

Reflections & Musings from George Kuh

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To honor and celebrate Dr. Kuh's retirement from Indiana University in 2010, two current members of the IUSPA Journal Review Board interviewed Dr. Kuh about his experience as a faculty member and researcher with the field of higher education and student affairs. In his typical manner, Kuh shared his personal stories and experiences with humor and humility.

George Kuh has been one of the most influential scholars in higher education with his work on student learning and engagement. Kuh served as a faculty member for the Educational Leadership and Policy Studies department within the School of Education at Indiana University (IU) for 34 years and retired recently in August 2010. Throughout his time, Kuh took on many different and influential roles that helped grow and secure the academic and scholarly reputation of IU's Higher Education and Student Affairs (HESA) program and established IU as the *Center* (pun intended) for Postsecondary Research. With over 350 publications, numerous awards and honors, and a curriculum vita the length of some novels, Kuh is an accomplished and highly proclaimed scholar of higher education. However, Kuh describes himself more as "an ordinary person who has had more than his share of extraordinary opportunities" (Kuh, 2013, p. 1).

Beginnings

This "ordinary man" began his career by receiving his Bachelor of Arts degree from Luther College in Decorah, Iowa in 1968. From his first visit to Luther College, Kuh fell in love with the campus and the environment, so it was no surprise that he happily accepted the offer to join the admissions staff after

graduation. His experience in admissions fostered his desire to learn more about higher education and provided an outlet to explore and understand different institutional types and experiences. While working in admissions, Kuh worked on his master's degree in School Counseling at St. Cloud State College (now University) in St. Cloud, Minnesota, completing his degree in 1971. After four years, Kuh decided to leave admissions because he was teetering on the edge of what today we call, "burn out." "If you are unhappy with your work, grow the job or grow yourself out of it" (G. Kuh, personal communication, April 2, 2013). This piece of wisdom was offered as advice for new professionals in the field but is certainly applicable to all levels. He acknowledged that we all get tired, but we never really burn out. He jokingly suggested chocolate and rye whiskey to help get through the tough times.

Kuh decided to grow himself out of his admission role and into the role of a doctoral student majoring in Counselor Education at the University of Iowa in Iowa City, Iowa. After completing his Ph.D. in 1975, Kuh stayed at the University of Iowa as an assistant professor in the Student Development and Counselor Education program. A year later, Kuh accepted an assistant professor position at IU in the Higher Education and College Student Personnel program (CSP; now the Higher Education and Student Affairs

Program), beginning his long tenure at the school. When asked if there were any growing pains in the transition from a counselor education program to a more practitioner-based student affairs program, Kuh noted there were enough similarities in the major field courses to be comfortable with the curriculum. In fact, prior to his arrival, the IU CSP program was originally based in counselor education; however, there were differences in the atmosphere. Kuh laughed as he recalled Betty Greenleaf's sternly articulated views about proper attire. He was used to wearing jeans to class, whereas Betty, one of the founders of the CSP department, insisted that men wear coats and ties and women wear blouses and skirts. He recalled his beanbag chair did not last too long in his office either. Aside from the cultural change, Kuh said the transition was easy.

Working with Legends

When asked about Betty Greenleaf, he referred to her as a grand lady who was deeply "committed to the success of her students and colleagues" (G. Kuh, personal communication, April 2, 2013). Elizabeth (Betty) Greenleaf, an active professor within the program in addition to her role as program coordinator, was best known for her inspirational administrative work and leadership in national professional and civic organizations. Kuh also had the opportunity to work with another of IU's legends, Bob Shaffer, former Dean of Students. Shaffer is described as having a "simple but important goal: to encourage the personal and professional development of those with whom he has contact" (Kuh & Coomes, 1986, p.614). In our interview, Kuh could say nothing but good words about both Greenleaf and

Shaffer. Shaffer, who "never had a harsh word to say about anyone" was always supportive and encouraging (Kuh still receives such notes from Shaffer on occasion) and strived to do positive work for the campus community (G. Kuh, personal communication, April 2, 2013). Kuh noted that Greenleaf and Shaffer gave him instant credibility within the field when he joined the CSP program. Greenleaf and Shaffer recognized the changing nature of higher education, especially within applied fields such as college student personnel, and knew that "our program had to increase its scholarly productivity to maintain its leadership position for the profession" (G. Kuh, personal communication, April 2, 2013). They made it very clear that Kuh's role upon joining the IU faculty was to "complement the program's strong practitioner orientation by infusing more theory and research into the course work and student experience" (G. Kuh, personal communication, April 2, 2013).

