

Philosophical Foundations of Student Affairs Practice

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It is a bit intimidating for a 25 year-old to be asked to supply a "personal theoretical and/or philosophical framework that might guide [my] professional practice." (Hurd, 2003, p 3) Despite my education, training, and background I am acutely aware of how much remains to be learned and experienced in the profession of student affairs. However, my experiences thus far in life and the profession have left definite impressions upon me which have firmly guided me into this profession. These impressions, vague as they may be, are everyday becoming more clear and more defined as they are confirmed or challenged. Out of my experiences, research, and classwork there have emerged three guiding principles in my professional practice: the individuality and uniqueness of each person, our role as students, and our role as teachers.

We are all individuals

One of the most memorable and humorous moments in the Monty Python movie *The Life of Brian* occurs when a crowd of people, after being chastised for being conformists and reminded that they are all unique individuals, proclaims in perfect unison that, "Yes, we are all individuals!" The irony of this statement lies in its truth. The simple, undeniable truth that each person is unique provides both the biggest joys and the biggest frustrations in our profession. Neither students nor staff can be stereotyped or labeled despite the temptation to do so. "Cookie cutter" solutions can not be applied to problems as there are no "cookie cutter" problems.

The theory of student development most in accord with my world view is Arthur Chickering's vectors of student development. His theory of simultaneous development in many different distinct but interdependent areas matches my own experiences and observations (Chickering & Reisser 1993). Many other student development theories are based upon chronological phases through which we must all pass in a specific order. The belief that all

persons pass through the same easily-labeled phases of development in the same order is contrary to my experience, common sense, and personal beliefs. I recognize their appeal as broad generalizations but reject them as dangerous to my own personal practice. The temptation to classify people in an effort to find easy solutions to their problems must be resisted as it inevitably proves harmful.

The Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education, written by Arthur Chickering and Zelda Gamson and based in large part on Chickering's seven vectors of student development, have been adopted by many universities as guiding principles. I, too, embrace them as they are not only excellent principles from leading authorities in our field but they also match my own experiences and common sense. They provide and are themselves based on an excellent foundation of both theory and practical experience. Like any such list of recommendations, however, I must be careful to not become constrained by them. These principles provide an excellent guide but I must not be afraid to wander off of the beaten path and seek my own way when appropriately guided by the needs of my students and staff.

We are all students

I understand the necessity for dividing the members of the university community into groups and labeling their members. However, the administrative necessity to label some members of the university community "students" and the rest "administration" and "faculty" should not fool anybody into believing that those distinctions define us or limit our experiences. At universities, as in life, we must all be students and continually grow and learn. Not only is it a practical concern to continue our education, formally and informally, but it is also an

opportunity to demonstrate through action our commitment to education and its importance in our lives.

Formal education continues to grow in importance as our profession continues to mature and build upon its theoretical foundations. Enrollment in classes sends a very clear signal to our staff and students that we truly value education. Formal classwork, particularly within our specialties and profession, exposes us to the formal theories underlying our work which can sometimes be overlooked in our daily activities. Participation in classwork and research gives us opportunities to connect with faculty and students which are difficult or impossible to come across outside the classroom. Finally, formal classwork, particularly masters and doctoral degree programs, gives us credibility that is nearly impossible to attain otherwise and "[establishes] the developing professional as an expert on the student experience and student affairs administration." (Kornives & Taub 2000, p 509)

Much as we encourage students to seek out appropriate student organizations and groups for comradeship and support, we must ourselves encourage membership and participation in our professional organizations. Professional organizations offer many opportunities which are difficult to find otherwise. They are often the first to respond to contemporary issues and offer guidance for professionals encountering them for the first time (Nuss 2000). Attendance and participation in conferences offer unique opportunities to network with others and become energized by exposure to new ideas and different perspectives on familiar problems.

Finally, we must not overlook our own students and staff as teachers and mentors. To believe that only those with recognized credentials or those older than us can teach us valuable skills and lessons is a huge mistake. Many of our staff members may lack advanced degrees but they often have significantly more practical experience than anyone else in our field. Our

students, particularly our student employees and Graduate Assistants (GAs), also teach us valuable lessons. In particular, they keep us abreast of new developments within our student communities and rapidly developing problems which may be easy to overlook until they loom large. Students, particularly undergraduates, offer us solutions and viewpoints untainted by historical bias and the "experiential baggage" which we often carry. In my own specialty of Information Technology (IT), students are often driving the field and its developments (it is always helpful and humbling to remember that both Google and Napster were developed by students). Many of our students and staff have overcome significant obstacles to get where they are and we can draw inspiration and practical lessons from their experiences.

We are all teachers

Just as we are all students we are also teachers. We can not forget the impact we have on everyone with whom we interact. Many of us have entered this profession explicitly so that we can positively impact others. We must remember that we can not "turn it off" - we are always affecting those around us, positively or negatively, and we are always under scrutiny to discover if our actions match our words.

Our calling to teach others is especially noticeable in our relationship with the students with whom we work and the staff whom we supervise. It has been my experience and it remains my personal belief that personal example is the most effective way to teach a lesson. We must strive to live the lessons which we try to teach others, even those lessons hardest for those in our profession to live such as balance between personal and professional lives. In addition, formal mentorship and role modeling must occur; it is a legacy from which we have benefited and must

pass on to future generations. This is one of the strongest draws and greatest strengths of our professional organizations.

If possible, we should spend our time in the classroom in front of the blackboard and not just behind the pupil's desk. Teaching is not only valuable experience in and of itself but it also gives us an opportunity to experience the university experience from the faculty's point of view. We can then use that experience to facilitate collaboration between student affairs and academic affairs. Even if we disregard the experience gained as an instructor, we must acknowledge that we each possess unique and valuable viewpoints and experiences which may prove useful to students and their differing methods of learning.

The fundamental mission of student affairs, the promotion of education as a holistic experience, is rooted in the acceptance of the uniqueness and importance of the individual. I have chosen student affairs as my profession because I believe in the importance of the individual and the power of personal relationships. I hope that my personal values and philosophical outlook on life continue to be aligned with those of the profession of student affairs and higher education in general. As matters stand right now, my personal beliefs align perfectly with the core principles of student affairs.

References

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