

Collaborative Common Ground: A Shared Vision of Student Learning

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This study examined the views of student affairs practitioners and undergraduate teaching faculty on 40 student learning goals. The Student Learning Goals Inventory was developed to provide a rating system on three issues: (1) how important is the goal as currently emphasized at the institution, (2) how important should the goal be at the institution, and (3) who should be primarily responsible for assisting students to achieve the learning goal? The results show 18 of 40 goals as shared responsibility, 4 goals identified as primarily faculty responsibility, 1 goal as primarily student affairs responsibility, 3 goals not attributed to either group, and some goals showing split responsibility. The results provide support for moving from a theoretical approach to student learning to a more empirically based practice to guide collaboration for student learning.

The call to action to embrace learning as the guiding philosophy for student affairs practice has been articulated through the Student Learning Imperative (American College Personnel Association, 1994) and Powerful Partnerships (American Association of Higher Education, American College Personnel Association, & National Association of Student Personnel Administrators, 1998). Student affairs professionals have responded with an abundance of scholarly articles, programs, and presentations addressing the transformation from student development to student learning. With momentum building for student learning as philosophy, student affairs professionals are faced with the familiar challenge of transferring this philosophy into practice.

Transferring the philosophy of student learning into student affairs practice demands attention to basic issues that are often unaddressed or unresolved, such as which developmental or educational goals should receive greater emphasis. Shifting paradigms to include learning and development as a unified philosophy requires a study of the often unexamined assumptions that guide student affairs and faculty views of student learning (Kuh, 1996). More specifically, Kuh (1996) asserts that a place to start is revisiting what constitutes learning and exploring the environmental conditions that most effectively foster learning. Determining workable outcomes for student learning presumes that

there exists a vision and set of priorities about student learning that are congruent between faculty and student affairs professionals. Yet, this shared vision has not yet been developed.

To become learning organizations and learning oriented practitioners, faculty and student affairs professionals must develop an individual and collective sense of what matters most within the student learning paradigm (Sorum Brown, 1997). The values of faculty and student affairs professionals about learning and development for students have not yet been examined. Many student affairs professionals assume that faculty values are at the opposite end of the continuum from their own (Blake, 1996). Yet, for collaboration to occur, this dichotomy is clearly counterproductive.

The purpose of this study was to identify student learning goals (academic and developmental) that teaching faculty and student affairs practitioners both view as important in the undergraduate experience. Specifically, faculty and student affairs professionals were asked to rate 40 goals as to their importance, and then to identify whether faculty members or student affairs professionals are primarily responsible for assisting students to achieve the goals. This study provides empirical evidence regarding faculty and student affairs professionals' values related to student learning. The results provide grounding for the transference of student learning philosophy into practice by indicating those goals where collaborative efforts are most valued. In addition, the development of the *Student Learning Goals Inventory* as a part of this study offers an instrument that can be used on individual campuses to provide information needed to prepare for collaboration.

In this study, student learning was defined as the overall undergraduate educational experience inclusive of curricular and co-curricular opportunities. This article discusses those goals which faculty and student affairs professionals both value as having medium to high importance and were identified as being a shared responsibility for both groups to address in their work with students.

Method

Instrument Construction

The studies which have examined shared goals focused primarily on the larger view of institutional goals utilizing the *Institutional Goals Inventory* (Peterson, 1992) which identifies specific student-oriented academic and student development goals in a limited number of areas. A study by Hintz and Stamatakos (1978) examined faculty and student affairs perceived need for cooperation utilizing their own instrument, which identified 22 broadly defined educational outcomes. The *Student Learning Goals Inventory* (Papish, 1998) was constructed to assess how faculty and student affairs professionals rate specific student learning goals. The goal statements were developed using theoretical frameworks and language within the literature that described academic and student development in a contemporary context (Bowen, 1980; Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Hintz & Stamatakos, 1978; Kuh, Shedd, & Whitt, 1991; Winston & Miller, 1996). The 40-item instrument represents a holistic view of what students might learn or experience during a four-year undergraduate

experience.

An exploratory alpha factor analysis with varimax rotation supported a two-factor solution dividing the items into an academic factor and a student development factor (see Table 1). Chronbach Alpha procedures were used as a measure of internal consistency for the factors and resulted in alpha = .92 for factor 1 (academic) and alpha = .91 for factor 2 (student development). Factor 1 and factor 2 combined (all 40 items) represent one student learning construct. Low loadings were not used to eliminate items because each is supported by the literature as a valid student development or academic goal even though it may not statistically strengthen the instrument.

