Student Affairs: A Return to a More Certain Future

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“It is not the answer that enlightens, but the question.”—Eugene Ionesco

Reforming Student Affairs

During the past quarter century, student affairs accompanied by an element of hubris heretofore never associated with its espoused altruism, decided to take control over its campus role, a role that, historically, was created in response to the changing needs of collegiate institutions and students and faculty abrogation of many of their traditional responsibilities (Mueller, 1951; Williamson, 1951). Contributing to the field’s dissatisfaction during the decade of the 1960s, were problems associated with the sexual and social evolution which challenged collegiate institutions’ traditional authority and control functions and students’ oversight responsibilities for on and off-campus student behavior. Also contributing to what many felt to be a compelling need for change were calls made for redefinition of student personnel work (Berdie, 1956), and a growing body of research and theories regarding student growth and development which appeared to lend itself to the essential educational and service work of the field.

The leaders of this reform movement called student development, believed that through the acceptance and successful application of developmental theory in student affairs work, the field would affect desirable developmental changes in students and, as ancillary or secondary consequences, the field would rid itself of what some perceived to be repugnant control and service responsibilities—while achieving its manifest destiny—that of acquiring the status of a profession, and overdue respect for its campus practitioners. Waving the “progressive” (sic) student development banner, we asserted, or certainly implied by our actions and publications (Brown, 1972; Crookston, 1972; COSPA, 1975; Miller & Prince, 1976), that we would discard some of the more onerous aspects of our subordinate role as support staff to the faculty and academic mission of our colleges (ACE, 1949), and become co-equal with the faculty.

Through our application and testing of developmental theory in the co-curriculum, and by establishing our own turf, so to speak, as “experts” on college students’ growth and development, the faculty would accept us as equal and collaborating colleagues (Stamatakos & Rogers, 1984). However, altruistic (or selfishly pragmatic) our intentions, we certainly could have justly been accused of the sin of vain-gloriousness!

Despite the lack of an agreed-upon philosophy of the field (Stamatakos & Rogers, 1984), or evidence of acceptance and agreement by the rank-and-file practitioners of student development’s potency for affecting desirable changes in students, the apostles of student development began to build the foundations of our professional house on a sea of sand.

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Rather than first addressing and reaching profession-wide agreement about student affairs philosophy (the foundations of a profession), student development’s adherents plunged forward as if they possessed truths revealed to them in communion with the Absolute.

The document, Student Development Services in Post-Secondary Education (SDSPE), (COSPA, 1975) laid the foundations for the content and directions of the reform movement. Later, a code of ethics (ACPA, 1981), and standards of professional preparation and practice (Council for the Advancement of Standards, 1986), were created to satisfy some of the criteria of a profession (Stamatakos, 1981), enhance our image as a profession, and improve our self-esteem by removing the stigma of being just student personnel worker or support staff. We encouraged the application of theory in practice, supported research and the creation of instruments to measure student growth, advocated creativity in organizational restructuring (Crookston, 1972), and urged developmental programming in the out-of-class environments of college students. Generally, and most unfortunately, most all of these activities were conducted in service areas and the co-curriculum, in isolation from the faculty and the basic instructional program of the college.

Hundreds of books and learned articles were published, and thousands of conference presentations were made extolling student affairs practitioners and graduate students to be developmental. To be in vogue, almost overnight, or so it seemed, great numbers of programs sponsored by the American College Personnel Association’s national conferences included the signal word development or developmental, while on campuses traditional programs and activities were renamed to include the term developmental, whether or not they actually included developmental components. Chief student affairs officers changed their titles and those of their divisions to reflect understanding, acceptance, and commitment to student development—even though there was ample reason to believe that (1) the concept (or model) was not really very clear, at least not to many, (2) the faculty in preparation programs were not, as a whole, interested, or knowledgeable enough to teach it, (3) the theories were not proven valid, broadly applicable or well understood for correct application in the wide variety of collegiate settings and populations comprising American higher education, and (4) the more typical student affairs worker did not possess the understandings, skills, competencies to actually apply its theories with any degree of sophistication and confidence in actual practice.

To compound the unrecognized confusion in the ranks about the concept or paradigm as it was championed and promulgated by its protagonists, student development was used to identify a model, a philosophy, a theory, a process, and an outcome. As well, as in the case of the term, “OK”, it was used as a noun, adjective, and verb.

Simultaneously, we proudly addressed ourselves as applied behavioral scientists, specialists, consultants, collaborators, and facilitators of this increasingly amorphous something called student development, all the while being fully aware of the fact that few practitioners and theoreticians in the field of student affairs actually possessed the preparation, training, discipline, and experience for its successful application in the environment of the typical college.

