

Preserving Student Affairs in Times of Fiscal Constraint: A Case History

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This article describes how Ramapo College preserved and redesigned its student affairs programs and services while being forced to manage statewide cutbacks in overall funding. This process was compounded in difficulty by the college's size--the smallest institution within New Jersey's state colleges--and its broad-based curricular mission, offering degrees in the liberal arts and sciences as well as professional studies. By agreeing upon concrete principles on how to best use resources and services, the Division of Student Affairs not only met the challenges of the fiscal crisis but also made the college better able to face future challenges. These principles, proven effective at Ramapo College, may assist other institutions facing reduced funding.

National and State Contexts for Public Support of Higher Education

Over the past decade, the relationship between higher education institutions and state government has markedly changed. This change has

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occurred in independent as well as public institutions in nearly all states. Even in states where there has been increased demand for enrollment, such as in California and Virginia, there have been substantial cutbacks in funding for public institutions.

In New Jersey, the state has consistently cut base budget appropriations for higher education and in recent years, at least in regard to its senior public institutions, has failed to provide more than an average of 50 cents on the dollar to cover collective bargaining agreements negotiated by the Office of the Governor. Reductions in the base appropriation and dramatic underfunding of collective bargaining agreements, combined with requirements that campuses pay matching funds and debt service for capital funding from bond sales, have resulted in dramatically increased tuition levels. As a consequence of these reductions in state support and increases in tuition, the percentage of campus revenue from state sources has declined.

Between 1988 and 1997, Ramapo College of New Jersey's base appropriation was cut, and money for state-imposed collective bargaining agreements was underfunded by a total of nearly \$11 million. In response, the college's senior staff made difficult cuts and reallocations, trimmed programs, and attempted to increase revenues. It terminated six academic programs, eliminated or froze nearly 60 positions, reined in budgets, and raised tuition and fees. The college also added three academic programs and two sports teams, increased library holdings, and enhanced computing and telecommunications capabilities.

The Centrality of Student Development and Student Affairs at Ramapo

Ramapo has always used student development as its term for purposeful curricular and extracurricular activities that lead students to intellectual growth, conscious civic responsibility, and discernable personal growth. Because these activities also are the central ones engaged in by the college as a whole, the institution consistently has regarded its chief student affairs officer as an integral member of the senior leadership team. This leadership team, working with other staff members in five principal operating areas, sets enrollment goals, develops and des-

ignates resources to meet college educational goals, and evaluates the results of those efforts. When state appropriations were reduced, expenditures had to be cut and income increased throughout the college. The pivotal role played by Student Affairs in advancing the primary purposes of the institution led the college's leadership team to reject the option of disproportionately downsizing the Division of Student Affairs, although that had been the response to financial pressures invoked by substantial numbers of other institutions nationwide (Cage, 1992). Instead, the senior staff decided to make changes based on a set of widely accepted principles that had been given consideration inside and, outside the Division of Student Affairs for some time.

Principles to Guide Cost-Cutting Choices

One fortunate aspect of Ramapo's 26-year history has been its consistent commitment to the central tenets of its mission, including education with an international and intercultural perspective, an interdisciplinary organization for its academic units, and a determination that as many students as possible would benefit from its experiential learning opportunities. In addition, its moderate size has permitted the faculty and staff to focus on individual student achievement.

As the college confronted lowered state appropriations, the Ramapo community publicly recommitted itself to these key mission features important in all areas of the college's operations. Its senior staff then further determined that general principles on university operations, derived through campus discussions over time, could serve well if prudently applied to the tasks at hand---cost reduction, increased effectiveness and efficiency, and the anticipation of emerging needs as our student population gradually shifted toward one with better academic preparation. Following are some of the most important principles or understandings that were relied on.

1. Salary expenditures would be lowered, as nonsalary reductions already had been made almost to the maximum extent possible. At 70% of the budget, salaries were by far the institution's largest expense category.
2. Deferred maintenance would not be an important method for cost reduction. Doing so would simply result in higher costs later.

