



The Student Learning Imperative: Implications for Student Affairs

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PREAMBLE

"The interval between the decay of the old and the formation and the establishment of the new, constitutes a period of transition which must always necessarily be one of uncertainty, confusion, error, and wild and fierce fanaticism." - John C. Calhoun

Higher education is in the throes of a major transformation. Forcing the transformation are economic conditions, eroding public confidence, accountability demands, and demographic shifts resulting in increased numbers of people from historically underrepresented groups going to college. More people are participating in higher education than ever before, yet the resources supporting the enterprise are not keeping pace with the demand. Because of these and other factors, legislators, parents, governing boards, and students want colleges and universities to reemphasize student learning and personal development as the primary goals of undergraduate education. In short, people want to know that higher education is preparing students to lead productive lives after college including the ability to deal effectively with such major societal challenges as poverty, illiteracy, crime, and environmental exploitation.

Both students and institutional environments contribute to what students gain from college. Thus, the key to enhancing learning and personal development is not simply for faculty to teach more and better, but also to create conditions that motivate and inspire students to devote time and energy to educationally-purposeful activities, both in and outside the classroom. The recent focus on institutional productivity is a clarion call to re-examine the philosophical tenets that guide the professional practice of student affairs and to form partnerships with students, faculty, academic administrators, and others to help all students attain high levels of learning and personal development.

Purpose

This document is intended to stimulate discussion and debate on how student affairs professionals can intentionally create the conditions that enhance student learning and personal development. It is based on the following assumptions about higher education, student affairs, and student development:

- Hallmarks of a college educated person include: (a) complex cognitive skills such as reflection and critical thinking; (b) an ability to apply knowledge to practical problems encountered in one's vocation, family, or other areas of life; an understanding and appreciation of human differences; (d) practical competence skills (e.g., decision making, conflict resolution); and (e) a coherent integrated sense of identify, self-esteem, confidence, integrity, aesthetic sensibilities, and civic responsibility.

The concepts of "learning," "personal development," and "student development" are inextricably intertwined and inseparable. Higher education traditionally has organized its activities into "academic affairs" (learning, curriculum, classrooms, cognitive development) and "student affairs" (co-curriculum, student activities, residential life, affective or personal development). However, this dichotomy has little relevance to post-college life, where the quality of one's job performance, family life, and community activities are all highly dependent on cognitive and affective skills. Indeed, it is difficult to classify many important adult skills (e.g., leadership, creativity, citizenship, ethical behavior, self-understanding, teaching, mentoring) as either cognitive or affective. And, recent research shows that the impact of an institution's "academic" program is mediated by what happens outside the classroom. Peer group relations, for example, appear to influence both affective and cognitive development. For these reasons, the terms learning, student development, and personal development are used interchangeably throughout this document.

- Experiences in various in-class and out-of-class settings, both on and off the campus, contribute to learning and personal development. Indeed, almost any educationally purposeful experience may be a precursor to desired outcomes. However, optimal benefits are more likely to be realized under certain conditions, such as active engagement and collaboration with others (faculty, peers, co-workers, and so on) on learning tasks.
- Learning and personal development occur through transactions between students and their environments broadly defined to include other people (faculty, student affairs staff, peers), physical spaces, and cultural milieus. Some settings tend to be associated with certain kinds of outcomes more so than others. For example, classrooms and laboratories emphasize knowledge acquisition among other things while living in a campus residence, serving as an officer of a campus organization, or working offer opportunities to apply knowledge obtained in the classroom and to develop practical competencies. Environments can be intentionally designed to promote student learning. For example, students learn more when faculty use effective teaching techniques and arrange classroom space to promote interaction and collaboration; similarly, when student affairs staff discourage students from spending time and energy on non-productive pursuits, and encourage them to use institutional resources (e.g., libraries, student organizations, laboratories, studios), to employ effective learning strategies (e.g., study time, peer tutors), and to participate in community governance and other educationally-purposeful activities, students learn more. Institutional and student cultures also influence learning; they warrant attention even though they are difficult to modify intentionally.
- Knowledge and understanding are critical, not only to student success, but also to institutional improvement. To encourage student involvement in learning tasks, thereby improving institutional productivity, the outcomes associated with college attendance must be assessed systematically and the impact of various policies and programs on learning and personal development periodically evaluated.
- Student affairs professionals are educators who share responsibility with faculty, academic administrators, other staff, and students themselves for creating the conditions under which students are likely to expend time and energy in educationally-purposeful activities. They endorse talent development as the over-arching goal of undergraduate education; that is, the college experience should raise students' aspirations and contribute to the development of skills and competencies that enable them to live productive, satisfying lives after college. Thus, student affairs programs and services must be designed and managed with specific student learning and personal development outcomes in mind.

