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THE HUMAN DIMENSION OF COLLEGE WORTH

WHY STUDENT AFFAIRS MATTERS



NASPA®

Student Affairs Administrators
in Higher Education

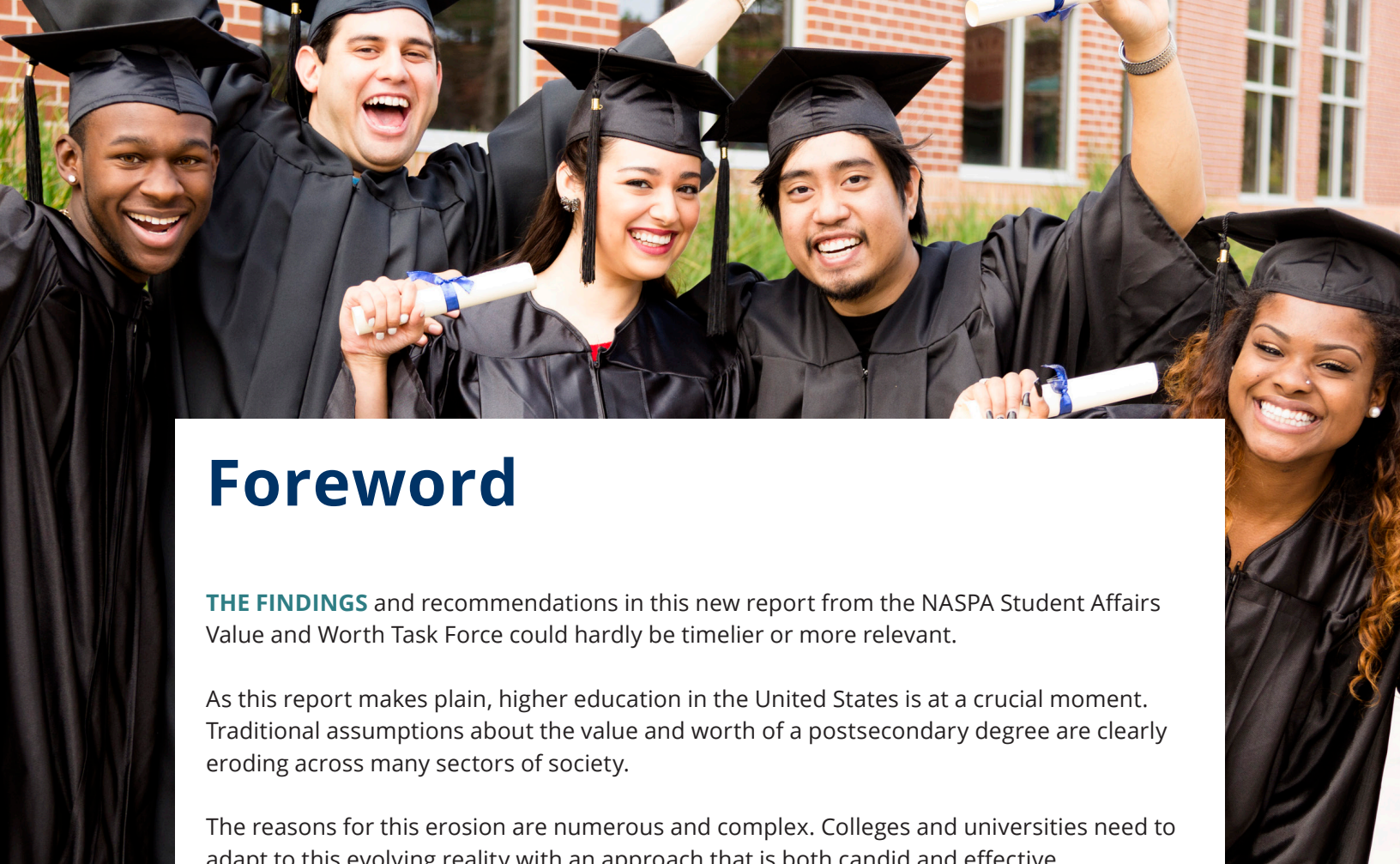


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Foreword

THE FINDINGS and recommendations in this new report from the NASPA Student Affairs Value and Worth Task Force could hardly be timelier or more relevant.

