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Higher Education's Missing Link: Examining the Gap between Academic and Student Affairs and Implications for the Student Experience

Gabriel Reif

With the expansion of higher education around the turn of the 20th century, the field of student affairs was created to enhance the extra-curriculum and promote student development beyond the classroom. This allowed faculty to focus on scholarship and formal curricular education. Unfortunately, with their different areas of responsibility, student and academic affairs grew in divergent directions and eventually developed contrasting functions, values, cultures, and epistemologies. Today, institutions must address this issue by creating ways for student affairs professionals and professors to gain a better understanding and appreciation for one another's work; this will facilitate collaboration between these groups in pursuing their shared goal of student education and development.

Higher education in the United States has evolved tremendously since its inception in 1636 in what was then the New World. No period brought greater changes to colleges and universities than the 100 years that spanned the late 1800s and first half of the 20th century. The expanded role of higher education in society and growth of enrollments during this period created a need for student affairs practitioners to oversee students' well-being and development outside of the classroom. Professors focused primarily on formal classroom education, as well as their research. While this division of oversight of students' experiences brought many benefits, it also created a rift between the functions of academic and student affairs. This division was exacerbated by the distinct cultures, values, and epistemologies of these branches of higher education.

This gap between student and academic affairs remains prevalent in modern higher education. It hinders collaboration between student affairs professionals and faculty and discourages students from making crucial connections between their curricular and extracurricular experiences. In this model, student success is compartmentalized and holistic development is difficult for students to achieve. Today, individuals within higher education must work to span the rift that it has created between the

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classroom and the residence hall, the professor and the student affairs professional, in order to provide students with the optimal college experience.

Overview

The original purpose of colonial colleges in the *New World* was to turn boys into pious, well-mannered men who would continue the traditions of their Puritan ancestors by serving “God and their fellowmen in the fullest” (Rudolph, 1962, p. 5). During the 17th and 18th centuries, the individuals responsible for the training and education of students on most campuses consisted of only institutional presidents and a few faculty. Beyond formal classroom instruction, presidents and professors lived among the students, either in dormitories or in the president’s home. Faculty were charged with monitoring student welfare and behavior in practically every setting, punishing students for minor violations and reporting major ones to the president. Meanwhile, presidents were responsible for a wide array of tasks, ranging from administering corporal punishment to assigning rooms. Boards of trustees established institutional policies and served as hearing boards for instances when students were accused of extreme disobedience (Leonard, 1956).

While this model of student supervision was trying for both students and college employees, it had certain benefits. Because presidents and professors wore multiple hats, not only were they responsible for administrative and educational tasks, but also their roles as mentors and disciplinarians tied them to the lives of their students beyond the classroom. Instructors were able to shape their students not only through formal curriculum but also by giving lessons in manners at the dinner table and lessons on cleanliness in the dormitories (Leonard, 1956). More importantly, the tight-knit community allowed the few professors and administrators to carefully direct their students’ growth so that they could become precisely what the institution intended.

Throughout the first half of the 19th century, higher education continued to change, but events in the late 1800s revolutionized the landscape of colleges and universities across the country. The Morrill Act of 1862 allowed for the creation of a land-grant institution in each state to encourage people from a wide array of backgrounds to attend college in order to gain the skills needed to help support a booming economy. Johns Hopkins University was founded as the country’s first graduate school. Other pre-existing institutions quickly followed suit by creating graduate and professional programs that emphasized research in response to the growing need for new knowledge brought about by the industrial revolution. Charles W. Eliot changed the face of higher education further when he instituted the elective system at Harvard University that gave professors the freedom to teach their own courses and allowed students to choose their own courses of study (Kerr, 1963). The turn of the 20th century brought further developments as land-grant

institutions began to strengthen ties to the states they served. The University of Wisconsin pioneered this movement, thus spawning the term “The Wisconsin Idea,” as it “entered the legislative halls in Madison with reform programs, supported the trade union movement through John R. Commons, [and] developed agricultural and urban extension as never before. The university served the whole state” (Kerr, p. 12). Kerr asserted that with this tremendous growth, the singularity implied by the title *university* made it no longer appropriate; instead institutions would be better described by the term *multiversity*, which encapsulated the diverse aims of higher education in the 20th century.