Life as a Faculty Member

As a faculty member, Kuh had some learning to do as he was required to teach a course on program evaluation early in his career, a subject in which he had no prior teaching experience. However, by the 1990s, when CSP evolved into the HESA program, Kuh had taught every single class offered (Kuh, 2013). The Introduction to Student Affairs Administration course was one of the classes he enjoyed teaching during his tenure because "the students were excited and enthused" to learn (G. Kuh, personal communication, April 2, 2013). The Introduction course is taken during the first semester of the first year of the HESA program. The course is highly intensive with the month of October

accounting for most of the rigor. Kuh saw October as a challenge and approached it the same way Bob Shaffer approached his work with the mindset that “we are going to push you, but we will be here to support you along the way” (G. Kuh, personal communication, April 2, 2013).

In addition, Kuh created and enjoyed teaching the Environmental Theory and Assessment course. As part of the class, students were required to conduct a semester-long research project. The current structure of the class remains similar to Kuh’s original class with students working in groups, conducting research to answer an environmental question, and addressing those results and their meaning to the field through a paper and presentation to the campus community. This was a highly stressful experience for the students as they were asked to complete a research project from start to finish in one semester, but it made them “go beyond what they thought they could do” (G. Kuh, personal communication, April 2, 2013). Looking back, Kuh realized he had designed a course that had all of the conditions for high-impact learning, a subject he would eventually research and address in 2008 with *High Impact Educational Practices: What They Are, Who Has Access to Them, and Why They Matter*. The course was challenging to teach as it was “very demanding of both the students and the instructor” (G. Kuh, personal communication, April 2, 2013). However, it remains one of his favorite courses because he could watch this “powerful educational experience” unfold throughout one semester (G. Kuh, personal communication, April 2, 2013).

Kuh was not only extensively involved in the master’s students curriculum, but also directed 54 doctoral dissertations and many of those students

continue to expand the knowledge of student affairs through research. Bruce Jacobs, the current executive director of the Indiana Memorial Union, was among those doctoral students. In reflecting back on his interactions with Kuh as his advisor, Jacobs mentioned that Kuh “taught many of us the value of quick and thorough feedback to students. It is my recollection that papers were returned quickly (often the next day) and generally with more written by George than was in the original document” (personal communication, April 18, 2013).

Kuh approached research as an on-going process. “On more than one occasion, when a dissertation manuscript had been sent to the publisher, the student has said they were pleased that this project was done—only to hear George comment that you are never done” (B. Jacobs, personal communication, 2013). Kuh continued to preach this understanding of research when working on the Documenting Effective Educational Practice (DEEP) project with several of his doctoral advisees. “A group of us who were conducting a campus visit as part of the DEEP project were having dinner after we had spent 3 days interviewing students, faculty and staff at a particular college. Three of us had George as our chair and director—one had not. As we were sifting through the data the person who had not worked with George said, ‘I think we have a great deal of solid information, I think we know what is happening on this campus. I do not think we have to come back, I think we are done.’ Almost in unison the three of us replied, ‘You are never done’” (B. Jacobs, personal communication, April 18, 2013).

