

The Nature of Relationships and Rewards for Student Affairs Professionals at Liberal Arts Institutions

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This study examined the nature of relationships and rewards for student affairs administrators at liberal arts colleges (LACs). Forty-three student affairs administrators from LACs participated in five focus groups. Results indicate that administrators tend to spend most of their time with students, followed by other student affairs administrators, and support staff. Student affairs professionals at LACs rate intrinsic rewards such as meaningful work more favorably than extrinsic rewards such as salary and benefits.

In higher education today, the field of student affairs represents an increasingly complex set of programs and services such as admissions, financial aid, student housing, student activities, and academic support services (Austin, 2002). With this growing complexity, administrators need a broad range of skills, experiences, and knowledge to succeed professionally. Ascending to higher levels of authority requires a combination of opportunities, skills, good fortune, and hard work (Blimling, 2002).

Many student affairs graduate programs, however, fall short in terms of equipping new professionals with the kinds of skills and knowledge they need to succeed. This programmatic oversight may be due to the myth that organizational and administrative skills are best learned on the job (Woodard, Love & Komives, 2000). Research suggests that graduate programs across the board fail to prepare emerging professionals for their respective positions in higher education (Austin, 2002; Gaff 2002).

This situation is further complicated by the diversity of institutions within the American higher education system. The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching has defined 18 unique types of institutions within the system. Most student affairs graduate programs are housed at either research universities or comprehensive institutions (Hirt, 2003). As a result, graduate students have limited exposure to professional life at other institutional types (Austin, 2002; Richmond, 1986).

Consider, for example, how student affairs work at a liberal arts college is different than work at a community college or a doctorate-granting institution. The transition from a graduate program at a research university or comprehensive institution into a position at a small liberal arts college can be particularly challenging because of the shift in the nature of work at these dramatically different types schools (Richmond, 1986).

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According to the Carnegie Foundation, Baccalaureate Colleges – Liberal Arts institutions are defined as “primarily undergraduate colleges with major emphasis on baccalaureate programs. During the period studied, they awarded at least half of their baccalaureate degrees in liberal arts fields” (Carnegie Foundation, 2005, ¶6). By definition, traditional liberal arts degrees are conferred in areas such as literature/letters; foreign languages; mathematics; philosophy; physical sciences; social sciences; and history (Carnegie Foundation, 2004). Pfinister (1984) further defines LACs as institutions that adhere “to the traditional liberal arts curriculum, providing individuals with a basic grounding in the meaning of one’s culture and the skills in analysis and presentation that are necessary for successful pursuit of professional and advanced study” (p. 48).

There has been ample research conducted on aspects of LACs, including shifting curricula, the role of faculty, and academic administrators. In recent years, research has revealed a shift in liberal arts curricula from more traditional offerings to professional curricula (Cejda & Duemer, 2001; Delucchi, 1997; Lang, 1999). These studies have revealed discrepancies between the Carnegie Liberal Arts classification and the curricular offerings of LACs as described in their literature. Curricula are being driven by increasing social, corporate, and fiscal demands that prompt LACs to offer more professional programs and, in turn, diminish their focus on liberal arts (Delucchi, 1997).

In addition to curricula, literature has also examined the work of faculty members at LACs. For example, research is a mainstay of faculty work. Research by LAC faculty, however, tends to be more diverse, student-centered, and focused on knowledge dissemination rather than contributions to the specific field (Ruscio, 1987). Faculty members at LACs study how students learn their disciplines rather than issues of the discipline itself. This may explain why there is a positive correlation between more effective researchers and the quality of teaching at LACs (Michalak & Robert, 1981).

This is not to say that the transition from graduate education at a research university to a faculty position at a LAC is easy. Many new LAC faculty members have difficulties adjusting to the type of research conducted at LACs and the more positive perceptions toward administration that faculty at LACs hold (Wilson, 2000).

