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*This chapter describes the student affairs profession in the digital age. The authors explore new challenges educators and professionals face as new areas are added and expanded, how social networks and digital technology tools continue to evolve, and what skills are needed to engage with students in person and online.*

## The Digital Age of Student Affairs

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The growth and ubiquity of digital and social technology have transformed our society. Forty-five million Americans use mobile phones as their primary Internet device (Duggan & Smith, 2013a) and nearly 26% of all college students are enrolled in some form of online education (Ginder & Stearns, 2014). Further, nearly 73% of adults with Internet access use a social networking site, particularly Facebook and/or Twitter (Duggan & Smith, 2013b). Coupled with this technological revolution is the evolution of student affairs on college and university campuses. The function of student affairs units in higher education continues to evolve and expand: since 2000, many additional operational functions have been added under the auspices of student affairs units to support the growing complexity of needs associated with the contemporary student (McClellan & Stringer, 2009). For example, the addition of professional roles in key areas such as first-year programs, disability resources, marketing, technology, legal counsel, financial aid, admissions, and facility operations has decentralized broad university functions and led to more oversight and direction from student affairs practitioners. Additionally, support services for underrepresented populations such as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered, and allied (GLBTA) students, commuters, and veterans have increased. Themed housing options such as living-learning communities have also seen an uptick in popularity, with the expressed goal of promoting student engagement and integration into the academic and social fabric of the institution. Although student affairs practitioners recognize the growth and specialization of practice within the profession, they also are responding to the implications and intricacies of digital and social technology in students' lives. These potentially competing priorities demand a nimble and innovative response, based on new definitions of the functions of student affairs in the digital age and new

understanding of the promising possibilities of engagement with students through digital and social technologies.

This chapter provides a foundation and framework for student affairs practitioners regarding the use of digital and social technologies in their work with students and in serving students effectively. The chapter explores the growth of student affairs functions, how new communication and digital paradigms have expanded the way we engage with and understand students, and what skills and insight student affairs practitioners need to develop in order to foster an effective and engaged digital mind-set.

## The Growth of Student Affairs Functions

Through much of the history of student affairs, practitioners have focused their attention on educating the whole student. More recently, student affairs work also has required balancing internal and external needs and demands, including expanding federal, state, and local regulations (Dungy & Gordon, 2011). Their roles in the academy have blended as practitioners, educators, and counselors, requiring a range of competencies including multiculturalism, student development, assessment, legal issues, and budget and finance (Herdlein, Riefler, & Mrowka, 2013).

Dungy and Gordon (2011) noted the development of the student affairs profession from its early beginnings of *in loco parentis* and the impact of high profile student activism to shifts in student demographics and new pathways to a degree in higher education. Manning, Kinzie, and Schuh (2014) expanded the literature regarding various student affairs administrative models. These include traditional (extracurricular, cocurricular, functional silos, and student services) and innovative (student-driven, academic-student affairs collaboration, academic-driven) approaches reflecting how various institutions organized student affairs functions. Further, the nomenclature for student affairs varies among public and private institutions alike. Some colleges refer to student affairs as “student life,” “student services,” or “student development.” Given the disparity of its various models and classifications, one can see how challenging it can be to those outside of the student affairs profession to understand its purpose.

As institutions and students diversify, student affairs practitioners have adapted to meet these needs through the expansion of programs and services (McClellan & Stringer, 2009). Since the turn of the century, institutions have formed efforts and offices focused on first-year programs, recreational sports, community standards (conduct), and mental health (Tull & Kuk, 2013). Moreover, universities have also increased the creation of centers that support disenfranchised groups of students, such as GLBTA, multicultural, women, and veterans. As student affairs functions have expanded, so have new types of student affairs practitioners, particularly in enrollment, financial aid, technology, fundraising, communications, and assessment.