3. Units providing direct services to students would maintain an advantage in any cost reduction plan.
4. Functional areas whose work was most clearly linked to achieving special goals mandated by the state, college, or both (e.g., the recruitment and retention of qualified minority students) would be preserved.
5. On-campus services that, in some sense, were duplicated by services offered in the outside community would be scrutinized to see if they had special merits that warranted institutional funding. Health services, security, child care, and psychological counseling were a few of the services subjected to this test.
6. Professional and support staff members would be freed for higher level tasks if we applied technology prudently. Computers could help us to better monitor individual student and program progress and would accomplish certain routinized procedures more efficiently.
7. Costs/benefits analyses would help us to determine what range and depth of services we should offer. To a large extent, we would consciously choose the degree of monitoring needed to gauge student progress and to conduct program evaluations. We would actively decide how much information was enough for decision making rather than simply striving for more.
8. Student services had evolved at Ramapo and elsewhere nationally so that certain units were functionally based (e.g., Career Services or Residence Life) while others were more constituency-oriented (e.g., the Women's Center or the office serving students with disabilities). A number of these individual services also had grown more specialized as time advanced. For the 1990s and beyond, we would consciously decide to what extent special constituency services still had relevance given societal trends stressing student commonalities and their different personal identities, in contrast to emphasizing groupings based on ascribed characteristics.
9. Because state and federal agencies were likely to continue their demands for greater controls and monitoring in areas such as financial aid, campus security, grants administration, and in the regulations governing international students, decisions on personnel and budgeting would take account of these likely concerns.

10. We recognized the essential validity of the views expressed in *The Student Learning Imperative*: "...The key to enhancing learning and personal development is ... to create conditions that motivate and inspire students to devote time and energy to educationally-purposeful activities, both in and outside the classroom" (American College Personnel Association, 1994, p. 1). Our decisions about changes in Student Affairs would reflect our acceptance of this tenet.

I 1. Understanding that 'administration is not the business of the business' (Pew Higher Education Research Program, 1991, p. 5A) in academic, student, or financial affairs helped us to determine that all student affairs managers would also be direct service providers, allowing them to have immediate contact with students and helping to prevent unnecessary administrative layering.

Other Strategies

Additional ideas for change came from a variety of student affairs publications, from sources outside the field, and from staff members themselves. For example, we recognized that by reducing the number of small individual offices within Student Affairs and recombining them into larger, more comprehensive units, synergies and economies of scale could be created. Similarly, developing more formal linkages with units outside Student Affairs but within the college would allow for a greater number of the "seamless transitions" students desired and would reduce college-wide the number of repetitive transactions, which each bore a significant cost. We noted, too, that some work simply no longer needed to be done, a conclusion reached as a result of "work out" analyses conducted in each operating unit. Some administrative services without apparent merit, such as career credentials files, were eliminated in this way, along with certain housing forms that made repetitive demands for information.

Staff entrepreneurship, or the creation of programs and services in response to newly perceived student needs, was recognized as a significant cost generator. Unfettered expansion of the "administrative lattice" described so elegantly in the *Pew Policy Perspectives* (1990) had to be curtailed or even reversed if cost containment was to occur, though we knew full well that to do so stood in contradiction to Breneman's apt observation that "there are constant pressures from

within to expand activities ... and improve the quality of the institution" (1993, p. 4). Instead, the expansion of services, if it occurred at all, would have to come from partnerships formed with agencies outside the college or from grant or gift funding. In any instance, there would be a clear understanding that any new service or program would have to be self-funded either by outside funding or by generating its own revenues through user charges or, alternatively, as a result of "growth by substitution" (Pew Higher Education Research Program, 1993, p. 9B). Substitution, of course, had the added benefit of further reducing costs, as it called for the elimination of services or programs no longer deemed priorities and allowed for a transfer of resources.