Administrators at LACs have also been examined in the literature. Tied closely to curricular and faculty issues, academic administrators at LACs have merited attention. Assessment has been conducted on the concerns of academic deans and their perceived ability to deal with those concerns (Montez & Wolverton, 2000). There are significant differences among LAC academic administrators based on gender, age, and years of experience.

Literature on student affairs administrators at LACs has been more limited. Some work has addressed LAC professionals in general and concluded that they serve the specific function of promoting student development (Palm, 1985). Additional work has been conducted on chief student affairs officers (CSAOs). CSAOs at

LACs report that their role and function are affected by different variables. The personality of the president, the religious affiliation of the institution (if any), and the size of the campus' endowment all influence what CSAOs do and how they accomplish their responsibilities (Palm, 1985; Tederman, 2000). Beyond these, studies that focus exclusively on student affairs work at LACs have yet to be conducted.

To summarize, student affairs is a complex profession that requires a unique set of skills (Blimling, 2002). These skills are applied at different types of institutions (Richmond, 1986). Although ample research exists on curricular issues (Cejda & Duemer, 2001; Delucchi, 1997; Lang, 1999), faculty (Michalak & Robert, 1981; Ruscio, 1987; Wilson, 2000), and academic administrators (Montez & Wolverton, 2000) at LACs, little research exists on the nature of professional life for student affairs administrators at these institutions. With this in mind, the purpose of this study was to address two important aspects of student affairs life at LACs:

1. What is the nature of relationships for student affairs administrators at liberal arts institutions?
2. What is the nature of rewards for student affairs administrators at liberal arts institutions?

Method

This study was conducted in conjunction with a national professional organization for student affairs administrators. Each year, a national conference is hosted at which student affairs administrators from around the country assemble to engage in professional development and networking. This conference provided an opportunity to conduct focus groups with representatives from LACs around the country.

Participants

Forty-three student affairs professionals from liberal arts colleges participated in five focus groups conducted at the professional conference. Table 1 describes the demographic characteristics of the participants. The participants provided data that examined the nature of relationships and rewards at liberal arts institutions.

Respondents were invited to participate in the study by the conference planners. To ensure maximal participation, personal emails were sent to all members from LACs who planned to attend the conference. Student affairs administrators who attended the 2003 conference and agreed to participate in the study were directed to register electronically to participate in one of five focus groups.

Instrumentation

The instrument used to collect data was a mixed method focus group protocol containing three segments. The protocol incorporated both qualitative and quantitative aspects, one way to thoroughly explore an issue (Creswell, 2003). The first segment served as an introduction to the study and overview of the session.

Two other segments utilized instruments designed to elicit data about the nature of relationships and rewards (respectively) at LACs.

The first instrument focused on data related to the nature of relationships between participants and constituent groups on their campuses such as students, student affairs colleagues, faculty members, and academic deans. Participants were asked to do three things. First, they listed a word or phrase that positively characterized the nature of the relationship between student affairs professionals on their campus and the constituent group. Next, they noted a word or phrase describing negative characteristics of the relationship with that same group. Finally, they estimated the percentage of time student affairs professionals on their campuses spent with each constituent group. After completing the worksheet, participants engaged in a discussion about their relations with other groups on campus.

The second instrument focused on data related to the nature of rewards at LACs. Participants were asked to rank order 15 rewards from 1 (*most important*) to 15 (*least important*). The list of rewards included items like advancement opportunities, autonomy, benefits, leave time, office space, performance reviews, recognition and praise, and salary. Then respondents discussed their rationale for their rankings in an open dialogue guided by the moderators.

Procedure

The focus groups were held in a meeting room at one of the conference hotels. All focus groups were audio taped and led by a moderator and a technical support person. As participants arrived at the focus group session, their name and institution were noted, they were given a nametag and a pre-coded participant packet, and they were asked to sit around a 15-person conference table. To limit potential bias, the moderator asked the participants not to preview the participant packet until directed to do so.

Once all participants were seated, the moderator explained the project and the process that would be used for the focus group. Exercises and discussions were then conducted. At the end of the session, all data including audiotapes, completed participant packets, and moderator materials were sealed in an envelope until the information could be transcribed and processed.

