

# STUDENT AFFAIRS LEADER

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## Extending Your Counseling Center's Resources: Adding an Online Q&A Page

*Brian Van Brunt*

Today's college students come to school with an extensive array of worries, questions, and difficulties. Counseling centers, faculty advisers, residence assistants, and student affairs personnel are often on the front line, addressing these concerns with students in direct conversations.

Occasionally, students have difficulty engaging in these conversations face to face. They may find the issue too embarrassing to share. They may not be sure what kind of response they may receive. They could be too rushed or overwhelmed to schedule a time to talk.

Counseling centers recognize that some students don't feel comfortable coming into therapy. That's where an online "Question and Answer" page can help. The concept has been around for decades (e.g., Dear Abby; [www.goaskalice.columbia.edu](http://www.goaskalice.columbia.edu)). College students post a health- or mental health-related question (either through email or an anonymous submission page) and a member of the clinical team responds within a stated time frame.

Questions are often about how to help friends in trouble, information on counseling services, or embarrassing subjects they wouldn't ask in person. The online format is attractive to students, as it is available 24/7 and gives them a sense of anonymity.

### Concerns

We've all had concerns about starting this kind of page. What if you log on Monday morning to find the message "I'm having a desire to kill everyone at the school with a bomb—I'd like to talk to someone soon," and the datestamp is Friday at 5:05 p.m.? What if you get 30 questions posted on a Tuesday night? What if a student says he is going to kill himself—how will you reach out to him if you don't know who he is? What if your department is already too busy with face-to-face contacts and there is no time to run something like this? What if everyone in town starts to use our site, not just our students?

Let's acknowledge that students will always have these questions, and they are often unwilling to bring them to therapy—regardless of whether there is a Web-based forum to address them or not. The student whose friend is depressed and suicidal will still be out there struggling with finding a way to help. The student turning 21 will still have trouble with alcohol. The student with the masturbation question will still wonder if masturbation equals mental illness.

The point is: If you have an online Q&A page, at least students will have a place to ask the questions. I'd hope our clinical training would allow us to say something helpful, albeit briefly and online, to push those asking a little closer to help.

If a stray community member or someone from cyberspace asks a question, count it toward your future karma by going a little "above and beyond" the call of duty. (Or send it to me and I'll answer it for you [[brian.vanbrunt@wku.edu](mailto:brian.vanbrunt@wku.edu)]; just give me 24–48 hours.)

I'd encourage you to look at developing this resource at your college. An online question and answer page attempts to provide some information to these students looking for help. While it is not perfect, this resource does provide a way to reach out to students who are scared, lonely, or worried, and are unwilling to come into the office in person. While it can be some work to get it up and running, we've found the investment of time and resources well worth it.

### Eight ways to do it well

1. Have a clear statement about what is OK and what is not OK to post. Include restrictions regarding names or identifying information. Include information about how to contact the office directly for emergencies and how to obtain help after normal business hours.
2. Establish a time frame for responses and stick to it. If you promise to have a response in 24–48 hours, make sure to respond during that time. If you

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promise to respond weekly, stick to that.

3. Design a system with your IT department so you can screen questions privately and re-word them if the content is inappropriate.
4. Use an anonymous submission form. Emails, even from an anonymous account, can still be traced back to the student in question.
5. Answer questions with general concepts and redirect folks to the appropriate resources for referral. Some therapists in the office will be better at answering online questions. Use them to give examples/training to other staff on the best way to respond.
6. Work within your scope of practice. Don't try to answer questions outside your area of expertise. Find a local resource to provide an answer for the question, or point the person in the direction of the appropriate resources.
7. If a student disagrees with an answer or tries to continue a lengthy dialogue through the online Q&A page, it is important to be polite and set boundaries. Consider a response like this one: "I hear what you are saying and would like to talk to you more; please contact me either in the office (give location and times) or through private email (give your email)."
8. When the page goes live for the first time, questions may come slowly. Consider advertising this new service or talking about it in Psych 101 classes, orientation programming, or RA training.

