

Are You Ready?
Preparing the Student Affairs Professional for Disasters

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Preparing the Student Affairs Professional for Disasters

The student affairs profession has evolved from professional generalist to highly educated specialist within the domain of the campus environment. Graduate faculty and students across the nation, however, will continue to debate the roles and relationships of student affairs professionals. For example, Sweeton and Davis (2004) believe that *in loco parentis* still has a strong presence in modern day student affairs practice. Decades ago graduate faculty understood the need to educate future student affairs professionals in both theory and practice. Although theoretical discussion and debate often center on the research of Astin, Banning and Chickering as core curricular models for class content, most faculty understand the need to discuss the relevance of the practical and experiential needs of the profession.

Student affairs professionals in residence life and counseling often set aside Chickering for crisis management. These professional staff members are often asked to make critical decisions that affect the safety and welfare of students, and perhaps, fellow staff. Live-in and on-call residence professionals may suddenly be thrust into a situation where environmental impact has far less importance than evacuation procedures or suicide intervention. Some institutions expect student affairs staff to monitor the weather, and “keep an eye” out for certain behavior that could indicate that a student may turn violent.

Student affairs professionals understand, and work effectively, with students, faculty, parents, alumni and even friends and neighbors. But, what about local firefighters, police, emergency medical services and emergency management officials? Who’s really in charge during a campus emergency, does it change, and how would “you” know? These are critical questions that Student Affairs professionals are finding themselves asking in contemporary college settings. Regardless of the role of student affairs professionals, it is clear that they are often on the frontline when it comes to handling crisis events on campus. Responding to traumatic student events can have detrimental effects on a wide variety of areas on any campus, including community building, student retention, and staff retention (Akers, 2004).

Essentially, graduate programs educate future student affairs professionals, but the need to **train** individuals to prepare for disasters and crises on campus are often filled on the job. The tragedy at Virginia Tech (and consequently several others over the past two years) only highlights the need for training student affairs professional for disasters. The obvious questions are: 1) What disaster preparedness topics should be covered in a training program; 2) How and when should training be offered; and, 3) Who should complete the training?

What disaster preparedness topics should be covered in a training program?

It would be easy to introduce a series of training topics, but in reality, the topics depend on the *risk* associated with the specific environment. The topic of risk itself is often an unfamiliar concept for student affairs professionals, and may be a good training class to launch a formal disaster preparedness program. *Risk* is defined by the United States Department of Homeland Security as influenced by the nature and magnitude of a threat, the vulnerabilities to that threat, and the consequences that could result (National Infrastructure Protection Plan, 2009). There are other ways to determine risk, including historical references and obtaining a copy of the county's hazardous mitigation plan that lists likely natural hazards for the area. Of course, each campus should have an Emergency Action Plan (EAP), and many will include annexes that cover a wide range of potential disasters on campus. Regardless of the determined method, campus leaders should be able to complete a risk management process that is thorough, but not too complicated (Altizer, Crocker & Hill, 2007). Below are listed several examples of training topics. These examples may differ from campus-to-campus:

- Fire – although every campus must be prepared and concerned over the fire threat, residential campuses have a heightened threat due to the very nature of students living on campus. Residence halls with kitchen units pose an even greater concern.
- Chemicals – research and technological campuses will undoubtedly have a higher risk than liberal arts institutions.
- Weather – depending on the location of the campus, student affairs professionals may need training to combat forces such as tornadoes, floods, hurricanes, etc.
- Violent Crime – The Virginia Tech tragedy has all campuses concerned with violent crime, although violent crime can happen in any campus environment.

In addition, Student affairs professionals should also learn about the Incident Command System (ICS). According to FEMA's web site (website, 2009): ICS is a standardized, on-scene, all-hazards incident management approach that:

- Allows for the integration of facilities, equipment, personnel, procedures, and communications operating within a common organizational structure.
- Enables a coordinated response among various jurisdictions and functional agencies, both public and private.
- Establishes common processes for planning and managing resources.