Interestingly, throughout this twenty-five year span of advocacies, proliferation of literature, leadership at the national levels, and promulgation of student development’s merits, very few voices were raised or heard which questioned or challenged the new orthodoxy of student affairs (Rhatigan, 1974; Bloland, 1986a and 1986b; Stamatakos, 1987a). Those who
did challenge or question its validity and viability were dismissed as obdurate, inflexible, heretics, or, humorously, 'the unwashed'. For all practical purposes their voices were as ineffective as if they had been shouting into the wilderness, for the converts to the reform movement were too consumed by the zealousness which often accompanies conversion to listen to the voices of experience, reason, or healthy and needed skepticism. Student development had been elevated to a divine status; it had achieved apotheosis!

Student development has had twenty-five or so years during which to be: (1) accepted as being the undisputed foundation of our work—philosophy and theory base, (2) taught as an essential component of the field’s professional preparation programs, (3) proven appropriate for application in the work environment, (4) considered as being the basic content of our literature, (5) supported by quality research and evaluation findings proving successful application and efficacy within student affairs divisions and for securing continued administrative support, and (6) effective in returning student affairs to the academy (Brown, 1974). In other words, to ‘make its case’. A number of articles have been published about the student development movement in the past decade, most historical or anecdotal in nature and intended to encourage the faithful. Recently, however, a more comprehensive and systematic examination regarding its role, performance and future as an appropriate and valid rasion d’etre for student affairs has been published (Bloland, Stamatakos & Rogers, 1994). And, not too surprisingly to some of the movement’s critics and growing body of skeptics within the field, evidence reveals that student development’s glowing promises for reforming the field’s methods, practices, outcomes and its role and place in student affairs and higher education, have fallen far short of such promises.

Analysis

1. As a philosophy, student development secured wide acceptance within the American College Personnel Association (ACPA). Among Chief Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA), however, it was not greeted with similar enthusiasm. NASPA’s conference programs over the years will reveal a predominance of programs attending to daily bread-and-butter administrative matters. In its “New Century” report, NASPA (1987) addressed student development as an essential goal, but barely in a manner comparable with ACPA’s statements. Having been subjected to careful analysis using established criteria (Stamatakos & Rogers, 1984), student development as philosophy was found to be deficient and inadequate as compared with the Student Personnel Point of View (SPPV), (ACE, 1949). Student development (COSPA, 1975), was found to have disregarded or ignored the missions and goals of higher education, as well as cast the student’s development as an end in itself—apart from the institution’s curriculum and societal expectations of its educated citizens.

2. As an essential component of graduate professional programs, it has yet to be shown that the majority of the field’s approximately one hundred programs have attempted, let alone qualified for certification using CAS standards which require a substantial component of student development theory and application. Significant additions to the curricula in recent years appear to have been those dealing with pragmatic subjects such as finance and budgeting, the law of higher education, planning, and the like.

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3. As for being proven as appropriate for application in the work environment of the practitioner’s field, student development theory has been found badly wanting (Bloland, Stamatakos & Rogers, 1994) in its ability to satisfy common denominators of good theory (Gergin, 1969; Hardy, 1973, 1978; Schrag, 1976). Student development theory is not a theory at all, but a disparate collection of theoretical perspectives, some far from having been proven adequate for the kind of application envisaged and advocated by developmentalists. Lacking an overall meta-theory to provide practice with guidance in application has compounded its inherent problems and will continue to mire the field with theoretical concepts lacking empirical bases, and prevent it from achieving accurate assessments of the effects of its interventions. This same inadequacy has reflected itself within the classrooms of graduate programs as faculty attempt to teach theory, as they try to help students translate theory into pragmatic and operational formats for workplace application, and as students attempt to apply theory in practice and internship settings which are not receptive and sometimes hostile to student development.

4. Any revolutionary movement within a profession would be expected, eventually, to reflect its importance in the profession’s literature. A careful and systematic review of student affairs literature over the past twenty years, especially that literature which is more permanent and most likely read (hard and soft covered books and monographs), reveals that student development as the central theme or as a significant component, accounted for only approximately 9% of that literature. Of apparently far greater importance to the field’s practitioners and consumers of its publications was literature on the overall administration of student affairs programs, enrollment management budgets and financing, multicultural and minority issues, law, alcohol and substance abuse, campus violence, and other practical matters (Bloland, Stamatakos & Rogers, 1994).

