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The Student Personnel Point of View: A Foundation for Change

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I am honored to be invited by *The Vermont Connection* to write a reflection paper on the 1937 *Student Personnel Point of View* document on the occasion of its 70th anniversary.

This is an especially exciting assignment for me since I will be retiring in July 2007 after working 40 years in the student personnel profession and for 31 years as a senior student affairs officer. My early years were spent at Indiana University, 17 years at the University of Vermont, 12 at Colorado State University, and 7 at the University of Hawai'i at Hilo. I have enjoyed every day of my life as a student affairs professional helping build institutions and making differences in the lives of students.

My life as a Student Affairs professional began in 1967 with my first course in Student Personnel Administration taught by the late Dr. Nel Koester at Indiana University. I was a graduate student and a residence hall staff member. Ironically, my first assignment was to read the 1937 *Student Personnel Point of View* on its 30th anniversary and to discuss whether or not the principles illuminated in the document were still relevant to student affairs administration in 1967.

The '60s era was a time of turbulence in America and in American higher education. Indiana University, as many college campuses at that time, was undergoing great social change. For one of the few times in American history, a large public outcry against a very unpopular war in Vietnam challenged the morality of the government's belief that war was a necessary evil. Students were demanding that university administrators recognize their rights to control more of their own college experiences, and soon universities across the nation found themselves being dragged, willing or not, into a vociferous social activism and protest period. The youth culture challenged the older generation and all of its values, authority, beliefs, and systems.

The graduate students in Dr. Koester's class, me included, were brash, outspoken, articulate student activists of that era. We attacked the *Student Personnel Point of View* and concluded, as young professionals, that nothing written in 1937, 30 years in the past, could have any value to us at all. Many in that class saw this document on its 30th anniversary as reflecting part or all of the values that students in the late 1960s

were fighting to change. After a heated discussion we agreed, rather reluctantly I might add, that maybe some of the principles and values in the *Student Personnel Point of View* did “fit” the 1960s era and could be of value to us in a profession that was just developing and evolving. As graduate students we reacted finally to this document in a positive way, mostly because of the work of our instructor.

What about today—2007—another 40 years after the discussion during that fall semester in 1967? Having mellowed somewhat over these 40 years, it was refreshing for me to read this document again. Today I realize that the basic principles, philosophy, and values articulated 70 years ago are still relevant and still form the foundation of the challenging and vital work of student affairs professionals. Even though the world is significantly different today, the philosophical foundation outlined in this historical piece still addresses the educational issues and challenges of our own turbulent and changing times.

Several dimensions of the student affairs profession, however, stand out today as being especially different from 30 years ago, and certainly different from 70 years ago at the time of the initial adoption of the 1937 *Student Personnel Point of View*. Three of the areas of greatest change that I see are the change in relationship between students and their institutions, a change in access to higher education, and changes caused by the impact of modern technology. Let us look at each of these three changes in the light of the 1937 *Student Personnel Point of View*.

The document emphasizes that the role of higher education is to teach values and moral behavior as it was then defined. In 1937 institutional policies such as women’s hours were constructed to identify and regulate expected behavior on the part of students. In the late 1960s through protest movements, court challenges, and student activism, this in-loco-parentis doctrine was abandoned for the most part as an important role for colleges and universities. Most universities began to reject the idea that they acted “in the place of the parent.” Around 1970 college students were allowed to make their own personal behavior decisions, and the university, through student affairs professionals, began to play a pivotal developmental role to assist students with making wise choices that advanced their own

Dr. Keith Miser will retire this year, after over 30 years in the field of student affairs, as Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs at University of Hawai‘i Hilo, a position he has held since 2000. From 1988 to 2000, he was Vice President for Student Affairs at Colorado State University, where he was also a member of the graduate faculty in the School of Education. An active believer in international cooperation, Dr. Miser was able to develop links between Colorado State University and the National University of Belize, an association he continues to support. He served as Dean of Students and Associate Vice President for Administration at the University of Vermont from 1975-1988, and taught in the graduate program there. Dr. Miser received his Ed.D. in Higher Education from Indiana University.

development. Very rapidly the role of student affairs professionals moved from a primary expectancy of behavior regulators to the role of facilitators and student development educators. This change was a dramatic one for our profession, and it changed dramatically the university's relationship to students. Even with these changes, the 1937 *Student Personnel Point of View* principles and philosophy were still relevant. This is true in spite of a major shift in roles away from the college or university as a surrogate parent, a shift which changed the emphasis and priority among the philosophical standards articulated in the document.

Secondly, over the past 70 years there has been a dramatic change in post-secondary education with regard to the diversity of students in attendance. When I was a junior in high school in 1957, growing up in a small, rural Indiana community, I had never met a person of color, and only about 10% of all high school graduates across the nation went on to college. I was the first member of my family to go to college and was only one of a small number of students from my high school to attend a college or university. Today over 60% of high school graduates enter some form of post-secondary education. The demographics of these students attending and graduating from institutions of higher education are much more diverse both ethnically and culturally in every university. Today, in some major urban universities, students of color are the majority of those attending school. At my present university, the University of Hawai'i at Hilo, 70% of the students attending come from ethnically and culturally diverse backgrounds. Access has increased dramatically since the 1965 Higher Education Act that created Federal Financial Aid. This opened the doors to higher education for many more students and allowed our institutions to become much more diverse. In 1937 higher education was mainly for the children of the wealthy, the majority of students were men, and most students attending college were White.

The *Student Personnel Point of View* statement is silent on the issues of access and diversity and all of the related challenges, roles, and responsibilities for student affairs professionals. Student affairs staff today welcome the roles of fostering diversity, enhancing all students' access and success, and promoting community through respect, communication, and the valuing of differences. If the 1937 *Student Personnel Point of View* were written today, I am confident that the authors would speak to this critical aspect of student affairs work.

Finally, the tremendous growth of technology has changed and is changing the way student affairs professionals serve students. When I was a freshman in college in 1959, there were no color or cable televisions, no copy machines, calculators, tape recorders, cell phones, email, video tape, or computers. Most of these important administrative and enabling tools were not even available when I started working as a student affairs professional in 1967.

All of these advances and hundreds of other new technologies have changed the very way we communicate with students and work with each other. Technology has created new ways to interact with students and new ways to serve them productively. Distance learning has now advanced to the point where thousands of courses are offered to students located many miles away from the institutions offering the courses or degrees. The educators of 1937 never could have imagined these technological advances or the applications of distance learning to student affairs. They would have been shocked at MySpace and Facebook, e-mail, and students communicating in ways to be “friended” by another student. These technological advances are shaping and changing our profession as new ways to communicate and work are being adapted to student affairs professional activities.

The *Student Personnel Point of View* still holds true, however, even with the technological advances over the years. It does not mention technology, but it does give us a professional philosophical foundation that helps define the *reason* we are working with students and why we use technology. In many ways the 1937 *Student Personnel Point of View* is timeless in the dimensions it addresses even though if written today it would certainly mention and address these new forms of technology and their impact on our profession.

To care for students, to assist them with their growth both intellectually and personally, and to help them mature and develop their own value systems is still our charge; it is this charge that is articulated so well in the *Student Personnel Point of View*. We still strive to coordinate services, to link with faculty colleagues, and to build bridges with secondary schools. Our professional associations are still seeking ways to better cooperate. Research and assessment which provide a culture of evidence in our profession are part of our everyday lives. In this milieu, the *Student Personnel Point of View* still stands as an important benchmark and a foundation document for the current challenges that face our profession.