




STUDENT AFFAIRS AT WESTFIELD STATE UNIVERSITY



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Executive Summary

The purpose of this consulting activity was to assess the strengths and weaknesses of Student Affairs in its current state and make recommendations to the President for the most appropriate structure of the division.

This assessment was conducted through 25 individual interviews and 6 student and 3 staff group discussions. The primary questions for these interviews/discussions were:

1. What is the purpose of student affairs at WSU?
2. How well is student affairs achieving its purpose?

Additional questions for some interviews/groups included:

3. What is the racial climate like on campus?
4. What needs to happen to improve the student experience?

Documents and websites were also reviewed to gather more information. Most significant to the review was the University Efficiency Analysis Advisory Committee report and Student Affairs Annual/Monthly reports.

As a result of the interviews and document reviews an assessment was made. Findings indicate pockets of strengths within the division of student affairs as well as challenges to be addressed. The most salient strength is the unanimity in the staff's commitment to caring for and putting students first. Students are having a varied experience with a continuum of experiencing support and loving WSU to feeling exhausted in their leadership roles. Staff within the division are also exhausted, feel unappreciated and are increasingly frustrated. There appears to be a mixed understanding on the campus on the purpose of student affairs at Westfield State which may be exacerbated by the current state of re-organization.

Based upon the findings and best practices on other campuses, this report offers 9 recommendations, with the most significant being to merge the divisions of student affairs and enrollment management. A few next steps are embedded in the recommendations, yet a more robust plan should be developed, based upon the acceptance of what is suggested here – as there will be a domino effect for each recommendation and they are interrelated.

Background

Westfield State is a place where students find themselves and their place in life. As a life-long learner in understanding the student experience at a 4 year-public university, I believe student affairs plays an essential role in the development of the student and their successful and meaningful journey through college and beyond.

As the Westfield State University community recovers and heals from the dual pandemics of COVID and an unprecedented racial awakening in the country, the campus must also grapple with declining enrollments and revenues. Investment in the student experience can be vital in addressing the challenges that the campus faces.

I have been asked by President Thompson to assist the university in identifying the best model for Westfield State to enhance the student experience through the lens of the division of student affairs. With new leadership on the campus, the departure of the Vice President for Student Affairs, and the return of students and faculty following the height of the pandemic, the student experience is poised to be developed with a clean state through reflection on the relevant and revered traditions of the past, most current best practices, and innovations utilized during the hiatus from campus. A mindful eye on opportunities for collaboration to create synergies across campus will be essential.

I. Individuals/Groups Consulted

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2. How well is student affairs achieving its purpose?

Additional questions for some interviews/groups included:

3. What is the racial climate like on campus?
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Administration/Staff

Juline Mills	Dick Lenfest
Maggie Balch	Dan Forster
Kim Morgan	Matt Dellea
Josh Hettrick	John Zocco
Shannon Broderick	Junior Delgado
Father Warren Salvage	Barbara Hand
Azanda Seymour	Lisa McMahon
Enrique Morales	Steve Taksar
Pauline Moran	Dan Price
President Thompson	Brian Jennings
Tony Casiano	Rob Thorton
Brian Cahillane	Nicole West
Suzanne Adams	

Staff Groups

Housing Resident Directors

TRIO staff

Banacos Center Staff

Student Groups

SGA Executive Council

SGA Senate

Resident Assistants (3 group sessions)

President BSU (with small group of RA's)

LAFE Executive Board

II. Documents Reviewed

Documents and websites were also reviewed to gather more information. These included:

- Student Affairs Strategic Plan
- WSU Strategic Plan
- Student Affairs Annual and Monthly Reports (2018-2021)
- UEAAC Final Report
- UEAAC Implementation and Planning Guides
- Student Leadership Academy Agenda
- Department of Student Activities, Involvement, and Leadership New Structure Proposal
- Student Activities Calendar (Web)
- Resident Assistant Program Reports
- Web based Organizational Charts-
 - Massachusetts Peers: Salem, Worcester, Bridgewater, Fitchburg, Framingham State Universities; Mass Maritime; Mass College of Liberal Arts
 - Aspirational Peers: SUNY @ Geneseo, Oneonta, New Paltz, Brockport; Stockton State, Salisbury University, Slippery Rock University

Student Affairs Review

I. Current Status

Student Affairs is currently in a state of transition. The Dean of Students is reporting to the Interim Provost and is sitting on Presidents Cabinet. Reporting to the Dean of Students are the Directors of Housing (interim), Career Services, Counseling, Health Services (interim) and the Associate Dean of Students. The Associate Dean is responsible for conduct and supervises an Associate Director of Student Activities, Involvement and Leadership (SAIL) and a staff member hired by SGA to assist and advise them.

