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## The State of Christian Student Development

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# The State of Christian Student Development

By Skip Trudeau, Ed.D., Ginny Carpenter, Norris Friesen, Ph.D., and Tim Hermann

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## Introduction

To provide a framework for the discussion of "The State of Christian Student Development," the editorial staff of *Growth: The Journal of the Association for Christians in Student Development* conducted an informal Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats (SWOT) analysis, presenting the results here as a means of beginning the discussion of where we are and where we are going as a profession. The analysis presented is meant to be generally applicable to Christian colleges and therefore may or may not be descriptive of specific campuses.

It seems appropriate to develop a working definition of Christian student development prior to presenting our SWOT analysis. The term "student development" by definition has come to embody three meanings. First, it describes the process and content of what students experience as they interact in various environmental settings during the college years. Secondly, it is used by many colleges to define the administrative area which focuses on the development of college students through policies, activities, and interpersonal relationships. Lastly, it is used to define the influences that help students to develop and integrate skills learned in the classroom and in the non-classroom environment. These skills include leadership, interpersonal skills and time management skills, to name a few. Christian student development therefore refers to how persons of faith and campuses pursuing specific Christian agendas address these concepts. In this context we present our SWOT analysis of Christian student development.

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## Strengths

Student development has emerged as an integral aspect of the Christian college and university and has effectively played a major role in creating environments that emphasize the building of living and learning communities. The shift from a remedial, "student services" concept to an educational concept has helped student development programs to reassess its purpose and mission. In this process several strengths have emerged, namely, an emphasis on student-centeredness, the positive effect that student involvement has on learning, and values/character building that results from student engagement with society and culture.

Colleges and universities have placed major emphasis on student-centeredness. This has been influenced in part by the Total Quality Management (TQM) movement, but has been very evident in student development programs from the beginning. The 1987 National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA) Point of View Statement asserts that students are unique and bring valuable experiences to the campus milieu. These unique and different experiences add to the diversity of the campus and should be celebrated as well as challenged. That is, students should be encouraged to share personal and cultural experiences in a safe and accepting environment, yet these experiences should also be subjected to examination and reflection. In such a developmental process students must examine beliefs and values to determine ownership.

The assessment initiative has also influenced this notion of student-centeredness. Campuses today are very interested in student retention as well as in student satisfaction. Initiatives have been launched to encourage retention. Assessment tools such as the Student Satisfaction Inventory (Schreiner & Juillerat, 1993) and the College Student Experience Questionnaire (Pace, 1990) measure both student satisfaction and the importance of specific issues to college student populations. Focus groups are often used to determine the significance of the issues and how best to address them.

Educators acknowledge the importance of hands-on learning, and correspondingly, student development educators recognize the value that co-curricular involvement has on learning. Astin (1987) identifies co-curricular involvement as critical to personal development. Astin feels that students who invest a significant amount of time in an activity assume more responsibility for their growth and development. Obviously, too much involvement can lead to failure and too little involvement can result in a limited perspective with no or very little applied experience. Students who volunteer or become involved in organizations or athletics tend to be more satisfied. They tend to take more ownership for their own learning, and also tend to support institutional values. These students also learn important skills that translate into lifelong abilities.

A recent experience at a Christian college illustrates this point. The student senate president at this particular college invited his father, an investment banker, to visit a senate meeting. It was not a particularly exciting meeting, but a funding request was debated and a parking proposal was discussed. Students used appropriate parliamentary procedures to discuss the items on the agenda. After considerable debate, a

vote was taken, a decision was made to fund the request, and a parking resolution was passed. After the meeting, the student's father spoke with the adviser about the meeting expressing appreciation for his leadership. The father commented that this was one of the most enlightening events he had attended at his son's college. He went on to say that he wished every one of his executives could visit a student senate meeting like this. He was obviously impressed that his son, an economics/finance major, could apply what he learned in a meaningful co-curricular experience. The father's comments affirmed the educational value of this experience.

