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## The Small College Dean: New Directions for Student Services, No. 116

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## The Small College Dean: New Directions for Student Services, No. 116

Sarah B. Westfall (Editor); (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass 2007).

Reviewed by Mark J. Troyer

I returned recently from a conference with fellow deans of students and realized how the role of senior student affairs officer (SSAO) continues to morph and change in today's small college environments. In reviewing *The Small College Dean*, edited by Sarah Westfall, I was pleased that the groups of authors writing the various chapters in this edited work seem to have a good sense of this role, even though positions vary significantly among different colleges. The authors address a wide variety of issues ranging from history of the position, to staffing, to future issues.

*The Small College Dean* is a book in the "New Directions for Student Services" series, published quarterly as part of the Jossey-Bass Higher and Adult Education Series. Sarah Westfall, the Vice President for Student Development and Dean of Students at Kalamazoo College in Michigan, gathered a group of fellow deans to address issues related to leading in small colleges in this short, easy-to-read, six-chapter book.

The book starts out appropriately with a chapter by the editor on defining the small college setting and addresses from an historical perspective the work of a small college dean. She appropriately points out that the majority of deans of students and SSAOs in the country (77 percent) actually come from small colleges. For the purposes of this book, she defines small colleges as those having 5000 or fewer students which make up approximately 77 percent of colleges and universities in the U.S.

Throughout the book, a theme emerges in various ways, pointing out the expanding need for the dean to have a broad knowledge of changing federal law, be adept at dealing with a crisis, and have skills in staffing and organizing personnel to meet the changing needs of today's students. In the second chapter, the author engages in a helpful discussion on the variety of the functional areas that frequently come under the purview of the small college dean. She also gives a couple organizational charts that can be easily adapted to a variety of college settings.

Chapter three, written by Doug Oblander, Vice President for Student Development at Mount Union College in Ohio, focuses on staffing at a small college. He does an excellent job of identifying the unique challenges and opportunities that a small college affords compared to the larger universities. The recruitment, selection, orientation, training, and development of staff are rightly identified as constant pressures at the small college. With the prevalence of many "one person offices," the importance of hiring is even greater. Oblander points out that serving at a small college may allow one to jump to higher level of responsibilities quicker. He also stresses that a small college experience often gives a better opportunity to collaborate with faculty and to interact with higher level administration by having close contact with key decision makers. Oblander addresses the importance of understanding the unique nature of each small college, and gives good strategies for staffing and recruiting. Though the series is not necessarily intended for the faith-based institution, the strategies seem to be universal. Some issues in staffing and training in a faith-based small college, however, do have a level of

uniqueness and it would have been nice to see these addressed in some way. (The author does call for future research; maybe one of our budding professionals in ACSD could focus on this issue as a thesis or dissertation topic.)

In the fourth chapter entitled, “Vice President for Student Affairs and Dean of Students: Is it possible to Do it All?” Janet Heeter Bass, Vice President of Student Affairs at Muskingum College, provides a fascinating discussion on the titles and roles of SSAOs. I found it particularly refreshing to mentally dialogue with the author on the issues that she presented. I also found it somewhat challenging to see on paper and to think about all the areas that a vice president or dean is responsible to keep track of on a small campus. This chapter served to even more support the importance of good staffing, and of hiring professionals that can be trusted with a variety of tasks. It was sobering to be reminded that deans are often on call 24 hours a day, 7 days a week and that their “futures could easily be determined by the way they responded (or failed to respond) to a single issue” (p. 51).

The content of the fifth chapter is one you could find at any large or small professional development conference in student affairs: the relationship between student affairs and academic affairs and the collaboration needed in these areas. Though much of this chapter discusses areas that are not new and are primarily reminders of the importance of this task, there was a section that was of particular interest—the discussion on the formal structures that naturally enhance the collaborative efforts on campus. In the light of the Virginia Tech tragedy and push for emergency response plans, many of us are putting together task forces and committees to address issues related to identifying struggling students or communicating better on possible high risk situations. Bruce Colwell, Senior Associate Dean of Students and Class Dean at Carleton College, gives some very specific examples throughout this chapter of collaborative programs and structures that enhance the overall persistence of students and add value to the college experience.

The final chapter by William Flanagan, Vice President and Dean of Students at Beloit College in Wisconsin, provides a future-oriented look at what SSAOs may face over the next decade. Flanagan synthesized his discussion to three primary realities that small college deans will face during the next decade. First, the increasingly complex nature of the profession was addressed. Statutory requirements such as the Cleary Act, Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act, Americans with Disabilities Act, and other federal and state guidelines make it challenging to keep ahead of both good practice and mandated requirements. The demands on the dean continue to grow, and the importance of being able to think critically, write and assess well, and deal with the demands of both internal constituencies and external constituencies, will prove critical.

A second reality that the book concludes with is that assessment is here to stay. Accountability will continue to be a theme in higher education and accrediting bodies will continue to demand evidence that we are doing what we say we are.

Finally, Flanagan’s last point in looking to the future is that change is inevitable. He rightly points out that issues such as the increase in the number of students with diagnosed mental health challenges, technology advances, increased parental involvement, and more inter-institutional competition will bring with them a demand that the SSAO is able to adapt and change, and lead their staff to do the same.

Though it is only 80 pages long, this book would be very beneficial for anyone

aspiring to be a vice president for student development or dean of students (or both). For those that are already in the position, it brings in many ways a helpful and ordered look at our positions and the issues and challenges relevant to what we should be thinking about and planning for. As an SSAO at a faith-based institution, I did not find the book to give me a particularly unique perspective on my role in a Christian college. In fairness, however, that was not the purpose of this book. A follow-up chapter or study on the small college dean in Christian colleges would be interesting and helpful. Overall, I would recommend this book as a unique addition to any student development staffer's library. The issues and discussions are relevant and important regardless of whether one is sitting presently in the dean's position, aspiring to the dean's position, or simply working on the team.

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