

*In Defense of Student Affairs*

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In the September 2, 2005, issue of *The Chronicle (of Higher Education) Review*, Professor Adam Weinberg of Colgate University challenges the “explosion” of student affairs positions at colleges and universities in recent years.

“Too many colleges have become obsessed with providing the newest and most-lavish services and amenities to keep up with the competition, diverting resources away from other, more valuable educational programs. In addition, by hiring so many trained professionals, we have robbed students of opportunities to learn through their own problem solving. We have encouraged a sense of entitlement among them, so that they increasingly view themselves as clients that our institutions are obliged to serve—isolated individuals with problems to be fixed—rather than members of a community who work together to develop solutions.”

While I commend Weinberg for vocalizing his goal of molding the campus into a community, I question his premise that the view students have of themselves as “clients” or customers to be served is somehow a consequence of the student services model. Considering that my colleagues and I spend an inordinate amount of time fighting against just this perception, to varying degrees of success, one has to wonder how entrenched such attitudes would be *without* the apparently unnecessary horde of student affairs professionals to weather the storm of incoming freshmen and assist in educating students about the true nature of the college experience. (Besides, one can just as easily claim that by hiring so many professors, we have robbed students of opportunities to learn through their own research...)

*(Brett Sokolow comments:: Nice riposte, Dan. This view of student affairs professionals as enabling nannies is contemptuous. Student affairs professionals generally don't do things for students that they can do for themselves. Rather, they challenge and support students and in the process teach the very problem-solving skills Dean Weinberg believes they are impeding, in my humble view).*

Perhaps some institutions *are* mired in an “amenities arms race”, but student affairs is about much more than placing a Starbucks on alternate floors and piping MTV into every room. Our goal is the same as Weinberg's; to create an environment in which learning can best be facilitated. It would be foolish to suggest the *status quo* is good enough to discourage innovation; yet at the same time, I must take issue with Weinberg's apparent disdain for the field in its current form.

*(Brett Sokolow comments:: Dean Weinberg's argument is a little like the Troglodyte's refusal to use a cell phone. That ship has sailed. Gone too are the days when the Ivory Tower could prosper without some concessions to consumerism. Students and parents are consumers of a product in a competitive marketplace. While it is quaint to rail*

*against the commoditization of education as a business, that ship, too, has sailed. But, a key point could be missed here if we fail to recognize that providing creature comforts and accommodations for students can morph into catering to them, or having them dictate our jobs to us, if we create that kind of unhealthy student service model. Yet, I read recently that some colleges are moving to double beds for single students, and to that I say amen. Good riddance to the prison cots. College amenities should change over time. Inevitably, they will. Airplane seats are wider now. SUVs outsell smaller cars. Bring on double beds. Supersize my Sealy, please!)*

To be sure, Weinberg finds some good in student affairs; specifically, it is beneficial for those students with “learning disabilities, emotional and social problems, and psychological disorders.” Clearly, since the majority of our students would appear to have no need of a judicial affairs office, we are free to return to the days of the “hebdomadar”—so named at a time when the job of discipline was rotated on a weekly basis among the faculty. It is also gratifying to hear that academic professionals like Weinberg will be able to shoulder the burden of career counseling and scheduling campus activities for the bulk of our population.

Much of Weinberg’s article is focused on dispelling certain “myths” he has identified about student affairs, two of which are particularly relevant from a campus conduct perspective:

**“Myth 3: More rules improve behavior.** Students may follow the rules, but that doesn’t teach them to think for themselves. It’s best to set high expectations for students, communicate with them clearly, and support them in creating their own paths to meet those expectations.”

It’s hard to find fault with Weinberg here, as he has expressed more concisely than I could have the intent and practice of judicial programs, whether he meant to or not. I am therefore all the more troubled that someone with such an understanding of the field would come up with this:

**“Myth 2: Alcohol is bad and must be avoided at all cost.** When an institution has many rules prohibiting alcohol, the only people who sponsor parties are the students who don’t mind breaking those rules.”

Exactly. And if guns are outlawed, only the outlaws will have guns. It is true that as a rule, colleges and universities don’t have the healthiest of attitudes towards alcohol—but then again, neither does our society. Consider the impact of this statement: Weinberg is effectively claiming that it is impossible to have a good time without alcohol. What happened to education, communication, and support regarding “high expectations”?

As I have argued elsewhere, we should not enact policies beyond those absolutely necessary—in that respect, I agree with Weinberg’s contention that more rules are not necessarily better. But if an institution has determined that alcohol is detrimental to the educational experience, I would hope we can come up with a better rationale for

challenging that decision than “if we prohibit it, only the bad kids will do it.” Weinberg further advocates that we “teach students how to plan fewer, higher-quality activities”. If he is unable to fathom how this can be done without resorting to the use of alcohol, I know several student affairs professionals who might be able to help...

Combine these statements with one program Weinberg holds up as an example of the New Deal in student affairs—“creating entrepreneurial cultures where students think of themselves as innovators and problem solvers ... Students run their own dormitories through ‘consensus agreements’...”—and the impression one gets is of the inmates running the asylum, so to speak. If we should be curbing students’ sense of entitlement, as Weinberg suggests, then it seems there are better ways to do this than by releasing control of our core values and leaving it to 18- and 19-year-olds to determine for themselves what constitutes appropriate behavior.

Absolutely, we want students to “buy in” to their community and become active constituents; as a result, there will be occasions when their views clash with those of the institution. At such times, it is necessary and appropriate to listen and respond in kind—if we expect students to understand our perspective, the least we can do is allow them to clarify theirs. But to approach campus life as a completely malleable experience, one shaped through the consensus of students without regard to the underlying mission and precepts of the institution, is to effectively dispense with the university system as we know it.

In the end, a college or university is a voluntary community, one that shares certain values with society as a whole, but retains a character all its own. Students are free to join this community, but in so doing they agree that the character of the institution is consistent with their own—or at least that they are able to live with it for four or five years. It is disingenuous to lure students without being transparent about these expectations. I can again agree with Weinberg that we should not provide services and amenities to students simply because they expect them. But in order to make our true selves known to prospective students while staying relevant in a changing world, a certain amount of marketing, if not outright solicitation, is necessary. Who is going to do that if not the student affairs professionals?

Obviously, the student services model is not a perfect one, and there will forever be new ways of approaching the field of student affairs more efficiently and effectively. But Weinberg’s goal of freeing money for “more valuable educational programs” would seem to have blinded him to the possibility that the non-academic side of the house serves an equally valid purpose; and that the point of student affairs is precisely to capture those “educational moments that take place outside the classroom” he claims to value.

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