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# The Final Word: Critical Voices in Higher Education Disconnected

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## THE FINAL WORD

Each year, we invite a member of our community to write The Final Word. This contributor is the consummate student affairs educator and serves as a role model to us all through dedication, wisdom, and compassion.

This year, we are fortunate to conclude with:

*Mike Segawa,*  
Vice President of Student Affairs &  
Dean of Students  
University of Puget Sound

## Critical Voices in Higher Education Disconnected

Mike Segawa

For nine years I have been privileged to serve our Student Affairs profession as a member of the NASPA Board of Directors, including as President from 2009-10. During this time I have been offered a perspective on our work that most are not afforded. As I end my national leadership commitments, I come away from the experience with a variety of emotions: eternal gratitude for the sharing and support that has been shown to me throughout my entire thirty year career, deep respect for the work we in Student Affairs do on a daily basis on behalf of our students and institutions, an abiding sense of pride for the evolution of our profession, and tremendous appreciation for the unsung contributions we make to the success of higher education.

Yet I am also troubled by challenges I see, challenges that many of us may either not see or choose to not see as concerns. There are, in my mind, critical voices in Student Affairs and higher education that are disconnected from each other. These disconnects have a direct impact on our work but are within our ability to change or at least influence should we so desire. I firmly believe successfully addressing these issues will be vital to the strengthening of Student Affairs.

### Higher Education and the Public

American higher education is at a crossroads with the public. Demands are increasing for us to look critically at affordability, access, and accountability. For all types of institutions, the cost of what we deliver is becoming increasingly difficult to manage. Maintaining quality, as we now define it, is nearly impossible to

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*Mike is not only a provider of higher education services but also a consumer as he and his wife Mary (Prevention Manager at the State Liquor Control Board) are the proud parents of a 2008 graduate of Western Washington University and a second year student at Washington University in St. Louis. Mike is a baseball geek, being the owner of three fantasy baseball teams and a Mariner season ticket holder since 1997. He has also tried being a runner for the last 29 years.*

achieve for the majority of campuses. Of course, affordability leads directly to the challenge of access and is making what we offer increasingly out of the reach for too many we desire to serve.

Accountability is a concept that we in higher education have been slow to accept and even slower to embrace. Only recently have we turned our minds to a true exploration of how to define what we do, how we legitimately measure that, and how we use that feedback to improve our performance. We are still not close to mastering these tasks. We have even further to go with systematically being transparent about these accountability efforts with external constituencies. Too often we choose not to share data for fear that it will not be understood, misused or will be misconstrued by those outside of our institution.

These challenges of affordability, access and accountability require those of us in higher education to radically re-envision what we do and how we do that. Many of our core operating principles such as tenure, faculty governance and administrative structures need to be critically examined and recast. To do this kind of examination requires a level of collaboration we have yet to achieve inside and outside the academy but must strive to do so. Campuses that continue to allow for organizational silos will be unable to evolve. Higher education associations will not remain viable if we remain separate in our efforts. And higher education itself will not prosper if we are not more effectively connected to the public we serve. Our future must truly be addressed collectively on the local and global levels if we are to achieve sustainable new models.

#### Student Affairs and Faculty

While there are campuses, including my own, where the relationship between Academic and Student Affairs divisions is a strong one, more typically I hear of the continuing divide between these areas charged with the education and support of our students. I do recognize significant progress has been made especially over the last ten years as the shared focus on student learning and assessment has taken root. However, as long as Senior Student Affairs Officers, our association conferences and preparation programs focus on topics such as how Student Affairs can become equal partners in the academic enterprise, we will for the most part be reinforcing a disconnect with our academic colleagues.

Almost all students come to college to earn a degree and student and institutional success are ultimately measured against this variable. And it is the faculty who are responsible for defining and providing the pathways for how a student achieves a degree. We in Student Affairs are critically complimentary to this enterprise, importantly helping to remove obstacles to student achievement and offering valuable but not usually required enhancements to degree learning. We can be an integral

part of an institutional mission statement but not its centerpiece. In this context, a term like “co-curricular” is actually presumptuous on our part but perhaps to the credit of our faculty, now generally accepted lexicon on many campuses.

