



DOWNSTATE
HEALTH SCIENCES UNIVERSITY

The State of Student Affairs: A National Perspective

providing a context for Student Affairs

Jeffrey S. Putman, Ed.D.

What Student Affairs Seems Like

Yes, it's Kevin Bacon!

What Student Affairs Is Actually More Like

Well, of course we're more like Matt Damon

Key Issues: External Pressures and Enrollment Dynamics

- **Federal and State Policy:** The need to monitor and respond to the federal and state political landscape was identified as a top-priority issue, impacting everything from funding to campus policies.
- **Enrollment Challenges:** The "demographic cliff," long discussed, is now a present reality. This is compounded by a significant decline in international student enrollment, which one speaker noted "did cause a pretty significant sucking sound" in the recent cycle.
 - **-> Data Point:** NAFSA projected a 15% decline in international students as of July, signaling a trend that is unlikely to rebound in the immediate future.
- **The Value of College Debate:** There is an ongoing public debate about the value of a college degree, often framed by concerns about cost and post-graduation employment. This presents an opportunity for the field to articulate the specific "value of student affairs" in preparing students for life and career.
- **Funding:** Concerns exist around federal research funding and general budgetary constraints, which directly impact the resources available to serve students.

Key Issues: Campus-Level and Operational Challenges

- **Rising Costs:** The cost to deliver safe, engaging, and high-quality student experiences (from food to activities) is increasing, while students' capacity to pay is not keeping pace. This creates a difficult financial gap for institutions to fill.
- **Student Mental Health:** Prioritizing student mental health and broader well-being remains a consistent and critical focus area for student affairs divisions.
- **Artificial Intelligence (AI):** AI is sparking crucial conversations about its potential to enhance student services but also poses new questions about how to manage operations and workflows within student affairs.
- **Free Speech and Political Influence:** Navigating discussions around free speech has become "even more difficult," as political influences at the local, state, and federal levels complicate efforts to foster open dialogue on campus.

Key Issues: Professional and Workforce Concerns

- **Staff Well-Being:** A major theme was the need to prioritize the well-being of student affairs professionals. The work is described as "hard work" and "heart work," but it is also exhausting. Leaders are increasingly aware that staff who do not feel valued are at risk of leaving the field.
- **Finding Joy:** A central question for the profession is how professionals can "find joy" in work that matters deeply but is also emotionally and physically draining.
- **Preparation for the Field:** There are ongoing discussions about the right pathways and skills needed to enter and advance in student affairs, a topic to be addressed by the forthcoming new version of the NASPA competencies.

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- Dr. Amelia Parnell, President and CEO, NASPA
- Dr. Michael Christakis, Board Chair, NASPA and Vice President for Student Affairs, University at Albany, SUNY

Key Advice: New Professionals

1. **Be Present & Open:** Take in as much as possible in a current role rather than only looking for the next opportunity. Say "yes" to new, sometimes uncomfortable, roles that expand horizons.
2. **Build Community:** Connect with a professional at another institution to compare notes and gain perspective.
3. **Read Widely:** Once a week, read something from an industry outside of higher education to calibrate expectations and spur innovation.
4. **Hone a Skill:** Commit to developing deep expertise in one of four key areas: **Communication** (public speaking, writing), **Budgets & Finance**, **Legal/Policy/Risk**, or **Data & Analytics**.
5. **Find a Mentor:** Mentorship can help guide you toward the future and there are many out there who are willing to mentor, but they won't necessarily find you! It is ok to ask!

Key Advice: "Seasoned and Marinating" Professionals

1. **Embrace Mentorship:** Acknowledge the obligation to support new and mid-level professionals to ensure the sustainability of the profession.
2. **Be a Connector:** Actively connect junior colleagues with peers at other institutions to broaden their networks.
3. **Say "Yes":** Accept invitations to serve on professional association institute faculties and in other mentorship capacities.
4. **Be Intentionally Present:** Use conferences and other gatherings as opportunities to engage with and support emerging professionals.

Things to Remember

- You are not alone. Other institutions and other professionals are having the same difficulties you are!
- Networking, either through professional associations or by creating personal networks with other professionals who are doing similar work are key!
- In health related institutions, we tend to think of ourselves as very different, but there are institutions out there like us. We do not have to always “re-invent the wheel”.

Things to Remember

Let's be clear: the work we do is profoundly rewarding. **It is, as many have said, not just hard work, but heart work.** But we are doing this work in an environment of unprecedented complexity and pressure. A clear-eyed assessment of these challenges isn't meant to discourage us; it is the essential first step toward strategic and meaningful action.

This is the bittersweet reality of our profession—what Dr. Amelia Parnell describes as "the chocolate and the lemon." The work matters deeply, but it can also be exhausting.

The Sweet (Chocolate)	The Sour (Lemon)
It's "Heart Work"	It's "Hard Work" + exhaustion and burnout
Positively impacting students and making a difference in their lives	Rising Operational Costs
Seeing Students Succeed	Budgetary Constraints
A deep sense of purpose	Navigating Political Influences

Things to Remember

In a profession that pours everything into student well-being, who is taking care of the professionals themselves? We must take ownership of our own health and well being and be sure to tell our story and remind our campus of our worth.

- Embrace both the hard work and the heart work.
- Continue to invest in your teams and in yourselves.
- Break down the campus silos.
- Use the resources of your professional community.
- And never, ever lose sight of the profound and lasting impact you have on the student journey! ***YOU MAKE A DIFFERENCE!***

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