

7

In this new century, building campus community is more important than ever, because of the challenges and changes in the traditional family and because of the fragmentation of society. In the building of campus community, presidents have frontline responsibility.

The President's Role in Partnering with Parents

Dennis C. Golden

An indispensable ingredient for building campus community is *cura personalis*, or care for others. The chief executive sets the tone for a campus ethos. Presidents in particular must realize that care for others is not a spectator sport. Caring for the parents and families of the students is a significant component of overall campus relations. Presidents must demonstrate a personal and professional commitment to orientation programs, related ongoing initiatives, and future ideas if the campus is to be transformed in a manner that is collaborative and student-centered. A primary task of the presidency is to create and sustain an intentional campus ethos.

Today's higher education context presents college and university presidents with many challenges. Presidents are held accountable, as they should be, for everything that happens on campus (Fisher, 1991). Although their leadership responsibilities focus regularly on global institutional issues, such as endowment development, as opposed to daily issues, such as the quality of food in the dining areas, the three-pronged relationship of institution-student-parents offers an interesting benchmark by which to measure the ethos of the campus.

The institution-parent relationship should not be micromanaged. When done effectively, leadership should begin emphasizing all campus community members during orientation. With a focus on *friendraising*, the president can involve himself or herself in the development of the community

feeling. After orientation, presidents have the opportunity to lead in the construction of campus environments that move students from marginality to “mattering.” A philosophy of “we care, you matter” (Schlossberg, Lynch, and Chickering, 1989) wins the commitment of students and their families alike. When all campus constituents share in a focus on the student, partnerships are formed that keep priorities on the institutional purpose without veering away into unnecessary micromanagement. When an institution connects with parents from the onset, it plants a basic reminder of the place of the student on campus and creates a comfortable trust when or if crises arise.

Orientation: Introduction to a New Family Community

A natural starting point for presidential leadership is with new student and parent orientation programs. Orientation programs trace their roots back to Harvard College’s practice of having experienced students assist new students in their transition. In the nineteenth century, the Harvard program expanded to include faculty in the student orientation (Miller, 1997). Today, many campus constituents are involved, including the parents and families of new students.

In 1997, the Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS) published information about modern orientation programs. The section devoted to student orientation programs and services asserts that the student orientation programs are based on stated goals and objectives; assist new students in understanding the purposes of higher education and the mission of the institution; assist new students in understanding their responsibilities within the educational setting; provide new students with information about academic policies, procedures, requirements, and programs sufficient to make well-reasoned and well-informed choices; and provide intentional opportunities for new students to interact with faculty, staff, and continuing students (Miller, 1997). Involving parents and families in explanatory programs only reinforces commitment to institutional values.

All of these tasks will be accomplished best when the president of the institution emphasizes their importance and commitment to their intent as a campus priority. This is a clear example of *cura personalis* in the modern era of shifting family demographics. Two-way relationships indicate that institutions comprehend that not all families look alike and respond favorably to the same circumstances. In order to be effective, these actions must be intentional rather than accidental. The interactions and the celebration are important components of an effective orientation program. Although viewbooks and campus visits help introduce the campus culture, orientation breathes life into this new adventure. The effect on parents and families should never be underestimated.

Fundraising. On today's campuses, presidents frequently function on a 24-hour-a-day, 7-day-a-week, 365-day-a-year basis. They must address daunting challenges that include fundamental academic issues, new technology, diversity, enrollment management, declining income, increasing costs, governance, research, outcomes assessment, and fundraising. These are all pivotal. Yet equally important on the campus today, presidents also must address the challenge of *friendraising*. Among the most important friends that colleges and universities can cultivate are new students and their parents. The institution, in general, and presidents, in particular, should view students and parents as partners in the educational process. To a great degree, the social cement that binds the partnerships is poured and cured during the new student and parent orientation programs.

Presidents who are especially interested in building friendships and partnerships realize that the essential nature of the institution endures long after their term of service is over (Wilson, 2000). They also realize that in order to strengthen the institution, they must, at least temporarily, "stop out" from time to time, or put aside the daily activities of the presidency, so that they can commit to positive, proactive participation in essential campus events. Orientation is one such program. When presidents themselves and their senior staff members participate in the orientation planning process, presidential efforts may lead to enhanced community in colleges and unity in universities. People want to feel that their presence matters; the presence of senior campus officials symbolically sanctions this feeling of worth.

