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Christian Higher Education and Christian Student Affairs

by David S. Guthrie

Introduction

The following essay is a reprint of a chapter authored by Dr. David Guthrie found in the book, *Student Affairs Reconsidered: A Christian View of the Profession and its Contexts* (David S. Guthrie ed.). This groundbreaking work published in 1997 represented what many would consider the first major piece of scholarship of its kind produced by members of the Association for Christians in Student Development (ACSD). This particular chapter, “Christian Higher Education and Christian Student Affairs” was significantly provocative in its challenge for student affairs professionals to consider their roles as educators in a “wisdom development” model of educational practice. The editors of *Growth* are grateful to Donna Romanowski of the Calvin Center for Christian Scholarship for permission to reprint this chapter for this edition of the journal. It is followed by a ten year reflection of how this landmark scholarship has impacted the membership of ACSD by the organizations president, Barry Loy.

As stated in the previous chapter, the principles of student learning and the purpose of student learning that we have offered to this point are ostensibly instructive for more than Christian colleges alone. That is, an institution does not have to be a Christian college to define its religious commitments clearly and, based on them, provide a multidimensional, integrated, communal, process-oriented, wisdom-focused student learning experience. Indeed, some institutions currently do so.

At the same time, we believe that the preceding principles and purpose of student learning resonate with a Christian view of life. That more Christian colleges do not frame student learning according to these principles and purpose therefore particularly curious. Perhaps it is the case that other Christian perspectives logically permit a student learning enterprise that is unidimensional, fragmented, individualistic, prescribed, and/or in pursuit of outcomes other than the cultivation of wisdom. Or, perhaps it is the case that some Christian colleges have simply struggled to connect Christian assumptions with the educational experience, opting instead for a Christian faith that is “privately engaging, but socially [and educationally] irrelevant” (Guinness, 1983). Whatever the reason, we wish to incite discussion not only about principles of student learning that are based on a Christian view but also about how these principles may be implemented Christianly in Christian colleges. In effect, we want to be more specific regarding how Christian educators may appropriate wisdom-focused student learning in Christian institutions. In this chapter, therefore, we offer several general comments about Christian student learning that may assist Christian colleges in renorming and restructuring (Richardson, 1971; Mohrman, et al., 1989) their student learning projects. We also provide three suggestions that may help guide the efforts of Christian student affairs professionals.

Christian Higher Education

We suggest that learning is a normative activity. By normative we simply mean that God intended learning as a good process that reflects part of what it means to function as human beings created *imago dei*. God meant for humans to learn; God's design was that learning would be a delightful capacity for humans to possess. Our Christian view pictures God creating humans to be wholly good, and part of what made humans so good was that God provided for them to be learners. We highlight this point because we are aware that, in some Christian circles, learning may be viewed with considerable suspicion as an instrument of evil. Those embracing this view may point to literature that indicates that colleges – even Christian colleges – are secularizing influences on students (Astin, 1993; Hunter, 1987).

We reject “the-more-you-learn-the-less-holy-you-become” approach in favor of the view that God created humans to be learners. We do recognize, however, that human learning can honor or dishonor God. Because our Christian view also underscores humans’ disregard of God’s provisions for life, we readily acknowledge the effects of such disregard on humans as they go about learning. Although God created humans to be learners, the result of human autonomy *viz-a-viz* God is that why, what, and how they learn may not conform to God’s designs for learning.

The significance of our Christian worldview for student learning is that unrequited learning is not the final word. Rather, the life and work of Jesus is the final Word. Jesus’ redemptive act recovers humans’ ability to learn in ways that conform to what God initially had in mind when God created humans as learners. For those involved in a college’s learning leadership – both faculty members and student affairs administrators – who are also committed to a Christian view of life, the very nature of our efforts becomes that of designing an integrated curriculum of in-class and out-of-class initiatives that will help students uncover what was envisioned when, with delight, God created them as learners. Although Christians will never get it completely right, they are obliged to remember, discern, and explore with diligences and “frolic” (Long, 1992, p. 62).

