

The Gateway to Cultural Competence – The Implications of Leadership and Gender on the Student Affairs Organization

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Abstract

Adopting Morgan (2006)'s metaphor of an organization as a culture as a framework, this study attempted to understand and connect the cultural behaviors and norms that influence the student affairs organization. The subcultures of leadership and gender were applied by looking into their impact on the culture of student affairs. By understanding the student affairs organization based on Morgan's metaphor and how it shapes behaviors, outcomes, and changes is beneficial to student affairs professionals.

The student affairs organization serves an integral role in higher education administration. Changing religious, economic, social, and political forces are influences on the development of student affairs (Komives & Woodard, 2003). The roots of today's comprehensive student affairs programs in American colleges and universities can be traced to the founding of the colonial colleges (Leonard, 1956). While the hallmark of student affairs programs has evolved drastically since the colonial era, the mid-nineteenth century introduced another shift in program development. During the 1990s, the student personnel movement led to greater student responsibility and an increase in faculty participation in student personnel matters. As faculty made adjustments to meet the demands of students, the development of distinct student personnel functions began to emerge (e.g. Academic Advising, Admissions, Financial Aid, etc.). As a result, Student Affairs has become the pulse of higher education institutions. By providing the first level of support, communication, and guidance for students, the student affairs organization has the responsibility of providing a superior customer experience that meets the needs of a diverse student population.

As a trailblazer in higher education organization, the functions of student affairs can vary depending on the size, type, and location of an institution (Hirt, 2006). The culture of the organization determines the flow of its daily operations. By developing cultural competence, higher education administrators, faculty, and students will be able to bridge the gap between theory and practice in higher education organization and governance.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to provide the history of the student affairs profession; define the purpose of student affairs in higher education; examine its organizational structure and hierarchy; and identify the cultural norms that embody the organization. Since behavior is a direct reflection of organizational culture, an examination of Student Affairs is necessary to identify any behaviors that need to be modified and positive outcomes that can be gleaned. A study of the organizational culture of the student affairs division is integral to gauge institutional memory for continued sustainability of foundational practices and procedures as well as extricate cancerous ideals that impede productivity, collaboration, and change. Leadership structures and gender are subcultures within the organization that require analysis in conjunction to organizational culture. By applying Morgan's metaphor of an organization as a culture, an analysis of the student affairs organization was reviewed to determine how culture affects the organization and the implications for higher education practitioners. In a highly fluid environment, higher education administrators and student affairs faculty must be cognizant of the cultural nuances that influence its daily operations and its impact on higher education administrators, faculty, and students.

The Development of Student Affairs

Between 1945 and 1985, several events shaped the future direction of the student affairs profession (Komives & Woodard, 2003). After World War II, the influx of soldiers pursuing higher education led to an increase in federal support. Under the Truman administration, federal support was evident by the passage of the Serviceman's Readjustment Act also known as the G.I. Bill. As federal support and interest increased in higher education so did the regulations relative to student affairs policies and practices (Komives & Woodard, 2003). The momentum of the civil rights movement was evident on college campuses as students began to speak on racial issues and civil liberties.

The assassinations of President John F. Kennedy and the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. were among the signature events of the decade that impacted students (Komives & Woodard, 2003). Afterwards, there was a considerable change in the relationship between students and colleges. The ramifications of the racial tension and political unrest of the time gave way to a revolution in the profession concerning diversity, public policy, professional standards, and campus culture. According to Blimling (1999), the concerns about campus climate and student conduct was evident as colleges and universities continued to face considerable public scrutiny about race relations, alcohol and substance abuse, and mounting concern about the regulation of campus protests, celebrations, and other forms of disruption. To counter the external influences

from uprisings in society and the internal demands of the student population, student affairs emerged as the voice of reason and peacemaker between the community and higher education institutions. To meet the tumultuous conditions of the times, a transformative approach in both leadership and practice added to the robustness of the student affairs organization. As student affairs professionals continue to forge into the twenty-first century, the various functions that make up the student affairs organization are instrumental in meeting the educational mission of the institution and the goals of its students.

