

The Evolving Role of Student Affairs in the

21st Century:

An American Perspective

2nd International Congress on Upper

Secondary and Higher Education: The Youth

in the Knowledge Era

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I would like to thank the Government of Mexico City for inviting researchers, teachers, students, and administrators to come together to address a very timely and important topic: "Youth in the Knowledge Era." I'd also like to thank Mr. Isaac Perez Serrano for his tireless energy, and for making the arrangements for me to be here with you.

I want to talk to you today about the complicated and changing nature of higher education, and I'm doing so from an American perspective. It's a very different world from what the vast majority of you and I experienced when we were undergraduates. And it should be apparent to all of you that I'm still a relatively young man—my undergraduate experience was not THAT long ago. At least that's what I keep telling myself.

The current college students are part of what has been defined as Generation Y, the Millennials, or the Echo Boomers. Let me give you some statistics on this generation:

- Born between 1982 and 1995, there are nearly 80 million of

them, and they're already having a huge impact on entire segments of the economy. And as the population ages, they will become the next dominant generation of Americans.

- The oldest are barely out of college, and the youngest are still in grade school.
- They already make up nearly a third of the U.S. population, and already spend \$170 billion a year of their own and their parents' money.
- They are already one of the most studied generations in history—by sociologists, demographers and marketing consultants.
- The Millennials are a reflection of the sweeping changes in American life over the past 20 years. They are the first to

grow up with computers at home, in a 500-channel TV universe. They are multi-taskers with cell phones, music downloads, video games, and Instant Messaging on the Internet. They are totally plugged- in citizens of a worldwide community. (*60 Minutes Report*)

How does this generation fit into college campuses? Let me give you a sense of the landscape of an American university today.

A student walks across campus between classes with her cell phone, texting her parents that she's worried about her midterm tomorrow. Her mom immediately texts back and asks what she can do to help.

In residential halls students live on the Internet, doing research for their next big paper. Some get so stressed out that they look for an easy way out—they start emailing friends to see if they have a good paper on Macbeth or they search the myriad websites out there offering well-written essays on any topic on the planet—for a fee.

First-generation college students come to campus in record numbers, and they are committed to succeeding in a new world, a world that no one in their family has experienced. As administrators we must create an environment that allows these students to thrive. Likewise, international students are coming to the United States in increasing numbers to take advantage of the world's preeminent higher education system. How do we accommodate these students and their diverse needs?

And then there are the ongoing questions of health and safety. My nightmare, and the nightmare of every university administrator or faculty member, is that call at three o'clock in the morning. A seemingly invincible student is in the emergency room and may not make it after an all-day and night drinking binge at a fraternity or sorority house or at a club or social group initiation. A young woman has been drugged and sexually assaulted, and the police are still trying to determine if the perpetrator was a fellow student or someone from off campus.

Make no mistake—there are tough issues and unprecedented challenges out there. But I am an optimist, and I know these issues are not insurmountable. Every day, I work with a dedicated group of people to create a world for undergraduates that is full of possibilities. The world of higher education should be truly a transforming experience. When we were undergraduates, we didn't always appreciate the power of that experience. But as we look back, we invariably realize that those four years—or five years—or even six years—laid the foundation for our lives and who we would become. So I want to spend some time with you today talking about some of the challenges that we face as we in higher education work to create an experience that will endure for undergraduates, an experience that will enrich their lives in ways that they will remember decades after they graduate.

Before I get too far in this talk, let me tell you a little about myself and my experiences. I grew up in Lewisburg, Tennessee, a small town outside of Nashville. I did my undergraduate work at the University of the South, a superb liberal arts college located on

the Cumberland Plateau in Sewanee, Tennessee. When I went to Sewanee, I was one of a handful of African American students at the college. After graduating I spent a few years in the banking industry when Sewanee asked me to come back and work in the admissions office to increase diversity on campus. I spent three years at Sewanee, and we had some significant success in our recruiting efforts.

And then my career took a different path. I decided to go the University of North Carolina at Chapel to earn a master's degree in social work. I used my master's degree to return to the academy, but this time I worked in a place vastly different from the mountaintop campus of Sewanee. I had the privilege to be a social worker at Duke University Medical Center's Pediatric Blood and Marrow Transplantation program. My job was to work with some of the sickest kids in the world, kids who had cancer or other more obscure, life-threatening diseases. They came to Duke from around the world—it was the last chance for many. While more than half made it through the program, many children did not, and I watched

many of them die in the unit. It was a wrenching experience, sitting with the families and their amazingly brave children during the final moments of their lives. Those are experiences that I will never forget.

After six years at Duke, my career path took yet another turn. I was recruited by Middlebury College, a national liberal arts college in rural Vermont, to serve as associate dean of student affairs. I moved from working with sick kids and their families to interacting with incredible college students, helping them to develop as individuals. About three years ago—out of the blue—I got a call from a woman from a prominent New England search firm who was working with Yale University. Yale was looking for a dean of student affairs, she told me, and they thought I might be a good fit for the position. After numerous interviews and visits, Yale offered me the job of dean of student affairs in June of 2007; I started two months later. Yale has lived up to the bill. It is a fascinating place with brilliant people and incredible opportunities.

