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Brief 8: Graduate Preparation of Student Affairs Staff: What's Needed

New England Resource Center for Higher Education, University of Massachusetts Boston

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NERCHE BRIEF

New England Resource Center for Higher Education
May 2001

The following Brief from the New England Resource Center for Higher Education (NERCHE) is a distillation of the work by members of NERCHE's think tanks and projects from a wide range of institutions. NERCHE Briefs emphasize policy implications and action agendas from the point of view of the people who tackle the most compelling issues in higher education in their daily work lives. With support from the Ford Foundation, NERCHE disseminates these pieces to a targeted audience of higher education leaders and media contacts. The Briefs are designed to add critical information and essential voices to the development of higher education policies and the improvement of practice at colleges and universities.

Graduate Preparation of Student Affairs Staff: What's Needed from the Perspective of Chief Student Affairs Officers

The Student Affairs profession has changed significantly. Is graduate training keeping up? Do young Student Affairs professionals know what to expect once they get to campus? Members of NERCHE's Student Affairs Think Tank met to discuss the relationship between graduate training and the workplace.

Student Affairs has spent at least the last 64 years (since *Student Personnel Point of View* in 1937) developing itself as a profession with a knowledge base that forms the foundation on which many Student Affairs graduate programs are built. But chief Student Affairs officers find that there is an imbalance between what young professionals are taught in graduate school, which emphasizes student development and research, and the skills and ways of thinking they need to function effectively in the workplace. While different graduate programs have different foci—some, for example, oriented to counseling and others to management—programs tend to encourage specialization. In a big university setting, specialization (though not professional segregation) may be organizationally appropriate. At most other institutions, well-rounded individuals are in demand, and the success of young Student Affairs

professionals may depend upon understanding the kinds of things that aren't taught in graduate school.

As often is the case with young faculty, many new Student Affairs professionals hit the campus eager to get to work but unequipped to deal with the complexity of the environments in which they are working and the jobs they are to do. These young professionals harbor the expectation that most of their time will be spent helping students adjust to college life, advising student organizations, or coordinating co-curricular programs. They are not prepared for the intricacies of a population of students that is far more diverse than any time in previous history. A growing proportion of students today is older and the first in their families to attend college. Some are entering a culture that is foreign to them, whether they come from the region or abroad. Others are trying to meet educational requirements while managing disabilities, some of which are only now beginning to be understood and accommodated. A Student Affairs professional needs to have knowledge—both theoretical and practical—of current students' needs.

At the same time these new staff are, themselves, entering a new culture—that of the college or university that operates with its own economy, political systems, and unique ways of getting things done. Senior administrators often have little time to mentor younger colleagues. Student Affairs officers need new recruits who can manage their own time and who require little supervision. New staff leave graduate school without understanding the politics of their jobs, such as coalition building, problem solving, and understanding organizational behavior. They often believe that to compromise—to choose one's battles—is to betray students. They need help learning that the landscape in which they will operate is not so evenly divided. New staff can gain some of this experience, such as learning about the unwritten rules of the culture of the specific institution, on the job; but upon their arrival at a campus, they should be aware of what to expect.

New professionals may expect that their work will be central to the lives of students, but the reality is that a college student's relationship with faculty is more likely to be of utmost significance. Young professionals must understand how important it is to build relationships with faculty, for they are often the link between students and Student Affairs. New staff need to know what life is like on the academic side of the house, especially as collaboration between Academic and Student Affairs becomes more critical.

New staff tend to be ahead of older colleagues in technological skills, but fall short in other skill areas. They search the Internet with ease and sophistication, but cannot write an effective email—which could go a long way toward establishing credibility on campus. In addition, the ability to understand and interpret data plays an increasingly important role in colleges and universities, especially in Student Affairs. Yet senior practitioners are finding that some new staff are weak in quantitative assessment and don't have adequate skills in financial management. Establishing good measures and linking them to planning and budget are now significant responsibilities for Student Affairs professionals. Junior staff also need to be able to access and assess information that changes rapidly. They need to be able to keep up with changing laws and legislation and to translate them for the academic workplace. They also need strong mediation skills in order to avoid costly litigation. Perhaps most important of all, new professionals need to learn to multi-task.

Here's what NERCHE's senior student affairs officers recommend:

- Graduate programs need to work closely with the professional associations such as the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA) in order to stay informed about what colleges and universities need in Student Affairs staff. Graduate programs should also solicit input from alumni and new professionals about the aspects of their graduate preparation that were most helpful and those that were incomplete.
- Graduate school programs in Student Affairs should be more interdisciplinary and offer opportunities for combined degrees. Academic connections to other schools or departments such as human services, business, and law should be encouraged.

- Graduate programs should draw on experienced senior Student Affairs officers to teach or to serve as guest speakers. These professionals have the practical and timely experience that can help students test and apply theories and coursework. Students can also do internships in Student Affairs offices at local colleges and universities.
- Graduate programs should include courses in pedagogy and curriculum so that their graduates are prepared to work closely with faculty on the campuses where they will be employed. On some campuses, it is conceivable that they would be able to teach college success courses, service-learning courses, leadership development, and/or field experience programs.

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