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Article

The Future of Student Affairs is Dependent on Choosing Roads Less Traveled

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The authors provide a critique of the report from the 2010 Task Force on the Future of Student Affairs and provide recommendations for future changes in the profession not found in the 2010 report. The authors also note that the 2005 study of ACPA member's interests in developing knowledge competencies and skills sets indicate professionals may be at a different place than what professional associations currently offer. The authors provide a critique of some of the professional development opportunities offered by professional associations and proposes some alternatives to how these programs are approached in the profession.

Robert Frost wrote about the path less traveled. His point was that there may indeed be merit in going in a direction different than what most others choose as part of their journey and that perhaps, the path less traveled may provide greater benefit to the individual over the course of their journey. The path less traveled can provide one with a different way of looking at the world. This current critique of the profession might be best summed up as a collection of

common pathways traversed by members of the professions yet as cobbled together may no longer be in the best interest of the profession.

The profession of student affairs has been around for over 100 years and has undergone a number of transformations over this period of time. These transformations were sometimes presented as crossroads where changes in the profession were abrupt and then at other times traversing the crossroads in the profession was more gradual over time. We saw abrupt times with what occurred in the profession following the post-World War II period with the influx of veterans attending colleges in vast numbers, and then in the late 1960s with the important yet tumultuous times that affected campuses and the shift away from *in loco parentis*. It is our position that the profession is at a crossroads.

Tyrell et al. (2005) conducted research on skill sets and knowledge competencies deemed important by student affairs professionals. The 2005 research compared responses of student affairs professionals to mid-level manager's responses in a survey administered 16 years prior by Walter, Fey, Cortese and Borg (1991). The results demonstrated that another shift in the profession had occurred (Tyrell & Farmer, 2006). These shifts had led to an assertion that the profession is again at a crossroads. Like any crossroads, the profession has some choices to make on which pathways it will journey henceforth. We believe there are choices to be made regarding various hallmarks of the profession such as professional journals and national conventions. We will also offer solutions to new pathways less traveled that we believe will advance the profession.

Our critiques are also not *per se* dissatisfaction with the profession but a concern that the profession has failed to step back and truly be critical of itself. We feel there are “elephants in the room” that are common points of concerns that reside among professionals in the field yet

seem to fail to make it into the discussions found in the hallmarks of the profession; instead the profession seems to maintain the status quo. There are many important documents in the profession that inform us about how we can best work with our students. Our critique is not to diminish the significance of these (often scholarly) efforts; however we offer that most of these works fail to address other important issues for the profession. We offer our criticisms of the profession openly and welcome future discussions with others in hope of expand these critiques towards a place where the profession truly advances.

The Task Force on the Future of Student Affairs

The Task Force on the Future of Student Affairs was established to look at the future of the profession. We offer the criticism here that the report the task force released (American College Personnel Association [ACPA] & National Association of Student Personnel Administrators ([NASPA], 2010) has not served as a guide for the future of the profession. Our critique of the report is not so much what the report said but what it did not say or to be precise, seemed to be absent in addressing the charge. The task force's charge included the following statement "Together we must be committed to considering and identifying strategies which will shape the future of student affairs and higher education" (Torres & Walbert, 2010, Mid-term report, para.

2). The Task Force was charged with

responding to the following questions related to challenges student affairs professionals have brought forth to our leadership. The expectation is that this group will develop a strategic plan to address these issues in the coming years.

1. What are the best mechanisms to contribute and advance the profession's knowledge base about practice, students, ourselves and organizations?

2. How can the comprehensive associations (ACPA and NASPA) best serve the broad professional development needs and expectations of our members?
3. How can the two comprehensive associations (ACPA and NASPA) assure efficiency and effectiveness in providing professional development?
4. What linkages to other student affairs associations, higher education organizations and governmental entities are essential to the work of student affairs? How should these partnerships be developed? (Torres & Walbert, 2010, para. 4-7)

The first charge was critical as it was an opportunity to inform the profession about how to advance the profession. We learned from the report that advancing the profession was delimited to many of the premises (i.e., access for students, assessment, diversity and the problems with “siloining”) circulating the profession for more than the decade. Unfortunately the report did not address how to advance the profession, which may have been a missed opportunity for the task force. We assert the profession is full of elephants in the room that are maintaining status quos that are barriers to advancing the profession.

