

STUDENT AFFAIRS LEADERSHIP COUNCIL



# Student Affairs Organizational Structures at Public Research Universities

*Custom Research Brief • October 18, 2011*

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

- I. Research Methodology
- II. Executive Overview
- III. Organizational Models
- IV. Organizational Philosophies
- V. Division Transitions
- VI. Appendix: Inventory of Student Affairs Divisions at Select Peer Institutions  
Networking Contacts

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# I. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

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## Project Challenge

Leadership at the Georgia Institute of Technology approached the Council with the following questions:

- *What programs and services are currently housed within student affairs divisions at peer institutions of the Georgia Institute of Technology?*
- *Have contact institutions reorganized their student affairs divisions in recent years? If so, why did the change occur?*
- *What were the advantages and disadvantages of such a transition?*
- *How did the reorganization impact students?*
- *What are the strengths and limitations of the current organizational structure of student affairs?*
- *How does the reporting structure promote clear delineation of responsibilities?*
- *How does the current structure facilitate collaboration across programs and offices?*
- *What do contacts perceive to be the main characteristics of a best-in-class student services/programming system?*
- *What do contacts consider to be an innovative manner in which to evaluate and improve student services programs?*
- *What advice can contacts offer to institutions that consider a transition?*

## Project Sources

- Education Advisory Board's internal and online ([www.educationadvisoryboard.com](http://www.educationadvisoryboard.com)) research libraries
- National Center for Education Statistics [NCES] (<http://nces.ed.gov/>)
- Contact institution websites

# I. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

## Research Parameters

The Council targeted its outreach to senior student affairs administrators at large public universities identified by the requesting member.

<b>A Guide to the Institutions Profiled in this Brief</b>				
<b>Institution</b>	<b>Location</b>	<b>Type</b>	<b>Approximate Enrollment (Undergraduate/ Total)</b>	<b>Classification</b>
<b>University of California-Los Angeles (UCLA)</b>	Pacific West: Large City	Public	38,200/26,200	Research Universities (very high research activity)
<b>University of Maryland</b>	Mid-Atlantic: Large Suburb	Public	37,600/27,000	Research Universities (very high research activity)
<b>University of Michigan</b>	Midwest: Midsize City	Public	41,900/27,000	Research Universities (very high research activity)
<b>University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill (UNC)</b>	South: Small City	Public	29,400/18,600	Research Universities (very high research activity)
<b>University of Virginia</b>	Mid-Atlantic: Small Suburb	Public	24,400/15,600	Research Universities (very high research activity)
<b>Virginia Polytechnic Institution and State University (Virginia Tech)</b>	Mid-Atlantic: Small City	Public	31,000/23,700	Research Universities (very high research activity)

Source: National Center for Education Statistics

## II. EXECUTIVE OVERVIEW

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### Key Observations

- ❖ **All 16 institutions surveyed in an inventory of student affairs divisions (see appendix) house the following seven units in student affairs: community service, Greek affairs, leadership programs, student activities and involvement programs, student government, student organizations, and student integrity (judicial affairs).**
- ❖ **At least three-fourths of institutions surveyed (see appendix) also house the following 18 units in their student affairs division: career services, diversity programs, orientation programs (new student, transfer student, and parent), counseling center, student center, student programs council, parents program, alcohol prevention and education, disability services, health education programs, housing, LGBT programs, multicultural office and programs, sexual assault prevention and education, student health center, campus recreation, dean of students office, and residence life programming.**
- ❖ **Associate and assistant vice presidents (AVPs) usually oversee a portfolio of related units (e.g. administrative services, health and wellness) and consider how their area of focus fits into division and institutional priorities; executive directors concentrate more closely on a specific office or topic (e.g. career center, development) and ensure the division meets its goals in those areas.** The strength of this model lies in its ability to keep broad priorities and specific goals on the radar of the student affairs division leader. This model's success relies on effective unit leaders who manage day-to-day program administration. This frees senior leaders to focus on strategic goals.
- ❖ **The assignment of AVP portfolios facilitates a clear reporting structure and delineation of responsibility, but does not preclude other division leaders from participation in work that relates to those areas.** The vice president and AVPs discuss division-wide matters and decide on future actions through consensus. For example, one AVP might serve as the point of contact for budget questions, but senior leadership decides how to allocate budget cuts as a team. Contacts do not mention a standardized procedure to designate portfolios. They advise that leaders cluster units that frequently work together under the same senior administrator to facilitate collaboration.
- ❖ **As the responsibilities of divisions expand, senior-level coordination of information technology, budget and finance, and human resources is essential to efficient operations; contacts strongly advise that division leaders appoint a chief of staff or AVP in charge of administrative affairs.** Most divisions maintain a dedicated staffer to complete these duties or include it in an AVP portfolio. All divisions include an information technology staffer. All institutions also have a development officer dedicated to student affairs; however, two institutions house this individual in the central advancement office with a dotted-line report to student affairs.
- ❖ **Contacts suggest that leaders use natural opportunities such as budget cuts or senior staff retirements to consider if current organizational structures meet division priorities.** Small-scale shifts that move an office or relocate individual staffers can help address concerns without widespread disruption. However, if division priorities have changed or the current structure significantly hinders division operations, a broader realignment may be necessary. Contacts advise that leaders assess, either formally or informally, the division's preparedness for change.
- ❖ **After senior leaders vet a transition plan with key staffers and clearly explain the rationale for the transition, they should communicate the news tactfully but clarify that the decision is not up for debate.** While feedback is valuable, contacts advise against focusing on how people feel about the transition. Rather, leaders should help people move into the new model. Students are more likely to offer feedback when a change impacts a program with which they regularly interact (e.g. residential life, dining services) or strongly identify (e.g., service learning, multicultural affairs). Staff are more likely to express an opinion on organizational changes, which students do not often notice. Nevertheless, contacts say recent transitions have enabled them to better serve students.

