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In Search of a Seamless Partnership: a Response to Barnes

By Tom Emigh

My esteemed colleague ends his essay with the challenging, yet inviting, question: "What would it take for us to lead the way?" I agree with the various parts of "the problem" and believe that they assemble to present a formidable barrier to our effectiveness. The basic premise of my response is that student development professionals have the opportunity to serve higher education by not following the discipline-focused culture, but instead moving to a learning-focused culture that clearly exists in the context of higher education. This can have an impact on each of the areas noted: paradigm, research, professional preparation, and territoriality.

It seems that much of our energy is spent trying to be like the faculty and trying to be liked by the faculty. Without diminishing the essential role of the faculty in student learning, I am wondering if our efforts to be affirmed or accepted by the faculty are of value. In many ways, we are different, yet we pursue the same outcome: student learning. For example, faculty are socialized in their training to focus on their discipline (Fairweather, 1996), which leads to specialization. In addition, faculty members expect a high degree of autonomy, and the "outcomes" and contexts for their practice are structurally different than many of the student development staff (Blackburn & Lawrence, 1995). However, it is not necessarily a part of a terminal degree program in many disciplines to focus on the process of learning, or to fully understand the workings of an institution of higher education (Birnbaum, 1988.)

So, then, as we search for a paradigm, is it possible that the desire to attach to a specific discipline is limiting? Should the contribution of the student development

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staff be that of becoming experts on student learning and the administration of higher education? Just as a physicist is prepared to understand physics, should student development professionals contribute by becoming scholars and practitioners of higher education? I would suggest that in order to be of significant service to higher education, we must be different from our faculty colleagues.

The issues of paradigm, research, and professional preparation seem, then, to be closely related. Is there a "right" field to which we should attach? This question must be answered in order for us to prepare professionally and conduct research in our field. It seems that our professional preparation must consist of training in the great diversity of issues that will have an impact on higher education, while also exposing us to the major theories and literature of various disciplines so we have a proper conceptual framework to address the challenges we will face. We should remain on the cutting edge of understanding student learning in a variety of contexts. We should seek to understand and interpret for the rest of the campus the dynamics, trends, and needs of each new generation of students. We should develop a challenging and relevant co-curriculum which will further student learning. We must significantly improve our ability to assess all of these areas and have that assessment inform our planning and budgeting processes.

Why is this important? For one reason, there is a significant amount of evidence suggesting that higher education is on the brink of transformational change, as are some of the forces driving this change (Dolence & Norris, 1995; Levine, 1999). Two of these forces -- diversity and technology -- have implications for many areas of our practice and scholarship.

A significant increase in the ethnic and cultural diversity of our students, the adult learner population and the population of students with varying degrees of learning and physical abilities each create challenges in preparing a meaningful and relevant co-curriculum, as well as planning, budgeting and evaluation. These trends are impacting the academy because they are existent and growing trends in society. For example, ethnic and cultural groups who were once referred to as minorities are now considered emergent majorities in many large, metropolitan areas. Demographic projections suggest that this ethnic diversity will only increase with time. Cohen & Brawer (1996) note that the adult learner now comprises more than forty percent of the undergraduate population. As more women continue to enter the workforce, moving away from past roles, their presence will continue to be felt in the academy. (Blackmore, 1989). The Americans with Disabilities Act is a legislative solution to opening the doors of the academy for students with physical and learning disabilities. In fact, the burgeoning diversity of our society, defined partially above, is creating a climate of growing opportunity for many groups of people that heretofore have been denied access to higher education. The physicist is still teaching physics, so who will assist in helping both higher education and the incoming students meet these transformational changes?

Dolence and Norris (1995) characterize the changes caused by technology as a shift from the industrial age to the information age and suggest that anything less than transformational change in higher education will simply not suffice. They note that this shift significantly loosens the hold of higher education on the reins of teaching and

learning because it challenges the notion of teaching and learning needing to take place in a specific location at a specific time. In essence, learning becomes boundaryless, and higher education begins to lose the franchise rights. Learners increase their control over how, when, and what they learn. Are student development professionals prepared to co-lead, with faculty, the efforts necessary to respond to these changes? Dolence and Norris state frankly that incremental change won't cut it: higher education transforms or stagnates. How will student development professionals be involved in this level of change?

It seems that transformation -- at its strongest and most profound level -- must permeate all levels, activities, and sectors of higher education if we are to remain relevant. By this I mean that organizations as well as individuals must engage in a process of deep and profound consideration of mission and purpose, and be willing to let go of those practices, ways of thinking, and strategies which will lead to stagnation -- on a personal and organizational level. For if we cannot change to accommodate the needs of society, we cannot serve that society -- which is our act of stewardship and leadership.

So, what would it take for us to lead the way in higher education? I think we must prepare ourselves to think broadly about higher education. Where we serve the academic mission, let us serve faithfully and with excellence. Where we lead, let us lead with vision and passion. Somewhere along the way of our faithfulness, excellence, vision, and passion, we may very well realize that the difference between serving and leading is not so very great -- and we, our institutions, colleagues, and students will have benefited mightily in the process.

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