Conversely, there is speculation that the growth in student affairs-related areas has contributed to the rise in overall university tuition and fees, which have garnered scrutiny in a time where higher education costs have skyrocketed (Selingo, 2013). As student loan debt reaches historic levels of nearly \$1 trillion (Desilver, 2014), students and families expect more from their college education and related experiences (Fry & Caumont, 2014). This puts increasing pressure on student affairs areas to demonstrate their value through cocurricular learning outcomes, assessment data, and skills built through engagement.

As higher education continues to evolve in the 21st century, so must the student affairs profession (Kuk, 2012). As the various pathways to a college education and degrees grow with additions of online and hybrid degree offerings, how has the field of student affairs diversified its pathways to cocurricular engagement? Certainly, electronic portfolios, cocurricular transcripts, and social media communication are examples that skim the surface of possibilities. However, the digital age is more than the adoption and integration of technology and communication tools. It requires those seeking to engage college students to develop the mind-set, fluency, and skills necessary to add value and relevance to the contemporary college experience.

University budgets will continue to decrease as state and federal dollars continue to flow in other areas (Manning et al., 2014). The cost of a college education has outpaced inflation since the early 1980s (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2010). The increased cost of attendance along with the rise of for-profit institutions has fueled the calls for accountability. What, if anything, are student affairs professionals doing to enhance the student experience? And given research on social media (see Junco, 2014), how are student affairs professionals leveraging new technologies to support student engagement and learning? Student affairs professionals must use digital and social technologies to engage students in new ways, market the value of the university's academic and cocurricular activities, and teach students how to leverage these tools to find and sustain work in the 21st century. Only then will student affairs thrive in the digital age and actualize the next evolution of professional practice. In a time where technological advances and their impact are ubiquitous on college campuses, the lack of fluency around digital and social technology is significant. Student affairs professionals are ill equipped to *meet students where they are* on social media, relegating these sites to minor roles in their own professional competency portfolios, which in turn leaves them with a lack of understanding of the full experience of our students.

## Student Affairs 2.0

Digital and social technologies have the power to reimagine the student experience. Consider the growing pressures on student affairs professionals

around expanding enrollment, the changing student demographic, and the expectations around retention and persistence to graduation (Kuk, 2012). The meaningful use of digital and social technologies heightens the complexities of these expectations as professionals continue to explore ways to integrate them into their work (Shirky, 2009). Among these include increasing engagement efforts in and out of the classroom through expanding communication paradigms in social networks, psychosocial implications of online identity development, and growing legal implications for online behaviors.

Whereas historically much of student engagement research focuses on traditional face-to-face interaction, newer research shares an expanded perspective of engaging students online through social networks, particularly Twitter. Junco, Heiberger, and Loken (2011) noted improved grades and increased levels of traditional measures of engagement among students who used Twitter compared to their counterparts who did not. This study highlighted how Twitter could be leveraged to support students' academic engagement, psychosocial development, and Chickering and Gamson's (1987) seven principles for good practice in undergraduate education. Additionally, Junco and others (2011) found that the deliberate use of Twitter also led to a culture of engagement that deepened interpersonal connection between students. Similarly, these findings are consistent with the teaching recommendations provided by Dunlap and Lowenthal (2009), who used Twitter as an additional social tool to supplement instruction and found that it can encourage real-time interactions, thus enhancing one's social presence (Burke, Marlow, & Lento, 2010).

Twitter has the potential to increase overall academic and social integration through online learning communities (Tinto, 1997) for networking and relationship building. For example, Twitter was used as a tool for extending the engagement of large lecture hall classrooms into smaller communities (Elavsky, Mislán, & Elavsky, 2011). In this study, participation rates were high, with 80% of the 300 students in their class actively engaged on Twitter, used mostly for class discussions and expanded dialogue. Elavsky and others (2011) discovered, "The Twitter stream discourse deepened and extended the class potential for engagement with the course themes in novel ways defied standard interpretation" (p. 225). Additionally, those who may have been less inclined to speak up in a large lecture course felt more comfortable with Twitter, which enabled greater class discussions.