As this report makes plain, higher education in the United States is at a crucial moment. Traditional assumptions about the value and worth of a postsecondary degree are clearly eroding across many sectors of society.

The reasons for this erosion are numerous and complex. Colleges and universities need to adapt to this evolving reality with an approach that is both candid and effective.

Student affairs professionals have an active and indispensable role to play in this process. To see why, look no further than the distinction that the task force draws between what it refers to as “value” and “worth.”

“Value,” under this formulation, represents the “market-based outcomes of higher education,” such as graduates’ employment and income levels. “Worth” denotes the “intrinsic and societal benefits of a degree,” including personal growth and civic participation.

The report rightly points out that these two categories are interdependent. It is difficult—if not impossible—to cleanly separate the lifelong market-measurable “payoff” of a college education from the more intrinsic personal growth benefits of that experience.

Looking over the full span of their careers, college graduates do not enjoy higher earnings and a broader range of vocational opportunities just because they have a credential.

Yes, the credential undeniably helps. But what tends to make the biggest and most lasting difference in both economic and personal satisfaction is the ability to understand oneself and other people, to respond skillfully to complex circumstances, and to meet change with both a curious mind and an expansive spirit.

College represents an ideal opportunity to develop these life-shaping and income-enhancing capacities. Within the collegiate setting, the student affairs function plays an increasingly influential role in fostering this development.

There are several reasons for this shift. Perhaps the most fundamental is that the U.S. college experience has changed profoundly over the past several decades. Colleges and universities today are now called upon to educate a far more diverse student population that is drawn from a far wider range of social, economic, and educational backgrounds.

The vital work of creating a campus environment that is rewarding, stimulating, enriching, and appropriately safe for all members of this population is a far less straightforward proposition for colleges and universities than it was when the bulk of students came from a more tightly circumscribed demographic pool.

Much of this work falls—directly or indirectly—to student affairs leaders and staff. It is no accident that this function has grown in both size and scope at the same time the life circumstances of college students have become so much more varied.

This variation, this extraordinary diversity, is good for colleges and universities, good for communities and the nation, and good for students themselves.

But it also demands institutional attentiveness to a broader and deeper range of student needs: for academic and vocational guidance, for the mastery of basic life skills like money management, for physical and mental health services, for a sense of basic belonging in what often seems like an increasingly polarized society, and for so much more.

If this list reads a bit like the mission statement of a typical university student affairs department, that is no coincidence and no accident.

The very elements that help ensure both the economic value and intrinsic worth of a college experience now often run directly through the student affairs function, and there is every reason to believe this will become even more true in the years to come.

This report provides an apt summary of the central importance of that function to the overall value proposition of a college education. Thanks to the task force members and other NASPA colleagues for their thoughtful engagement in the creation of this document.

The hope—and expectation—is that it will provoke useful discussion, both within the student affairs profession and the broader higher education community.

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Executive Summary

ACROSS THE COUNTRY, questions about the value of higher education persist, remaining top of mind for students, families, and policymakers. Rising tuition costs, student debt burdens, and uncertain employment outcomes have led many to wonder whether a college degree is still worth the investment. The metrics used to answer this question—earnings potential, job placement rates, and wage growth—are important, but they do not tell the full story.

This report introduces a critical distinction:



Value refers to the market-based outcomes of higher education, such as employment, income, and economic security.



Worth encompasses the intrinsic and societal benefits of a degree, such as civic participation, personal growth, and community vitality.

Both are essential. And both are strengthened by student affairs.

Student affairs professionals—through advising, mentoring, health and wellness support, community engagement activities, and more—are the architects of the student experience beyond the classroom. Their work prepares students not only to earn a living but to live with purpose, connection, and resilience. It is through student affairs that institutions nurture the full potential of learners as individuals, workers, and citizens.

