

Educators, Service Providers, or Both?

For *Communique*

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Nothing has been more polarizing in divisions of student affairs (or student services) than the parallel convictions that student life professionals (an ambiguous term that avoids the conflicts over “services” and “affairs”) are *educators* and that students *learn* through their participation in or use of student life programs, services, and activities. Student life professionals whose work is primarily developmental -- as is true in most residence life, health promotion, and leadership development programs, as examples -- easily accommodate the idea that what students do in those programs amounts to out-of-classroom learning; they see the learning potential and value in every activity. But their colleagues working in student services -- financial aid, counseling, or clinical health services, for example -- or in the infrastructure of student affairs (information technology, business operations, or facilities) -- often protest that their work is not so much about learning as it is about high standards of practice or good customer service. One group thinks in terms of student learning outcomes; the other, of student satisfaction, meeting professional standards, and operational efficiency.

The very name “student affairs” often implies a developmental approach that is not primarily oriented toward consumer values. In student affairs work today, students’ satisfaction with and ratings of programs, while important, generally matter less than the outcomes achieved by those students after participation in the program; residence life educators have become less reassured by students’ endorsement of their programs and more challenged to ensure that those programs contribute to student learning. Few student affairs professionals would go so far as to say, “I don’t care whether they liked the program -- I just want to know what they learned from it, how it helped them take another step toward achieving desired outcomes from university,” but most would agree that “liking the program” is not enough.

The name “student services,” on the other hand, generally suggests exactly that -- consumer services provided to students as an important convenience that prevents, or at least ameliorates, the potential distraction and lost time inherent in locating and accessing those services off campus. Most professionals who administer or provide student services would agree that those services support learning: the health service physician or nurse treats illnesses or injuries and thereby helps students avoid missing excessive time from class, the counselor addresses mental health concerns that may

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undermine a student's ability and readiness to learn, and the financial officer works with students to ensure that they have the resources and flexibility to stay in school. Similarly, staff members who maintain computer networks and Web sites, keep facilities and equipment in good order and repair, or assist student organizations in managing funds consistent with institutional requirements and regulations would probably say that their work contributes to the quality of the learning environment and makes it easier, or less complicated, for students to focus on learning. But many service providers question the proposition that the services they provide -- especially when those services seem to be relatively simple transactions or oversight functions -- are in and of themselves learning experiences. Looking for learning outcomes among students who have had clinical visits to the health center or interactions with the information technology staff often seems like an empty exercise to these professionals; in their minds, it may be more than enough that they provide high quality services that students find pleasing and easy to use.

Outcomes, or satisfaction? Operational effectiveness and efficiency, or learning? Transactions or learning experiences? Educators or service providers? Student services or student affairs? We need both, in each case. Certainly it is not enough to make students happy and satisfied with services; in stopping there, we overlook our fundamental responsibility to support -- or collaborate in -- their learning. Similarly, it is not enough to focus on learning outcomes, to the exclusion of satisfaction and measurements of operational effectiveness or perceived quality; even if students achieve certain desired learning goals through their participation in a program, they are unlikely to return for another program if their overall experience was poor. An airline that gets you to your destination, but loses your luggage, fails to inform you about delays in a timely fashion, or cancels your original flight and rebooks you on a less convenient itinerary is unlikely to secure your future business -- and an airline that treats you with courtesy and provides passenger comfort but does not get you to your destination will probably not have your business either. The levels of personal and professional concern perceived by students can give our interactions with them authenticity -- which, in turn, opens their minds to the learning offered by the experience.

At the heart of discussions about the current roles of student life professionals are several points that deserve consideration.

- Learning is not just a classroom activity; it lives as much in residence halls and student centers as in laboratories and libraries. Students learn as they live; the separation of university life into "two sides of the house" (academic affairs and student affairs), as has regrettably been true in many US colleges and universities, is an administrative construction that does not respond to students as whole people. It is as though the Cartesian notion "cogito, ergo sum" ("I think, therefore I am") has obscured the reality that students learn about the world and

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themselves at the same time; the processes of personal, emotional, and social maturation proceed hand-in-hand with the acquisition, analysis, and application of new knowledge. It is truly just a question of which kind of knowledge it is -- knowledge of the world (which we have traditionally called learning), or knowledge of the self and others (which is considered student development). While the methods and purposes of learning differ in classroom and out-of-classroom contexts, it is nonetheless learning that is occurring in both -- and students develop in classrooms just as they learn in residence halls.

- Every encounter that a student has with new situations, information, or requirements -- no matter how short-lived or seemingly trivial -- is a learning opportunity. Transactions can very well be learning moments. Counseling not only helps students resolve their distress about current relationship conflicts, but also provides them a way to learn about how their previous relationship patterns may influence their current friendships and family interactions. Assisting a student in solving a financial problem is helping that student learn a transferable life skill that will have importance after university life. Explaining why the leaders of a student organization cannot handle funds in a certain way prepares them to understand financial management. Every clinical encounter in the health center can be a learning moment if the clinician focuses the student's attention on an analysis of her symptoms and the reasons for a certain treatment selection.
- Finding the learning opportunity in an interaction does not require service providers to be less concerned about quality and satisfaction. In fact, the two are often strikingly in synergy. Consider, for example, how a physician might emphasize self-care as one of the strategies for treating depression; educating a student about the relationships that exercise, alcohol or other drug use, or sleep patterns have with the symptoms of depression and the ways that the student can use his own internal resources to improve those symptoms both demonstrates commitment to the student -- which the student appreciates and rates highly if asked -- and enhances the quality of care delivered.
- Being a service provider -- counselor, physician, nurse, financial advisor -- in higher education is not the same as doing that work in an ordinary public or private context. The counselor working for a university is accountable not only to professional standards and requirements linked to the discipline, but also to the university itself, and its mission, values, principles, and priorities. Just as a professor of physics has both educational and research responsibilities, a counselor in higher education has both counseling and educational responsibilities. It is not enough to meet professional standards and use best practices in student services; the context in which they practice, demands that service providers be educators as well.

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Across the spectrum of student life programs and services (to adopt the ambiguity of “student life professionals”), some departments and activities may seem to have a stronger alignment with the principles and values of learning and development than others. But at all points on that same spectrum, both learning and quality matter. Institutions of higher education that accept their responsibility for the education and preparation of the whole student will reasonably seek to make their whole campus a learning community and to celebrate the learning that occurs, no matter where, or under whose supervision, it happens. And universities that invest substantial resources in learning will recognize the coequal value of quality; after all, one of the core purposes of defining and assessing the achievement of student learning outcomes is to generate information that supports quality improvement in programs and services.

We do not need to make every department and activity have the same degrees of emphasis on learning outcomes or service quality. But we also should not neglect the learning that happens in transactions and services. In this, as in so many other areas of policy and practice in higher education, balance is to be strongly valued. Just as student life professionals must be both educators and capable, quality-oriented providers of services, so their faculty colleagues are called with increasing clarity to consider both the outcomes and the processes of learning. Students come to us actively engaged in the complicated process of learning as whole people; our approach to them should demonstrate our embrace of them in all their diversity and complexity and should reflect our understanding of the multidimensional nature of our interactions with them. Students will grow from learning while they appreciate quality; we should not believe that the one ever excludes the other.

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