A major repercussion of the expansion of institutions of higher learning was that college presidents and professors were no longer able to devote as much attention to their students as they did prior to the mid 1800s. Faculty were still dedicated to the primary function of educating students inside the classroom, but now research and service were also priorities; the days of faculty dining and living among students were gone. The responsibilities of university presidents burgeoned with the creation of the multiversity. Kerr (1963) wrote:

The university president in the United States is expected to be a friend of the students, a colleague of the faculty, a good fellow with the alumni, a sound administrator with the trustees, a good speaker with the public, an astute bargainer with the foundations and the federal agencies, a politician with the state legislature, a friend of industry, labor, and agriculture, a persuasive diplomat with donors, a champion of education generally, a supporter of the professions (particularly law and medicine), a spokesman to the press, a scholar in his own right, a public servant at the state and national levels, a devotee of opera and football equally, a decent human being, a good husband and father, [and] an active member of a church. Above all he must enjoy traveling in airplanes, eating his meals in public, and attending public ceremonies. (p. 22)

With faculty and presidents preoccupied with fulfilling newly developed institutional objectives, someone else was needed to look after students.

In 1890, Eliot recognized the decline in attention received by students at Harvard. He requested the services of LeBaron Russell Briggs, an English instructor who was popular with the students, to serve as a “student dean” (Sandeen, 2004). The establishment of this position marked the creation of student affairs professionals in higher education. Other institutions followed Harvard’s lead, hiring and promoting individuals to monitor student behavior and well-being. Eventually, student affairs grew to become an integral component of higher education. Student services offices were created to assist students with many aspects of their lives, ranging from academic, career, and psychological counseling to departments dedicated to establishing bigger and better extracurricular activities. Further, graduate programs were created in the field and researchers began studying student development and

demonstrating the important role of student affairs professionals in enhancing students' college experiences (Lyons, 1990; Stage, Watson, & Terrell, 1999).

On campuses today, divisions of student affairs provide students with myriad experiences that allow them to develop competencies that would normally not be addressed through a standard curricular experience. For example, students hone their leadership skills through clubs and organizations while they explore new activities and experiences. Students are also presented with opportunities for community involvement, as they move beyond the campus and engage in service-learning (Lyons, 1990). On many campuses, student affairs professionals lead the way in promoting cultural pluralism and exposing students to the importance of diversity in modern society (Pope, Reynolds, & Mueller, 2004).

Discussion of the Problem

Student affairs and the extra-curriculum at colleges and universities complement students' academic experiences by providing students with opportunities for growth in a wide array of areas. Student affairs developed, however, as an entity separate from the academic realm of the university, which has led to a detrimental divide between student and academic affairs. These two areas of higher education have little, if any, functional overlap, and they have dissimilar values and cultures (Brown, 1990). The disconnect between academic and student affairs creates a disjointed experience for students and results in the compartmentalization of student success.

Rather than adopting a model in which a single group of people shares responsibilities for all aspects of a student's success in college, as exemplified by the colonial colleges, higher education currently divides the student experience into numerous segments. Specialists are assigned to specific components of students' lives. Certainly, this model has its benefits. For example, if a student is contemplating suicide, she or he can be better served by a mental health counselor with extensive training in that field than she or he could by a "jack-of-all-trades" who has little or no formal training in counseling. Additionally, if a student wants to learn about cutting edge computer science research, a professor in this field is more likely to be up to speed on current trends if she or he is able to devote more time and energy to her or his research rather than monitoring students in the residence halls.

On the other hand, allowing faculty and student affairs professionals to function separately from one another has detrimental repercussions for students. Because professors focus on scholarship and matters of formal education, they frequently become removed from the lives of the students they instruct. Today, due to the presence of student affairs professionals, faculty advisors for clubs are obsolete at many institutions. By limiting faculty interactions with students to the classroom,

students do not have as many opportunities for academically-oriented discussion during their free time as they would if professors were involved in the extra-curriculum. Furthermore, professors are seldom aware of the lives their students lead in the residence halls, drug and alcohol abuse on campus, or similar topics that fall under the oversight of student affairs professionals. This distance between students and professors encourages professors to dedicate more of their time and energy toward their research and for students to care less about their education (Brown, 1990).

