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## Mutual Expectations: The Relationship of the President to the Student Personnel Officer

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# Mutual Expectations: The Relationship of the President to the Student Personnel Officer

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*By David McKenna with Steve Moore*

## ABSTRACT

This article is a transcription of an address presented by Dr. David McKenna at a recent pre-conference workshop at an ACPA conference. The workshop was sponsored by ACSD in conjunction with the annual prayer breakfast. Dr. McKenna shared insights gleaned from his more than thirty years of service in Christian higher education including three presidential posts. The article focuses on two areas. They are one, what a president expects from a senior student affairs officer and two, what the SSA can expect from a president.

## INTRODUCTION

A president recently fired a key administrator with the explanation, "We are not on the same page." In response, the administrator asked, "How could I know which page we were supposed to be on when I had never even seen the score?"

From this short exchange, we learn some fundamental lessons of leadership. One lesson is that a president owes an administrator a clear statement of the expectations he or she has for the administrator's role. The second lesson is that these expectations must become the basis for performance review. A third lesson is that the relationship between a president and an administrator is defined by expectations that run on a two-way street. Each party has expectations of the other that must be clearly understood and consistently followed, not just for the effectiveness of the organization, but for the quality of the relationship. As you would know, the fired administrator is a thoroughly confused and deeply wounded person in the ranks of the unemployed today. Adding to the confusion and the hurt is the fact that both the president and the administrator are colleagues in Christian higher education and believers in Christ.

Taking a lesson from this incident, we know that we must frame the relationship between the president and a student personnel officer in terms of mutual expectations. Accordingly, I have chosen to divide my reflections into three parts. Part I identifies

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the foundational expectations of the president upon which other expectations are built; Part II identifies what the student personnel officer can specifically expect of the president; Part III identifies what the president can specifically expect of the student personnel officer.

### **Foundational Expectations for the President**

Let me begin by stating the obvious. A student personnel officer can expect the president to serve as a model for Christian leadership. After reading endless definitions of leadership, I keep coming back to the four strategies for leadership given by Bennis and Nanus in their book, *Leaders*. With just the turn of a phrase, these strategies can be stated as expectations that an administrator can expect of the president in any organization, but especially in Christian institutions.

First, the president is expected to cast an engaging vision for the future. Such action captures the imagination of followers. Although the idea of vision casting is overworked, it is a fundamental expectation that we cannot neglect. When Peters and Waterman were searching for the qualities that made business organizations excellent, they assumed that leadership made little difference. After they identified the companies of excellence, however, they found that many of them had the common quality of a leader with a vision for the future and sensitivity to human values.

Second, the president is expected to communicate the college's mission with clarity and passion. Such action provides followers with a sense of meaning and purpose in their respective roles. As the president's vision for the institution answers the question "What?" the president's statement of mission answers the question, "How?" In those answers, each person is finding meaning for his or her role in the future of the organization. Again, even though mission statements are in vogue and often innocuous, they are still an indispensable expectation for presidential leadership.

Third, the president is expected to be consistent in word and action, especially during times of transition. Such action gains the trust of followers. Nothing creates greater chaos in an organization than inconsistency on the part of the president. One of the most creative presidents in Christian higher education demonstrates how one's strength can become a fatal flaw. His administrators and faculty say that they can expect a new vision for the institution every six weeks. He is a classic example of the adage, "Ready, fire, aim."

Fourth, the president is expected to give himself wholeheartedly for the good of the organization. Such action serves to mobilize the energies of followers. Self-deployment is the word that Bennis and Nanus use to describe this expectation for leadership. In Christian circles, we talk about the terms self-giving and self-sacrifice. Before the president can expect hard work and sacrificial efforts from followers, he or she must set the example.

With these four expectations as the base upon which we build other expectations, we now turn to more specific expectations that a student personnel officer can expect of the president.

## What the Student Personnel Officer Can Expect of the President

The president must meet several expectations of the student personnel officer in order for the officer to be effective in his or her role. First, a student personnel officer can expect the president to be committed to his or her personal and professional growth. As with all expectations of leadership, this expectation sets the stage for the commitment that the student personnel officer will make to students. Such an expectation may not be as obvious as it seems.