Data obtained from focus groups were compiled and tabulated using a spreadsheet. For nature of relationships, data relative to percentages of time spent with each constituent group were calculated. The phrases and words that were used to describe what participants liked and disliked about each constituent group were also captured in the spreadsheet and categorized into four groupings.

Table 1

Demographic Characteristics of Participants (N = 43)

Characteristic	<i>n</i>	%
Institution		
4 year Public	2	5
4 year Private	41	95
Undergrad enrollment		
<999	4	9
1000-4999	37	86
5000-9999	2	5
Age		
20-30	15	34
31-40	8	19
41-50	12	28
51-60	8	19
61-70		
Years in student services		
0-2	4	9
3-5	8	18
6-9	6	14
10-more	25	59
Primary activity		
Career Planning	1	2
Disabled services	1	2
Greek Affairs	2	5
Leadership dev.	1	2
Residence Life	11	26
Student Activities	2	5
Student Affairs Adm.	23	53
Student Union	2	5
Secondary Responsibility		
Yes	20	47
No	18	42
Level of Responsibility		
Entry	8	19
Mid	12	28
Cabinet	23	53
Sex		
F	18	42
M	25	58
Race		
African American	2	5
Mexican American	1	2
Puerto Rican American	1	2
Other Latino/Hispanic	2	5
White	37	86

For nature of rewards, data were compiled and tabulated using a second spreadsheet. Mean scores were determined by averaging the rankings provided by each participant. The rewards were then listed by average ranking from most important to least important. Utilizing this analytical approach, results were used to answer the research questions posed in the study.

Results

Table 2 describes the nature of relationships at liberal arts institutions. Participants indicated that they spend most of their time (38.9%) with students, student affairs colleagues (22.3%), and support staff (10.4%). Under each group, categories of descriptors were listed that indicate what these professionals liked and disliked about working with each particular group. Participants used descriptors that fell into one of four categories: words that describe the group (e.g., energetic, self-absorbed), words that identify the impact the group has on professionals (e.g., gives purpose, time drain), descriptions of the relationships of the group to professionals (e.g. supportive, dependent), and what members of the group do (e.g., validate, complain). A fifth category labeled “unassigned,” included words that did not fall neatly into one of the four categories. Table 2 reports the raw number and overall percentage of words that fell within each category. For example, under what professionals liked about working with students, respondents used 21 (44.7%) words that described group characteristics, 21 (44.7%) words describing the impact of students on professionals, and 3 (6.4%) words describing their relationship to students.

Finally, Table 3 describes data on the nature of rewards at liberal arts institutions. Participants rated 15 different types of rewards on a scale from 1 to 15. The overall rankings and mean scores are reported in this table. The top four rewards reported by professionals in liberal arts institutions were (a) engaging in meaningful work, (b) working in a positive environment, (c) having good relationships with co-workers, and (d) having the ability to influence decisions.

Data obtained in this study help describe the characteristics of working at liberal arts institutions. By assessing these data, the nature of relationships and rewards can be framed to create a more complete description of what professional life is like for student affairs professionals at liberal arts institutions.

Discussion

Specific conclusions can be drawn about the nature of professional life at liberal arts institutions from data obtained in this study. These conclusions address the research questions posed in the study.

The Nature of Relationships

The nature of relationships was examined through the groups with which student affairs professionals spend time, as well as what professionals like and dislike about spending time with each group. Data suggest that student affairs professionals at

Table 2

Nature of Relationships (N = 43)

