

The Student Affairs-Industrial complex

The National Association of Student Personnel Administrators is the professional organization for American "student affairs administrators in higher education." It's responsible for promulgating the proliferation of "student affairs professionals" in American higher education.

I have come to know it simply as "the enemy."

So I decided to infiltrate their 2008 annual conference, held in Boston during Spring Break. Upon entering the main exhibition hall, filled with representatives from more than 100 companies peddling their respective wares, I was a god.

Exhibitors' eyes lit up when they saw "Duke University" on my conference badge. My outward appearance as a scrappy, jetlagged college student was irrelevant. Duke has money. Many of our students have money. Lots and lots of money.

With that money, Duke can contract with (among others):

- EdVenture, a company providing something called "learning collaboratives" (your guess is as good as mine);
- LeaderShape, a "highly interactive and energizing" program for "leadership development";
- Lifetopia, something allowing "students to come to life";
- Snoozester, a company that will deliver wake-up calls to undergraduates;
- The Scholar Ship, a semester-long program on a cruise ship. Worst. Pun. Ever.

After I had enough of people trying to sell me things that students don't need (and indeed, that I don't have the authority to buy), I proceeded to the conference's afternoon sessions.

Having worked with both Duke Student Government and The Chronicle during my four years at the University, I probably fit NASPA's definition of a "student leader." Consequently, I decided to learn about my so-called life in a session entitled "A Day in the Life of a College Student Leader."

The session was led by two "Assistant Professor[s] of Educational Leadership" who have doctoral degrees in student affairs practice. They went to college to learn about people (student affairs professionals) who go to college to learn about people (students) who go to college.

The "professors" spent the entire session trying to promote their new book. It consisted of case studies designed to aid in the training of new "student leaders." Sarah Marshall, one

of the presenters, suggested to the audience that they require students to analyze one of their cases and then "to use, in writing, two parts of student development theory to justify your decision."

She also suggested a "speed-dating case study" exercise.

Not on your life.

The exhibitions and many of the sessions pointed to one thing: an unholy alliance between student affairs administrators, the people who train them and the people whom they hire to provide services to students.

Say a person wants to work at improving the lives of college students.

In order to get a job at most institutions (including Duke), he or she must enter a degree program in "higher education leadership" or "student personnel administration." There, "faculty members" teach him or her the importance of using materials that the student affairs "industry" produces.

Some of those newly minted student affairs professionals grow up to sell services to colleges and universities and/or become professors of "higher education leadership" themselves. That often involves promoting their own wares in addition to those they were taught are necessary for students to "develop."

With every generation of student affairs administrators, the influence of the "industry" grows larger and larger; before you know it, everyone will be booking a cruise on the Scholar Ship.

Luckily, however, the process started with individuals who simply want to help students. And I did meet student affairs staff who care about students-and only students-and not, as NASPA refers to it, "the profession."

In response to my questions about student development, a vice president for student affairs at a university in West Virginia said simply, "I firmly believe that there are as many theories out there as there are students."

When I commented that Duke has a de facto requirement that student affairs staff have master's degrees in student development theory, he responded, "I look for people with master's and doctoral degrees in common sense."

And luckily, similar people can be found at Duke.

The Student Affairs-Industrial complex, however, has to go.

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