

Student Affairs in China

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Chinese higher education moved rapidly from an elite system to a mass system over the past three decades. Propelled by a markedly larger and more diverse student population and the adoption of market principles in higher education, student-affairs administration is beginning to emerge in new forms in Chinese higher education. Often translated as “ideological education,” psychological and character development has been part of the Chinese university under the organizational structures and activities comprising “ideological and political education.”

The main purpose of ideological and political education is to prepare college-educated future generations for national development and the maintenance of social stability. Substantively, ideological and political education includes required courses in political theory, history, and doctrine for undergraduate and graduate students across academic majors. Beyond the classroom, it permeates student extracurricular activities and student governance through structures such as the university student union. Organizationally, the

ideological and political education profession in Chinese higher education consists of staff and programs in bureaucratic units at the university, school, and department level under each institution's committee of the Chinese Communist Party.

In 2004, the Chinese government issued "Views on Further Strengthening and Improving Ideological and Political Education for Students in Higher Education." This document called on universities to prepare professional student-affairs administrators to develop students' values, beliefs, and moral action. Student development is described as desired outcomes in terms of political orthodoxy and patriotism, in the service of national advancement. This is not a departure from the existing ideological and political education profession in Chinese higher education.

It is no accident, however, that the government directive has emerged at this point in time in response to a number of converging pressures that have ruptured the older indoctrination model of youth formation and made college student services an urgent concern. Most prominent among these pressures is the rapid massification of higher education in China. While the push to increase enrollments has been wildly successful, expanded postsecondary participation has come together with accompanying economic and social conditions, to result in high levels of student dissatisfaction and stress.

WHY STUDENT AFFAIRS?

In the late 1980s, as part of its larger move to a market economy, China instituted tuition for university enrollment and abolished government job allocation for new graduates. The requirement to find one's own job upon graduation is

problematic because of unclear career pathways and the inability of many graduates to find work in preferred geographic locations. Competition for college entrance via the national examination is a familiar pressure among Chinese youth, but continuing fierce competition and pervasive uncertainty about future career prospects among enrolled students is a new phenomenon. Large numbers of unemployed or underemployed college graduates threaten social stability. Even choosing a career path is problematic because students are frequently barred from entering their preferred academic major and nearly always prevented from changing their specialization. The one-child policy also plays a role in the current student problems. For both parents, status and parental retirement prospects rest on the single child. Having been indulged and protected from uncertainty and obstacles, this generation of cherished only-children might be particularly ill-equipped to withstand these pressures. Nor can students turn to professors for personal support; several empirical studies in China recently concluded that there is little interaction between students and faculty outside the classroom.

Existing university organizational and administrative structures have proven unequal to dealing with this volatile combination of competition, uncertainty, and fragility. In academic work, cheating is endemic. Student suicide has escalated sharply. Incidents of student violence are also on the rise. Untreated mental health problems are common. Although universities have made significant improvements in infrastructure, overcrowded dormitories remain a problem, and students are dissatisfied with campus teaching and extracurricular facilities. Discrimination against students from low social-economic backgrounds is increasing.

In response to these serious student problems, and in keeping with government policy, universities throughout China are establishing new and reconfigured administrative positions and structures charged with nonacademic student services such as career advising, mental health counseling, and financial-aid advising. Universities have established master's and doctoral programs to train student-affairs administrators. Higher education scholars have begun to conduct student research for evidence-based institutional policy, for instance with Tsinghua University's large-scale study of student experience at a representative sample of Chinese universities. Peking University is conducting another major research project, a government-sponsored study of student engagement across all higher education institutions in Beijing. A small but growing scholarly literature on Chinese student affairs consistently points to unstandardized training, poor professionalization, lack of theoretical foundations, and low status of student affairs.

POTENTIAL DIRECTIONS

The impetus for student affairs in China is clear. Less clear at this early stage is the shape the profession will take. Structurally, the current administrative system has two separate branches. Student-affairs units that provide student services fall under a general administration branch. The oversight of student development—such as, ideological, political, and moral formation—is organized by the university division of the Chinese Communist Party. The way these separate units might collaborate will play an important role in student affairs.

Conceptually, three relatively separate discussions potentially bear on the question of the trajectory of student affairs. Most obvious is the government call

for more effective ideological and political education. This discourse emphasizes organizational direction and guidance of students. Chinese higher education administrators and higher education scholars are also investigating mature models of student affairs, most notably in American higher education. Fundamental questions are raised about whether student affairs should be constituted as student management, student services, or student development. The third and final consideration focuses on advancing its leaders' creative thinking capacities and the related issues of general education and reform in postsecondary teaching and learning. Together, these three discussions have the potential to frame student affairs as both community and student centered, concerned with holistic student development, and connecting academic and nonacademic student experience. Conversely, if these three deliberations remain separate, student affairs may evolve as a managerial function, with limited reach and little philosophical coherence.

It seems clear that more universities will establish professional graduate-degree programs in higher education administration and student affairs. Student-affairs staff will continue to proliferate, especially in career-advising and student-support areas. The production of empirical research on college students' experience will intensify, along with research on student-affairs professionals and organizational structures. The Chinese government will watch the results of experiments with liberal arts curricula and residentially based education at top universities and will act to spread promising models. Proliferating and ambiguous models of student-affairs goals and professional roles will almost certainly result in a period in which the shape and status of student affairs remain an influx.

STRENGTHS AND CHALLENGES

Chinese higher education already features a strong-cohort model of students who live and study together. Cohort-based counselors, academic department-sponsored activities, and the Communist Party Youth Union umbrella for social activities and leadership development are among other existing structures that foster community and student learning. China will need to develop its own theoretical foundations and professional norms for student affairs. Universities can build on current practices that can be models for student support and holistic personal development. More research is needed to assess how institutional practices and organizational arrangements affect student learning and well-being.

Having expanded postsecondary enrollments so quickly and dramatically, China's emphasis on the quality of higher education has opened the possibility of significant change in how institutions structure student learning and personal development. The recently issued government document "National Education Reform and Long-term Planning Program" emphasizes the holistic development of university students. Such official statements, along with research projects and institutional efforts, point to an emergent student-development movement in China, whose contours are still forming.