THE LEARNING-ORIENTED STUDENT AFFAIRS DIVISION

A student affairs division committed to student learning and personal development exhibits the following characteristics:

1. THE STUDENT AFFAIRS DIVISION MISSION COMPLEMENTS THE INSTITUTION'S MISSION, WITH THE ENHANCEMENT OF STUDENT LEARNING AND PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT BEING THE PRIMARY GOAL OF STUDENT AFFAIRS PROGRAMS AND SERVICES.

Student affairs professionals take seriously their responsibilities for fostering learning and personal development. Their

efforts are guided by a holistic philosophy of learning that is congruent with their institution's mission and clearly distinguishes between the institution's commitment to process values (e.g., ethnic diversity, gender balance, equity, and justice) and desired outcomes (e.g. student learning and personal development). If learning is the primary measure of institutional productivity by which the quality of undergraduate education is determined, what and how much students learn also must be the criteria by which the value of student affairs is judged (as contrasted with numbers of programs offered or clients served).

Questions and challenges:

- Does the division's mission statement explicitly address student learning and personal development as the primary objectives of student affairs?
- Do staff understand, agree with, and perform in ways congruent with this mission?
- What must staff know to implement this mission?

2. RESOURCES ARE ALLOCATED TO ENCOURAGE STUDENT LEARNING AND PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT.

The division rewards structure values those processes and conditions that are associated with desired student outcomes. The orientation of many student affairs professionals, and the activities in which they engage, emphasize certain aspects of learning and personal development (e.g., psycho-social) over others (e.g., knowledge application or intellectual development). For this reason, student affairs divisions must attract and reward people who design programs, services, and settings that encourage student involvement in activities that have the potential to foster a wide range of learning and personal development outcomes. Staff themselves model such behaviors as collaboration and reflection that are likely to promote learning and participate in training and professional development opportunities that focus on talent development strategies.

Questions and challenges:

- How can student affairs professionals be more intentional about promoting student learning while continuing to provide needed services to students and the institution?
- What is the role of professional associations in preparing student affairs staff to focus on student learning as a primary goal of student affairs?
- To what extent do student affairs staff attend institutes and programs that address the student learning imperative?

3. STUDENT AFFAIRS PROFESSIONALS COLLABORATE WITH OTHER INSTITUTIONAL AGENTS AND AGENCIES TO PROMOTE STUDENT LEARNING AND PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT.

As with other units in a college or university, student affairs divisions often are highly specialized compartmentalized, fragmented units that operate as "functional silos": that is, meaningful collaboration with other units is at best serendipitous. The learning-oriented student affairs division recognizes that students benefit from many and varied experiences during college and that learning and personal development are cumulative, mutually shaping processes that occur over an extended period of time in many different settings. The more students are involved in a variety of activities inside and outside the classroom the more they gain. Student affairs professionals attempt to make "seamless" what are often perceived by students to be disjointed, unconnected experiences by bridging organizational boundaries and forging collaborative partnerships with faculty and others to enhance student learning. Examples of campus agencies that are potentially fruitful links include instructional design centers, academic enrichment programs, and faculty and staff development initiatives. Off-campus agencies (e.g., community service) and settings (e.g., work, church, museums) also offer rich opportunities for learning and students should be systematically encouraged to think

about how their studies apply in those settings and vice versa.