Student development, like other college departments, has been enhanced by technology. Students are more technologically experienced than ever before and come to campus expecting technological support to be provided. In response, our campuses have provided everything from laptop computers to extensive computer laboratories to computer connections in individual rooms. Student development educators have had the opportunity to be involved in discussions that challenge administrators and faculty alike to think about the positive and negative implications of technology. Examples of these discussions include the impact computer overuse or dependency has on community; pornography concerns; ethical use of copyrighted materials; academic dishonesty; and plagiarism. Technology adds much to the educational environment, yet we are all too aware that it can also be a detriment. When it is not carefully considered and thoughtfully applied, it can have a negative or debilitating impact on the environment.

Other technology issues include student use of cable television, videos, and telephones. All of these forms of technology heighten the student's experience, but each facet also provides concerns and must be carefully considered in light of institutional values. Student development has had the unique opportunity to help shape student responsibility and institutional response regarding these issues.

Another development is that student affairs educators have been given the opportunity to expand leadership and service learning programs. These programs are sometimes maintained as retention initiatives, but are also potentially meaningful vehicles for both supporting and challenging students. Leadership development programs are highly varied and may include activities ranging from extensive outdoor challenge/ropes courses to curricular offerings on leadership development. Career development, vocation and topics related to one's calling are often included in first year seminars and senior capstone courses. Some Christian colleges and universities have supported service learning by developing offices and providing personnel that focus specifically on service learning. While these programs may compete with other departments and initiatives for funding, they are funded because of the recognized potential they have to enhance the educational experience.

As enrollments have increased, campus facilities have been updated and expanded. Residence life is an area in which student development educators have had considerable influence. Specifically, on numerous campuses residence halls have been built to either accommodate increased enrollments or to replace outdated, inadequate residence halls. Student development professionals are working with architects and planning teams to develop facilities that heighten community and accentuate learning. Computer labs, computer connectivity, cable television, phone connections, lounges,

kitchens, recreation and study space have been included in many new residence halls specifically for the purpose of enhancing the student experience. In other words, student development educators have been able to reflect the research on community development in the construction of new residence halls.

### **Weaknesses**

Despite the encouraging signs referenced, several areas within Christian student development can be considered limitations. These are not mentioned as an indictment against our efforts but rather as an attempt to begin to identify areas of anticipated future challenge. To be sure, some of our campuses are making significant strides in addressing these issues, but in general, these are areas where many of our programs struggle. Four areas have been identified as being particularly significant. These areas consist of the gap between academic affairs and student affairs; the lack of collaboration between student affairs and other functional areas; a lack of attention to multicultural issues; and the lack of assessment in student development.

There is little doubt that a gap exists between academic affairs and student affairs on many campuses, Christian colleges notwithstanding. This gap is evidenced in many ways such as "cultural" differences between faculty and student affairs staff, differences in educational preparation, values, goals, purposes and the longstanding separation between the curriculum and co-curriculum (Kuh, 1997; Schroeder, 1999; Whitt, 1996). This gap has been described as "a bifurcated existence where academic and student affairs have little in common" (Guthrie, 1997, p. 47). A frequent manifestation of this gap is the familiar faculty perception of student development professionals as focused on "hand-holding" and frivolous social programming. While there may be some merit to these criticisms, for instance, over-involvement in extra-curricular activity has been negatively associated with academic success (Pascarella, Terenzini, & Blimling, 1994), this perception clearly dismisses our cherished view of student development professionals as educators (Komives, 1999). Whether born of malice or ignorance, this perception is indicative of a general lack of understanding of the primary purposes of student development. Simply put, many academic faculty members do not view student affairs practitioners as contributors to the educational missions of our institutions. Christian student affairs personnel should recognize this and seek to understand why such views are so widely held and what can and should be done to change this view.

