Carving Out a Service Niche
Innovation Profile #5
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How to Navigate This Document

This series of innovation profiles is only the beginning of our work to assist members in navigating the decade ahead and all of the challenges and opportunities it will present. For these profiles, we have chosen nine practices that address the challenges we feel institutions – and more precisely, divisions of Student Affairs – will be most pressed to address in the years ahead. We encourage our members to look to these profiles for inspiration in their own work, and as conversation starters on campus around some key considerations to keep in mind as we move forward in addressing the challenges we face in our work, and in serving our own students.

Each profile contains most or all of the following components:

The Challenge
What is the situation we’re facing? What is the nature and source of the problem? Why does this issue matter, and who does it matter to? Furthermore, what is difficult about addressing this challenge?

Potential Consequences
What are the potential repercussions – both short and long term – of not addressing this challenge now? What parties are affected by this issue and how will addressing it improve or contribute to serving our students?

Case Study
How has one institution successfully addressed, or at least approached, this problem? What are the strategies, ideas, and innovations that have been employed with some success here?

Spotlight Rationale
What is noteworthy about this case study? Why is this example worthy studying? What differentiates it from what others are doing?

Lessons Learned
What can we, as institutions and practitioners, learn from initial efforts in this space? What lessons learned or keys to success can we derive from this one institution’s actions? What can we take home from this example to employ at our own institution?

Member Brainstorming
What are our next steps as an institution? Where do we start? Who will be involved and what must we do to prepare to move forward? What are the key considerations to ask ourselves on an ongoing basis as we continue to navigate through this challenge?
Carving Out a Service Niche

The Challenge

Why Does This Issue Matter?

As we heard repeatedly throughout the course of doing this research, institutions – and specifically Divisions of Student Affairs – can no longer be “all things to all people.” Resources are not unlimited and student populations will continue to grow and diversify. Instead of continuing to expand and attempting to adapt in all directions, smart institutions are thinking about how to carve out a niche for themselves and specialize in how they serve students, or for which student populations they will develop more dedicated services.

This is no easy task as we, of course, want to serve all of our students to the best of our ability, and there are complex questions – both financial and ethical, about which specific student populations we choose to serve. However, these are decisions institutions must make in order to remain sustainable in the years ahead.

Potential Consequences

The Risks of Not Acting Now

The risk of not making a strategic resource allocation decision is that we will begin to fail to properly serve all of our students by spreading ourselves too thin. We must employ our resources smarter and more effectively to keep up with the changing environment in which we’re working, and this will involve making difficult decisions about where to invest.

Furthermore, there may be enrollment implications for institutions that aren’t able to keep up with serving all students, as we know our students and their parents are increasingly approaching our institutions with a consumer mindset.

Case Study

The University of Arkansas’s Institutional Positioning as a Veteran’s Destination

Many schools are starting to think this way: that the only way for them to survive will be to stop trying to be all things to all students, and instead identify the market and demographic they are best suited to serve, and hone their services to excel at serving them. This is not only a more feasible strategy in terms of existing resources, but also well-suited to fundraising, since it is easier to appeal to donors for scholarship money, for example, with a narrow ask, targeted to specific areas or student populations.

Danny Pugh, the Vice Provost for Student Affairs at the University of Arkansas, adheres to this philosophy. About five years ago, Arkansas decided to develop themselves into a destination for veterans, and has made many changes and investments to that end. They have hired more dedicated staff, increased funding, developed mentorship programming, and put key support services in place. They want to be the institution that veterans want to come to and have aligned their resources to support that goal.
Arkansas leveraged the widespread state support for veterans established by the Governor’s Yellow Ribbon Taskforce, to form their own. The taskforce evaluated how the institution was already serving veterans, and produced a ten point plan to develop and improve their veteran’s services.

Their goal was not just to increase veteran enrollments, but to carve out a special value proposition, determining where they could best serve them. They decided they could do this through targeted academic programs and career preparation and support. They aim to recruit veterans into discipline-specific majors with built-in local internships and job opportunities. They are lucky to have Walmart and a number of other large companies headquartered nearby, and they work hard to connect veterans with these Fortune 500 companies.

Key Differentiating Services

Arkansas has grown from 1 FTE to 3.5 FTE dedicated to serving veterans at the institution. One of these FTE is funded by the local VA; once an institution breaches 800 veteran students, they become eligible to apply to the local VA for a Veterans Success Coordinator, who becomes a full-time staff member, but whose salary is paid by the VA. This person helps veterans take advantage of all of the benefits available to them. Arkansas shares their coordinator with the local community college, a partnership that helps them recruit students to transfer to the institution.

Arkansas has established three offices dedicated to serving veterans and is in the process of adding a dedicated Veterans Center in the Student Union. The Student Union is currently under renovation, and the $2 million Veterans Center that will be featured in the new space was primarily paid for by alumni donations. According to Student Affairs leadership, having a dedicated space “makes all the difference in the world” in serving veterans, and messaging to them how invested the school is in their success.
Arkansas has based much of its appeal to veterans on the career resources and support they provide. They feature connections with world class – as well as local – businesses and, in particular, offer a mentorship program for veterans, through which they’re paired with a local business leader for guidance, advice, mentoring, and support.

Based on a recommendation from the Dean of Students, the Board was asked to assist in endowing a fund dedicated to supporting veterans in unexpected times of financial need, whether for a utility bill, car repair, or travel expense. The Board was able to identify a local patron that designs knives to design a special one for the campaign. They made and sold 20,000 of them and donated all of the proceeds to the hardship fund (at about $10 per knife) – as a result, they were able to endow the fund.