Previous reports to the Vice President have been reassigned as follows:

1. Police to Vice President for Administration and Finance
2. Athletics to President

Housing has recently been reunited to include both operations and residential engagement. The former director of housing operations is currently serving as the interim director of Housing and Residential Life. There is an interim associate director working centrally and 5 Residence Directors overseeing 34 RA's.

II. Assessment

The purpose of this consulting activity is to assess the strengths and weaknesses of Student Affairs in its current state and make recommendations to the President for the most appropriate structure of the division.

A. Strengths

1. **Student focused.** Student Affairs staff share a common value of being student focused. All staff that I met with indicated their commitment to student well-being and success. Student government leaders feel that the student affairs staff care about them, listen, provide support and guidance. Staff in student affairs have respect for one another. There are a number of campus colleagues, particularly in Academic Affairs who tap the resources of the staff in student affairs and recognize and value the work they are doing to support students.
2. **Facilities.** Staff have private offices and access to conference space with which to meet students. While ideally more units would be co-located, there are good adjacencies of student affairs units. Housing facilities are for the very most part in excellent condition. Each hall has community and study space for students to utilize outside of their rooms. This is particularly noteworthy where there are apartments. Buildings are clean and well maintained.

3. **Innovation.** Housing has established extended office hours that allow students to access services past 5 pm. Housing has demonstrated creative problem solving to address occupancy issues (77%) and loss of revenue. New initiatives include flat rate for all housing, locking contract renewals earlier and an easier room selection process.

This year a Joint Student Leader Academy was initiated to combine efforts in housing, orientation and student activities. This is an excellent example of working both effectively and efficiently. Based on the staff's assessment this is a good model for leadership and positional training, yet opportunities for improvement in future academies have been identified.

The Health Center is preparing to incorporate electronic medical records.

4. **Collaboration.** Throughout the division there are pockets of strong connections with faculty, especially regarding students of concern and/or in distress. Collaborations across the university exist, including: case management and threat assessment teams, housing/dining rate setting, family weekend and homecoming. Both Career Services and Counseling have active and extensive outreach programs. These include working with students and with faculty.
5. **Staff longevity.** Most staff have been here for a long time and can provide valuable institutional history and context.
6. **Student Government and programming.** Staff within the division work exceedingly well with student government. Student Government is well staffed with an administrative assistant and full-time advisor. Both SAIL and Student Government offer numerous programs on campus – daytime, evenings and weekends. There is a great deal of coordination between these entities in offering events for students. There is a web-based calendar of events that are offered.

B. General Student Perspectives

Students come here because of the small campus feel – looking for community. Many students feel a sense of community within their major and spoke highly of their professors– yet do not feel connected more broadly on the campus.

RA's and SG leaders are tired. Both groups shared that they are being asked to do what paid professionals should be doing – such as addressing racial justice on campus.

While these student leaders want to have a voice and be part of the solution, they are carrying a full load, working other jobs, and have other commitments. Some expressed that they are dealing with their own trauma and recent incidents are re-traumatizing them. One student

described her role is to bring student concerns and questions to the administration, yet when she met with an administrator was given a 2-page list of things to do for that administrator.

RA's feel that they are not respected by residents. Some feel that student athletes get more respect on campus. RA's do not feel supported by the professional staff. They feel unnecessarily burdened with requirements which take away from allowing them to deal with the problems and challenges facing the residents. These include minimum programming requirements and creating new bulletin boards and door tags on a monthly basis (note: these issues are currently being addressed).

Students do not feel that the campus puts students first. An example that was raised is that parking is free for faculty and staff, yet students pay \$100.

Students leaders within the Black and LatinX communities do not feel they have anyone within the student affairs staff that relate to them and provide support for their groups.

C. Challenges

1. **Mission.** It is not clear what the mission of the Student Affairs division is at WSU. According to the Student Affairs website; *Student Affairs fosters the development of knowledge, skills, and values vital to students' personal, professional and global success.* More specifically, the website indicates that student affairs assists students to:
 - *Be informed decision makers*
 - *Understand, respect and appreciate diversity;*
 - *Engage in and strengthen their communities'*
 - *Embrace the importance of giving as volunteers and philanthropists;*
 - *Develop and exhibit transferable lifelong career skills;*
 - *Seek out resources for learning and living that enhance their overall well-being;*
 - *Thin critically, engaging in independent thoughts and action;*
 - *Work constructively with others*

Many of the individuals with whom I have spoken, indicated that the purpose of student affairs is to provide social programs for students so they have something to do when they are not in class and studying. In addition, I heard that some recognize that student affairs should help students with their personal issues. Staff outside of student affairs longed for the way things were in the past – including having alcohol/bar on campus.