Questions and challenges:

- What are promising strategies for developing collaborative projects between student affairs and other campus and off campus agencies committed to enhancing student learning and personal development?
- How can student affairs professionals help students and faculty to intentionally connect academic work and out-of-class experiences?
- What is the role of professional associations in establishing linkages with other organizations with similar interests?

4. THE DIVISION OF STUDENT AFFAIRS INCLUDES STAFF WHO ARE EXPERTS ON STUDENTS, THEIR ENVIRONMENTS, AND TEACHING AND LEARNING PROCESSES.

Student affairs staff should know how students spend their time and whether students are using the institution's resources to educational advantage. They share responsibility for initiating conversations--with students and other institutional agents--about how students could make more effective use of their time and institutional resources. They monitor whether institutional policies and practices enhance or detract from learning and personal development. More over, they integrate data about student performance from faculty and others with their own observations of students' experiences and disseminate this information to stakeholders.

Questions and challenges:

- How can student affairs staff obtain and synthesize information about student performance?
- What must student affairs staff know and be able to do to assist faculty in creating cooperative learning environments?
- What additional skills and knowledge are needed to successfully translate information about student behavior to faculty and others?

5. STUDENT AFFAIRS POLICIES AND PROGRAMS ARE BASED ON PROMISING PRACTICES FROM THE RESEARCH ON STUDENT LEARNING AND INSTITUTION-SPECIFIC ASSESSMENT DATA.

Certain conditions promote learning more than others. For example, learning and personal development are enhanced when students participate in groups organized around common intellectual, curricular, or career interests. Student affairs professionals should adapt to their institutional setting promising practices from those fields that contribute to the body of knowledge about student learning and personal development. They should routinely collect information to redesign institutional policies and practices and rigorously evaluate their programs and services to determine the extent to which they contribute to the desired outcomes of undergraduate education. Toward this end, student affairs staff should participate in institution-wide efforts to assess student learning and personal development and periodically audit institutional environments to reinforce those factors that enhance, and eliminate those that inhibit, student involvement in educationally- purposeful activities.

Questions and challenges:

- Do student affairs staff have the knowledge and expertise in learning theory and student development research needed to shape policies and practices that will lead to increased levels of student learning, personal development, and institutional productivity?
- What must graduate programs do to prepare the next generation of student affairs professionals to base their

work on theory and research on learning and intellectual as well as psycho-social development?

CONCLUSION

As with individuals, colleges and universities rely on experience to guide behavior. But when external forces (budget constraints, shifting demographics, accountability) produce radical changes, familiar, comfortable practices may no longer work. Change brings uncertainty as well as opportunity.

Student affairs professionals must seize the present moment by affirming student learning and personal development as the primary goals of undergraduate education. Redefining the role of student affairs to intentionally promote student learning and personal development will be dismissed by some as a restatement of the status quo ("old wine in new bottles") or an attempt to rekindle the momentum of a bygone era; others will interpret the message as forsaking the special humanizing role student affairs play in the academy; others will conclude that to proceed as this document suggests will force student affairs to invade faculty territory; still others will be intimidated by the prospect of changing their behavior. None of these views speaks to the concerns of students, parents, and other stakeholders who have high expectations for higher education. Student affairs must model what we wish for our students: an ever increasing capacity for learning and self-reflection. By redesigning its work with these aims in mind, student affairs will significantly contribute to realizing the institution's mission and students' educational and personal aspirations.

CONTRIBUTORS

The Student Learning Project was initiated by ACPA President Charles Schroeder in the fall of 1993 by convening a small group of higher education leaders to examine how student affairs educators could enhance student learning and personal development. The group included Alexander Astin, Helen Astin, Paul Bloland, K. Patricia Cross, James Hurst, George Kuh, Theodore Marchese, Elizabeth Nuss, Ernest Pascarella, Anne Pruitt, Michael Rooney, and Charles Schroeder. Following a three day retreat in Colorado, a version of this document was submitted by George Kuh to spark discussion at the 1994 ACPA meeting in Indianapolis. This is a revised version of the original draft informed by comments and suggestions made at the Indianapolis meeting, and continuing dialogue since in various forms and forums.

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