



# LESSONS FROM A PANDEMIC: THE VALUE OF CAMPUS ACTIVITIES PROFESSIONALS

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WHEN SOMEONE IN HIGHER EDUCATION PICTURES THE “TYPICAL” WORK OF CAMPUS ACTIVITIES, a variety of vivid images likely come to mind. Some may picture organizing a significant concert with students streaming into a large venue on campus. Or perhaps they think of coordinating historic campus traditions like Homecoming, where current and former students mix and mingle while attending a variety of parades, pep rallies, and events that promote institutional spirit and pride. There are, of course, many other examples of how campus activities professionals promote a lively and engaging campus environment. Still, many examples may be less known to those outside our profession – even if those individuals work on college and university campuses.

The most common perceptions of campus activities work, however, likely suggest that such work now plays a diminished role on campus, at least temporarily, and potentially long into the future. For example, it will probably be some time before individuals feel safe attending campus public events, both large and small, with any consistency. Given the realities of campus administration in a pandemic, how does the work of campus activities professionals contribute to their campuses during the COVID-19 crisis? As many institutions face significant and negative budgetary implications as a result, should campus activities be suspended? Eliminated? Should positions be repurposed to serve other campus priorities? In this piece, the JCAPS editorial board discusses the critical roles that campus activities professionals continue to play during the pandemic, including crisis management, student leadership development, and campus engagement support. Our central goal is to support campus activities professionals help their institutions survive and even thrive during this unprecedented global crisis.

## THE ESSENTIAL ROLE OF CAMPUS ACTIVITIES PROFESSIONALS

In the book, “Engagement and Employability” Peck and Cummings (2017) wrote, “...the concept of fun can be very limiting to campus activities professionals. It implies that there isn’t substance to this work. For campus leaders who must allocate increasingly scarce resources in higher education, campus activities may seem an easy area to cut. After all, the primary purpose of education is for students to learn. In difficult times, tending to students’ entertainment may seem a luxury that the institution cannot afford” (p. 149-150). As campuses across the country see dramatic enrollment declines, many are already cutting budgets and reducing staff. For example, the University of Massachusetts system recently announced that it would lay off 6% of its full-time employees. Ohio University has undergone multiple rounds of layoffs, and thousands of faculty and staff on campuses around the country have been subject to furloughs (Zalaznick, 2020).

In this challenging environment, the “fun” that campus activities work brings to campus may seem superfluous. That is why it is essential for campus activities professionals to connect to our higher purpose – and communicate that with clarity to others. It is also critical that our work explicitly reflects this purpose. Whether it is amid a global pandemic – or in more “normal” times, our central purpose is to create strategies for deeply engaging students with each other and to connect them with the institutions we serve. The engagement in which our work results pays dividends for both our institutions (Tinto, 2012; Kuh, et al., 2010), but also for the students themselves in terms of employability (Peck, 2017) and even wellbeing across their entire lifespan (Gallup-Purdue Index, 2014). Certainly, engagement has become crucial as many institutions scramble to save faltering enrollments or face far more negative consequences. In this light, the leadership that campus activities professionals can play in these efforts cannot be overstated. In Volume 1, Issue 1 of this journal, Dungy and Peck (2019) wrote, “In the past, professionals in the field of campus activities may have wished for a generally accepted, well-defined, and standardized description of their work across all colleges and universities. However, its historic expansiveness and porous boundaries make campus activities in the modern college and university the perfect umbrella under which all student engagement could be located” (p. 7).

## STUDENT ENGAGEMENT IN CRISIS

Traditionally, one would not imagine the campus activities department to be engaged in the middle of a campus crisis management team. Student affairs administrators typically serving within these teams represent facilities, medical, and counseling staff, and maybe include the Vice President or Dean of Students (Zdziarski, Dunkel, and Rollo, 2007). However, this does not mean that campus activities professionals cannot play a meaningful role in these contexts – especially during a prolonged crisis like the current pandemic. Campus activities administrators represent some of the most valuable personnel on campus during a crisis. On most campuses, campus activities administrators have direct access to one of the most valuable resources on a college campus – engaged student leaders who would love to play a productive role in helping the campus respond. For example, during Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, students were mobilized to volunteer and assist the emergency management team and FEMA with staffing the most extensive field hospital on United States soil since the Civil War, a fieldhouse for displaced people, and an agriculture center for displaced animals (McCullar, 2011). These students were not initially counted in the emergency planning effort. They were only brought together later through the work of campus activities units, student organizations, Greek life, student government, residential life, and other campus entities.