The question at hand is – what is the purpose of a student affairs program at WSU and is it effectively achieving its purpose. I would suggest that the purpose of student affairs in today's WSU is greater than that described by most of the individuals outside of student affairs. Within student affairs, there is a much more robust reason for why they exist...yet a level of complacency for accepting the minimal role defined by others. This complacency is rooted in the lack of leadership, vision, and adequate resources. If this is indeed the goal student affairs

at WSU today is social programming and assisting students with personal problems, then they are doing what is expected. It is important to note however, that this assessment is based on the resources that they currently have available.

2. **Outside Perceptions.** There is a perception by staff outside of the division that there is nothing to for students to do and that students have too much free time on their hands. A consistent theme was that staff in student affairs do not collaborate outside of the division. Staff within the division offered many examples of collaboration, however did indicate that they have great difficulty in engaging faculty in their programs. While there are some campus partners who believe that student affairs is doing the best they can with the resources they have, there are many who do not feel that student affairs is effective. In addition to indicating there is nothing for students to do, some individuals outside of the division do not trust certain departments because they don't respond fast enough or do not close the loop regarding an issue. One person said, "It does not appear that staff is on the same page. Nothing sticks with Student Affairs" – meaning that a program or initiative happens once to address the issue of the day and no follow up. At this time there is a care team that is helping to address sharing information about individual students however communication and collaboration across the university needs to be addressed.
3. **Staff Capacity.** Currently there are many individuals in interim roles and/or taking on responsibilities once held by others. Staff are doing the core functions of their work, yet are unable to engage at a broader level to be strategic, collaborative and developmental in their work to the level with which they desire and are expected. Most of the individuals with whom I spoke shared their concern about a lack of respected and credible leadership in student affairs.
4. **Ethnic diversity in staff.** There is one LatinX identified at the director level and one Latinx-identified counselor, and two African-American staff member within the division. At one time there was a staff member who was responsible for working with the multi-cultural/multi-ethnic student organizations and providing diversity education. This individual/position was moved into Human Resources and has since left WSU. Currently it appears that the Interfaith Center is filling some of the void for these students. There is a great desire for the previous position to be re-established in Student Affairs.
5. **Staff longevity.** Most staff with whom I spoke have been here for most, if not their entire career. Some staff were also students at Westfield, so this is the only campus for which they have experience. While it appears that all staff desire to serve the needs of students, there is a need for more robust and fresh ways to approach the work. Balancing the staff with a good mix of both new and long- standing individuals would benefit the overall team.
6. **Staff Morale.** All staff within the division with whom I spoke expressed feelings of frustration, exhaustion, a lack of direction. One staff member said, "spirit of the place is

broken” – feeling that the institution has lost its vision of who is WSU. Staff feel unappreciated and blamed for all that goes wrong regarding students. They do not feel that they are being resourced to do the job that is needed on the campus.

7. **Student Concerns.** Another common theme was students complaining that there is nothing to do. It appears that the most frequent medium for communicating with students is email, which could be problematic, as most college students resort to social media for keeping in touch. I heard a number of times that there are too many rules in Res Life. No alcohol is permitted for residents over 21. Staff outside of student affairs remember the days when there was a pub/bar on campus and feel that it should be brought back.
8. **Other.** Some additional concerns include that the campus does not feel welcoming, students and staff would like to see more annual traditions, and faculty do not engage in out of class activities.

D. Additional observations

WSU is a diamond in the rough with regards for providing a rich and rigorous student experience for this region of the Commonwealth. The campus setting is beautiful, natural resources abound, residence halls are ripe with opportunity, athletic teams excel, potential for expanding diversity of the student body exists.

While many factors contribute to enabling WSU to live up to its potential for transforming lives, it must make the student experience a priority. Creating synergies across the institution, retooling positions, identifying new resources for expanding living learning communities, outdoor recreation programs and increased attention to racial justice and student well-being could make a significant impact on recruitment, retention, graduation and success of students. It appears that technology enhancements are being initiated and WSU students could be well served by making these initiatives a priority and coordinating across the campus.