The second area of weakness, a lack of collaboration between student affairs and other functional areas across campus, may be closely related to the gap between student and academic affairs. However, this issue appears more complex. Even if the two groups disagree on the educational role of student affairs, this does not necessarily imply that the two cannot work collaboratively. It also does not speak to the lack of collaboration between student affairs and departments other than academic departments. The call for collaboration has been heard from several authors, both from higher education in general (Blimling & Whit, 1999; Kuh, Branch Douglas, Lund, & Ramin-Gyurnek, 1994; Schroeder, 1999a, 1999b; Student Learning Initiative, 1997), as

well as from those writing specifically about Christian higher education (Guthrie, 1997; Painter & Loy, 1997). There have even been calls from within ACSD itself for the pursuit of collaborative efforts by student affairs practitioners at Christian colleges (Loy & Trudeau, 2000; Trudeau & Johnson, 1998). The espoused goal of such collaboration is usually the creation of a "seamless curriculum," where in-class and out-of-class experiences are both integrated into a total or "whole-person" education (SLI, 1997). Student affairs workers should be encouraged to focus on student learning or active learning (Blimling & Whitt, 1999; SLI, 1997). In Christian higher education "wisdom development" (Guthrie, 1997) has been offered as a working metaphor. Despite this call to arms, so to speak, it appears that many Christian student affairs programs have been unsuccessful in achieving a sense of collaboration with academic affairs and other areas within the academy. As stated earlier, this lack of collaboration is likely contributed to by the way faculty and others view student affairs. It is also likely that student affairs personnel may be focusing more on the student services they provide as opposed to the educational role they can and should fill. It is not clear whether this scarcity of collaboration is a product of the lack of appreciation for student affairs, an overemphasis on the part of student affairs on the service aspect of their function, or a combination of these and other factors. It is clear, however, that student affairs practitioners need to strongly consider how to create and maintain venues for collaboration with academic affairs and other areas (Schroeder, 1999). This may be even more critical in the Christian college setting where we seek not only to integrate the "in" and "out" of classroom learning experience but the integration of faith and learning as well.

The third area of weakness is the lack of diversity on Christian college campuses. While it may be comforting to acknowledge that this is not exclusively a student affairs concern, we cannot afford to ignore our role in addressing issues of diversity on our campuses. This is not a new issue but is one that requires renewed attention. While populations of minority groups such as Asians, African-Americans, Hispanics and Native Americans has risen dramatically in the United States in the last 15 years (Blimling & Whitt, 1999a; Pascerella & Terenzini, 1998), a number of race-related concerns still exists on college campuses. (Blimling & Whitt, 1999b; Hughes, 1994). The picture is much the same for Christian colleges. Though our student populations may reflect an increase in diversity and more services are provided specifically for these students, we still face needs for meaningful and effective programs related to multicultural awareness and appreciation, as well as racial reconciliation. While understanding and appreciation of cultural differences is an oft-espoused goal within the entire realm of liberal education (Blimling & Whitt, 1999b; Hughes, 1994), it has special significance in Christian education. Student affairs personnel need to be intimately involved in the process of addressing diversity issues. One area of particular concern is the lack of professionals from underrepresented groups. A second area of concern is the lack of student leaders from the same groups. Student affairs personnel need to provide strong, effective leadership in this area.

A final fault relates to our efforts in the area of assessment. Simply stated, student affairs programs in general and Christian student affairs programs in particular

have been slow to engage in meaningful assessment activities. Higher education as a whole is under fire from a variety of internal and external sources (Baxter Magolda, Terenzini & Hutchings, 1999; Blimling, 1999; Blimling & Whitt, 1999). The criticism of higher education results from a combination of several factors including escalating costs, constrained revenue sources, and a general erosion of confidence in existing educational practices (Blimling, 1999; Blimling & Whitt, 1999; Upcraft, 1999). While the whole academy is under scrutiny, student affairs programs may be particularly vulnerable. Certainly we are accountable to the same external examination and internal criticism as our colleagues (Blimling, 1999; Blimling & Whitt, 1999). In response to the calls for accountability, higher education has turned to assessment as a viable means of measuring and documenting programmatic success (Blimling, 1999). Student affairs programs, including those in the Christian college sector, have not been significantly involved in this process. This is a situation that needs to change if we are to maintain and improve our roles within the academy.

### **Opportunities**

Several areas of particular opportunity seem to be present at this time. Here again, some campuses may already be capitalizing on these opportunities while others may need to consider new initiatives to benefit from them. The opportunities identified are the current emphasis placed on whole person and character-enhancing education, the increasing level of professionalism within the ranks of Christian student development practitioners, and new opportunities to collaborate with academic affairs in the areas of assessment and student learning.