Although we have attempted to make references in the previous chapter as to how Christian colleges may interpret the purpose of student learning, several further observations are warranted. First, given the inherently religious nature of student learning, Christian colleges should strive to provide student learning Christianly with respect both to content issues and to organizational structures. This is simply to underscore the idea that neither the content of student learning nor the systems that undergird it are neutral. For example, for a Christian college simply to install the formal curriculum of a state university as its own is inappropriate. Much care must be taken regarding what, how and why various subjects comprise the in-class curriculum of a Christian institution. Similarly, organizational issues such as conduct codes, faculty reward structures, student discipline procedures, graduation requirements, and the like should be intentional, thoughtful byproducts of the Christian beliefs that guide a Christian college. This is not to say that good ideas about student learning – ideas that are consistent with a Christian view of reality – are the exclusive domain of Christian educators. To be sure, many who are not Christian believers have ideas about student learning that are Christian if you will – that is, they make sense within a

Christian worldview. Our point here is simply to highlight that the learning leadership of Christian colleges must work to produce and sustain student learning projects for which they can make apology based on their Christian perspective.

Second, Christian colleges must take care to promote multidimensional student learning. Christian colleges, to our mind, must not merely be colleges with chapel programs, theology departments, and dorm Bible studies; likewise, they must not merely be church camps where students also have to read some books and take several tests before departing. Each aspect of the student learning experience – whether cognitive, psychosocial, vocational, or moral – not only must find proper expression in the Christian college but also must be accepted and honored as a legitimate component of student learning by the institution's learning leadership.

Third, a univocal student learning experience should be a hallmark of Christian college education. At a time in which many colleges and universities lack educational coherence – both intradivisionally as well as interdivisionally – Christian colleges can distinguish themselves by providing student learning experiences that hold together. In-class and out-of-class learning coordination must not only occur in Christian colleges but these respective programs must also be complementary. Moreover, perhaps the time has come to discard the traditional organizational structures – academic division and student life division – in favor of a unified, collaborative student learning division in which both those who perform the majority of their work inside the classroom and those who perform the majority of their work outside of the classroom collaborate willingly and enthusiastically as a matter of course (Brown, 1990).

Fourth, there is no room for self-aggrandizing autonomy in the Christian college. The professor who is solely interested in her work, the student whose only concern is his career, and the student life professional who makes no effort to enjoy his faculty colleagues are misfits in a Christian college; for, at the Christian college, and an understanding of the community aspect of student learning should enjoy its richest expression. This is not to say that Christian college faculty, staff, and students cannot perform tasks individually or must always act like one big happy family. We simply wish to emphasize that, by virtue of the fact that Christians ultimately view one another as image bearers of God, they enter the learning project with a particular obligation to view and embrace others as valuable contributors to their learning and vice versa.

Finally, Christian colleges may do well to view student learning as part of the process of sanctification. Learning is surely a process. At a Christian college, however, the student learning process takes on a particular significance. There students are introduced to ideas, people, experiences, events and the like, such that they will begin to develop ways of thinking, acting, questioning, and living that are, in the truest sense of the term, godly. This is what wisdom development is all about from a Christian point of view. Willimon (1995, p. 55) offers:

We are not calling [students] back to something they have previously known but have now forgotten; we are not attempting to open up the closed-minded provincialism of their childhood years; we are not providing cautious Christian nurture for youth who, having been raised in a Christian culture, now need a little spiritual nudge to cultivate the best that is within them. We are taking people to places they have never been, calling them to become part of a

countercultural adventure called discipleship, showing them how to perceive the world through a startling perspective called the gospel and adopting them into a new home called the church.

Stated another way, student learning at a Christian college takes shape around the process of students' further developing frameworks of understanding that not only will be sufficient for orienting their lives but will enable them to engage life for life in a way that will honor God (Garber, 1994). As such, attending a Christian college may contribute to one's sanctification, particularly in the realms of thinking Christianly and in faithfully relating what one learns to what one does.

The Marks of Christian Student Learning

One of the principle questions that we frequently returned to in this project was: "How might student learning look if it was done right from our [Christian] point of view?" We were particularly admonished to address this issue in response to Boyer's (1990, p. 283) thoughtful comments:

At a time in life when values should be shaped and personal priorities sharply probed, what a tragedy it would be if the most deeply felt issues, the most haunting questions, the most creative moments were pushed to the fringes of our institutional life. What a monumental mistake it would be if students, during the undergraduate years, remained trapped within the organizational grooves and narrow routines to which the academic world sometimes seems excessively devoted.

