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The Conflict Between Personal and Professional Roles of Senior Student Affairs Officers During a Time of National Crisis

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This article reports themes that emerged from interviews with 16 senior student affairs officers (SSAOS) following the September 11th tragedies. Themes related to personal and professional reactions to the terrorist attacks are discussed. The authors focus on the stated desire of several SSAOs to compartmentalize their reactions—that is, to keep separate their personal and professional reactions—and the possible consequences of this compartmentalization.

Senior student affairs officers (SSAOS) provide leadership in times of crises (Clement & Rickard, 1992), setting the direction as well as the tone for the campus response. In response to the national tragedies of September 11, 2001, student affairs professionals quickly moved into uncharted territory in crisis management. Although student affairs professionals have handled individual student and campus crises in the past, the national scope of the terrorist attacks of September 11th was unlike anything experienced in recent memory. Understanding how SSAOs experienced the terrorist attacks personally and professionally, therefore, could provide further insight into their abilities to effectively work with people and offer leadership on campus in a time of national crisis.

Crisis management literature in higher education generally reads like a “how-to” list, and rarely focuses on the leadership role of the SSAO. Advice and strategies for communication, collaboration, and decision-making during times of crisis abound, often contextualized in the stories of individual campus tragedies like earthquakes (Wilson, 1996), hurricanes (Foote, 1996), and homicides (Sandeen, 1994). Much of the advice is general or presented for higher education professionals other than SSAOs (Fanelli, 1997; Gutierrez Kenney, 1997; Larson, 1994). Generic how-to lists may be of only limited use for student affairs professionals.

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In addition to the limited applicability of how-to lists, crisis management literature in student affairs and higher education often fails to address the personal side of crisis response. The literature does not address the emotions elicited from the responder as a result of his or her role in crisis management. The purpose of this article is to report findings from interviews with SSAOs following the September 11th terrorist attacks. Findings illuminated how SSAOs assumed leadership in the time of crisis, but also indicated that SSAOs did not act upon their personal need to reflect and heal. Interviews conducted up to six months after the attacks indicated that SSAOs may not have reflected on their personal reactions to the terrorist attacks.

The SSAO as Crisis Manager

SSAOs are part of the campus leadership team (Sandeen, 1991) and often are responsible for various aspects of crisis response. In a national survey of NASPA member institutions (NASPA Research Division, 2000), 93% of SSAOs reported having supervisory responsibility for counseling centers and over 91% supervised student health functions on campus. Although the total percentage of SSAOs responsible for campus security was lower (34%), SSAOs at smaller colleges likely are responsible for the oversight of the campus security function (Reason, 2001).

Literature related to the SSAO position focuses on functional areas necessary for professional success and often ignores more personal characteristics of individuals in the SSAO position. In a meta-analysis of 30 years of research on student affairs administrators, Lovell and Kosten (2000) summarized that successful student affairs administrators need skills in administration, management, and human facilitation. Reisser and Roper (1999) also concluded that human facilitation and relationship skills were important for SSAOs, although these skills were contextualized as functional professional skills. That is, human facilitation and relationship skills were discussed relative to their importance to functioning effectively in the SSAO position. Few studies, however, directly addressed the personal lives of those working in student affairs administration.

A recent interview study of SSAOs highlighted the importance of personal characteristics and relationships to successful leadership in student affairs (Schuh, 2002). Respondents in Schuh's study discussed the importance of finding balance in life and taking time for reflection. The importance of relationships and support systems during times of stress also were highlighted.

The incongruence between Lovell and Kosten's (2000) meta-analysis and the advice of Schuh's (2002) respondents is conspicuous. If reflection and support systems are important to the success of SSAOs, why do the last 30 years of research ignore these characteristics? We are left to wonder how SSAOs experience reflection and supportive relationships during a time of crisis like
September 11th. The current inquiry thus attempted to understand how SSAOs’ personal and functional skills intersected during the national crisis of September 11, 2001.

Methodology

Researchers employed a qualitative methodology to plan the inquiry. The goals of qualitative methodology were congruent with the purposes of the inquiry since qualitative research is “concerned more with understanding than with causes” (Patton, 1991, p. 391). The objective of qualitative research is to describe, understand, and contextualize events as they are experienced by respondents in research studies.