The second and third charge of the task force focused on professional development, yet the report responded to professional development mostly from a historical perspective in its reference to foundational documents. It stated

The final theme among the foundational documents focuses on how individuals are, or should be, trained for student affairs work. Some documents see the training of professionals as the responsibility of graduate preparation programs, while others focus on multiple entryways into the field. Both depictions place tremendous responsibility on professional associations for assuring high quality student affairs work. (Torres & Walbert, 2010, Designing and enduring professional, para. 1)

Although the task force states that a tremendous responsibility is placed on the two organizations to deliver professional development, it does not offer any insight into what the future of professional development should be for the profession or the professional associations. In absence of any forecasting, the reader of the report is left with the impression that the professional associations should simply carry on as usual in regard to professional development. The tasks force barely gives any attention to how the professional associations have best attended to this tremendous burden and nor where there could be improvements to advance the profession. We also believe the associations may have become so comfortable with their roads recently traveled that the current professional development opportunities they offer may not be fully advancing the profession. To us, the report felt . . . incomplete. What happened? What was missing seemed more noticeable than what was present in the report.

The Marginalization of the Profession

Sandeen and Barr (2006) raised important issues for the profession to weigh in considering its future. Although the authors suggested some specific and valuable courses of action for the profession to consider, collectively the list of actions presented a number of clear challenges the profession must now address as a result of how there has been a slow marginalization of the student affairs organization in the overall campus structure over the past two decades. The common water cooler conversation in the profession is that salary inequity and credential erosion are casualties from two decades of battles waged at institutions over budget cuts and fiscal constraints. Whether or not SSAOs have been coopted to accept these forms of marginalization, the profession has been transformed. Today, we regularly hear concerns of salary inequity between directors of student affairs programs and directors of administrative programs outside of student affairs.

Equally concerning, we continue to hear an erosion of credential requirements for new hires in the profession as colleges look for ways to balance budgets. The same could not be said of lawyers or doctors as they are profession protected from credential erosion. In higher education, would any faculty program accept a doctoral prepared student affairs practitioner, football coach or student activities director to be the Provost, Dean, or chair of an English department. Yet in college after college, university after university, we accept just such a thing to happen when a new vice president for student affairs is hired who happened to be an astronaut, an ex-football coach, a tenured faculty member, or an assistant provost, all with no student affairs credentials, training or experience. Likewise, to hire a person with bachelor's degree in linguistics to run a residence hall or to be a career counselor is to sell ourselves short as a profession and perpetuates the view held in many circles in higher education that anyone can do student affairs work. These scenarios tell a story of slow marginalization of the profession over the past two decades; one that will continue to worsen until the profession chooses a new pathway to travel.

We believe the student affairs profession will continue to be marginalized unless the profession establishes itself similarly to the medical profession. For medical professionals, the profession dictates the credential requirements, not the hospital chief executive officer. Student affairs professionals are the primarily care givers for helping many students successfully navigate the college experience, grow and mature into contributing adults and citizens in society. If we want to end salary inequity and credential erosion, we need to follow our medical and legal colleagues and establish certification of the profession. The profession has discussed certification for years (Arminio et al., 2006; Janosik and Carpenter, 2006); it is surely controversial and for many mid-level managers and SSAOs certification may even appears

threatening to their current level of professional credentials. Perhaps this is why we cannot seem to come to closure on certification for student affairs professionals. In light of the on-going marginalization of the profession, professional certification may be one of the few future strategies that will save the profession.

Student Development Theory to Practice

The realities of selling ourselves short for two decades are not going to resolve themselves over night. Two elephants in the field today are professionals' ongoing failure to effectively apply student development theory to practice and the profession's inability to fully embrace student learning outcomes assessment in the specific work we do. We cannot embrace the latter, assessment, unless we fully understand the former, student development. The authors have interviewed literally hundreds of candidates for mid-level positions in the last decade. When candidates are asked to apply theory to practice, the responses invariably look like the following: "I have conducted student satisfaction surveys," "We use CIRP with incoming students", or worse "I remember a class on student development in my graduate work, but I do not remember much about how to apply any of those theories to practice," or "I remember Perry's vectors, but I haven't looked at it in a while." The responses here reflect a profession composed of mid-level managers and senior student affairs officers, with few exceptions, who cannot fully and deeply engage in the conversation of how to work *intentionally* with students. Intentionally is defined as the practitioner knowing how to use theories and student development models as guides in determining how can they best support and challenge students to grow.

Conversely, many graduate students entering the field today are quite conversant of theory to practice techniques. Unfortunately, those that are conversant in theory to practice learn very soon that this foundational work in student development is not valued by their supervisors.

Some graduates report that a common response by supervisors is “that was graduate work; you are in the real world now.” We assert that the profession is hamstrung itself in fully engaging in the student learning outcome assessment movement as a result of SSAOs and mid-level managers failing to lead theory to practice techniques with others. Once again, there are exceptions to our critique here but they seem sadly too infrequent.

