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## A Response to David Guthrie's *Report Card for Christian College Student Affairs*

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# ***A Response to David Guthrie's Report Card for Christian College Student Affairs***

**By Barry Loy**

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Just as Dr. Guthrie is honored to be asked to write an inaugural article for the ACSD journal, I am honored to have the opportunity to respond to his thoughtfully prepared essay. I have much admiration and respect for David's leadership in student affairs. I had the opportunity to work with him on the book, *Student Affairs Revisited: A Christian View of the Profession and Its Contexts* (Guthrie, 1997), and quickly grew to appreciate the depth of his knowledge of student affairs and his passion to "do" student affairs work out of a Biblical framework.

David has prepared a document that concisely covers some of the most current and important issues in student affairs today. He has produced for many of us, from the experienced practitioner to the new professional, a summary of important guiding principles very useful for strategic planning and assessment in our individual schools. Even though David says his article is geared more for those working in Christian institutions, I see its value for faith-affirming and non-faith based-institutions. His explanatory comments and inclusion of supporting and complementary works of other writers has clarified and elucidated the "Principles of Good Practices" in such a way that they are more accessible and employable. For those who take the time to use it, his work will be very helpful in conducting the evaluative analysis that David suggests we undertake in our student affairs' departments.

An attempt to respond to every aspect of David's treatise would result in a work at least as long as his if not longer. Therefore, I will selectively respond to certain aspects of the article as my experience and knowledge allow. My analysis deals

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with the first six of the seven principles Dr. Guthrie discusses.

To aid the reader, I have organized my remarks below according to the "Seven Principles of Good Practice." My primary goal is to add to David's comments on the implications of these seven principles for Christians working in student affairs.

**Principle One: Good practice in student affairs engages students in active learning.**

David encourages us to have student learning as the goal of all our efforts in student affairs. What is student learning? The "Student Learning Imperative" (ACPA, 1994) tends to use "student learning" as synonymous with "personal development" and "growth." I've been associated with Christians doing student affairs work for 22 years now and I believe that holistic growth or learning has been a hallmark of our efforts. Student affairs professionals have understood the importance of the total learning environment far more than our faculty colleagues. We have also championed the need for experiential learning -- the connection of knowing with doing and being. The recent literature on student learning has added an important dimension to our work, but Christians have practiced the core of this imperative for many years. For one thing, whether out of a "ministry" or "student affairs" perspective, we have encouraged students to connect what they know with who they are and what they do. We have made it our business to be deeply concerned about "conduct" and matters of the "heart" while maintaining that behavior should be tied to belief and knowledge. We have not taken the easy approach of dispensing great truths without expecting action to follow.

Another area where Christians have excelled is in mentoring. Christian student affairs professionals have been mentoring (e.g. discipling) students long before the term was popular. We have believed in the importance of incarnational ministry as modeled by our Savior. We know that close, authentic and highly personal relationships promote character development and student learning.

**Principle Two: Good practice in student affairs helps students develop coherent values and ethical standards.**

As David states, Christian colleges have viewed the development of values and ethical standards as a defining characteristic of their work. He also says that the actual impact of our efforts in student's lives is less clear. While it is true that the outcome of our work lacks good documentation, I think our approach to character development is more advantageous than others who approach the matter from a more secularized and relativistic point of view. For example, David extensively quotes the work of John Dalton with regards to the development of values and ethical standards. While I see value in much of Dalton's work, he has stated that student affairs professionals must avoid moralization and the transmission of religious values (Dalton, 1993). It may be difficult for Christians working in non-faith based institutions, but for those of us working in Christian settings our approach differs from those who advocate a more pluralistic or postmodern standard. To complement John Dalton's five strategies for values development offered by David, I would like to introduce the work of Arthur Holmes, professor of philosophy at Wheaton College. Dr. Holmes offers a framework

that is solidly based in a biblical worldview. Holmes presents the following eleven objectives for moral education.

1. Consciousness Raising - Things in this world are not ideal.
2. Consciousness Sensitizing - Compassion coupled with indignation.
3. Values Analysis - Understanding values of decision makers.
4. Values Clarification - Understanding personal values.
5. Values Criticism- Are the operative values what they ought to be?
6. Moral Imagination- Tracing the web of moral responsibilities.
7. Ethical Analysis- Exploring ingredients of complex moral situations.
8. Moral Decision Making - Having wisdom to make good moral decisions.
9. Responsible Agents- Doing something about ethical issues in society.
10. Virtue Development - The development of Godliness and righteousness.
11. Moral Identity - Becoming a person of Christian character (Holmes, 1991.)

Perhaps another way to assess how all of us are doing (both faith-affirming and non-faith-based institutions) is to use the results of Astin's and Antonio's study that David also referenced. Astin and Antonio (1999) found that the following experiences/activities have the greatest impact on character formation and student learning.

- Performing volunteer work
- Participation in leadership education or training
- Exposure to interdisciplinary studies, ethnic studies, and women's studies
- Participation in religious services
- Social activities with students from a variety of racial and ethnic backgrounds
- Faculty members who provide emotional support

As I examine this list with regard to Christian colleges, I think it fair to say that most Christian Colleges have done fairly well with numbers 1, 2, 4 and 6. In fact, Astin and Antonio themselves state that Catholic and Protestant Colleges appear to provide students with activities that increase civic values, volunteerism, and religious beliefs/convictions while academically selective institutions appear to negatively effect the development of civic values, religious beliefs, and cultural awareness.

