

# Student Affairs in Community College Contexts

by Francena Turner, Research Assistant  
 Fredrick Douglass Dixon, Research Assistant  
 Eboni M. Zamani-Gallaher, OCCRL Director

## The Evolution of Student Affairs Practice

Student affairs as a field began to take cogent shape during the late 19th – early 20th century and falls into three movements and nomenclatures: student personnel work (early 1900s – 1950s), student development (1960s – mid-1990s), and student learning (mid-1990s – present). The early 20th century saw the rise of several professional organizations for student personnel workers at 4-year institutions. Deans of women formed the National Association of Women Deans (NAWD), which later became the National Association of Women in Education (NAWE) in 1916. The National Association of Deans of Men (NADM), founded in 1919, merged with an organization for deans of students to form today's National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA). Still later, the National Association of Placement Secretaries became the American College Personnel Association (ACPA). Today NASPA and the ACPA are the leading student affairs organizations in the United States. A 1929 conference eventually led to the first official professionalizing document for the student affairs field. Clothier offered an early formal definition:

Personnel work in a college or university is the systematic bringing to bear on the individual student and all those influences, of whatever nature, which will stimulate him and assist him through his own efforts, to develop in body, mind, and character to the limit of his powers so developed most effectively to the work of the world. (as cited in Hinton, Howard-Hamilton, & Rentz, 2011, p. 46)

Essentially student personnel work concerned itself with holism—the condition of the whole student and not solely the student's classroom pursuits.

In order to further define key terms and efforts in the field, a group of scholars, some from the previous conference, produced the Student Personnel Point of View, five guiding principles that defined the field as an organization that is holistic, is student-centered, and is an integral part of the education process (Hinton, Howard-Hamilton, & Rentz, 2011). Here, Cowley offered a more succinct definition:

The personnel point of view is a philosophy of education which puts emphasis upon the individual student and his all-around-development as a person rather than upon his intellectual training alone and which promotes the establishment in educational institutions of curricular programs, methods of instruction, and extra-instructional media to achieve such emphasis. (as cited in Hinton, Howard-Hamilton, & Rentz, 2011, p. 47)

With the advent of the 1944 GI Bill, college enrollment exploded and community colleges grew in both relevance and importance as student bodies swelled. As such, student personnel workers had to expand their views and their methods to accommodate an ever-growing and diversifying student body that was increasingly of color and varying levels of academic preparation. In 1949, with the devastation of World War II in mind, the field responded by revising the Student Personnel Point of View to include efforts that should lead to a global democratic citizenship and an acknowledgement of the age, nationality, marital status, and veteran status of student bodies (Hinton, Howard-Hamilton, & Rentz, 2011).



<sup>1</sup>Student affairs professionals have been referred to a number of ways over the years, and I use the terminology of the time in this piece.

The Civil Rights Movements of the 1950s and 1960s further increased student, governmental, and industry expectations, and colleges responded by shifting their focus to student development. Community college student personnel professionals began to confer and publish articulations of their work toward that end. C. C. Collins' 1967 report, *Junior College Student Personnel Programs—What They Are and What They Should Be*, represents one of the earliest publications dedicated to evaluating community college student affairs work. In doing so, student personnel work at the community college level needed to be defined and the degree to which community colleges were doing that work needed to be determined.

Furthermore, the level of preparation of student personnel professionals needed to be assessed, and appropriate policy suggestions needed to be made. In addition to defining 21 key functions of community college personnel programs and finding that most community colleges were not adequately performing those functions, the study found that there were little to no adequate graduate programs that specifically centered on community colleges as a discrete specialization. Student personnel coursework that focused on the traditional-aged residential student was the norm, and this affected senior student personnel leaders' ability to train staff from a student services background adequately. The team suggested that graduate programs offer either community-college-centered courses and or majors. It would be nearly two decades before the next statement piece.

