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Abstract

The Dean of Students is a role with deep historical significance and holds a unique place in the administrative structure of higher education. Over the last century the role has evolved and changed to meet the needs of students and it continues to change in the 21st century. At small colleges, the Dean of Students is often the Vice President of Student Affairs, a combined role requiring a multi-faceted set of professional skills. This literature review explores the history of the role as well as considerations for professional practice at small, liberal arts colleges. It is important to note that significant research on this topic has not been conducted for over a decade. The author of this review has conducted multiple studies on Deans of Students including an updated exploration of the role and professional practice. Given the large number of such positions across the country, and the limited staffing that many of them have, it is important to understand the nature of the role so that preparation and professional development opportunities can be better shaped to provide needed support.

Keywords: small liberal arts colleges, Dean of Students, professional practice

The position of Dean of Students has a long history on college campuses and has changed in function over many decades (Barnes, 1963; Hecklinger, 1972; Pierson, 1973; Swank, 1942). A search of the literature on the role of the Dean of Students in the last decade yields few results. It has been almost ten years since research has been published on the Dean of Students at a liberal arts college (LAC). In 2006, a *New Directions for Student Services* monograph dedicated to *The Small College Dean* grappled with the importance of the small college, the role of the Dean of Students, staffing practices, collaborations with faculty, and future challenges (Westfall, 2006). In this monograph, Sarah Westfall, as the editor, made a strong case for studying the Dean of Students role at small colleges. Using the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA) definition of small colleges (under 5,000 enrollment), she pointed out that 77 percent of four-year colleges and universities in the United States were small colleges (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2004). This means that the

majority of senior student affairs officers are in small colleges. At the same time, many student affairs preparation programs are located at research institutions, offering their students very little exposure to the small college environment. Hirt, Amelink, and Schneiter (2004) examined the nature of student affairs work in a liberal arts college and argued that graduate students, new professionals, and faculty need to better understand what it is like to work in this setting.

The role of the Dean of Students at small colleges is unique in its breadth and scope and requires a multi-faceted set of professional skills (Hirt, 2006; Schwartz, 2010; Winston, Creamer, & Miller, 2001). Flanagan (2006), considering the future of the role, predicted that challenges would include recruiting and retaining students, creating more welcoming living and learning environments for an increasingly diverse student population, working with increased parental involvement, helping students with learning disabilities and mental health issues, assessing programs, understanding new technology, and addressing institutional competition. Others have added to this list of growing challenges to include dealing with external pressures, managing funding concerns, responding to students' identity development, changing reporting structures, and providing opportunities for non-traditional age students (Tederman, 1997; Tull & Kuk, 2012; Zdziarski, 2009). At small colleges, the Dean of Students may be responsible for addressing all of these challenges, whereas at a larger institution these would likely fall to an array of professionals with specific responsibilities. Anecdotally, a review of recent higher education websites reveals more than a dozen stories where the Dean of Students has struggled in their position. Exhaustion in the position can lead to dissatisfaction, disconnection, physical and mental illness, and occasionally a break with the position altogether. A former small college Dean who chose to leave her position described her role as evolving from one that was challenging but rewarding into one that was professionally impossible (Williams, 2015). Over many years, the role became more about managing threats of litigation, media coverage, and students in crisis. The following sections will examine the role from a more general historic perspective and culminate with insights from the small, liberal arts college context.

Evolution of the Dean of Students: The Early Years

The title *Dean* was first used strictly in the academic context in 1816 at Harvard (Gmelch, Nies, Montez & Wolverton, 2001). Senior faculty members who were established scholars filled this position most often. In addition to continuing in their roles as teachers and researchers, these Deans were to be liaisons to the students and assist them in adjusting to student life. As institutions grew, university Presidents realized the need for more assistance with student life issues and appointed a new type of Dean on campus, the Dean of Students (Rentz & Howard-Hamilton, 2011; Thelin, 2004; Schwartz, 2010).

The first Dean of Students was LeBaron Russell Briggs, appointed in 1890 at Harvard. He was the first of what would be fewer than a dozen men called upon

to occupy a new role without specific professional guidelines or structure (Rentz & Howard-Hamilton, 2011; Thelin, 2004; Schwartz, 2010). The early Deans of Students followed the *in loco parentis* philosophy in working with male students, providing guidance, discipline, and support. A belief that would persist for decades was that Deans (of Men) were born, not made or trained through graduate education (Schwartz, 2010). This belief stood in sharp contrast to the ways in which Deans of Women conceptualized their role.