Definition and Purpose of Student Affairs

Student Affairs is usually led by a Vice President or Vice Chancellor who reports directly to the President/Chancellor of the institution. Depending on the size, type, and location of an institution, another familiar title for Student Affairs is Student Services or Student Support. Student Affairs is the area within colleges and universities that provide services, programs, and resources that help students learn and grow outside of the classroom (ACPA & NASPA, 1997). Whereas, Miller and Prince (1976) define student services as “the application of human development concepts in postsecondary education so that everyone involved can master increasingly complex developmental tasks, achieve self-direction, and become independent” (p. 5).

McClellan and Stringer (2009) state the primary purpose of the student affairs program is to complement and enhance the college’s central educational mission. The student affairs philosophy is based on self-governance (i.e. students assume responsibility for themselves and their actions). While student affairs professionals provide the tools that will make the collegiate experience rewarding, the student still has the primary obligation as an independent thinker. A concurrent goal of student affairs is to develop an effective support community within each residence hall that reflects and addresses the broad range of student experiences, life within a rigorous academic environment and concerns for the future (McClellan & Stringer).

As reflected in its title, the focus of Student Affairs is the student. The student is the nucleus for all administrative and functional responsibilities of the organization and the motivation behind the initiatives that it supports. According to Hamrick, Evans, and Schuh (2002), student affairs leaders must be introspective and reflective about their personal identity development and intercultural sensitivity in relation to their actions as leaders. In doing so, student affairs professionals must deliberately align student development models with services and support structures focused on educating the whole student (Hamrick, Evans, & Schuh).

Organizational Structure of Student Affairs

Student affairs professionals work in a wide range of functional areas within many types of institutions (Hirt, 2006). These include, but are not limited to, four-year colleges and universities; two-year and community colleges; historically Black colleges and universities; Hispanic-serving institutions; tribal colleges and universities; religiously affiliated schools; women’s institutions; and for-profit institutions (Hirt, 2006). The divisions available at each institution will vary depending on the size, type, and location of the institution. Typically,

student affairs programs include residence life, student activities, student leadership development, health services, counseling services, career planning and placement, multicultural student services, international student services, community service, student judicial affairs, student orientation, commuter services, and campus ministry (Wheelan & Danganan, 2003). However, some of the most common divisions within the organization include Admissions, the Career Center, Dining and Food Services, Financial Aid, Residence Life and Housing, and Wellness Services (Komives & Woodard, 2003).

The basic job of admissions personnel is to tell prospective students about the institution and its programs, as well as to recruit, screen, and accept applicants (Komives & Woodard, 2003). Some admissions offices are part of student affairs; others are in enrollment management (often with the registrar and financial aid offices). Usually they are part of an enrollment management model and report to the provost, executive vice president, or president (Wheelan & Danganan, 2003). Admission officers essentially serve as salespersons for the institution. Although they are not compensated by commission, performance has an impact on funding and the allocation of resources for the institution.

Career development specialists help students with career exploration, planning their job search, and other skills such as resume writing, interviewing, and making effective presentations (Komives & Woodard, 2003). According to Zunker (2006), career services foster a foundation to view career development and its influence on other life roles from a broader perspective. Although career centers are most often situated within student affairs, on some campuses they may be housed in academic affairs or in the institution's development office (Komives & Woodard, 2003).

Food service programs can vary from one institution to another with services ranging from vending machines to full-service food courts. In 20% of the colleges and universities, food services reports to student affairs (Heida, 2006). Dining services operations often report to student affairs divisions, although sometimes the responsibility for managing food services is shared with another administrative unit in the institution, such as the business office (Wheelan & Danganan, 2003).

The role of the financial aid office is to help students create a plan to finance their education (Komives & Woodard, 2003). Cohen, Brawer, and Kisker (2013) note that financial aid monies are particularly important to student access, as they are directly related to students' decision to enroll and continue in higher education. As the economic condition continues to decline and state funding becomes scarce, students are relying on financial assistance through grants, scholarships, and loans to finance their education. In addition to working with student aid recipients, financial aid staff works closely with government agencies, banks, loan guarantee agencies, and corporate and individual donors (Wheelan & Danganan, 2003).

The primary responsibility of residence life is to provide healthy, clean, safe, and educationally supportive living environments that complement the academic mission of the institution (Komives & Woodard, 2003). For campuses that offer on-campus living for students, the office responsible for this service is usually called residence life, residential life, or the campus housing office (Wheelan & Danganan, 2003).