THE REPORT EXPLORES SEVEN DIMENSIONS OF STUDENT AFFAIRS PRACTICE THAT ANIMATE BOTH VALUE AND WORTH:

1. **Career and Academic Development**
2. **Civic Engagement and Community Responsibility**
3. **Access and Opportunity**
4. **Health and Well-Being**
5. **Leadership and Ethical Decision-Making**
6. **Problem-Solving and Innovation**
7. **Personal Development and Life Skills**

These practices improve measurable outcomes such as retention, graduation, and job placement, while also cultivating the deeper human capacities that democratic societies and healthy economies require.

THE REPORT CLOSES WITH A CALL TO ACTION:

- **Policymakers and philanthropists** must recognize and invest in student affairs as a core strategy for economic mobility and civic renewal.
- **Institutional leaders** must center student affairs in student success planning and public value creation.
- **The public** must demand a postsecondary system that delivers not only credentials but also the competencies, relationships, and habits that make communities thrive.

Student affairs is not a luxury. It is the human infrastructure that turns a degree into a life of purpose and impact. If higher education is to remain a powerful force for individual opportunity and democratic vitality, student affairs must be understood—and supported—as essential.

Introduction: Framing the Challenge

HIGHER EDUCATION today sits at the center of a swirling debate. Rising tuition costs, concerns over student debt, and underemployment of college graduates have led many to question whether a college degree is still worth the investment. The public is demanding clearer evidence that higher education delivers on its promises—that it leads to secure employment, economic mobility, and tangible opportunity. These concerns are real and justified, but questions regarding the value of college are often framed too narrowly.

Discussions about the return on investment for college tend to focus on what can be most easily and consistently measured: earnings premiums, employment rates, and wage growth. These are vital indicators of economic mobility, and they remain an essential part of why a degree matters.

Yet stopping there overlooks the additional benefits of a college experience. The true impact of a college degree cannot be captured solely in dollars and cents. It also lies in the habits and values that graduates carry into their lives and communities: their capacity for critical thinking and civic responsibility, their ability to navigate complexity and difference, and their sense of purpose and belonging.

THESE ADDED BENEFITS ARE WHY IT IS SO IMPORTANT TO DISTINGUISH BETWEEN VALUE AND WORTH:



Value encompasses the market-based outcomes of higher education, such as earnings, job placement, and economic security.



Worth speaks to the intrinsic and societal benefits of a degree, such as personal growth, democratic engagement, and lifelong learning.

The distinction is not just semantic. It is foundational to understanding how colleges contribute to individuals and to society, as well as to recognizing that student affairs is not a peripheral function but a central driver of both value and worth.

Higher education systems are incredibly diverse, encompassing far more than the traditional image of a residential, 4-year university. They include community colleges, regional comprehensive institutions, online universities, minority-serving institutions, small colleges, and technical and trade schools—all of which play essential roles in expanding access and opportunity. This report is written with that full landscape in mind. Regardless of institutional identity or classification, the core argument holds true: the practices and principles of student affairs are critical to delivering on the promise of postsecondary education, no matter the setting.

This report argues that student affairs practice is essential to strengthening both value and worth. Through student affairs—the leadership opportunities, wellness initiatives, and community-building work—campuses cultivate the environments and experiences that make higher education more than a transaction. When student affairs practice is strong, students graduate not just with a credential but with the resilience, civic-mindedness, and adaptability on which employers, communities, and democracies rely.

Although this report focuses on the role of student affairs, it recognizes the critical role that academic affairs, faculty engagement, and institutional leadership play in delivering the returns of higher education. Student affairs, however, offers a unique perspective on how these broad goals are brought to life in the daily lived experience of students.

Defining Value and Worth in Higher Education

A COLLEGE DEGREE has long been viewed as a gateway to better economic prospects, such as higher wages, more secure employment, and greater social mobility. Decades of research support these benefits: on average, individuals with a bachelor's degrees earn significantly more over their lifetimes than do those without. These measurable outcomes are the value of a degree—the economic returns that families, policymakers, and employers understandably prioritize.

Yet focusing exclusively on these metrics risks flattening the purpose of higher education, suggesting that the worth of a degree can be reduced to a line on a paycheck. In reality, the worth of a degree encompasses much more: the civic habits it cultivates, the resilience and adaptability it fosters, and the ways it prepares individuals to contribute to and shape their communities.