In the long-term crisis created as a response to COVID-19, which has prompted stress, fear, and anxiety across all pockets of institutions, campus activities administrators should be depended upon to bring a sense of community, spirit, and belonging to the campus. Administrators are looking for ways to return the campus to a state of normalcy. Even as campuses operate differently (e.g., hybrid or online), a deep-seated desire continues to exist for other aspects of the campus to look as close to normal as possible so that students continue to feel a connection to the campus even when their physical association is diminished or absent. Significant responsibility could be placed on-campus activities administrators to assist with innovative enrollment management efforts within the institution, as senior-level leaders look to them to create engaging initiatives for students, even if such initiatives must live online.

COVID-19 has caused campus activities administrators to begin thinking differently about what our core priorities for our students and campuses. Most of the talent and events that are brought to campus – everything from opportunities for students to make a novelty item in a late-night event to bringing a large-scale concert to thousands of people – are designed to physically bring as many students together as possible for a shared experience. Such experiences are difficult to attain, if not morally tenuous, in an environment where we are not allowed to have more than a handful of people together and where students must stay 6 feet apart from each other. While this can be seen as a significant barrier to the current model of programming, numerous opportunities remain available for professionals who can think in creative and innovative ways.

The crisis can bring opportunities to evaluate current practices. Since physical events have been shut down since

March 2020, we have seen progressive artists and agents find ways to present their acts online. Acts that would typically not be able to come to certain campuses because of routing, size, availability, or cost have become more broadly accessible. Artists, too, are looking for ways to creatively – and profitably – engage their audiences. Likely, a music act may not be able to play even within a small venue until sometime in 2021. Many artists are willing to do intimate shows with a campus now online, sometimes doing multiple shows at schools across the country in one day. Artists and speakers that may not normally do college dates have become willing to book a show for one of these intimate “Zoom” talks or performances.

Our current time of disruption and ambiguity also provides campus activities administrators the opportunity to look at their traditional processes and evaluate if they need to continue in the post- COVID-19 world. Let us not wait to continue to ensure our students receive the best value for the fees they pay. Additionally, let us finally be intentional on how we engage our online students. Students have been online for years, but minimal student services have been geared towards those students, often requiring them to come to campus during traditional service and programming hours. The necessities of the pandemic create a press for us to evaluate the needs of our online students and to engage them as effectively as we have long engaged traditional on-campus students. For years, the needs of online students have been either a whisper in the room or an afterthought discussion in many campus activities units. This crisis presents an opportunity for us to bring the needs and wants of our online students to the forefront, to engage them so that they, too, can develop a deep sense of belonging to their institution.

## STUDENT LEADERSHIP DURING A PANDEMIC

The preceding paragraphs make clear the degree of ambiguity, transition, confusion, and fear that currently exist in the landscape of higher education. At the same time, campus activities work has been and should continue to be proactive in helping build the skills students need for success now and in the future as working professionals. A significant part of that work is developing student leadership capacity through formal programs, curricular course offerings, and informal initiatives. Indeed, the goal to equip students with the skills to navigate – and help their peers navigate – the incredible degree of ambiguity, confusion, and fear currently facing them can be immeasurably valuable during the pandemic.

Over the past quarter-century, the curriculum for student leadership development in campus activities units has rested on socially responsible and values-based concepts of what it means to lead effectively in today’s society. Typical examples include the Social Change Model of Leadership Development (Higher Education Research Institute, 1996) and the Relational Leadership Model (Komives, Lucas, & McMahon, 2013), etc. Moreover, the targeted outcomes in many of these programs focus on developing capacities such as self-awareness and self-management, authentic and courageous interactions with peers, and the creation of positive change within the communities where students reside (Owen, 2012). These concepts and outcomes can be explicitly brought to bear in the currently fraught higher education environment of Covid-19 response.

