Student Affairs: Increased Visibility and Influence in the Presidential Search

With Sheila Murphy, Consultant

Senior Student Affairs Officers (SSAOs), VPs of Student Affairs, Deans of Students, and related titles are in the spotlight as campuses have become increasingly preoccupied with Title IX and other important student-related matters. Student Affairs leaders play a pivotal role in the recruitment of an institution’s next president, and are often being seen themselves as excellent candidates for presidencies. In the interview below, Witt/Kieffer consultant Sheila Murphy, a former Student Affairs leader at several schools, looks at the influential role that Student Affairs has during a presidential search and transition.

Are Student Affairs issues in general becoming more prominent in presidential searches? Are serious candidates expected to be attuned to student issues much more than in the past?

Murphy: Yes, but it has less to do with whether presidents are more curious about or committed to the fundamental dynamics of the student experience and more to do with what is often an institutionally protective strategy. A candidate will want to know the institution’s track record on, for example, Title IX violations, civil rights issues, alcohol and drug trends, and so forth. The Student Affairs agenda has come to the forefront. Especially with Title IX, there is fear that the institution will be found noncompliant and therefore subject to negative press and regulatory pressure.

A presidential candidate wants to know about student affairs because it paints a picture of what they will be walking into. As much as we would like candidates to be interested in, for instance, the quality of dorm food, it really has to do with a whole set of complicated and potentially litigious issues. Candidates come in all stripes, but serious candidates know that the ground is shifting under their feet in large part because of Title IX and an increasingly litigation-minded parent and student population.

What role should a Student Affairs Officer play in a presidential search?

Murphy: It is important that accurate information and data be made available regarding student affairs. If I were coordinating the search effort, I would go to the Student Affairs Officer to ask questions: What are our outstanding Title IX cases? What is the school’s sexual misconduct history? How many drug and alcohol emergencies are there each year? Part of my role as a search consultant is to make sure that the committee is able to give candidates a very accurate sense of these things.
In terms of the SSAO’s role, if we fast forward to campus interviews (which may or may not occur, as searches are becoming more private), it is important to make sure there is access and also to encourage as many opportunities as possible for candidates to interact with students. A Student Affairs leader provides a steady background beat of reminding people of the importance of the student in the overall institutional profile.

**Once a president is chosen, what transitional role does the SSAO play? What kinds of support will the president want right off the bat?**

**Murphy:** In the early stages of a presidency, it’s really about helping the president to feel welcome and positioned for success. It is routine in Student Affairs to help find the president opportunities for visibility – with the student newspaper, on the radio, judging a contest, announcing the starting line-up – so that he or she can be looked at as a real person. Later when the president really needs the campus, he or she has support to draw on.

Students love to see the president around on the campus. Presidents miss opportunities for easy wins all the time! When presidents make themselves accessible – spontaneously have lunch with students, for example – it becomes part of student lore.

**Do presidents typically like to bring in a new SSAO when they take a new job?**

**Murphy:** Sometimes they will, particularly if the Student Affairs Officer is not tenured. In all cases, the SSAO should try to demonstrate value and competence at every level. But of course there are always questions of fit, style, or flexibility as to what a president wants in all of her/his senior officers. And I have known Student Affairs administrators who have left their jobs on principle because new presidents pursued policies contrary to their beliefs or principles.

**SSAOs are viewed more credibly as presidential candidates. Why is this happening and do you expect the trend to continue?**

**Murphy:** Yes, I do expect it to continue. Part of the reason is that some places, structurally, are putting Student Affairs and Enrollment Management under the same portfolio. That’s a powerful combination. If you control these areas you control a lot of the portfolio. People who do so have refined and sophisticated executive experience that translates nicely into the presidency.

Another reason is the increased emphasis on thinking about the success of the institution in terms of student outcomes – that is, do you do what you say you do? Student Affairs has taken a leadership role institution-wide on matters of assessment, and these leaders become very valuable to an institution in terms of how to preserve and continue accreditation. That’s a skill set that is very much wanted, and it’s part of a trend in which people other than traditionally trained academics are being viewed as candidates for presidencies.

**About the Author**

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