

Contemplating the Myths of Student Affairs

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The author explores the myths fashioned during the growth of student affairs and discusses their implications for student affairs administrators. Among the myths she contests are that the field lacks a professional philosophy, that it was founded "by default," and that it must have an educational mission equal to that of the faculty.

Cultures have a corpus of myths. These myths are stories people tell about themselves to celebrate their heroes and heroines, pass on generational wisdom, and build unity among community members (Manning, 1989; 1994a; 1994b). While myths are conducive to budding viable cultures and communities, these same cultural artifacts can also be divisive and misguided. When myths are built on a negative or inadequate interpretation of past events, they can persuade people, perhaps an entire community, that they occupy a lesser place in history or position within their organization.

This article explores several myths within student affairs which prevent practitioners from fully realizing their potential. These myths include notions that student affairs lacks a well-formed and coherent professional

philosophy, was founded "by default," and must have an educational mission equal to that of the faculty.

By addressing these myths, student affairs educators can reconceptualize the field's origins and future as well as more astutely conceive a credible educational mission. The purpose of this article is to consider what student affairs educators have come to believe about themselves through the perpetuation of negative myth-making. Throughout the article, student affairs is discussed not from an apologetic stance of second class citizenship but from its position as a critical component of higher education in the United States (Penney, 1969).

In Need of a Philosophy

The first myth within student affairs is that the field lacks a professional philosophy. This myth is most articulately expressed in the article, "Student affairs: A profession in need of a philosophy" (Stamatakos & Rogers, 1984). The authors stated that student affairs lacks

a complete, internally consistent, clearly articulated, accepted, and effectively promulgated philosophy ... the result has been discord and divisiveness within the profession, identity crisis for the individual practitioner, and confusion among faculty and administrators regarding student affairs' necessity within and contribution to the collegiate experience (p. 400).

The view that the field lacks a coherent, complete philosophy is supported by Knock (1988) who claimed that the founding statements (American Council on Education [ACE], 1937; 1949) are "more a declaration of purpose and commitment than a philosophical dictum" (p. 3). Basing his argument in educational philosophy, Knock grounded student affairs practice in rationalism (e.g., development of human intellect and reasoning power), neo-humanism (e.g., education of the whole person within the context of a mind/body dualism), pragmatism (e.g., an experiential, theory and practice approach based in democracy and liberalism), and existentialism (e.g., responsibility for development rests with the student).

Stamatakos and Rodgers, reflecting a neo-humanist philosophy, expanded the call for a well-founded philosophy by grounding student affairs in a

liberal arts philosophy. Such an approach, they argued, would better link student affairs purposes with the higher education mission. This strategy would also more closely bond the field to the faculty and their pursuits. Using a liberal arts perspective, student affairs could expand beyond its psychology and counseling heritage (Penney, 1969).

The view expressed in the present article is that the American Council on Education (1937; 1949) founding documents cannot be expected to stand on their own as a coherent practice-based educational philosophy. Instead, the mission and purposes within the 1937 and 1949 statements should be coupled with educational philosophy to provide the foundation recommended in those founding documents. In other words, educational philosophy can provide an ideological foundation; the *Student Personnel Point of View* (ACE, 1937; 1949) dovetails with that philosophy to form a coherent outlook on the field.

For example, the 1937 *Student Personnel Point of View* stated that student affairs exists

to assist the student in developing to the limits of his potentialities and in making his contribution to the betterment of society (ACE, 1937, p. 1).

While this student personnel point of view may seem too rudimentary and obvious to act as a coherent and complete philosophy, one can be impressed by the simple and elegant statement of purpose. Student affairs educators teach by assisting students to realize their full developmental potential.

A second perspective suggested in the *1937 Student Personnel Point of View* is that student affairs educators are involved in the "betterment of society." The goals of bettering society can be defined in current campus practice as celebrating diversity, sustaining the environment, educating toward world peace, and teaching students to get along with one another in residence halls and in leadership situations.

The 1937 *Student Personnel Point of View* also suggests that

this philosophy imposes upon educational institutions the obligation to consider the student as a whole It puts emphasis ... upon the development of the student as a person rather than upon his intellectual training alone (ACE, 1937, p. 1).

These statements and the student affairs field in general clearly reflect the educational philosophies of pragmatism and existentialism. Understanding that the ideas within the *Student Personnel Point of View* exist within the context of educational philosophy eliminates the yearning for an independently produced student affairs philosophy. Student affairs is an applied field in the discipline of education (Knock, 1988); its mission and purposes are linked to educational philosophy through practice and theory.

Founded "by Default"

The second myth preventing student affairs from fully achieving its potential is that the field was founded "by default." Surprisingly, early writers from within student affairs used these somewhat pejorative words to describe the field's origins. Illustrations of the "by default" assumption are numerous:

Higher education took the wrong fork in the road when it thrust personnel maintenance upon staff with specialized duties in many instances the tasks were accepted in good faith and/or by default (Brown, 1972, p. 37).