Becoming a Legend

Kuh certainly delivered on Greenleaf's expectation to expand upon the program's strong practitioner-based reputation by emphasizing high-quality, rigorous, research with practical implications. In order to turn his aspiration into a reality, Kuh understood that strong faculty members were instrumental in not only producing knowledge for the higher education and student affairs field, but also in providing students with concrete research experience. "During his tenure the following faculty joined HESA: John Bean, Nancy Evans, Don Hossler, Fran Stage, Trudy Banta, Vasti Torres, Gary Pike, Robin Hughes, and Tom Nelson-Laird. While the HESA master's program had always been highly regarded, George provided much of the impetus for moving the doctoral program from a well-regarded program to one of the leading doctoral programs in the country" (D. Hossler, personal communication, April 21, 2013). In addition, Kuh utilized research to expand on the Living Learning Programs on IU's campus, going above and beyond Greenleaf's expectation. "While serving as Associate Dean of the Faculties, George's research and work lead to the creation of new living and learning environments that continue to grow and thrive to this day" (B. Jacobs, personal communication, 2013).

While Kuh was becoming legendary within the HESA program for his emphasis on research, his desire to understand student engagement and the value of out-of-class experiences made him a legend in the field of higher education and student affairs. In attempting to understand what makes for powerful learning conditions both on- and off-campus, Kuh and John Schuh, now

a distinguished professor emeritus in Educational Leadership and Policy Studies at Iowa State University with an astounding 235 publications to his name, conducted the College Experience Study, a multi-institutional study, which would lead them to write *Involving Colleges: Successful Approaches to Fostering Student Learning and Development Outside the Classroom* (1991). "My view at the time was that there would be more interest in our work if the unit of analysis were the institution, not an administrative unit, and if the study focused on the out-of-class experience" (Kuh, 2013, p. 22). Through their study, Kuh and Schuh were able to describe the rich harvest of learning taking place outside of the classroom, the institutional policies and practices that enabled this learning, and the valuable role of student affairs. In addition to providing validation for student affairs, Kuh said the "project was a terrific experience for me, in part because of the wonderful colleagues on the research team and others on the 14 campuses we came to know pretty well" (G. Kuh, personal communication, April 18, 2013). "It put me in a position to do some other national projects that promise to have lasting significance, such as the College Student Experiences Questionnaire (CSEQ), National Survey for Student Engagement (NSSE), Strategic National Arts Alumni Project (SNAAP), and the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA)" (G. Kuh, personal communication, April 18, 2013). These national projects allowed Kuh to continue "to conduct research to better understand the value of educationally purposeful out-of-class experiences and what institutions could do to implement policies and practices to engage students more deeply in these meaningful learning

activities” (G. Kuh, personal communication, April 18, 2013).

Kuh’s stewardship of the CSEQ, which was transferred to IU from UCLA in 1994, was integral in creating NSSE and furthering the research agenda for the program and higher education in general. NSSE sought to “shift the national discourse about what matters in college from what institutions have—resources by way of faculty accomplishments, physical attributes, and student backgrounds—to what students do with these resources” (Kuh, 2013, p. 25). The goals were to learn more about the conditions that helped foster student engagement inside and outside of the classroom and what institutions could do to create and sustain those conditions. This survey has become an important assessment tool that colleges and universities use to guide improvement and foster accountability. Scholars have used NSSE data to advance knowledge of the field, including Kuh, who discovered and documented the value of the high-impact practices. In addition, NSSE was the backbone that allowed the Center for Postsecondary Research to grow and prosper, something Kuh regards as one of his most important contributions. Additionally, Kuh continues to be proud of IU’s well-earned reputation for attracting “strong, productive faculty and students” (G. Kuh, personal communication, April 2, 2013).

It is clear that, by any standard, Kuh produced an extensive amount of research on student learning and engagement while establishing a strong research-oriented HESA program and the Center for Postsecondary Research. Kuh applied the knowledge he gained from this research to assist IU in creating positive learning environments for students and faculty. “During his tenure ...,

true to his own academic writing, [Kuh] implemented a series of initiatives that broke down silos across academic and student affairs offices that enhance both the in-class and out-of-class experiences of undergraduates” (D. Hossler, personal communication, April 21, 2013).

