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## In Search of the Seamless Curriculum

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# In Search of the Seamless Curriculum

By Jay Barnes, Ed.D.

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It was fall 1976. I was in my first graduate course in a doctoral program in College Student Personnel Work. One of our first assignments was an article from the *Personnel and Guidance Journal* (September 1976, pp. 26-29) written by the late Burns Crookston and published shortly after his death. "Student Personnel -- All Hail and Farewell!" the title proclaimed. Crookston complained that varied terminology used in our field was "symptomatic of the confusion that has been rampant in our field for many years" (Crookston, 1979, p. 26). He felt that the terminology mattered because the various terms (student personnel, student affairs, personnel work, student development, and human development) suggested different things about the nature of our work. Agreeing on uniform terminology would not only help us, but also those we work with beyond our field to better understand what the profession is all about. He suggested "that student personnel work as historically defined is no longer a viable concept; . . . that student affairs should be used to describe an area, sector, or administrative subdivision; . . . that student development should be used to describe the underlying philosophy of the field" (Crookston, 1979, p. 26). He went on to make the case that student development, "the application of the philosophy and principles of human development in the educational setting" (Crookston, 1979, p. 28), is our guiding paradigm, that it was the bridge over that "chasm that has so long separated 'teaching' in the classroom and 'educating' outside the classroom" (Crookston, 1979, p. 28).

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## The Problem

Twenty-five years later, not much has changed. Not only are we unsure of what to call our field, we are still arguing about which paradigm will prevail. If the broader field of student affairs is in flux, the world of student affairs in Christian higher education both mirrors and lags behind our professional counterpart. The problem before us is multi-dimensional. Its components relate to the search for a paradigm, the need for adequate research, the concern for professional preparation and credentialing, and the ongoing struggle with territoriality.

*The paradigm problem is significant.* While we will never be like physics, we have attached ourselves to the field of developmental psychology with all of its strengths and weaknesses. Since psychology also lacks a dominant paradigm, we are at the mercy of the elder sibling as it attempts to find its way. In a sense, we are stuck in scientific adolescence. Our field is observational, descriptive, and functional in its orientation. One might even ask, have we attached to the right field? Should our search for a paradigm take us more into theology than psychology? If we have fundamentally different worldview assumptions from our professional colleagues and from the underlying discipline, are we building on the right foundation? While Guthrie et. al (1997) started us down a path of exploring these questions in *Student Affairs Reconsidered: A Christian View of the Profession and its Contexts* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America), it was only a beginning. The response to the book has been more silence than action. Have we adequately answered questions such as, "What difference does it make that we are Christian? What difference does it make that we believe that truth is revealed to us in Scripture? What difference does it make that we believe that we are created in God's image?"

While there is much to applaud in the *Student Learning Imperative: Implications for Student Affairs* (Alexandria, VA: American College Personnel Association, 1994), a cynic might say that this is just our latest attempt to gain respectability. When our profession emerged in the late 1800s, we began a process of differentiation from the faculty. We picked up the roles that they gladly cast off. The initial sighs of relief and thankfulness from the faculty gave way to the development of a second-class status for our field. Yes, we were doing something important, but it was of importance to the faculty primarily in that they no longer had to do it. The guiding paradigm of *in loco parentis* resulted in our being seen as police or babysitters, hardly the status we envisioned for ourselves. *The Student Personnel Point of View* (American Council on Education, 1938) was an early attempt at professional respectability. It was a critical step forward and still provides background for our profession. The challenges of the free speech movement in the 1960's and the arrival of Title IX in the early 1970's pointed out the inadequacy of our working paradigm. The work of Sanford, Chickering, and others moved us toward the student development paradigm. It still did not provide us with credibility with the faculty, but it gave us the basis for a curriculum for students in the world beyond the classroom. Residence life, leadership development, campus citizenship and diversity initiatives took on new dimensions with the desire to promote development in students. But this, too, has passed. As

pressure mounted through the late 1980's and early 1990's to control costs in higher education, administrative overhead became a target. We found ourselves in a budget category scheduled for reduction. *Involving Colleges: Successful Approaches to Fostering Student Learning and Development Outside the Classroom* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1991) gave us hope that the seamless curriculum made a difference when it was valued across the campus. However, it was still the student affairs professionals who pushed that agenda. The student learning paradigm that followed reminded us and our colleagues that we, too, contributed to the education of students.

In addition to the paradigm problem, *we face a research problem*. We have been inadequate in doing systematic assessment and research in areas related to student affairs at our institutions. In spite of the national accrediting pressure to do assessment, this area of student affairs tends to be the last area of campus to undergo scrutiny of the claims we make about our effectiveness. While we benefit from the work done on a national level by people like Astin or Kuh, our schools are underrepresented in their sample populations. The CCCU Quality Retention Project reinforces some of the contributions we make to the student experience. Building on the cooperative work done in the CCCU gives hope that our individual campuses will take a next step toward important outcome assessment in the area of student affairs.