Groups ^a /Themes ^b	% Time Spent with Group	<u>Comments by Theme</u>	
		<i>n</i>	%
Students	38.9		
Like:			
-Who they are (energetic, involved, creative)		21	44.7
-Impact on Professional (purpose, challenging, refreshing)		21	44.7
-Relationship to Professionals (supportive, connection)		3	6.4
-Unassigned		2	4.3
Dislike:			
-Who they are (entitlement, self-absorbed, disenchanting)		28	66.7
-What they do (demanding, confronting, whining)		8	19.0
-Impact on Professionals (draining, frustrating, take time)		6	14.3
Student Affairs Colleagues	22.3		
Like:			
-Rel'p to Professional (collaborative, team, supportive)		17	41.5
-Who they are (student-centered, competent, energetic)		11	26.8
-What they do (understand, support, validate)		8	19.5
-Impact on Professionals (refreshing, prof. Development)		5	12.2
Dislike:			
-Who they are (busy, unprofessional, territorial)		23	60.0
-Rel'p to Professional (negative toward colleagues)		8	20.5
-What they do (complain, resist change, get stuck)		6	15.4
-Unassigned		2	5.2
Support Staff	10.4		
Like:			
-Who they are (supportive, committed, helpful)		24	64.9
-What they do (expand skills, organization, good ideas)		8	21.6
-Relationship to Professional (positive rel'p, team)		4	10.8
-Unassigned		1	2.7
Dislike:			
-Who they are (narrow focus, want more time, lack vision)		20	69.0
-Rel'p to Professional (dependent, departmental, suspicious)		4	13.8
-Unassigned		5	17.2

^a Groups with which student affairs professionals spend time^b Themes from participant comments about each group

Table 3

Ranking of Rewards (N = 43)

Reward	Rank	Mean Score
Meaningful Work	1	1.9
Positive Work Environment	2	3.1
Good Relationships/coworkers	3	4.7
Ability to Influence Decisions	3	4.7
Autonomy	5	6.0
Recognition/Praise	6	6.6
Salary	7	7.7
Support for Cont Ed/Prof Dev	8	8.7
Work Schedule	9	9.0
Support Staff	10	9.9
Benefits	11	10.7
Advancement Opportunities	12	11.1
Leave Time	13	11.2
Performance Reviews	14	12.0
Office Space	15	12.3

Note. Participants ranked rewards of working at a Liberal Arts College from 1 (*most important*) to 15 (*least important*) to job satisfaction.

LACs spend over 70% of their time with people from three groups: students, student affairs colleagues, and support staff.

Student affairs professionals spend nearly 40% of their time with students. The words used to describe what professionals like about this group include challenging, supportive, and dynamic. One professional explained,

I think that working with students you're always going to get something different. Each student brings something different to you and it keeps the environment you work in when dealing with students all the time a dynamic environment. You're not dealing with the same things every day.

Another saw the relationship with students in terms of rewards received as a result of that interaction:

They affirm what we do. I think most of our students – we don't have grades or paychecks to hold over them and so, when they come to us for advice or to solve a problem, it is because they see something in us that is appealing.

Despite the positive aspects of dealing with students, there were also some downsides to such relationships. One participant explained how a sense of entitlement among students was a negative aspect of the relationship with students:

When I get a call from my director, who got a call from her supervisor, because a parent or student reported something directly to the president because they felt their need or their problem was more important than anybody else's.... The way I work with students is sometimes very difficult ... because they feel they are paying so much money that they shouldn't have to wait or have something not go their way.

On average, student affairs professionals spend 22.3% of their time with student affairs colleagues. The words used to describe what they like about this group include collaborative, supportive, and student centered. One participant elaborated,

They are your colleagues and become your friends, especially at smaller liberal arts colleges, where you are the only handful of people that do what you do coming from different parts of the country to do it.

Another participant explained the supportive nature of student affairs colleagues:

I think that they are ... the people that really understand what we do. We try to describe to the community what our work is – it is hard for them to understand or realize that people actually get paid for doing what we do. Your colleagues do understand and see how you fit into the larger work.

The time-consuming nature of collaboration was an aspect of the relationship with student affairs colleagues that participants disliked. “Just the time involved in trying to keep those friendships and relationships going, because it deters you from working with students and that’s frustrating.”