**Principle Three: Good practice in student affairs sets and communicates high expectations for learning.**

The greatest commandment as defined by Jesus is to "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind" (Matt. 22:37). We may not be doing it, but those of us working with Christian students have a good platform from which to raise the bar and ask great things of our students. Christian academics believe in the importance of the life of the mind as well as the heart and soul and for that reason, I think we do ask our students to be faithful as God's stewards with

the learning enterprise. However, I'd like to offer a word of caution. More and more I hear Christian colleges stressing the importance of institutional excellence and individual excellence of faculty, staff, and students. This may be another way to raise the standard but I prefer an argument which encourages us to be more "faithful" instead of more "excellent." For me, the idea of faithfulness connects better with the idea of Christian stewardship -- the notion that God has blessed us with resources and gifts that we need to use as good stewards for His glory. In my opinion, the excellence argument appears to be tied to "arrogance" and "competition" and less tied to promoting God's kingdom through responsible stewardship.

**Principle Four: Good practice in student affairs uses systematic inquiry to improve student and institutional performance.**

David mentions the Collaborative Assessment Project and the Quality Retention Project data that is available to CCCU colleges for analysis to help us improve our performance. Another very helpful research project now underway is the National Survey of Student Engagement, led by Dr. George Kuh of the University of Indiana. This survey attempts to measure the extent to which colleges and universities encourage actual learning. Learning is measured by questions clustered around five benchmarks of effective educational practice: level of academic challenge; the amount of active and collaborative learning; student interaction with faculty members; access to enriching educational experiences; and level of campus support. A recent report in the Chronicle of Higher Education (2000) lists schools with exemplary scores on the National Survey of Student Engagement. Of those, I only recognize one that belongs to the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities. The meager showing of Christian schools might be a function of the actual number taking part in the survey. Nonetheless, as far as I know, this is one of the few studies being conducted that tries to measure how well schools are doing at promoting student learning. That being the case, for those of us serious about student learning, this is something we should seriously consider. More information can be found at <http://www.indiana.edu/~nsse/>.

**Principle Five: Good practice in student affairs uses resources effectively to achieve institutional missions and goals and Principle Six: Good practice in student affairs forges educational partnerships that advance student learning**

What we want students to learn and how we accomplish this learning must be an institutional discussion and decision. Unfortunately, faculty members and student affairs professionals have traditionally completed this exercise separately. For the sake of stewardship and for what makes sense educationally this is of paramount importance. We need to make peace and end the turf wars between faculty members and student affairs professionals. A true partnership with faculty will only occur if we can come to very similar conclusions about what learning is all about. If we can do this we can maximize our efforts and resources toward what we want students to learn.

The idea of collaboration and partnership with faculty has received a great deal of attention during the past 10 years. In 1989, desiring to reexamine the historic "Student Personnel Point of View," NASPA published a statement entitled "A

Perspective on Student Affairs" (NASPA, 1989). One of the first assumptions expressed in the document is that "The Academic Mission of the Institution is Preeminent." Ever since this declaration, writers in student affairs have been busy making the case that we should partner with the faculty. My experience tells me that this desire comes primarily from professionals in student affairs, not from faculty members. We (student affairs professionals) have a felt need, while they (faculty members) do not. Perhaps it comes from our vision of a holistic approach to students and our desire to connect knowing with being and doing. We will have a difficult time building partnerships until provosts, academic deans and faculty members truly believe that student learning takes place inside and outside the classroom. I offer the following as suggestions for colleges and universities wanting to bridge the gap between knowing and doing.

- Develop a set of learning outcomes that flow from the institution's mission statement. Hopefully, these outcomes will address the total learning environment.
- Both curriculums, the "formal" curriculum and the "co" curriculum, should be evaluated using the learning outcomes with the goal of fashioning a seamless curriculum which promotes congruence, harmony and clarity.
- Once the new curriculum is in place, faculty and student affairs staff should be held accountable for implementing the learning outcomes in their respective domains. For example, let's assume Ideal College has adopted the following as one of their learning outcomes: Ideal College endeavors to prepare graduates who grow in their intellectual curiosity, with an enduring desire for knowledge that will motivate life-long learning. With this goal in mind, faculty and student affairs professionals at Ideal College should be thinking about how to develop learning strategies and experiences that will help students realize this outcome - in class and out of class. All other outcomes could be approached in a similar manner.
- Student affairs professionals should make connections with the general education or core curriculum since historically this aspect of the academic program is most closely in line with student affairs' concern for wholistic education.
- Student affairs professionals should support and collaborate with faculty in developing service learning initiatives in and out of the classroom.

As I have mentioned, I have chosen to address the first six of the seven principles. In closing, for those seriously interested in utilizing the "Seven Principles of Good Practice" I recommend the online inventory sponsored by ACPA and available at <http://www.acpa.nche.edu/pgp/principle.htm>.

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