At Yale College, we strive to provide superb educational experiences for about 5,300 undergraduates. Our students are some of the brightest and most promising students anywhere. Our goal is ambitious. Let me read you our mission statement:

“The mission of Yale College is to seek exceptionally promising students of all backgrounds from across the nation and around the world and to educate them, through mental discipline and social experience, to develop their intellectual, moral, civic, and creative capacities to the fullest. The aim of this education is the cultivation of citizens with a rich awareness of our heritage to lead and serve in every sphere of human activity.”

Yale undergraduates have opportunities to pursue over 70 majors. We have more than 365 registered undergraduate organizations—from Afrika Now to the Yale Literary Magazine, from the Dominican Student Association, to the Women’s Leadership Initiative, to the Anti-Gravity Society, to name just a

few. We have four cultural centers—Afro-American, Asian American, Latino and Native American. We have twelve residential colleges, each of which is a distinctive community with its own character and goals.

Yale offers an extraordinary range of activities. Few students have the time to contribute to all the publications, productions, and groups that attract them. Students are encouraged to attend performances and sporting events, to read and discuss undergraduate publications, to attend talks given by the wide variety of artists, scholars, and media personalities who come to campus. Recent visitors have included Oscar Arias Sánchez, former president of Costa Rica and winner of the 1987 Nobel Peace Prize; recently sworn U.S. Supreme Court Justice Sonya Sotomayor; Harvard professor and renowned criminal lawyer Alan Dershowitz; Henry Fogel, president of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra; and David Stern, commissioner of the National Basketball Association. To name just a few.

And then there are the social events. Beyond small parties and casual socializing, the campus teems with college-sponsored parties; casual and formal dances; musical jams and recitals in the dining halls; plays at the Yale Repertory Theatre, the Dramat, and individual colleges; movies on campus and the Criterion Cinema, and the multiplexes just outside of town. Students also enjoy New Haven's restaurants, clubs, concerts, and professional theaters. Whether students prefer producing the events or simply sitting back and enjoying the show, Yale offers social and cultural events for every palate.

So my job as dean of student affairs and associate dean of Yale College is like running a small city. What I love about my job is the city has some of the smartest and most interesting residents in the entire world. And what keeps me up some nights is the same thing—how do you govern and keep in check some of the smartest and at times most mischievous minds.

The environment at Yale is not unique in higher education. Across the country, my colleagues in student affairs are dealing

with similar issues—I talk to them all the time about the issues we face. How do we engage our students? How do we push our students? How do we foster independence? How do we excite students to stretch their leadership capacity? And how do we keep students safe? As we have these conversations, several issues come to the forefront:

- Diversity
- International students
- The first-generation college student
- Technology
- Responsible conduct and a moral code
- The role of parents
- Preparing students for leadership opportunities after the academy and the role that student affairs professionals play in this critical development.

Let me spend some time focusing specifically on these issues.

Diversity has become a buzz word in higher education, but I believe diversity has taken on a much broader meaning today than when I was an undergraduate. When we talk about diversity in higher education, we are looking at far more than racial diversity. We are also looking at diversity in terms of geography, socio-economics, gender, and the interests and backgrounds of our students. The term, *intercultural*, is the word that I have begun to hear more frequently; it better describes the broader distinctions of diversity.

At highly selective colleges like Yale, we get a huge number of applicants who have tremendous GPAs and off-the-chart test scores. That alone doesn't get you into a place like Yale. We are looking at students who are distinctive, who bring different backgrounds and ethnicity and interests to the mix. If we do our job well in selecting a pool of applicants for the freshman class, we will have an amazingly diverse group of students, and this will create huge benefits for the educational experience.

Imagine being in a residence hall surrounded by people who share your passion for education, but these students don't necessarily look like you and in fact are very different than you. Some come from Los Angeles and some hail from Boston, with a healthy smattering of students from Des Moines, Iowa or Gadsden, Alabama mixed in. Some are amazingly wealthy and some are first-generation Latinos whose parents are migrant workers. Some are sure to be musicians or writers or actors and others have already figured out that they will be scientists or surgeons or CEOs. This melting pot of backgrounds ensures that students will have enriching experiences that will challenge them and force them to live in a world far bigger than the place they came from. In student affairs, our goal is to encourage this intercultural group of students to interact with each other, to share experiences outside of the classroom that are often as rewarding, if not more so, than their academic experiences.

Integrally tied to the term intercultural is the increasingly larger role that international students play on campus. Historically,

in the United States, colleges and universities have done a superb job of attracting graduate students to America from throughout the world. In terms of graduate education, America stands as a beacon to the world, educating students who want to earn doctorate degrees or who want the best postdoctoral experiences.