We began by serving needs that had been pushed to the periphery, and some would argue that the field has remained there ever since If faculty at the turn of the century had viewed what we did as important, we probably would not exist in the organizational form found today (Appleton, Briggs, & Rhatigan, 1978, pp. 12-13).

Student services emerged and evolved by default, by taking over necessary and sometimes unpopular tasks abandoned by trustees, administrators, and faculty (Fenske, 1989, p. 6).

Generally understood, "by default" means that student affairs educators perform the *functions* faculty will not undertake. According to this perspective, the faculty, in fact, once performed out of classroom roles as advisors, house parents, and counselors (National Association of Student Personnel Administrators, 1987). These out of classroom roles were abandoned in the mid-nineteenth century when faculty embraced the German higher education system's research emphasis (Fenske, 1989; Kerr, 1963; Knock, 1988; Rudolph, 1990). During and following this shift in faculty practice, "the individuality and personal development of students"

and "the welfare of students outside of the classroom" were no longer faculty concerns (Knock, p. 11). The faculty reward system for reappointment, promotion, and tenure at research universities as well as liberal arts colleges focused on achievements in research, teaching, and service, respectively (Birnbaum, 1991).

One cannot deny that Colonial era and nineteenth century faculty fulfilled a valuable higher education role by managing the out of classroom life (Fenske, 1989; Rudolph, 1990). But that out of classroom life was profoundly different from the one currently managed by student affairs educators. Between 1900 and today, student affairs adopted two founding documents (American Council on Education, 1937; 1949) and numerous defining statements (Council of Student Personnel Associations in Higher Education, 1975; NASPA, 1987). Professional standards (Council on the Advancement of Standards, 1986) were established, refined, and expanded. Student affairs progressed beyond *in loco parentis* and caretaking to encompass leadership development, service learning, career development, and programs and services not within the purview of the faculty. Despite any historic lack of design or planning, the current form and aspects of the field emanate not by "default" but from a legitimate campus need for the services provided by student affairs professionals.

Throughout the 1940s and the 1960s, student populations and institutions expanded exponentially (Appleton, Briggs, & Rhatigan, 1978; Fenske, 1989; Kerr, 1963; Levine, 1989). Student affairs flourished with the concurrent growth of higher education. Student development theory was introduced and continues to mature. The original developmental theory (Chickering, 1969; Kohlberg, 1981; Miller & Prince, 1976; Perry, 1970) was expanded and refined (Baxter Magolda, 1992; Chickering & Reisser, 1993). Traditional models based on predominantly male samples were enriched with theory that took into account gender and racial differences (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberg, & Tarule, 1986; Gilligan, 1984; McEwen, Roper, Bryant, & Langa, 1990). Federal and state support of higher education waxed and waned throughout the development of student affairs, creating peaks and valleys of support and growth and of opposition and downsizing. In sum, higher education and student affairs, both in and out of the classroom, barely resemble practices in Colonial era or the nineteenth century colleges. If once "founded by default," we currently exist because of need and demand.

Founded By Need

When student affairs educators speak of the field as founded "by default," this language implies that today's student affairs roles mimic the faculty out of classroom role of the past. If this perspective prevails, student affairs educators will invariably wrestle with misunderstandings about their educational and administrative role. In addition to these misunderstandings, our history remains distorted and understated. It is time to abandon the notion that student affairs educators currently assume roles previously shed by faculty. A more correct interpretation holds that student affairs expanded with the needs of a growing higher education system.

Collegiate missions, administrator roles, and faculty circumstances are now too complex (Burnham, 1991; Cohen & March, 1974; Weick, 1979) for a return to the halcyon days when students required limited services and faculty could double as house parents and advisors. The contemporary faculty role of teaching, research, and service (Smith, 1990) is extremely different from the predominantly teaching role of the late 1800s and early 1900s (Rudolph, 1990). The student affairs administrative role, composed of counseling, programming, administering services, and managing environments, experienced concomitant change and growth. The advent of student development theory, enrollment management, and a better understanding of organizational theory (Creamer, 1990; Delworth & Hanson, 1989) all combine to provide student affairs with a growing theoretical foundation. The professional knowledge and expertise necessary to perform current student affairs functions differs profoundly from the skills needed by the faculty.

If student affairs educators accept that the field was founded by need and expanded by demand, they can promote a fuller understanding of its tradition and history. As institutions flourished after World War II and during the "golden years" of the 1960s (Kerr, 1963), there was a *need*, caused by a demand for services and programs, for an expanded group of administrators. These administrator educators became responsible for the development of the whole student and for the creation of out of classroom learning opportunities complementing the academic purposes of the faculty. Concurrent with this growth of a new educational specialty, colleges and universities became more complex with the proliferation of disciplines and majors, diversity of institutional missions, and partnerships with industry and schools (Levine, 1989; NASPA, 1987; Weick, 1983).