### III. ORGANIZATIONAL MODELS

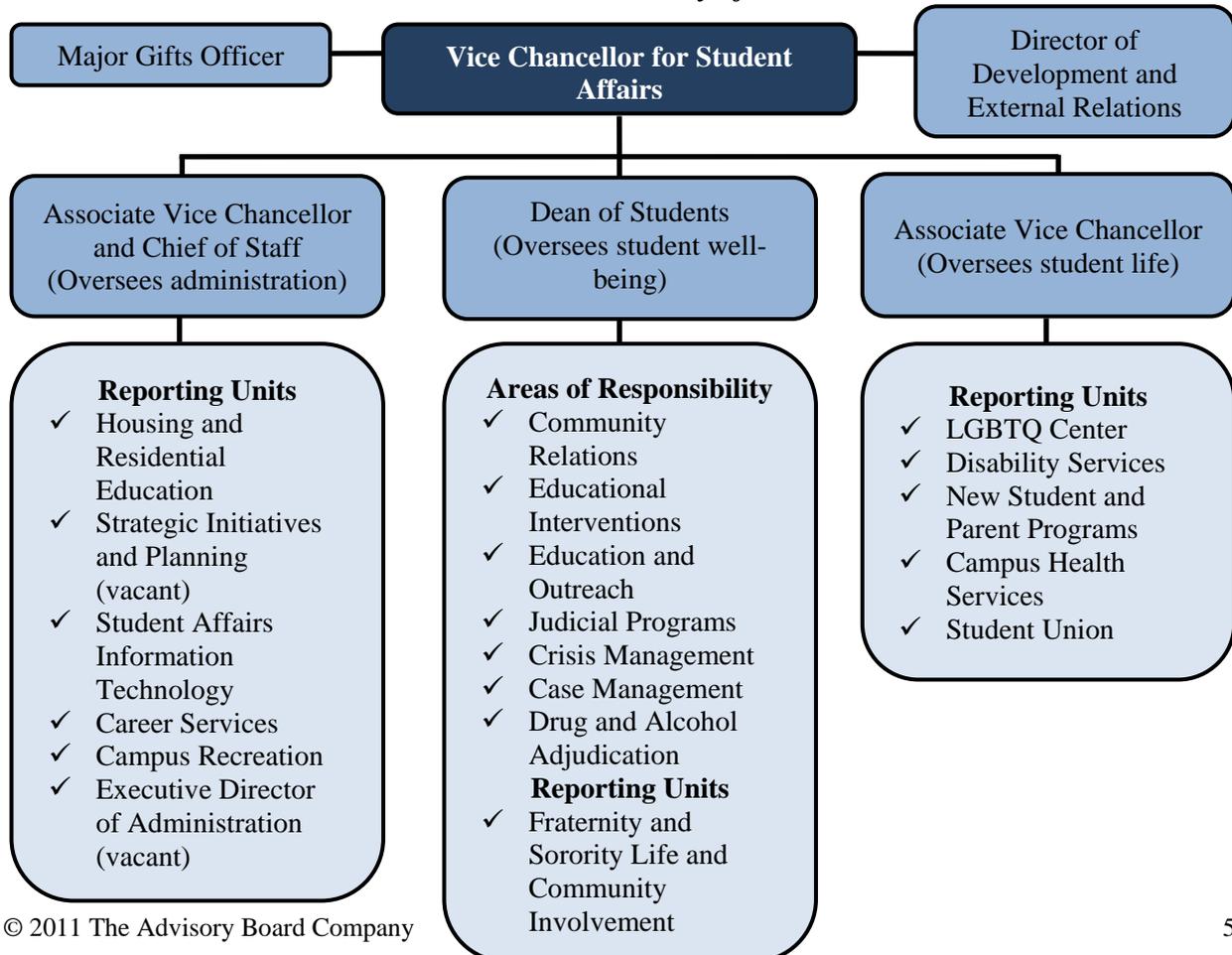
Student affairs divisions offer a variety of continuous learning opportunities and maintain a healthy campus environment. Community service learning and leadership development programs complement students’ academic pursuits, while clubs and recreation activities promote student involvement. Residence halls and dining services meet students’ basic needs. Resource centers offer information on various topics (e.g. disability services, multicultural programs), and health and counseling centers provide care for physical and mental health. Across this spectrum of responsibilities, a clear mission for student affairs can instill a unified sense of purpose in staff at all levels. Leaders of student affairs can use the division’s organizational structure to help realize this mission.