Creating a culture of respect, care, cooperation and most importantly student-centeredness is the responsibility of the entire campus. With proper attention given to the role of student affairs on the campus, WSU could see robust leadership emerge that would have a positive ripple effect throughout the institution.

Recommendations

A strong student affairs division is essential to the retention and success of students. At its core, Student Affairs supports the well-being of the student and provides a learning experience which is critical to their success as students, professionals, and citizens within their communities and the world.

A strong student affairs division understands their role in the academy and seeks to ensure collaboration across organizational lines that facilitates student success. Each division within the university has an essential role to play to ensure that students thrive and learn. Some of these roles are supportive, such as back of house human resources, procurement and budget office, while others are clearly in the forefront such as academic teaching and support. Student affairs has a front and center role if the goal of the institution is transformation of the student and the public good.

Students come to the university as whole beings...they not only bring an intellectual skill set, as is often evaluated through the admissions process, they also bring their cultural wealth, physical, psycho-social and spiritual selves. In addition, they bring their personal life backpack which could include trauma, privilege, family expectations, etc. It is only by embracing who students are as holistic individuals, can the institution deliver on its educational promise.

Currently WSU is struggling to address a financial deficit. Every effort must be made to be good stewards of all its resources. Efficiency is essential in the administration of all services that support the educational mission. Effectiveness must be in the forefront of the delivery of the educational mission. Current recommendations by the UAAEC focus on efficiencies to save money by eliminating the Vice President for Student Affairs and moving units into Academic Affairs and Administrative Affairs, yet may not be in the best interest of student retention and success.

As stated above, at its core, Student Affairs should support the well-being of the student and promote learning critical to their success as socially just students, professionals, leaders and, citizens within their communities and the world. If this is the purpose that WSU defines then Student Affairs must have effective leadership throughout the division that define its work through a social justice and equity lens with a passion for student success.

The recommendations below are offered as first steps in creating and building an exceptional experience for the students of Westfield State University.

Recommendation 1: Create a new division of Students, Enrollment and Campus Life with a Vice President that reports directly to the President. Merge student affairs and enrollment management into a new division with a Vice President for Enrollment and Student Life reporting directly to the President.

At this time of declining enrollment, WSU would benefit by creating a new division of Students, Enrollment, and Campus Life. Conjoining the current divisions of student affairs and enrollment provides an opportunity to demonstrate an understanding of the student life-cycle, create a vision for the total student experience, bring that vision to life, authentically market the vision to prospective students and be accountable for the effective delivery of that vision as demonstrated by retention and graduation rates and success after college.

Additionally, a new division of Students, Enrollment and Campus Life (SECL) may benefit the campus by:

- Enhancing the quality of student life through use of a holistic lens of looking at the student experience from recruitment to graduation
- Strengthen recruitment efforts when offices in Student Affairs are more involved in recruiting the incoming classes. Today's students are looking for more than a major – they want to belong, be mentored, grow as people. Prospective students need to see the benefits of living on campus, participating in orientation and becoming involved on campus during the early stages to help with the yield rate.
- Creating a stronger more vibrant campus community when the admission counselors are aware of the social and leadership opportunities and resources for students.
- Responding to the concerns by students and staff that the voice of the students and the importance of addressing their needs may be diminished by having student affairs and enrollment reporting into an already large division.
- Combining resources to effectively communicate with and market to students.

This newly created division should have a direct report to the president. Direct reporting would ensure that enrollment management and the student experience are central to the WSU priorities at this juncture. It will send a clear message to students that, "You Matter", and will keep students at the forefront of the President's agenda.

In my review of organizational charts at Massachusetts state and aspirational peers, there is a mix of this reporting structures. The predominate structure is the vice president of student affairs reporting to the president and second most frequently identified structure is for student affairs to be aligned with enrollment management with a vice president reporting to the president. While it is not uncommon for student affairs to report to academic affairs, only one of the Massachusetts schools and one of the aspirational peers reviewed showed this alignment.

While a true merger may take months to get effectively lined up, it would be important to take the first step immediately in order to alleviate the confusion, fear and feelings of frustration that currently exist. This first step would be to bring all the units previously in student affairs under the current Vice President for Enrollment.

It will be critical that the leadership team engage all staff in developing a clear mission statement and compelling vision for the newly created division.

Recommendation 2: Create an Assistant Vice President for the Student Experience to bring together Housing Operations/ Residential Engagement/Student Activities, Involvement, Leadership (SAIL- includes Orientation and affinity group advising).