Health services for students and, sometimes, for faculty and staff can be provided through on-campus facilities or through partnerships with off-campus agencies or hospitals (Komives & Woodard, 2003). When the campus has a medical center, the student health service may be linked administratively to the medical school or affiliated hospital. The primary purpose of

student health services is to provide immediate medical assistance to students who are ill or injured; student health services also encourage individual good health and provide leadership in promoting the concept of a healthy campus (Wheelan & Danganan, 2003).

Organization as a Culture

When we talk about culture, we are usually referring to the pattern of development reflected in a society's system of knowledge, ideology, values, laws, and day-to-day ritual (Morgan, 2006). The culture of an organization is also known as its "corporate culture" (Morgan, 2006, p. 125). However, within a corporate culture, there is a subculture that exists that influences the way things are done (Deal & Kennedy, 1982; Kotter & Heskett, 1992; Schein, 1990). At the surface, culture is limited to systems and ideas but an introspective examination reveals the role that gender and rules play in organizational culture as well. The effect culture has on an organization stems from power, influence, and groups (Schein, 1990). When power is the motivating factor behind the decision making process or the cooperation of personnel, a climate of resentment, tension, and division is created.

Morgan (2006) provides a review of Harold Geneen at ITT (International Telephone and Telegraph Corp.) and his tyrannical management style. The contrast to a fearful environment was one of collaboration and camaraderie exemplified by Hewlett-Packard. The disparity that often exists in organizations is the lack of a balance of power and influence. When decisions are often forced from the top-down without dual communication from the bottom-up, trouble is sure to follow. Consequently, leadership has a significant influence on the culture of an organization. When teamwork is missing, competition and selfish ambitions will emerge triumphant. Therefore, a leader must allow for frequent dialogue and keep the line of communication open. Doing so eases tension from any opponents and creates a culture in which different viewpoints are heard and respected. Leaders are expected to see themselves as people who ultimately help to create and shape the meaning that are to guide organized action (Morgan, 2006).

According to Harari (2002), "Plans don't accomplish work. Goal charts on walls don't accomplish work It is people who get things done" (p. 125). Since it is the people who are in the trenches doing the bulk of the work, the role of an individual shapes organizational culture. If the culture advertises teamwork and service but the daily operations reveal another, a fragmented environment will develop. A dichotomous culture then shapes the behaviors of staff which can have a negative impact on the organization. Morgan (2006) notes that divergent and competing value systems can exist within an organization that can impede on a uniform corporate culture. He stated, "Besides gender, race, language, and ethnicity, religious, socioeconomic, friendship, and professional groups can have a decisive impact on the cultural mosaic" (2006, p. 132). The long-term effects are divided loyalties and behaviors that conflict with typical day-to-day functioning. As a result, subcultures are created in which private conversations are held to discuss problems but they never make it to the forefront and go unresolved (Deal & Kennedy, 1982; Kotter, 1992; Schein, 1990).

The implication is that an organization as a culture must be mindful and address the groups within the organization that arise to ensure they do not diminish the predominant culture as a whole. According to Ahren (2008), although student affairs may be more integrated as a

profession, there is undoubtedly variation in the values and approaches that individual members adopt. While profession-wide assumptions have been espoused consistently, each staff member has private motivators that may diverge from group norms and expectations. The root to the issue is really a matter of motivation. The culture can positively as well as negatively affect motivation. Morgan (2006) provides a glimpse of how culture is connected to motivation in his description of the United States and Japan. Japan has a culture that focuses on dependence and the importance of community. Respect for and dependence on one another is central to their way of life. However, the United States and many other Western countries have historically valued separateness and individualism. The result can be a lack of motivation, feelings of being unappreciated, and a leadership team that is in the dark.

Organization as a culture establishes a framework from which to understand and harness the cultural behaviors and norms that influence its organizations. By understanding the role of power, influence, and groups on the culture of the organization will help in creating a motivating, collaborative, and team inspired work environment. By keeping these ideas in mind, the metaphor of an organization as a culture will help professionals navigate the tumultuous waters of their profession.

