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The Logic Positioning and Reform Path of College Student Affairs Management in the New Era

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Abstract: In the new era context, the characteristics of college student populations exhibit significant generational shifts. Post-00s and post-05s students have undergone profound transformations in their core values, behavioral patterns, and overall demand structures, making traditional student affairs management models increasingly inadequate. To address these emerging complexities, this study conducts comprehensive empirical research on the current challenges, underlying influencing mechanisms, and potential optimization pathways in university student affairs management. Based on a robust dataset comprising 2,476 valid questionnaires collected from 31 universities across China, alongside in-depth qualitative interview data from 12 diverse higher education institutions, the analysis provides a multifaceted evaluation of the current landscape. Findings reveal that overall satisfaction scores for student affairs management average only 3.42 out of 5. Furthermore, there are notable gaps in the delivery of precision services, psychological support, and targeted employment assistance when compared to student expectations. The analysis identifies three core variables—professionalism of management teams, data governance capabilities, and interdepartmental collaboration efficiency—which account for 22.7%, 18.9%, and 16.3% of the variance in management effectiveness, respectively. Consequently, the study proposes an integrated reform framework combining ideological guidance, data-driven decision-making, diversified service provision, and comprehensive team capacity building. This approach offers actionable solutions for achieving high-quality student affairs management. Ultimately, these conclusions not only enrich the local theoretical framework for student affairs management but also provide vital empirical evidence for strategic policy formulation in higher education institutions.

Keywords: student affairs; higher education; empirical research; educational reform; data governance

1. Introduction

Since the 2018 National Education Conference, China's higher education has entered a new phase of high-quality development, with "student-centeredness" becoming the core value orientation in higher education governance. As a vital component of university education systems, student affairs management undertakes multiple functions including ideological guidance, academic support, life services, and growth counseling, serving as a crucial vehicle for implementing the fundamental mission of moral education. According to the "National Report on Student Affairs Development in Regular Higher Education Institutions" released by the Ministry of Education in 2025, China's higher education institutions now employ over 180,000 full-time student affairs administrators covering 12 operational areas such as ideological and political education, mental health education, career guidance, dormitory management, and financial aid programs [1]. However, significant disparities in management efficiency persist across regional and institutional levels, with some universities still grappling with issues like "overemphasis on administration at the expense of services" and "administrative focus overshadowing professional expertise," making it challenging to meet the diverse needs of students in the new era. These challenges highlight the need for a more balanced approach that integrates

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administrative efficiency with professional expertise to better address the evolving requirements of students.

Current research on student affairs management in higher education institutions primarily focuses on three areas: First, conceptual organization and framework construction at the theoretical level. Researchers have introduced the student affairs management theory from international associations and proposed a student affairs management model under the perspective of "holistic education" in the context of China's local conditions. Second, empirical summaries at the practical level, mostly focusing on reform cases of individual universities or specific business domains, such as the informatization of student management under the smart campus framework and the construction path of "one-stop" student communities [2, 3]. Third, comparative studies drawing on international experiences, which have analyzed the characteristics of student affairs management models in countries and regions like Europe, America, and Singapore, providing insights for reference in China. However, existing research still exhibits two notable shortcomings: On one hand, it lacks large-sample empirical studies, with most research relying on case analyses or small-scale surveys, resulting in conclusions with limited generalizability. On the other hand, there is insufficient response to the new characteristics and demands of contemporary student groups, with few studies quantitatively analyzing the gap between student needs and management supply, and a lack of actionable systematic reform solutions. Addressing these gaps requires a more comprehensive approach that combines theoretical insights with large-scale empirical data to develop practical solutions tailored to the diverse needs of modern students.

Based on this foundation, the research questions of this paper encompass three dimensions: First, what is the current overall effectiveness of student affairs management in Chinese universities? What differences exist across different dimensions of effectiveness? Second, what are the core factors influencing the effectiveness of university student affairs management, and how do these factors operate? Third, what feasible pathways exist for optimizing university student affairs management in the context of the new era? The research contributions of this study are primarily reflected in two aspects: Firstly, it establishes an effectiveness evaluation system for university student affairs management in China based on large-scale empirical data, addressing the lack of empirical support in existing research [2, 4]. Secondly, it proposes a systematic reform framework tailored to the characteristics of the new era, which holds both theoretical significance and practical guidance value. By integrating quantitative analysis with actionable strategies, this study aims to bridge the gap between student needs and management supply, offering a robust foundation for future advancements in student affairs management practices.