#### Reporting Structure

Leaders of student affairs at contact institutions supervise five to eight direct reports. Three or four associate or assistant vice presidents (AVPs) maintain responsibility over a broadly defined portfolio (e.g. administration, student programs, student resources). These portfolios often align with the division’s priorities. Two to five directors who report directly to the student affairs leader oversee offices or areas (e.g. health center, development). Contacts describe that AVPs focus on how their portfolio fits into division- or institution-wide goals while directors concentrate on the operations of their unit. The combination of AVP and executive directors as direct reports helps ensure that general priorities and designated areas of importance receive the leader’s attention.

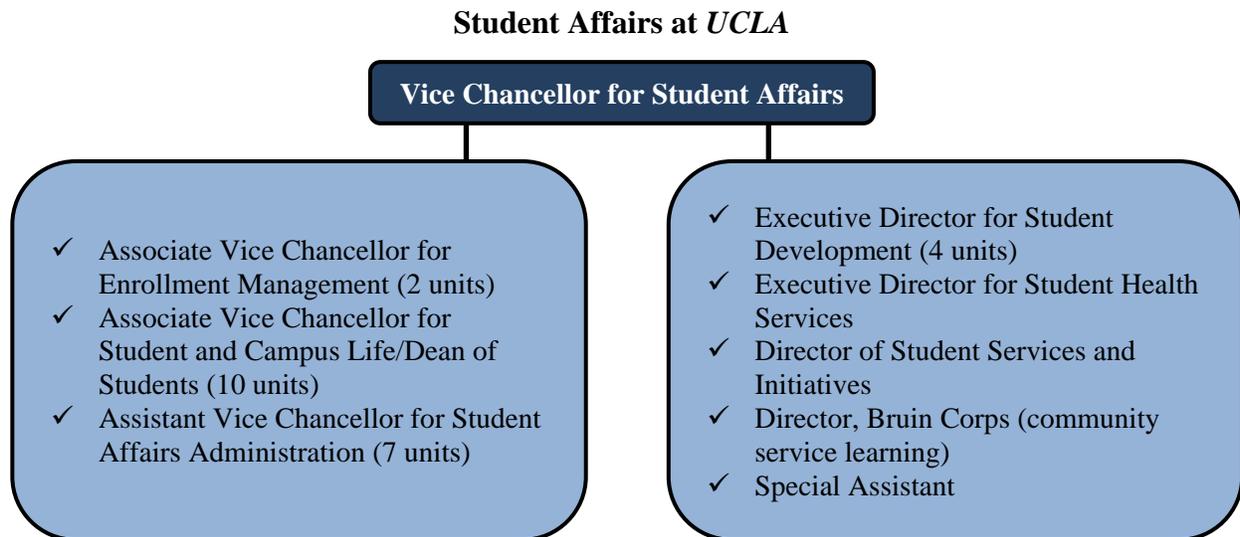
The vice chancellor of student affairs at **UNC** has the fewest number of direct reports, as illustrated on the following organizational chart. Budget constraints may force contacts to eliminate or combine the two vacant positions under the chief of staff.