In all of our planning, we acknowledged that across-the-board cuts should be minimized as doing so would simply allow us to avoid hard choices and would treat equally (but unfairly) the effective and ineffective parts of our organization (Chabotar & Honan, 1990). Concomitantly, we recognized that one-time or short-term solutions would not produce lasting positive effects, nor would merely shifting costs to another division of the college work long-term (Ern, 1993). We further agreed that the costs attendant even to some of Student Affairs' core activities would have to be borne by students themselves if fiscal prospects did not improve (Levy, 1995).

Building on the proposition that we should not continue any activities we were unable to do well, we further resolved that by using certain Total Quality Management principles we would (1) ensure that our change efforts had a strong student (as customer) focus rather than an administrative convenience locus and (2) develop accurate outcomes assessment methods for each of our operating units. By doing so, and by institutionally encouraging management by fact rather than anecdote, we believed continuous improvement could occur over indefinite periods of time (Marchese, 1993). We further agreed with Peter Ewell's point (1995) that the policy focus for quality assurance in higher education was shifting from an institutional to a client-based view that includes an expanded idea of what a 'client' is to incorporate not only students, but also parents, employers of graduates, and taxpayers.

In deciding on the best roles for staff members, three tenets guided our thinking. First, we agreed that a smaller number of staff members

could each be asked to do more and would be paid commensurately for those extra efforts. We hoped these new professional growth opportunities would help to provide motivation in a time of disquieting change. Second, an attendant core belief led us to encourage staff members to become student affairs generalists rather than more narrow specialists. We believed that employees with the broad skills of a generalist would be more valuable to the institution itself as well as on the external job market if that need should arise. Finally, we anticipated that students themselves could provide important programs and services for their fellow students, which could free full-time employees for new undertakings.

Actual Choices

Our actual choices largely followed from adherence to our principles and strategies and proceeded with remarkably little internal dissension because the principles had long been generally acknowledged.

We reduced the number of separate operating units within Student Affairs by combining some one-person "units" into larger offices with defined missions. For example, Greek Affairs, Student Activities, Student Center Operations, Orientation Programs, the Women's Center, International Student Services, and Leadership Programs became the Office of Student Development so that we could locate these staff members in one physical space and create a set of floating teams ready to reinforce one another during times of particularly heavy responsibility. An unintended consequence of this move was the expansion of the Women Center's clientele to include some students- male and female-who otherwise felt they did not have an extracurricular 'home' at the college. These included highly politically active students; students with intellectual interests outside the mainstream; students with a strong commitment to social justice; as well as gay, lesbian, and bisexual students. We also combined the offices of Experiential Learning with Career Services, and Health Services with Counseling Services, to streamline operations and provide a logical locus for students.

Football was eliminated when the president recognized that even at the Division III level we would no longer perform competitively, given

capital budget limitations and the need for major facilities upgrades. Two staff positions were also eliminated as a result of changes in Athletics, although two new sports with part-time coaches were- added. A separate (originally grant-funded) position to effect international cooperative education placements was eliminated and the responsibilities transferred to another full-time professional staff member.

Grant funding was continued or developed for services for students with disabilities, for substance abuse programs, and for certain service-learning initiatives. Partnerships were forged or continued with state agencies such as the New Jersey Job Service and the New Jersey Department of Transportation specifically to provide help with job placement services and to assist with alcohol abuse prevention.

Residence Life was reorganized to bring its staff closer physically and operationally to the students they actually serve, while the Security Department was also brought into the Division of Student Affairs to improve communications and to effect more cooperative working arrangements between it and the campus judicial system. The conviction that learning takes place everywhere on campus caused us to use the savings generated to increase faculty "after hours" programming and to create nascent learning communities built around our College (i.e., freshman) Seminar classes.

In Health Services, a nurse practitioner was substituted for the retired registered nurse to reduce physician hours and to improve clinical services for students. Student fee monies more directly covered the office's operating expenses.