*Brian Van Brunt, EdD, is the director of counseling and testing services at Western Kentucky University in Bowling Green. He will present an online seminar on "Practical Suggestions for Improving Your Counseling Website" on March 4. For more information, go to [www.magnapubs.com/](http://www.magnapubs.com/).* ●

## Examples of Questions and Answers

**Q:** *I'm scared because I turn 21 in January and I will be able to get drunk whenever I want. I have a bad history with alcohol. I crave it. I can never tell what my personality will be when drunk. I'm happy, sad, or angry. When I am sad or angry, I will do things that I regret in the morning. What should I do?*

**A:** It's a healthy sign that you are scared about turning 21, because it means you recognize the problem and struggle you have with alcohol. The personality changes you have noticed, the regret, and the shame are all red flags for you about drinking. You have taken a huge step in admitting these things.

I encourage you to make an appointment with a counselor who can help you get a handle on coping with the urge to drink and who can help you explore your behaviors connected to alcohol. Our Counseling & Testing Center number is \_\_\_\_\_. Also, Student Health Services on campus has lots of information on alcohol and cutting back/stopping. I am sure it was not easy to submit your question. I urge you to pursue getting help.

**Q:** *My friend is very depressed, almost to the point of suicide. What should we do?*

**A:** It sounds like you and your friends are very concerned about the welfare of your friend. You are right; it does sound like she is depressed. Symptoms of depression include withdrawing from activities that you used to enjoy, feeling helpless and hopeless, interference with sleep (either requiring too much or getting too little), interference with appetite (either too much or too little), tearfulness or irritability, having a difficult time getting

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**Politics upon us:** At press time, we are just a week away from Super Tuesday, and it is fair to say that we are captivated by the primaries, and so we are publishing two articles (pages 5 and 6) about the political engagement of college students. One of the points both of these articles make is that students prefer to get their information and conversations from friends and family, which is why social networking sites (such as Facebook) are part of the political scene. This rings true for us: one of us has a daughter at the University of Minnesota who is the campus coordinator for one of the candidates, and she tells us that Facebook is one of her most important campaign tools.

Of course, there are many political stories waiting to be told — from University of Florida President J. Bernard Machen's endorsement of John McCain to the record turnout of student voters to the candidates' policy debates on education issues. What's happening on your campus? We'd like to hear about it. Send your comments to [Catherine.stover@magnapubs.com](mailto:Catherine.stover@magnapubs.com).

#### **Graduation Pledge Alliance:**

Students at over a hundred colleges and universities are using the Graduation Pledge of Social and Environmental

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motivated, and having a difficult time with concentration.

It would be best to get your friend to counseling as soon as possible. In order to set up an appointment, call our office at \_\_\_\_\_ between 8 a.m. and 4:30 p.m. Monday through Friday — or we can see her immediately if there is a crisis. If you believe that your friend is about to harm herself, please inform a staff member if she lives in the residence hall, or call our office or the police. ●

Responsibility, which states: *"I pledge to explore and take into account the social and environmental consequences of any job I consider and will try to improve these aspects of any organizations for which I work."*

According to the Pledge website ([www.graduationpledge.org](http://www.graduationpledge.org)), the Pledge has inspired college graduates to initiate changes at their workplaces. For example, this year there will be a pledge organized by ACPA that asks students to act before graduation — to consider the social, economic and environmental consequences of their actions.

**Parental involvement:** As Kathleen Manning described in our last issue, research from NSSE indicates that the often maligned "helicopter" parents can provide important support to students. Now, UCLA's annual survey of college freshmen — the largest of its kind — gives us additional information about the role of parents. (Go to [www.gseis.ucla.edu/heri/index.php](http://www.gseis.ucla.edu/heri/index.php)). Their conclusion: the overwhelming majority of freshmen at four-year institutions think their parents are involved the "right amount" in key college decisions. *Inside Higher Ed* ran an interesting analysis of the study in an article titled "Parental Involvement Wanted."

**Eye on crime:** As reported in *Magna's Campus Legal Monthly Briefing*, the

#### *PERSPECTIVES from page 6*

#### **Show appreciation to faculty for their contributions to campus student life.**

Many student affairs divisions make annual awards to faculty members who have demonstrated their support for student activities, and such recognition is always appreciated and valued by faculty. On a daily basis, a personal note of thanks sent to a faculty member who has done something special for a student or a student group is also appreciated.

Faculty members are our most valuable

University of Minnesota has nearly 1,000 security cameras around the campuses in the Twin Cities and Duluth. They are monitored 24 hours a day by three employees. Now, the institution is piloting Percepttrak software, which is designed to detect suspicious behavior. It detects erratic movement, a vehicle going the wrong way, or abandoned objects. Currently, Johns Hopkins, Temple, and the University of Pennsylvania use this software.