Because of who they are and what they do, presidents are prone, if not programmed, to speak about their institutional vision, mission statement, strategic planning, academic programs, and fundraising. But as new presidents quickly realize, though students and parents will likely forget what the president said and did, they never forget how the president made them feel about the institution. Orientation programs offer a symbolic point for presidents and chancellors to articulate a vision and expectations to new students and parents.

Presidential Involvement. The president's charge, therefore, is to start the actualization of the "we care, you matter" philosophy. Helping students (and parents and family members) feel secure, respected, and accepted as individuals during the orientation process is a logical first step. Building upon the process, presidents should emphasize the rigors of academic life yet at the same time make students feel secure. In addition, presidents should explain that students need to feel some stress and strain before successfully completing the transition from home to college. The new learner will move from dependence through independence to the interdependence of a mature learner.

One modern example of how this can be done is through distance education that involves parents. At Arizona State University, the parents of new students can take a course entitled "Student Passages: A Decision-Making

Course for Parents” (Carr, 2000). Parents log on to the course once a week and interact with their peers about how to help students with the daily dilemmas or crisis situations of campus community life. The intent of the course is to help parents who are trying to understand the struggles that students face at the university. The course is offered for credit, and the parents are given academic responsibilities.

Community Development. On a campuswide basis, presidents can further advance the “we care, you matter” philosophy by implementing six principles of campus community (Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 1990). In the foreword, E. L. Boyer cites the following six principles that describe the kind of community every college and university should strive to be:

First, a college or university is an educationally *purposeful* community, a place where faculty and students share academic goals and work together to strengthen teaching and learning on the campus.

Second, a college or university is an *open* community, a place where freedom of expression is uncompromisingly protected and where civility is powerfully affirmed.

Third, a college or university is a *just* community, a place where the sacredness is honored and where diversity is aggressively pursued.

Fourth, a college or university is a *disciplined* community, a place where individuals accept their obligations to the group and where well defined governance procedures guide behavior for the common good.

Fifth, a college or university is a *caring* community, a place where the well being of each other is sensitively supported and where service to others is encouraged.

Sixth, a college or university is a *celebrative* community, one in which the heritage of the institution is remembered and where rituals affirming both tradition and change are widely shared. [Carnegie Foundation, 1990, pp. 7–8]

When parents and families understand the aspirations and see their students as just one part of a much larger institutional community, they are likely to have fewer self-indulgent expectations. By stepping down from the proverbial ivory tower, presidents can shape the nature of community through their leadership and example. Personal correspondence with students, families, and faculty members communicates accessibility. Reinforcing the values of the institution to multiple constituencies communicates a consistency and spirit of purpose. The president must move beyond rhetoric and operationalize principles through policies, actions, spirit, and leadership.

Beyond Orientation

Even in such positive communities, twenty-first century presidents will find themselves focusing their remarks, statements, or policies on real-world

subjects. In our postmodern world, topics range from the abuse of alcohol to diversity and from discrimination in the workplace to environmental sustainability. The list is endless. Add to this range of topics an obligation to multiple constituencies and the messages become even more complex. Although academic credit is not given for these real-world out-of-class experiences, their lessons must be learned or students will not become fully functioning adults. Presidents should, therefore, acknowledge the existence of both the credit-bearing, formal curriculum and the noncredit-bearing, real-world curriculum. Students and their families will feel welcomed, understood, valued, respected, and appreciated. Students require organizational support to assist them in making connections among the multiple experiences that they have while in college. Involvement of family is more often than not a valuable asset in connecting meaning from seemingly unconnected events.

Constituent Involvement. An example of commitment beyond the new student experience could be a presidential initiative to lead the academic convocation at the beginning of each school year for the entire campus community. The purpose of an academic convocation is to develop a campuswide ethic on the importance of academics and to establish the roles and responsibilities of the faculty, students, and staff in the overall operation of the college. Presidents should give careful attention to the choice of convocation speakers. The women and men selected should emphasize academics, support the mission and values of the institution, and show the connections between in-class and out-of-class learning. They should also express a commitment to diversity in gender, race, culture, and more. The special significance of each constituent group can be emphasized by the issuance of presidential charges to the faculty, staff, and students, with responses from their representatives.