Contacts at Arkansas emphasize that one of the keys to thinking about serving a specialized population is that no single shop can do everything; it is imperative to build on existing services and resources to provide and scale comprehensive support. For example, Arkansas has one of the premier food pantries in the country – a resource that financially-strapped veterans often take advantage of. It’s important to survey the pre-existing services and resources on campus that could be of value to your special population, and be sure to develop awareness and accessibility of these resources to them.

They also thought strategically about hiring and – as mentioned above – hired new counselors that specialize in veterans’ issues, but serve all students.

The VPSA reworked his budget to find the resources to dedicate to veterans. He requires every unit to do a 5% contingency set-aside each year, which, when necessary, he uses to support veterans’ services.

He also thought creatively, and would encourage others to do the same. He switched the campus from Coke to Pepsi products, which resulted in significant savings and a new revenue stream; that entire savings is directed to serving veterans, which has resulted in a permanent revenue base to support them. He indicates that it has been fairly easy to deal with pushback on these initiatives because when people learn that the funds are going to support veterans, they are largely supportive.

Arkansas is committed to making veterans feel welcome and valued, as well as supported, on campus. They have developed a series of programs for veterans to ensure they feel this way. They hold a Veteran’s Night for students and their families each year, a social event to celebrate their success and give them a chance to get to know each other. This is just one among a series of programs run for veterans out of their dedicated center. They also receive a Challenge Coin at graduation commemorating their accomplishment.
In 2009, when the University of Arkansas’s taskforce was initiated, they served approximately 300 veterans. Last year, they served more than 840. Contacts at Arkansas assert that this number is probably low, as it only represents the number that self-identify and receive benefits.

**What Stands Out About What Arkansas Has Done?**

- The University of Arkansas made an institution-wide commitment to serving veterans, and has been successful due to the comprehensive supports they have in place to serve veterans, and the commitment across campus to be a premier veteran destination.

- Arkansas went beyond deciding to focus on serving veterans, and targeted a specific niche within the population. They focused on recruiting and serving veterans looking to establish specific careers (i.e. nursing and careers at local Fortune 500 companies) because of the strength of the programs they could offer them in these areas. They acknowledge that some veterans may be best served elsewhere, at institutions that have strong programs in other areas. They have invested the bulk of their resources in career services and residence life, and market themselves to veterans accordingly.

- Arkansas invested in key differentiating services for veterans, making the institution an attractive destination for them and facilitating recruitment, as well as ensuring they have the resources and supports in place to address all the needs their students will face upon matriculating.

- Arkansas’s commitment to serving veterans is also apparent in the funding they worked hard to secure for these efforts. Leadership rigorously reworked budgets to find resources to dedicate to veterans, found alternative revenue streams, and did targeted fundraising, ensuring this didn’t become an unfunded mandate.

- There may be unrealized local – or other, external – resources available to support certain populations. Arkansas was able to leverage resources from the local Veteran’s Affairs office to build up veteran’s services.

**What Can We Take Away From This Case Study?**

**Importance of senior leadership.** The University was involved with a taskforce created by the Governor of Arkansas to focus on serving veterans, and there was a lot of top down support, as well as directive, to focus on this initiative.

**The need to secure funding.** Arkansas has made a great number of investments in veteran’s services, and to do so, looked hard at their budgets to find available dollars, as well as found some creative ways to reallocate money.

**Defining a “niche within a niche.”** Contacts at Arkansas emphasize that even within veterans, they have looked to specialize further to ensure they can deliver on the services they promote, and to facilitate recruitment of certain veteran segments.

**Stakeholder buy-in.** The top-down nature of this shift made attaining campus buy-in a bit easier, but contacts emphasize the importance of getting support for the initiative from across and off campus. This includes: academic departments, faculty, student services, and community members (e.g. the local division of Veteran’s Affairs). Student Affairs offered training to faculty and staff on working with veterans, which was instrumental in building support and goodwill for the effort.
Establishing comprehensive supports. Successful institutional positioning depends upon investing in key services and ensuring that comprehensive supports are in place to address the various needs of your target student population. At Arkansas, this meant investing in resources to support the academic, financial, social, emotional, and other possible needs of their veteran students.

Member Brainstorming

Questions to Consider as You Move Forward

Use the following questions to begin conversations on your campus – with your colleagues, staff, and other stakeholders – around innovation. Keep in mind this is just an initial list of considerations – a place to start a discussion before diving deeper into the specific issues, challenges, and particularities of your unique situation, and institutional goals.

Ensuring Alignment with Institutional Mission

- How does this investment fit with my institution’s mission and strategic priorities?
- Do these decisions strengthen or weaken our institutional dedication to serving and educating students?
- How will this investment affect services for my general student population? Am I comfortable with this reallocation?
- In evaluating which special population(s) to serve, some will have the potential to bring money with them (e.g. international students, veterans); what does this mean for high-need, low-cash special populations (e.g. low income, first generation)?

Securing Funding for Student Investments

- Will I be able to appropriately fund the necessary investments to develop a reputation for serving these students?
- Where will I find funding for these investments – internally or externally?
- Does this specialization have potential to be used as a fundraising tool to support it?
- Is this a sustainable investment for the long-term? How will it fit into my institution’s ongoing budget decisions?

Establishing Infrastructure and Staffing

- What are the staffing implications of this investment? Will I need to staff up in certain areas and, if so, where?
- Will this have any negative effects on my staff? Will it require too much of an increase to their workload or daily responsibilities?
- What new offices, services, and programs would I ideally put in place to help these students thrive, and do I have the resources to do so? Where will I start?

Attracting and Recruiting Students

- How will I attract this population of students to my institution? What is my institutional value proposition and what messages will resonate best with them?
- What are the most effective channels to reach these students?
- What is a reasonable growth target for this subpopulation? For one year? For five years?
- What are my ultimate student recruitment goals?