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Student Services at Metropolitan Universities

A recent study by the author, of student services at a number of metropolitan colleges and universities, indicated that the services most needed by urban commuter students are available on all campuses but are substantially underutilized. The resulting unmet needs constitute a major problem.

Some of the causes for underutilization of student services are inherent in the pattern of attendance as well as the background of the commuting students in metropolitan institutions. Students typically spend only a few hours a day on campus and have little free time in which to seek out student services. It is difficult to identify those who need assistance and to get them to make use of what is available. Most first generation urban students either have had little, if any, prior exposure to counseling and other support services or have had negative experiences with high school staff and "resource rooms." Many have stereotypic notions that counseling is for the mentally unbalanced and compensatory education for slow learners. Some may also be hesitant to use such services because they fear exposing their problems and perhaps having them noted in their records.

The reality of these barriers often leads to the assumption that underutilization of student services is inevitable for urban commuting students, and that metropolitan institutions cannot improve the situation. However, the study indicates that both the organizational patterns and the methodology of student personnel services delivery as they now exist in most institutions impede utilization of services. Both organizational patterns and delivery can and should be adapted to improve the utilization of services by urban students.

A recent study of student services at a number of metropolitan colleges and universities indicates that the services needed by urban, first generation students are available but underutilized. Underutilization, often viewed as related to the characteristics of commuting students, is also a result of the organizational patterns of student services and the methodologies used for service delivery. Both organization and delivery methodology can and should be modified to meet the needs of urban students.

Organizational Patterns of Student Personnel Services

Four factors emerge as barriers to the utilization of student services: a compartmentalized arrangement; a *laissez-faire* management style; an emphasis on organizational efficiency; and lack of systematic evaluation of the effectiveness of such services in meeting student needs.

Compartmentalized Services

The compartmentalized arrangement of student personnel services, under which most service components perform only a few specialized functions, was found in varying degrees at all the institutions studied. Almost everywhere, academic advising is treated as separate from counseling. Counselors are reluctant to offer academic advice, preferring that students see their academic advisors for this type of help. The researcher also found that financial aid offices are concerned almost exclusively with the management of aid programs. Students with financial problems who need budgeting help must go to the counseling center where they may or may not obtain such assistance.

Such a compartmentalized arrangement of student services is inconsistent in several respects with the needs of urban students. Most student problems do not fit into neat categories. Students with poor academic skills often have self-esteem problems, and students who have severe financial difficulties are apt to be under emotional stress. The academic problems of students may be caused by a combination of poor study skills, family difficulties, and high anxiety about their ability to achieve in college. Multifaceted difficulties cannot be dealt with effectively by a single specialized student services component. They require an integration of several kinds of approaches. Enabling students to overcome academic deficiencies involves building self-confidence in their ability to learn at the same time as they are being taught techniques for improving reading comprehension. Easing financial difficulties requires both direct financial aid and guidance in budgeting limited resources and cutting commuting costs. Reducing anxiety may require not only counseling but also adjustments in college policies and practices in order to accommodate special needs of urban students.

In addition, specialized student service components make it necessary for students to go from one office to another in order to obtain the help they need. Students must often make appointments before they can actually secure assistance. Such an arrangement is impractical for urban students, given the limited time they can spend on campus. The compartmentalized arrangement of services also depends on student willingness to utilize referrals for specialized assistance. Students seeking help with financial problems receive money from one source and are directed to another office for budgeting help. Similarly, students being tutored in basic mathematics

who have low self-esteem are referred to the counseling center for reasons that probably are unclear to them. There is no assurance that students will follow through on referrals. Indeed, given their unfamiliarity with counseling and other educational support services, as well as their fears of self-disclosure, it is likely that many students will not do so.

