

Neil B. Gerard
Associate Dean of Students (Retired)
Director, Smith Campus Center and Student Programs
Director of Bridges Auditorium
Pomona College

a- What motivated you to join the student affairs profession?

In the late 1960s, I took a job as Director of Student Activities at a small campus of the State University of New York, in Alfred. It was there that I found a career. I found my role as an educator, teaching outside the classroom, stimulating, rewarding and important. I found that what I did mattered in the lives of students. Forty-plus years later, I have those same feelings about the work that I do.

When I accepted my first position, I had no understanding of the profession of student affairs. I had a job that was a combination of student activities and residence life. With the guidance and assistance of mentors and supervisors, I came to understand both the importance of the work that I was doing AND the depth of the profession. A combination of graduate work for depth and professional experience for growth, I was convinced that this was a career worth maintaining and nurturing. I cannot understate the importance of professional organizations like ACUI and NASPA to my growth and development. The conferences, the connections with colleagues across the nation and around the world, showed me how so many others were doing to the same work as I was doing, in a variety of settings and institutions.

b- How have the students and the profession changed over during your career?

The students have changed by becoming more worldly and by having tremendous access to information, technology, and power. They have also moved towards a consumer-mentality and, unfortunately seem to have a greater sense of entitlement and less appreciation for that which is offered. The profession has changed with the technology that is available. The ease of communication (social media, electronic billboards, electronic text, etc) has made direct communication with students, alumni and community remarkably easy. While we never achieved the "paperless office" that was so much a part of the discussion in the early 1990s, we have resources, access to colleagues, etc. that we couldn't have dreamt of when I started.

The involvement of the families of the enrolled students has been another significant change. The concept of en loco parentis was all the rage at conferences and on campuses. We're we to act in place of parents for our students? FERPA said that we shouldn't even communicate with parents (without student permission) on certain items. Now, the involvement of parents is not only accepted, it's expected. Terms like helicopter parents or Velcro parents, have replaced en loco parentis as our themes. Our offices of Parent Relations, no longer solely used as fund raising tools, are part of the communications systems. Parents' email addresses are loaded into our emergency management systems. Parents are viewed more as partners in helping us deal with problems than impediments.

There also seems to be a greater number of students with psychological difficulties than at the start of my career. The presence of earlier diagnoses, better medical intervention, and higher degree of acceptance of counseling services, has increased the numbers of students who can attend our colleges and universities. Bi-polar, autism spectrum, depression, disordered eating, etc, have all been more prevalent on campus. Many of these students demand an inordinate amount of time from staff and

faculty, further stressing the already diminished delivery systems. And yet, as demanding as many of these students can be, with support they can not only succeed in the institution but can become productive members of society.

The profession has changed in many ways as well. Much like our students, we have become early adopters of the new technologies, communicating electronically with all of the stakeholders of the institution. We are adept at using technology to keep abreast of our students. Our ever-expanding knowledge base is readily available on our computers or our smart phones. The down-side of this expanded ability to communicate is that our students have come to the expectation of hearing from us at all hours of the day and days of the week. Many of us have been willingly complicit in this expansion of our workday and workweek. Our professional associations have also changed to meet the needs of members and to respond to the diminished resources that many of us access. Video conferencing, simulcasting, interactive communications devices have lessened the need for expensive travel. While there is no full replacement for face-to-face meetings with colleagues, this electronic access is better than not attending or reading the conference notes weeks or months later.

c- What do you see in the future of the student affairs profession?

I see a bifurcated future for our profession. I see some of public education continuing to struggle financially and continuing cuts to the student affairs areas that are not deemed essential to the educational mission of their (short-sighted) institutions. This will mean fewer people to provide the services that are more critically needed. It will also mean that what we do will, most probably be done more superficially and less-well than in the past. The growing need of students will not be able to be met by those who are left in the trenches.

On the other hand I see the wealthier institutions, both public and private, thriving in the information age. Students at these schools will be well-served by better informed and better prepared staff. The graduates of many (most?) of the graduate programs producing our new colleagues are better able to meet the needs of incoming students that were my colleagues when I entered. If their work-ethic can match their preparation, they will soar as professionals.

d- What is one lesson you want to pass on to new professionals?

The lesson that I would share with new professionals is very simple: Work every day to the best of your ability. Don't watch the clock or the calendar. Your students deserve your very best, always and all ways. The biggest single impedance to the success of young professionals is a diminished work commitment and work ethic. While life/work balance is important, it must be remembered that student affairs has never been and most probably will never be a forty-hour week. Long days, working nights and weekends, is part of the commitment that we make when we accept our positions. There are many, many perks that come with working in higher education. A short work-week is not one of them.

e- What was your most significant professional achievement?

While I had many highlights in a long career, my crowning achievement was the creation of a Campus Center at Pomona College which has become the true center of campus life. An architecturally powerful building was transformed into a vibrant and alive center with the help and hard work of a dedicated staff, significant leadership from the College administration and a Board of Trustees whose dedication and commitment was matched with the funds to make it happen.

In its first iteration, the Center was perceived as a cold, austere facility which didn't create an environment which students enjoyed or respond well to. The hard-working and dedicated staff were found themselves struggling to overcome the design of the building to bring services and programs to the campus. After about six years, we were given the opportunity to re-do major portions of the building and be creative about finishing previously unfinished areas. A campus-wide committee, with tremendous financial support from Trustees, armed with the working knowledge of what didn't work, teamed with an exciting architectural group to create a vibrant and fulfilling center that became the true center of campus life. Some years later, looking back on that experience, I still experience the joy of knowing that we accomplished our goal and provided a facility that will be critically important to the campus for decades to come.

f- What was your greatest professional difficulty?

Perhaps the greatest professional difficulty came when I accepted my first Director-level position. I had been blessed with great supervisors and mentors who believed in the concept of team and who valued input, debate and consensus. I didn't understand how important my interaction with them was until I was on my own and having to be that consensus builder to my staff. Having a direct supervisor to bounce ideas off of, get regular feedback, etc, was more important than I knew. I remember feeling very alone and very much in need of external support in those first months of that position. I tried to use all of the lessons taught by my supervisors, both the positive ones and the negative ones, to be the best supervisor, mentor and colleague that I could be. My guess is that I fell short in some of those early relationships, only to grow and learn from missteps and mistakes.