downward enrollment trends are cause for alarm. To that end, we must counteract the negative implications this can result in. We must find creative, strategic ways to retain our students and talented workforce. The goal should not be quantity with merely a financial agenda in mind, but providing an unparalleled level of service that will create a reputation that will precede it amongst other institutions of higher education.

As a faith-based institution, this also entails demonstrating the value in Christian education in comparison to secular schools. I dare say, faith-based institutions have a greater challenge and greater responsibility at stake. Not only are we seeking to educate our students for the here and now, but also ensure we education them for eternity. God has placed a great responsibility and burden on us to ensure His mission is fulfilled. From an academic standpoint, and as reflected upon, this will entail data-driven decision-making and strategic planning. From a spiritual standpoint, this will entail seeking God's counsel and heeding His word in how we ought to education young minds.

We must understand the importance of what we do on a daily basis and move away from simply completing tasks. Every effort we put forth should be measured against what God expects from us as educational leaders, and we must take action to fulfill the meaning and purpose God has revealed for our lives. Only by these means will be able to succeed in bringing young souls to Christ, and achieve career success.

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