Research underscores these broader impacts. Communities with higher levels of college attainment see stronger rates of civic participation, greater social trust, and more vibrant local economies. These are not byproducts of education; they are core outcomes—part of the worth that higher education delivers.

Value and worth are not in tension; they are interdependent. The economic benefits of a degree are real and essential, particularly for students from historically underserved communities. But those benefits are strengthened and sustained when they rest on a foundation of personal agency, civic engagement, and social connection.

This interdependence highlights the role of student affairs practice as the part of higher education most directly concerned with students' full human development. The next section of this report explores how student affairs is the engine that drives both the value and the worth of a college degree.



How Student Affairs Builds Value and Worth

Student affairs refers to the wide-ranging set of roles, offices, and professionals on a campus that supports students beyond the classroom and enables their success within it. This work includes academic advising, financial aid counseling, career development, health and mental health services, residential life, student organizations, multicultural affairs, and more. In short, student affairs is the infrastructure that ensures students are not only enrolled but equipped to thrive—academically, socially, and personally. It is in this space that higher education becomes a lived experience, where students are supported holistically and prepared to succeed both during college and beyond.



At its best, student affairs practice is not a collection of programs or events. It is a philosophy and a framework: a commitment to meeting students where they are and helping them become who they aspire to be—as learners, as workers, and as members of a broader civic society.

This section introduces seven dimensions of student affairs practice that bring these ideals to life. They are not standalone initiatives but interconnected strategies that shape the entire student experience. They translate higher education goals into concrete pathways for students to learn, grow, and thrive. Each dimension is illustrated with an example of evidence-based practice, drawn from programs recognized by the NASPA Excellence Awards, demonstrating how these approaches are applied in context. Together, they reveal how student affairs animates the full value and worth of a postsecondary degree—for students, employers, and communities.



Each year, NASPA recognizes the outstanding contributions of members who are transforming higher education through exceptional programs, innovative services, and effective administration.

To submit a nomination, visit <https://www.naspa.org/membership-communities/awards/excellence-awards/excellence-awards>.

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Center for Career Engagement

WashU's Center for Career Engagement serves as a unified gateway to WashU's interdisciplinary talent pool. By centralizing resources across all schools, the center connects employers with students who have diverse academic perspectives and industry-ready competencies—versatile leaders prepared for a complex global market. The center's innovative approach has resulted in an employment rate of 93% or above and an average starting salary that is 34% higher than the National Association of College Employer (NACE) national average since 2023.

WashU's Career-Oriented Approach

The center takes a holistic approach to career engagement—integrating career opportunities into every facet of the student experience.

- Students are encouraged to join industry-specific Career Communities early on. Led by certified career coaches, Career Communities allow students to explore different career paths, make career-specific connections, and develop deeper industry awareness.
- The center also advances classroom-to-career integration by cultivating a network of career-informed campus partners positioned to engage students and create a culture of intentional career engagement.

Setting Up Students for Lifelong Career Success

Research shows that pre-professional experiences such as internships and research positions significantly impact students' career outcomes. Students participating in experiential learning build experience in an applied setting, expand their professional networks, and establish social capital. WashU's goal is for every student to experience at least one paid pre-professional career-relevant opportunity.

Whether a student is looking for their first job, pursuing graduate or professional education, or making a career change, the center supports WashU students anywhere along their professional journey.

Career and Academic Development

Student affairs professionals play a crucial role in supporting students' career trajectories and academic success. From offering career readiness workshops and internship opportunities to providing mentorship and co-op experiences, these efforts directly contribute to measurable outcomes such as job placement and higher earnings potential. These programs also encourage students to explore career pathways aligned with their strengths and passions, which fosters a sense of agency and direction that enhances both the value and the worth of their degree.