So, what does the exception look like in the student affairs organization? At the campus of one author, staff participates in a student development theory/model to practice seminar. Led by senior leaders in the division, 15 major theoretical models to practice are covered in 10 seminars. Whether a new employee has a master’s degree in a non-related area, or a current member who has never had any coursework or professional development session on theory to practice, they complete the seminar. No one in the profession should be exempt from this foundational work. This is one road less traveled in the profession . . . for the moment.

Student Learning Outcomes Assessment

The case has been made for student affairs professionals to engage in student learning outcomes assessment efforts for some time now (Hanson, 1990). Nevertheless, as recently noted in the report from the Task Force on the Future on Student Affairs, “Despite many calls for outcomes assessment and data based decision making in student affairs, there have been only a few examples illustrating efforts in the field to respond wholeheartedly or effectively to these calls” (Torres & Walbert, 2010, p. 3). Later the report makes a call for better assessment in student affairs as a way in which to rethink the way we view the profession. Again, we couldn’t agree more with this assertion, especially since there has been a consistent call for student affairs to engage in better assessment efforts for more than 20 years (Erwin, 1991; Keeling, Wall, Underhile, & Dungy, 2008; Upcraft & Schuh, 1996). We would assert that with few exceptions,

the profession in general *has failed* to fully engage in outcomes-assessment programs on their campuses and this failure has unfortunately led to devaluing of the profession by others engaged in the higher education enterprise.

Hanson (1990) wrote two decades ago

the research agenda for student affairs will be dictated by the purposes behind the assessment of students. . . . The first purpose is accountability. . . . The second purpose . . . is to understand the process of student learning and development with a goal of improving our educational practice. (pp. 277-278)

Hanson (1990) identified one of the important, if not essential, part of our work as a student affairs professional is that our assessment efforts should also be tied to student learning. In recent years, the federal government has pushed for greater accountability (Spellings Commission, 2006). The increased emphasis on accountability measures for higher education should include us as a profession if our profession still ascribes to the decades old adage in our field 80% of what a student learns occurs outside of the classroom. To remain a vital and viable part of the higher education community in the future, we must embrace these assessment skill areas and become adept at them. We firmly believe that assessment in general and specifically assessment programs in student learning outcomes in our work can no longer be an optional activity for anyone in our profession. All student affairs professionals should be required to develop and administer student learning outcomes assessment programs without further delay. Our role as the principle advocates for the students and their learning depends on it. This change in how we approach our work will also allow the profession to stand alongside academic colleagues as equal partners in the student learning enterprise.

Hallmarks of Profession Development Have Marginalized Core Competencies

Our hallmarks of professional development today demonstrate an apparent disconnect exists between what professionals want for professional development in the 2005 study (Tyrell et al., 2005) and what is generally offered at national conventions and is published in professional journals. Many of the 10 skill/knowledge competencies professionals want for professional development are not largely evident in traditional professional development opportunities offered by our professional associations. We postulate why this disconnect exists and put forward a claim that our professional associations, though well-intentioned, have sponsored professional development programs and scholarly bodies of work that are overly focused on the fringe of our work and have drifted away from many key professional competencies.

The idea that academe has moved away from core competencies and toward fringe activities is not new in higher education (Tyrell, 2011). Anyone on the pathway of scholarly recognition in most academic disciplines achieves promotion by researching and then publishing that what is generally considered a new contribution to the knowledge base. For those in academe, these activities are necessary to achieve the appropriate professorial rank.

ACPA (Love et al., 2007) and NASPA/ACPA (Bresciani et al., 2010) both have identified the 10 core competencies categories that were surveyed by Tyrell et al. (2005). Seven of the 10 competency categories were earlier surveyed by Walter et al. (1991). These seven core professional competencies: leadership, fiscal management, professional development, personnel management, student contact, communication, and research and evaluation have remained consistent for two decades and in the last five years we have seen a few additional categories identified (technology, culture, diversity/pluralism and inclusion, professional self). They all represent important areas of professional development for the profession.

What concern us is that many of the seven skill sets and knowledge competencies considered core to the profession in 1989 and still today are not easily accessible to professionals through their participation in these hallmarks of the profession. As we sample the broad array of journal articles and professional development sessions offered at conventions over the course of the last decade, many of the seven professional competencies are absent. Again, it is important to state here that these current programs and scholarly works are important in regard to understanding the complexity inherent in the human condition and the environments with which we interface with students. The problem is not that these programs and articles are the center of the profession today, but that they dominate the offerings at conventions and in journals and has left little room for professional development in many of the other core competency areas; in most cases other professional competencies (i.e., leadership, personnel management, communication, fiscal management) are almost nonexistent in these hallmarks of the profession.