A third problem for Christian student affairs is *the problem of professional preparation*. While we have made strides over the past two decades, we still lag behind our counterparts in higher education in our level of professional preparation. Comparisons with faculty preparation show the gap more clearly. While the pathway from tired coach or faculty member to dean is not as well worn as it used to be, we lack a clear pattern of what prepares us best for major leadership roles in student affairs. It is harder to imagine a student affairs professional gaining an appointment as an associate professor of psychology than it is to imagine an associate professor of psychology gaining an appointment as a dean of students. We're still not sure that there is a primary path leading to senior leadership or that a terminal degree is a necessary credential.

*A fourth problem is territoriality*. Academic affairs will be the 900-pound gorilla for the foreseeable future. If that is the reality we live with, how can we move toward meaningful partnerships? What initiatives are we willing to take in order for those partnerships to occur? What will we have to change about ourselves to build bridges? While the territorial issue with academic affairs occurs between unequal partners, there is a territorial issue that occurs on many of our campuses with a department more our size: our relationship with the campus ministry professionals too often displays the dynamics of a sibling rivalry. What would it take to develop a true partnership there? In terms of campus roles, professional preparation, and research issues, they are much more like us. Is there a way that we could work together with synergy? Do we really believe in a seamless curriculum? When "push comes to shove," are we the only ones who do?

## Important Trends

The worlds of Christian higher education and private higher education have discovered a new model. Provosts are popping up everywhere. What distinguishes them as much as anything is variation in their job descriptions.

Upon introduction a provost is most likely to hear the question, "So, what is a provost?" Most provosts come out of an academic affairs background. There are at least two driving forces in the development of these positions, both of which have implications for student affairs. First, a president's attention is increasingly focused on off-campus concerns. None of our campuses would survive without the president's attention to fundraising and lobbying of important external constituencies. The provost has become the internal campus leader at many colleges, guiding day-to-day operation. Second, there has been a deliberate attempt to bring together all the program areas that affect students. Academic affairs, student affairs, and campus ministries are finding themselves aligned under the provost. While it may not guarantee the desired outcome of closer working relationships, it can be an important help. The implications for student affairs professionals are obvious. Does this further subordinate student affairs to academic affairs? Will academic affairs influence student affairs or will the reverse be true? Will this bring student affairs and campus ministries closer to the models of preparation and programming practiced in academic affairs?

A second trend in our institutions is the demise of *in loco parentis*. While our colleagues in state universities celebrated its demise 30 years ago, we did not. While Christian higher education is still more rule-oriented than much of higher education, we are not the schools we were in the 1970s. Even though many families think of safety more than challenge for their sons (and especially) daughters when they send in the tuition check, our approach has changed dramatically. Perhaps the more appropriate model is *in loco pastoris*. The mentoring/modeling role suggested by Steve Garber in *The Fabric of Faithfulness: Weaving Together Belief & Behavior During the University Years* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996) takes us in the right direction, providing guidance for student affairs, academic affairs, and campus ministries.

## Issues Ahead

The problems identified above suggest an agenda for us. Perhaps the most important is the development of a guiding paradigm for Christian student affairs. While there is much to commend in the developmental models that guided us or the learning imperative that currently focuses our discussion, we have yet to address the meta-problem of adequately identifying and integrating the core assumptions of Christian faith into Christian higher education. Both the learning imperative and the developmental models are naïve in assuming that movement is always in the direction of the good. It is important to ask, "What is the purpose of higher education?" as we try to identify our role. "Learning" may be a good or necessary answer to the question, but it may not be a sufficient answer. If, as Garber suggests, the years between adolescence and adulthood are a crucible in which moral meaning is formed, that has implications for our

agenda. If, as Willimon and Naylor suggest in *The Abandoned Generation: Rethinking Higher Education* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmann, 1995), two of the key questions to be addressed in college are "How do people become good?" and "Why are we here?" our answers may be found more in theology and philosophy than in psychology. Our guiding paradigm ought to be rooted in our theology if it is to adequately address the issues before us.

A second issue has to do with our sense of professional self-worth. What will it take for us to embrace our role without resorting to comparisons? Will we ever be able to say with the apostle Paul, "I have learned to be content" (Philippians 4:11)? Our role is valuable, essential, but different. Let us not resort to making ourselves in the image of the faculty.

A third issue has to do with career paths. What do we do with all the entry-level professionals for whom there are so few opportunities to advance? How many residence directors become deans? How many stay in the profession? What does this suggest about the nature of our preparation programs, recruiting, and professional development programs?

## Conclusion

Our friend and fellow traveler, Russ Rogers, has been asking us good questions for years. One of his favorites is, "Is this as good as it gets?" While much of what we do in student affairs is good, I hope this is not as good as it gets. Higher education needs us. Christian higher education needs us. The seamless curriculum beckons us. What would it take for us to lead the way?

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