

Helping College Students: Developing Essential Support Skills for Student Affairs Practice

By Amy L. Reynolds

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Student affairs practitioners must rely on a myriad of skills in their everyday interactions with students, faculty, administrators, parents, and community members in order to be effective in their work. These skills include oral and written communication, problem solving, and mediation, among others. In *Helping College Students: Developing Essential Support Skills for Student Affairs Practice*, Amy Reynolds (2009) highlights one of the most critical roles inherent in any position in the field: that of the helper.

Orientation professionals realize the importance of helping incoming students transition to a new and challenging environment. In her foreword to the book, Susan Komives states that practitioners who work closely with and for students advise, supervise, facilitate, and engage in conflict and crisis management. Reynolds groups these professionals into four core areas, which are present throughout the book. The areas include counseling-related positions such as career planning and counseling services; leadership development and educational positions like orientation, student activities, and residence life; administrative positions such as student conduct, deans of students, and admissions; and academic affairs positions, including advising and academic support services. By including such a broad range of professionals in her definition of “helpers,” Reynolds shows the transferability of the skill set to a variety of colleagues and the range of practice throughout the institutional landscape. This approach brings helping to the fore as a “mindset” for all professionals who work with students, and encourages them to further develop their helping competency by learning more about the practice (p. xiii).

Reynolds educates her audience of student affairs practitioners, higher education professionals, faculty members, and graduate students by dividing the book into two distinct sections. Part One, “Understanding the Helper’s Role,” focuses on the context and theory behind the skill, including how student affairs practitioners became helpers, what circumstances on campus necessitate the helper’s role, the ethics of helping, and which counseling and helping theories are

critical to the practice. Part Two, “Essential Helping Skills,” is the more practical section of the book, providing concrete strategies and guidance for both new and seasoned helpers alike. A particular focus on developing multicultural competence is highlighted in this section of the book.

In the first chapter, Reynolds explores the development of student affairs practitioners as professional helpers on campus. She begins with a short history of the evolution of the field, which grew as a response to the changing needs of college students over time. The author then builds a case for helping as a core competence in the field. She highlights the particular skills that each of the four professional core areas bring to their work, whether it be helping students to address personal and vocational concerns (counseling area) or group advising and supervision of student leaders (leadership/educational area). She closes the chapter with a discussion on the benefits and challenges of being a helper, and by identifying ways that professional preparation and training can be leveraged to address the helper’s role.

Mental health issues on college campuses affect student affairs professionals and their work in a variety of ways. As helpers, practitioners need to be cognizant of the issues as well as ready to respond when students are struggling with particular personal concerns. Chapter Two explores the mental health needs and issues present on campus in order to prepare helpers for the types of scenarios that they may face while working with students. Some common psychological concerns are addressed in the chapter so that helpers can identify the behavior, respond, and/or refer to other campus resources when appropriate.

The challenges of working with students who are grappling with mental health issues are acknowledged, particularly the “emotionality of the work and how at times it can be draining and discouraging” (p. 46). Specific strategies to avoid helper burnout are also discussed. Ultimately, Reynolds recognizes that the proliferation of student mental health issues into the campus culture requires more than just the student affairs helper’s attention and expertise. She calls for a cooperative model that involves the entire campus community in delivering and enhancing the services available to students with mental health concerns. Through “a proactive, coordinated, and intentional educational effort,” individual students, the student body as a whole, and the institution itself will be involved in helping students get the care they need (p. 49).

Chapter Three serves as a primer for helpers to explore the ethical dilemmas inherent in their work. Acknowledging that ethical issues in the literature and in the field can be quite different, Reynolds chooses four common themes to discuss: competence, dual relationships, confidentiality, and suicide/duty to warn. Each issue is described and relevant cases are discussed in order to effectively illustrate the complexities of the issue. Strategies to address ethical dilemmas are identified, such as environmental scanning, reflective models, and creating ethical communities. Developing insight about potential ethical concerns while consulting professional standards and codes of conduct will assist the helper to prepare and implement appropriate strategies to address such dilemmas.

John Mueller contributed Chapter Four—an overview of relevant theories that

contribute to the body of knowledge pertaining to helpers. Mueller's chapter begins with the evolution of theory in student affairs practice and describes how theory can inform the helping process and aid the practitioner. The core of this chapter is a collection of "essential" theories that highlight a variety of approaches to counseling and helping students (p. 93). These theories include cognitive/behavioral therapy, the multicultural/feminist model, and other frameworks that assist helpers in defining and approaching complex problems. A description of each theory and an explanation of how the theory applies to student affairs practice are provided, as well as core theoretical helping assumptions which guide the relationship between the helper and the student. The chapter ends with suggestions on how to develop a personal theory of helping.

Chapters 5 through 10 make up Part Two of the book and describe the helping skills essential to student affairs practitioners. This section serves as a how-to guide for beginners as well as a check-in for more seasoned helpers. It describes everything from microcounseling skills to group dynamics and details how helpers can actively practice the skills illustrated in the section.