The researchers’ shared belief in a social constructivist philosophy (Schwandt, 1994, 1997) guided this inquiry. Constructivism holds that knowledge of the world is a reflection of how experiences and social artifacts are interpreted by individuals. That is, the knower constructs knowledge based on his or her interpretations of reality. Constructivist inquiry seeks an in-depth understanding of a particular experience (Manning, 1999). For this inquiry we were interested in a deep understanding of SSAOs’ interpretations of their experiences of the events of September 11th.

This social constructivist philosophy is congruent with the phenomenological perspective also assumed by the researchers. Phenomenology is concerned with the study of everyday experiences and events. As Schwandt (1997) stated, a phenomenological perspective seeks “a description of ‘things’ (the essential structures of consciousness) as one experiences them” (p. 114). This research sought to gather the SSAOs’ descriptions of the “things” they experienced on and immediately following September 11th. We attempted to arrive at “structural descriptions of an experience [and] the underlying and precipitating factors that account for what [was] experienced” by our respondents (Moustakas, 1994, p. 98).

Participants

Participants in this study were SSAOs, 6 women and 10 men, at 16 institutions across the United States. Participants were selected using a combination of convenience and purposeful sampling. Initial interviews were conducted with SSAOs familiar to the research team members. We then attempted to achieve maximum variation (Patton, 2002; Seidman, 1991) in respondents based on gender, geographic location, and type of institution (2-year/4-year, Carnegie Classification, urban/rural, public/private). Participants were identified by searching the American College Personnel Association (ACPA) membership list and soliciting names from other higher education professionals.

The final sample of 16 SSAOs represented two community colleges; three research institutions; six regional, comprehensive institutions; and five
baccalaureate colleges. Eleven institutions were public and five were private. Further, seven institutions were in the Northeast, including three in New York State, one in the Washington, DC, area and one in Pennsylvania. One institution was located in the Southeast, seven in the Midwest, and one in the West/Southwest. All institutions were in the continental United States.

Data Collection

Data for this study were collected by a group of four doctoral students working closely with a postdoctoral research associate. A full-time faculty member assisted in setting direction for the project and with data analysis, but did not participate in data collection. Data were collected between December 2001 and March 2002.

A semi-structured interview protocol guided the data collection. The protocol was designed to elicit description of respondents’ personal experiences, institutional responses and policy changes, and any perceived campus cultural changes as a result of the September 11th attacks. Because geographic diversity was a goal, most interviews occurred over the telephone, although one face-to-face interview took place with a local SSAO. Each respondent was interviewed one time for approximately 45 minutes to one hour. Based upon the researcher’s preference, the researcher took extensive notes of the interview or tape-recorded and transcribed the interview. Notes or transcripts were then distributed to each member of the research team for initial coding.

Data Analysis

Following the emergent design of qualitative research, the research team met frequently during the data collection phase. During these intermediate meetings, adjustments were made to the interview protocol as needed. Using a constant/comparative method (Glaser & Straus, 1967), the research team also shared and discussed the initial themes they identified individually. Research team members attempted to reach a shared understanding of the themes that were emerging from the data.

Data were examined for themes across interviews; a technique Strauss (1987) called inductive coding. With the understanding that respondents in narrative research studies attend to what is important to them (Polkinghorne, 1988), the research team also examined the interview data for both the content and process of each respondent’s story. That is, we examined each respondent’s narrative for the ordering of events, what was included, and what might have been excluded from their story, all of which provide deeper understanding of an individual’s narrative (Atkinson, 1998).
Establishing Rigor

In order to achieve credibility and trustworthiness, criteria that parallel validity and reliability in quantitative research (Guba & Lincoln, 1989), members of the research team discussed and agreed upon emerging themes, achieving a consensus among team members. Further, in March 2002, preliminary findings were presented to a group of SSAOs who gathered at a national conference to discuss crisis management in light of September 11th. In a form of member check, this group confirmed the themes that emerged from the data, increasing the degree of trustworthiness that can be assumed from this research.

Findings

Several themes related to SSAOs' personal and professional reactions to September 11th emerged from the data. Themes related to personal reactions included the emotional response of the SSAO upon hearing of the events and an initial concern for family and friends. Professional themes included three main roles assumed by the SSAOs on September 11th: a doer/reactor role, a leadership role, and a connector role. Finally, SSAOs' responses revealed, directly and indirectly, the conflict between the personal and professional areas, especially as it related to compartmentalization of the two areas. These themes are explored in the next section.