#### **"Five Colleges Where Work**

**Counts"** is the title of our favorite article in the recent *New York Times Education Life* supplement. It profiles the work programs at Alverno College, Milwaukee; Bennington College, Vermont; Kettering University, Flint, Michigan; Keuka College, New York; and Northeastern University, Boston. We see that as an important new trend in 2008, and we're looking forward to publishing stories about successful programs.

**Banished words:** Lake Superior State University recently published a list of words and phrases they'd like to banish, and we could not agree more. They include: *perfect storm, webinar, waterboarding, organic, wordsmithing, authored, post-9/11, surge, give back, Black Friday, back in the day, random, sweet, decimate, emotional, pop, and it is what it is.* ●

resource in our efforts to improve our programs and services to students. Among the faculty on any campus, virtually every area of expertise is present; despite their busy schedules, many respond positively to invitations from student affairs staff to engage in educational, co-curricular, and social activities with students.

*Arthur Sandeen, PhD, and Margaret J. Barr, PhD, together have more than 45 years of experience as vice presidents of student affairs. They are contributing editors of Student Affairs Leader.* ●

# Millennials and Politics: A New Mix

Brian A. Vander Schee

College students today are getting involved politically, but not in the way ascribed to previous generations. In a 1993 publication, *College Students Talk Politics*, the Charles F. Kettering Foundation reported that students considered politics irrelevant to their lives and saw little purpose in getting involved.

However, a new study sheds some light on generational differences. College students today are finding their own way to engage in civics and social change, according to *Millennials Talk Politics: A Study of College Student Political Engagement*, released in November 2007 by the Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE).

The study was conducted in 2006 and 2007, using focus group interviews and written surveys of almost 400 students representing 12 four-year college and university campuses. The researchers define Millennials as those born between 1985 and 2004.

The four main findings include:

**1. Today's college students are more engaged than Generation X.**

This is not too surprising, given the feelings of social alienation displayed by those born in the late '60s and early '70s. This change may also be partially attributed to the service component now required in many high schools. Millennials grew up with civic engage-

ment as part of the curriculum and thus are used to working together on social issues.

**2. Millennials are involved locally with others but are ambivalent about formal politics.**

College students today may not resonate with national political parties, but they do see value in getting involved in local associations that address relevant issues. Voting in national elections is a duty rather than a statement about who they are as people. Their willingness to get really involved therefore correlates somewhat with the potential to see immediate results and the likelihood of receiving personal recognition for their efforts.

**3. Millennials dislike spin and polarized debates and seek authentic opportunities for discussing public issues.**

The crux here is that college students today want to know the relevant concerns in contemporary political debate. However, they want the unfiltered version so they can make their own judgment regarding the merits of each position. As a result, many students turn to trusted sources such as family and friends for political information.

**4. Differences among the Millennials: Colleges and universities are providing very unequal levels of opportunity for civic participation and learning.**

Some campuses, particularly those with civic missions, provide students

with many opportunities to engage politically. Students on these campuses may take classes in civics and cite routine solicitation to get involved in one way or another. Students at other institutions report little civic activity present on campus and little encouragement to initiate such.

**How should we respond?**

College administrators may want to initiate a dialogue about whether civic responsibility is important for their institution and, if so, how it is reflected in the curriculum and life of the campus. More specifically, they should consider orchestrating opportunities for students to discuss politics. The fact that students want to talk about current issues is good news.

However, students are leery of sponsored activities. Having grown up with savvy mass media messages, they can smell a sales pitch a mile away. Thus they will stay clear of any event perceived as having something to sell, whether it is a T-shirt, button, or political idea. Thus informal environments with peer-to-peer discussions without a hostile or divisive agenda may work best.

The full report can be downloaded from the CIRCLE website at [www.civicyouth.org](http://www.civicyouth.org).

*Brian A. Vander Schee, PhD, is an assistant professor of marketing at Aurora University, Illinois.* ●

## Increasing Student Voter Turnout

Matthew Segal

**Editor's note:** You may remember Matthew Segal, the college student from Ohio who formed Student Association for Voter Empowerment (SAVE) after spending 12 hours waiting in line to vote during the 2004 presidential election. Our September 15 article described his efforts to increase voter turnout amount college students. At

press time, Super Tuesday is still on the horizon, and SAVE is in full swing.

