



Article

Reflecting On the Past; Shaping the Future of Student Affairs

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The purpose of this essay is to offer several reflections on the content of the Envisioning Student Affairs document co-published by ACPA and NASPA. The metaphor of a public art exhibit with five reflective questions is used to inspire educators to think critically about serving students. As the demographics of students pursuing higher education changes, we urge a recommitment to historically underserved student populations. This call to service invokes a social justice philosophy when we serve historically marginalized student groups, including but not limited to immigrants, students of color, and first-generation learners. Doing so will engage students and reenergize our commitment to the profession. (100 words)

Key Words: IMMIGRANT; STUDENT ENGAGEMENT; FIRST-GENERATION; STUDENT SUCCESS; SOCIAL JUSTICE; STUDENTS OF COLOR

Reflecting On the Past; Shaping the Future of Student Affairs

What is the purpose of our work as student affairs practitioners? Are we making a difference where a difference *really* matters? A thorough self-examination of our profession—with a focus on future directions—can serve as a helpful exercise during these times of great change. The primary objective of this scholarly essay is to offer several reflections on the content of the *Envisioning Student Affairs* document co-published by the American College Personnel Association (ACPA) and National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA) task forces in 2010. More specifically, we advocate for a recommitment for student affairs professionals to focus on success for all students, including historically marginalized and underserved student groups in higher education contexts (e.g., including but not limited to students of color, immigrant students, first-generation learners, low-income students, and students with disabilities). The article will conclude with several insights about future directions for practitioners and the profession of student affairs.

Setting the Context

Applying a Public Art Framework to Student Affairs

As a way of providing contextual background for this piece, a brief personal narrative is in order. My family and I (lead author) live in an urban area of St. Paul, MN, not far from the Mississippi River. On a recent crisp September morning, I decided to explore one of the new phases of a trail that connects the river to the inner urban core of downtown Minneapolis. This trail is the Midtown Greenway (<http://midtowngreenway.org/trailusers/>), and it runs approximately seven miles before connecting to other tributaries around the city. The Greenway is a bike and pedestrian trail that was constructed in the mid-1990s on an old railway bed. Designed by a local firm, the project included input from public participants and residents, many

who are recent immigrants (e.g., East and West Africans, Hmong, and Hispanic groups) that live in neighborhoods surrounding the trail. The participants contributed ideas around abstract themes and design criteria. Later, I learned that the overarching theme of the project is *personal journeys*.

Along the Greenway, there are five rest stops representing various sub-themes: culture, nature, entertainment, the past, and work. Additionally, each stop has an inviting bench with bronze shoe sculptures attached to the structure. There are artistic sign posts supported from the base with an inscription approximately 25 feet in the air. At each stop, these signs ask visitors five separate questions about the journeys they have taken during their own lifetimes. The five prompts or directional sign posts can be adapted to reflect on the future of student affairs as a profession as well as our place within the higher education landscape. The five questions are:

**Where are we headed?*

**Where do we stand?*

**What is our story?*

**What is our hope?*

**When will we dance?*

In the subsequent sections, we explore each question and apply it to core features of the task force document weaving in personal reflections. It should be noted that these are rhetorical inquiries; we provide insights but there are no clear or concrete answers. We invite readers to ponder and discuss these questions, and consider how to apply our contributions to your own work with students. Given the growing diversity in the college student population, we need to refocus future efforts on addressing and serving the needs of historically underserved student groups.

Overview of Directional Sign Posts

Where Are We Headed? A Look at Student Demographics and Trends

Where are we going as a profession? Higher education will continue to be impacted by the changing demographics of students seeking educational opportunities as well as global, multicultural, and technological influences (Lane, 2011). As mentioned in the *Envisioning* document, there are numerous contextual influences occurring nationally and globally that are impacting higher education and student affairs work. Examples include globalization, demand for higher education, gaps in educational attainment and achievement, expanding technologies, internationalization, and economic fluctuations. Global interconnectedness will impact work and life more than ever before; for better or worse, we and our students are immersed in technology, including multimedia tools (e.g., social networking) that make it easier to communicate with others around the world.