ICS is flexible and can be used for incidents of any type, scope, and complexity. ICS allows its users to adopt an integrated organizational structure to match the complexities and demands of single or multiple incidents. Senior university officials should take the time to learn about the National Incident Management System (NIMS).

These are just a few examples of how a common sense risk assessment should provide the basis of the topics to be covered in a disaster preparedness program for student affairs professionals. It is also important to assess the abilities of those being trained to maximize timeliness and resources.

How and when should training be offered?

Few would argue that student affairs preparation programs should offer sound theory in the historical and philosophical underpinnings of the student affairs profession. It is from a sound theoretical base that a strong student affairs professional must approach his or her work. With that said, as stated earlier, many student affairs professionals will be expected to handle some form of crisis, emergency, or critical incident early in their careers. While much has been written on handling crises within higher education, particularly in recent years, it is unlikely that masters- level graduate preparation programs will replace Chickering and Astin for Zdziarski, Dunkel and Rollo (2007) since disaster preparedness is just one important aspect of the student affairs profession. However, few would argue that professionals must understand how to respond to critical incidents. "While management of a crisis seems overwhelming, one must remember it is what many student affairs professionals do every day. Applying sound

management principles is the key to best resolve the day-to-day critical incidents and the large scale events” (Zdziarski & Watkins, 2009).

It is in this area that many master’s and doctoral preparation programs in student affairs have capitalized upon the case study method, popularized in MBA programs, for student affairs professionals to apply theory to practice in an academic setting. Emergency management case study is an excellent way for student affairs professionals to grapple with the complex and difficult practical issues which all student affairs graduate students will face when working in a full-time capacity. While it is the senior student affairs professional and his or her direct staff who will most likely oversee managing a major crisis or critical incident on a college or university campus, it is the entry-level and mid-level professionals who will manage the day-to-day critical incidents which occur in higher education. “Understanding how to best manage smaller incidents prepares a student affairs professional for moving from managing day-to-day crises to the large scale incidents that, sadly, often make national news” (Zdziarski & Watkins, 2009). An additional benefit of the case study method within the classroom setting is that it mirrors what many colleges and universities apply in their own emergency preparation through tabletop exercises involving key personnel to brainstorm how they will apply their own emergency response plans in the time of an actual emergency. Such an exercise will allow participants to discuss how they would respond to a disaster in a controlled environment.

While graduate preparation programs may discuss emergency management, new and mid-level professionals should take it upon themselves to learn about their institutions’ emergency management plans. Many colleges and universities have this information available to the general public on their websites under the direction of an emergency management team. In addition, most student affairs divisions have their own specific emergency management plans and student affairs staff should familiarize themselves with these materials and participate in student affairs division emergency response exercises. This also provides an excellent opportunity for staff to take the initiative to seek involvement in updating student affairs emergency response plans as most are updated routinely.

A few concrete examples of training that is available include:

- Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) Independent Study Program. This online program covers a wide variety of emergency preparedness topics. Courses are free! (<http://training.fema.gov/IS/crslist.asp>)

- NASPA New Professional Online Series online “Crisis Management in Student Affairs.” (<http://www.naspa.org/programs/newprof/crisis/default.cfm>).
- Community Emergency Response Team (CERT) training – usually taught through local fire departments or emergency management agencies. (<https://www.citizencorps.gov/cert/>)

Of course, internal training programs and the expertise of campus professionals cannot be disregarded. Many campuses now have emergency management offices, full-time police departments and environmental health and safety departments that include fire safety professionals. Local first responders (police, fire and rescue and emergency medical) will usually tailor specific training for campus officials. The U.S. Department of Homeland Security, through the state office of Homeland Security or emergency management agency, has a comprehensive list of free courses that are available.

Who should complete the training?