Moreover, student affairs professionals work closely with academic departments to integrate experiential learning and real-world applications into the undergraduate curriculum. Whether through research opportunities, global learning programs, or partnerships with community employers, these collaborations ensure that students graduate with adaptability, curiosity, and confidence to navigate a rapidly changing labor market. These out-of-classroom experiences not only prepare students for immediate employment but also position them as lifelong learners and engaged citizens.

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Civic Fellows Program

Gephardt Institute for Civic and Community Engagement

The Civic Fellows Program prepares WashU students to become impactful civic leaders through a 14-month experiential curriculum that includes intensive coursework, experiential learning, civic skill building, leadership training, and mentorship. **This selective academic program equips passionate students with civic knowledge, skills and experience, fueling their lifelong commitment to civic and community engagement.**

Program Goals:

1. Civic Leadership: Fellows will be capable and confident in their ability to collaborate with others and lead efforts that improve the human condition.
2. Civic Commitments: Fellows will understand themselves as agents of change with the knowledge and skills to strategically impact the collective good throughout their lives.
3. Civic Knowledge and Skills: Fellows will graduate with fluency in civic engagement concepts, analytical tools, and skills that they are equipped to apply to a range of civic issues.

Civic Fellows participate as a cohort in courses that include immersive learning in St. Louis and Washington DC. They design and implement a substantial Civic Summer internship or project in collaboration with their community partner and supported by a summer stipend and project funding.

Examples of Civic Summer Projects & Partnerships:

- Promote fair housing in Boston by supporting efforts to expand and evaluate affordable housing initiatives
- Conduct arts-based interventions to amplify lived experiences, reduce stigma, and foster connections among individuals living with mental illness
- Investigate the stress-coping strategies of rural women in Cass County, MN and explore the role of local faith-based organizations in shaping community attitudes toward mental health

Civic Engagement and Community Responsibility

Student affairs programs create meaningful pathways for students to connect with their communities and develop a powerful sense of civic duty. Through initiatives such as voter registration drives, community service projects, and service-learning courses, students learn the importance of active participation in democratic life while developing the cross-cultural awareness to thrive in community. These programs build habits of civic engagement that extend beyond graduation while also contributing to a sense of purpose and belonging.

As students work alongside community partners to tackle real-world challenges, they develop an understanding of the broader social context of their education. This experience strengthens the measurable value of their degree by preparing them for careers that require collaboration, curiosity, and innovation, while also reinforcing its intrinsic worth as they learn to see themselves as agents of positive change in the areas they care about most.

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Taylor Family Center for Student Success

The Taylor Family Center for Student Success guides first-generation and limited-income students to create cultural capital, nurture their career aspirations, and develop skills that enable them to be fully immersed in the WashU community.

The center implements an innovative four-year comprehensive program that prepares students for life on campus and after graduation. This programming integrates academic success, leadership opportunities, career development, and strategies to help students acquire the cultural capital to transform their lives, their families, and their communities.

Four-Year Program Overview

- *Community & Belonging (year 1):* Students are offered an Early Arrival Program—a pre-orientation program designed to help students identify goals and how to reach them, adjust to campus life, and learn about key resources, offices and administrators. Students also participate in peer-to-peer mentoring, social gatherings and cultural outings to connect them to a supportive community.
- *Focus & Purpose (year 2):* Second-year students meet bi-monthly to attend a seminar led by faculty and staff who have a deep understanding of the important benchmarks of success during sophomore year. Each student also has a designated faculty or staff mentor and advisor to help navigate topics like leadership and purpose, understanding/developing cultural capital, financial literacy, and exploring internships and career opportunities.
- *Life & Professional Skills (year 3&4):* The Beyond College Program aims to connect our FGLI students with industry leaders to enhance their social and professional networks and break down cultural barriers that may exist and otherwise impede their success as they look beyond their time at WashU. These mentors will focus on the students' career goals, helping them to define those goals where appropriate, suggesting approaches for achieving their goals, helping them pursue their purpose, and measuring success along the way.