When I did institutional research for the president's office at The Ohio State University in the 1960s, the law stated that all Ohio residents who had a reasonable chance of academic success and wanted to attend the university had to be admitted. 7500 students crowded out the freshmen class in the year that we performed our study. The students were divided into two groups: the *Coms* and the *Non-Coms*. Coms were freshmen that were already committed to a major field of study. The large majority of freshmen, however, were Non-Coms or students who had made no commitment to a major. The ratio of advisors to the students who were committed to a major was 1:6, but for students who had made no commitment, the ratio of 1:600. Who would be surprised then to learn that of the 7500 that enrolled as freshmen only one half survived the cut to become sophomores! Add to this the fact that 80 percent of the students at Ohio State never had a class taught by a person with professorial rank until they were juniors!

Out of that study, I developed a working principle that I brought with me into my presidency in Christian higher education. A president's most sacred trust is the lives of those who have made a commitment to the institution. This trust begins with the direct reports of the president. Again, no commitment is one way. When a person of leadership quality makes a commitment to the president, the president makes a commitment to that person. I spell out that commitment with the expectation I will immediately embark upon the development of personal and professional growth plan for that administrator. Early on in our working relationship I ask three questions - "Who do you want to be in five years?" "Where do you want to go professionally in five years?" and "How can I help you get there?" The most fun comes when the person answers, "I want your job." This response poses no threat to me because that is the kind of person with whom I want to work and whom I want to see grow.

In the early years of my career, I tended to limit my commitment to professional growth plans for my administrators. As a discipline on my own leadership role, I set annual performance goals for the president, announced them to the community, did a mid-year review, and publicly appraised my own performance in the last faculty meeting of the year. Using this model, I asked my administrators to present the annual goals for their area each fall followed by a mid-year and final review in the spring. On one occasion, I had a tough mid-year review session with the dean of students. We reworked his goals and scheduled another appointment in the next quarter. Watching his performance through that quarter, I was prepared for what I call a "show cause" meeting. As he came into the office, I noticed that he slumped into the chair. So, I asked, "How is it going?" Usually, we ask that question not wanting a true answer. In this case he said, "Not well."

When I asked him to tell me about it, he opened his heart to tell that his brother

was dying of aids and he had to bring him home to live with his family. Talk about a paradigm shift. In an instant I changed from a president on the warpath to a pastor in a counseling session. From then on, I always started my performance review sessions by honestly asking, "How is it going?" and then giving a ready ear to listen. More than that, I added the personal and family dimension to the professional growth. Still later, I realized that spiritual growth was a dimension that we took for granted in Christian higher education. When I added it to the developmental plan, another world opened up in our relationship.

Out of these sessions has come my greatest satisfaction. Administrative sabbaticals have been established, family vacation periods have been ordered, physical examinations have been scheduled, cell groups for spiritual growth have been encouraged, confidants have been recommended, and advanced degrees have been achieved. I believe that a student personnel officer can expect that kind of commitment from the president. As proof of my intent, I counted eight different vice-presidents or deans of student life with whom I worked over a period of 33 years as a president. Four of the eight became presidents of Christian colleges!

Second, a student personnel officer can expect the president to show full confidence in his or her ability to lead and manage campus life and student development. As chief executive officer, the president is the sole employee of the board of trustees with sole authority and responsibility for the welfare of the institution, its mission and its people. If the job is to get done, then authority and responsibility for student life must be delegated to the student life administrator by the president. Once again, it may seem as if we are rehearsing the obvious, but in many instances, this is not the case.

*Empowerment* has become another code word in our managerial language, but its overuse does not deplete its meaning. A president not only delegates authority and responsibility to the student life administrator, but he or she also wraps those formal functions in a cloak of confidence that gives meaning to the word empowerment. Our son, Doug, a general manager for executive development with Microsoft, says that any less than full confidence between a CEO and the primary reports will inevitably cause trouble. Without full confidence in the administrator, the president will second-guess decisions, and without full confidence from the president, the administrator will lead with uncertainty. Doug says that, in fairness to both parties, a president should never hire an administrator in whom he or she does not have full confidence. If you have such a person reporting to you, decide what needs to be done to inspire full confidence or make plans to relocate or fire that person. Those sound like tough words until you begin to think about cases you have known and perhaps situations in which you find yourself at the present time.