Creating multiculturally competent helpers is the focus of Chapter Five. Reynolds writes that through awareness, knowledge, and skill building, practitioners can be prepared to work with individuals from a myriad of cultural groups. Multicultural competence is one of the core areas of counseling practice, allowing helpers to incorporate the worldviews and perspectives of individuals from different cultures, races, ethnicities, sexual orientations, and religions into their work. This openness to difference cultivates insight and empathy in the helper and allows students to feel heard, valued, and supported. Like other chapters, examples of multicultural helping behaviors across the four professional core areas are discussed, as well as the challenges and benefits to becoming a multiculturally competent helper. Suggestions for graduate preparation programs to incorporate multicultural competence and professional development strategies like case studies and cultural exercises are also mentioned.

Chapter Six, contributed by Marcia Clark, focuses on microcounseling skills that helpers should use in their practice. Discussions include the three phases of helping (establishing rapport and identifying the problem, gaining insight to explore the problem, and taking action) and the ways that helping behaviors are expressed in various professions. Clark states that one of the challenges in helping students is that many of them will not seek support for a problem or concern, so it is the responsibility of the professional to recognize students in need and ask the right questions to get them the proper help.

Chapter Six also discusses helping skills clusters and outlines strategies to practice active listening, ask clarifying questions, and make referrals. A unique section within this chapter addresses the temptations and fears that new helpers may experience. Explaining these challenges and offering solutions is helpful for the novice professional. An opportunity for reflection is provided by more seasoned helpers, who can think critically about their helping behaviors and how these challenges play out in their daily practice.

The types of conflicts and crises inherent on college campuses and the role of

the student affairs practitioner as helper in these situations is the focus of Chapter Seven. Reynolds writes that conflicts and crises are a part of life both on and off campus, and being able to accept the reality of conflict and address it appropriately is a learned skill. A variety of resources, such as workshops, conferences, and classes, to help practitioners respond to crises are addressed in the chapter. Readiness is a critical part of responding to crisis and conflict, and the more that professionals can explore these issues and prepare, the more a conflict can be prevented. Being cognizant of subtle clues in students' language and affect can help prevent a crisis through intervention and referral. In short, the communication and relationship building that student affairs helpers engage in provides "a positive context for dealing with crises well" (p. 193).

The challenges and benefits of working with groups and the skills needed to facilitate group work is the topic of Chapter Eight. This area is one that student affairs professionals use often in their work with students, faculty, and other constituents. It is a critical part of the helper's role and is often the most overlooked because it is so commonplace. The skills inherent in effectively leading groups, such as building cohesiveness among members, delegating tasks, and defining a common purpose are outlined in the chapter. Suggestions to manage group dynamics like cliques and divisiveness are also explored.

Issues affecting supervision are brought forth in Chapter Nine because mentoring, coaching, and providing feedback to colleagues is an important part of the helper's role in student affairs. Recognizing that supervision is a process that affects the field writ large requires the profession to put more resources into the development of supervisors, writes Reynolds. Creating opportunities for supervisors to learn how to effectively manage employees through educational classes and workshops, rather than learning on-the-job, will encourage supervisors to continue to develop this skill.

In Chapter Ten, Reynolds states that "readers have been challenged [in this book] to broaden their view of the helping role and the diverse ways in which they are called up to intervene in the lives of students, their colleagues, and the larger institution" (p. 261). The ways that *Helping College Students* defines the helping role, identifies theory to elucidate and support the role, and provides practical instruction on how to effectively help students and colleagues is evident throughout the book. The organization of the chapters, the flow of information, and the writing make the book approachable to student affairs practitioners from new professionals to senior administrators. Each chapter can be used on its own to focus a training session, to use in a class discussion, or simply as an assessment of one's helping practices. Overall, the book is an extremely useful guide and a valuable resource for practitioners. It is one of those books that has the capacity to become dog-eared because of repeated use, with sentences underlined and notes in the margins.

Criticisms of *Helping College Students* are few, but some are highlighted here. Several of the references used throughout the book are dated. It would have been helpful to have more recent literature cited and have less reliance on research from the 1980s and 1990s. Further, although the recommendations for

incorporating various helper-related topics into student affairs preparation programs at the end of each chapter were constructive, the experience of professionals who took alternate paths into the field was absent. It seemed as though the assumption was that all student affairs practitioners took the same path into the profession through a graduate program in the field and left little room or consideration for alternate training routes. Perhaps addressing transferable skills that other disciplines bring to the field would have been a more inclusive approach to the discussion.

In closing, orientation professionals can enrich their practice by reading and discussing *Helping College Students* with colleagues and student leaders. Chapters of the book can be used in professional development training sessions and classroom syllabi. Reynolds and her co-contributors have done a good job of defining, explaining, and exploring the many facets of helping in student affairs. The book is a must-read for all who consider themselves helpers and want to continue to develop the skill.