Related to this issue of globalization, there are current changes in terms of shifting demographics that will likely impact the profiles of prospective college students and our work with students (Camarota, 2010); for example, the number of both legal and illegal immigrants has increased in the United States over the last two decades (Camarota, 2010; Conway, 2009; Malone, Baluja, Costanzo, & Davis, 2003). Although the number of new arrivals in recent years has plateaued, there are currently over 38 million foreign-born individuals residing in the United States based on U.S. census figures. Furthermore, minorities and immigrants are expected to constitute a larger share of the United States population by 2018 (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2010). Early previews of the 2010 United States Census indicated that during the past decade the United States passed the 300 million mark in population; approximately 83% of that growth came from non-Whites. In fact, nearly one out of four Americans under 18 has at least one

immigrant parent according to recent analysis of American Survey data released through the Brookings Institute (Wilson & Singer, 2011).

Additionally, the 2010 Census reported a 43% increase in the Hispanic population, accounting for over half of the population growth. Hispanics are currently the fastest growing segment of the U.S. population (Humes, Jones, & Ramirez, 2011, 2011). These numbers will likely increase in the future. What does this mean for higher education and student affairs? Based on immigration trends, predictions indicate that there will be a significant growth of immigrant college students on college campuses (2-year and 4-year institutions) in the near future (Erisman & Looney, 2007). This student population will largely be comprised of individuals who are first-generation, low-income, and/or members of minority groups who have been historically marginalized in higher education. Many of these students will begin their journeys in the community college and 2-year systems (Conway, 2010).

Student affairs practitioners play key roles in helping to better understand the needs, issues, and goals of historically underserved groups—including immigrant student groups—as they strive towards their academic and professional objectives (Stebbleton, 2011). From a higher education perspective, it is vitally important that prospective immigrant college students gain access to postsecondary institutions *and* achieve success once admitted. Historically marginalized students (e.g., students of color, immigrant students, first-generation students, low-income) continue to make progress in terms of gaining access to higher education opportunities (Adelman, 2007), but success in terms of graduation and retention rates have lagged when compared to their peer groups (Jehangir, 2010; Mortenson, 2008; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Engstrom and Tinto (2008) contended that access without support is not opportunity. Student affairs professionals need to ensure success for all students. As described in the *Envisioning the*

Future of Student Affairs document “student affairs professionals must become more skillful in working with diverse learners and more attentive to policies that create barriers for those who may not fit the traditional image of a college student or of how college is experienced . . . true success must be ensured” (ACPA & NASPA, 2010, p. 9). Success begins by keeping true to our values.

Where Do We Stand? Placing Students at the Center

As aptly articulated by the task force contributors, in these unsettled times it is vital to identify and hold onto a mission that is centered on personal and institutional values: “never lose sight of the fundamental purpose for which your work exists and the core values it honors” (ACPA & NASPA, 2010, p. 13). Where do we stand as student affairs practitioners and educators? The answer to this question is both personal yet collective when we envision the future of the profession. From our perspective, the response to this inquiry is fairly straightforward: our students need to remain at the center of everything that we do. This statement is congruent with the foundational documents mentioned in the task force document, including the *Principles of good Practice for Student Affairs* (ACPA, 1997). Included in this list is the charge to build supportive and inclusive communities. It is this last principle (builds supportive and inclusive communities) that most closely ties to the mission of serving the historically underserved student groups as noted previously. Do your personal and institutional mission statements include advocating for social justice causes and services that support historically marginalized groups?

If student affairs practitioners are committed to the foundational principles and core values of the student affairs profession, we must find new and innovative strategies to support these programs and related student services. For example, many 2-year and 4-year institutions

house a TRiO program on campus. TRiO is a federally-funded program administered by the United States Department of Education that has a rich history of serving primarily disenfranchised student groups—first-generation, low-income, student with disabilities, and immigrant students. Many of these students are students of color and/or first in their families to pursue a 4-year degree. Yet these programs (e.g., Upward Bound, Student Support Services, and McNair Scholars) are consistently threatened by budget cuts and must continually promote reasons for their existence. Supporting these programs is essential, whether directly (e.g., participating in a program) or more indirectly (e.g., writing a letter of support to your representative or lobbyist on behalf of the initiative). Again, it is important that we create success opportunities for all students irrespective of age, race/ethnicity, national origin, sexual orientation, ability level, or socioeconomic status. Facilitating student success begins with student engagement; this may require student affairs educators to adapt current tasks in order to play a more active role in student engagement objectives.