I happen to be a person who cannot hide my feelings. If I don't have full confidence in an administrator, I will communicate that lack of confidence in a thousand ways. The way I state a question, the way I parcel out key assignments, and the way in which I share privileged information are all dead giveaways on the level of my confidence. Yet, full confidence in an administrator is essential to the performance of an effective president. With all of the demands upon the president for external relations, such as capital campaigns, and internal relations, such as trustee development, no chief executive can be successful unless he or she can delegate authority and responsibility in key administrative areas with full confidence.

Third, a student personnel officer can expect the president to provide clarity of performance goals, performance evaluation, and appropriate rewards or sanctions. Returning to case of the executive who was fired without knowing the president's expectations or the basis upon which he was being evaluated, we come to a cardinal principle of leadership that applies at all levels. The principle is this: Never allow hidden expectations to be the basis upon which you are evaluated.

A president owes a student development officer a written statement of performance goals that are high, clear and consistent. Not that the president should write those goals. My approach is to ask the administrator to write five to eight performance goals in priority order with a quality outcome upon which performance can be evaluated, a time schedule for achievement and resources that are required. These goals, of course, must be consistent with our mission and operational outcomes for the strategic plan. The administrator then sends those goals to me in advance of a scheduled meeting so that I can review them, comment on them and be ready for a focused discussion. From that discussion comes an agreement for our working relationship. At a later review session, I ask the administrator to provide a self-evaluation of his or her performance. Room is made for contingencies that affect the outcomes so that priorities and performance may be influenced. I like to ask the question, "If you were to accomplish only one thing this quarter, what would it be?" More often than not, I will say, "If you do this, you will have met my expectations."

Presidents can also be expected to be clear and consistent with their sanctions and rewards based upon performance review. Of course, we know about the formal sanctions of "show cause" probation or dismissal and formal rewards of salary increases. They are not all. A former vice-president wrote to me recently to say, "I especially remember the times when you said, 'I have a bone to pick with you.'" He was referring to the times when I had a question about an issue that threatened to separate us if we allowed it to fester. One wise man wrote, "A leader who avoids risk is always at risk." The same can be said about confronting an issue. "A leader who avoids confrontation only prolongs greater confrontation." The vice-president then added another sentence, saying, "I also appreciate the blue cards that you sent to me saying, 'Well done.' I still have them in my file."

A student personnel officer can expect the president to provide clear and consistent sanctions and rewards, formal and informal, as an essential part of their working relationship.

### **What the President Expects of the Student Personnel Officer**

Now for the other side of the story. Here we see how vital the student personnel officer is to the life of the institution when we consider the expectations the president has for the person who holds that position.

First, the president expects the student personnel officer to be a *mission-maker*. Contrary to some opinions, the mission of the Christian institution of higher education cannot be fulfilled without an effective leader of student life. Because the integration of faith and learning is at the core of the curriculum in Christian higher education, there is a tendency to make the quality of student life secondary to the academic function. Our mission, however, is not complete until we speak of faith, learning,

living and serving as the totality of the educational experience. For this reason, I have always reacted against the idea that student life involves extra-curricular experiences. We should be talking about co-curricular experiences because the whole sphere of student development is a partner with academic development.

As president, then, I expect that the student personnel officer will envision himself or herself as a mission-maker. At Asbury Theological Seminary I had a prominent trustee who was the federal district judge for South Texas. He also served as a member of the Southern Methodist University Board of Trustees during the time when the school got caught in a scandal that seriously undermined its credibility. From that experience, the judge learned a lesson that he brought to our seminary board. Whenever I presented a proposal for a new venture for the seminary, he would ask the question, "Is this consistent with our mission?" At first I resented the question, but as time went on, I realized that I needed this check and balance on my entrepreneurial nature in order to keep us on track. The same question should guide the student personnel officer in the development and assessment of living and serving programs.