The Organizational Culture of Student Affairs

The metaphor of an organization as a culture best exemplifies the student affairs organization. By understanding the role of organizational culture and how it shapes behaviors, outcomes, and changes will prove advantageous to student affairs professionals. Organizational culture provides meanings for routine organizational events, thereby reducing the amount of cognitive processing and energy members need to expend throughout the day (Hammal & Vadi, 2010). There is an inherent mindset that inspires how and why certain processes and functions occur every day. According to Trice and Beyer (1995), organizational culture speaks to the overarching and underlying values that permeate through the division in our methods of communication, interaction, expectation and performance. This tenet plays a significant role in how work gets done and the environment to which work is accomplished.

Depending on the institution, the work environment within student affairs can be practice-based rather than theory-based (Hirt, Collins, & Plummer, 2005). For instance, on a typical day in the student affairs division, one will hear varying conversations. When asked whether the work environment was more practice-based than theory-based, a liberal arts participant (Hirt et al., 2005) states:

We don't find ourselves talking about theory especially when we talk to faculty. We don't talk student affairs jargon. I think that would be a turn off and we would lose our credibility. Faculty's language is not student affairs theory and development. (p. 3)

As the professional indicates, the language and jargon within student affairs reflect the cultural nuances that personify the division. The humor, dress code, ceremonies, and technology that various professionals use are also reflective of the organizational culture.

Individuals bring cultures of origin to work that reflect their particular ongoing histories in various cultural contexts (Gibson & Zellmer-Bruhn, 2001). As a result, various attitudes and social behaviors will manifest in the division which determines the approach for conflict

resolution, decision making, and leadership decisions. In this manner, culture guides choices, commitments, and standards of behavior (Gibson & Zellmer-Bruhn, 2001). When past cultural experiences collide with present cultural expectations, information exchange and collective information processing must occur for effective team collaboration. The culture within student affairs and the cultures of origin that individuals bring to work reveal the need to make changes within the division. Many institutions now have a multicultural division within student affairs to address diverse student populations and the growing demand to understand how culture influences academic success, retention, and perseverance. A major thrust of the multicultural affairs office is to retain and graduate students of color at a rate that is the same or better than the majority student body (Komives & Woodard, 2003). Looking at students holistically, an emphasis is placed on the educational, cultural, personal, and social goals of each student (Komives & Woodard, 2003).

Depending on the functional area in observation, the general tone in the organization is often reminiscent of a pep squad or cheerleading team. There is a feeling of belonging, friendship, and purpose. As the first meeting of the day begins, it is evident that something inherent within the culture shapes the agenda, facilitator, and the progression or stagnancy of outstanding topics of discussion. According to Ahren (2008), the University of Michigan financial aid office begins each work day with a team chant by reciting their organizational mission. However, Bennett College is less likely to make administrative changes due to the structure of its leadership team (Ahren, 2008). Both are four-year institutions but the culture of their student affairs offices varies greatly. While the general tone within the organization reflects a collaborative spirit, relationship development with external partners is necessary as well. According to Morgan and Policello (2010), colleagues in student affairs must become comfortable cultivating relationships, so that partnerships are formed throughout the division.

The pace in which work is done, the speed with which change occurs and the reactive or proactive approach to work is another cultural distinction within student affairs. Rather than take a proactive approach, professionals believe the profession requires a more reactive approach. According to Hirt et al. (2005), what is most stressful about the nature of student affairs work is that things are not predictable. Nobody can predict when a student is going to commit suicide and when there's going to be a tragedy on campus. That goes along with the multitasking (Hirt et al.). The uncertainty in the organization is warranted due to events such as the Virginia Tech Massacre and other shootings on college campuses. The motivation to meet the educational mission of the institution and the needs of the student are put to the test when tragic events occur. However, the collaborative nature of the culture automatically kicks in as various departments (i.e. Counseling Services and Religious Services) within the division band together to help one another.

Subcultures of Leadership and Gender

The subcultures of leadership and gender can exist within an organization. While culture plays an integral role in shaping the way things are done, subcultures can be detrimental to the organization. Subcultures can develop when members of the organization have divided loyalties (Morgan, 2006). A neglected and often overlooked aspect of organizational subculture is the leadership style within the organization. As seen in the example of the leadership approach of

Harold Geneen at ITT (as cited in Morgan 2006), tyrannical leadership will produce division; whereas, transformational leadership will produce collaboration. According to Burns (1978), transforming leadership demonstrates two essential qualities – it is relational, and it is about producing real change. Transforming leadership occurs when one or more persons engage with others in such a way that leaders and followers raise one another to higher levels of motivation and morality (Burns).

