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A Response to Jay Barnes Essay

by John Witte

The editors wish to thank John for this thoughtful reflection upon the theme of last years' journal. The inclusion of this response represents an attempt to encourage continued dialogue and consideration of the important issues involved in assessing "the state of Christian student affairs." This piece offers the critical challenge to consider the ultimate ends of our work with students. We are grateful for the opportunity to carry on this significant discourse.

In the opening of his essay, Dr. Barnes reflects on the state of our profession, both when he began his doctoral program back in 1976 and today, in the year 2002. And since my own graduate work began somewhere between these years, I recognize the problems and challenges he explores. As a profession, are we merely a conglomeration of staff members with no other logical connection than that we deal with students "outside of the classroom?" With few standards for admission into our field, with a mostly borrowed research base, and with no accrediting bodies to ensure standards, can we really call "Student Affairs" a profession? And specifically as Christians, do we (and should we) operate any differently than our "secular" counterparts?

The last question is perhaps the most important. Dr. Barnes has suggested that perhaps we as Christians should be looking at a guiding paradigm for our profession in the world of theology or philosophy. After all, our worldview assumptions are considerably different than many in the field. All professionals in student affairs, no matter their setting or religion, would likely profess a desire to promote student development and student learning. But development and learning to what end? A good job? A "successful" life? Is good citizenship the ultimate goal? Then citizenship where, and why?

John Witte is the associate dean for residence life at Calvin College. He has a master's degree in college student personnel from Bowling Green University and a BA from Calvin College.

A Christian in higher education should see other aims, and those of us in Christian higher education should see those aims woven throughout our institutions. Ultimately, we are about a type of vocational development, but defined much more broadly than a career or job – we should be preparing students to take up their place as citizens in the kingdom of God. In as much, teaching the many implications of this life-long vocation would be outstanding goals for any institution.

Having a better guiding paradigm will not let us off the hook as a profession, however. The research problem Dr. Barnes discusses is real. Though we should not have to mirror our faculty colleagues, we can certainly learn from them. Our faculties are continually assessing the learning that goes on in the classroom, through grades, course evaluations, senior seminars, alumni surveys, etc. Are we being as diligent with assessment as they are? The typical excuses that time and budgets are tight provide all the more reason we ought to be sure that what we are doing is “worth” the effort. Are we staying as current in our field as our faculty colleagues are expected to be? Are we aware of new trends in staffing, pending legislation which affects our work, or relevant research into specific student populations? Can we do more in the realm of Christian higher education to encourage our graduates and professionals to take up some of this research, and can we contribute voices to the broader discussions which are ongoing in student affairs? We have the minds within our ranks.

Dr. Barnes exposes several issues and questions in his essay with which we will continue to struggle as a profession for years to come. How can we better root our work in a firm foundation? Are there better ways to align ourselves in the institutional hierarchy so that our efforts are seen as more co-curricular than extra- or even anti-curricular? Will we come to accept ourselves professionally, in spite of (and perhaps because of) our different roles in our institutions? As the Association for Christians in Student Development continues to grow and develop, I hope we continue to grapple, discuss, prod, explore and dream about these issues, because on this side of Heaven, we will never be done with our task of furthering God’s kingdom.