Much evidence seems to indicate that this is truly an unprecedented point in the history of Christian student affairs. While most of the institutions within the realm of Christian higher education have articulated longstanding commitments to "whole-person education," the substantive emphasis has never been greater. Student development is being placed at the philosophical heart of the educational endeavor. Many Christian college presidents expend more efforts extolling the virtues of the co-curricular enterprise than they do the traditional academic program. Closely related to the emphasis on the whole person is the call to envision higher education as a character-enhancing experience (King, 1997; Kuh, 1998). Christian colleges and universities are uniquely equipped to respond to this call to fashion higher learning in a such a way as to nurture the development of people who are not only intellectually superior but who are also morally superior. In other words, Christian colleges and universities are producing graduates who are both educationally and morally equipped to contribute significantly to their chosen vocational fields. One need only look at the recent attention afforded college student values to see that Christian institutions are extraordinarily well-positioned to provide leadership in this realm. Many Christian colleges and universities are being recognized as pioneers and guides in the realm of values education.

Another area of clear promise is found in the higher levels of professional training of Christian student development personnel. A cursory comparison of practitioners today to those of twenty-five years ago reveals a greatly enhanced level of train-

ing and career commitment. In the past, many Christian college and university personnel found their way into student development "by accident" and had little related experience, preparation or vision for the field. Currently, most of those coming into student affairs have intentionally chosen this as a career path and have sought educational and practical experiences which have helped to prepare them for their given responsibilities. This enhanced level of intentionality and preparation gives Christian student development professionals a much stronger platform from which to articulate their positions as educators; clearly, student affairs professionals are "educators whose classrooms are the residence halls, student government offices, small groups, cross-cultural settings, etc." If this is the case, there is both the opportunity and the responsibility to establish and proclaim the Christian student development curricula. It is our duty to explain exactly what it is Christian student development educators are attempting to teach in their "classrooms" and how it is known that students are learning what is intended.

Finally, even though the lack of collaboration between student affairs and academic affairs has been identified as a weakness, the need for collaboration presents itself as a unique opportunity for student development professionals. There are at least two areas in which collaboration between student and academic affairs seems to be desirable and attainable, namely assessment and student learning. First is the area of assessment. Because the area of student development strives to be "value added," a nebulous concept at best, virtually all institutions of higher education struggle with measuring and assessing what student development does. The opportunities have never been greater for collaboration between student affairs and academic affairs professionals (Blimling, 1999; Blimling & Whitt, 1999; Schroeder, 1999; Upcraft, 1999). There is rich opportunity for student affairs to provide leadership in navigating the difficult waters of institutional assessment. Assistance in measuring efforts and outcomes related to the development of critical academic, life, and citizenship skills will be welcomed.

A second prospect for mutual effort is the emphasis that many institutions are placing on student learning (Dalton, 1997; SLI, 1997). The shift in pedagogy from a more traditional lecture-based delivery system to a more student-centered approach has increased the need for expertise on how students learn. As student affairs professionals we can and should be guides to and sojourners with our brothers and sisters in the classrooms as we seek to better understand and better serve students. There is widespread acceptance of the truism that, "in order to teach we must first understand." The current emphasis on experiential and service learning opportunities is familiar territory to the student affairs professional. Student affairs has much to offer to this discussion and it seems that at greater levels than ever before student development professionals are being asked to assist and are being given the opportunity to co-labor. Again, the need and opportunity for this collaboration is even more vital on the Christian college campus as the integration of faith and learning is sought in and out of the classroom.

### **Threats**

Four areas are identified as significant threats to Christian student development practice. They are an uneasy tension between *in loco parentis* and *en loco amicus* as a guiding metaphor for our work with students, an unhealthy emphasis on student service at the expense of implementing pertinent theory, the difficult nature of assessing student affairs work, and the "bottleneck" effect.