Participants

Data were collected during the 1997-98 academic year at a large, publicly supported, research university in the southeast. A purposeful sample of faculty and student affairs administrators was sought utilizing the entire student affairs professional staff and a random selection of faculty. After eliminating incomplete responses the sample consisted of 97 undergraduate teaching faculty and 73 student affairs professionals, representing return rates of 79% and 81% respectively. The student affairs staff who participated represented 75% of the student affairs professional population while the faculty sample represented less than 10% of undergraduate teaching faculty. Participation in the study was voluntary and confidential.

Procedures

For each individual goal statement, t-tests were used to compare the means of faculty and student affairs professional ratings to examine differences in goal importance. Frequency data indicated the attribution of responsibility for each goal to either faculty, student affairs professionals, shared, or neither, and significant differences were determined using chi-square statistics.

Limitations

The study was administered at a large, public, research institution, which is likely to impact the learning environment and the attitudes of faculty, students, and staff differently from other institutional types. The impact of institutional type, culture, and size cannot be ignored when interpreting the implications of this study.

Faculty and student affairs professionals were asked to rate who was primarily responsible for assisting students to achieve goals, taking into account that students are ultimately responsible for goal achievement. Even though it was specified in the instructions that student responsibility should be assumed, eleven responses did not indicate whether faculty or student affairs were responsible for assisting students. In these instances respondents indicated neither group should bear primary responsibility and wrote in responses such as "where is the student in this equation?" It is not clear from these responses if the respondents did not read the instruction to assume student responsibility or if they truly believed that student affairs and faculty had no responsibility at all for assisting students to achieve those goals.

Table 1
Exploratory Factor Analysis of Student Learning Goals Inventory
(N=170)

	Academic Factor	
Goal Statement (Students will...)		Loading
make appropriate and realistic choices of academic majors		.379
assume responsibility for their actions		.525
develop effective communication skills		.622
acquire the skills, knowledge, and commitment for active citizenship		.589
develop critical thinking skills		.701
embrace life-long learning		.656
develop effective public speaking skills		.466
develop skills for effective studying and academic success		.598
adopt appropriate professional behavior		.638
develop sound quantitative or mathematical skills		.660
acquire substantive knowledge in a chose field or discipline		.648
solidify appropriate career goals		.568
develop skills needed to realize life goals		.525
develop effective interpersonal skills (cooperation, teamwork)		.590
develop skills for inquiry or research		.662
develop skills for problem-solving		.749
develop effective writing skills		.628
get involved in community service		.521
	Student Development Factor	
develop positive peer relationships		.389
be knowledgeable about cultures other than their own		.479
manage psychological stress well enough to meet academic requirements		.485
embrace multiculturalism and show respect for individual differences		.353
develop effective social skills		.543
develop a sense of personal identity		.712
develop an appreciation for improved personal health and wellness		.459
gain a sense of interdependence with other people		.534
develop skills in personal budgeting		.631
learn to explore and manage their emotions appropriately		.773
develop skills needed to establish intimate relationships		.760
establish a sense of personal independence		.588
explore religious/spiritual beliefs		.551
acquire skills or interest in recreational activities		.515
understand issues of alcohol and other drug use		.411
develop leadership skills		.322
explore issues of morality		.503
explore personal values		.691
experience a smooth transition from high school into college		.388
gain an appreciation for the arts		.205
address issues of sexuality		.634
develop skills needed for self-sufficient living		.562

Findings

Responsibility for Goal Achievement

Faculty and student affairs professionals were asked to identify who should be primarily responsible for assisting students with each learning goal. Table 2 displays those goals for which faculty and student affairs administrators significantly differed as to who should be responsible for assisting students.

Faculty Responsibility. Four academic goals were identified primarily as the responsibility of faculty. Each of these four goals received agreement from 67% or more of both faculty and student affairs professionals. The four goals identified primarily as the domain of faculty are developing sound quantitative and mathematical skills, acquiring substantive knowledge in a chosen field or discipline, developing skills for inquiry or research, and developing effective writing skills.

Student Affairs Professional Responsibility. The goal of acquiring skills or interest in recreational activities was seen as primarily the domain of student affairs professionals by 46% of faculty and 60% of student affairs professionals. Managing psychological stress sufficiently to meet academic requirements was rated by 52% of faculty as a student affairs goal as compared to 64% of student affairs professionals and 42% of faculty who viewed this as a shared goal. Understanding issues of alcohol and other drug use was rated by 66% of faculty as a student affairs goal, as compared to 64% of student affairs professionals who viewed it as a shared goal. Student affairs professionals (75%) viewed experiencing a smooth transition from high school into the college environment as a shared goal, while faculty were split with the goal as both student affairs professionals' responsibility (51%) and shared (48%).