Student affairs professionals spend 10.4% of their time with support staff. Participants described the relationship with support staff in terms of their helpful and committed nature. They see them as partners in their work:

My support staff I see as the gatekeepers. They really know an awful lot of information about several different functions and they are really sort of my eyes and ears in terms of what students are coming in, what kinds of questions students are coming in with, what are they hearing.

There were also aspects that participants disliked about the relationship with support staff. Evidently the partnership had some limitations:

Support staff are hourly wage or salaried employees, so I know there is sort of that “mind the clock” orientation there. I consider them and I hope that they consider themselves a part of the community and part of the educational process and part of the work that we do. That’s more easily said than done.

On a typical day, student affairs professionals spend the majority of their time with students. However, the professional life of student affairs administrators at LACs is also impacted by the relationship they have with student affairs colleagues and support staff. The relationship with these latter two constituent groups is ultimately defined by how those groups help student affairs professionals nurture specific students and meet students’ developmental needs.

The Nature of Rewards

Themes related to the nature of relationships with different constituent groups at LACs are reinforced by how student affairs professionals view rewards. For this study, rewards were defined as aspects of participants' professional lives that impact job satisfaction.

Out of 15 rewards, student affairs professionals at LACs indicated intrinsic rewards impacted job satisfaction far more than extrinsic rewards. On average, meaningful work was ranked number one by participants. This reward was followed by a positive work environment, good relationships with co-workers, and the ability to influence decisions. Less important are extrinsic rewards such as recognition, salary, availability of support staff, benefits, and office space. One participant illustrated how meaningful work impacts job satisfaction at LACs:

Being able to connect is one of the reasons I'm at a small liberal arts college instead of a large public institution. I knew the name of the vice president [at my former, large campus] but maybe I was in his office once. [At the liberal arts college] students get to see me and I get to see students. I can see the effect of a decision that I've made, good or bad, and have an opportunity to correct it if it's a bad decision or at least to learn from it in some ways. After spending some time there I can see growth and maturation, I think that is the most rewarding aspect of my job - to know a first year student and then know him as a senior and see the difference between the two.

Another participant related the job satisfaction received from meaningful work to the global impact student affairs professionals at LACs have:

There is this sense that it matters, what we are doing. These communities that we are helping to sustain and develop, liberal arts colleges really are important places in terms of development, leadership, growth, and values. Just sort of thinking about who these people will become.... I really think that we see ourselves more now in the education of citizenship ... in ways in which faculty, a discipline-specific environment don't. I think that we are on a threshold of our field that we are going to be significant players at our institutions.... It is a higher calling and that's why meaningful work is so high up [on my rankings]...

Office facilities were ranked lowest among rewards. One respondent explained,

Office facilities are my least important [reward] because the more I thought about it ... I could have the greatest office in the world that can overlook scenery and have a great computer ... but if all this other stuff isn't there, I'm not going to want to go there. My office facility right now isn't that great but there are a lot of other things that make my job enjoyable [and] rewarding.

Participants in the study described themes specific to professional life as a student affairs administrator at LACs. The study revealed professionals work closely with one another to meet individual student needs. The individual-intensive environment at LACs is demanding of student affairs professionals' time. As students mature and

contribute to society, student affairs professionals at LACs find satisfaction in their jobs because they are able to see the results of time and energy they devote to students. The job satisfaction derived from relationships with colleagues and students reveals an interesting dimension of professional life at LACs.

Specific references were made about the uniqueness of LACs relative to other institutional types. In terms of relationships to students, one participant commented,

That's one of the biggest differences I found coming from a large four-year public institution where I went to undergrad and grad. Operating there, if a student is unhappy with a roommate you may move them ... you may not. Here if a student is unhappy with a roommate we move them. If a student doesn't like their furniture at a four-year public, well get over it. Here if they don't like it we do something about it because we're concerned about retention and satisfaction.