Alcohol and other drug education efforts were enhanced in recognition that many different campus "pathologies" with high human and monetary costs (such as assault, sexual assault, poor academic performance, impaired personal relationships, and vandalism) are driven by abuse of alcohol or drugs. Conflict management services were added in the expectation that they would reduce some of the costs inherent in a formal campus judicial system.

Career services were improved through the use of various technologies that provide students with computer-based career information, offer

vocational self-assessments, and match students with job openings. Service-learning initiatives were expanded as student interest in volunteerism and in developing a renewed sense of personal purpose took greater hold.

outsourcing of food and bookstore operations had long been the practice at Ramapo. Vending operations, banking services, game machines, some printing, and certain employee training programs have now been privatized without negative effect. On the other hand, institutional reviews of Security and of Health Services demonstrated they were not good candidates for similar reorganization, given current state policies governing how employee benefits are provided and our institution's particular mission (Webb, Widseth, & John, 1997).

Students were trained for and assumed more significant jobs as workers in various campus offices. Provided with career and pay "ladders," these students improved their performance. Students then became the trainers for other students in our computer labs and ran much of our high-technology video equipment for others, including faculty members. They also became peer facilitators, assisting some faculty members who taught our College Seminar and general education classes.

Future Challenges in an Era of Decreased Financial Support

Difficult financial challenges will continue for colleges and universities in general and for student affairs divisions in particular. Colleges and universities competing for students will experience intense consumer demands for more elegant residences and recreation centers as well as for the latest technologies (Marcus, 1995). Students will be financially taxed as heavy loan dependence continues and sometimes will be emotionally battered by breakdowns in their families.

The enormous range of academic and other abilities possessed by students in both public and private institutions will continue to challenge the ingenuity of faculty and staff as will the auditing and compliance requirements, which continue to expand but are not externally funded. Deeply troubled students will arrive on campus with regularity, and it will require enormous efforts to support them until graduation.

Resistance to rising tuition rates is growing, and a general lawmaker- and taxpayer-led demand for high quality and for measurable outcomes is rapidly emerging (Eaton, 1995). Information for good or ill about an individual institution's characteristics will flow ever more rapidly from student to student as the Internet flourishes. Already difficult institutional competition may grow even fiercer as comparisons are made more easily

More diverse learners will be attracted to our campuses (or to our alternative learning delivery systems) to meet increasingly specific objectives including preparation for a greatly changed labor market or to enhance personal development in (even earlier) retirement.

A strong collegiate education will be one in which students become personally known to faculty and staff and where priorities for student development include curricular and extracurricular dimensions, both on and off campus, in the United States and in other countries. Institutions that focus on these priorities will continue to attract and retain students and faculty who are committed to teaming in all of its dimensions and are not just focused on training students for a credential and a career.

Student affairs operations have a critical role to play in ensuring that these prospects are achieved, and in so doing they merit institutional support even when difficult financial constraints exert pressure. The student affairs operation of the future must be a nimble and flexible organization, skilled in meeting rapidly changing and evolving student needs. The application of the principles earlier enumerated can help public institutions in particular to develop the needed resources to meet legitimate student needs in a time of overall fiscal constraint. Such financial demands have fundamentally been brought about by competing state priorities and a belief on the part of many taxpayers that it is the individual and not society at large who most profits when a student graduates from an institution of higher education (Task Force on Funding and Tuition Establishment, 1995).

Efforts at Ramapo to contain costs through the methods cited above resulted in an overall reduction in student services expenditures (including enrollment services expenditures) of 6.2% from 1992 to 1996, even while prices for everything from salaries to pencils rose.

Student surveys indicated a high degree of satisfaction with nearly all the services located within the Division of Student Affairs despite considerable reorganization.

While the challenges of the early and mid-1990s were not pleasant, they encouraged the college to closely examine its fundamental values as well as its operating methods. As a result of this self-scrutiny, Ramp emerged both as a stronger institution and as more committed to its international and intercultural mission supported by inter-disciplinary and experiential learning.

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