A caveat is important before examining the findings of this inquiry. SSAOs' reactions to the tragedies of September 11th were varied and the themes presented below should be viewed as tentative. Variables such as the location and size of the institution mediated how SSAOs responded professionally. The geographic proximity and personal proximity (e.g., direct relationships with victims in World Trade Center and/or Pentagon) to the events also affected how SSAOs responded personally. As always when reading research generated from a constructivist perspective, the reader should remember that the findings presented are the interpretations of the researchers.

Personal Responses

SSAOs' personal responses to the terrorist attacks included feelings of “helplessness and lack of control.” No SSAOs in our study reported acute emotional reactions, but rather they indicated a “general heightened emotional state” throughout the day and for some time afterward. Respondents used words such as numb, devastating, unbelievable, horror, overwhelming, and stressful to describe their emotional reactions at the time of the event. Despite the fact that the interviews occurred several months following the event, the emotional reactions remained vivid. Individuals shared the magnitude of the attack stating, “The world doesn't make much sense,” “I am trying to grasp it from a human standpoint,” and “It is jarring to get back to reality.” One SSAO's personal reaction captured the sentiments of many:
I was sort of maybe numb because it didn’t really hit me how horrible this was. The impact of that actually came later that week. In terms of the significance of the tragedy, I found myself very tired and I couldn’t move fast.

Although many SSAOs mentioned their personal reactions, most quickly moved past these descriptions to address their professional responses. One respondent stated, “We needed to have an adult present where students are [because] people want stability in this time of uncertainty.” Another respondent explained the need to think of staff members who might be touched and affected by the crisis. It seems SSAOs’ concerns centered on others rather than themselves during this time of crisis.

Professional Responses

SSAOs seemed more aware of and able to discuss their professional responses to the events. Themes related to their professional responses included the emergence of three roles that SSAOs assumed while reacting to the attacks. These roles included doer/reactor, leader, and connector.

**Doer/reactor role.** The initial reaction of many SSAOs was one of action. Several SSAOs reported “jumping into crisis management mode” upon hearing of the attacks. Others commented that “we had to drop everything” and be responsive to student and campus needs. Finally, in a particularly telling comment, one SSAO stated, “I felt a compulsion to do something, I just did not know what to do.” The scope of the tragedy may have thrust SSAOs into previously uncharted territory of crisis response, although they reportedly functioned effectively in “crisis management mode.”

**Leader.** SSAOs in this study reported moving quickly into “highly visible” leadership roles on campus. SSAOs were planning and leading campus-wide events, speaking at memorial services or educational programs, and serving as spokespersons for their campuses. Most respondents gathered student affairs staff members together to set the direction for the institutional response. Many SSAOs in this study indicated that they chaired or co-chaired the campus crisis response team.

The expectation that SSAOs would assume leadership of the crisis response came both from external sources (faculty, students, and other administrators) and internally from the SSAOs themselves. More than the formal leadership roles discussed above, SSAOs perceived that faculty, students, and other administrators expected them to assume a leadership role in the campus response to crisis. Further, the SSAOs’ own words also revealed internal expectations of leadership in response to crisis. “This is what we do” and “we’re all experienced with crisis” were common sentiments among the respondents in this study.

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Connector. The need for collaboration among faculty, student affairs staff, and other administrators in response to the September 11th tragedies was high. Additionally, campus responses often included connections with parents and other constituencies external to the institution. The SSAOs in this study discussed their role as “connector” of these disparate groups.

The SSAOs reported collaborating with faculty both inside and outside the classroom at higher levels than previously experienced. In several instances, faculty contacted SSAOs (and other student affairs staff members) for assistance in how to effectively use classroom interaction with students as a way to respond to individuals’ needs for personal and emotional support. One SSAO described conversations with faculty:

So you run into the whole issue of “We don’t, we’re not counselors.” This is on the part of some faculty, you know...I said just listen...our students want to talk. So that was sort of an interesting dynamic for me.

Many individuals talked about new initiatives in partnership with academic affairs as institutions developed programmatic responses in the weeks following September 11th. Not only did student affairs professionals offer information to the campus community regarding students' needs and personal development, but they also worked collaboratively with faculty to enhance student learning through planning and participating in educational programming related to the attacks.

The SSAO’s office on several campuses became the information clearinghouse for students and families. These offices collected and relayed information about all-campus memorial events, student and alumni safety, and military activation of campus community members. It is interesting to note that in at least one instance, the SSAO’s office became the de facto information clearinghouse. While the institution released no announcements or press releases, students and parents assumed the SSAO’s office was the appropriate place to connect with the institution about the crisis. This may be yet another example of the external expectations of SSAO leadership in times of crises.