Across the globe, students were thrust into a suddenly online learning environment this past Spring. Their student organization meetings and events they had been planning for months were fundamentally disrupted, along with their social relationships and daily rhythms of their on-campus existence. They then spent the summer social distancing and likely bemoaning internship experiences that were promised but not delivered, while learning that their plans for the Fall semester would likely need to be modified significantly. Students have since returned to online environments that may not look all that dissimilar, in their eyes, to the chaos of this past Spring. And if they are back on campus, they are navigating a physical environment that includes new campus policies, ubiquitous personal protective equipment, and the need to navigate new social environments that may or may not need to sustain themselves for the foreseeable future. Now more than ever, student activities professionals are required to help students not only make sense of their new environment but to support them as emerging leaders able to build their skills and capacities in these spaces proactively. Self-awareness and self-management skills have always been critical. This academic year, they are even more crucial. The capacity to create authentic interactions with peers has long been the foundation of effective leadership skills. In the space of online interactions, and at a time when social justice issues have rarely (if ever) received more attention, these skills are even

more crucial. Creating sustainable positive change has long been a laudable goal. This academic year, as we all struggle to reformulate what “the campus experience” means to students, such goals are even more crucial.

Higher education institutions need their campus activities professionals to think creatively and innovatively regarding how they can develop formal and informal leadership development initiatives focused on the same traditional learning outcomes and goals as they typically would. These initiatives are inarguably more important now they have been in recent years. What would a leadership development session focused on social justice education look like in the context of a Zoom call? What types of multi-media resources exist on the internet that can be leveraged in an online environment that may have been less helpful in a physical space? Can campus activities professionals create short asynchronous educational units – through podcasting, YouTube video, Instagram posts, etc. – that help students broaden their minds, provide inspiration in a time of anxiety, invite opportunities for skill-honing, or simply help students feel more at home, while... they are at home?

## DEMONSTRATING IMPACT

Assessment has become a standard role of an effective campus activities professional. However, how campus activities professionals approach assessment often varies by institution. Student affairs, broadly speaking, consistently identifies assessment, evaluation, and research as core competencies necessary for professional success (Eanes et al., 2015). Campus activities offices often produce annual reports that provide descriptive data such as attendance at events, academic affiliations of student organization leaders, and self-report satisfaction data associated with participation in campus programming efforts. Such data has been critical in supporting a case for continued funds and resources through demonstrating that student involvement in campus activities has been broad and that satisfaction in the experience has been consistent.

During the pandemic, participation trends and satisfaction data are not enough to justify the resources granted to the work of campus activities. As professionals are asked to identify and provide a rationale for student-learning-focused programming, campus activities offices must develop a culture of comprehensive assessment if they have not already done so.

Schuh (2013) notes that within “a culture of assessment staff members recognize that they must collect evidence systematically to demonstrate accountability to their stakeholders and that they must use that evidence to improve” (p. 89). For example, CampusLabs (2020) found in a survey related to the use of assessment during the pandemic that the most common change to assessment practices was an increase in conducting initiatives related to student and employee needs. As a result, forward-thinking campus activities offices were positioned ahead of most campus units in being able to speak to how students experienced pandemic-related transitions. On many campuses, assessments with this focus remained positioned for campus activities staff to provide powerful insights to other administrators. Moreover, thinking about how to use assessment in the upcoming year will be essential in preparing our offices for a post-COVID-19 campus environment. How can assessment officers in campus activities use assessment practices to track resource needs, link to larger institutional data sets, document data-informed practices, and recognize the role of physical space in the daily work of campus activities professionals?

### Using big data

Many institutions have an institutional research office that gathers and coordinates big data sets. Picciano (2012) notes that “big data is a generic term that assumes that the information or databases system(s) used as the main storage facility is capable of storing large quantities of data longitudinally and down to very specific transactions” (p. 12). Campus activities offices may not often think about partnering with institutional research (IR) officers to analyze assessment data related to their students, or collaborate with them in analyzing data related to other large surveys (e.g., NSSE, MSL, etc.). Now is the time to develop relationships with these offices to ask about what data they have available, and to work with them to explore assessment questions for your programs that focus on student learning and success. We suggest you begin by searching for institutional research on your campus’s website to learn which specific datasets might exist at your institution. Subsequent web searching or contact

with IR staff will help you determine which of these datasets on which to focus. Armed with this knowledge, you can then develop a list of assessment questions in which to investigate within them.

