Choosing to Hope in Challenging Times

Florence A Hamrick

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Choosing to Hope in Challenging Times

Florence A. Hamrick, Iowa State University

Abstract

Over the past several months, messages of “hope” from the most recent presidential campaign have been followed by documentation of widespread financial insecurity. The rocky economic climate continues to impact adversely higher education institutions, communities, families, and individuals. This fall, more students with financial or educational uncertainties may be seeking assistance at student affairs offices with smaller staffs, fewer resources, or both. While offering no concrete solutions to these problems, the three major ethics and professional standards statements are abiding sources of support and guidance as student affairs professionals begin what may be a very difficult year.

I have lived in Iowa for almost 14 years, so my fellow caucus-goers and I began hearing presidential candidate Barack Obama’s dual messages of “hope” and “change” somewhat earlier than did the rest of the country. Although hope and change came to be largely identified with Obama, John McCain later incorporated these same messages into his own rhetoric, highlighting the resonance of these messages for voters across the political landscape. During the caucuses and the subsequent presidential campaign—together, quite a long process for Iowans—the degree to which individuals became energized and optimistic about this election was clear. Young people on foot, carrying voter registration forms, clipboards, or PDAs regularly canvassed our neighborhood. Large numbers of students were actively involved in electoral politics on behalf of multiple presidential candidates and political parties, serving as campaign staff members or volunteers, event organizers, and in some cases, local spokespersons.

During the months of the general election, however, fallout from the mortgage and credit crises became widespread, followed by reports of tenuous foundations in the banking and some industrial sectors of the economy. Families and individuals reeled from the joint effects of the mortgage crisis and rising unemployment. By inauguration day in late January 2009, the economic situation that the now “President Obama” faced was likely not the sort of “change” that “candidate Obama” had once had in mind during the campaign. Economic uncertainties on a number of levels are commanding attention from federal and state governments; the federal government in particular has distributed large shares of public monies in the form of corporate support and infusions to ease credit. The past year or so has combined high levels of individual involvement in electoral politics with levels of economic disenfranchisement and hardship for large numbers of people. The past months have been characterized by optimism for the future while citizens cope with potentially disabling economic hardships.

College and university educators should expect that educational plans and aspirations of students arriving this fall may reflect these same uncertainties. Large numbers of students may be affected. In particular, first generation students and students from families experiencing chronic

1 Florence A. Hamrick is associate professor of higher education at Iowa State University. Her research centers on issues of higher education equity, access, and success for members of traditionally underrepresented or non-dominant groups.
or acute financial hardships may be hit hardest. Educators should expect that students are determining how to further tighten their figurative (or actual) belts. For some students, these difficult circumstances may mean altering their immediate educational plans or their future educational goals. For other students, this may mean deferring enrollment, taking one or two courses rather than a full load, or stopping out for a semester or year. To best serve students during this time, what should student affairs professionals do?

My sense is that student affairs professionals should do, generally speaking, what we are called to do as professionals, and revisit how our sets of professional ethics can provide valuable guidance in challenging times. For a variety of reasons, some of which are discussed below, I do not anticipate that the upcoming academic year will be an easy one for all students. But, as in more prosperous times, individuals can learn from their experiences, and student affairs professionals can help foster this learning.

Three sets of professional ethics statements and guidelines for student affairs professionals (ACPA, CAS, and NASPA) all affirm student affairs professionals’ involvement in supporting student learning and development. In the current environment of increased job layoffs, mortgage defaults, personal or commercial bankruptcies, and reductions in household and individual spending, many students are experiencing levels of economic uncertainty either directly or vicariously. Optimistically, one prospective developmental outcome from experiencing such uncertainty is that entering students may be less apt to rely unquestioningly on experts and expert knowledge and more readily see the need for active questioning, probing, and skepticism. The failures of otherwise respected private sector experts to predict or avert catastrophic downturns, plus the failures of expert overseers to monitor and challenge questionable activities, certainly prompt skepticism of experts on all sides. The conscious actions of some notorious individuals, for example, to mislead and defraud investors may also prompt students to question assumptions of experts’ ethical integrity and the wisdom of placing blind faith and absolute trust in experts. These high stakes object lessons, although potentially crushing in their impacts on individuals, can position students advantageously for further reflection and development that will better equip them for thinking critically and making judgments in the midst of ongoing complexities and uncertainties.

One danger, however, is that skepticism may easily give way to cynicism. And cynicism can be an understandable response from students who have kept their part of the educational bargain through their academic achievements but see that their once-realistic plans for higher education are now no longer feasible. Indeed, students may not be the only ones tempted by cynicism. Colleges and universities, especially those in the public sector, have been stressed in the current economy, and the stress has frequently touched student affairs and student support units. Student affairs professionals have cut budgets and resources, perhaps multiple times by now. Some professionals have faced their own job terminations, some may have eliminated colleagues’ jobs, and some have absorbed additional duties following cuts in the numbers of positions within units.