**Student Affairs at the *University of North Carolina***



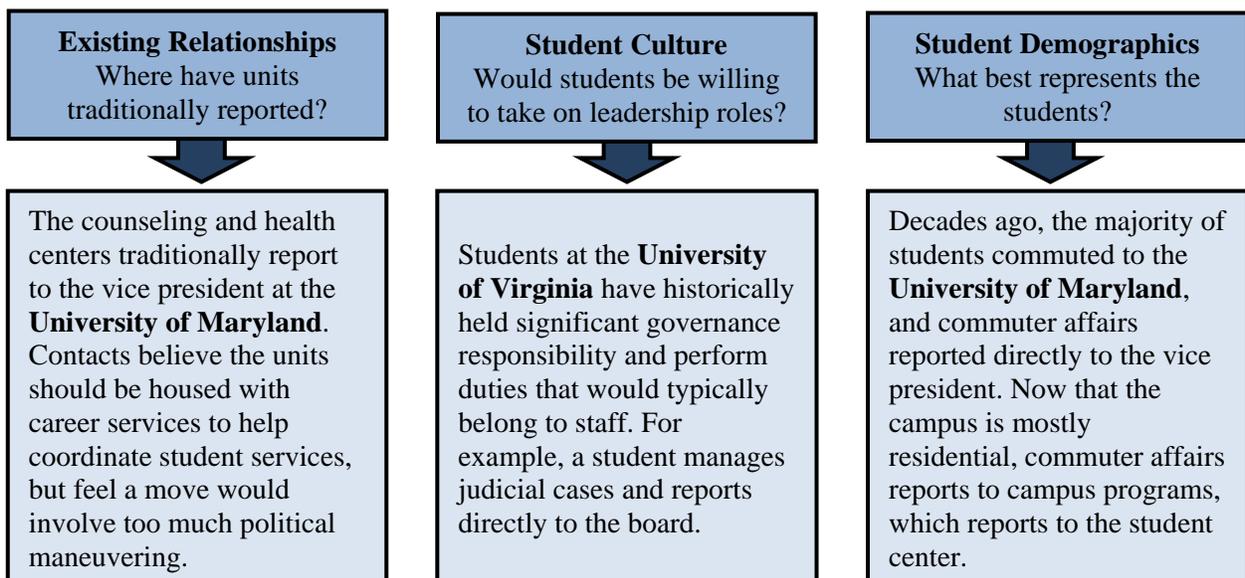
### III. ORGANIZATIONAL MODELS

The vice chancellor for student affairs at **UCLA** has the most direct reports, at eight. They are listed in the organizational chart below. The number in parenthesis indicates how many units report to the official listed. Contacts say this structure reflects shifting institutional priorities. After a dramatic drop in state funding, institutional leaders prioritize recruitment of out-of-state and international students, who pay higher tuition rates. A newly created associate vice chancellor for enrollment management now oversees admissions and financial aid, which used to reside in a student academic services division within student affairs. The assignment of only two reporting units to this position allows the individual to focus his or her time solely on this institutional priority, a strength of the model.



The assignment of portfolios to senior administrators enhances the visibility of strategic priorities within the division and across campus. Contacts recommend units that often work together or share similar missions report to the same senior leader. Effective communication among units fuels progress and clear reporting structures provide a framework through which staff can accomplish goals. Contacts do not mention a standardized procedure to delineate reporting structure but advise that administrators take existing relationships, institutional culture, and student demographics into account.

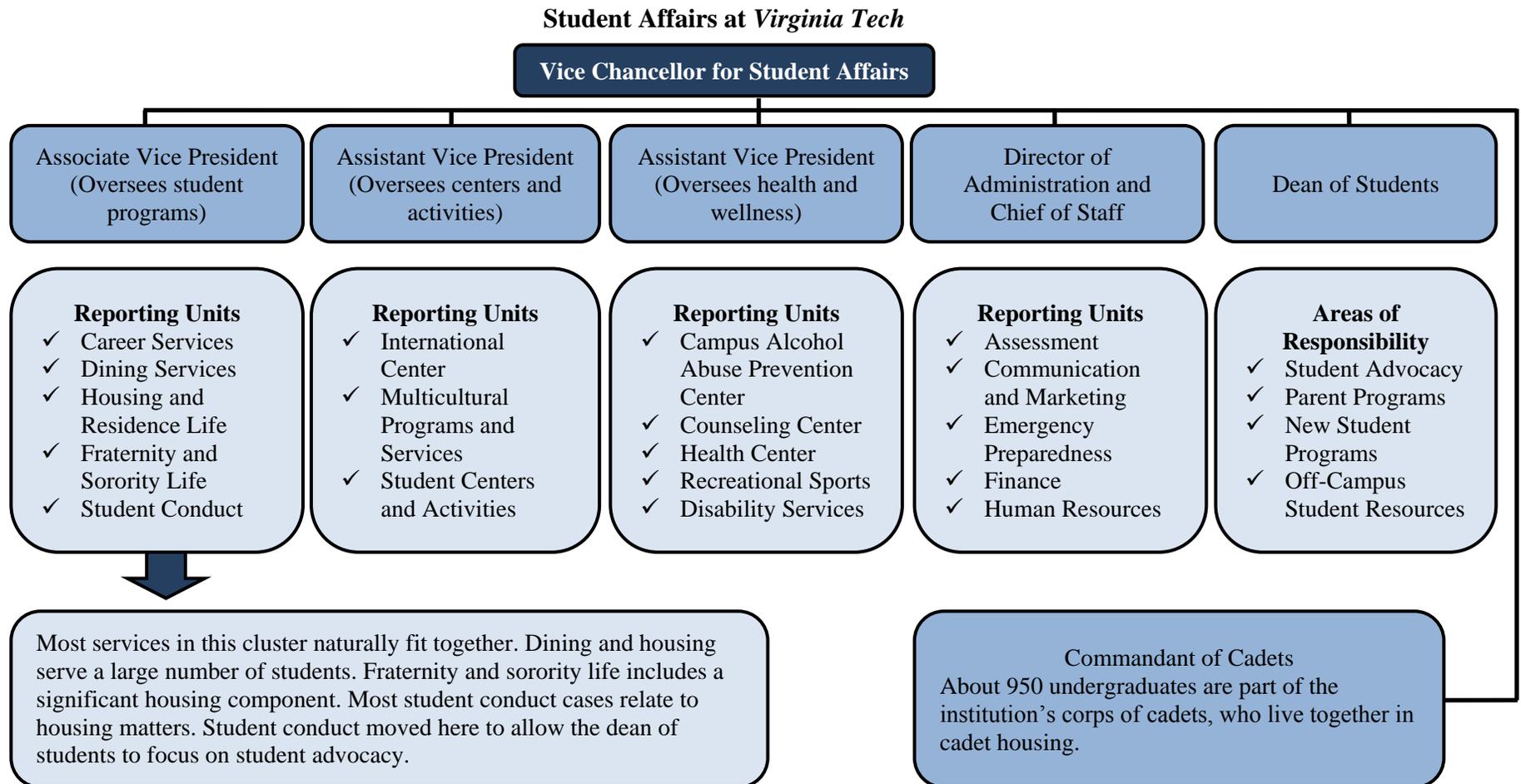
#### Factors to Consider in the Determination of Reporting Structures