A system of specialized student services also encourages student personnel professionals to define their roles narrowly, even though they may have the capability and interest to respond to a variety of student problems. Faculty advisors may be more effective than a counselor in helping some students with personal problems, but may hesitate to get involved with issues not related to academic matters. Likewise, a career counselor may be in a better position to motivate students to improve their academic performance as a means of enhancing job prospects, but may be reluctant to inquire about grades or study habits.

The possibility of an eclectic, noncompartmentalized approach is clearly indicated by the existence on many campuses of offices or centers which respond to the multiple needs of special groups, such as African-American students, handicapped students, and older women returning to higher education. Typically, such units provide comprehensive support services ranging from personal counseling and crisis intervention to developing specialized instructional aids and barrier-free classrooms. The staff in these units combines academic skills specialists, counselors, part-time student aides, and faculty advisors. Study spaces, student lounges, and even special libraries are often contiguous to the staff offices. Such an arrangement eliminates the necessity of students going from place to place to secure help. It also facilitates the development of unified problem-solving strategies that take into account the various obstacles many urban students must overcome in order to achieve their educational goals.

Just as specialized student services components function in isolation from each other, so student services as an entity generally functions separately from academic programs. On the whole, student services staff have little contact with faculty members in their efforts to assist students. There are few instances of student services being integrated into academic programs and, except for the academic advising process, few college staff members' responsibilities encompass both student services and academic functions. The two groups tend to be separate from one another, even in their physical locations.

Since urban students spend most of their time on campus engaged in academic pursuits, integration of student services with academic programs would make assistance to students more readily available than under the present circumstances. Greater integration of student personnel with the academic enterprise also

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would promote cooperative working relationships between academic and student affairs staff and facilitate a clearer definition of joint responsibilities for helping students achieve their educational goals. Presently, student services personnel and academic staff tend to hold each other responsible for shortcomings and do not work cooperatively toward a common goal of ensuring that students receive the guidance and support they need to be successful.

Laissez-Faire Management

Another organizational factor that impedes utilization of student services by urban students is a *laissez-faire* style of management. The directors of various student services components have considerable autonomy in carrying out their functions. Much of what happens in each service unit depends on the inclination of the person in charge and the talents and experiences of the staff. Relatively little energy is invested in coordinating the efforts of the various components within an overall framework.

The *laissez-faire* style of organizational management creates several problems. First, there is no mechanism for ensuring that the objectives and operations of the various components are consistent with the overall goals for student services. Also, the lack of overall coordination and the reliance on individual inclination provides little opportunity to establish and maintain common standards. Consequently, appreciable variation exists in the way services are delivered, the treatment of students, and in the criteria for determining success in achieving goals.

The autonomy with which each service component operates also results in duplication of services and a tolerance of such overlap, particularly in the areas of academic advising, personal counseling, and career planning. When students hear that a particular service is available in several places, they become confused. In addition, the numerous offices offering the same service find themselves competing for students rather than coordinating their efforts.

Efficiency

An excessive emphasis on efficient administrative programs rather than on positive changes in student behavior also contributes to underutilization of services. This emphasis limits many of the possibilities for meaningful contacts between student services staff and students and may, in part, explain why the students interviewed in the study gave little feedback about their relationships with student services professionals. Emphasis on smooth administrative functioning often results in institutional policies and practices that lack the flexibility to respond to the diverse needs of urban students. "Efficient" administrative procedures designed to process

batches of like people do not allow for flexible scheduling in order to accommodate part-time job requirements or the extensions students need on bills until they receive their financial aid awards. In some cases, these procedures may penalize students for missing deadlines they don't understand.

The strong emphasis on efficient administration also influences student personnel staff perceptions about responsibilities vis-a-vis students. During the study, the author observed that frequently staff performance reflected greater concern with fulfilling administrative requirements than meeting student needs. For example, many staff members believe addressing a student's problem by letter satisfies the responsibility to communicate with that student.