Student affairs practitioners can assume leadership roles in helping to create and support opportunities for greater *student engagement* for all students. Research has demonstrated that intentional learning activities that are integrated into the curriculum can be impactful for most students, but especially students of color (Lardner & Malnarich, 2008). Kuh (2008) outlined high impact educational practices that institutions can implement to enhance academic and social engagement. These practices include first-year seminars and experiences, common intellectual experiences (e.g., common book), learning communities, writing-intensive courses, collaborative assignments and projects, undergraduate research, diversity/global learning opportunities, service learning/community-based learning, internships, and capstone courses and projects. High impact educational practices tend to positively impact student engagement and student success (Kuh,

2009); however, Kuh (2008) indicated that there are at least two challenges that student affairs educators can help address. First, there are presently not enough high impact opportunities offered at most institutions. Second, students of color tend to participate less frequently in these opportunities than White students do (even though the compensatory effects are greater for students of color). In other words, the impact on student engagement and success is even higher for students of color. Research has demonstrated that diverse student populations experience engagement in varied ways (Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Harper & Quaye, 2009). Student affairs educators can build collaborative relationships with divisions of academic affairs as well as other partnerships (Stebbleton & Schmidt, 2010); they can become involved in first-year experience initiatives such as learning communities (Shapiro & Levine, 1999); and they can teach or facilitate in programs that best serve students (Stuart Hunter & Murray, 2007).

The student affairs profession has a rich history as evidenced in the foundational documents. Much of this history is grounded in serving a diverse student population and helping to prepare students for life after graduation (Dungy, 2011). It is this reflection on the past that leads us to future.

What Is Our Story? Developing the Whole Student

As eloquently described in the task force document, student affairs can learn from the field's past to help shape its future. Recognizing the contributions from a rich history described in the foundational documents is vital. What is our narrative as a profession? The answer lies in a foundational commitment to develop the *whole* student (Braxton, 2009; Brown, 2011; Torres, Jones, & Renn, 2009). Brown (2011) defined the whole student as concern for moral education, character development, and spiritual development; this would include issues related to meaning-making and purpose (Astin, Astin, & Lindholm, 2011; Baxter Magolda, 2009; Nash & Murray,

2010). Most of the early historical documents include an emphasis on student affairs educators working to develop the complete or whole student. In other words, there is a holistic approach to student development (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2010), including psychological, emotional, vocational, and spiritual development.

Sandeen and Barr (2006) suggested that student affairs educators should periodically review and reinforce the foundations of the profession—**now** is one of those times. According to the *Student Personnel Point of View* (American Council of Education, 1949) there are several objectives that student affairs personnel assist students to achieve. Several of these goals include the following: the student progressively understands himself (sic); the student understands and uses his (sic) emotions; the student develops lively and significant interests; the student progresses toward appropriate vocational goals; the student discovers ethical and spiritual meaning in life; and the student prepares for satisfying, constructive post-college activity.

Upon reflecting on the *Student Personnel Point of View* (American Council of Education, 1949) and other foundational documents, we question whether we have somehow stepped slightly *off* the path along our collective journey. In our attempt to master our individual tasks in our respective silos (whether career services, residential life, student judicial affairs), have we inadvertently overlooked the value and merit of educating the whole student? Has our pursuit and struggle for individual professional identity (i.e., increase in specialized associations) overshadowed our goal of a shared identity as a unified profession that can best serve students and student affairs professionals? Sandeen and Barr (2006) suggested that “the most serious problem resulting from the astonishing proliferation of specialty professional associations in student affairs in that it has made a mockery of the most important idea of the profession: a commitment to the whole student” (p. 188). We agree with Sandeen and Barr and suggest that a

reaffirmation to serving the whole student is needed at this time; consequently, student affairs educators have an opportunity to work collaboratively to fulfill this objective.