Table 2
Significant Differences Between Faculty and Student Affairs
Administrators Views of Primary Responsibility (n=170)

Goal Statement (Students will ...)	Chi-square	p
be knowledgeable of cultures other than their own develop	12.34	.000
effective communication skills	27.91	.000
develop critical thinking skills	35.85	.000
develop skills in personal budgeting	8.28	.004
develop skills needed to establish intimate relationships	9.10	.003
develop sound quantitative/mathematical skills	6.92	.009
acquire skill or interest in recreational activities understand	7.65	.006
issues of alcohol and other drug use experience a smooth	8.69	.003
transition from high school	19.12	.000
into the college environment	27.64	.000
develop skills for problem solving		

df=1

Shared Responsibility. Eighteen goals were identified by 50% or more of faculty and student affairs professionals as having shared responsibility (see Table 3). These goals ranged from developing public speaking skills (50% of faculty, 64% of student affairs professionals) to solidifying appropriate career goals (79% of faculty, 86% of student affairs professionals).

Neither Faculty Nor Student Affairs Responsibility. Three of the goals were rated high by both faculty and student affairs professionals as the responsibility of neither group. The goals (personal budgeting, developing skills needed to establish intimate relationships, and exploring religious/spiritual beliefs) were identified by a majority of faculty (65%, 63%, and 68%, respectively) as being a responsibility of neither group. Student affairs professionals viewed these goals more than any others as the responsibility of neither group (40%, 33%, and 41%, respectively). Twenty-four respondents wrote in that they believe the student should be primarily responsible for these goals.

Split/Mixed Responsibility. A number of goals could not be categorized by any one of the response categories, but received a range of responses from both groups. For example, 88% of student affairs professionals felt that developing effective communication skills was a shared responsibility, while faculty were split regarding student affairs professionals (48%) or shared (48%) responsibility.

Table 3
Shared Goals for Faculty and Student Affairs Administrators
Identified by 50% Or More Of Both Faculty And Student Affairs
Administrators (n=170)

Goal Statement (Students will ...)
develop positive peer relationships
make appropriate and realistic choices of academic majors
assume responsibility for their actions
be knowledgeable of cultures other than their own
acquire skills, knowledge, and commitment for active citizenship
embrace multiculturalism and show respect for individual differences
embrace life-long learning
develop effective public speaking skills
gain a sense of interdependence with others
develop skills for effective studying and academic success
adopt appropriate professional behavior
solidify appropriate career goals
develop leadership skills
develop skills needed to realize life goals
explore issues of morality
develop effective interpersonal skills
gain an appreciation for the arts
develop skills for problem solving

Two other goals (developing critical thinking skills and getting involved in community service) reflect response patterns with student affairs professionals and faculty spread out across all categories.

Conclusions

The results of this study shed valuable light on the concept of student learning. Beliefs that faculty and student affairs are polar opposites (Blake, 1996) or that there is little readiness for cooperation (Hintz & Stamatakos, 1978) are not supported. Evidence exists that faculty and student affairs professionals both identify academic goals as the most important for student learning (Papish, 1998). While faculty place student development goals as secondary to academic goals, both groups rated numerous student development goals as important to student learning (Papish, 1998). Faculty and student affairs professionals agreed that four goals were specifically the responsibility of faculty, and one specifically the responsibility of student affairs. Most significant are the 18 goals seen as shared responsibility. It appears that through the identification of shared goals institutions can best achieve the challenge of creating environments most conducive to student learning (American Association of Higher Education, American College Personnel Association, & National Association of Student Personnel Administrators, 1998).

Although it is commonplace to refer to the gap between academic affairs and student affairs, there is little empirical evidence about the nature of this gap. The findings of this study provide some insight into some evidence about the degree to which priorities for student learning are shared between faculty and student affairs professionals.

At the institution used for this study, a collaborative initiative aimed at the development of critical thinking skills is not likely to appeal to faculty since 68% see this as primarily a faculty responsibility. Similarly, faculty are not likely to collaborate on a developmental goal such as recreational skills since that outcome is seen as primarily a student affairs responsibility. The potential for success in collaborative partnerships is more favorable in those areas where the difference in priorities is minimal or non-existent between faculty and student affairs. An initiative on leadership skills is a potentially powerful topic for collaboration since 73% of faculty and 78% of student affairs professionals see this as a shared responsibility. While there may be gaps between faculty and student affairs views there are 18 goals (academic and student development) which can now be identified as areas for potential collaborative approaches.

Creating a completely seamless learning environment may be an ideal which cannot be achieved at most institutions. Yet, collaboration toward this aim need not be based solely on experience, hunch or assumption. Through systematic assessment, issues can be identified which cross boundaries, real or mythical, and allow for intentional approaches to collaboration with greater potential for success (Schroeder, 1999). The *Student Learning Goals Inventory* created for this study is one tool that student affairs professionals can use to move from a philosophy of student learning into practice. The gap between academic affairs and student affairs may be closing, and the potential for more powerful learning

environments will increase as professionals determine specific areas that are most likely to lead to profitable collaborative efforts.

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