Access and Opportunity

Student affairs professionals champion access and opportunity by addressing barriers to success and fostering a sense of belonging for all students. Programs such as tailored retention, mentorship, and outreach initiatives help close opportunity gaps, create a sense of belonging, and improve measurable outcomes such as graduation and retention rates. At the same time, these initiatives affirm the dignity and inherent worth of every student, thus creating an environment where all can thrive. By centering the success of each student and fostering inclusive communities, student affairs practice supports both the economic value of higher education and the civic and social contributions of a diverse and engaged student body and citizenry.

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Healthy Excellence: A Campus Culture of Well-Being

WashU is committed to **Healthy Excellence**, a campus-wide multi-dimensional spectrum of programs and services that prioritize all dimensions of health and well-being as a foundation for lifelong success.

Through a holistic model of education, prevention, treatment, and recovery, **the goal is to empower undergraduate and graduate students to meet their full potential and distinguish WashU as a place where students graduate even healthier than when they arrived.**

Recognizing the interconnected nature of well-being across every stage of the student journey, WashU focuses on **eight dimensions of well-being**: social, physical, financial, emotional, environmental, occupational, spiritual and intellectual.

As an example, the Office of Recreation offers an unprecedented number of programs to promote well-being: not only club Sports, intramural Sports and fitness classes but also cooking classes, massage therapy, personal trainers, and outdoor adventure trips. Over 90% of the undergraduate student body is engaged with programs through WashU Rec that address multiple dimensions of well-being.

Through multiple assessments, the university maintains an informed understand of the ever-changing needs of students and ensures that workshops, education and programming all support the wide spectrum of well-being. By developing a common understanding of problems, collecting data and measuring results of initiatives, implementing reinforcing activities across the dimensions, and constant communication among staff, students and faculty, WashU has formed a proactive culture of addressing well-being for students, inside and outside of the classroom.

Health and Well-Being

The well-being of students is foundational to both their academic success and their capacity for long-term personal and professional fulfillment. Student affairs programs focused on wellness—from mental health counseling and peer support groups to holistic health initiatives—play a critical role in supporting student resilience and retention. These efforts improve measurable outcomes such as academic performance and persistence while also nurturing the lifelong habits of self-care and balance that contribute to personal worth. By creating a campus culture that prioritizes health and well-being, student affairs ensures that students have the foundation they need to thrive during and after college, both professionally and personally.

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Bauer Leaders Academy

WashU has an ambitious goal: to become the nation's premier institution for developing tomorrow's leaders through immersive leadership education. WashU believes that leadership is not confined to the position one holds; rather, all individuals have the potential to influence and energize others while working together toward a common goal. By reframing prevailing notions of leadership, WashU aims to create a culture where leading is about the positive change *any* person can affect, and the diverse forms leadership can take.

The Approach to Leadership Learning

The George and Carol Bauer Leaders Academy employs a highly immersive experiential model for leadership education, emphasizing practical application, character development, and a strong sense of purpose. This model is a core component of the student experience at WashU, designed to integrate learning with hands-on practice and personal growth.

- Experiential Learning (70%): Structured opportunities such as internships, community service or leadership roles in student organizations allow students to apply theory to practice in real-world settings.
- Coaching & Relationships (20%): Professional leadership coaching and peer mentorship opportunities help students refine their leadership abilities and gain practical insights.
- Workshops & Guided Learning (10%): Classes and workshops pertaining to the development of purpose-driven leaders are designed to help students understand foundations of leadership

Stand Out Leadership Coaching

At the Bauer Leaders Academy, these transformative opportunities are offered to all students—completely free! This program is a strategic pathway to a co-created purpose-driven leadership plan that deepens communication skills, values, strengths and mindsets. Whether you hold a formal leadership role or not, *Stand Out* empowers you to integrate real-world experiences into your personal development.

Leadership and Ethical Decision-Making

Student affairs programming provides essential opportunities for students to develop as leaders and ethical decision-makers. Leadership programs, employment opportunities, and experiential learning opportunities challenge students to step into roles of responsibility, practice collaboration, and grapple with the complexities of ethical leadership. These experiences contribute directly to the value of a degree by enhancing employability and workplace readiness while also cultivating the personal integrity and civic mindedness that define the worth of a college education. By equipping students to navigate uncertainty and make decisions guided by principle, student affairs strengthens both individual success and community impact.