Hiring a seasoned professional who understands today's students is essential for WSU. This person must be able to articulate the value of the out-of-class experience for all students. Research has demonstrated that student involvement outside the classroom increases retention, graduation, and life satisfaction after graduation.

Recommendation 3: Retool the Dean of Students position to focus on student well-being with Counseling, Health, Conduct, Police reporting to this individual. This position will be the senior student affairs officer and lead for all student-related crisis management.

Student well-being has become increasingly complex and demanding. Enabling the Dean of Students to focus on the welfare of the individual student would ensure timely and seamless response to student needs. In addition, this focus would allow for the Dean of Students to be connecting the dots on individual students who could likely be talking with many different offices around the campus and could easily fall through the cracks. The Dean of Students needs to be seeing the big picture of students and be the safety net.

While there are strict ethical and legal restrictions for Counseling and Health sharing of information, having these two areas report to the Dean will enable a more fluid way for student acute needs to be met. Other areas that need to have a close working relationship include Student Success and Interfaith. Clear structures for enabling collaboration, cooperation and sharing information need to be a priority.

The Dean needs to articulate to the campus the big picture of what is happening related to student well-being with data and advocate for areas to be addressing those needs.

Recommendation 4: Hire a coordinator of student diversity and inclusion to advise clubs (often refer to as "affinity groups") and provide educational opportunities for all students around JEDI...starting with Orientation.

The university is actively seeking a Vice President for Justice, Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion. This individual will ultimately be serving at the highest level under the president and will likely have many competing responsibilities to juggle. If WSU is to authentically recruit students of color, then the student experience needs to be more welcoming, supportive, and inclusive. A student affairs professional with a shared lived experience would be an asset for marginalized students. This individual will be visible and accessible to student groups and will guide the division of Enrollment and Student Life to ensure that structural inequities within the student experience are addressed.

Recommendation 5: Merge the Office of Student Activities, Involvement, and Leadership with the Student Government Association offices.

While there is currently some overlap and collaboration with the activities within the Student Government Association, the two areas lack a cohesive mission. This new model will provide an increase in events and support that have an intentional purpose and will increase student learning and engagement outside the classroom. Having a structure that provides more guidance from professionals with experience and knowledge in Student Development working directly with Westfield State students, allows staff to further the goals of enhancing the Leadership Academy Program, Emerging Leaders Program, Student Leadership Awards, Social Justice Theme Months, and week long program efforts focused on specific areas such as kindness, humanity, community engagement, and wellness.

Recommendation 6: Move Retention office under Vice President for Students, Enrollment and Campus Life.

This recommendation is addressed in the UAAEC Report. In addition to looking at retention from a strictly academic perspective, retention must be viewed from an out of class and co-curricular perspective. Numerous anecdotal reports throughout my conversations have noted that students do not feel valued and cared for. These reports should be documented and shared with campus to develop intervention strategies.

This office can have a significant impact on student retention by working with the staff to provide valuable analytics and guiding staff in assessing their work. Staff will be able to make better data informed decisions about programs, policies, services etc. which impact students moving through the institutions.

Recommendation 7: Consider creating an on-campus internship program and a comprehensive student record.

These are 2 innovations that would be of great value to the students at WSU. A recent presentation was made to the President's Cabinet about these ideas.

Recommendation 8: Merge Counseling and Health under an Executive Director for Student Wellness.

There was a great deal of interest in this concept in the past and a search was conducted to fill the executive director position. Unfortunately, this search was failed. Bringing these two areas together could create a much more robust approach to promoting student wellness on the campus. An Executive Director would work across the division, academics and the entire community to address the ever increasing wellness needs of students.

Recommendation 9: Create a Council under the Provost to include senior staff in Academic Affairs and VP for Student Life and Enrollment, Dean of Students, Assistant VP for Student Experience, and Director of Admissions to enhance information sharing and collaboration.

The UAAEC reports speaks to the importance of creating a stronger tie across the university. Most individuals with whom I spoke did not understand how student affairs processes function, what activities are available to students and the overall purpose of student affairs. Creating a formal structure that ensures better understanding and on-going communication can ultimately improve the overall student experience...and increase enrollment.

Recommendation 10: Move Department of Public Safety in the new division of Students, Enrollment and Campus Life.

Campus police play a vital role in crisis management and are often at the front lines in dealing with student situations. While they are concerned for the safety of the entire campus, the reporting line within this new division will keep the Department of Public Safety closely aligned with the players (Dean of Students, Counseling, Residence Life) who are managing student issues and incidents.