### **Data-informed practices**

As we mentioned earlier, in an environment like a pandemic, student representation or satisfaction data is not enough to show the value of campus activities units on campus. Administrators can work with IR offices. You can collaboratively identify questions that can capture impact related to student success and learning on campus. Using the results from your own assessments within campus activities, coupled with big data from your IR office, is critical for making data-informed decisions about services/programs.

### **Tracking resource needs**

The reduction of fiscal and human resources within campus activities offices represents a significant threat as a result of institutional responses to COVID-19. Recognizing that budget structures within higher education will not simply return to pre-COVID-19 levels anytime soon, it is safe to say that the competition for resources on campus will only increase. Using assessment practices to document both human and financial needs, as well as benefits, in offering campus activities services and programs, will be critical. Some suggestions include pulling past descriptive data for programming events to show previous expenses and the number of staff (professional and student) required to deliver the event. In the current environment, you will need to document the change in delivery based on COVID-19, staff required, the technology necessary for implementation (remember that individual home internet access and computers have an expense), reduction in capacity which resulted from any limits to access, and the cost associated with developing online materials/marketing. Using both sets of data, you can predict unit needs based on how you see the program being delivered. Upper-level administrators appreciate such data-driven budget modeling rather than rough estimates that do not show such detail.

### **Role of physical space**

Even in the midst of the pandemic, many students have returned to campuses this Fall semester. Student voices have been strident in their desire to return to campus. However, their comments indicate their expectation to return to pre-COVID-19 traditional campus experiences. Campus activities officers will be needed to play a critical role in helping students understand how to create meaningful interactions on campus until our society has overcome the challenges associated with Covid-19.

## **SHAPING THE PERSPECTIVES OF SENIOR CAMPUS LEADERSHIP**

University presidents, senior-level cabinet members, and representatives of boards of trustees or governors often conduct their work somewhat removed from the daily interactions of students, staff, and faculty. As a result, these groups and individuals can have a limited view of the role and scope of campus activities, the impact it has on student learning, and the employability competencies students gain through participation. As we mentioned previously, the stereotype of campus activities work as “fun” leads to the misperception that fun does not equal learning, growth, or skill-building. It is the responsibility of the senior student affairs officer (SSAO) to articulate and champion the value of campus activities in times of crisis and to assist other stakeholder groups in recognizing the connection to the total educational experience.

In cabinet meetings, in written proposals and reports, and in casual conversations, the SSAO must connect all programs and services to critical learning outcomes and competencies to be able to demonstrate achievement, especially during times of constrained resources when mission-critical decisions are being made that could have implications on the very survival of some institutions. Opportunities are missed when reports are shared that only provide attendance numbers at events or types of students served. Broadly voicing the value of campus activities initiatives rests on the shoulders of the SSAO. Still, these individuals need the perspectives and, most importantly, data from those who are doing the work. During times of crisis, the narrative must include direct

and tangible connections to the overarching challenge the university is facing and how campus activities professionals are uniquely positioned to contribute to solving problems.

Campus activities professionals recognize their own value and take great pride in how their students connect their learning through their campus involvements to what they are studying in the classroom and the professional competencies they are developing broadly. Campus activities professionals have anecdotally made these connections themselves while articulating them to their students. In turn, student leaders themselves are positioned to describe and demonstrate these competencies to other students and future employers. In periods of crisis, it would be easy for senior leadership to dismiss campus activities as entertainment, rather than an essential function. There is no question during the COVID-19 crisis that senior leadership clearly viewed health services and residential life as essential services. In plans for testing, tracing, and containment as the top priority on campus and in society, energy and focus has been directed to those critical areas, placing them in the spotlight. However, this past Spring semester, campus activities professionals played a vital and essential role in keeping students engaged and connected while balancing the challenge of being physically apart due to social distancing restrictions. It is imperative that SSAOs recognize the impact of this work on the overall student experience, both this past Spring and continuing through this academic year.