Meanwhile, student affairs professionals are just as likely be removed from the classroom as professors are from the residence hall or student center. Most student affairs professionals, while they are familiar with student development theories, are not trained to support students' academic pursuits directly as tutors or supplemental instructors. According to Brown (1990):

Student development theory indeed has provided fertile ground for both program development and research, but too often it has blinded its practitioners to the fundamental mission of most colleges and universities. . . . Too many student affairs professionals [fail] to understand and participate in intellectual pursuits, which are, in fact, at the heart of higher education. (p. 247)

The separate roles filled by student affairs professionals and professors affect the way students perceive their college experiences. Rather than being cognizant of the holistic nature of one's education and development, students view their academic and extracurricular experiences as distinct and unrelated entities. According to Cardinal John Henry Newman (1996):

All that exists, as contemplated by the human mind, forms one large system or complex fact, and this of course resolves itself into an indefinite number of particular facts, which, as being portions of a whole, have countless relations of every kind, one towards another. (p. 41)

In order to acquire knowledge, a student should therefore understand the relations that link one fact to another. It may be easy for a student to see the connection between material taught in two courses in the same field, but tying information from a sociology textbook to a community service project can be much more difficult. Rather than creating ways for students to understand how different parts of their education are intertwined, most colleges operate in a disjointed fashion that break up a student's in-class experience from what takes place beyond the classroom, establishing what John Dewey (1916) called "the artificial gap between life in school and out" (p. 228).

A major factor that leads to the divide between student and academic affairs is the naturally segmented structure of higher education. Brown wrote (1990):

Some of the barriers to collaboration between academic and student affairs are no different from those that impede collaboration among groups

at most institutions. Because of the high degree of autonomy afforded faculty and the fragmented organizational structure characteristic of colleges and universities, collaboration does not emerge naturally. (p. 245)

Other factors that contribute to the separation between professors and student affairs professionals include limited resources and a dearth of incentives for university employees to bridge the gap between the curriculum and extra-curriculum.

Beyond these barriers, contrasting values of professors and student affairs professionals exacerbate the misalignment between student affairs professionals and faculty. According to Lyons (1990), “student affairs professionals place special import on the uniqueness of the individual, on the relationships between thinking and feeling, on asserting worth and dignity of all people, and on the power of personal involvement in educational experiences” (p. 25). Pedagogical methods and educational environments are also of significant concern to the student affairs professional (Mueller & Stage, 1999). On the other hand, faculty members are generally trained as scholars in their field rather than as educators; most receive little formal training in teaching (Brown, 1990). Rather than focus on their students, educational approaches, or expanding their understanding of the institutions they serve, professors, who are encouraged by incentives such as tenure, devote their energies to their academic specialties (Sandeen, 2004). Furthermore, many professors often take an independent or competitive approach to their work. This practice is promoted by the way in which curriculum development, promotion, and resource allocation are structured in academic affairs (Brown; Sandeen). Most student affairs professionals, on the other hand, see the concepts of community and collaboration as integral to their work (Brown).

In addition to differing values, the issue of epistemological distinctions between student affairs professionals and faculty creates a deeper, less visible rift that keeps these two groups apart. According to Palmer (1987), faculty culture encourages competition and individualism rather than collaboration and community. Furthermore, professors’ way of knowing is “characterized by objectivity, analysis, experimentation, [and] separation of subject and object,” which is strikingly different from the subjective, affective perspectives of many individuals in student affairs (Brown, 1990, p. 245). Kuh, Shedd, and Whitt (1987) suggested that the epistemological divergence between individuals in academic and student affairs is one of the major forces that prevent collaboration among the groups.

While faculty and student affairs professionals both strive to educate students, the manners in which they attempt to reach this goal are markedly different. The functional and cultural divides between these branches of higher education lead to the lack of holistic student development. For example, take the case of a student who attends college with the intention of excelling in her or his courses and acquiring as much knowledge as possible in her or his field of choice. The place

for her or him to accomplish this goal is the classroom, and her or his ally in this process is the professor. The values of this student and her or his academic mentor are aligned; both believe that executing scientific method, performing research, understanding literature, and creating knowledge are the most integral components to a student's college experience. Meanwhile, the student may perceive the student affairs professionals on her or his campus to be unimportant in helping her or him achieve goals due to the strictly extracurricular expertise of most student affairs professionals. Other students may resonate more with the culture and values of student affairs and the opportunities it presents. While these individuals may still take their education seriously, they are more likely to devote their time and energy to the extra-curriculum because of the climate surrounding it, which is created by student affairs professionals.

