## Are Today's Methods Adequate for Tomorrow's Challenges?

### Don G. Creamer

*Contemporary methods of college student affairs can be used effectively to deal with new campus realities and challenges of the future. Their effectiveness depends on individual professionals, however, and the fulfillment of certain conditions.*

One of the historic realities of college student affairs is that the burden of its institutional responsibilities has never been balanced by equivalent institutional support. Much of the criticism of college student affairs effectiveness can be explained in part by this historic imbalance between assigned responsibilities and support received to carry them out. Some of the blame may be due, however, to a relatively ineffective use of the methods of the profession. Critics often point to out-of-classroom, and thus, out-of-mainstream, strategies as a reason for an overall lackluster performance of college student affairs relative to other functions in higher education. Are the methods of college student affairs appropriate to the work of higher education? Moreover, are they adequate to deal with new campus realities of the 1990s?

These questions are contemplated in this essay. Emphasis is placed on individual professional responsibility and on effective engagement with institutions.

### What Are Our Methods?

The methods of college student affairs are similar to the methods used by educators in higher education but with a distinctive spin toward out-of-class teaching and learning. The methods of the profession are not mysterious, but they can be complex. Effective use of them requires skill and wisdom that come from experience, intellectual insight, and educational sophistication.

The methods of college student affairs include philosophies, knowledge, principles, change strategies, technologies, and research; yet, each method actually suggests a cluster of approaches, techniques, or modes of operation. The primary methods of the profession and their associated tactics follow:

**Philosophies** include a coherent system of values, beliefs, attitudes, and commitments that define our perspectives on the purpose of higher education. Philosophies help us to decide what is important and what must be assigned priority.
**Knowledge** represents our collective understanding of how people learn and develop and how educational environments shape student outcomes. Our knowledge includes theory that allows us to explain relevant phenomena, research that tests our theories and discloses the correspondence between specific procedures and effects on students, and experience that instructs professionals about the variety of uses of knowledge in education.
**Principles** refer to the ethics and standards of the profession. Principles inform us about criteria of morality and excellence and guide us in decisions about what is right and what is best practice.
**Change strategies** include teaching, consultation, and administration. These tactics are used to inform and to encourage learning and change in individuals, groups, or organizations. Each approach is characterized by a distinctive style of communication and by variations in duties and tasks, but their aims are similar.
**Technologies** refer to specialized vehicles of communication that allow us to teach, consult, and administer such as through media and electronic devices. These approaches are especially important for communication on a large scale.
**Research** refers to procedures to create new knowledge and to evaluate current conditions. The products of discovered knowledge are used to develop or to improve professional practices.

These methods have been articulated elsewhere with varying points of emphasis. For example, the Student Personnel Point of View (1989), in both its 1937 and 1949 versions, revealed aspects of our philosophies, our functional tactics, and our place within the institutions of higher education. These documents reflected a clear service orientation to our work. Later, other statements reflected an expanded perspective on our work that included a student development point of view and placed particular emphasis on the use of theory in practice and on an outcomes orientation. This perspective is evident in Brown's (1972) Student Development in Tomorrow's Higher Education and in Cooper's (1972) Student Development in Higher Education. Recent descriptions of the campus ecology perspective (Banning, 1989) likewise portray these methods with yet another spin to their application as they contemplate environmental design strategies. Each approach brings a distinctive conceptual perspective to

college student affairs practice, but their underlying methods remain reasonably constant.

Since college student affairs is an applied field, effectiveness in the use of its professional methods is tied to experience. There is much for college student affairs professionals to know, much to understand, and much to learn to do in educational environments with high standards and high performance expectations. It takes time and constant dedication to self-improvement to master these methods. Fortunately for all of us, there are many ways to serve students, faculty, and the organizations in which we work. Even those with little experience can make significant, early contributions to student and institutional development as a member of a larger team. One should expect, however, to grow in effectiveness as meaningful professional experiences accumulate.

## Tomorrow's Challenges

We cannot know with certainty what the greatest challenges to college student affairs will be in the future. Prognosticators about the future of higher education have a pretty good record of being wrong. The chances of being wrong, of course, are related directly to how far in the future one claims to see. I cannot see very far, and have no intention of prognosticating, but I can recognize some environmental conditions of the present that almost certainly will continue to affect the nature of higher education in the short term and, consequently, will affect the practice of college student affairs. I am referring, of course, to conditions of increasing diversity among our clients and colleagues, increasing complexity of our goals and tasks, and increasing turbulence or uncertainty in our environments. The prevalence of these conditions creates what Cameron (1984) called a "postindustrial environment" (p. 133) where adequate solutions to problems within the environment require "Janusian thinking" (p. 136).