National conventions. There is an absence of many of these core competencies at the national conventions. For instance, there are very few workshops offered on how to learn effective leadership techniques. Workshops on topics related to fiscal management are practically non-existent. Topics on the foundations of supervision are few and far between. Strategies for effective research techniques and designing assessment programs are also difficult to find. Programs on effective communication strategies in working with different organizational constituencies are minimal at best. Managing the politics of organizational life also was noticeably missing. These are topics that professionals rated as in high demand in 2005, yet little has been provided on these professional competencies at convention in a decade (or more). These are major knowledge competencies and skills sets in our core competencies, yet they are largely missing from the national conventions. Instead, the workshop offerings seem to largely

gravitate to issues of campus culture, student programs, diversity and inclusion (and mirror many of the core competencies found in the professional journals).

We know that there are smaller professional development institutes offered at other times of the year by NASPA and/or ACPA that address some of these core competencies (i.e. assessment), but with budgets tight, few professionals can attend a second professional development program and out of necessity commit their funds to attending the national conventions. We need to strengthen our offerings of all professional competency areas at the conventions. As an aside, oddly, the 2010 ACPA convention's claim was that every convention program offered met an ACPA competency requirement. It is our opinion that this was not the case as many programs were at best remotely connected to the core competency they were associated with in the program.

We suggest future convention planners consider two changes in planning and promoting professional development sessions. First (and the lesser of the two): accurately label a session as a professional competency if it clearly conveys the specific skill set or knowledge competency determined by our profession. If it does not meet the criteria, leave it un-labeled. There are plenty of good sessions that do not need to be labeled a professional competency to be winners. This strategy will take additional time to evaluate by the convention reviewers. However, to mislabel a program as a professional competency to some degree degrades the work the profession has established in the creation of these competencies.

Second (and more importantly): we recommend that convention planners specifically solicit presenters with the expertise to present on specific core competencies topics absent from the conventions. This strategy, by the way, is a common practice in other professional and academic disciplines in higher education. Who might we ask to fill this void in the convention

program schedule? For years, both professional associations have lamented on how to get SSAOs and senior leaders in the profession more involved in the convention activities (besides networking). The SSAOs and senior leaders in graduate preparation programs should lead tracks of workshops for just about every core competency area described here. They should teach mid-levels and new professionals the core materials and fill this gap at the conventions. The convention participants largely composed of new professionals and mid-level managers would immediately benefit from their wisdom. SSAOs who have also mastered professional competency areas at the advanced levels could also provide training to other SSAOs and future SSAOs. Many of the session topics we noted absent at conventions were also in high demand by SSAOs in the 2005 survey.

Professional journals. The second hallmark of the profession we offer a critique are the primary professional journals of the profession (NASPA's *Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice* and ACPA's *Journal of College Student Development*). The journals serve as vehicles for the dissemination of new knowledge added to the profession. However, we assert here that in the 1980s, you could regularly find an article on leadership or personnel management; not so much today. Today we find scholarly works in the journals that surely celebrate adding new corpuses of knowledge yet seem to be areas of interest that are again on the fringe of many of our core competencies. We believe that as the profession moved to look more like academic journals, our journals have suffered the same fate of fragmentation as found in the academic discipline, where knowledge production is so far removed from foundational works of the disciplines, that it is hard to discern where are the connections between the bodies of work in many of these disciplines (Gregorian, 2004; Valsiner, 2006). However, unlike the academic journals, our membership is not made up mostly of scholars. Scholars in our profession are

mostly faculty and graduate students in our professional preparations programs. As the majority of their writing is dedicated to advancing new knowledge to our field, their works mirror the fragmented works of other academic disciplines. They appear to be more distanced from the array of core professional competencies identified by the profession they serve. Our finding is that most articles published in the journals, albeit valuable works to the profession, are limited to the core competency categories of advising and helping, student culture, diversity and inclusion or student development. Similar to our critique of the professional development sessions offered at the national conventions, there are few journal articles on other core competencies topics or categories such as supervision, leadership, fiscal management, research and evaluation strategies, personnel management issues, or effective communication strategies.

