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What College Presidents Need to Know about College Students and Student Affairs

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The college presidency is filled with challenges and opportunities, ranging from maintaining communication with on-campus and off-campus stakeholders, coordinating work being done across campus, to simply keeping all of the institution's operations up and running in an efficient manner. These activities are all designed around a specific purpose: providing opportunities for students to learn.

The college experience is one where students learn, develop, mature, and grow in different ways. Student development theory contends that students enroll in college, make mistakes, grow, learn, and evolve into individuals who contribute to democracy. Faculty, staff, and administrators all have an effect on how students experience higher education, and on how the lives of students are impacted by an institution of higher education.

Offered here, taken from nearly 25 years of working with college students, are elements that college presidents need to know and think about in regard to college students. College presidents will benefit from taking stock of who students are, including what students are looking for, and what institutions can and should be doing to guide students in their development.

1. Presidents need to stay current and connected to students. Students' needs change constantly. A strategy or process that worked well five years ago might not work today. Presidents need to visit residence halls, eat in dining halls, and experience new student orientation through the perspective of students and parents. Presidents need to connect with students and be aware of how students are experiencing the campus. The president's guide in this process should be the vice president for student affairs, and together the president and vice president for student affairs should have first-hand knowledge of how the institution is experienced by students.
2. Presidents need to know what is happening on the front-lines of all divisions throughout the institution. This means, for example, that presidents have to understand how academic advising is offered, how students register for classes, what the social climate is for students, and how campus services are provided. Presidents must be engaged on campus and see students as their primary constituents.
3. Presidents need to be aware of how policies and processes affect students. Ultimately, the president needs to be aware of how students experience the institution academically and socially, and must be aware of how policy changes impact these interactions and

opportunities. Changes to policies and processes can impact student access and student success in numerous ways.

4. Presidents must be aware of issues affecting students. Student issues are complex and are becoming increasingly complex. For example, presidents must be aware of changes to federal student aid, federal guidelines and regulations related to privacy, etc. Establishing student affairs and academic affairs as partners in the process can be invaluable to creating a climate for growth on the part of the student.
5. Presidents must be in a position to advocate for students. This means that they have to understand the trends, behaviors, and needs of students. Student development does not always occur in a stream-lined way. Presidents need to engage their campuses and focus on students as individuals.

In order to ensure student needs are being determined, addressed and met, administrators must spend more time with students, and must do so in the environments where students spend the majority of their time. Effective ways to establish interactions can differ from institution to institution, depending on the scope and mission of the individual institution, and the delivery methods of programs. Often, the president's relationship with students can become ceremonial rather than significant. Presidents can learn a great deal when they are part of the lives of students, and divisions of student affairs can help provide these opportunities.

In this process, presidents have to distinguish the fine line between students as customers and students as young adults. Students are participating in higher education to learn and grow, and they are there to earn a degree, not be given a degree. Presidents must be intentional in their work to assist students as they progress toward their goals.

Ultimately, college presidents need to lead the conversation about higher education, including ensuring that institutions focus on students as individuals. Presidents need to remind all of society that the role of higher education is one that benefits all of society.