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The Final Word

Jill M. Tarule

I was deeply moved and honored to be invited to write the Final Word for this 33rd Volume of *The Vermont Connection*. It meant a lot, having recently made the switch from administrator to faculty member. Thus, as a “new” faculty member in the HESA program, the invitation felt like a warm welcoming.

But another set of emotions was swirling as I read the invitation. Battling away with moved and honored, I was feeling intimidated and worried. Having spent decades as an administrator on the “academic side of the house,” as it is often defined in higher ed talk, what did I have to say about the “other” side of the house? Whether as chair, dean, or associate provost, I had always been aware of student services as a critical component in the work we were trying to accomplish – but it was somewhat peripheral. So this was the darker side of my reaction: what was I doing having the “last word” after all the wise and better informed that precede this entry?

Then it dawned on me that this was precisely the sort of thinking that reifies seeing the academy as divided into sides (one could argue that there are more sides like academic/administration or business/academic); thinking that has for years been problematic for the central project of higher education: supporting human beings to develop, learn, and become moral, ethical, and thinking individuals whose lives and work contribute to sustaining and creating a better future. Just about every mission statement aspires to these goals, and most of us chose higher ed because we care a lot about achieving these goals.

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Yet in our daily work, we divvy up the responsibilities, assigning them to different sides of the house, each with different structures and different leaders. Slowly, the sides talk less and less to each other, and recognize their shared purpose and mission less and less. And then there is a sudden blooming in the institution of a need for efficiency, often prompted by economic challenges, that causes the various units to become even more insular while they deal with their own attempts to become lean, efficacious, and sustainable.

I realized I did want to try a final word about this business of sides, particularly the academic and student affairs sides. I wanted to explore what it has meant to all of us who care about higher education.

A Personal Interlude

I have actually been in academia my whole life. I was born into a conversation about education and learning; both of my parents were members of a faculty at a small private progressive college. For them, it was both a job and a life work. Educators who were trying to think through and practice what progressive higher education was and should be were often in our living room.

A core issue for a progressive education is that learning should be centered around the student's interests, which means someone has to work closely with the student to help the student define their interests, design an individualized program, stay focused, etc. Thus, the faculty role includes counseling. Faculty members in the college met with their students every week and had professional development conferences on topics like Psychological Issues in Education. The emotional and daily life of the student – so often a responsibility assigned to the student affairs side – was part of the academics. There were not sides at this progressive college.

I emerged from this environment thinking that it was neither necessary nor appropriate to divide the student up into an emotional being trying to learn how to live in community and a rational being trying to be an academic, with different professions assigned to guide the student in each.

Higher Education's DNA

As I moved into higher education as an academic, it quickly became apparent that this dividing up of the student was exactly what was happening; it was common practice. I recall student affairs contributions being referred to as the “co-curriculum,” a separate and maybe equal curriculum. There is a long history of scholarship on this issue of the boundary between academic and student affairs. One that is, I am sure, more familiar to and better known by student affairs students and professionals than it is to me. And that in itself points to the fact that

the academic is privileged in the academy. Those of us who hung out on that side paid a lot less attention to this issue, while those in student affairs thought more about the boundary because, as is the case in so many instances of privilege and boundaries, the less privileged status sees the power structures and their effects more precisely and with greater clarity.

Recently, I found a new way to think about the division as I read Christensen and Eyring's (2011) *The Innovative University*. They analyze what constitutes "a great American university," a title of a section in which they define what they call higher education's DNA, comprised of "strategically significant traits copied from Harvard" (p.136) by colleges and universities across the nation. (Harvard is used as the mother lode of traits, a privileged stance for sure – but that is another discussion.) Traits that have been widely adopted in the DNA include:

face-to-face instruction, rational/secular orientation, comprehensive specialization, departmentalization and faculty self-governance, long summer recess, graduate schools atop the college, private fundraising, competitive athletics, curricular distribution (General Ed) and concentration (majors), academic honors, externally funded research, up or out tenure with faculty rank and salary distinctions, admission selectivity. (p. 136)

They identify four traits that were not widely adopted: "extension school (degree programs for nontraditional students), residential house system, Ivy Agreement (limitations on competitive athletics), four year graduation" (p. 136).

Note what side of the house is being addressed almost exclusively. Aside from athletics and admissions, all the DNA traits that diffused into higher ed, in their view, are academic. And of the four that were not adopted, only the house system might be viewed as a student affairs DNA trait, but the authors do not make this argument. In short, in their ivy-centric view, there is no 'student affairs DNA.'

But of course there is, so the obvious question is what are the student affairs DNA traits?

Student Affairs DNA

The first trait that I am aware of is the notion of *in loco parentis*. Considerably less legally binding for institutions of higher education now than when I first entered higher education, I would argue that this principle was the seed of a very important student affairs trait: the concern for the student as a developing human being and the notion that students are in need and deserving of care. And specific kinds of care, like what Sally Ruddick (1980) defined as "maternal thinking," the ability to care for another with concern for their unfolding development as well as a concern

for their preservation. Student affairs carries so much of the responsibility of ensuring that there are processes and procedures in place that support and care for the developing student. While it isn't parenting per se, the term reminds that it is a unique role and relationship in the care of another.

The second trait I propose is the *responsibility for community*. Student affairs, it seems to me, has been significantly engaged for years with the notion of the campus as a community, and the community as a model for what students need to know and do as productive and effective citizens. Higher education institutions would be barren and ineffective learning environments without this component in their DNA. It may be what Christiansen and Eyring (2011) were intending to signal when they note that the Harvard house system, which was a four-year community for students, didn't get adopted.

The third and final trait is intimately tied to community and to the theme of this journal. I would argue that the student affairs side of the house has made a significant contribution by insisting that higher education *create and sustain functioning models of diverse communities* that both liberate the learner and provide students with active and complex ways to confront privilege, imagine a socially just world, and create a viable identity. What is worrisome, however, is that the boundary between the houses of academia is particularly robust in this regard, so that the academic side still holds onto the idea that introducing diversity into the curriculum is an elective choice, not an imperative for all faculty members.

Conclusion

I suspect there are additional DNA components for student affairs. I hope there are. And I hope that as they get identified, it sparks dialogue about what it takes to develop a whole human being. Like the exploratory and innovative dialogues in the living room of my childhood, this needs to be an emblematic dialogue. It needs to illuminate a new vision for learning environments. A vision that bridges the divides currently troubling and diminishing higher education's potential as a force for ensuring a smarter, brighter, and more just world.

References

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