Adjusting to resource scarcities can be trying, even as decisions regarding cuts must be made. The CAS statement (“Council,” 2006), for example, asserts the importance of responsible stewardship of institutional resources. However, honoring this principle can be distressing when staffing and resources are reduced, yet high quality services and programs must be provided for students who now may need even more support or assistance to be successful. Colleagues at community colleges, where total enrollments are projected to swell disproportionately, will certainly be affected. It is reasonable for supervisors to anticipate at least flashes of cynicism along with some degrees of fatigue, stress, or anxiety from staff members (or themselves) who have declining resources even as they have also done their part to support student and institutional success.
Using Nevitt Sanford’s (1966) terms, the current environment for many students will be characterized by high “challenge.” Supplying an offsetting balance of “support” is key for students to meet these challenges and for development and growth to occur. It is more difficult to provide students with support when institutional support resources are stretched, but some focused areas can be prioritized. For example, financial aid, enrollment management, and housing offices could grant extensions for fee payments whenever possible, explore and tap additional sources for student financial support, and expand emergency or short-term funding programs to meet the unanticipated needs of students.

Full-time students who also work may decide to work more hours at one or more jobs in order to lighten their financial burden or provide direct family support. Other students may assume (more) loan debt or delay college enrollment for an academic term—or indefinitely. To minimize expenses, some students may transfer to colleges and universities closer to home or enroll in colleges with lower tuition or overall expenses. Additionally, students may reassess their majors and career plans with a heightened focus on future employability or projected earnings. Students may decide to forego international study opportunities, service learning experiences, or internships offering little or no pay.

Student affairs professionals can support students by affirming students’ efforts at being responsible problem-solvers and to understand that for many students, their options or perceived options are fewer. Affirming students’ autonomy, dignity, and freedom of choice—noted in all three professional ethics statements—can help empower students who have been disempowered by current circumstances. Although colleges and universities face their own financial and budget shortfalls, realistic provisions should be offered to students and their families such as flexible payment plans or, for example, offering full or partial deposit refunds for first year students when intervening circumstances outside their control have prevented them from enrolling. Professionals should also discuss with students ranges of long- or shorter-term consequences of decisions such as pursuing high demand majors that may entail lowered career satisfaction, or discuss challenges associated with leaving a campus and friends to transfer to another campus where work will occupy disproportionate amounts of their time. As students make these critical and potentially high stakes educational decisions, student affairs professionals should try to ensure that students are considering a more complete range of options and are aware of available sources of information and support that students may not have been—up until now—in a position to know or seek out.

As student affairs professionals work to meet students’ needs, they should be aware of their own sets of challenges as well, including the very real concerns about material resources and future job security. Student affairs administrators and supervisors should not ignore or dismiss these concerns but instead provide the support that they can to staff members. Much of this support centers on respect and integrity. For example, professional ethics statements discuss collegiality and mutual respect; these principles can be honored by communicating information as honestly and openly as possible without unduly or inadvertently heightening anxieties or breaching confidentiality. Student affairs professionals should also be aware of their own needs for support and implement strategies for reducing or managing their own stress. Supervisors can assist staff members to identify appropriate priorities to guide their work with students, check for signs of stress or burnout in staff members, and encourage balance.

As I think toward the future, I wonder what students might learn or conclude from being in college now or simply from living through these challenging times. Will experiences of examining, adjusting, or delaying their own educational goals and plans in light of chronic or acute financial shortfalls lead to new or different understandings? For example, as a result of persisting in these economically challenging times, what might students learn about their own
resilience, fears, and courage? With the extensive news coverage of at least one spectacular
investment scam, what might students conclude about individual ethics and integrity as guides for
their own and others’ lives and decisions? For students who have scaled back or interrupted their
education because of unanticipated resource unavailability or uncertainty, what might they
conclude about students in chronic poverty who have educational goals, capabilities, and hopes
similar to their own? How might these understandings shape their values and their perceptions of
appropriate roles for educational institutions, the private sector, and government?

I think it may have been fortuitous that “hope” and “change” were the themes that
seemed to resonate across both major political parties during the most recent presidential election
cycle. Iowans in particular heard these messages repeatedly over many months. In retrospect,
perhaps it was an advantage to have these extended infusions of optimism before—or while,
depending on one’s calculation—the economic recession descended. In acknowledging the
sometimes devastating losses many people have sustained, it can be easy to dwell in cynicism,
apathy, or detachment if we feel that we are powerless to effect change or improvement. The
three major professional ethics statements (ACPA, 2006; CAS, 2006; and NASPA, 1990) do not
appear to sanction these stances and instead discuss professionals’ involvement, integrity, and
active efforts toward development and improvement.

As one concrete start, it may be helpful to identify some of our own signs of hope or
reasons for optimism in these challenging times. These will likely differ among individuals, as we
ought to expect within a diverse society. My signs of optimism include: the recession has
(ostensibly!) begun to lift, the US now has its first African American president, and, at the time of
this writing, it is likely that the first Latina Supreme Court justice will soon be confirmed.
Additionally, most of us have lost—at least temporarily—our naïveté about the illusions of
“abundance” gained through overextensions of personal credit and have begun to construct
different measures of abundance. I see a great deal of optimism in these changes, which helps
give me hope.

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