As the presidential primary season continues, one thing is unequivocally clear: 2008 is the year of the young voter. Take these numbers for instance...

- 65,000: the number of voters under age 30 to participate in the Iowa caucuses.

- 84,000: the number of voters under age 30 to participate in the New Hampshire primary.
- 18 percent: The percentage of youth as a share of the caucus goers in Iowa.
- 9 percent: The percent increase in Iowa caucus goers under age 30 since 2004.
- 511: The number of Google alerts for caucuses.

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news stories on the “youth vote” in my inbox since the Iowa caucus!

So why is youth turnout so strong? I believe there are a number of reasons:

*Outreach to young voters:* Unlike in years past, the candidates are finally reaching out to young voters. Hillary Clinton, Barack Obama, John Edwards, Ron Paul, and Mitt Romney have all hired national youth directors who court young voters full time. When campaigns consider our demographic seriously, we deliver in return.

*Social networking websites:* Thanks to the rise of Facebook and YouTube, politics are becoming more and more accessible. Campaigns are finding creative ways for youth to explore issues and frame their political perspectives. These websites have also helped to turn a stuffy academic debate into a social dialogue.

*Competitive races:* Competition stimulates interest and breeds high turnout. With more legislative crises than ever before, our next president will have minimal margin for error. Both parties are therefore spending more resources and time than ever before to win the faith and support of the American people.

And what can you do as student affairs administrators to maintain this excellent participation? I have five ideas:

### 1. Help protect student voting rights

Recently David Yepsen, the influential *Des Moines Register* columnist, called the effort to increase participation by out-of-state student voters in Iowa “Chicago-style politics” that “risks offending longtime Iowa residents.”

Let’s note that the Iowa law gives out-of-state students the right to register where they attend college. And, many out-of-state college students consider themselves important parts of their communities: we help the local economy, and we have vested interests at stake in

district affairs. We wish that more people would see that political participation by college students is a positive for the community.

Voter rights is a big issue for college students. Photo ID laws can prevent out-of-state college students from registering in the district where they attend school. The substitutions for a photo ID — utility and other residential bills — are also not easily obtainable for students who live in dormitories. SAVE has been fighting recent voter ID laws tooth and nail. We’ve signed onto the Supreme

**Make voter registration a fundamental part of freshman orientation.**

Court amicus brief, done dozens of op-eds and interviews, and have met with civil rights and higher-education leaders across the country about how best to disseminate the student message.

### 2. Institutionalize voter registration

Make voter registration a fundamental part of freshman orientation. Dedicate certain days and venues to political lectures, discourse, or presentations. Provide more time for discussion in the classroom for relevant and contemporary political news. Host a debate between high-profile professors on campus, or between the college political parties.

### 3. Send letters to student post office boxes

According to the Harvard Institute of Politics (IOP) survey conducted by John Della Volpe in 2003, 26 percent of those who planned to vote in 2004 said they were “not sure” of where their polling place was or how to vote by absentee ballot. ([http://www.iop.harvard.edu/pdfs/survey/fall\\_2003.pdf](http://www.iop.harvard.edu/pdfs/survey/fall_2003.pdf)) Simple letters to every student post office box that explain how, when, and where to vote could address this problem.

### 4. Demand more from the media

Dianne G. Bystrom and Daniela V. Dimitrova’s study at Iowa State University compared television network news with the Internet as a source of political information for young people in the 2000 campaign. It found that “youth were rarely mentioned — as a voting unit or as sources — in stories aired by NBC, CBS, and MSNBC. In fact, of 229 broadcast stories analyzed, only five (2 percent) covered young people as a voting unit and just one story used youth as sources.”

This is striking when you consider the fact that the Millennial Generation will constitute 20 percent of the electorate in 2008! We hope that you will contact your local media and pitch them stories about the youth vote.

### 5. Contact SAVE to learn more about our College President’s Commitment to Civic Participation Pledge

SAVE is a Washington, D.C.–based nonpartisan, nonprofit organization founded and run by students. Our mission is to remove access barriers and increase civic participation among young people. Since our inception less than a year ago, SAVE has established over 20 college chapters, held numerous press conferences, hosted town hall forums with presidential candidates, directed higher-education meetings on civic education, been featured in dozens of newspapers and media outlets, and formed partnerships with organizations including The League of Conservation Voters Education Fund, Earth Day Network, Common Cause, and Mobilize.org for a number of key projects. For more information, please contact Matthew at [Matthew.Segal@avevoting.org](mailto:Matthew.Segal@avevoting.org) or check out [www.savevoting.org](http://www.savevoting.org).