Just two years after LeBaron Russell Briggs became the Dean of Students at Harvard, Alice Freeman Palmer became the Dean of Women at the University of Chicago (Nidiffer, 2000; Schwartz, 1997). The increasing numbers of women on campus necessitated a Dean of Women to respond specifically to their needs. In a culture that was dominated by men, concerns were raised around women's propriety, health, safety, and virtue. Although these concerns may seem sexist by modern standards, the presence of women on campus created great anxiety among college presidents and senior faculty. Like their male counterparts, the Deans of Women were academics by training and all held faculty rank. The Deans of Women were concerned with building the foundations of professional practice which included establishing graduate study, conducting research on students and college environments, and refining guidance and counseling. The journals, research reports, and books that they wrote adhered to strict scholarly practice and established them as professionals (Caple, 1998; Chafe, 1972).

In 1937 the American Council on Education (ACE) published the *Student Personnel Point of View (SPPV)*. This document defined the role of student personnel work and attempted to define the whole student and argued the importance of learning beyond the intellectual sphere. In addition, the *SPPV* also defined the areas in which services were needed and so began to define functional areas for student personnel work (Caple, 1998). As the role of the Dean of Students continued to evolve, the *SPPV* assisted them in defining their roles on campus.

Navigating Change: The Dean of Students Post WWII to the 1990s

After World War II, significant changes occurred on college campuses reflective of the changes happening in the larger society. The role of the Dean of Women and Dean of Men changed as well, culminating in a radical shift of student affairs philosophy in the 1960s. In the post-World War II years, when the United States did not have to be focused on wartime work, the values and priorities of pre-war society returned. Women were expected to return to traditional roles of wife and mother, and veterans were given more access to education via the Serviceman's Readjustment Act of 1944, commonly known as the GI Bill (Caple, 1998; Rentz & Howard-Hamilton, 2011; Thelin, 2004). College enrollments of men swelled, and institutions had to adjust to new student types – married, veteran, and international (Rentz & Howard-Hamilton, 2011). The *SPPV* was revised in 1949

to reflect expanded roles for higher education and for student personnel (American Council on Education, 1949). These guiding principles affected student personnel practice and the Dean of Students role. A return to traditional roles for women resulted in declining enrollments and a perceived lack of need for the Dean of Women position (Schwartz, 2010). Meanwhile the Dean of Men role expanded to become the Dean of Students or Dean of Student Personnel, and in 1951 the National Association of the Deans of Men changed its name to National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (Schwartz, 1997). For the remainder of the 1950s and into the early 1960s, the Dean of Students role would expand to include management of multiple student services to address the expanding student population. Although enrollments for women would increase in the 1970s and 80s, the Dean of Students position remained predominantly male.

The 1960s brought widespread societal change marked by turmoil, confrontation, and civil disobedience. Issues of social justice were paramount, and those marginalized in society fought for rights and representation. College campuses were a center of this activity, and students participated widely in protests and demands for equal rights (Brubacher & Rudy, 1997; Caple, 1998; Thelin, 2004). The Dean of Students was thrust into navigating a role that was part administrator and part advocate for students. This was not a comfortable place to occupy, and it forever changed the relationship of the students to the administration. Historically, college campuses had acted as *de facto* parents for students, known as *in loco parentis*. This philosophy no longer worked with students who demanded independence. For some students, who had served in the military or lived independently, it seemed especially inappropriate (Geiger, 2011). By the 1970s the Dean of Students had become an administrator focused on student support services, commuter and married students, health and wellness, and mental health care (Caple, 1998). In addition, in 1974, Congress passed the Federal Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA, 1974). This legislation provided guidelines around what information institutions that receive federal funding could share and who would have access. Students now had control and increased privacy around their educational records, including grades, transcripts, conduct records, and health care records. The Dean of Student's role continued to change in the 1980s as new concerns mounted around retention and accountability. In this more conservative decade, students began to act as consumers, and institutions began to think about college as a business (Caple, 1998; Geiger, 2011; Thelin, 2004). Deans of Students, who were responsible for writing and enforcing institutional policies, had to grapple with an increasingly complex political and legal landscape.

1990s and Beyond

Drawing from his experiences as Dean of Students at multiple small liberal arts colleges, Tederman (1997) identified a series of institutional challenges he had experienced in each position, as well as suggestions for improvement in each

student affairs functional area on campus. He identified several challenges as most important to the role of the Dean of Students: meeting students' basic needs, helping students with developmental problems, addressing student behavioral problems, dealing with life-endangering situations, managing student demonstrations, and responding to campus tragedies (Tederman, 1997).