We offer a second insight on another theme that is connected to learning from the field's past—responding to the increasing diversity of students. Our profession was built on social justice principles and values, including a focus on meeting the needs of the new arrivals to the United States at the beginning of the 20th century (Parsons, 1909). Student affairs educators are in a position to help the new residents at the onset of a new century. Acknowledgement of the past can influence the present and future. At the beginning of the 20th century (early 1900s), there was an influx of new immigrants to the United States, primarily from Eastern European countries. During this time, the birth of the vocational guidance movement took place (which would later be termed career development). Frank Parsons, known as the founder of career development counseling, and the early social reformers assisted these new immigrants to find work and educational options (Baker, 2009; Parsons, 1909; Spokane & Glickman, 1994; Stebleton, in press). In many ways, the social reformers who helped the disenfranchised were some of the first student affairs professionals.

Allow us to fast forward 110 plus years to the present time. Once again we are near the beginning of another century highlighted by tumultuous change—economically, politically, and socially. The impact of globalization, internationalization, and technology is dramatic. The current economic situation in the United States and internationally has resulted in the layoffs of thousands of workers; it is a dire time in our history. Yet many individuals and their families envision immigrating to the United States, much like the immigrant groups of earlier centuries. Instead of massive immigrant influxes from European countries, demographers indicate that newer immigrant groups are travelling from various countries in Africa, Southeast Asia, Mexico,

Latin America, and other geographic locations. Student affairs educators can honor a call to service similar to the response of Parsons and his social reformer colleagues. The opportunity to serve this growing immigrant student population will continue in the future as greater numbers enter institutions of higher education.

What Is Our Hope? Serving the Historically Underserved

Analyzing the past lends insight to the present as well as goals for the future. What is our hope? What are collective future goals of the student affairs profession? There are potentially numerous and thought-provoking responses to this question, perhaps without a clear consensus. We hope that the barriers and educational gaps between the privileged and the historically marginalized will be reduced over time; that access to higher education opportunities and success will be possibilities for all students that seek them. Although an exhaustive discussion of this prompt is not feasible, we list several goals that are specific to meeting the needs of diverse learners. Student affairs practitioners ideally can help to meet these goals through mutual collaboration with other key stakeholders on campus in the form of partnerships between student affairs and academic affairs (Whitt et al., 2008).

First, we call for a renewed focus on access **and** support for all students, including historically underserved student populations and immigrant learners. Programs targeting underserved groups should exist beyond the first-year and be intentionally designed with specific learning and developmental outcomes.

Second, a concentrated effort should center on improved measures of student success (persistence; graduation rates) for all students, but especially historically underserved groups. Targeted initiatives (e.g., Summer Bridge options, McNair scholars) should continue to be funded to help students succeed and persist towards graduation. As is the case with

interventions, ongoing assessment and evaluation should be embedded into program budgets, and student affairs practitioners should play an active role in helping to build strong cultures of evidence at their respective institutions (Oburn, 2005).

Third, student affair practitioners can assist to promote an increase in the number of high impact activities available to all students; there should be greater participation rates in high impact practices from students of color and underserved groups as described by Kuh (2008). More opportunities need to exist and then student affairs practitioners should actively promote and encourage all students to participate. Related to this issue of active participation, we call for a greater use of student services across the entire student population. According to Kuh (1998), about 10% of the students consume about 80% of staff time and attention. Often, underserved students do not interact with student affairs practitioners on a regular basis. For example, Kim (2009) discovered that many immigrant college students enrolled at large, public universities do not use institutional agents and student services to get information; they rely on peers instead. A significant change would mean altering the roles of student affairs professionals and creating new ways to reach students and market student services and programming (e.g., Facebook, use of social media, and other technologies).