In applying five criteria to the student development literature which has been published, it was found that: (a) it was, in most instances, written with the student and practitioner in mind, and avoided highly technical matters, jargon, and pedantry; (b) conveyed a reasonable number of ideas and examples of relevant utility for the sophisticated practitioner, but ignored or did not take into account the level of professional preparation and experiential backgrounds of the majority of practitioners who, it can be said, are “paraprofessionals”; (c) was occasionally seriously flawed or negatively affected because of opinion, over-generalization, and paucity of easily implemented program models understandable to the typical practitioner; (d) ignored or easily dismissed the need for knowledge of educational philosophy, learning theory and processes necessary for successful practice; (e) confused the meaning of the term development through multiple interpretations (noun, verb, adjective, philosophy, paradigm, mission, goal, theory, process, and outcome); (f) too often provided theories for application which lacked adequate methodologies for assessment; (g) met only some of the five criteria of professional literature for affecting practice (Bloland, Stamatakos, & Rogers, 1994).

5. One of the hallmarks of the validity of any movement within a profession is the degree to which the field has: (a) translated that the movement’s tenets and theories into workable formats for successful application in the field, and (b) secured the continued confidence of and support from the collegiate institution’s officers and trustees. Unfortunately, student development’s early promises have yet to reach fruition in any significant or convincing manner, given the findings of research on this subject (Bloland, Stamatakos & Rogers, 1994; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Thrasher & Bloland, 1989).
practitioners in the field would admit, candidly, that the majority of developmental programming administered by student affairs has occurred within the co-curriculum, not in the main tent of the college, the classroom, or in collaboration with faculty. Thus, it cannot be said that through the vehicle of student development student affairs ever returned to the academy in any manner similar to that envisaged by Brown (1972), COSPA (1975), Miller and Prince (1976), Crookston (1976) and others.

Since the early vestiges of the student development reform movement in the late 1960s, student affairs workers have shared confused notions about their role and place in higher education. On one hand, they have been subject to a top-down cascade of association-sponsored literature and papers written by student development advocates intended to persuade them to accept its tenets and to practice and promulgate the essential ideas, ideals, and methodologies of the student development reform movement as professionally qualified applied behavioral scientists. On the other hand, cynicism has developed among students and practitioners as confusion has been compounded by the inadequacies of their own professional preparation as a foundation for ‘doing’ student development, from the outcomes of their own experiences as practitioners, and by the absence of persuasive evidence of wide and successful application of student development theory.

In this sense, many of the visions, promises and benefits of student development for reforming student affairs practice and professionalizing the field were in many instances unproven, erroneous, and possibly overstated.

Indeed, the evidence is very persuasive in leading us to the conclusion that the student affairs house is not in very good order. That after more than two decades of unquestioned assertions, indoctrination, unchallenged organizational politics, policies and commitments, and major but well-intentioned experimentation upon unsuspecting college students, the halcyon days, if there really were any, are over. That a major reconceptualization of the role and place of student development as a major paradigm within and driving the practice of student affairs work may be quite overdue. If so, the perspicacious reader will ask, “toward what end?”

Some Observations and Recommendations

Seven years ago this writer (Stamatakos, 1987b), contended that by subscribing to a student development agenda, student affairs had distanced itself from rather than returning to the academy (Brown, 1972), and that the major precipitating factors leading to this unanticipated and unfortunate consequence were: (1) encouraging the abandonment of student affairs’ traditional commitment to its service and educational support roles as subscribed to in the SPPV (ACE, 1949), by substituting student development as the field’s raison d’etre, and (2) the insistence of student developmentalists in directing our training and practice in the manner of behavioral science experts, and the exercise of its applications in a manner generally disassociated from the instructional and roles of the faculty, the curriculum, and the classroom.

It was in this context that the writer recommended that student affairs give careful consideration to the comprehensive educational and developmental potency and proven viability of the general education curriculum of the college (Hickerson, 1981; Bloland,
Stamatokos & Rogers, 1994), as core and content of those learnings essential for the intellectual, social, spiritual, and emotional growth of college students. The writer contended that the profession’s basic premises (first principles), values, roles and functions, and identity, had evolved and had been established through a century of valued service and educational work in colleges and universities, and were further confirmed by the SPPV (ACE, 1949). Furthermore, he contended that student affairs’ future as a service and educational instrument of the college would certainly be assured only insofar as it reconceptualized its present self-image of developmentalists into a commitment to the basic tenets of the SPPV, and exercised its educational responsibilities in a manner which supported and enhanced the achievement of the goals of the general education program and curriculum of the college and university.

In this context he suggested that student affairs should continue to conduct its fine educational activities within the co-curriculum while simultaneously developing working relationships with the faculty which would result in the development of co-curricular educational programs and activities which intentionally support, enhance and reinforce those critically important core concepts, principles, values, learning central to the general education program and the goals of the college. It would be through such educational activities and intentional relationships and the educational experiences of the student in the classroom and out-of-class life, that a high degree of congruence and impact could be reasonably assured.