2. Theoretical Framework and Research Design

2.1. Core Concepts and Theoretical Foundations

The student affairs management in higher education institutions during the new era, as defined in this study, refers to the comprehensive set of administrative and service activities implemented by universities under the "Three-Aspect Holistic Education" framework. These initiatives aim to address students' developmental needs across multiple dimensions, including ideological and political education, academic support, mental health services, career guidance, financial aid programs, dormitory management, and campus culture development. The primary objective is to facilitate a strategic transition from traditional administrative management to a more holistic approach that prioritizes educational services fostering student growth and development. This transition underscores the importance of aligning institutional resources and strategies with the evolving needs of students, ensuring that their academic, personal, and professional aspirations are comprehensively supported [5].

The theoretical foundation of this study primarily comprises three interconnected pillars. First, student development theory emphasizes that student growth is inherently

multidimensional, requiring student affairs management to address a wide range of needs, including cognitive development, moral cultivation, career planning, and psychological well-being. This approach ensures that students receive comprehensive support tailored to their diverse developmental trajectories. Second, new public management theory advocates for the adoption of market-oriented and professional management approaches in public services. This perspective provides a robust framework for enhancing the precision and efficiency of student affairs management, particularly through professional reforms and digital transformation initiatives [6]. Third, collaborative governance theory highlights the necessity of coordinated participation from multiple stakeholders to address complex public issues effectively. In the context of student affairs management, this involves integrating resources from academic affairs departments, academic administration units, logistics departments, secondary colleges, families, and broader societal entities. Such integration fosters the creation of a synergistic educational ecosystem that holistically supports student development and institutional objectives.

2.2. Study Design and Data Sources

This study employs a mixed-method research approach that integrates the strengths of both quantitative and qualitative methodologies to ensure the scientific validity and reliability of its conclusions. At the quantitative research level, a nationwide questionnaire survey was conducted from September to December 2025, encompassing 31 universities distributed across the eastern, central, and western regions of China. The sample included 12 "Double First-Class" universities, 11 regular undergraduate institutions, and 8 vocational colleges. A total of 3,000 questionnaires were distributed, resulting in 2,476 valid responses, which corresponds to an effective response rate of 82.5%. The demographic characteristics of the sample were as follows: male students constituted 48.2% of the respondents, while female students accounted for 51.8%. Freshmen represented 27.3% of the sample, sophomores 25.6%, juniors 24.1%, and seniors or above 23%. Additionally, urban students made up 54.7% of the respondents, whereas rural students accounted for 45.3%. The sample structure closely mirrors the overall demographic composition of university students in China, thereby demonstrating strong representativeness and ensuring the generalizability of the findings [7, 8].

In the qualitative research component, in-depth interviews were conducted at 12 universities representing diverse institutional types. The interviewees included 12 academic affairs department heads, 36 frontline counselors, and 48 student representatives, with the total interview duration exceeding 120 hours. The discussions centered on identifying existing challenges in student affairs management, exploring reform obstacles, and gathering practical recommendations for improvement. All interviews were conducted with the informed consent of participants, and the sessions were recorded for accuracy [9]. The recordings were subsequently transcribed into approximately 300,000 words of textual data, which were then subjected to systematic coding analysis. This qualitative approach provided rich, nuanced insights into the complexities of student affairs management and complemented the quantitative findings by offering a deeper understanding of the underlying issues and potential solutions.

The variable measurement framework in this study consists of two primary components. First, the dependent variable, which is student affairs management efficacy, is evaluated across seven dimensions: ideological guidance, academic support, psychological services, employment assistance, financial aid management, dormitory services, and cultural activities [10]. These dimensions are assessed using a 5-point Likert scale, where 1 represents "very dissatisfied" and 5 represents "very satisfied." Second, the independent variables include four core indicators: the professionalization level of management teams, data governance capabilities, cross-departmental collaboration efficiency, and the intensity of policy support. Each independent variable is measured using 3 to 5 items, with all scales demonstrating Cronbach's α coefficients exceeding 0.78, which indicates strong reliability and validity. This robust measurement framework

ensures that the study's findings are both credible and applicable to the broader context of student affairs management in higher education institutions.

3. Analysis of Empirical Research Results

3.1. Overall Characteristics of Student Affairs Management Efficiency

Descriptive statistics reveal that the overall satisfaction score for student affairs management in Chinese universities is currently 3.42. This score places it at a moderately high level, yet it still falls short of achieving the "excellent" standard, indicating room for significant improvement [11]. A detailed analysis by dimension shows that ideological guidance achieved the highest score of 3.76, reflecting substantial progress in ideological and political education programs, which have garnered widespread student approval. Cultural activities followed closely with a score of 3.61, highlighting students' appreciation for the diverse range of campus cultural offerings. However, three critical areas—employment support (3.12), psychological services (3.18), and targeted financial aid (3.24)—received comparatively lower scores. These findings underscore existing deficiencies in these aspects of student affairs management. The detailed distribution of satisfaction scores is presented in Table 1, providing a comprehensive overview of the performance across various dimensions.