Student affairs comprises a diverse array of services that can make a student's educational trajectory a meaningful and swift experience, including resource location, counseling, crisis intervention, housing and resident life, and minority student affairs. When students' interactions with administration, faculty, and staff, particularly with student affairs professionals, are positive, it shapes and heightens their desire to succeed academically and socially.

In the early 1980s, community colleges were experiencing more local and national oversight amid an ever-expanding and diversifying student body, and student development services were often working with ever-shrinking budgets. The *Traverse City Statement*, the work of student development leaders from community colleges from the United States and Canada, revisited the needs and tensions in community college student development work (Keyser, 1985). It gave local and national level suggestions for improvements in areas such as creatively managing resources, integrating student affairs into instructional and administrative decision-making, and evaluating programs. In 1989, community college scholars revisited the initial recommendations in *Toward the Future Vitality of Student Development Services: Traverse City—Five Years Later* (Keys, 1989). Both documents addressed graduation programs and the academic/professional preparation of student affairs professionals.

The current movement, student learning, began in the 1990s with an increased focus on measurable outcomes. In this movement, student affairs administrators and practitioners represent a valued entity in the success of a burgeoning student population. Student affairs comprises a diverse array of services that can make a student's educational trajectory a meaningful and swift experience, including resource location, counseling, crisis intervention, housing and resident life, and minority student affairs. When students' interactions with administration, faculty, and staff, particularly with student affairs professionals, are positive, it shapes and heightens their desire to succeed academically and socially. In addition, a growing sentiment regarding the potential of student affairs to provide additional career tracks that encourage graduating students to become higher education professionals continues to expand.

## On-Ramps to the Community College Student Affairs Profession

Student affairs professionals remain responsible for creating an atmosphere that requires a connection to a vast knowledge base of human needs. According to Ashley Knight,

Excellence is developed in community college student affairs professionals through consistent application of the kinds of actions that are termed best practices or promising practices. Taking it one step further, evidence-based practices are the gold standard, and these are found in institutions that habitually measure and assess the results of their actions. (Knight, 2014, p. 6)

Student affairs professionals address pressing social justice issues imperative to student success. The profession attracts individuals from diverse worldviews and widens the potential graduate student candidate pool (Latz, Ozaki, Royer, & Hornak, 2016). Attracting graduate students on pathways to student affairs careers is necessary, as nearly half of all undergraduates enrolled in postsecondary education attend community colleges (American Association of Community Colleges, 2017).

As individuals move from early career to senior student affairs positions they possess a host of experiences across diverse departments that correlate to the institution's mission (Nadler, Newman, & Miller, 2011). Prior community college leadership research shows pathways to community college student affairs positions began with varying levels of graduate training. However, the more popular pathways to graduate studies in student affairs and subsequent careers as student affairs professionals for many often occur from deep engagement in student organizations as undergraduates (Helgot & Culp, 2005) and/or via serendipity.

Many student affairs and higher education administration graduate programs generally offer courses that reinforce and norm-reference 4-year collegiate contexts, and little if any exposure to student development and nuances of campus life at community colleges (Kelsay & Zamani-Gallaher, 2014). Although some higher education and student affairs administration programs offer graduate-level coursework specific to the community college sector, more often than not, there is a single course offering, and it is elective not required. There also should be intentional partnering of student affairs and higher education graduate programs with community colleges that provides administrative and research internships that place graduate students in positions in student affairs units to gain pragmatic skills and experience working in community college contexts and serving community college students.

Institutions that invest in and bolster student services will reap rewards and set the pace for community college student success if actively working in concert with student affairs and acknowledging student affairs as co-curricular partners in advancing the academic mission. While student affairs professionals in community colleges are essential, there is a dearth of organizations founded explicitly to meet the needs of community college student affairs professionals. Among the few is the [National Council on Student Development \(NCSD\)](#) that advocates for and provides professional development for community college student development professionals. There are a few select states that have student services organizations to meet the professional development needs of student affairs professionals: [Iowa Community College Student Services Association](#), [Michigan Community College Student Services Association](#), [College Student Personnel Association of New York State](#), and the [Texas Association of Community College Student Affairs Administrators](#). Additionally, pathways to student affairs in community colleges need to diversify the leadership pipeline to add perspectives that aid in better engaging the whole student while also finding richer ways to evaluate and improve current practices. Graduate programs in student affairs often ignore the

community college context or subsume it under general practices (Biddix, Giddens, Darsey, Fricks, Tucker, & Robertson, 2012; Lunceford, 2014).