As colleges and universities began to serve a more diverse clientele after World War II and throughout the 1970s, faculty alone could not meet the growing needs of students (Sandeen, 1991).

The long-standing confusion about student affairs being founded "by default" takes on new meaning as campuses experience downsizing, strategic planning, and budget crises. With these changes, well-founded fear grows that student affairs divisions and positions will be cut. Despite these realities, one cannot assume that higher education institutions will experience a major philosophical shift from student affairs being directed by administrators to having those same educational services completely eliminated or managed by faculty.

Equal to the Academic Mission

The final myth explored is that to be effective student affairs must have an educational mission "equal to" that of the academic mission. This myth is problematic in that any refutation of its sentiment cuts to the core of the student affairs professional identity. The literature often discusses the importance of the field in terms of the substantial time students spend in co-curricular activities (Boyer, 1987), the amount learned in the out of classroom environment (Sandeen, 1991), and, therefore, the equal, if not elevated, importance of student affairs.

This article suggests that student affairs educators consider their role as essential, not because of their relative importance to the academic mission, but because their purposes and mission are intrinsically essential to the mission of higher education.

Complementary Mission

Rather than arguing for equality to the academic mission, one can talk about a complementary, though no less essential, mission (NASPA, 1987). Both academic and student affairs missions are of value despite their profoundly different approaches. While both seek to produce an educated person, their means to that end are radically different. The faculty teach in a formal manner in the classroom where rules of authority and decorum, depending on the individual professor, are established and explicitly defined. Student affairs educators teach outside the classroom, using an informal style based on an affable relationship with the learner. The student is challenged to develop socially, intellectually, and physically as far

and as ably as he or she is capable. Faculty centered teaching is structured around a disciplinary content which is shared, refined, and produced. Student affairs teaching, in contrast, is predominantly experiential rather than content centered: one learns by doing, receiving feedback about that doing, and reflecting upon the results.

The assumption of a complementary relationship between the academic and student affairs missions does not diminish the role of the latter. The higher education environment would be diminished without student affairs' caring presence in building community, teaching leadership, and advocating for students. Student affairs educators build and foster a supportive community so that all students can pursue critical thinking and learning-inside and outside the classrooms. The question at issue is, can student affairs educators and faculty fulfill different roles within different cultures yet be intimately bound to each other's purposes in a complementary fashion?

Conclusions

Student affairs educators should reconceptualize the myths that divert them from their central and essential place in higher education. They function on campus, not within a field founded "by default" or peopled with "second class citizens" (Brown, 1972) but as vibrant and integral members of the higher education community firmly grounded in insights gained from educational philosophy.

In order to achieve the goal of reconceptualizing these long-standing myths, the following actions are suggested:

1. Student affairs educators should periodically review the *Student Personnel Point of View* (ACE 1937; 1949) and examine their professional philosophy in light of the documents' insights. The intention of this exercise is to gain inspiration about the mission of student affairs practice within higher education as well as his or her role in light of those purposes. The review should be coupled with a rather thorough consideration of the philosophy which defines educational practice.

2. Student affairs educators should cease the unproductive debate about the value of student affairs as compared to that of faculty. We should no longer frame dialogue about our practice as "equal to" or "better than" their teaching, research, and service activities. Rather, student affairs educators can formulate an unapologetic stance about their

essential, albeit supportive (NASPA, 1987), role on campus. Administrator and faculty relationships can be discussed in collaborative terms whereby students, faculty, and administrators jointly construct learning communities on their campuses.

3. A major purpose of student affairs work is to build an environment that supports academic achievement and stimulates student development. This complex work requires skilled practitioners working in conjunction with all members of the higher education community. Professional development and advanced education are necessary for student affairs educators to remain competent and effective in these pivotal campus positions.

These three suggestions merely scratch the surface of actions necessary to reconceptualize the myths of second class citizenship within student affairs. As higher education changes over the next 20 years, student affairs educators require a thorough understanding of the field's notable set of beliefs reflecting our central role in higher education.

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Understanding Black Student Culture and Black Student Retention

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The study examines black student culture at a predominantly white liberal arts and engineering university; the values, beliefs, academic orientation to the college, and interactions of black students are studied, using a questionnaire and a theory of interpersonal environments. The findings raise issues relevant to retention services and to institutional response to black students and black student culture.

Introduction

African American students have been a significant part of the predominantly white college and university environment since 1954 (Fleming, 1984). While black students have attended institutions of higher education for many decades, their participation level has varied and their experiences have not been studied and interpreted from a student culture perspective (Kuh and Whitt, 1988; Person, 1990). Although there have been many recruitment, persistence, and retention studies, these have rarely investigated the influence of the black student culture on student recruitment and persistence.

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