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WashU's Premiere Student Engagement Portfolio

Every year, WashU offers students opportunities to play critical roles in the on-campus community while gaining invaluable pre-professional experiences. Through innovative programs like the Emergency Support Team (EST) and WashU Student Associates (WUSAs), students undergo rigorous training under the mentorship of professional advisors to hone their problem-solving and critical thinking, while developing leadership, collaboration and communication skills.

The Emergency Support Team (EST) is a student-run volunteer organization that operates 24/7, responding to any emergency on WashU's Danforth campus. EST members are CPR-certified, Missouri licensed EMT-Bs (basic life support emergency medical technicians) and are required to provide the same level of care as other state EMS agencies for medical emergencies including cardiac, respiratory, intoxication, drug abuse, orthopedic, diabetic, severe bleeding, head injury, and any major trauma.

The WashU Student Associate program (WUSA) offers paid positions to current students to serve as orientation leaders, assisting incoming first-year and transfer students as academic and personal mentors as they transition to WashU. WUSAs are important resources for incoming students and their families, assisting with planning and implementing essential programs throughout the academic year including Fall Welcome and Parent & Family Weekend. Every new student is assigned a WUSA for individual mentorship through weekly WUSA hours.

WUSAs attend weekly skill-based training on topics including facilitation, cultural competency, effective communication and dialogue, conflict resolution, and event planning and logistics. WUSAs play a key role in making the first-year experience at WashU rewarding and successful.

Through these programs in the Division of Student Affairs, WashU prepares students to be change agents by cultivating skills and competencies and providing the framework for them to make an immediate positive impact in their communities.

Problem- Solving and Innovation

Through beyond-the-classroom activities and experiential learning, student affairs nurtures the skills of critical thinking, technical competency, creativity, and adaptability. Whether it is through entrepreneurial initiatives, developing fluency in digital tools and platforms, or collaborative problem-solving workshops, these experiences prepare students for the demands of a rapidly evolving workforce. At the same time, they foster a mindset of curiosity and experimentation that transcends the workplace and supports students as engaged citizens and change agents in their communities. In this way, student affairs bridges the measurable economic value of a degree with the broader worth of lifelong learning and civic leadership.

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Personal Development and Life Skills

Beyond academic and career preparation, student affairs practice supports students' holistic growth as individuals. Programs that teach financial literacy, cross-cultural awareness, and people skills equip students with the tools they need for lifelong success—skills that are critical in the workplace and in civic life. These programs contribute to the economic value of a degree by ensuring that graduates are adaptable and self-sufficient. They also enhance the intrinsic worth of higher education by fostering well-rounded, reflective, and engaged citizens who are prepared to navigate the complexities of modern life.

Dialogue Across Difference

In an increasingly polarized society, WashU provides students with supportive environments where they can engage in productive conversations and learn from others, including those with whom they disagree. Dialogue Across Difference (DxD) is equipping students for life by exposing them to diverse perspectives, ideas, and opinions and by training them in techniques for engaging with people who disagree with them on fundamental points. Through eight-week intergroup dialogue courses and workshops across campus, DxD provides opportunities for courageous conversations, helping students overcome barriers to difficult discussion topics, and strengthens the foundation of ethical engagement at WashU.

Led by trained WashU faculty or staff facilitators, program topics explore complex ideas such as politics, religion, race, gender, and socioeconomic identity. Through the innovative DxD framework, students engage in small enough groups that every person becomes a participant in the conversation. By cultivating a range of viewpoints, they develop valuable skills in leadership, critical thinking, conflict management, active listening, continuous learning, and respect for multiple perspectives—skills they will need as speakers, listeners, citizens, and leaders.

By facilitating connection and dialogue among our students, we strive to prepare them with the tools and self-awareness to confidently navigate a complex world and to be engaged citizens.

Financial Well-being

When students are financially empowered, they are free to focus on what matters—their goals, their passions, and their future. WashU is committed to helping students feel confident and capable when it comes to managing their finances.

