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Article

Who Will Speak for the Higher Purposes of Higher Learning?

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The economic advantages bestowed on individual graduates of colleges and universities have come to predominate the public's understanding of the purposes of higher education. Yet the purposes of higher education are neither that singular, private, and one-dimensional. An examination of the role of student affairs work in higher education presents an opportunity for considering the role of student affairs educators in advancing a more complex notion of the purposes of colleges and universities in contemporary America.

Anyone who has read anything about higher education in the popular media is aware that, on average, college graduates earn much more over the course of a lifetime than high school graduates. The oft-cited couple of education and opportunity remains secure in its place at the foundation of the American dream.

Higher education, however, offers a society cultural benefits that far outweigh the economic advantage acquired by individual college and university graduates. If higher education is to be both fully understood and appreciated as a foundation of American culture, it is critical that a more complete portrait of higher education emerges in the public eye. Current Harvard

President Drew Faust noted “I don’t think we have to choose between a vision of universities as instrumental to economic growth and one in which they are seen as places devoted to the life of the mind” (as quoted in Wildavsky, 2011, para. 8). Yet this is precisely the choice being foisted on us by our colleges and universities and the framers of their communication with the general public.

Colleges and universities are marketed in very simplistic terms. Over the course of two generations, most institutions have adopted marketing practices that do not lend themselves to a sophisticated understanding of higher education. How do you communicate the true core purposes of higher education, such as the preservation and transmission of knowledge and the formation of new insights and consciousness, on a billboard or the side of a bus?

The mass media takes higher education’s lead and runs with it. To explain higher education’s role as cultural critic, for example, requires pages and pages of thoughtful text. What we get instead is quarter-page advertisements in educational supplements or eye-catching ads in magazines that each year trumpets college and university rankings as if they were predicated on anything tantamount to a nuanced conception of higher learning. College rankings, for the most part, compare institutional resources - again reinforcing the idea that in higher education, it is all about the dollars.

College and university presidents have been complicit in the oversimplification of the nature and outcomes of higher education. They have become so consumed with cultivating benefactors and raising money, their primary external measure of success, that they are necessarily limited to promoting higher education in only the basest ways. When seeking government support, for example, they are compelled to focus nearly exclusively on the idea of colleges and universities as engines of economic development.

Unless someone speaks for the higher education community and widely articulates the many different ways higher education serves society, the public’s sense of the benefits accrued

from supporting higher education may be irreparably stunted. Higher education fulfilling so many varied purposes is at the heart of its richness. That richness is threatened by the constant transmission of an extremely narrow conception of higher learning to an increasingly unquestioning audience.

Those of us actively engaged in the teaching and learning process know that a student who has truly taken advantage of the spectrum of opportunities within higher education will unlikely assess the richness gained merely in terms of dollars earned. Higher education certainly involves more than the transmission of information that eventually results in economic gain. Information becomes knowledge, and knowledge becomes skill, only when knowledge is assigned a social purpose. Much of the social context for the acquisition of knowledge on our college and university campuses is in the realm of student affairs work.

Who, then, will speak for the higher purposes of higher education? Perhaps it is those of us who work in the field of student affairs. I was reminded of this possibility recently when I reread *A Perspective on Student Affairs: A Statement Issued on the 50th Anniversary of The Student Personnel Point of View* (National Association of Student Personnel Administrators [NASPA], 1987). The conclusion of this document states:

Throughout the history of American higher education, student affairs has contributed a special perspective about students, their experiences and their campus environments. . . . The agenda for higher education has never been more challenging. Colleges and universities must reflect the values of a pluralistic society, provide a forum in which these values can be tested, and seek solutions to persistent issues and problems. Higher education also is expected to provide leadership in responding to perplexing dilemmas facing society - excellence and access, stability and change, freedom and responsibility, individual interests and the common good. . . . Student affairs has a diverse and complicated set of

responsibilities. As a partner in the educational enterprise, student affairs enhances and supports the academic mission. In addition, student affairs professionals must advocate for the common good and champion the rights of the individual; encourage intelligent risk taking and set limits on behavior; encourage independent thought and teach interdependent behavior. The extent to which colleges are successful in creating climates in which these paradoxical goals can coexist will be reflected in how well students are able to recognize and deal with such dilemmas during and after college. (NASPA, 1987, p. 14)

This description of higher education is as apt today as it was when it was published in 1987. It underscores that in our daily work there is just more at stake than the economic well being of our graduates. Our stock in trade is education staked on a commitment to student development, ethical and moral responsibility, and the common good. In attending to these larger social and moral purposes, student affairs work fulfills a vital role in American higher education.