For example, at my small private institution, I stated, "As president, and on behalf of the Board of Trustees and the Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet, I charge you to cherish and pass on the intellectual heritage rich from the contributions of all humanity. I charge you to perform your primary duties of scholarship and teaching with dedication and energy, with tolerance for differences among people, with determination to celebrate diversity and with a rigorous search for truth. I charge you to bring commitment and zeal to the process of continuing your own learning. And I also charge you to be women and men who model the 350th year values of the sisters of St. Joseph, namely, quality, respect, service, diversity, community, justice, faith and Catholic presence" (D. Golden, speech at Fontbonne College Academic Convocation Program, August 2000).

The faculty representative's response to her colleagues at the convocation was: "I charge you to hold and pass on an intellectual heritage rich from the contributions of all of humanity. I charge you to perform that task with energy and dedication, with humane tolerance for difference and a rigorous search for the truth; and I charge you to bring enthusiasm and zeal to the process of continuing your own learning, never allowing yourselves

to be content with yesterday's hypotheses" (speech at Fontbonne College Academic Convocation Program, August 2000).

For new and continuing students, the academic convocation can have a profound effect that emphasizes academic success and connects the historical roots of higher education when faculty and staff participate in full academic regalia. In addition, students witness the presidential charges and constituent responses that underscore faculty scholarship, staff service, student status, and interdependence.

Because this event occurs at a time that prohibits attendance for many parents, additional activities are needed for them. Other initiatives designed to invest families in the lifeblood of the campus include an evening candle-light ceremony for parents and students the first night that the new students are on campus. This type of program represents an opportunity for multiple offices to collaborate in planning. Fontbonne College offers a program called "Catch the Fire: Catch the Spirit." Parents, along with faculty, staff, and guests, form an honor guard of welcome inside the darkened college chapel. The new students silently proceed through the honor guard and take their seats in the chapel. Faculty, staff, alumni, and upper-class students offer a welcome and personal experiences. The director of campus ministry then performs a powerful one-person play, the message of which for the new students is to use their time and talents wisely while gaining lasting treasures.

The new students symbolically unite with the college as they receive candles from the president when their names are called. All participants light their candles, and the chapel is illuminated beautifully. The program is not only meaningful, moving, and memorable but symbolic of the transitions that are occurring in the lives of the students and their families. The new students and their parents become more bound to the college (and to each other) through this celebration of community and the "we care, you matter" philosophy.

Emphasis on Students. Although most colleges and universities operate as nonprofits, the reality of budgets, enrollments, and accountability issues at times can eclipse the student experience. In the modern era, therefore, students cannot be viewed as empty vessels into which the wisdom of the ages is poured. In today's world, students and parents want value for the dollar, and consumerism is frequently the order of the day. Presidents do well when they articulate what their product is. Vision statements, mission statements, accreditation and audits aside, students and parents are interested in knowing about the end product of the educational experience that lasts four or more years.

Presidents may envision students as women and men who have learned how to think logically, write clearly, speak truthfully, function effectively, decide ethically, and exercise a keenly sensitive social conscience for the greater good of others, in addition to gaining technical capabilities and job placements (College of the Holy Cross, 1968). The creation of such "end

products” takes time and energy, and there are no shortcuts. In this process, presidents can be important when their constituents perceive them as competent, legitimate, of complex mind, and open to influence. Value-driven presidents remind faculty, staff, and themselves that it is a privilege, not a right, to work in the academy. Although the academic mission is primary, what goes on outside of the classroom, library, and laboratory is part of each student’s total educational immersion (Blake, 1979). Consequently, in all that we do, we should keep the individual student at the epicenter of our concerns because students are a *sine qua non* of all colleges and universities. Parents and families want to be assured, quite simply, that their student matters.

Institutional Purpose. Along with Boyer’s principles of community (Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 1990), presidents also should seek to transform their institutions by stressing the importance of seven highly prized values in higher education (Young, 1997). These values are service (the value of altruism), truth (not an end in itself), freedom (choice with responsibility), equality (ensuring a fair start for all), individualism (human dignity growing), justice (balancing freedom with duty), and community (mutual empowerment). These values are at the heart of what every college and university can manifest to students regardless of its size, location, heritage, and identity. Although these principles make for good reading in promotional materials, presidents must institute points of accountability (in other words, assessment) to ensure that they are upheld by the campus ethos.