Therefore, we thought it fitting to relay brief "signs and traces" (Adelman, 1989) of Christian student learning that emerged in our conversations. Some of us preferred to think of student learning that is Christianly enacted as making connections, of linking learning and experience, knowing and doing, thought and deed (Hutchings & Wutzdorff, 1988; Kolb, 1984). Others liked the idea of learning, made popular by Bellah et al. (1985; 1987), as that which resists "the gravitational pull of privatization" (Palmer, 1990, p. 148) and hones commitment, engagement, and service to other persons as well as to public life. Others championed a biblical notion of maturity as an identifying mark of Christian student learning, meaning that educators assist students in developing into the persons – cognitively, emotionally, relationally, culturally, and so on – that God intends them to be. Still others spoke of right learning as that which inspires students to love or care for those things that God loves or cares for (Holmes, 1991), borrowing from Postman's (1993) recent idea that proper education develops "loving resistance fighters."

The common, identifiable strain that seemed to echo loudly among us was that Christian higher education is about enlivening and equipping students to participate in a "restoration project" (Plantinga, 1990, p. 3). This restoration project involves preparing students with the knowledge, skills, and tendencies (Wolterstorff, 1980) that are necessary in framing and living their personal and civic lives in ways that reflect their

ultimate commitments to God. In this sense, college is “a staging ground for action” since the goal is to help students make connections between “what they learn and how they [will] live” (Boyer, 1990, p. 54), such that God may be pleased by their efforts. Perhaps Brueggemann (1982, p. 89) sums it up best when he states: “Education consists in teaching our young to sing doxologies” to God for and in all areas of our earthly lives.

Christian Student Affairs

Student Affairs professionals at Christian colleges face many of the same issues and pressures (e.g., marginalization, partnership in student learning) that confront their counterparts at nonsectarian institutions. In addition, they wrestle with how their Christian faith comes to bear in day-to-day practice. In this section, we suggest three guidelines to assist Christian student affairs professionals in their efforts.

Student Affairs as Legitimate Vocation

From a Christian point of view, work of all kinds is legitimate activity. That is, God intends humans to labor in various and sundry tasks – including the student affairs profession. In contrast to those who may consider work a necessary evil, a Christian perspective suggests that humans are commanded to imitate God by laboring creatively as nurses, plumbers, residence hall directors, pastors, accountants, and so on. Realizing that God calls persons to their tasks provides a significant and compelling rationale for Christians who are involved in student affairs roles to consider their work as eminently purposeful.

In addition, because God has imbued work with such purpose, Christians employed as student affairs professionals do their work “on purpose.” They do their work intentionally, freely admitting that they possess an agenda. Working with college students for God’s sake, if you will, demands that the planning and executing of their work be accomplished with particular goals or outcomes in view; not just any goals or outcomes will do. Creating student affairs functions and programs for their own sake is inappropriate. While such an approach may keep student affairs professionals busy, it ignores the religious nature of their work. That is, Christian student affairs practitioners must consider as their unique task exploring and uncovering goals and practices of work – for residence life initiatives, disciplinary procedures, orientation programs, personal and career counseling, and so on – that reflect their allegiance to a Christian view of reality. Although we acknowledge that aspects of various educational theories and programs may resonate with biblical principles, it should never be the custom of Christian student affairs professionals to imitate contemporary thinking and practice without serious reflection and analysis from a Christian point of view. Moreover, as we stated earlier, perhaps a Christian view of student learning necessitates moving away from rote fulfillment of the typical functions of the profession in favor of investigating more integrated approaches to organizing and executing student learning initiatives and procedures while not ignoring particular tasks that still must occur.

Student Affairs As Contextualized Endeavor

At the outset of the previous chapter, we stated that the work of student affairs practitioners must be viewed in the context of student learning and, subsequently, went on to explain what we mean by student learning. We now reiterate this vital point for student affairs professionals in Christian colleges. The efforts of student affairs staff in a Christian college must occur within the framework of wisdom-focused student learning that is shaped by a Christian view of reality. This has several important ramifications for those employed as student affairs professionals at Christian colleges. First, their job is to help students learn. We recognize that this view may conflict with the current self-emphasis of some Christian student affairs professionals as well as the present roles that others within the Christian academy typically ascribe to them. We contend, however, that although their efforts most often occur outside the classroom, the programs, interventions, role modeling, and services that student affairs professionals at Christian institutions provide must be educational. Moreover, since education is never undertaken neutrally, the learning opportunities that student affairs practitioners at Christian colleges offer must also reflect their religious commitments as Christians. Dalton (1993, p. 88) summarizes this underlying principle succinctly:

The central issue for student affairs leaders, therefore, is not whether they should advocate certain essential values but which values should be advocated and how these values can be advocated in a clear and intentional manner [emphases his].