It is important to place training in a proper context. The mission, size, type, and design of campuses vary widely and priorities in an emergency situation will differ accordingly. For example, some universities in California will probably study earthquakes and brushfires. A college in Louisiana will prepare for the next hurricane. While institutions of higher education in New York City will undoubtedly train for acts of terroristic threats or attacks. Following the tragedy at Virginia Tech, many colleges and universities created reactions to armed assailants. Furthermore, as Carol Shelby, Director of Environmental Health and Public Safety at Purdue University states, “...awareness, preparation and rehearsal, (are) the keys to safety” (Purdue University, 2008). Institutions of higher education must assess their most likely disaster or crisis scenarios, then work to comprise their training teams.

With such a broad spectrum of possible emergency issues, no one training model suffices. A campus should comprise its emergency management and response team following the prioritization of likely emergency conditions. Most likely candidates for membership in the team could include the following:

- Campus Police
- Physical Plant and Campus Services
- Residence Life/Housing

- Communications or Public Affairs
- Information Services & Technology
- Dean of Students & Student Affairs Representatives
- Student Body Officers
- Business Office
- Chaplain or Religious Life
- Health Services
- Capital Projects

Once appointed, the members of the emergency management and response team must commit themselves to the orientation, training, and education that are requisite for awareness and preparation. Every campus should engage in an annual review of related protocols and printed information to ensure that they are updated and enhanced. The University of California at Berkeley reports (University of California-Berkeley, 2009) that its training model includes the following materials: (1) Instructor Guides with PowerPoint slides and instructor notes; (2) Presentation Materials with PowerPoint slides; (3) Student Materials including textbook style outlines with references and with frequently asked questions; and (4) videos, with short segments related to component issues.

Sal Rinella, a strategic planning consultant, and former president for Austin Peay State University in Tennessee advises colleges on disaster issues. At a recent gathering of liberal arts colleges, Rinella recommended that “presidents faced with responding to disasters should learn from each other.” (Chronicle of Higher Education, Jan. 7, 2008). As emergency management and response teams gather information, then organize and annually update their training models, they should communicate ideas freely with other colleges and universities. At the 2008 New Professionals Institute in New Orleans, sponsored by the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators – Region III and by the Southern Association of College Student Affairs, 60 administrators heard Tulane University Vice President for Student Affairs Cynthia Cherrey describe the campus’ response to Hurricane Katrina. Cherrey offered her perspectives on the successes of Tulane’s responses; and, she noted that lessons were learned on how to better their performance if another disaster occurred. Cherrey states, “The leadership of any institution

needs to take emergency planning seriously, look at as many scenarios as possible, practice those scenarios, have a plan, make sure that the plan has a plan, - asking yourselves “what if this would happen?” or “what if that would happen?” Colleges should also make sure the plan is communicated to everyone involved, including faculty, students, parents and staff. Once a disaster happens, be prepared. And no matter how prepared you are you may need to improvise. No matter what happens, you’ll always have something that surfaced that you could never imagine...like Katrina! That is why it is so important to have effective leadership in place. It takes the power of many working together to make the impossible possible.” (Boomer, 2006.) As the administrators took copious notes in that workshop, one is reminded that there is no better teacher than experience.

Conclusion

Emergency preparedness on campus is everyone’s business. Student affairs professionals are often the closest to the action on campus, and consequently, the first on scene after a crisis or emergency. Student affairs professionals have an important educational role on today’s campus, but they must also understand their role during an emergency. Campus leaders should value, grasp, and expect to be trained in areas based on threat and risk when it comes to emergency situations. Student affairs, and senior campus officials, must also understand their role in the incident command system. Professional responders to these emergencies may have not heard of titles like Residence Hall Director, Assistant Dean of Students, Greek Affairs Coordinator, but in an ICS environment and after learning what these professionals can offer on the scene, they will become valuable partners in crisis management and response efforts. On a college campus, it is often the student affairs professional that is the first on the scene. Are you trained? Are you ready?

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