Separating the Personal and Professional

One theme emerged relating to the conflict between the personal and professional lives of SSAOs: compartmentalization—operationalized as the ability to distinctly separate various aspects of life. Although one respondent noted, “It is hard to separate the personal from the professional,” the compartmentalization of these two spheres seemed to be the goal of most respondents in our study. The prevailing sentiment was that in order to be effective during this time of crisis, SSAOs could not allow their own emotions to interfere with their decision-making processes.
The SSAOs took pride in their ability to compartmentalize their lives in response to the crisis of September 11th. Many spoke of putting their personal emotions aside, after accounting for the safety of their family members, and concentrating on their professional response. One particular SSAO close to one of the attack sites stated that she appreciated work for “keeping my mind off the events and my personal connections.” Another respondent expressed the desire to “make sure that I’ve got balance,” indicating the need to keep the two spheres separated, albeit in equilibrium.

As stated earlier, SSAOs described their personal reaction to September 11th using highly emotional words such as horror, devastating, overwhelming, stressful, and disbelief. In discussing their professional reaction however, SSAOs focused on the needs of others through their attention to the campus response. They served as important resources for faculty, security, crisis management teams, and students. Several individuals shared that their role after the immediate response was to anticipate students’ needs. One SSAO shared thoughts of “what does this mean for our students and how will we respond to help them feel secure?”

Although SSAOs in this study took pride in their ability to separate the personal and the professional, the national scope and magnitude of the terrorist attacks may have hindered the ability of SSAOs to clearly delineate these two areas as successfully as they reported. The emotional impact of the tragedy had a clear influence on how SSAOs performed their professional roles. One respondent explained his difficulty in working with the depth of students’ emotions of anger, disbelief, and helplessness. Another respondent discussed how his personal feelings crept into his consciousness while he attempted to plan an all-campus event, stating

[Following an outside service there was] the reception inside for people to kind of process their feelings...you know, trying to make some sense for people...that would be consoling and helpful and hopeful. That's what I found myself doing that afternoon is trying to put some of it into words, and help coordinate an event to bring the campus together.

This SSAO found himself trying to “put some of it into words” for himself as he planned major events for the campus community. His personal need to make sense of the events kept him from completely compartmentalizing his personal and professional responses.

Discussion

Senior student affairs officers, like everyone, were greatly affected by the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. By nature of their role in crisis management on college campuses however, SSAOs were forced to address professional issues instead of personal concerns or emotions.
Attending to what was not said during the interviews (Atkinson, 1998), researchers concluded that respondents in our study may have suppressed or ignored their own emotional reactions. Few SSAOs reported acute emotional reactions. When personal feelings were acknowledged, the SSAOs reported moving quickly past them to focus on their professional roles. No respondents indicated they had taken time to reflect upon their feelings. In fact, at least one respondent acknowledged focusing on work to avoid reflecting on personal concerns.

SSAOs seemed much more able to discuss professional responses to the attacks, perhaps because they were forced to focus more attention to their professional roles on the days that followed September 11th. Professional responses seemed to fall into three interactive and overlapping categories: doer/reactor, leader, and connector. SSAOs entered “crisis management mode” upon hearing of the events, leading the campus response to the attacks. SSAOs indicated they were thrust into visible leadership roles interacting with the students, the administration, and the public to facilitate the exchange of information. Discussion at two gatherings of SSAOs attended by the researchers after September 11th also centered on the crisis management response including campus responses, addressing needs of students abroad, campus and community concerns, and counseling/educational issues.

Ramsden (1998) cited the tendency to operate in crisis management mode as a major problem in higher education leadership. Functioning in crisis management mode “inhibits leaders from practicing effective leadership by causing the very things that good leadership tries to overcome” (p. 262). Crisis management mode keeps leaders focused on the present, ignoring the long-term consequences of the crisis situation. The tendency of SSAOs to immediately move into, and remain in, crisis management mode should be examined more fully in light of Ramsden’s discussion of the negative implications of such a tendency. Although student affairs professionals often are successful functioning in a doer/reactor role, it may be equally important to explore the long-term implications and lessons of crisis after the immediate situation is addressed.