### III. ORGANIZATIONAL MODELS

#### Delineation of Responsibility

Decades ago, student affairs at **Virginia Tech** had one assistant vice president; a group of directors oversaw major units within the division. As the institution and division grew, contacts decided that a model with AVPs would enable leaders to focus on strategic priorities. Contacts clustered reporting units that work closely under the same leader to facilitate communication and program operations. (Contacts note that organization decisions do not all need mission-specific rationale. For example, career services could fit in any thematic area, so contacts placed it with the AVP who oversees student programs because their office buildings are next door to each other.)



### III. ORGANIZATIONAL MODELS

#### Auxiliary and Administrative Services

The following table depicts which institutions dedicate an office or a staffer within the division to a technical or administrative subject area. All student affairs divisions have a staffer for information technology. All institutions also maintain a student affairs development officer. However, at **UCLA** and **Virginia Tech**, this staffer is housed in the central advancement office with a dotted-line report to the student affairs division. At some institutions, positions existed but have since been eliminated. The **University of Michigan** used to have a dedicated staffer for marketing and communications; the position was eliminated due to budget cuts. **UNC**'s head of strategic initiatives and planning led assessment and an executive director of administration managed human resources, but both positions are now vacant and may be eliminated. At other institutions, individuals oversee a service for their unit and occasionally complete related division-wide work. For example, counseling center staff at the **University of Maryland** manage the unit's assessment and assist with division-wide assessment projects as needed.

Inventory of Auxiliary and Administrative Services at Contact Institutions						
Units	UCLA	University of Maryland	University of Michigan	UNC	University of Virginia	Virginia Tech
Information Technology	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Development		✓	✓	✓	✓	
Research and Assessment	✓		✓			✓
Budget and Finance		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Administration/Chief of Staff	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Human Resources			✓		✓	✓
Marketing and Communication				✓	✓	✓

Some contacts also describe plans to introduce these services into the division. Administrators at **UCLA** plan to move budget and finance, human resources, and marketing and communications under the purview of the assistant vice chancellor for administration. Those at **UNC** plan to include assessment in the portfolio of the associate vice chancellor who oversees student life, since most of the position's reporting units must meet learning outcomes.



**Assign Administration Portfolio to a Senior Leader**

Contacts advise that division leaders appoint a chief of staff or designate an AVP to manage administrative matters. As the complexity of student affairs divisions deepens, lack of operational coordination can significantly hinder progress toward division goals. State budget allocations are unpredictable and division leaders must evaluate priorities and quickly respond to potential cuts. Tailored communication materials can help reach constituents faster and more effectively.

## IV. ORGANIZATIONAL PHILOSOPHIES

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Organizational charts illustrate hierarchy and delineate reporting structures. They show junior staff where each unit fits and allow directors to focus on their programs. They outline where senior leadership have oversight authority but do not indicate cross-divisional responsibilities. Administrators must ensure their reporting units operate effectively, but they also spend considerable time on strategic priorities at the division and institutional level.

### Generalist Approach to Leadership

The assignment of portfolios to AVPs facilitates division operations and helps promote collaboration across similarly aligned units. This model does not suggest the AVP maintains sole responsibility over their area of focus. The AVP acts as the division's main contact for a particular area, but the vice president and AVPs typically make major decisions as a team.

Although AVPs oversee a designated portfolio, the vice president and AVPs make decisions and consider strategic priorities together.

For example, the **University of Michigan's** associate vice president who manages budget and finance matters is the first to analyze and comment on budget matters, but the vice president and four AVPs decide together how to allocate any budget cuts throughout the division. The AVP role requires individuals to step out of an area of focus and examine the wider division and institutional picture. In this sense, AVPs could theoretically exchange roles without any impact on division operations.

### Staff Development

Given its diversity of responsibilities, a student affairs division employs individuals with a variety of backgrounds and skill sets. As leaders consider strategic priorities, they must also observe the abilities of their staff and match people with the right skills to each job. Nowadays, as many leaders must accomplish goals with fewer resources, they expect staff to maintain flexibility and embrace new opportunities. Leaders may not want doctors in the health center to do much beyond see patients, but they increasingly desire that staff in more broadly defined roles (e.g. student development, program coordination) accept duties that play to staff strengths, even if such responsibilities lie outside an individual's subject of focus. For example, one dean at the **University of Virginia** is an international negotiator, and contacts describe they use the dean's skills to defuse student tensions around racial matters.