Table 1. Satisfaction scores across dimensions of student affairs management in higher education institutions

Dimension Name	Score (out of 5)	ranking
Ideological Guidance	3.76	1
Campus Cultural Activities	3.61	2
Dormitory Management Services	3.47	3
Academic Support Services	3.35	4
Precision funding management	3.24	5
Mental Health Services	3.18	6
Employment and Entrepreneurship Support	3.12	7

Significant disparities exist in the effectiveness of student affairs management across different types of higher education institutions. Double First-Class universities achieved the highest overall satisfaction score of 3.71, followed by regular undergraduate institutions with a score of 3.39, and vocational colleges with a score of 3.17. These differences are statistically significant at the $p < 0.001$ level, underscoring the critical role that abundant educational resources play in enhancing student affairs management efficiency [12]. Furthermore, an analysis by academic year reveals a notable trend: freshmen reported the highest satisfaction score of 3.68, which progressively declined in subsequent years. By their senior year, students' satisfaction dropped to 3.09, a decline that can be attributed to increased employment pressures and heightened demand for career support services during their final year of study. These findings highlight the need for targeted interventions to address the evolving needs of students as they progress through their academic journey.

3.2. Analysis of the Impact Mechanism on Student Affairs Management Efficiency

This study utilizes multiple linear regression analysis to investigate the factors that influence the effectiveness of student affairs management. The adjusted R^2 value of the regression model is 0.663, signifying that the model explains 66.3% of the variance in the dependent variable, demonstrating a high-quality fit. The regression analysis results indicate that all four core independent variables have significant positive impacts on the effectiveness of student affairs management. Among these variables, the professionalization level of management teams exhibits the strongest influence, with a coefficient of 0.227 ($p < 0.001$). This finding implies that a 1-unit increase in the specialization of management teams results in a 0.227-unit improvement in management effectiveness, establishing it as the most critical determinant [13, 14]. Following this, data

governance capability shows an influence coefficient of 0.189 ($p < 0.001$), highlighting its role in enhancing precision and efficiency. Cross-departmental collaboration efficiency, with a coefficient of 0.163 ($p < 0.001$), and policy support intensity, with a coefficient of 0.084 ($p < 0.01$), also demonstrate statistically significant correlations, underscoring their importance in the overall management framework.

To provide a clearer understanding of the causal pathways among these factors, this study develops an impact mechanism model for student affairs management within contemporary higher education institutions. This model is constructed based on qualitative interview data and regression analysis findings, as illustrated in Figure 1. The model highlights that policy support serves as a foundational safeguard, offering institutional backing for the development of management teams, the establishment of digital infrastructure, and the facilitation of cross-departmental collaboration. Management teams are identified as the core entities responsible for implementation, where their professional competence directly influences the quality of service delivery. Data governance is emphasized as a pivotal technical tool that enhances service precision and operational efficiency. Meanwhile, cross-departmental coordination is recognized as a crucial operational mechanism that integrates resources from multiple stakeholders to achieve collaborative educational outcomes. Collectively, these four factors significantly shape the overall effectiveness of student affairs management systems in higher education institutions.

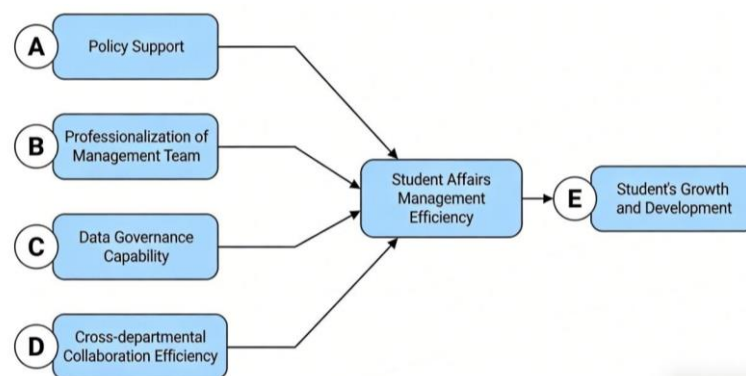


Figure 1. Impact Mechanism Model of Student Affairs Management Efficiency in Universities in the New Era