In the last decade, however, American colleges and universities have been more deliberate in recruiting international students for undergraduate programs. The reasons are broad—international students bring different backgrounds and experiences; their robust participation in campus life only enhances the belief that colleges and universities must continue to broaden their scope. And American universities, in a world of globalization, also understand that they need to become part of a larger global community. If they can bring international students to campus, then they can create an undergraduate experience that reflects the global marketplace of ideas. Yale University President Richard Levin captures the essence of the new global university. He says:

“The globalization of the University is in part an evolutionary development. Yale has drawn students from outside the United States for nearly two centuries, and international issues have been represented in its curriculum for the past hundred years and more. But creating the global university is also a revolutionary development—signaling distinct changes in the substance of teaching and research, the demographic characteristics of students, the scope and breadth of external collaborations, and the engagement of the University with new audiences.”

Additionally, as universities compete for students and resources and philanthropy, they want to broaden their pool of students from which to recruit. If there are bright students with successful parents in Shanghai or Mexico City or Berlin, then American universities are realizing that they need to recruit them.

On the American home front, universities are dealing with a very different reality. There is an ongoing discussion about access

in higher education—and I think the colleges and universities are truly trying to open their doors to as many students as possible. At Yale, we are clearly trying to recruit students from different socio-economic backgrounds, and we are committed to making a Yale education possible for promising first-generation college students, and for bright students in less rigorous high school programs. Our financial aid package is extremely generous—if a family makes under the US equivalent of \$60,000 a year, Yale will cover all costs of an admitted students' education. That means a Yale education is free for many students—first—generation college students, in particular.

Once these students arrive on campus, our goal in student affairs is to ensure that they have the support and resources they need to thrive. Our Science, Technology and Research Scholars Program for example, is designed for students who have historically been underrepresented in the sciences. These include women, students of color, students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, first generation college students, and

the physically challenged. The program seeks to create a network of support for first and second year students. This network is supported by strong undergraduate student collaborations, social events, and faculty and graduate student mentorship. This is one of several programs on campus to engage first-generation and other under-represented groups, providing them mentorship and one-on-one dialogue. I am a strong advocate of these programs and my team works hard to ensure that students have access to the best resources at Yale. If they do, I am confident that they will succeed and serve as role models for future generations of students.

Regardless of our students' backgrounds, there is one thing that ties them together—their incredible reliance on technology. Frankly, I don't know how they do it. How can you walk to class texting wildly with one hand with headphones on grooving to the latest song by Beyoncé and not trip or get hit by a bike? I know that I couldn't do it.

Technology provides tremendous opportunities for students, faculty, and administrators. Through websites, email, and text

messages, faculty and students have new ways to communicate about ideas, course content, and the body of research that exists not just in traditional libraries, but through virtual libraries. Conversations that ended in classrooms extend now well into the night through electronic discussion groups. From an administrative perspective, we can use text messaging and email to let students know about events on campus or, in the case of an emergency, to let students know how to remain safe.

With the advent of technology, students are communicating constantly—problems occasionally arise, however, when the information they are communicating is simply not accurate. Gossip and rumors fly over Facebook or Twitter pages at breakneck speed, and it's not always easy to contain misinformation. It could be something simple—I heard that a fraternity is going to be banned from campus. Or it could be something more substantial—did you hear that tuition is going to increase 20 percent next year? From a student affairs perspective, one of our goals is to reinforce the lessons taught in the classroom—to impress upon students that

they must research and think through their ideas before they present them. In the world of electronic communications, that needs to happen much more often than it does.

Which leads to a related issue—how can we foster a greater sense of responsibility and accountability for students on campus? As many of you know, often the role of a Dean of Student Affairs is to serve as the bad cop—in other words, we often play the role of disciplinarian. When there's an honor code violation or we hear about students abusing alcohol or drugs, it's my office's responsibility to investigate these claims and get to the truth. Let me state for the record—these problems occur infrequently. But they happen.

And when they happen, the most difficult thing often is to get students to take responsibility for their actions. Our goal when there is a problem is simply not to be punitive—we want students to grow from their mistakes and learn. Invariably, students either don't understand the repercussions of their mistakes or they want to run away from them. Obviously, this behavior is not just true for

19-year-olds—it's true for politicians and CEOs of global corporations AND major sports figures.

As I sort through the occasional problems with conduct and behavior at Yale, I am reminded of a speech by James Carville, the democratic strategist. Carville is at once a funny and serious man. He was talking about raising his two young children and what he should teach them. He's from Louisiana and he can talk like a Baptist preacher:

“People say that sound bytes aren't any good. I don't necessarily agree with that,” Carville said. “What if I told my daughters one thing that would help them get through life: *Treat others the way you would like to be treated.* If I only told them that one thing, I think that would be pretty good advice. I think they would grow up to be pretty good people.”

Now life is not quite that simple, and Carville knows that. But that is one of the most important concepts that we try to get across to students. Treat others the way that you want to be treated. Develop a code of respect for others and for yourself.