Evaluation

Another organizational factor contributing to underutilization of student services by urban students is the absence of any systematic evaluation of the effectiveness of service programs in achieving established goals. Except in isolated instances, the author found no regular evaluation process in place. Existing accountability is geared toward assessing the efficiency of operations rather than the degree to which student needs are met. Some form of systematic evaluation of student services in relation to student needs is of utmost importance at urban institutions where the composition of the student body has changed significantly in the last twenty years.

Methodology of Student Services Delivery

The Reactive Approach

Underutilization of services by urban students can also be attributed in part to the methodology employed in their delivery, especially the reactive approach to meeting student needs that is taken by most student services components at the institutions studied. The staff too often *responds* to problems brought to its attention, rather than seeking out potential problems and taking steps to prevent their occurrence. Most staff devote their efforts to working with students who seek help. Even though the staff knows from previous experience the types of problems students are apt to have and the categories of students who will need assistance, but are unlikely to seek it, student services personnel still expect students to initiate contact.

Student services professionals have few systematic ways of identifying students who need assistance. Aside from freshman placement tests and grade report summaries, the primary methods used are individual referrals from faculty and others. The student services personnel rarely conduct either formal or informal assessments, such as determining the adequacy of students' resources for meeting college expenses or reviewing off-campus

commitments, as a first step in planning a realistic course schedule. There is also little attempt to learn about family situations even though family pressures are thought to be a major source of difficulties for urban students. The study indicated that counselors, financial aid officers, and student activities staff members rarely communicated with each other in order to ascertain which students might benefit from the services offered by other components and how to encourage students to use a variety or combination of services.

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A further aspect of the prevalent reactive manner is the lack of follow-up with students who request assistance. Few institutions make it a standard practice to be aggressive in this area. In fact, many staff members frown on such practice, believing it to be the student's responsibility. If students do not respond to suggestions, the staff assumes they don't need or care about securing available services. There are also some staff members who believe that active follow-up is an invasion of students' privacy or a denial of students' rights to conduct their personal affairs as they choose.

Most student services staff members work only with students who appear at their offices; they seldom contact students referred for help from faculty members or others. They also do not check with students directly to determine reasons for excessive absences, unless they are specifically requested to do so. Such follow-up typically consists of a formal letter and nothing more. The only observed instance of systematic follow-up involved parents inquiring about their children's progress.

The reactive approach is also reflected in the limited involvement of student services staff with compensatory education programs at the institutions studied. Students in compensatory education courses predictably encounter considerable difficulty surviving in college. Yet there are few instances of student services staff collaborating directly with compensatory education instructors to help students overcome their difficulties and achieve educational success. Collaborative efforts might include developing and implementing methods to help students in compensatory courses build self-esteem, increase motivation, and resolve nonacademic problems before they reach crisis proportions.

Inadequate Communication

Inadequate means of communicating with commuting students about available services and how to use them constitute another barrier. The institutions studied rely essentially on four methods for making students aware of services: printed materials; new student orientation programs; faculty and staff who frequently contact students; and outreach programs.

Both students and student services staff expressed frustration with all of

these methods. Printed materials, such as college catalogues, brochures, and letters, are the most widely utilized means of communicating with students. Yet students constantly miss deadlines, misunderstand academic requirements, and are often confused about matters explained in these publications. Clearly, print is not an adequate medium to purvey important information to urban students. Prior to coming to college, they have relied for information on television, radio and informal means such as "the grapevine," rather than the written word. Student services staff should foster an institutionalized grapevine through informed peer counselors and tutors.

Many orientation programs for new students include workshops and lectures on various aspects of the college, campus tours, social gatherings, meetings with academic advisors, and course selection. These typical events provide a flood of information that leaves many urban students feeling overwhelmed, confused, and only a little clearer than before about what to expect of college. The thrust of orientation programs is more on relaying information and dealing with administrative matters than facilitating student adjustment to college. There also is a tendency to accentuate positive institutional attributes, as if it were necessary to convince incoming students that they made the right college choice. As a result, most orientation programs fail to prepare urban students for the problems they will encounter once classes begin, such as the bureaucratic hassles of registration or straightening out billing. Little attempt is made to identify student problems that could be dealt with more easily before classes begin than in the middle of a semester. In addition, no effort is made to find out what students expect of college and how these expectations fit the characteristics and goals of the institution they will be attending.