3.3. Core Challenges in Current Student Affairs Management

Through integrating quantitative research findings with qualitative interview data, we identified three core challenges in current student affairs management at higher education institutions: First, insufficient professionalization. A significant proportion of frontline counselors reported lacking systematic training in student affairs management, with many simultaneously handling over five non-core responsibilities. Administrative tasks consume excessive time and resources, which hinders the delivery of refined and effective student services. Second, delayed digital transformation. A majority of students highlighted the presence of data silos between disparate systems, which require repetitive information submission across multiple platforms for service processing. This results in severe information fragmentation and inadequate intelligent management capabilities, ultimately failing to accurately identify and address personalized student needs. Third, inefficient collaboration mechanisms. A large percentage of student affairs staff reported cross-departmental coordination issues characterized by unclear accountability and frequent buck-passing. For example, addressing student psychological distress requires coordination among academic affairs, academic administration, logistics, and university hospitals. However, the absence of standardized workflows and clearly defined responsibilities often leads to delayed interventions, negatively impacting student well-being.

4. Reform Paths for Student Affairs Management in Universities in the New Era

This study introduces a comprehensive four-in-one reform framework for student affairs management in higher education institutions, tailored to the demands of the new era. The framework integrates ideological and political guidance, data-driven decision-making, diversified service provision, and team capacity enhancement. These elements are designed to work synergistically, ensuring that student affairs management evolves to meet contemporary challenges while fostering a supportive and dynamic academic environment [15].

4.1. Strengthening Ideological and Political Guidance to Implement the Fundamental Task of Moral Education and Talent Cultivation

Ideological and political guidance serves as a core function of student affairs management, which must be seamlessly integrated into every stage of student service operations. To achieve this, it is essential to foster a deep integration between ideological education and student services by embedding political elements into various support programs such as career counseling, financial aid initiatives, and mental health services. For example, financial assistance programs should not only address economic needs but also incorporate motivational education and integrity training, thereby achieving the dual objectives of providing financial support and fostering character development [8]. Furthermore, innovative methods of ideological guidance should be explored, utilizing new media platforms and engaging formats such as short videos, interactive games, and practical activities. These approaches can effectively resonate with students, enhancing the appeal and impact of political education. Additionally, a robust accountability mechanism for comprehensive education must be established. This mechanism should clearly delineate departmental responsibilities in ideological cultivation, ensuring that the effectiveness of educational outcomes is integrated into departmental performance evaluations and staff assessments. Such measures are critical to ensuring the tangible and sustained implementation of ideological and political guidance across all facets of student affairs management.

4.2. Promote Digital Transformation and Establish a Data-Driven Management Model

Digitalization serves as a critical technological foundation for enhancing student affairs management efficiency. Breaking down "data silos" is a fundamental step, achieved by integrating data from various systems such as academic affairs, teaching administration, logistics, and library services. This integration creates a unified student data platform that enables "one-time collection and campus-wide sharing" of student information, significantly reducing the burden of redundant data submissions. Additionally, the development of student profiling and demand alert systems, powered by big data analytics, allows for the precise identification of personalized needs. Through comprehensive analysis of academic performance, consumption patterns, psychological assessments, and activity participation data, these systems can provide timely warnings for students facing academic challenges, psychological issues, or financial difficulties. This transition from "reactive responses" to "proactive services" enhances the overall support framework. Furthermore, the creation of an "all-in-one" online service hub centralizes essential student operations, such as leave requests, expense reimbursements, financial aid applications, and counseling appointments, into digital platforms. This approach achieves "one-stop service" or even "zero visits required," substantially improving accessibility and convenience for students.

4.3. Optimize the Service Supply System to Meet Students' Diversified Growth Needs

To address the mismatch between current student affairs service provision and student needs, it is essential to establish a diversified and targeted service delivery system. Strengthening service offerings in underdeveloped areas is a critical step, which can be achieved by increasing resource allocation for mental health services, employment and entrepreneurship support, and targeted financial aid. Specific measures include expanding the recruitment of professional psychological counselors and establishing a

comprehensive four-tier psychological early warning and intervention mechanism that spans university, college, class, and dormitory levels. Additionally, differentiated career guidance services should be provided to cater to the unique needs of students at different academic stages. For instance, freshmen can benefit from career planning education, sophomores from vocational experience programs, juniors from internship matching services, and seniors from job-seeking guidance that includes position recommendations. Implementing a regular student needs collection mechanism is also vital. This can be achieved through surveys, focus groups, suggestion boxes, and online feedback platforms, enabling institutions to promptly identify evolving student demands and dynamically adjust service content. Furthermore, multi-stakeholder collaboration should be introduced by engaging external resources such as faculty members, alumni, enterprises, and social organizations. For example, alumni can serve as career mentors, while faculty members can participate in academic support initiatives to enhance the professionalism and diversity of services.