*Matthew Segal is the executive director of the Student Association for Voter Empowerment.* ●

## How Can Student Affairs Work More Closely with Faculty?

**Q.** *When I moved to a new campus this year, one of the biggest surprises for me was the lack of cooperation between academic affairs and student affairs. The collaboration at my previous institution was so prevalent that I took it for granted, and now I don't know where to begin. Do you have any suggestions?*

**A.** *Arthur Sandeen and Margaret J. Barr respond:* We imagine that you do miss the collaborative nature of your previous campus. And while it's hard to start from the beginning, enhancing relationships with faculty is a very worthwhile activity. It will require hard work, perseverance, and persuasion, but as you have already observed, the results are worth it.

Close collaboration with faculty to improve the educational experience for students has been one of the most positive developments in the student affairs field during the past several years. Most national conferences now include sessions on this topic. We believe that you can improve and enhance your programs and services by convincing faculty to help plan and implement them.

Here are our suggestions:

**Develop a good understanding with the provost about your goals and programs.** The chief academic affairs officer on any campus controls most of the budget, and enhancing student affairs programs and services will be much easier if the provost is supportive of these efforts.

**Understand the priorities of faculty.** They are very engaged in their academic disciplines and are promoted and rewarded on the basis of the work they perform in their field. In some cases, they may be reluctant to participate in student life programs, as such participation may not be rewarded.

**Make sure that student affairs staff who initiate programs with faculty are highly competent professionals.** Whether the program is a drug education program where medical school faculty are asked to participate or a campus-wide symposium on current political issues where law school faculty are involved, we

must demonstrate our own skills, knowledge, and expertise.

**Urge the provost and academic deans to expand the promotion and tenure system for faculty.** On some campuses, little or no acknowledgement is given to involvement in campus student life as part of the tenure and promotion process. If this can be accomplished, it could make it much easier for faculty to engage more frequently in campus student life.

**Identify faculty expertise in a number of areas and seek them out.** With the help of the provost, the academic deans, and others, faculty members who have specific talents in areas critical to programs and services in student affairs can be targeted. In many cases, when these faculty members are contacted and invited to participate in student life activities where their expertise is valued, they will respond positively.

**Encourage faculty to serve as advisers to student organizations.** In some cases, faculty may not even know about the existence of some student group, and student affairs staff can be the matchmakers. The activities do not have to be purely academic; faculty may enjoy helping groups engaged in camping, chess, cooking, or debate.

**Encourage expansion of service learning and community service programs.** These areas represent perhaps the most positive potential for collaboration between student affairs and faculty. Some campuses already have service learning centers, jointly administered by academic and student affairs. When these programs can be linked directly to the curriculum and to students' future careers, they can become very important to student learning.

**Encourage more diverse participation in study abroad programs.** By working with the provost and key faculty,

student affairs can help enhance these programs through its extensive contacts with students and student groups. We can also participate with faculty in improving the quality of students' experiences while studying abroad.

**Involve faculty in the periodic review and revision of policies.** We have responsibility for policies affecting students in areas such as health, student records, admissions, residence halls, and student conduct. Every campus has faculty who are experts in policy making, and involving them directly in the process of improving the policies in these areas will certainly enhance the quality of the policies and gain better support for our work.

**Encourage faculty-in-residence programs in campus living facilities.** If good planning takes place, this can greatly increase the frequency of close faculty-student contacts and enrich the living experience for students.

**Urge the establishment of a student assessment program.** This is a natural way to work closely with the provost and the faculty in systematic efforts to understand what students are learning and how they are, in fact, engaged with their educational programs.

**Invite faculty to student functions, banquets, retreats, and residences.** Some faculty simply do not have much contact with students in their out-of-class activities, and many of them will enjoy the opportunity. By making this happen, we are likely to gain additional faculty supporters!

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Do you have a question for our Perspectives Q&A columnists? If so, please write to [Catherine.stover@magnapubs.com](mailto:Catherine.stover@magnapubs.com).