I offer this perspective not to minimize the importance of the work we do related to student learning but, rather, to challenge us to re-think what we do on some fundamental levels. It is often a Student Affairs lament that faculty do not understand or appreciate us. While I have no doubt this can be the case, it is also the case that we in Student Affairs too often do not understand the academic environment in which we serve. For example, how many Student Affairs staff know the general education/graduation requirement for their students? What percentage of our staff training is devoted to understanding how academics work on our campus? How familiar are we with the structure of the academic division? Do we know the scholarly interests of many of our faculty colleagues? How is tenure achieved and how might we be supportive of faculty colleagues in that process? When was the last time we visited a faculty member during their office hours? Do we even know where their office is?

Recently I came to the realization that I had been limited in understanding how the faculty are equipped to do things that we in Student Affairs are not. In our profession the issue of social justice has been a vital part of our Student Affairs heritage and often to our credit we have been the ones at the center of these efforts on many campuses. But it is quite likely that there are faculty members on our campuses who have greater content knowledge than we do when it comes to issues of social justice. This past year we had a campus issue with some of our organizations for students of color. It was a very difficult and nuanced situation but one that benefitted greatly from the involvement of faculty from a variety of academic disciplines. They brought a depth of topical knowledge that we in Student Affairs did not possess. We in Student Affairs brought a depth of experience in working with students outside of the relatively controlled classroom environment that our faculty does not possess. Together we were able to bring content and process knowledge to bear on a student challenge of significant institutional interest.

As I have reflected on that collaboration, I have come to realize that when there is a disconnect between academics and Student Affairs, our students are the ones who ultimately suffer. Because of this, we have a responsibility for better understanding how to more effectively bring these voices together. Doing this may necessitate a reassessment of how we conceptualize and articulate our work in the academy.

#### Preparation Faculty and Practitioner

One of my more surprising revelations as a NASPA Board member has been the disconnect I perceive between our field’s practitioners and the faculty at Student

Affairs preparation programs. Certainly there are exceptions to this assertion but, overall, I witnessed more often than not a lack of conversation between these two critical constituencies in our profession. Rarely did faculty follow-up with employers of their recent graduates and even more rarely was I aware of practitioners providing faculty with feedback on the performance of their graduates. The scholars in our profession were generally not aware if their research was being used by practitioners and practitioners were not consistent in their use of cutting edge data to inform practice. Even when the practitioners and faculty were on the same campus, often the awareness of each other's work was minimal.

Perhaps a strong contributing factor to this dynamic is the historical tendency for our faculty colleagues to more readily identify with ACPA as a professional association home and for especially the senior level employers to more often affiliate with NASPA. Some of this may have changed in the last ten years but not to the point where the predominant paradigm is one of consistent collaboration and consultation. I believe the potential for enhanced faculty/practitioner connections has been one of the most underappreciated benefits of the recent ACPA/NASPA consolidation process. It would be my assertion that a consequence of this disconnect is that both practitioners and faculty are slower to evolve than we should given the data and talent readily available to us. In this present societal climate, professions that are slow to change are at risk for becoming marginalized, forced to change and even eliminated.

This final word was not meant to be a doom and gloom prediction for our beloved profession. Overall I am optimistic that we will collectively continue to find ways to strengthen the work we do for the benefit of our students, institutions, and society. Historically our profession has proven to be adaptable and Student Affairs is stronger and healthier because of this ability to evolve. But I do not believe we are guaranteed a more vibrant future for our field and as the saying goes, "we should not rest on our laurels." The signs of challenge are there for us to witness and we most definitely have the resources to create forward looking strategies. The issues I have described are by no means insurmountable but if we allow them to exist in their present forms for too much longer I suspect they will become challenges that we will not control and will only have the most painful of solutions.