

CAMPUS ASSAULT SCENARIO: THE ROLE OF THE DEAN OF STUDENT AFFAIRS

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A Campus Assault Scenario: The Role of the
Dean of Student Affairs

Today's Dean of Student Affairs must juggle a variety of roles.

The Campus Assault Scenario portrayed in the Opening Plenary Session suggests the often contradictory expectations and demands that may be simultaneously placed on this individual from a constituency which includes presidents, campus administrators, faculty, students, parents, news media and community groups.

The Dean therefore needs to develop productive and meaningful relationships with these groups, earning their respect and support.

It is important to point out that the Dean of Student Affairs is not always working in a crisis mode. In fact, successful administrators are able to keep crises to a minimum through a variety of proactive strategies. However, as a chief advocate for the educational mission of the institution, at no time is the credibility of this individual so publicly tested as in a crisis such as the one presented in this case study. Without developing the specific responses to this assault scenario from the Dean's perspective (that will be done in the extemporaneous discussion by the panel), I would like to briefly review some of the functions that a Dean often performs. Many of these duties will have

direct relevance to the case study.

Historically, student affairs originated from a commitment of higher education to buttress the academic mission by offering students a variety of programs and services outside of the classroom, which would provide additional social and real-world intellectual perspectives. By the mid to late 1940's, this objective became the responsibility of "student affairs", and the field would begin to emerge as a profession. The earlier pre-occupation with discipline would give way to an emphasis on the human growth and the development of the "whole student". These student affairs professionals would now take on the roles of change agents, advisers, counselors, researchers, diagnosticians and administrators. Student Affairs would be organized as a separate department under a Dean of Student Affairs or Vice President of Student Affairs.

Arthur Sandeen in his notable work, The Chief Student Affairs Officer has provided valuable observations and insights into the significance of this important post. He discusses how this officer must understand the complexities and ambiguities of leadership, support the President, work with students and respond to campus, community and alumni groups. He goes on to say that as a "campus leader", the chief student affairs officer must develop skills as a manager, mediator and educator. These skills and qualities are

particularly relevant to the model campus assault scenario.

Although, as I expressed earlier, Deans of Student Affairs can not define the role as merely crisis management, they must on the other hand be prepared to respond to crisis situations. It is crucial that a coordinated university-wide plan, which includes a community response, be established before a crisis occurs. The Dean in the role of "mediator" or facilitator may manage or coordinate the university's plan and the various personalities involved. The campus assault scenario suggests the consequences of the failure to have a operationalized plan in place. Such an oversight causes confusion, bitter feelings and recriminations, all of which could be avoided. As reported in Synfax Weekly 93.21, "How not to handle a crisis", there is too often a tendency to allow the "lawyers, public relations people and other mid-level executives to circle...the wagons and embark...on a finger-pointing campaign that exacerbates the public's worst fears". A well conceived encompassing plan should stress accuracy, honesty and total candor in reporting an incident to the outside world. If indeed the university is culpable, it should include a realistic strategy for preventing any similar occurrence. This might engender "good" press coverage or at least direct the public focus to the positive steps that are being taken. Care, however, must be given not to imply responsibility for an incident in which the university had no control.

The task of reporting a crisis to the outside community is much easier if there is already a positive working relationship with community officials through regular communication at formal and informal functions. If the Dean has gained the respect of these individuals, that reservoir of trust and confidence may pay huge dividends in this type of situation. Also a relationship of mutual respect and trust between the Dean and the other campus officials, especially the President, is crucial.

Finally there are some key facts presented in the assault scenario that are of particular relevance to the Dean of Students:

1. "...is enrolled at State University".
2. "Stu makes arrangements with an independent caterer for food and beer to be catered."
3. "The fraternity house is owned by the university".
4. "Special provisions regarding the house being operated as a fraternity house, but other rules regarding inspection by the university...., are evident".
5. "Stu urges Sophie to join in the fun and Sophie agrees".

6. "Jason persists, lifts her, and tosses her..."
7. "The officers.....decide to call in to their dispatcher...., they continue their rounds without stopping at the Alpha Beta Gamma house.
8. "Unfortunately, the boys throw her too far, and she strikes her head on a cement figure....knocking her unconscious and causing her to sustain a serious head injury".
9. "...an ambulance is dispatched to the scene, arriving within seven minutes"
10. "Dean of Student accesses his voice mail at 8:15 a.m..... that there had been a serious injury of a student"
11. "This is the first he hears of the accident"
12. "....confirmation of a skull fracture and a significant period of recovery with impairment"
13. "This incident follows a series of situations of rowdy student behavior during and after football games, both at the stadium and at parties"

14. "Students have complained throughout the term about noisy parties at fraternity houses"

15. "...as well as a reported incident of some hazing of some female students"

The Dean, in his ensuing interviews with all participants involved as part of the investigation that might lead to disciplinary proceedings, would place particular attention on these issues. Numbers 13 and 14 are of immense significance and may be especially devastating since it is being suggested that there exist a much broader and negative context for viewing this campus assault. A real challenge in this instance is balancing the crisis management functions in terms of the discussions with the outside community (public relations, perceptions of the university) during a student disciplinary investigation, while at the same time addressing the real individual human needs of the victim, parents, fellow students and advisers. The Dean must also remain sensitive to the overall question of the division's staff morale, which often suffers in such cases.

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