The Roman god of Janus is depicted with a head looking in multiple directions. This depiction suggests an ability to "see" in extraordinary ways or, according to Cameron (1984), to accept two contradictory thoughts as simultaneously true. Such recognition and acceptance may be necessary to solve very complex problems in organizations such as those facing higher education. Traditional forms of thinking and problem-solving may not be able to cope with some conditions that pit seemingly irreconcilable forces on a collision course. Bigotry and violence on college and university campuses, for example, are so antithetical to the values of higher education to virtually immobilize the institutions when they occur. Yet, bigotry and violence often accompany new demographic realities on our campuses. Unless uncommon tactics of thinking and seeing, such as those suggested by Janusian thinking, are used to find common ground for conducting the business of higher education, our

effectiveness will be diminished. Are the methods of college student affairs adequate to cope with seemingly contradictory situations?

Increasing organization complexity can be illustrated by results of dual loyalties of faculty between "campus communities" and "disciplinary communities" (Alpert, 1985, p. 250). On many university campuses, faculty exhibit divided allegiance between their campuses and their own disciplinary societies. Since it is the disciplinary communities that often provide the greatest recognition of scholarship and other achievements of faculty, it is not surprising that faculty give priority to disciplinary goals. Such divided loyalties, however, make it extremely difficult to create genuine communities on a campus. At the same time, the division among faculty may create an opportunity for powerful leadership from student affairs. Does student affairs have the tools to build campus communities under these conditions?

Environmental turbulence comes from multiple external requirements of higher education. Demands for accountability in affirmative action, student outcome assessment, and graduation rates, for example, are made simultaneously with funding agency cuts in fiscal resources. Institutional adaptation to such demands sometimes results in modifications to their very character. As with students who seem increasingly to be motivated by external rather than internal drives, colleges and universities often are mandated to change by persons with power outside rather than inside the institutions. Are student affairs' methods adequate to provide campus leadership for these organizational adaptations?

## Steps Toward Meeting the Challenges of Tomorrow

My response to the questions posed is a conditional "yes." The methods of the profession have served it well; however, the effectiveness of their use depends heavily upon the presence of certain conditions. These conditions include fully prepared professionals, principled and cooperative action, and commitments to both students and to the institutions in which we work.

First, we must accept responsibility individually to be fully prepared at all times to carry out our duties. This means that we must be fully aware of our collective knowledge in the profession, have grounded ourselves in a suitable educational philosophy, and are prepared to act skillfully and prudently. Being fully prepared means that we know and can use our collective knowledge. A professional who depends on personal experience only to explain complicated phenomena is destined to a limited perspective on important issues. Constructing global views and finding uncommon solutions to complex problems commands the use of collective knowledge and the application of well-honed skills.

Next, individual professionals must think and act ethically. The use of professional principles and standards is necessary when major dilemmas must be resolved. Adherence to principles and standards will offer appropriate guidance in

most circumstances; however, when they are inadequate to offer guidance for action, the professional must call upon the highest forms of thinking and reasoning to decide on the right course of action. Both ethical and legal principles and standards may guide our decision-making, though they may not cover all contingencies faced by professionals, and they sometimes conflict with one another. Still, the effective professionals will strive to do the right thing even when standards fail to point the way. Deciding on the right thing calls upon intellectual skill of the highest form.

A third step in solving tomorrow's problems is for us to clear up any uncertainty about our professional identity. Just as in personal development, we must know professionally who we are and be comfortable in that knowledge before we can establish genuine working relationships with others. College student affairs is not in the business of educating college students alone. We contribute to the education of students in concert with many others in our institutions, and, for education to be done well, each educator must respect and depend upon the other. When professionals in college student affairs are equivocal, mushy, or vague about their roles in the education of students, it is difficult to engender enthusiastic collaboration and support from others. We may express who we are and what we purport to do in philosophical terms, but we must be able to act skillfully in the use of educational strategies.

