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A Look at the Bigger Picture: In Response to Guthrie

By Carolyn Arthur, Ph.D.

David Guthrie has done an excellent job of examining how Christian colleges are doing when measured against the yardstick of the seven "Principles of Good Practice in Student Affairs" as outlined by Blimling and Whitt (1999). While agreeing, for the most part, with his evaluation of how Christian colleges measure up on each of the seven principles, I could not help but ask the larger question: Upon what underlying philosophy are these principles based? Thus I find myself responding more strongly to the underlying principles upon which the article is based than to Guthrie's assessment of how Christian colleges are doing.

Before addressing the larger question raised in my own mind, though, I want to outline some responses to Guthrie's "report card" which I believe would be representative of those in the ACSD constituency.

The Pessimist's Response

For "seasoned" student affairs professionals in Christian colleges, there may be the temptation to respond to Guthrie's assessment rather pessimistically. They may argue that Blimling and Whitt's principles are far too idealistic to put into practice on Christian college campuses, given current staffing, budget and time constraints. One might be tempted to say, "Yeah, right. Why don't they come to MY campus and see what it is really like day in and day out? We don't have time to step back and exam-

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ine why we do what we do. We're too busy doing it!" Thus, some may conclude that it is appropriate to pat themselves on the back for doing as well as they are under the circumstances.

The pitfall of this response, of course, is that unexamined practice is doomed to be repeated and "business as usual" continues. While it is short-sighted, I believe it is nonetheless a realistic response for some.

The Philosopher's Response

Still others may agree whole-heartedly with Blimling and Whitt's principles and Guthrie's assessment of their state in Christian colleges. The more philosophical among us may set about further examination of their own campuses to see how they compare principle by principle. They may vow to do a better job in each of the seven "good practices" in the months and years to come.

For this group, pitfalls may lie either in "paralysis by analysis" or in attempting too much too soon. The temptation to analyze further is very real for some, which can prevent them from dealing with praxis. On the flip side of the coin, I'm reminded of the old adage, "How do you eat an elephant? One spoonful at a time." When faced with the "elephant" of massive change in student affairs practice, it may seem too difficult to "eat" a spoonful at a time, so one may opt instead to stick with the traditional diet of "business as usual."

The Pragmatist's Response

Many who are drawn to the field of student affairs are pragmatists at heart, feeling out of place in the midst of philosophical debate in the academy. As Christians, inherent pragmatism may be buttressed by the concept of stewardship, how to make the best use of the resources we may have. The pragmatist might respond by thinking, "O.K., you've convinced me of the necessity of examining principles in good practice. Our staff needs to look at why we do what we do in student affairs at our particular Christian college. And we do want to be good stewards for the Lord." But for this group among us, the primary question in life is "how?" "Just tell us how we can do our jobs more effectively and we'll do it for you."

The pitfall of the pragmatist's response, of course, lies in its passive nature.

The Practitioner's Response

My definition of practitioners includes those professionals who understand the principles behind praxis and strive to improve on both. This group would respond to Guthrie's assessment by saying, "We can't afford not to look at how we're doing on these principles of good practice, whether we think we have time to do so or not." My hope, of course, is that most respondents would fall into this category.

As Guthrie noted in response to Principle Five, student affairs professionals have the dual challenge of both effective management and visionary leadership. I

believe that the teamwork of a student affairs staff tackling these principles together would create a synergy that not only answers the philosophical questions but the pragmatic ones too. Such a discussion could become the main topic for a staff development retreat over the summer. The challenge then becomes to implement the results of such a discussion once an academic year begins.

A Look at the Bigger Picture

While an examination of principles of good practice is a necessary thing, I do not believe it is sufficient to create lasting change. For that to happen, we must look at the bigger picture: first and foremost, we must agree upon our *raison de existence*, the philosophy behind the principles which guide good practice.

I would offer the following underlying beliefs are those which should define our existence as student affairs professionals, particularly in Christian colleges. None are new. They are drawn from foundational documents and books in the profession and only synthesized here.

- As a profession, student affairs exists to support the larger academic enterprise of higher education.
- Learning takes place outside the classroom as well as inside it. Students deserve a "seamless" curriculum in which student affairs professionals are viewed as educators.
- We must be about the business of educating the whole person. Luke 2:52 says Jesus grew in wisdom and stature and in favor with God and man. We should be providing ways our students can do the same.
- We must educate others in the academy, particularly faculty, about the importance of the role student affairs plays in a student's educational experience. Just as there is more to college than the classroom, there is more to student affairs than discipline.
- Christian institutions of higher education exist to advance the Kingdom of Christ by affecting the culture; first on campus, then in the community, then the nation and around the world.

Elaborating on the scope of these beliefs is a subject for another article. However, they are offered here as additional "grist for the mill."

Conclusion

I believe Guthrie's assessment of how Christian colleges are doing on the seven principles of good practice deserves discussion on every Christian college campus represented in ACSO. Whether one sees oneself in the response of the pessimist, the philosopher, the pragmatist or the practitioner, there is always room for improvement in praxis. However, I believe in order to effect any permanent, long-term changes in practice, the professional needs to take a look at the bigger picture of

philosophy. Deciding on the foundational issues of why we do what we do in student affairs, and the role Christian faith plays any part in it, is a vital first step in the process.