In relation to higher education, a transformational leader must be able to relate well with faculty, administrators, and the student population. A leader that does not keep an ear to the voice of the people will not produce positive change in the organization. Leaders that are close-minded and resist change are likely to miss out on opportunities to propel their students and university into a changing global economy. Leadership will then determine whether there is a team orientation or competitive tone within various offices and departments. When asked about their work environment, two individuals expressed a team orientation and collaborative environment. A research university participant states: “I work with colleagues that just ... they want to help you with what you’re doing ... they want to share with you” (Hirt et al., 2005, p. 6). A comprehensive university participant states:

They're our family. [They] share in the successes as well because you really are a family. And when Residence Life is successful at something, financial aid and counseling and everybody else are right there with [us]. There isn't any competition, even in success. (Hirt et al., 2005, p. 6)

Another aspect of organizational subculture is the role of gender within the organization. Given the leadership crisis in community colleges (Evelyn, 2001) and the increase in women ascending to positions of leadership in colleges and universities (Ross & Green, 2000), the role of gender takes on increased importance in discussions regarding leadership. Within the admissions office of many institutions, women are predominantly in positions of leadership (Ahren, 2008). As women take the lead in positions of power, they approach problem resolution differently. The predominant stereotypes concerning women are that they are intuitive, emotional, submissive, empathic, spontaneous, nurturing, and cooperative. However, men are thought to be logical, rational, aggressive, exploitative, strategic, independent, and competitive (Morgan, 2006). The impact gender has on the culture of the student affairs organization is that male and/or female dominated value systems can impede progress. The influence is notable in the athletics division of the student affairs organization which is primarily led by men (Ahren, 2008). McElhinny (1998) notes:

Workplaces are gendered both by the numerical predominance of one sex within them and by the cultural interpretations of given types of work which, in conjunction with cultural norms and interpretations of gender, dictate who is understood as best suited for different sorts of employment. (p. 309)

When archaic stereotypes are used to determine the success or failure of an individual (e.g. male or female) depending on the department or position in which they work, varying perspectives may be overlooked and needful enhancements may never occur.

By understanding the culture and subcultures (e.g. leadership and gender) of the student affairs organization and their effects, the organization and culture can be transformed. Rather than avoid the disparity that can occur in leadership positions due to gender, student affairs professionals should embrace it as an opportunity for meaningful change. Awareness and then acknowledgement are critical steps to addressing biases that may be detrimental to any organization. The influence of leadership on the work environment and general tone of the workplace is notable as well.

Conclusions and Implications

As the face of higher education academia continues to change, the importance of organizational culture and the influence it has on an organization are paramount to the success of student affairs. While the fundamental objective of the profession has evolved since its early days during the colonial period, the commitment to develop the whole person and support the academic mission of the college and/or university remains the cornerstone of the organization. Although the structure and hierarchy will vary depending on the size, type, and location of the institution, the divisional commonalities that exist are numerous. By examining the history of the profession, its function in higher education, and the application of it to an organization as a culture, higher education administrators can forge into the future equipped to face the technological and multicultural needs of its students and faculty in higher education academia.

Morgan's metaphor of an organization as a culture is a foundational stepping stone to understanding the student affairs organization. While the organization focuses on the student, there are subcultures (e.g. leadership and gender) that can impede productivity. To foster a greater leadership style within the organization, it is recommended for higher education practitioners to assess their leadership style by taking a leadership inventory. Upon review of the inventory results, appropriate modifications can be made to ensure various leadership styles in contrast to a single approach are utilized. Another suggestion is to participate in professional development programs such as ones sponsored by the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) that will assist men as well as women in developing the competencies and skills that are necessary for advancement opportunities. Evaluating any gender biases that may exist in the workplace will be a healthy exercise to ensure various viewpoints are heard and ideals can be expressed freely. By assessing the organizational culture of the student affairs organization, current and future practitioners will be equipped with the tools that are necessary to help eliminate stigmas in the workplace by creating a positive work environment that thrives on teamwork, collaboration and encouragement.

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