Fortunately, effective orientation programs do exist. The one at Emmanuel College in Boston closely resembles the program for students enrolling in the the Educational Opportunity Program at the University of California at Los Angeles, which is considered highly successful. Emmanuel's program begins with a campus visit and an individual meeting with the associate academic dean shortly after the student is admitted. Several other individual and group meetings are held during the summer. Students meet with faculty members in their academic interest areas, select courses, correct financial aid problems, and become acquainted with the campus. A final two-day session for all students is held immediately before classes begin; the purpose is to orient students to the nonacademic aspects of the institution and help them establish friendships with other new students. By the first day of classes, most new students have a reasonably clear sense of what they

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can expect at Emmanuel and have resolved many of the difficulties that students at other institutions must contend with during the first few weeks of school. Orientation continues after classes begin, under the direction of the associate academic dean who serves as the academic advisor for all freshmen.

Lack of Incentives

A third methodological problem with student services organizations at the institutions studied is the limited number of incentives for students to use them. Utilization of student services is almost entirely on a voluntary basis. The only mandatory services are compensatory education courses for those who fall below a certain level on placement tests and academic advising in instances where an advisor's signature must be obtained in order to register for courses. Use of the other student resources is optional. Hence, whether students take advantage of services depends largely on what incentives exist for using them.

Institutional incentives for students to use student services include college credits, money, the opportunity to develop skills related to students' interests and goals, social contacts, and the desire to avoid penalties. Given the financial pressures and time constraints under which urban students attend college, academic credit and money seem to be the most attractive. The need for money is the incentive that motivates students to apply for financial aid; it also is a major reason why students are attracted to cooperative education. Similarly, the popularity of a career planning and job placement center at all the institutions studied indicates the importance that urban students attach to jobs and financial security. The fact that workshops on career and life planning, study skills, preventative health care, and other topics carry academic credit at some institutions undoubtedly accounts for why they have high student participation levels. The availability of academic credit for participation in student activities may also account for more commuter involvement in student organizations. In the institutions studied where incentives such as money and academic credit do not exist, utilization of student personnel services is consistently low. Many urban students have difficulty justifying spending scarce time on personal, intellectual, and social development when they are pressured by more immediate survival needs.

Inadequate Resources

All metropolitan colleges and universities operate under major financial constraints, which constitute further barriers to adequate utilization of student services. The situation is often aggravated by the way in which resources are distributed among student service components. In many

urban institutions that have some residential facilities, services for commuting students receive less than their fair share. Frequently, for example, the housing services staff make up a greater fraction of the total student service staff than the proportion of residential students in the institution.

In addition, although all students usually pay the same student activities fee, resident students utilize student unions more and participate in student activities to a much greater extent than do commuters. In the case of health services, a similar situation exists. All students pay the same health services fee even though commuters use these services much less than do residents. On the other hand, services that directly target specific needs of urban students are often underfunded. All institutions have compensatory education courses, but it is rare to find a comprehensive academic skills development center staffed with skills diagnosticians and specialists. Tutoring services also are limited because of scarce resources.

Extending Campus Boundaries

For institutional services to be more responsive to the needs of students at metropolitan universities, administrators need to consider the particular circumstances under which students attend college. While urban students place a high emphasis on college education as career preparation, their requests for assistance from student personnel reflect an interest in intellectual, social, and emotional growth, as well. The desire to overcome inadequate academic preparation/anxiety about whether they will be successful in college and concern for establishing meaningful relationships with faculty and peers are all examples of students' interests in other aspects of development in addition to vocational development.