*"I've got attorneys, I've got therapists, but they're not necessarily in legal or therapy-related roles."*  
-Council Interview

### Collaboration Across Units and Divisions

Staff participate in committees that focus on strategic priority implementation within the division and across the institution. They also attend meetings with individuals across the reporting structure to communicate information and foster collaboration among units.

#### Committees

**Institution-wide:** Division leaders provide input from the student affairs perspective on broad priorities (e.g., integration of sustainability into campus life).

**Division-wide:** At UNC, a department leader and junior staffer co-chair committees that discuss division themes (e.g., promotion of a supportive campus environment). Membership on the committee rotates.

#### Meetings

**Leadership:** Vice presidents often meet bi-weekly with their direct reports to discuss pressing concerns and plan long-range initiatives.

**Division-wide:** All staff come together monthly to discuss division news and receive updates on initiatives across units. Ideas for intra-division collaboration may stem from these meetings.

## V. DIVISION TRANSITIONS

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### Clarification of Division Mission

Contacts explain that a clear mission and goals are instrumental to effective operations. The mission inspires staff and articulates the core purpose of a division. Priorities demonstrate what the division values and where it seeks to progress. In some cases, articulation of a mission can help illustrate to staff the rationale behind an organizational structure.

#### Developing Division Priorities at *Virginia Tech*

Over the past one-and-a-half years, contacts at **Virginia Tech** have led an initiative to articulate a vision for student affairs. Staff brainstormed what they believed students should learn from their experience on campus, which generated a lengthy list of goals. A committee of staff and students categorized the list and met with groups of students, staff, and other academic partners across campus to discuss the goals. Ultimately, the division settled on five aspirations, each of which has its own committee comprised of division staff. The committees organize forums for students and others on campus to share their experiences. An event last spring attracted an overwhelming number of students, and feedback was positive. Contacts report that this exercise shifted the organizational paradigm of staff within student affairs and infused a greater sense of purpose among all.

### Preparedness Assessment

Leaders may choose to alter division structure if:

- ✓ Current structures hinder effective operation.
- ✓ A significant number of staff or students express dissatisfaction with existing policies or services.
- ✓ Division or institution strategic priorities change.
- ✓ Budget cuts force leaders to downsize.

Contacts suggest that leaders evaluate a division's readiness for change when they consider a transition. Doing so can help identify a specific area of the division's organizational structure that requires improvement and determine the type of change necessary. The departure of a senior-level administrator can prompt a review of organizational structure and provide a natural segue into transition. Contacts at the **University of Michigan** examined delineation of responsibilities when a long-standing AVP retired and realized the individual managed the equivalent of two roles. They then hired two AVPs, one to oversee administration and the other, auxiliary services.

#### Methods to Assess Division Readiness for Change

- ✓ Commercially available assessment tools
- ✓ Anonymous surveys
- ✓ Focus groups
- ✓ One-on-one discussions

#### Questions to Assess Division Readiness for Change

- ✓ How clear is the mission of the division?
- ✓ How many people understand the mission of the division?
- ✓ Does the current organization structure hinder how easily people can work toward the mission?
- ✓ Do people generally trust one another?
- ✓ Do people generally trust division leadership?
- ✓ How transparent are current division operations?
- ✓ How open is division leadership to feedback?
- ✓ Do staff know how and where to offer feedback to senior leadership?
- ✓ Do staff feel comfortable to offer feedback?
- ✓ How do students feel about the division?

## V. DIVISION TRANSITIONS

### **Division-Wide Reorganization**

Senior leaders may choose to alter the entire organizational structure if:

- ✓ Institutional or division priorities have shifted.
- ✓ Frustration with the current structure is widespread.
- ✓ The departure of existing leaders provide a natural opportunity to realign senior leader portfolios.