SSAOs in this study were proud of the response they provided. Student affairs professionals, with SSAOs in positions of leadership, served students well in the wake of the terrorist attacks. The SSAOs also indicated pride in their ability to react professionally without personal emotions interfering. That is, they were proud of their ability to compartmentalize their personal/emotional reaction from their professional/leadership reaction. Although dispassionate compartmentalization may allow leaders to execute their duties effectively during crisis events, research on healthy responses to crises situations points to the importance of creating opportunities for reflection and healing (Flannery & Quinn-Leering, 2000; Lane, 1994).
The Importance of Reflection

SSAOs reported jumping into leadership action without taking time to reflect upon their own feelings about this national tragedy. SSAOs interviewed as late as five months after September 11th indicated that they had still not reflected on the personal repercussions of the events. Coupled with the pride with which SSAOs were able to focus on their professional responsibilities to the exclusion of personal feelings, the unwillingness or inability of SSAOs in this study to discuss their personal reactions may reveal an area for concern related to student affairs leadership.

The findings of this study may indicate that SSAOs still hold to “conventional views of leadership” (Rogers, 1996, p. 301), which call for leaders to be “decisive, tough-minded, [and] unemotional” (p. 302). Congruent with the findings of Clement and Rickard (1992), SSAOs in the current study chose their professional roles over attending to their feelings, remaining a “dispassionate observer” (p. 155) able to make decisions without emotion.

Research outside student affairs literature related to crisis management highlights the deleterious effects of ignoring emotions during times of crisis (Lane, 1994), drawing connections between exposure to violence and psychological trauma (Flannery & Quinn-Leering, 2000; Lane). Even violence experienced via the television news, as was the case for many on September 11th, elicits emotional reactions (Schuster et al., 2001) that must be addressed before healing can begin (Lane). Lane found this to be particularly true for crisis responders.

Creating Opportunities for Reflection

Although student affairs literature does not address directly the emotions involved in crisis management, Scott (1992) conducted research related to stress and burnout at the upper levels of our profession. She found that many of the ways SSAOs effectively managed stress included creating opportunities for reflection. “Arranging a quiet space at home” (p. 112), for example, was an environmental coping strategy used by over half of Scott’s respondents. SSAOs should consider opportunities to create such quiet reflection space in their own environments.

Quiet reflection space can take many forms. Moran (2001) suggested “keeping a journal of thoughts about values, beliefs, and purpose” (p. 274) as one way to maintain balance and well-being during stressful times at work. Scott (1992) found that a majority of her respondents used walking or running to cope with stress. A majority of male SSAOs in Scott’s study also used gardening and yard work to cope with stress. Journaling, walking, and gardening are examples of strategies that allow SSAOs quiet time to reflect upon and work through stressful events with few distractions, as suggested by Lane (1994) to facilitate emotional healing.
Scott (1992) also highlighted the importance of building networks and support systems to cope with stress. SSAOs should find opportunities to build and use the network of other SSAOs. In March 2002, for example, a group of SSAOs gathered at the national convention of the American College Personnel Association in Long Beach, CA, to discuss issues related to crisis response. It is important to expand these discussions beyond the professional “how-to” agenda to include discussions of personal reactions. In so doing, SSAOs may create a network of other professionals who share similar experiences but can also offer collegial support.

Conclusion

Moran (2001) suggested that student affairs leaders “spend time reflecting on their own values, beliefs, and purpose in life in order to be able to effectively lead students in doing the same” (p. 274) and that they should “incorporate issues of purpose in life into every aspect of their work with students” (p. 276). Schuh (2002) expanded the importance of reflection beyond leadership of students to include leadership of staff and colleagues. His respondents explicited the relationship between reflection and leadership, recommending that SSAOs “read and reflect a lot” (p. 212) in order to improve their leadership skills.

Findings from our study may indicate that SSAOs failed to heed this advice following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. It may be that in times of crisis SSAOs focus on their professional roles, but fail to return to their personal feelings after the initial crises subside. Based upon crisis management literature (Lane, 1994) from outside of our field, we believe this lack of reflection could prove detrimental to the emotional health and professional functioning of SSAOs.

Understanding that SSAOs are thrust into leadership roles at times of crises, it is imperative they find time to reflect when the crises end. Reflection, or debriefing, limits the negative effects of stress that results from crisis situations (Lane, 1994). We agree with Scott (1992) that SSAOs must address stress in their lives in order to be effective leaders. Unfortunately, many SSAOs in our study still may need to address the personal stresses that resulted from September 11th.

References