Two important contributions to the field of student affairs that offered connections between the work and philosophy of Deans of Students were *Involving Colleges* (Kuh, Schuh, Whitt, & Associates, 1991) and the *Student Learning Imperative* (ACPA, 1994). *Involving Colleges* acknowledged the critical role of student affairs in stimulating student involvement in learning and summarized research documenting the positive impact of the out-of-class experience on student involvement in learning. The *Student Learning Imperative* took this a step further by formally identifying student learning as a mission of student affairs. This represented a critical shift in philosophy for many student affairs professionals, centering responsibility on student learning as part of their work. This would drive a new focus for student affairs on assessment, collaboration with faculty, and the creation of mission statements that reflected student learning and development as central goals (Kuh et al., 1991; Upcraft, & Schuh, 1996).

In the 21st century, the role of the Dean of Students continues to evolve and is intensely focused on student needs, campus needs, and pressures from outside constituencies. Although there is a dearth of literature on current role expectations, a few authors have illuminated pressing challenges. These include finding new sources of funding, maintaining adequate staffing, responding to students' identity development, revising reporting structures, navigating parental involvement, helping students with learning disabilities and mental health issues, and conducting assessment (Hirt, 2006; Oblander, 2006; Tederman, 1997; Tull & Kuk, 2012; Zdziarski, 2009). At small colleges, the norm is tightening fiscal resources leading to a culture that is collaborative and accustomed to condensing programs and combining responsibilities (Tull & Kuk, 2012).

The Dean of Students at Liberal Arts Colleges

The private liberal arts college is the oldest institutional type in U. S. higher education and currently represents 13% of colleges in the United States, around 575 schools (Carnegie Classification, 2019). Many of these institutions enroll fewer than 2,500 students. In addition, these institutions have a similar shared set of values, including a focus on the individual student, direct interaction between students and faculty, and faculty who focus on teaching a traditional curriculum (Hirt, 2006). Students can expect to have personal contact with faculty and administration and forge lasting relationships with their peers. The campus culture is highly relational and interdependent. LACs are recognized as producing "life-long learners," students who value education and often go on to pursue graduate degrees. In fact, six out of 10 students pursuing a Ph.D. are LAC

graduates (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2004). LACs are often places where faculty and administration develop close relationships with students and each other. The culture is closely tied to the mission of the institution and is typically centered on student learning (Colwell, 2006). This is supported by the fact that on average, teachers at liberal arts colleges spend more than 65% of their time teaching (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2004). The nature of work at a LAC is collaborative, partly as a function of tradition and partly due to fiscal limitations (Hirt, 2006).

The Dean of Students at a LAC serves an important function, providing leadership and managing a variety of areas (Bass, 2006). Possibly the most generalist position on campus, the Dean of Students often supervises the majority of student services including residence life, campus life, student conduct, career services, health services, Greek affairs, multicultural affairs, first-year experience, recreation, and disability services (Hirt, 2006; Tederman, 1997; Westfall, 2006). Discussing the portfolio of Deans of Students at small colleges, Heida (2006) described the role as influenced by the institutional mission, history, resources, strategic plans, and presidential preferences. Although the role has changed over time, the need for highly skilled and flexible individuals has not.

Moving beyond mere descriptions of the role of the Dean, very little published research exists on the experience or nature of the role at LACs. In a 2004 study on the nature of student affairs work at in this setting, the researchers used paired word selection as a way for student affairs administrators at LACS to describe their work (Hirt, Amelink, & Schneider, 2004). From their choices, such as “collaborative or competitive,” themes were drawn. Although this study did not focus specifically on the role of Dean of Students, the results offer insight into the nature of the work at these colleges. In the study, three themes emerged around the manner in which work is conducted, the work environment, and work habits in relation to students. Administrators reported that their work was conducted in a collaborative fashion, was challenging in a positive way, and balanced with support and recognition. In addition, the work environment revealed that they hold multiple responsibilities, find it difficult to say no to professional requests for their time, and conduct their work in a highly professional manner. Finally, they described their work habits as student-centered, practical, and service-oriented.

Conclusion

The literature provides a rich history of the Dean of Students position, the nature of the small liberal arts college, and past challenges Deans of Students have faced. If history is a good predictor, and current events a barometer, then it is clear that today’s Dean of Students faces myriad challenges. Student affairs professionals continue to be educated in graduate programs at large research institutions where they may not have the opportunity to experience or understand the small liberal arts college environment. In order to provide better education to aspiring or future

Deans of Students, as well as appropriate institutional supports, it is necessary to have a clear understanding of what the role involves.

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