

Student Affairs and Technology: To Centralize or Not to Centralize

Derek Moreno

Advising & Registration Specialist
College for Creative Studies
dmoreno@ccscad.edu

Technology impacts student affairs operations in several different ways. Advertising events on the Internet, online maintenance requests in residence halls and interactive educational programs are a few examples of how student affairs is utilizing today's technology. As technology continues to advance, student affairs divisions will continue to utilize more technology in everyday operations. Student affairs divisions need to analyze how their Information Technology departments are structured and staffed, how they are using technology effectively and how they are planning for future technology use.

Student affairs divisions are typically comprised of several different departments, but not all student affairs divisions have their own IT department. A recent study suggested that a major problem of advancing technology in student affairs is when student affairs relies on the institution's centralized IT department (Barratt, 2001). Centralized IT departments have to plan, implement, support and maintain all IT resources on the entire campus. This can limit the amount of time and resources that the IT department can devote specifically to student affairs needs. If the institution believes that the academic affairs unit can benefit more from utilizing new technology, most the resources in IT will be geared toward academic projects.

Many student affairs divisions have a decentralized IT strategy; however, complete decentralization of IT is not an appropriate structure. With this approach, departments use their own IT personnel because this structure is perceived as being the best way to handle their respective, differing departmental technology needs. While this may be somewhat true, a centralized IT department within the division of student affairs can provide a more focused technological strategy within the overall division of student affairs. Centralizing IT in student affairs structure requires a shift in thinking from the leaders of most student affairs divisions.

Should a student affairs division decide to centralize its IT, a thorough analysis of the divisions' needs and current structure should be conducted. Establishing a centralized student affairs technology department could allow the staff within the various departments to continue to work with their respective departments but begin developing and supporting the overall student affairs technology agenda. A centralized IT structure also allows for student affairs technological goals and plans to be represented at higher levels of the university by a professional with the technical expertise that is needed when making campus-wide technology

plans.

Appropriate staffing of a student affairs IT department can seem like an intimidating task. It cannot be assumed that new student affairs professionals will have the basic technological skills needed to keep up with changing technology. Renn and Zeligman (2005) found that our future student affair leaders need explicit instruction in Technology in Higher Education, and they also noted that a technology course is needed in student affairs administration graduate programs (Renn & Zeligman, 2005). If trained properly, future student affairs professionals will be able to effectively communicate their needs and visions to the division's IT staff and will also be able to effectively utilize the established technology practices. One course in a graduate program will not fill the training need for a high level IT staff member who can lead the department and represent the division at university-wide technology planning. To fill their highest level technology staff positions, student affairs can look to the professionals already providing IT leadership at higher education institutions in campus technology divisions. The higher level professionals will already have the knowledge and skill needed to navigate the complex structure of the institutions. They will also be familiar with systems used in higher education and will be able to bring this expertise and knowledge to the leadership in student affairs. These professionals can educate student affairs professionals on the capabilities of technology that already exist and work to create new systems specifically for student affairs.

The benefits of bringing in a higher level IT professional can outweigh the potential costs. Educating student affairs about the possibilities of technology will allow student affairs professionals to enhance their own technological skills. These student affairs professionals then can begin to lead our profession into the future.

Although some student affairs departments may be using technology more effectively than others, ensuring that all departments take full advantage of technological advances will require an in depth look at student affairs practices. Staying informed regarding current technological advances and strategically planning for technology are just two ways student affairs can continue to move forward.

Many student affairs professionals may be hesitant to fully embrace technological advances because of the potential to lose personal interactions with students. Dare (2006) discussed the issue of high tech versus high touch in an article examining the need for a new NASPA technology knowledge community, and he noted that student affairs professionals need to realize that increased technology does not necessarily lead to decreased student contact. In fact technology can be used to streamline procedures, remove unnecessary paperwork, and allow easy communication outside of the office. These are just some of the ways that technology can be used to create more time for interactions with students. In the future, student affairs technology needs to focus on not only what services can be provided for students but also what tasks can be automated or made more efficient in departments. This balance will help student affairs professionals keep the student interaction they desire.

In summary, IT needs to be an integral part of the organizational structure like any other student affairs function. Analyzing the technological needs of students and student affairs departments in order to effectively meet the learning and development needs of the campus community is vital to the survival of student affairs. When student affairs divisions realize that a need exists in technology that can enhance students' experiences, they need to address it the way they would if they found a student service missing on campus. Creating a divisional IT strategic plan will allow divisions to be more proactive than reactive. Scattered IT professionals supporting departments is no longer sufficient. The future of our profession will continue to be greatly influenced by technology and it is well past the time to embrace the change to a centralized student affairs IT structure.

References

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