For example, if the mission of the institution is to admit only Christian students, it has a direct bearing on the nature of student services for that kind of community. Presumably, Christian nurture takes precedence over evangelism and serving becomes the natural extension of Christian living. But if our mission is to admit all students who qualify, the purpose of student services takes a radical turn. Evangelism, discipline, counseling and leadership development must be customized to the college culture created by that decision. Leadership development serves as case in point. The other day I heard about a Christian college that has admitted all comers in the interest of building the enrollment. Somewhere along the line of growth, however, the critical mass of students shifted from Christians to non-Christians. Consequently, the college is now dealing with issues of skepticism about the integration of faith and learning in the classroom, opposition to required chapel, and division of the campus into two distinct subcultures. Needless to say, the vice-president for student life has the unenviable task of bringing integrity to the mission of the college. Although this is an extreme example, it illustrates how vital the role of the student personnel officer is to the mission of the institution.

At this point, let me run the risk of venturing into a field of land mines. Student personnel officers are often perceived as second-class citizens in the academic community because they may hold professional degrees without obvious identification in an academic discipline. This may be unfair, but it is realistic. To address this issue, I always included in the growth plan of student personnel officers a special academic and intellectual component. Whether it was an opportunity for participation in a research project or reading books in an academic field of interest, the purpose was to close the gap between faculty and the student life officer. To teach a class and obtain faculty status is my goal. I like to think of the student personnel officer as a person who can "eyeball" it intellectually with a faculty member. One of my favorite questions when interviewing prospects for a student personnel position was to ask, "What are you reading that you can recommend to me?" Not only do you learn a lot about the intellectual interest of the candidate, but you also open the door for a continuing conversation for intellectual growth.

Second, the president can expect the student personnel officer to be a *tone-setter*. Of

course, the president is the primary tone-setter for the institution. My experience in Christian higher education, however, has led me to conclude that there are primary tone-setting places that complement the president's role. I see the chapel as the setting for the spiritual tone, the library as the setting for the academic tone, and, the dining commons as the setting for the social tone. Secondary tone-settings are residence halls, gyms or playing fields, snack bars and the bookstore. Note the number of these tone-setting places that are within the responsibility of the student personnel officer. Let me choose, from among this list, the chapel for additional comment.

Elton Trueblood, who was dean of the chapel at Stanford before moving to Earlham College in Indiana, told me that you could read the spiritual quality of a campus by observing the chapel services. On his many visits to college campuses, he found some chapel services that were only ghosts of a spiritual past and others that were the heartbeat of vibrant spirituality within the community. From his observations, Trueblood concluded that the Christian integrity of a college could be read from the chapel experience. For him, the chapel served as the centering point for the integration of faith, learning and living. While Trueblood was most concerned about the dilution or loss of the chapel experience in Christian colleges, we may have another concern.

Chapel programs that follow the format of contemporary worship in order to attract students put themselves in danger of losing their value as the point of integration for the learning experience. Even when chapel attendance is required of all students and a contemporary worship experience attracts the numbers, the chapel program still may not serve its integrative function. One concern is that the chapel program becomes an experience fragmented from the academic process. This leads immediately to another concern - faculty attendance at chapel. If faculty do not attend and participate, the integration of faith, learning and living suffers and the community is spiritually fractured. I am especially concerned about the theology of worship that our chapel programs teach. In some instances, the fundamentals of Christian worship are lost in the entertainment motif and the focus upon spiritual self-interest. In other instances, a counter-culture to the institutional church is being created, even in denominational colleges. It is important to ask questions about our chapel programs. Are they teaching a Biblical model of worship?" "Are they helping the student experience a variety of worship styles in the Christian tradition?" "Are they preparing the students for leadership in the church?" and "Are they serving as the integrative center for the total educational experience?" As a president, I can expect the student personnel officer to address these questions as a part of his or her tone-setting responsibility.

Third, the president can expect the student personnel officer to be a gatekeeper. This function reminds me of the story that Martin Marty tells about Olga and Sven, a married Norwegian couple who belonged to two different Lutheran churches. One church served wine at communion and the other served grape juice. When Sven finally got Olga to attend church with him, communion was served with wine. Afterwards, Olga complained about the sinful practice and Sven said, "But honey, Jesus turned the water into wine!" "Yah," answered Olga, "And dat's youst anodder ting that I don't like about Jesus!"