As higher education expands online learning offerings, Twitter use in online classes can mimic the dynamics of in-person discussions. Revere and Kovach (2011) explored the effectiveness of online course design and student engagement, and found that Twitter built a strong learner-centered environment and made coursework more vibrant. The researchers noted enhanced student engagement as well as higher levels of learning through extended class discussions. Dunlap and Lowenthal (2009) also explored using Twitter in the online class environment in place of traditional learning

management systems. The researchers' goal was to enhance social presence, aimed at increasing one's cognitive abilities to process and participate in online classes. Ironically, an indirect benefit of academically integrating Twitter was the increase in the faculty's own teaching presence increasing through better course management and meaningful student contact. Certainly, instructors who effectively incorporate Twitter as a learning tool in their online or hybrid courses could reasonably expect to achieve enhanced student engagement as well as higher levels of learning (Revere & Kovach, 2011). When framed properly, using Twitter in the classroom may provide student affairs professionals the key to meaningfully engage students in online environments. At the very least, use of a social technology such as Twitter helps student affairs professionals connect with students in a way that leverages a student-preferred method of communication in order to make the interpersonal connections necessary to engage students in the ways necessary to support academic success.

As more student affairs professionals engage with students in digital social spaces, how should traditional methods be considered? Initially, Junco (2014) highlights the important difference between adult and youth normative perspectives when expanding one's understanding of social networks. Generally, an *adult normative* perspective reflects an adult viewpoint, marked by a prescriptive approach, highlighted by negative beliefs, where the sole source of information is from themselves. Those who engage in the *adult normative* perspective often believe popular media's negative portrayals of youth technology use. Conversely, a *youth normative* perspective reflects a youth-centered viewpoint, marked by an inquisitive approach, highlighted by balanced beliefs, where the primary source of information is from youth themselves. Consider the number of adult normative messages college students receive around the use of social networks by the time they attend college—they have been repeatedly told that a normal part of their existence is wrong. For example, boyd (2014) highlights the struggles of teenagers who are criticized for socializing through their mobile devices and social networks yet are never taught to expand the use of technology outside of social constructs. Additionally, the number of administrative school policies prohibiting mobile and social technologies in school, along with mainstream media messages around its negative impact (Junco, 2014), prevent any level of meaningful adoption on either perspective. Indeed, understanding the impact of both of these perspectives and how student affairs professionals expand their understanding into a *youth normative* perspective is an important step to understanding and implementation.

Next, student affairs professionals must consider how online identity development expands and complements traditional student development theory. Higher education practitioners and student development or related graduate programs must explore ways in which digital and social technologies have shifted related and connected scholarship. Although this area of research is uncharted and vast, given the depth and breadth of current

literature on student development, the importance of such exploration is noteworthy. Junco (2014) notes:

The identity development models reviewed thus far focus exclusively on identity development in the offline world—the expression of and interaction within a community that leads to changes and movement along a developmental path. However, the emergence of online social spaces has allowed youth to explore their identities in ways not previously possible. (p. 105)

Additionally, student affairs practitioners must find ways to incorporate online identity development into programs and services. Some examples may include digital identity conversations at orientation and various leadership programs, student employment training, and professional competency building programs through career services. Junco (2014) also noted the importance of recognizing and teaching three levels of expressed online identification: “True Identity,” “Pseudonymity,” and “Anonymity” (p. 106). The more-obfuscated forms of identification allow students to explore their identities in ways not previously possible. Student affairs practitioners must give pause to reflect on how they may have engaged in digital and social communication before teaching their students about its values and consequences.