Whether facing an unexpected expense or planning for a future opportunity, students have access to a range of free tools, resources and expert guidance designed to help them make informed financial decisions: confidential one-on-one coaching, workshops on essential financial skills, and iGrad, a 24/7 digital resource that provides practical support on topics like budgeting, credit, loans, and investing.

Why It Matters: The Broader Impact

Understanding how student affairs practice builds both value and worth is not an academic exercise. It is a public imperative. At a time when higher education's legitimacy is under scrutiny—when families are weighing tuition bills against uncertain job markets and policymakers are examining every dollar spent—making the full case for how colleges and universities contribute to individuals and communities is more critical than ever.



Student affairs is central to this case because it is the part of the institution that connects personal development to professional and civic purpose. It is where students learn not only how to earn a living but how to live in community with others—how to listen, collaborate, and navigate differences. These skills are foundational to healthy democracies and resilient economies alike.

Moreover, student affairs work ensures that the measurable value of a degree is equitably distributed. By focusing on access, belonging, and well-being, student affairs helps close gaps in retention and graduation and ensures that the economic promise of higher education is not reserved for the few. In this way, student affairs contributes directly to social mobility, one of the most compelling arguments for public investment in colleges and universities.

But the impact extends beyond economics. Communities with higher levels of college attainment consistently report stronger rates of civic participation, volunteerism, and trust in local institutions. These civic outcomes are not abstractions; they are the lifeblood of communities that can solve problems, bridge divides, and sustain democratic practice. They are the *worth* that higher education delivers, and student affairs is where that worth is cultivated.

When colleges and universities invest in robust student affairs practice, they are investing in graduates who can lead in the workplace and in the public square. They are investing in communities that are stronger, more connected, and more adaptable to change.

Conclusion and Call to Action

STUDENT AFFAIRS IS NOT A LUXURY. It is the human infrastructure that turns a credential into a catalyst for economic mobility, civic engagement, and community vitality. If higher education is to remain a source of opportunity, student affairs cannot be only a peripheral concern. It must be recognized, supported, and invested in as a core component of higher education's value and worth.

THIS REPORT MAKES A CLEAR CALL:

For leaders in public policy and private philanthropy: Recognize student affairs as essential to the value and worth of a postsecondary degree. Invest in it, and evaluate its outcomes with the same rigor and weight you apply to job placement and earnings. This commitment means supporting initiatives that connect learning inside and beyond the classroom, ensuring that accountability frameworks include measures of well-being and civic engagement, and funding partnerships that foster resilience, leadership, and adaptability for all students.

For institutional leaders: Center student affairs in strategies for student recruitment, retention, persistence, and social impact. Commit to leading with an understanding that the ways students live, learn, and connect outside the classroom are fundamental to how they will show up as graduates, citizens, and leaders. Doing so requires aligning budgets to sustain student affairs infrastructure, elevating student affairs voices in decision-making, and embedding measures of belonging, health, leadership, and civic readiness into institutional success metrics.

For the public: Demand a higher education system that delivers both the skills needed for work and the mindsets and commitments that strengthen communities. Families, alumni, and employers alike must advocate for institutions that prepare students not only for their first job but also for a lifetime of contribution and adaptability. Employers can demonstrate this commitment by valuing graduates' leadership, problem-solving, and civic capacities alongside technical credentials in their hiring and advancement practices. Communities can affirm it by supporting colleges as anchors of civic vitality and social trust.



Meeting this moment cannot fall on any single sector. Policymakers, philanthropists, institutional leaders, faculty, employers, families, and students all play a role in sustaining the full value and worth of higher education. What unites these groups is a shared responsibility to ensure that the investments in higher education translate into stronger graduates and stronger communities. Student affairs serves as the bridge to make this vision real.

The next decade will determine whether higher education continues to expand opportunity and strengthen democracy or whether it narrows into a transactional system that leaves many behind. Meeting this challenge requires partnership: policymakers funding equitably, philanthropists investing strategically, institutions aligning priorities, and the public demanding more than credentials. Student affairs is the connective tissue across these efforts, ensuring that higher education prepares graduates who are also engaged citizens ready to lead. The stakes are urgent, and the time to act is now.





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