The Challenges Facing Senior Student Affairs Practitioners.

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Outline

- What is a SSAO?
- The role of a SSAO?
- The challenges of a SSAO?
- Strategies for SSAO.
What is an SSAO?

- According to the University of Wisconsin System an SSAO is a Senior Student Affairs Officer who is a senior level administrator in charge of the division that provides services, support, and education that enhances student’s academic, social and personal development.
- SSAOs strive to foster inclusion and work to strengthen a sustainable educationally diverse co-curricular environment where all students have access and the support they need to achieve their educational goals.
- The SSOs are responsible for ensuring effective student service delivery and student development efforts. Their primary responsibilities are:
  - Leadership
  - Management
  - Compliance
  - Student conduct
  - Residence life
  - Strategic direction
  - Policy development
  - And administrative oversight of the Division of Student Affairs
Who are these people and what do they really do?

- “The role of the SSAO is complex and crucial to the effective leadership of their student services organization” Tull (2004)
- “The role of the SSAO is ever changing with no single model for organizing programs and services in the student Affairs organization (Hirt, 2006; Laws, 2011; Miller & Miles 2008)
- “Today SSAOs are charged with the supervision of a whole host of services that have been said to serve the broadest spectrum of students in higher education” Tull (2004)
- There is no single characteristic to describe SSAOs. Variety of titles:
  - Vice President for Student Affairs/Student Services
  - Executive Directors of Student Affairs
  - Senior Director/Director/Dean of Students
- Variety of titles for divisions:
  - Student Affairs
  - Student Services
  - Student Support & Development
  - Student Life
  - Campus life, etc.
SSAOs’ Portfolios

- Academic Advising/Educational Counselling Programs
- Admission Programs
- Adult/Non-Traditional Student Services
- Alcohol, Tobacco, Other Drug Programs
- Bookstore Services
- Campus Activities Programs
- Campus Information and Visitor Services
- Campus Religious and Spiritual Programs
- Career Services
- Childcare Services
- Clinical/Health Programs
- College Honor Societies
- College Unions
- College Preparatory Programs
- Commuter and Off campus Living Programs
- Conference and Events Programs
- Counselling Services
- Dining/Food Services
- Disability Support Services
- Distance Education Programs
- Education Abroad Programs and Services
- Financial Aid/Student Employment Programs
- Fraternity and Sorority Advising Programs
- Health Promotions Programs
- Housing and Residential Life Programs
- International Student Programs
- Internship Programs
- Learning Assistance Programs
- Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Programs
- Multicultural Student Programs and Services
- Orientation (New Student) Programs
- Outcomes Assessment and Program Evaluation
- Recreational Sport Programs
- Registrar Programs and Services
- Service Learning Programs
- Student Conduct/Discipline Programs
- Student Leadership Programs
Challenges facing SSAOs

- Lack of clear institutional philosophy and model of Student Affairs, which impacts
  - Positioning & reporting lines
  - Staffing
  - Resourcing
- Competition for resources
- Role ambiguity & role conflict
  - Balancing advocacy and managerialism
- Lack of standardized Student Affairs personnel development programmes (NASDEV & ACUHO-I, etc. attempting to address this)
  - Student Affairs practitioners competencies
- Massification
Challenges cont’d

- The advent of technology – a boon or a curse?
- Diverse student needs
- The cultural dynamics of students on campuses have increasingly become complex, making the work of student affairs professionals ever more challenging.
  - Issues and concerns that include significant variables such as race, gender, physical ability, age, income, and other social variables contribute to the difficulty in creating an environment that is “welcoming for all students…”
- Restructuring- re allocation of functional areas
Top issues for SSAOs on campus

Top 3 Health, wellness and Safety issues
- Mental health concerns
- Alcohol abuse
- Illicit drug abuse
- Suicide prevention
- Sexual assault
- Violence
- Firearms

Top 3 Campus Culture issues
- Changing student demographics
- Diversity, equity and inclusion
- Campus safety
- Campus-community relations
- International students
- Athletics/student athlete concerns

Wesaw & Sponsler (2014)
Top issues for SSAOs on Campus

Top 3 administrative issues
- Diminishing resources
- Compliance and regulatory requirements
- Strategic planning
- Managing crises on campus
- Construction of new facilities (residences)
- Reorganization/restructuring
- Development of online student services
- Social media strategy
- Fundraising
- Outsourcing

Top 3 student learning & success issues
- Completion/graduation rate
- Persistence
- Assessment and accountability
- Co-curricular learning outcomes
- Civic learning and democratic engagement
- Parental involvement
- Study abroad

Wesaw & Sponsler (2014)
Strategies for SSAOs.

Ackerman (2015) suggests the following strategies:

- Forging powerful and strategic relationships within the university
- Communicating up and down the hierarchy more effectively
- Managing staff, supervisors and constituents
- Developing professional skills
- Seeking out and sustaining mentorships
- Leading change
- Advancing through the field of student affairs through research, reflections and personal stories
Strategies cont’d

- Find yourself a coach
- Develop your own philosophy of student affairs
- Developing fundraising strategies
- Develop copying strategies – find ways to distress
- Learn to do more with less
Conclusion

- The role of an SSAO is complex; unenviable; labor of love
- The challenges are many and can be summarized as follows:
  - Achieving a work life balance
  - Balancing your advocacy role and managerial and administrative responsibilities
  - Institutional challenges
    - philosophy
    - Positioning
    - Resourcing
  - Operational challenges
- SSAO should develop strategies to address the challenges
  - Strategic partnerships
  - Managing & communicating up & downwards
  - Sharpening skills
  - Do more with less