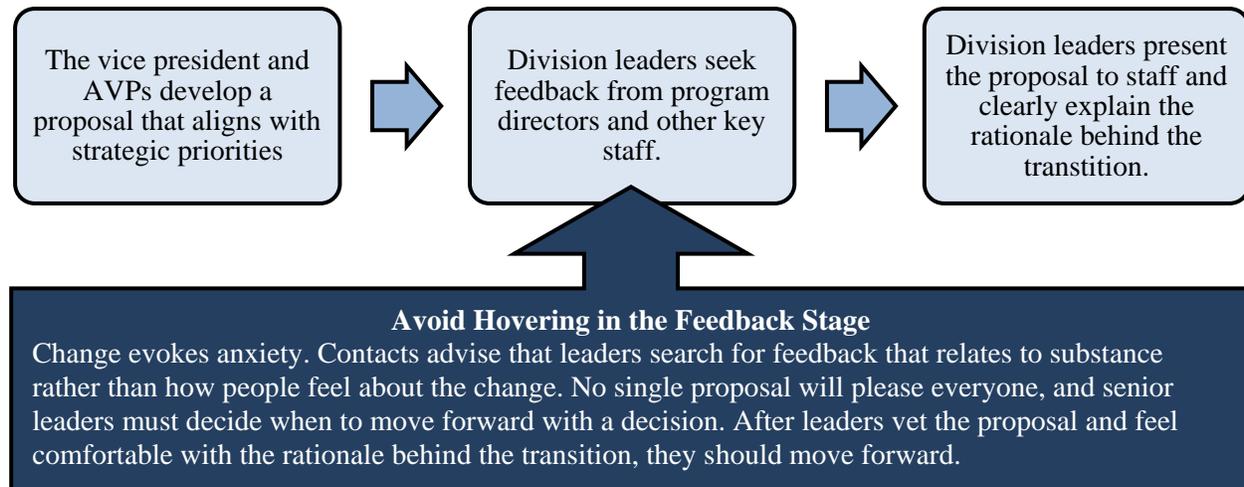
### **Small-Scale Transitions**

Senior leaders may want to shift an individual office or reassign specific staff members if:

- ✓ Strategic priority shifts are concentrated (e.g., the dean of students wants to focus on advocacy rather than student conduct).
- ✓ Budget cuts can be absorbed through individual changes rather than wholesale program or position elimination.

### **Division-Wide Reorganization**

Once senior leaders decide to move forward with a transition, they typically follow the process below.



### **The Importance of Communication**

Frequent communication informs staff, promotes transparency, and helps people determine what a change means for them individually. However, contacts emphasize the need for leaders to clarify that a decision is final. While the consideration of feedback is an integral part of the decision process, if consulted too often, division staff may feel that communication is intended to seek their approval rather than convey information. Communication should offer strategies to help staff prepare for the division's future direction.

## V. DIVISION TRANSITIONS

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### Communication Strategies

Contacts offer the following strategies to leaders as they consider how to inform their divisions about transitions.

#### Use Multiple Media

Contacts advise that leaders experiment with different types of media (e.g., email, newsletters, blogs, announcements at division meetings) until they find what works effectively and what people respond to well. Leaders should ensure that all communication is consistent and sends the same message, regardless of medium.

#### Identify Staff Who Support Change

Leaders often direct their energy toward management of those who resist the change, but contacts advise that leaders also seek out individuals who support it. These individuals can help communicate the transition to division staff. In addition, program directors and mid-level staff should reiterate the change to their direct reports and address any questions their staff may have.

#### Help Staff Adjust

Communication should demonstrate that leaders have committed to the new direction and are prepared to help everyone move forward. Staff can direct feedback to their supervisor or to a designated division point-person. Contacts mention that vice presidents also hold regular office hours where they welcome staff input.

### Staff Transitions

The reassignment of specific staff members can better align a division with its strategic goals without the disruption of an entire reorganization. This also gives senior administrators the chance to cultivate the management and leadership skills of mid-level and junior staff. Contacts at the **University of Virginia** relocated two staffers from the office of sorority and fraternity affairs to other offices due to budget cuts.

#### Communicating Staff Transitions at the *University of Virginia*

Administrators advise that senior leaders link the rationale for a division reorganization to strategic priorities. Contacts at the **University of Virginia** acknowledge this strategy may not work when communicating an individual job transition, as it can appear insensitive to tell someone his or her position no longer aligns with the division's goals. Leaders frame such conversations around the value of developing a broad skill set. They explain to staff how new roles provide professional development opportunities that help build general expertise, which staff can apply in future leadership roles. Ultimately, some individuals may decide to leave the institution. Although this is difficult, contacts explain that the division must move forward in pursuit of its priorities. Clear communication can help keep these situations from escalating into a cause for concern.

## V. DIVISION TRANSITIONS

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### Impact on Students

The division of student affairs serves the core purpose of enhancing the student experience. Contacts report that when leaders consider a transition, they first ask whether it will best serve students' interests. Leaders then consider student response to the change. Contacts explain students are more likely to weigh in when a proposed change affects services with which they regularly interact (e.g., residential life, dining services) or strongly identify (e.g., service learning, multicultural affairs). Students may also voice opinions when the change involves the relocation or elimination of a specific full-time employee, especially if that individual works closely with students. Students typically express less concern when a transition changes the reporting structure. All contacts explain that their recent division changes improved student services, even if students were unaware a change occurred.