Fourth, we believe that more efforts at the local and national levels need to be made to help immigrant students, including undocumented families and prospective students (Gildersleeve, 2010; Ortiz & Hinojosa, 2010). As of this writing, incremental progress has been achieved on the Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors Act, or DREAM Act (e.g., California Governor Jerry Brown recently signed into law policy that would allow illegal immigrants access to privately financed scholarships to attend state universities). This particular issue is no doubt controversial as is the current debate surrounding immigration issues nationally

and internationally. Yet we strongly believe that the fight must continue. Advocacy efforts can be made to expand the objectives of the DREAM Act to undocumented immigrant families across the United States. At the federal level the DREAM Act would allow undocumented students to qualify for in-state tuition and have a pathway to citizenship. The bill has been introduced in the Senate several times since 2001. In the past the federal DREAM Act has received bipartisan support, but recently it has lost many of its more conservative supporters. At the state level, the DREAM Act has been more successful: currently 11 states have passed and implemented their own versions of the DREAM Act.

Finally, there is the issue of affordability of a college education. Data released by The College Board (2010) demonstrates that the cost of a college education has significantly outpaced the rate of inflation. The average undergraduate from a 4-year college or university assumes over \$20,000 in debt (The Chronicle of Higher Education, 2010). Many students, including underserved students, are forced to drop out of college due to unwieldy tuition bills. A college education should be affordable for all students. Limits on tuition increases must be put in place and a range of financial aid options, including grants and loans, should be available to students.

The list is not exhaustive. Each of us might consider crafting a personal list. What is most important to you or your institution? The questions posed in *Envisioning the Future of Student Affairs* serves as a relevant starting point. For example, what does it mean to serve the student affairs field in the context of rapid and critical change? How can you be true to your individual and collective values in turbulent times? The answers to these questions might not be clear. Moreover, progress towards these objectives might not always be evident.

When Will We Dance? Reflecting on Success and Acknowledging Progress

The dance question is perhaps the most metaphorical and ambiguous of the five inquiries. We interpret the question as one of celebration. In other words, we will be able to *dance* as a professional association when we make progress, or meet the objectives outlined in the previous section. When students from underserved groups have the same opportunities and success as more privileged groups do, that will be an occasion to dance and celebrate collectively as a profession. Related to this question of personal and collective celebration, it is worth taking the time to reflect on what is important to us both personally and professionally. Why did you pursue work in the student affairs profession? What factors keep you active and motivated on a daily basis?

Most of us likely entered the field for one or more of the following: 1) We had a series of positive experiences as an undergraduate that helped to spur in an interest in the area; 2) A mentor, faculty member, adviser, or other influential person showed interest in us at a key developmental time; 3) We assisted another student (either as an undergraduate or graduate) and there was personal satisfaction that resulted; we found it gratifying to serve students. Whatever the specific narrative details, there are reasons why we are committed to student affairs and the work that we engage in with our students. It is worth periodically reflecting and celebrating the work that we do. We likely are making a difference where a difference really matters. But it is easy to occasionally lose perspective; we can get overwhelmed amidst all the pressures—starting a new semester, helping students prepare for graduation, and orientating first-year students. It is important to take the time to honor and acknowledge the service to students. Additionally, it is important to refocus and recommit to the whole student. One strategy for seeing the whole student is by working with other stakeholders, creating partnerships, and building bridges with

faculty and other staff members across campus as well as in the community. At times, the progress may be slow and incremental. Yet it is vital to acknowledge and celebrate success as a profession along this collective journey.

Conclusion

It is an exciting time to be involved in the student affairs profession; change is inevitable as we continue to shape the future. Using the framework of a local public art project located in a diverse urban setting, we posed five questions that help to provide direction as we move forward. Our reflections were based on the final report of the Task Force on the Future of Student Affairs by ACPA and NASPA published in 2010. The urban art project, along with five reflective questions, provides a useful metaphorical lens to explore the issue of serving the historically underserved to help promote college student engagement and success. The five directional signs are: 1) where are we headed? 2) Where do we stand? 3) What is our story? 4) What is our hope? and 5) When will we dance? Student affairs educators are called upon to reflect on the historical social justice mission and tenets of the profession, and to consider making a commitment to serving and advocating for historically marginalized student groups—new immigrant college student populations, first-generation students, and students who come from lower-income family backgrounds. Ultimately, this recommitment to our historical foundation benefits students and reenergizes student affairs educators in the process.

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