Post Retirement

Although Kuh is officially classified as Professor Emeritus at IU, he is still active in the field. Earlier this year, Kuh was awarded the 2013 Robert Zemsky Medal for Innovation in Higher Education (Monaghan, 2013). This award is one of many Kuh has received throughout his career in student affairs. When asked how Kuh felt about all of the awards he has received, he jokingly said, “I have outlived those who didn’t think I was deserving of them” (G. Kuh, personal communication, April 2, 2013). In all seriousness, Kuh thinks it is “wonderful to be acknowledged” and is “pleased that the kind of work he has done has made a difference and that it has helped others in their work” (G. Kuh, personal communication, April 2, 2013).

Kuh continues to serve in his role as Director of the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment, which is co-located at IU and the University of Illinois where he is an adjunct professor of Education Policy. He still enjoys interacting with current HESA master’s and doctoral students. Last spring, Kuh spoke to current IU HESA master’s students via Skype, offering them a chance to ask questions and gain an expert perspective as they transition into their first positions as new student affairs professionals. As with any living legend, current and past HESA students are always excited to say that they saw and

talked with Kuh at the IU receptions at national conferences.

Looking Forward

When asked how the student affairs profession is different today, Kuh observed that “the field now has a much deeper and richer literature to draw on to guide practice. At the same time, what matters as much as anything else is what has not changed and I hope will not change, which is that student affairs act in good faith as the conscience of the campus (as Peggy Barr long-time student affairs practitioner and leader always reminded us), and consistently advocate on behalf of high-quality student experience, inside as well as outside the classroom.”

When asked about current trends and issues in higher education, Kuh identified several areas of which student affairs professionals need to be aware in order to perform their roles effectively. Kuh emphasized once again the importance of assessment work, since it provides the data to prove that what student affairs professionals do is important to student success. Without assessment, “how can we prove to others that we are essential?” (G. Kuh, personal communication, April 2, 2013). Tied to assessment is the college cost crisis, the implications of which are further exacerbated by the recent economic challenges faced by many recent college graduates who have had difficulty finding jobs that commensurate with their educational preparation. To some observers, such an environment makes participating in co-curricular activities an unnecessary luxury. To combat this, “we need data to determine whether student organization leadership experience, service learning, and other such activities

merit institutional and student interest and support” (G. Kuh, personal communication, April 18, 2013). In addition to this data, new student affairs professionals need to stay on top of current research by reading journals, attending conferences, and engaging in conversations with colleagues, both seasoned professionals and contemporaries because “every generation needs to discover for itself what it needs to know” (G. Kuh, personal communication, April 2, 2013).

Within their first job, new professionals will be faced with the challenge of “making the strange familiar,” (G. Kuh, personal communication, April 2, 2013). Kuh underscored the importance of learning as much as possible as early as possible about the campus culture and one’s employing office or program. “Please, please, please do not be one of those student affairs professionals who starts each sentence with, ‘Well at my former institution, we did things ‘X’ way’” (G. Kuh, personal communication, April 2, 2013). Lastly, the HESA graduate students are always reminded throughout Outreach and the job-search process that the field of student affairs is a small one. Kuh strongly encouraged new professionals to “stay connected with peers and expand that network, remembering to be nice to everyone as nothing is to be gained by bad mouthing a colleague” (G. Kuh, personal communication, April 2, 2013).

While reflecting on his career, Kuh stated, “I hope my students will say I held them to academic performance expectations that stretched them to achieve at levels they did not think possible. I hope the IU faculty and staff will remember me as a congenial colleague who took his share of responsibility for tending to the commons

and left the program stronger than when he arrived. People who know me primarily through my publications and national work will likely think of NSSE and my role in establishing the Center for Postsecondary Research as a major research and development operation in higher education. There are worse things

to be remembered for..." (personal communication, April 18, 2013).

Over the course of IU's history, there have been many alumni, faculty, and staff that have left a positive impact on the institution and its legacy. Kuh is among those influential people as he left the HESA program and the field of student affairs stronger than when he arrived.

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