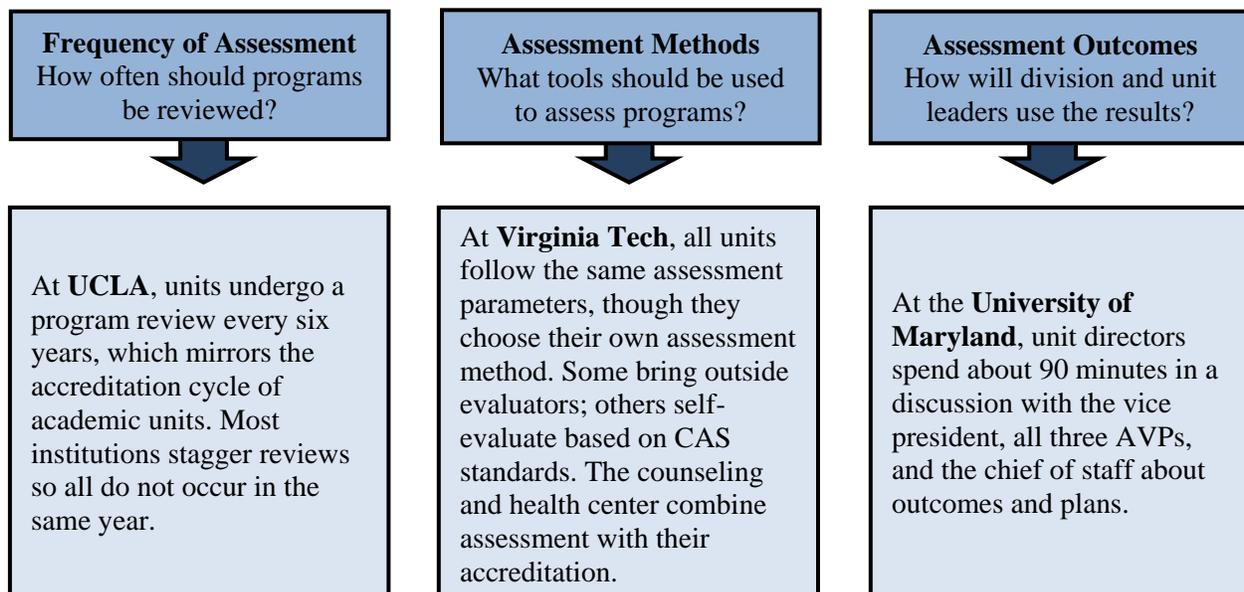
#### Student Advisory Boards at the *University of Michigan*

Contacts at the **University of Michigan** advise that leaders use existing mechanisms to solicit feedback when they consider a transition. Student advisory boards allow unit and division leaders to discuss existing services and solicit student input on improvements. Each unit within the division has a student advisory board, as does the vice president. Boards vary in size and meeting frequency. They have between 15-25 students, meet monthly or bimonthly, and use social media to send updated information. Contacts have actively used student advisory boards for about five years and report they are an effective means through which to channel the energy of a dedicated student body.

### Assessment Strategies

Robust assessment practices help cultivate a culture of reflection, analysis, and preparation for change. When staff feel comfortable with the assessment process, they may be more likely to embrace transitions, whether across the division or within their units.

#### Considerations for Program Assessment



## VI. APPENDIX: INVENTORY OF STUDENT AFFAIRS DIVISIONS AT SELECT PEER INSTITUTIONS

The Council and leadership at the Georgia Institute of Technology conducted an inventory of units housed in the student affairs division of the institution and a designated list of 15 peers. This information is from a web-based search of 16 institutions.

- ✓ Georgia Institute of Technology
- ✓ North Carolina State University
- ✓ Ohio State University
- ✓ Pennsylvania State University
- ✓ Texas A&M University
- ✓ University of California at Berkeley
- ✓ University of California at Los Angeles
- ✓ University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign
- ✓ University of Maryland at College Park
- ✓ University of Michigan at Ann Arbor
- ✓ University of Minnesota
- ✓ University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
- ✓ University of Texas at Austin
- ✓ University of Virginia
- ✓ University of Wisconsin at Madison
- ✓ Virginia Polytechnic Institution and State University

### Inventory of Units Housed within Student Affairs Divisions

Unit	Number of Institutions
Community Service	16
Greek Affairs	16
Leadership Programs	16
Student Activities/Involvement Programs	16
Student Government	16
Student Organizations	16
Student Integrity (Judicial Affairs)	16
Career Services	15
Diversity Programs	15
New Student, Transfer, and Parent Orientation Programs	15
Counseling Center	14
Student Center	14
Student Programs Council	14
Parents Program	13
Alcohol Prevention and Education	13
Disability Services	13
Health Education Programs	13
Housing	13
LGBT Programs	13
Multicultural Office/Programs	13
Sexual Assault Prevention and Education	13
Student Health Center	13
Campus Recreation	12

Unit	Number of Institutions
Dean of Students Office	12
Residence Life Programming	12
Student Legal Affairs	9
Academic Support	8
Dining Services	8
Veteran Services	8
Student Media/Publications	7
Tutoring	7
Women's Resource Services	7
Campus Ministries	6
Performing Arts Center	6
Service Learning	6
Advising	5
Financial Aid	5
International Student Services	5
Student Ombudsman Office	5
Admission Office	3
Freshman Seminar	3
Registration	3
Student Employment	2
Campus Police	1
Parking	1



**STUDENT AFFAIRS LEADERSHIP COUNCIL**  
**Student Affairs Organizational Structures at Public Research**  
**Universities**

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