Furthermore, legal issues pertaining to digital and social technologies should be considered in all student affairs settings. Binder and Mansfield (2013) note important issues such as privacy law, intellectual property ownership, and mandatory reporting of anonymous speech, particularly around sexual violence. One way to address these concerns is to create a cross-divisional university committee composed of staff, faculty, and legal counsel to create guidance documents on digital and social technology use. Additionally, student affairs professionals should complement these guidance documents with proper training tools such as case law. For example, in *Tatro v. University of Minnesota*, the University of Minnesota and its Mortuary Science Program expelled Amanda Tatro based on comments posted to Facebook while off campus (Levine, 2013). Whereas Tatro claimed her comments were part of her First Amendment rights, the case matched decisions levied by the U.S. Supreme Court decisions in *Tinker v. Des Moines Independent County School District* and *Bethel School District No. 403 v. Fraser*, which assessed student’s rights to free speech as applied in light of special characteristics of a school environment. In other words, *Tinker* allowed school officials to restrict student speech when it is reasonably likely to cause a material and substantial disruption of school activities. In the *Tatro* case, the Minnesota Supreme Court found that the right to freedom of speech did not protect Tatro, because her Facebook posts violated the university’s academic guidelines.

The contemporary student requires an intentional level of digital and social technology education and training in order to prepare them

appropriately for citizenship in the digital age. Whether the focus is on engaging students in and out of the classroom, gaining an expanded view of identity through social networks, or developing a more holistic view on legal issues related to the use of digital communication tools, student affairs professionals must assume a leadership role in these initiatives (Tull & Kuk, 2013). Although the barriers to this shift in curricula and cocurricular endeavors remain visible, student affairs staff should consider strategic ways in which they can act swiftly to discover better ways to address student digital and technological skills in and outside the academic setting.

### **Student Affairs Pixelation**

In the world of digital photography, pixelated images look blurry, often because the image has been enlarged without simultaneously increasing the resolution. This creates a low-quality image that sometimes makes it difficult to identify the subject. Similarly, the field of student affairs appears pixelated due to its rapid growth in response to the diverse needs of today's college students (Dungy & Gordon, 2011) and an increased focus on student success (Bowen, 2013). How can the student affairs profession increase its resolution? First, student affairs professionals must identify how its functions will be defined in online or hybrid environments (Shea & Blakely, 2002). Certainly, with the rise of project based degrees and immersive curriculum focused on the gamification of learning, student affairs practitioners can no longer ignore technology's impact in the academy (Selingo, 2013). Second, student affairs professionals must clearly articulate what types of digital and social technology skills are needed to engage this generation of students. This is important due to the work professional organizations such as the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA) and the American College Personnel Association (ACPA) are undertaking to update guidance documents on professional competencies. Third, student affairs professionals should explore ways to use data around digital and social technology use to help inform practice and share stories around the impact of their work. Indeed, the combination may unlock the clearest picture of the student affairs profession we have.

A common question posed among student affairs professionals around the use of digital and social technologies is how student affairs functions will manifest in online environments. However, this question moves beyond the literature that discusses social networks, technology's psychosocial impacts, and student engagement. Of course, this question seeks to understand how to connect, engage, and support those students who do not physically come to campus. Dare, Zapata, and Thomas (2005) noted seven recommendations for student affairs professionals:

1. Understand the administration of distance learning programs.
2. Understand the vocabulary of distance learning.

3. Understand the funding of distance learning programs.
4. Be prepared to advocate for the role of student affairs in distance learning and to educate others about the mission, function, and objectives in student affairs units.
5. Advocate for equal services for students who take courses online and on campus.
6. Develop programs to meet the unique needs of online students.
7. Establish positions with duties focused entirely on the needs of online students. (as cited in Crawley & LeGore, 2009, p. 297)

Although these recommendations provide a starting point for important conversation, it is equally important to recognize the convenience of online courses being the driving force behind those enrolled (Crawley & LeGore, 2009). Patience and understanding of this uncharted territory is required, as this may negate some of student affairs' intentional efforts to connect with online students.