As preparation for playing a leading role in composing a competitive global workforce, community colleges in concert with the field of student affairs will bear the acute burden of widening their complex networks of servicing the unique needs of community college students. (Owens, Thrill, & Rockey, 2017). One means of addressing student persistence in the current college completion era is through advancing student affairs within 2-year contexts (Cooper, 2010; Helgot & Culp, 2005). Like Collins (1967), we see merit in fueling the pipeline well before the graduate level to introduce students to the importance of student support services to the value of community college education.



## References

- American Association of Community Colleges (2017). *Fast facts*. Washington, DC: Author.
- Biddix, J. P., Giddens, B. M., Darsey, J., Fricks, J. B., Tucker, B. D., & Robertson, J. W. (2012). Career paths and choices leading to the senior student affairs office (SSAO) for women at community colleges. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, 36(9), 713–732.
- Collins, C. C. (1967). *Junior college student personnel programs -- What they are and what they should be*. Washington, DC: American Association of Junior Colleges.
- Cooper, M. (2010). *Student support services at community colleges: A strategy for increasing student persistence and attainment*. Washington, DC: Institute for Higher Education Policy. White House Summit on Community Colleges.
- Helfgot, S. R., & Culp, M. M. (Eds.). (2005). *Community college student affairs: What really matters*. Jossey-Bass.
- Hinton, K., Howard-Hamilton, M., & Rentz, A. (2011). A historical perspective of higher education and student affairs: Transitions and transformation. In N. Zhang (Ed.), *Rentz's student affairs practice in higher education, 4th edition* (pp. 30–62). Springfield, IL: Charles C. Thomas Publisher's LTD.
- Kelsay, L. S., & Zamani-Gallaher, E. M. (2014). Preface. In L. S. Kelsay & E. M. ZamaniGallaher (Eds.), *Working with students in community colleges: Contemporary strategies for bridging theory, research, and practice* (pp. xv–xvi). Sterling VA: Stylus Publishing.
- Keys, Robert C. (1989). *Toward the future vitality of student development services: Traverse City—twenty-five years later*. Traverse City, MI: National Council on Student Development.
- Keyser, J. (1984). *Traverse City statement: Toward the future vitality of student development services*. Traverse City: National Council on Student Development.
- Knight, A. (2014). Excellence in community college student affairs. *New Directions for Community Colleges*, 166, 5–12.
- Latz, A. O., Ozaki, C. C., Royer, D. W., & Hornak, A. M. (2017). Student affairs professionals in the community college: Critically examining preparation programs from a social justice lens. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, 41(11), 733–746.
- Lunceford, C. (2014). It takes a village: The role of the individual, organization, and professional in the preparing new professionals. *New Directions for Community Colleges*, 166, 13–20.
- Nadler, D. P., Newman, R. & Miller, M. T. (2012). [Leadership development on the college campus: The student affairs conundrum](#). *e-Journal of Organizational Learning and Leadership*.
- Owens, D., Thrill, C., & Rocky, M., (2017, June). [Equity and student services](#). *FEATURE on Research and Leadership*, 3(2), 1–8.



Francena Turner may be reached at [fturner2@illinois.edu](mailto:fturner2@illinois.edu).  
 Fredrick Douglass Dixon may be reached at [fdixon2@illinois.edu](mailto:fdixon2@illinois.edu).  
 Eboni M. Zamani-Gallaher may be reached at [ezamanig@illinois.edu](mailto:ezamanig@illinois.edu).