The issue of professional identity needs elaboration on at least two points. First, clarifying our professional identity means that we must analyze the role of a student development perspective in conducting our work and, especially, when our work depends on collaboration and mutual understanding with academic colleagues. College student affairs professionals have yet to gain universal understanding and acceptance of the perspective within their own ranks, especially as an organizing or strategic concept for guiding our work. On the other hand, the concept holds great promise for specifying educational outcomes and, when added to our historic service orientation, may illuminate our purposes very well. Second, the identity of college student affairs has a history of embeddedness in the liberal arts or general education functions of higher education, and this historical fact may offer organizing and strategic opportunities. Many college student affairs professionals have liberal arts backgrounds and define their goals for student learning in terms that resemble, if not correspond identically, with the goals of liberal education. This fact of history gives us an opportunity to construct our professional identity around our disciplinary orientations in the liberal arts. Such a coalition with the liberal arts provides recognition within the academic community and permits the negotiation of strategic arrangements with colleagues in similar disciplines.

A fourth step toward addressing tomorrow's challenges is for us to forge multiple partnerships on campus. Remembering that it is unlikely that college student affairs, acting alone, can ensure that students achieve their goals, it is necessary that we form working alliances that bridge traditional boundaries on

campus. Many productive alliances will be ad hoc in nature, contingent upon situation-specific requirements, while other alliances must be permanent and tied to the organizational units where decisions are made and resources are allocated. Nutter and Hurst (1987) described a structural solution to such an alliance that offers a workable model for spanning student and academic affairs interests. Building partnerships that work depends, in part, on insight into organizational dynamics and direct involvement in institutional politics.

A fifth step in dealing with tomorrow's challenges is to build legitimate communities on campus that bind us together in common causes. Mutual respect for and healthy interdependence of all members are universal ingredients of communities. Communities generally are ill-defined, however, and present vague targets for group action. While it is not always clear what precise actions should be taken to build communities, we know that relationship building is a crucial part of the process. Further, we know that community building should not be a unidimensional effort. Multiculturalism demands pluralistic forms of bonding and connecting; thus, we need not one but many communities on campus, each with its own character.

Finally, tomorrow's challenges demand that college student affairs professionals work toward organizational health in their institutions. Organizational health refers to the capacities of the institution to solve its own problems and to achieve its goals. A healthy organization generally is populated by members who adhere to a creed of democratic and humanistic values and who confront problems nondefensively. These organizations practice open communication and collective problem-solving. They are constructed around effective groups in which members respect and depend upon one another. When college student affairs professionals assist their institutions toward greater health, or when they work toward organization development in addition to student development, they effectively position themselves to address the challenges of tomorrow.

## Summary

Can college student affairs professionals use current methods to address effectively tomorrow's challenges in higher education? Yes, they can; however, any method is only as strong as its user. The key to addressing tomorrow's challenges lies in the individual professional. When the professional is well-prepared, is ethically sensitive, is aware of and secure in an accurate and suitable knowledge of professional self, forges effective partnerships, builds multicultural communities, and guarantees organizational health and effectiveness, contemporary methods are adequate for the challenges of tomorrow.

# References

Alpert, D. (1985). Performance and paralysis: The organizational context of
the American research university. Journal of Higher Education, 56(3),
241-281.

Banning, J. H. (1989). Creating a climate for successful student development:
The campus ecology manager role. In U. Delworth, G. R. Hanson and
Associates (2nd ed.), Student services: A handbook for the profession
(pp. 304-322). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Brown, R. D. (1972). Student development in tomorrow's higher
education: A return to the academy. Alexandria, VA: American
College Personnel Association.

Cameron, K. S. (1984). Organizational adaptation and higher education.
Journal of Higher Education, 55(2), 122-144.

Cooper, A. C. (1972). Student development services in post- secondary
education. In G. L. Saddlemire and A. L. Rentz (Eds.), Student affairs--
A profession's heritage: Significant articles, authors, issues, and
documents (pp. 384-395). Alexandria, VA: American College
Personnel Association.

Nutter, J. F., & Hurst, J. C. (1987). A structural partnership: The academic
deans/student affairs advisory council. National Association for Student
Personnel Administrators Journal, 26(1), 33-39.

Student personnel point of view, 1937 & 1949. (1989). In Points of view (pp.
21-63). Washington, DC: National Association of Student Personnel
Administrators.

*Don G. Creamer is a professor of education and the coordinator of college
student affairs preparation programs at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State
University, Blacksburg, Virginia. He earned his doctorate in higher education
from Indiana University-Bloomington.*