Tyrell and Farmer (2006) also found that professionals continue to struggle with the scholarly side of their professional lives. The second lowest response to the questions of importance to your work and if you desire professional development in this area was maintaining a scholarly background in our discipline. The water cooler conversation echoes with professionals lament that they are not reading our professional journals and they are not relevant to their work. Have our theoretical frameworks become so fragmented and distant from our professionals that many cannot see how the research produced is relevant to their work? Interesting then is one of the oddest transactions that occurs every year is the associations' acknowledgement that a major benefit of paying dues to the association is having access to a journal that in essence, many professionals claim they are not reading.

We suggest the following course of actions for our professional journals:

- Dedicate one article in each journal to a core competency topic (i.e., effective supervision, conflict resolution, five major tenets driving legal issues in student

affairs today) that are not necessarily new knowledge production but more so focused on a “theory to practice model” and/or everyday application of other professional competencies neglected over the years.

- Invite a SSAO or a mid-level practitioner to author one article in the journal that emulates how they incorporate research in the field into everyday practices of the profession.

In general, we believe the journals need to make as much of an effort to better connect with the professionals and professionals need to become true educators who foster stronger assessment and research activities.

Emergence of the Scholar-Practitioner

Conversely, another elephant in the room is the taken for granted behavior of some practitioners who run from research activities. As we advocated earlier, student affairs professionals must become competent at assessment and that will involve increasing their skills and understanding related to research and scholarly activities. With this said, a road less traveled has arrived with the professional associations recent recognition of the “scholar-practitioner.” This is an important statement for the profession and perhaps more so than most might think. The scholar-practitioner is a unique and uncommon professional. They practice the craft of the everyday professional but they also make scholarly contributions to the profession. They are not on either side of this widening gap between the professional or the scholar engaged in niched research; they are the bridge! We need more scholar-practitioners in the field.

Getting into the Game of Higher Education Politics

The recent economic crisis across the world points to the stark reality that little help is on the way to redress decades of cuts in higher education. Eventually, this erosion of financial support seeps into the conversations of budget cuts and returns us to our earlier conversation about credential and salary erosion for new hires in the profession. These facts necessitate SSAOs to change their roles in the state and federal political game, because we have an obligation to better represent students in the political arena of higher education. The profession has not effectively gained access to the political stage and we have not effectively exercised our student affairs voice.

At the federal level, our professional associations have partnered with the American Council on Education (ACE) to advocate the student affairs perspective. The recent exchanges in the Spellings Commission illustrates a dialogue on critical issues in higher education, but nevertheless, the student affairs' voice was absent in the discussion. ACE, our surrogate voice, also represented constituents other than student affairs. If the profession and the professional associations ever decided to proactively develop a political-legislative agenda at the federal level, instead of passively responding to the proposed mandates rolling out of Capitol Hill, we might develop a political voice that would allow federal legislatures and the US Department of Education to have a better understanding about how to improve the educational system and the lives of our students. We have been ineffective in responding to proposed mandates and even when mandates are legislated into law, our profession has little political clout to revisit and revise any legislation that becomes law.

Locally, the campus president, provost, or other vice presidents may have concerns about SSAOs exercising their voice directly to state legislatures and the federal government if that message was off point with the broader institutional message. However, similar to our concerns

at the federal level, if we continue to allow any of these surrogate voices to represent the profession, our student affairs voice will continue to be lost among the voices of competing interests. We see the best avenue for SSAOs to develop a political voice for the profession is through our professional associations. In order for this strategy to be effective, NASPA and ACPA need to relinquish their relationship with ACE as the surrogate voice for the profession. Instead, we assert that the two professional associations create a lobbying arm that is directed by a council of SSAOs representative of the diversity of institutions in the field. Currently, the profession mostly passively reacts to legislation proposed at the federal level. We need to exercise our voice through our lobbyists, through drafting legislation and position papers to advance higher education and via press conferences to illuminate the student experience on college campuses. Parents and our publics are not hearing our stories through the press or through their legislative representatives, largely because we have not told them or our stories have been lost within the interests of surrogate voices. We assert here that the profession should provide direct testimony on the state of students and student affairs to the federal government and state legislatures. Student affairs professionals need to exercise their responsibility to find their voices and express necessary views on the issues impacting higher education today.

The report of the Task Force on the Future of Student Affairs for the most part stayed on pathways most traveled by the profession. These pathways may no longer be serving the profession as best as they should. We have proposed here that the profession has new roads that have been less traveled by the profession. Our critique of the Task Force on Student Affairs, our professional associations, and SSAOs is that they have not done enough to get at the elephants in the room. With the best intentions set forth, they have not done enough to push the profession

outside of its self-prescribed status quo. We hope to push way beyond those margins here and leave the reader to judge how we fared in daring where the profession needs to go in the future!

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