The environment for urban commuting students extends beyond the traditional campus boundaries. It includes the community in which the students work and live, sleep, and study. What happens to urban students in the community context directly affects their involvement in college and the degree to which they achieve their educational goals. In their communities, students encounter not only rich learning opportunities but also obstacles to the realization of their college aspirations.

In order to help students maximize their options for personal growth, it is essential that student services at metropolitan universities address the needs of students in the context of their total environment. If student services personnel assume that the only place where they can influence the learning experiences of commuting students is within the traditional campus boundaries, then the developmental opportunities for such students are limited. When the total environment in which urban students function is viewed as the context in which learning and growing take place, opportunities for student development are increased one hundredfold. In addition, viewing learning in this larger context eliminates much of the frustration

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generated for student services staffs by the limited time that urban students spend on the traditional campus, since learning is no longer restricted to this setting. At commuting institutions, much of the students' environment is outside the control of college staff members. The job of student services professionals at urban institutions, therefore, is not so much to create an environment that encourages student development, as would be the case at a largely residential campus, as it is to help students capitalize on the positive learning opportunities in the larger metropolitan community and overcome obstacles found in that setting.

Extending the campus boundaries of metropolitan colleges and universities to include the environment in which students live and work has several implications for the conceptual framework of student services at these institutions. To seem relevant to urban students and their felt needs for assistance, student services must attempt to integrate students' off-campus experiences with on-campus learning options. In many instances, it is also desirable to recognize the legitimacy of off-campus learning experiences by granting academic credit rewards if off-campus learning with college credit will provide an incentive for urban students to identify and engage in other community-based opportunities for personal development.

Viewing the off-campus lives of urban students as an integral part of their learning experiences parallels in some respects the concern that residential colleges take in the personal lives of their students. This concern is reflected in the intensive staffing of residence halls and extensive programming of on-campus extracurricular activities. In the case of urban students, the neighborhoods in which they live are their dormitories and student centers, and the community activities in which they participate are their extracurricular interests.

At urban institutions, student services staff also must be sensitive to racial oppression, poverty, and other obstacles in the larger environment that confront many urban students. Student services professionals cannot change the urban environment. They can, however, acknowledge the societal forces that impinge upon the development of urban students. They also can provide formal and informal learning situations in which urban students can acquire the knowledge and skills needed to overcome societal obstacles and make progress toward their goals.

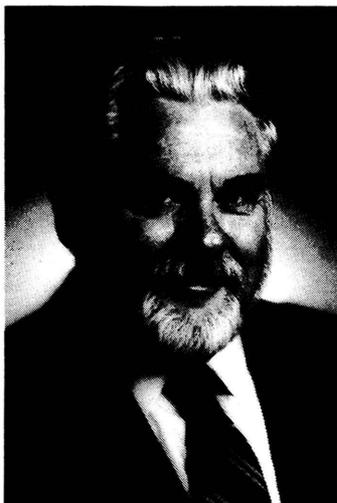
Extending campus boundaries to include the urban environment could involve the utilization of community resources to assist students with nonacademic problems. Such problems include family difficulties, inadequate housing, financial crises, legal hassles, lack of transportation, and child care problems, as well as anxieties resulting from the conflicting roles of spouse, breadwinner, single parent, and student. These problems are

commonly found within urban student populations, and they often interfere both with students' academic performance and personal development. Universities are not multiservice social welfare agencies and cannot deal directly with all such problems. But student services staff should be familiar with community-based sources of support and expertise to which they can refer students.

While there are significant limitations to the utilization of student services by commuters, it is possible to make improvements that will increase student use. Urban students need the learning opportunities and assistance provided by student services. Restructuring the present organization and modifying service delivery methodologies will make services more responsive to urban student needs. Services for urban students can be further improved by expanding the definition of the metropolitan campus to include the larger community in which students live and work and by utilizing community resources to enhance student learning experiences and assist with student problems.

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