Willamon and Naylor (1995) chronicled the end of *in loco parentis* as the pre-eminent metaphor for describing the relationship of college to student and suggested in its place *in loco amicus*, where the college was to play the role of a wise friend or advisor. Student affairs practitioners are most likely more comfortable with latter as they tend to consider students as adults and active partners in whole-person education. This is especially true for those in the Christian sector. Indeed, one of the major transitions Christian student development personnel hope to see in their students is an examination of the faith assumptions handed down by parents and others in an integrative process that results in the development of their own beliefs and faith practices based on those beliefs. However, there is a definite tension between this process and the desire of significant constituents (parents, some students, faculty and staff) for student development staff to adopt a more *in loco parentis* approach. One reason that enrollments at Christian colleges has risen is that parents and some students want the protection and even the comfort of a small and nurturing environment (Winston, 2000). These same parents and students are often dismayed to find that one of Christian student development's major goals is to challenge them to move out of the very comfort zones they are seeking when they come to our campuses. The resulting tension is often manifested by the phone call from the-less-than-happy parent who questions the Christian integrity of the student development staff member for exposing their student to a controversial film or requiring their student to read a non-Christian book. This tension is a threat to whole-person education and student development must play a major role in mediating it.

The second threat is that many Christian student development staffs are forced, due to a lack of resources and other contributing factors, to overemphasize service to students at the expense of implementing good theory. Student development practitioners in general, and those in the Christian sector in particular, are prone to verbalize a reliance on emergent and pertinent theory while practice may not resemble the same theories (Guthrie et al. 1997 and Trudeau & Johnson, 1998). The problem isn't that there are no good theories, and it isn't that existing theories are misunderstood. Rather, it is that in light of restrained resources, many student development offices are forced to focus more on providing the basic services than on the more esoteric application of theory. There are no easy solutions to this dilemma, but it is an area that must be addressed. Christian student development personnel must continue to meet basic student needs while finding the resources to infuse student learning into day-to-day student development practice. Failure to do so will eliminate the possibility of full partnership in the educational enterprise.

The third area of threat lies in the difficult nature of assessing what it is that student development does. In many ways, the programs and services provided by stu-

dent development are difficult to measure because they are values-based. It is difficult to calculate whether a student, after four years on campus, merits a six or an eight in civility, or whether a student deserves an A, B, C, D or F in the integration of faith and learning. The temptation for already-overworked student affairs practitioners is to either refrain from assessment activities or to rely on outmoded, ineffective approaches that are unreliable and unhelpful. Data obtained from such efforts is unlikely to produce useful answers to the serious assessment questions being asked of all areas within higher education. The current literature provides a chilly forecast for those who fail to engage in meaningful assessment (Blimling, 1999 and Blimling & Whitt, 1999). Failure to properly assess student development practice will negatively impact the effectiveness of this practice within higher education and will seriously hamper the efforts of student development to influence the academy.

The final threat is the "bottleneck effect" within the student development profession. This refers to the fact that there are a limited number of opportunities for entry-level staff, such as resident directors, to advance into mid-level posts such as director, assistant, and associate dean positions. The bottleneck doesn't stop there. The squeeze is also felt by mid-level professionals desiring to move to senior-level spots. The bottom line is that the limited number of advancement opportunities is pushing many gifted persons out of the student development profession. To illustrate, a typical student affairs staff may have six hall directors (entry level), three mid-level administrators, and one senior-level administrator. What are the chances that one of the entry level staff persons will find his or her way to a mid-level post or to the senior level over his or her career? The odds become worse as the professional tries to move "up the ladder." Exacerbating this phenomenon in Christian higher education is that the entry-level position most common and plentiful, that of resident director, is one with a high turnover rate. This higher level of burnout, coupled with a typically longer-than-average tenure for mid-level professionals and satisfied senior level persons, results in the bottleneck. Bright, educated, experienced young professionals are exiting the field of student development prematurely. What will be the long-term effects that this bottleneck-induced attrition has within the student development profession?

### **Conclusion**

By presenting this informal SWOT analysis, the editors of this journal hope to "prime the pump" for the more in-depth treatment of "The State of Christian Student Development" that is presented in the next two articles. We are cognizant that this analysis is far too general to be descriptive of any single campus. However, we are hopeful that it has raised some questions for consideration as the analyses provided by David Guthrie and Jay Barnes and the accompanying responses from several ACSD members are read. We offer encouragement to our readers to find points of agreement and divergence between what is presented and your own practices and experiences.

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