The president, faculty members, staff, student, and families are vitally important to the perpetuation of these values in a campus community. Some campuses articulate the values of their institution through a creed. At the University of Louisville, the Cardinal Creed has now become a continuing part of the new student enculturation process at that university. The Cardinal Creed states, “The University of Louisville is a community of scholars dedicated to personal and academic excellence. In joining this community, I commit to a code of civilized behavior. I will practice personal and academic integrity; I will respect the dignity of all persons; I will respect the rights and property of others; I will not condone bigotry; I will strive to learn from differences in people, ideas and opinions; I will demonstrate concern for others, their feelings and their need for conditions which support their work and development. Allegiance to these ideals requires me to refrain from behaviors which threaten the freedom and respect every individual deserves” (University of Louisville, 1990).

After orientation, presidents can communicate an intentional approach to developing and sustaining community by spending time with students in their informal settings (for example, dining halls, social events); by interacting in meaningful ways with subgroups of the student body (for example, commuters, international students); by participating in activities associated with school spirit and traditions; and by providing resources for

faculty to facilitate more out-of-classroom interactions. Presidents also can enhance collaboration between academic and student affairs by supporting such initiatives as honoring faculty members who contribute significantly to the quality of undergraduate life and by fostering the growth of cooperative educational programs and internships (Kuh, Schuh, and Whitt, 1991).

With the reality of distance education challenging traditional models of higher education, presidents should provide the leadership to communicate the value-added benefit of a community of learners. In sum, presidents should give considerable attention to the academic mission of the institution, but they also should give commensurate attention to the alternative and critical real-life education that students need, starting with orientation and continuing throughout the academic year. Presidents hold a keen responsibility to articulate these priorities to family members so that there can be a true partnership in developing students.

Families and the College Campus

Presidents must be committed not only to academic achievement but also to the psychological, physical, spiritual, financial, and career development of their students. In short, presidents must be committed to the philosophy of holistic education. Ideally, a positive relationship with students and their families should be a priority from the onset of their matriculation on to the campus. That way, if a crisis arises, as it may for some students during any given academic year, the likelihood of an efficient and effective resolution will be significantly heightened.

Presidents know that it is important for the families of students to feel that they belong to and are connected with the campus community. When this happens, parents are more likely to be forces for change and are also more willing to support the institution financially when they are asked.

Conclusion

The college presidency is not an easy job; few things of value are. Yet when presidents set their sights on developing positive relationships with students and their families, the rewards can be remarkable. Beginning with new student and family orientation programs, continuing with the upper-division life of students, through alumni status, presidents can set a tone for campus community involvement for all constituents. When presidents earnestly commit to engage actively in the mystery of student transformation, parents can begin to comprehend a philosophy of “we care, you matter.”

References

- Blake, E. S. “Classroom and Context: An Educational Dialectic.” *Academe: Bulletin of the AAUP*, 1979, 65(5), 280–292.

- Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. *Campus Life: In Search of Community*. Princeton, N.J.: Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 1990.
- Carr, S. "Parents Learn About Their Children's Challenges at College by Taking a Class Themselves." *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Nov. 3, 2000, p. 45.
- College of the Holy Cross. *Goals Report*. Worcester, Mass.: College of the Holy Cross, 1968.
- Fisher, J. L. *The Board and the President*. New York: Macmillan, 1991.
- Kuh, G. D., Schuh, J. H., and Whitt, E. J. *Involving Colleges: Successful Approaches in Fostering Student Development Outside the Classroom*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1991.
- Miller, T. K. *The CAS Book of Standards and Higher Education*. Hagerstown, Md.: HBP, Printing, Graphics and Information Services, 1997.
- Schlossberg, N. K., Lynch, A. Q., and Chickering, A. W. *Improving Higher Education Environments for Adults: Responsive Programs and Services From Entry to Departure*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1989.
- University of Louisville. *Student Handbook*. Louisville, Ky.: University of Louisville, 1990.
- Wilson, B. J. "Testing the Resilience of Presidents and Institutions." *The Presidency*, Winter 2000.
- Young, R. B. *No Neutral Ground: Standing By the Values We Prize in Higher Education*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997.

Copyright of New Directions for Student Services is the property of John Wiley & Sons, Inc. and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.