4.4. Strengthening Professional Team Building to Enhance Management and Service Capabilities

The management team plays a pivotal role in student affairs administration, as their professional competence directly influences the quality of services provided. To enhance this, it is crucial to establish well-defined career development systems for counselors, incorporating clear pathways for progression and a dual-track mechanism that integrates rank advancement with professional title evaluations [16]. This approach minimizes administrative burdens while ensuring a concentrated focus on student services. Additionally, a comprehensive training framework should be implemented, offering specialized programs in areas such as mental health counseling, career planning, and the application of big data technologies. Encouraging counselors to obtain certifications, such as those for psychological counseling and career planning, will help create a highly skilled, expert-led student support team. Furthermore, a rational evaluation and incentive system must be developed, with key assessment criteria including student satisfaction and measurable educational outcomes. Recognizing and rewarding outstanding counselors will foster a stronger sense of professional identity and enhance their motivation to excel in their roles.

4.5. Improve Collaborative Governance Mechanisms to Form Synergistic Educational Efforts

Student affairs management represents a comprehensive and systematic endeavor that necessitates coordinated collaboration among various stakeholders. To begin with, it is crucial to establish robust cross-departmental coordination mechanisms. This can be achieved by forming a Student Affairs Committee under the leadership of university executives, which includes representatives from academic affairs, teaching administration, logistics, the university hospital, and security departments. This committee should delineate the educational responsibilities of each department, implement regular consultation frameworks, and collaboratively address significant challenges in student management. Furthermore, the dual management framework between the university and colleges requires refinement [4]. At the university level, the focus should be on macro-level policy development and resource distribution, while colleges should be empowered with greater autonomy to execute specific operational tasks, thereby enhancing management flexibility and responsiveness. Additionally, a "university-family-society" collaborative education system should be developed. This involves fostering stronger communication with students' families and utilizing societal resources to provide comprehensive support in areas such as practical training, internships, and career development. Such efforts aim to create a cohesive and integrated educational ecosystem that supports holistic student development.

5. Conclusion and Prospects

In the new era context, university student affairs management faces emerging opportunities and challenges. Traditional administrative management models are increasingly inadequate in addressing the diverse developmental needs of contemporary

students, necessitating a shift toward an "educational service-oriented" model. This study, based on extensive empirical data collected from 31 universities across the nation, provides a systematic evaluation of the current effectiveness of student affairs management in Chinese higher education institutions. It identifies core factors influencing management efficacy, highlights existing challenges, and proposes a comprehensive "Four-in-One" reform framework. The findings reveal that while the overall management effectiveness in Chinese universities is moderately high, there remains significant potential for improvement in critical areas such as employment assistance and psychological services. Key determinants of management efficacy include the professionalization of administrative teams, the enhancement of data governance capabilities, and the efficiency of cross-departmental collaboration. To address these gaps, future reforms should prioritize five strategic dimensions: strengthening ideological and political guidance, accelerating digital transformation, optimizing service delivery, advancing team development, and fostering collaborative governance. By systematically implementing these reforms, institutions can achieve greater operational precision, professionalism, and efficiency. This approach aligns with the student-centered educational philosophy and ensures robust support for nurturing a new generation of talents equipped to meet the demands of societal and national development. Furthermore, the integration of digital tools and data-driven decision-making processes can significantly enhance the adaptability and responsiveness of student affairs management, ensuring that it remains relevant in an ever-evolving educational landscape.

This study has certain limitations that warrant further exploration. Firstly, the survey samples were predominantly drawn from universities in the eastern and central regions, resulting in limited representation from western areas. Future research should aim to expand the geographical scope of the sample to improve the generalizability of the findings. Secondly, as this study was conducted as a cross-sectional analysis, it provides only a snapshot of the current state of student affairs management. Longitudinal studies could be undertaken to examine the long-term impacts and sustainability of management reforms over time. Thirdly, while this research primarily focused on institutional-level management factors, future investigations could delve into the moderating effects of individual and family-level variables on the effectiveness of student affairs management. For instance, exploring how socioeconomic background, parental involvement, or individual psychological resilience interacts with institutional policies could provide a more nuanced understanding of management outcomes. Additionally, integrating advanced analytical methods, such as machine learning or predictive modeling, could enhance the precision of future studies. These approaches would not only address existing gaps but also contribute to the development of more tailored and effective strategies for improving student affairs management in diverse educational contexts.

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