Campus activities professionals can demonstrate their added value to senior leaders by offering to assist other areas of the university during times of crisis. Campus activities professionals are known to be generalists and have skills that can benefit other areas of the university. According to Komives, “Campus activities educators also possess opportunities and challenges in forming meaningful academic partnerships” (2019, p. 23). In a crisis, most traditional processes are disrupted; this has undoubtedly been the case in academic affairs as well. Faculty are struggling to make sense of how to build community and keep students engaged in their online courses. Now might be a perfect time to reach out to academic administrators to offer help in the form of coaching faculty, participating in a faculty meeting to discuss these topics, or even just to express support. In addition, campus activities professionals who possess skills in curriculum design and instruction, developed in crafting leadership programs for students, can be particularly valuable to faculty accustomed to teaching one way being required to adapt. Completing an inventory of the skillsets of each campus activities professional and how these skills can be leveraged within another area of the university can create more exposure for campus activities professionals across institutional boundaries.

## A CRUCIAL ROLE IN RETENTION

Retaining students is the lifeblood of a university, especially in the present circumstances of disruption and anxiety. Most administrators fail to see the issue of attrition and retention in the complexity necessary to impact these critical outcomes. Tinto (2012) wrote, “Much of the research on student attrition has not been particularly useful to those in the field who seek to develop and implement programs to improve retention and completion because it assumes, incorrectly, that knowing why students leave is equivalent to knowing why students stay and succeed. The process of persistence is not the mirror image of the process of leaving (p. 5).” Students may leave the institution for many reasons. But why do they stay? This question that campus activities professionals seem particularly well-positioned to answer.

Schreiner et al. (2011) stated, “Students do not stay in or leave institutions as much as they stay in or leave relationships. To the extent that one can understand the quality of students’ relationships with individuals within colleges and universities, it is possible to better understand the dynamic of students’ choices to stay or leave” (p. 333). The ability of campus activities professionals to adapt programs and services to foster an individual and collective sense a sense of belonging to the campus contributes to retention in moments of crisis. These professionals are perhaps best suited to fostering relationships during an ongoing crisis and will be who many students look to for support, whether in person or virtually. In this way, we both humanize and personalize the student experience. Institutions that leverage these administrators well will have a strategic advantage in maintaining consistent enrollments.

It is not enough to simply endeavor to improve student engagement. Campus activities professionals need to keep their senior student affairs officer informed of how they are adapting their programs and services, and how these adaptations are influencing students' sense of belonging and, ultimately, their retention. It cannot be assumed that success in this regard will automatically be noticed, acknowledged, or valued. Examples of success in these efforts during the uncertain early days of the COVID-19 crisis abound. Consider the creation of online campus awards programs, moving commencement ceremonies to virtual formats, extensive interactive social media campaigns, virtual programming board events, interactive training for student leaders, and teambuilding initiatives from afar. While these programs are not viewed as crisis management or essential programs, the outcomes they generate for the campus are essential. Campus activities programs must assess these efforts and be able to articulate the value to senior leadership throughout the crisis, not waiting until it is over. The narrative must be ongoing and connected to the bigger picture of student success. Strayhorn (2019) states, "To excel, students must feel a sense of belonging in schools or colleges, and therefore educators must work to create conditions that foster belongingness among all students" (p. 17).

## THRIVING IN A TIME OF UNCERTAINTY

We have reached a crucible moment in the history of higher education, the field of student affairs, and the discipline of campus activities work. As has been true in other contexts, COVID-19 has not exclusively created new challenges; it has also revealed and exacerbated longstanding challenges. For the country at large, these challenges include economic disparities that impact access to healthcare, childcare, stable housing, or the savings necessary to live on a limited income. They have also further revealed in sharp relief the political divisions that shape the way we see everything in our lived experience – including a global pandemic.

Within our field of campus activities, the structural issues revealed include the imperative to collect and disseminate the data necessary to tell our story and demonstrate our impact, as well as the lack of clarity with which we typically explain our essential purpose to engage students. To the extent to which we can overcome these challenges, our field can emerge more robust than it was before. If we are unable to rise to this moment, we may see not only our role diminished in the short term, but fundamentally changed in the years to come.

The skillset of campus activities professionals is unique and valuable. But this alone will not be enough to sustain our profession in this challenging time. We must be committed to learning as we face the challenges ahead. We, the members of the Editorial Board, are proud to be associated with a journal that endeavors to facilitate the discovery and dissemination of new learning within the field of campus activities. Never before has this work been so important.

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