If the profession is reasonably convinced that it is time to examine critically the actual record of student development’s performance as its appropriate paradigm, and if it is reasonably convinced that student development is wanting, and that a reconceptualization of student affairs is in order, then it is morally obligated to confront its record willingly, openly and honestly. Organizational politics and priorities, personal and professional commitments, and fear of embarrassment should not continue to overwhelm facts and experience if the profession is ever to come to its collective senses.

For those who are willing to be circumspect, and in some respects daring, the following questions and issues will need to be addressed through discussions and debates in open forums of our professional associations at the national, regional, and state levels, and in our professional journals, graduate programs, and divisional staff meetings (Bloland, Stamatokos & Rogers, 1994).

1. The profession has before it two major documents which are purported to represent its philosophy, the SPPV (ACE, 1949), and the SDSPSE (COSPA, 1975). Can or should the profession continue as function as one, and with some degree of unity among its major associations, without resolving the differences, omissions, and conflicts between them? If not, then who should attempt to write or re-write the profession’s philosophy? Should a joint task force be formed representative of the profession, co-sponsored and supported by our major associations for the purpose of reaching consensus about what the profession holds as basic principles (first principles), values, roles and functions (Stamatokos & Rogers, 1982), and to determine in what ways these philosophical elements contribute to its identity, and to its contributions to the achievement of the missions and goals of colleges? If not, then who should attempt to do the job? If the work is accomplished, then through what means should the philosophy receive careful review, and profession-wide approval?

Should discussions about a professional philosophy include concerns about (a) the generally accepted missions, purposes, and goals of higher education; (b) the extent and nature of student affairs contributions to the achievement of institutional goals; (c) the importance and significance of contributions student affairs can make; and (d) how student affairs can make those contributions?

2. If the general education curriculum of higher education best represents the colleges’ core values, as those values are expected to become manifest in the educational process and students, in what respects are these educational values held important by student affairs? Assuming a high degree of congruence between the core values of the college and those of student affairs, in what ways can student affairs develop its out-of-class curriculum of valued learnings which will compliment and enhance the intended impact of classroom instruction?

If student affairs views its mission as essentially service and education-based, what is student affairs to teach? What would constitute its curriculum and syllabi? Would student development theory be helpful in developing instructional strategies and methodologies? Should student affairs seek the consultation, cooperative and support of the faculty in creating and administrating its curriculum, syllabi, out-of-class and instructional methodologies and programs of educational intervention? If so, what knowledge, pedagogical understandings and techniques do the faculty possess for assisting student affairs in this manner? What would the faculty have to gain through such assistance and collaboration?

3. What kinds of experience, knowledge, and understandings does student affairs actually possess which can assist the faculty in making its general education curriculum and syllabi more vital and responsive to contemporary student needs, while keeping the intended learnings of the curriculum inviolate?

4. If student affairs were to respond to the call for its return to the academy through a commitment to the importance of general education, what role can the profession’s knowledge and experience with student development theory and programming play in effecting the achievement of holistic educational goals as those goals are reflected in the curriculum of general education, and, as well, in the co-curriculum and various support and service activities?

5. In what ways should the professional preparation standards of student affairs graduate programs (CAS, 1986) be altered to accommodate for student affairs’ subscription to and alliance with the general education program of the college? Should learning theory and pedagogy receive attention in equal measure as that of student development? Should philosophy of higher education be a required component of the curriculum? Should practica and internships in formal and informal instructional settings be included in equal measure as those opportunities provided for student activities, service programs and developmental experiences?

There are a host of other questions which would need to be addressed before the task of student affairs’ reconceptualization would approach completeness. For example, what effects would a reconceived concept have upon: in-service staff development, priorities and commitments of its professional associations, national, state and regional conference workshops and programs, professional publications, organizational arrangements and alliances across various administrative units of the college, organizational structure of student affairs divisions, and, lastly, although not completely, research and evaluation measures for determining student affairs’ effectiveness?
Conclusion

The purpose of this paper has been to stimulate the serious consideration of the graduate student, practitioner, and professorate in student affairs administration in a manner which encourages healthy and needed skepticism, critical thinking, and questioning of student affairs' current commitments, priorities, practices and performance in contemporary higher education. Hopefully, the readers will soon be contributing to the needed and purposeful questioning, discussion and debate that has been relatively absent over the past quarter century.

In the best of all possible worlds, discussion and debate will lead to purposeful and concerted action on the part of all who have made a commitment to dedicate some part of their lives toward the improvement of their profession. And, it follows logically that improvement of the profession must ultimately benefit the quality of services we provide and the educational experiences of college students.

References


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