In order for student affairs professionals to achieve some or all of these recommendations, they must first understand how to implement change in their institution's organizational structure (Bess & Dee, 2012). Certainly, good practices to achieve these important changes exist, and vary with size and focus of the institution. That is to say that what may work at a small private college would not work at a large research university. Still, by working with key staff across university departments and divisions, particularly in academic affairs, student affairs professionals have a greater chance in building and sustaining movement toward a focus around engaging students in online environments. Second, the use of external consultants through the program review process may serve as change agents by adding expertise into existing conversation (Crawley & LeGore, 2009). Third, consulting and collaborating with similar institutions that are actively engaging students online provides another level of evidence that may lay the groundwork for increased staffing and resources around online student engagement efforts. Effective resource allocation is reliant on student affairs professionals pursuing evidence indicating online student engagement efforts are directly related to student retention.

As the student affairs profession continues to evolve in the digital age, so do the depth and breadth of its competencies (Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education [CAS], 2012; National Association of Student Personnel Administrators [NASPA], 2010). It is standard for many student affairs professional organizations to have specific competencies for each of their functional areas, such as the Association of College Unions International (ACUI), the Association of College and University Housing Officers International, and the National Association for Campus Activities. CAS (2012) highlights 38 functional areas in higher education, particularly in student affairs, documenting area standards, and specific learning outcomes. Additionally, NASPA (2010), along with ACPA,

share one guiding document for student affairs professionals around 10 professional competencies: Advising and Helping; Assessment, Evaluation, and Research; Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion; Ethical Professional Practice; History, Philosophy, and Values; Human and Organizational Resources; Law, Policy, and Governance; Leadership; Personal Foundations; and Student Learning and Development. Each competency is broken into three competency area levels (beginner, intermediate, and advanced) to allow for learning on a continuum. Surprisingly, even with these and other higher education standards, there still lacks a widely accepted higher education or student affairs competency in digital and social technology (Herdlein et al., 2013). The only association that has a competency focused on technology is ACUI, which defines this competency as the ability to understand the overall intent of digital tools and to choose from appropriate tools, equipment, and procedures for service delivery and problem solving.

Currently, technology is listed as a competency “area thread,” along with sustainability and globalism (NASPA, 2010). These threads are considered as essential elements *as a part of* each competency area, rather than existing as their own separate competencies. In the digital age, student affairs professionals require clearer guidance in the absence of a national professional standard for the use of technology. The establishment of this standard may provide a matching framework for faculty to intentionally include digital technologies in their pedagogy. In its absence, faculty and staff continue to explore the merits of newer technology tools while students fail to gain valuable knowledge and skills necessary for postgraduate life. Thus, how can student affairs professionals begin to establish an industry-accepted technology standard? Jenkins (2009) noted 11 work skills that people need to be active contributors in the digital age, with 6 being focused around digital and social technologies:

1. Appropriation: The ability to meaningfully sample and remix media content.
2. Distributed cognition: The ability to interact meaningfully with tools that expand mental capacities.
3. Collective intelligence: The ability to pool knowledge and compare notes with others towards a common goal.
4. Judgment: The ability to evaluate the reliability and credibility of different information sources.
5. Transmedia Navigation: The ability to follow the flow of stories and information across multiple modalities.
6. Networking: The ability to search for, synthesize, and disseminate information. (p. 4)

Recognition of technology competencies would address the knowledge, skills, and mind-set around digital and social tools that provide important data. These data provide synthesized information and workflow

efficiency to increase student engagement opportunities. Consider how each of the skills could begin translating this new competency. Transmedia Navigation, Judgment, and Collective Intelligence reflect the need to sift through the enormous amount of available data via the Internet and make meaning of it. Networking and Appropriation reflect the need to understand, synthesize, and present data in a way diverse audiences can relate and respond to. Distributed Cognition reflects the need to use tools that encourage critical thinking ensuring that the highest quality dialogue will take place. As NASPA and ACPA update student affairs competencies for 2015 and beyond, the hope is that technology emerges as a new competency for the profession.