In this manner, students gravitate toward the areas that exemplify their values and present them with opportunities to accomplish their goals. The diversity in cultures and opportunities between student and academic affairs is beneficial in one way because it allows for students to select the area that is right for them. The lack of overlap between these components of higher education, however, discourages students from experimenting in arenas in which they are not as comfortable. Students who are passionate about their studies and connect with their professors likely will not be introduced to valuable extracurricular opportunities, since faculty are unaware of them for the most part. Meanwhile, student affairs professionals frequently are not prepared to turn their student leaders on to opportunities for research or other forms of scholarship due to the gap between student affairs and the strictly academic functions of higher education. In this regard, the distinct cultures and functions, along with the paucity of collaboration and familiarity between student and academic affairs, are responsible for impeding holistic student development.

While the model of student supervision and instruction during the first 250 years of higher education in the United States had its drawbacks, it excelled in creating a cohesive experience for its students. Students lived and dined with the same individuals that instructed them in the classroom. In contrast with today's system, one person was made responsible for all aspects of a student's development and well-being. Today, dividing the responsibilities of assisting students with their academic and personal growth between professors and student affairs professionals allows for cracks through which students can slip; this certainly was much less of a possibility before student supervision was so decentralized. Furthermore, the disjointed nature of modern higher education makes it difficult for students to see how the lessons they learn inside and outside the classroom connect.

There are several steps that colleges and universities in the United States can take to begin to remedy the identified problems of the compartmentalization of student success and the divide that separates academic and student affairs. First, institutions need to assess their practices and make a conscious commitment to bridge student and academic affairs, creating an enhanced and more seamless experience for students. One way to achieve this is to “look beyond traditional departmental boundaries, which often have been barriers to coherence in undergraduate education” (Sandeen, 2004, p. 32). This initiative should be led by the central administration, which has the power to influence both faculty and student affairs professionals through the distribution of resources and the creation of programs that unite both professors and student affairs professionals in their shared mission of promoting student success.

An example of this work can be made visible through the use of a residential college system. This structure has been in place in European institutions since centuries before higher education reached the New World. Much like the colonial colleges, residential colleges place an emphasis on tight-knit communities that emphasize the involvement of a team of professionals in all aspects of students’ lives. Given the financial restraints and large enrollments at many universities, it would be hard for most institutions to downsize their student bodies. Residential colleges however, can be created within any school to establish a more intimate atmosphere, allow for more interaction between students and staff, and facilitate collaboration between individuals from the academy and those from student affairs.

A residential college functions by taking a cross-section of the student body and putting a small group of professionals from across the institution in charge of many aspects of the students’ education, well-being, and development. In large universities, it is very easy for professors and student affairs professionals to operate entirely within their distinct domains. The intimate nature of a residential college however, encourages professionals from various branches to become familiar with one another’s work and to collaborate on a variety of projects. This poses a challenge because individuals must work with people who possess different educational backgrounds, specialties, epistemological views, values, and roles within the institution. The key to overcoming these differences lies in understanding that “the academic mission of the institution is preeminent” (National Association of Student Personnel Administrators, 1987, p. 8). With this goal in mind, collaboration between professionals in student and academic affairs is possible and the results present great rewards for the students these individuals serve. In residential colleges, faculty work alongside student affairs professionals in designing extra-curricular and co-curricular events that build upon coursework. Individuals in student affairs in turn become familiar with the college’s curriculum and may discover ways to directly assist students in their academic pursuits. Appropriate facilities encourage interactions among all members of the college in classrooms,

dining halls, residence rooms, and common spaces (O'Hara, 2006). The benefits of the residential college model revolve around a cohesive student experience that emphasizes the connected nature of knowledge and promotes holistic student development.

The coming years will bring many challenges to higher education in the United States, but one of the greatest will be for colleges to reverse the momentum that has pulled academics and student affairs apart from one another. Professionals in higher education must begin to seek ways to collaborate in the shared goal of promoting student success. Obstacles preventing these changes will include budget cuts and advances in technology that will increase impersonal communications between university employees and students. Individuals in academic and student affairs must work in unison to overcome their differences and realize their common objectives in the attempt to provide students with holistic, interconnected educational experiences.

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