It is commonly accepted that many of the campus activities overseen by student affairs administrators today descended from collegiate literary societies that emerged in the 19th century. These groups, in the words of historian Frederick Rudolph (1977)

gave a sense of completeness to the college experience that would . . . (be) largely absent without them. They made a vital connection with an uncertain future just as surely as the (formal) course of study was more effective in making an intentional connection with a revered past (p. 98).

Rudolph (1977) goes on to say “their importance to . . . what (has) developed into the American system of education makes the term extracurricular a misnomer” (p. 98).

Similarly today, various aspects of student affairs work address gaps in students’ educational experiences that may be little more than narrowly conceived job training programs.

The importance of these aspects, to echo Rudolph's observation, is not attributable to their disconnection from the core purposes of higher education (transmitting information and developing skills), but rests on their potential to integrate these core purposes with social, moral and ethical considerations. Their importance is that they contribute to and support, in the words of Carol Geary Schneider (2009), "an education for complexity and change" (p. 3).

The concepts of community and civility are at the heart of student affairs work. Through the maintenance of community standards, educational programming on such issues as leadership development, and opportunities for meaningful engagement in high impact practices such as diversity experiences and service-learning, the individual development of college students is fused with a larger social purpose. As Amy Gutmann (1987), president of the University of Pennsylvania, pointed out in her book *Democratic Education*, "Unless children learn to associate their own good with the social good, a peaceful and prosperous society will be impossible" (p. 23). It is our responsibility to provide those children, who have presumably already learned the basic truth of Gutmann's declaration, continued and strong reinforcement of this necessary association as they become young adults on our campuses.

I believe that student affairs administrators play a large role in bridging individual good and the common good. Student affairs work that successfully integrates the individual student experience with the larger campus community does so in a manner that is consistent with Gutmann's views that "the democratic ideal of education is that of *conscious* social reproduction [and] Education may be . . . broadly defined to include every social influence that makes us who we are" (Gutmann, 1987, p. 14).

In 2007, when the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) released its report entitled *College Learning for the New Global Century*, it outlined four broad essential learning outcomes, and encouraged links between traditional classroom learning and

other non-academic collegiate learning experiences as a key to achieving these outcomes. The essential learning outcomes identified by AAC&U (2007) were

- knowledge of human cultures and the physical and natural world;
- intellectual and practical skills;
- personal and social responsibility;
- integrative learning (p. 3).

A highly functioning, educationally purposeful college or university student affairs division is committed to addressing these learning outcomes on a daily basis. Such learning is not approached through parallel curricula, as some critics have opined, but as supplements to often narrowly conceived programs of study. Student affairs administrators should ensure that their effectiveness in achieving these learning outcomes can be documented and demonstrated over the long haul, and that these assertions can be supported by substantial evidence.

Already a decade into the 21st century, we find ourselves facing political and economic uncertainty and experiencing a great deal of populist anger as we have been forced to reconsider the limits of the American dream. Some of the students who left us at the turn of the century with only “tools for upward mobility” (Sullivan, 2000, p. 15) in hand may now find themselves lacking some of the more essential and overreaching tools that higher education should provide.

It would seem a fortuitous time for student affairs educators to illustrate to the public, using today’s necessary evidentiary methods that we are integrally involved in nurturing independent thought that is aligned with interdependent behavior. In doing so, colleges and universities can be better equipped to stand as exemplars of something more than the “default program of instrumental individualism” decried by Sullivan (2000, p. 15), and continue to aspire to the ideal of liberal and democratic education upon which our colleges and universities were long ago founded.

The most recently published statement on the role and purpose of student affairs, *Envisioning the Future of Student Affairs* (Torres & Walbert, 2010), the final report of the joint ACPA/NASPA Task Force, reinforces the close ties that exist between the practice of student affairs and the needs of a changing society and world. *Envisioning the Future* closes with a plea for “Rethinking Our Tools (and) Creating Our Field’s Future” (Torres & Walbert, 2010, p. 16). If we as a segment of the higher education community are reimagining our place in the academy, should we also not be rethinking how and on what basis we interact and communicate with our many publics? If so, will we in student affairs speak for the higher purposes of higher education? If not, who will?

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