To be a gatekeeper is an expectation for the student personnel officer that we would like to avoid or forget. But we cannot. Even though we are just a generation or so from the days when the dean of women measured the length of a girl's skirt and

the dean of man enforced the 18-inch rule between couples, our responsibility for ethical development in Christian living cannot be forfeited. The code words, “lifestyle choices,” “values,” and “campus ethos,” are intended to cushion this responsibility, but they do not negate it. All one needs to do is to review the surveys by Gallup and Barna to see that the moral behavior of evangelical Christians is not significantly different from their secular counterparts. While the primary responsibility rests with our homes and churches, the Christian college must complement these institutions, especially during the formative years of moral decisions.

A tragedy in the Northwest recently serves to illustrate my point. At a fine Christian college with a public witness in athletics, a vital chapel experience, and an affirmative campus climate, as many as 200 students were renting a house off campus for keggers. The parties ended when as many as 100 students jammed the deck of the rented house so that the weight brought the structure crashing down. A freshman was killed and many were injured. Each of us is aware that a similar event could happen on our campus because students everywhere are under pressure to make life choices that are in conflict with Christian values.

I have no answer to the dilemma, but I do have a suggestion. In the 1960s when student protest was rising, studies revealed that campuses had an “environmental press” or “prevailing tone” that influenced student behavior. How was this “press” or “tone” created? At first, it was thought that the critical mass of students made the difference. In our case, it would mean that a critical mass of Christian students would set the press or the tone. But, then, the researchers found that student protesters were setting the tone with as little as four percent of the campus population. Leadership, then, became the difference. Whether at Berkeley, Chicago or Kent State, dominant leaders set the tone for the protest.

Let me turn this illustration into an expectation of the president for the student personnel officer. I expect the student personnel officer to be a tone-setter by working to shape the environmental press of the campus. The shaping tools are the cultivation of the critical mass and the development of campus leaders. After being surprised by the quality of students who came into leadership by default, I made leadership development a specific expectation for the student personnel officer. We need to identify potential leaders who represent the outcomes we identify in our mission statement and cultivate their development through a series of experiences that prepares them to lead. Much more could be said, but this is sufficient to illustrate the importance of the role of the gatekeeper of campus climate for the student personnel officer.

Fourth, I expect the student personnel officer to be a community-builder. Much is said about building an academic community. But, we also need to build on campus a biblical community that embraces and extends the academic community. Usually, we define the biblical community by three strong words from the Greek text – *kerygma* or the community of proclamation, *koinonia* or the community of fellowship, and *diakoinia* or the community of service. Once again, the critical role of the student personnel officer comes into view while fulfilling the mission of the Christian college.

The academic community is bound together in the search and discovery mission of scholarship and teaching. In the secular institution, that is the limit of the intellectual endeavor. But, in the Christian college, when divine revelation and human reason meet the discoveries become the basis for the proclamation of the Word and its relationship

to human learning. Chapel is the natural center for this proclamation. The kerygma or the Good News of the Gospel must be proclaimed as well as researched and taught.

The community of fellowship or *koinonia* is a well-known concept among us. In practice, however, it always needs to be cultivated and renewed. Each of us has seen instances where the bond of trust is shattered by incidents or issues on campus. In such instances, the common bond of faith in Jesus Christ must be renewed with the understanding that Christians can disagree without breaking that bond. My guess is that lessons learned through the process of reconciliation are some of the most important lessons that students can learn during their college days. These lessons will become even more important as our campuses diversify with differences of gender, race, age and ethnic origin.

Of course, we recognize that a community of service or "*diakoinia*" is at the heart of all learning institutions. Whether Christian or secular, all institutions of higher education claim the three functions of teaching, research and service. But there is a distinction between the way in which Christian and secular institutions serve. All institutions will serve by educating leaders for the public sphere, employees for the marketplace and citizens for a democratic society. Christian colleges will do the same with the distinction of "vocation" as divine calling and "service" as self-giving servanthood. Frederick Buechner defines "vocation" as the "deepest gladness within us meeting a deep human need." I expect that the student personnel officer will both model and communicate that meaning in the context of a community of service.

Certainly it is in the working out of the details that we come face to face with the real dilemmas of life. I find that student personnel leaders are sometimes timid when they come to the table with their higher education counterparts in academics, finance or such. My final encouragement to you is to be proactive and bold! These are not days for timidity. They are days in which we must step up and make a difference in the institutions of which we are a part.