Many references to rewards were associated with the tendency for LACs to be smaller schools. One participant articulated sentiments expressed by many others:

I was thinking about this and how I'd answer this if I was working at a different kind of institution. I think I would answer it very differently.... Well I know I would if I was still at the school of 25,000. I'm not sure meaningful work would be the first one [reward] because I had to sort of seek out meaningful work when I was at a huge place and now meaningful work is just in the cards. It's just what I feel. What I touch feels meaningful because I'm dealing with people rather than policy and paper and email which is what I felt like what I was doing at the larger institution.

These results can inform both future research and future practice. In terms of future research, other questions might be addressed that concern variables associated with professional life at LACs such as institutional size, differences among levels of student affairs professionals, or gender and other demographic differences.

Graduate students who aspire to work at LACs might be assessed to determine their preconceived notions about professional life in the LAC environment. The findings of such a study could be compared to data in this study to identify gaps between the perceptions of graduate students and the perceptions of current professionals.

A third study might compare data from this study to further assessments of student affairs administrators' satisfaction with their jobs. Such data could be used to correlate levels of satisfaction to certain attributes of professional life at LACs

From a practical perspective, these results might suggest curricular changes in graduate preparation programs so that they better prepare students for work at liberal arts institutions. A curriculum or track focused on liberal arts schools may include a greater emphasis on counseling issues since professionals at LACs work so extensively and intensely with students. It might also address maintaining

relationships with colleagues as the data suggest such relationships are lifelines for administrators at LACs. Finally, preparation programs might incorporate training on managing time in order to handle multiple tasks. Nearly half the respondents in this study had ancillary responsibilities and that seems to be more the norm than the exception at LACs. Furthermore, supervisors at LACs who work closely with young professionals can use these data to better explain and market the environment when recruiting new staff. Aspects of LACs that may be appealing to young professionals include the collaborative environment, size of school, the opportunity to engage in meaningful work, and exposure to a broad array of responsibilities.

Another practical application for the data impacts human resource professionals. Orientation programs for young professionals could be strengthened by addressing dominant characteristics of LACs such as the need to multi-task and to work collaboratively. By utilizing the findings from this study, human resource professionals at LACs could build skills in new professionals to help them operate more effectively in the LAC environment.

In addition to the implications for practice and research, there were some inherent limitations to the study. First, a number of the professionals that self-reported as working at liberal arts institutions also indicated that their campuses were religiously affiliated. Further delineating these institutions may refine the results. Second, we had a disproportionately high number of cabinet level professionals in our focus groups. A professional who is a vice president may have significantly different perspectives on the nature of professional life than an entry-level administrator holds. Third, there may also be important distinctions about the institution that would influence the outcome of the data. These characteristics may include size of the student population, selectivity, endowment, location, or academic majors offered. While our respondents came from a wide variety of LACs, the data provided by 43 participants may not be reflective of the sentiments of all LAC administrators. A final limitation to the segment on the nature of rewards is reflected in the following quote from a participant:

The things I'm thinking about all the time like meaningful work, the ability to influence decisions, positive work environment, and relationships with colleagues. Everyday I experience those things so whether I am satisfied on a daily basis is important. But I realize once again where benefits, leave time, salary - I mean those things are really important to me but they are set. I mean I went into the job knowing what those were and so that was about making a decision about a job. I recognize that I made that decision when I started that job or any job and so it's not as much a part of my daily satisfaction because those are established. They don't change every day, they are generally what they are.

This comment may reveal a limitation to this element of the study. The fact that student affairs administrators deal with extrinsic rewards less frequently may have prompted them to rate intrinsic rewards as more important.

Overall, the results obtained in this study indicate some important trends in the type of work done at liberal arts institutions. By looking at the nature of relationships and rewards, a better approach to preparing graduate students who have an interest in working at liberal arts schools can be developed. Such an approach might allow for better decision-making on the part of professionals and lead them to have a greater impact on the students at such schools. Further research may lead to more effective employee selection processes for liberal arts institutions and a larger pool of informed applicants. In general, there is a need to learn more about what it is like to work at a liberal arts institution. This study provided some initial insights about that work life on which future studies may elaborate.

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