As student affairs practitioners continue to integrate technology into their work, opportunities to use big data may help inform modern student affairs practice. For instance, large data sets may provide the foundation and infrastructure to share stories about the impact of student affairs in a digital age. Certainly, if data-driven evidence leads student affairs efforts (McClellan & Stringer, 2009), the emergence of big data use in higher education should become an important imperative. Picciano (2012) defines big data as information or database systems used as a main storage facility capable of storing large quantities of data longitudinally, down to very specific transactions. Applicable examples in higher education infrastructure include data in student information systems (for example, Banner), data stored through the use of student identification cards (e.g., checking in at the residence halls, library, recreational facility, or college events), and data from learning management systems (for example, Blackboard, Moodle). Additionally, website and application data provide information on frequency and use of various digital technology services available to the university community. Furthermore, social networks and mobile devices provide self-reported, location-based, and sentiment-filled data that give institutions an innovative view on the student experience. Big data can be analyzed in order to equip professionals with usable information to catalyze data-driven decisions; however, the data only *inform* those influencing decision making and should not be taken out of big picture context.

Harnessing the power of big data in student affairs is a complicated process, requiring political support across the institution (Johnson, Adams-Becker, Estrada, & Freeman, 2014). Cross-divisional partnerships are required, particularly within faculty leadership, in order to ensure diverse data points are represented. This is achieved, in part, through building a climate of trust around the process and the data and allowing open access to created dashboards. Indeed, recruitment, retention, research, and fundraising efforts have the potential to be positively impacted by these efforts. In support, Wishon and Rome (2012) noted that the initial creation of an enterprise data warehouse provides the necessary infrastructure needed to create reporting and analytic capability. Only then could the creation of data dashboards make it easier to access and consume information and give

nontechnical users the ability to get answers for the questions they are asking. For instance, such a dashboard could identify the types of students who struggle in first-year science courses in order to plan appropriate interventions. Ultimately, big data have the ability to influence funding decisions in a time when financial and staffing resources continue to decrease (Manning et al., 2014).

In student affairs, decisions based on big data analytics have the potential to elucidate and improve upon the diverse types of student affairs work. Data warehouses such as “Degree Works” provide information about degree audits in a user-friendly format, providing timely information to academic advisors and students, focused on increasing retention and graduation rates. Cocurricular transcripts and electronic portfolios allow students to share how they have actualized classroom knowledge in ways that demonstrate marketable skills. Data represented through visual information graphics with complimentary, interactive websites provide salient information while measuring which data sets were engaged with most often. In fact, most website data are rich with information around frequency, time spent on the website, and how people were referred to your website (for example, from social networks, search engine, main university site). Also, social network data are often visually represented through heat maps, where bursts of colors represent high quantities of activity and through stories, constructed by combining single social network posts into one threaded web page. Finally, with the rapid growth of wearable and health-related mobile technologies, innovative applications to education may already be in production. When you combine digital data with the learning outcomes and program evaluation data, student affairs professionals have the potential to share powerful stories for prospective and current students, alumni, parents, and community.

## Conclusion

The digital age of student affairs is rich with opportunities to enhance the student experience, both in person and online. As digital and social technologies evolve, educators have the opportunity to unlock new, innovative ways to engage the contemporary student and the university community. Of course, legal issues should be considered through well-developed guidance documents that support both faculty and administration’s efforts and appropriately address concerns. However, opportunities to use digital information may provide university leaders the ability to make more informed decisions and provide timely initiatives to support student success. As more functional areas are added to the student affairs infrastructure, developing technological fluency provides important evidence toward student success and engagement. Seeking key supporters at one’s institution and identifying good technology practices at peer institutions are the first steps in discovering the potential of social and digital technology.

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