Because student learning takes shape around the ultimate beliefs of individuals and institutions, it is incumbent upon student affairs professionals at Christian colleges not only to view and enact their work as contributing to student learning but also to do so in ways consistent with their Christian beliefs.

A second consideration, related to the first, is that student affairs professionals at Christian colleges must help students develop wisdom that corresponds with a Christian view of life. The idea that wisdom is the goal of student learning is as important to student affairs professionals as it is to faculty members. Our impression is that some believe professors to be the wisdom producers and student affairs staff to be the trouble preventers; the notion that faculty members are the real educators that student affairs professionals as “wise friends” (Willimon, 1993, p. 1018) who help students develop wisdom. As regards student affairs practitioners in Christian institutions, we suggest a strengthened resolve to frame their efforts as those who are assisting students become more wise in conformity to Christian intentions for such wisdom, irrespective of whether these efforts occur in a residence life program, discipline hearing, service-learning project, dining hall conversation, diversity seminar, or movie discussion.

Third, student affairs at Christian colleges should be multidimensional. We sense that student affairs professionals at Christian colleges may tend to construe their efforts as ministry. That is, they provide Bible studies, hymn sings, prayer groups, missions excursion, fellowship groups, volunteer programs, moral encouragement and correction, and servant role modeling. While we do not deny the appropriateness of these endeavors, it is mistaken to believe that this is what constitutes and distinguishes

student affairs at Christian colleges. In contrast to this approach, we believe that student affairs practitioners at Christian colleges must be fully engaged in helping students come to terms with emotional, physical, relational, cognitive, vocational, civic, ecclesiastical, aesthetic, and moral issues – in short, with life – from a Christian point of view. What distinguishes student affairs at Christian colleges is not limiting the scope of out-of-class programs to those determined to decidedly spiritual, but is rather providing multidimensionalized out-of-class initiatives for and with students, all of which are interpreted through a Christian lens.

Fourth, student affairs professionals at Christian colleges must help students make connections among classroom lectures, out-of-classroom involvements, and personal choices. As such, they function as integrators of students' learning experiences (Garland & Grace, 1993) – they help students weld lectures on biomedical ethics with an internship experience in a local hospital; they encourage students to connect service learning experiences with vocational decisions; they assist students in making sense of individual giftedness and choice of major; they challenge students to apply principles of journalism garnered in class to the production of a campus weekly; and the list goes on. This connecting of knowing and doing, this integrating of components that comprise student learning in college simply makes sense within a Christian view of education. And, although we believe that faculty members at Christian institutions should also assist student in establishing such connections, student affairs practitioners may play a critical role in this endeavor by virtue of their frequent, informal contact with students.

This leads us to a fifth consideration for student affairs professionals at Christian colleges, namely that they should exploit ways to foster a coherent, univocal curriculum with other institutional colleagues, particularly faculty members. This means that student affairs practitioners and faculty members should not only communicate regularly regarding their respective efforts, but should also plan and enact learning initiatives, both in-class and out-of-class, conjointly involving each other in consulting and strategizing, collaborating on research projects pertinent to student learning, and exhorting one another to do their work as to the Lord and on behalf of students. Among professionals in the field writ large, Christian student affairs staff should understand the necessity, importance, and benefit of a communal approach to wisdom-focused student learning. Rather than perpetuate, by design or default, a noncommunal educational approach, student affairs professionals at Christian colleges must press the issue of communally achieved coherent learning.

Finally, Christian student affairs professionals must understand the incompleteness of their efforts. Realizing that learning is processual, that growing in wisdom is a lifelong undertaking, and that helping students become biblically wise thinkers and doers does not eventuate after four years of undergraduate learning may be readily admitted but not nearly so easily accepted. Student affairs educators – including and perhaps especially those who are Christian – earnestly desire to believe that their theories of adolescent development are salient, that their educational programs work, and that their interventions and modeling produce appropriate effects. And they do – sometimes partially, and with some students more than others. Consequently, Christian student affairs professionals do well to accept the limitations of the various educational techniques that comprise their efforts and the naturalness and complexity of the already-but-not-yetness of the learning process as it unfolds unevenly, perhaps in fits and starts, in students' college experiences.

Student Affairs as Ordinary Service

In our zeal to challenge student affairs professionals at Christian colleges to define and shape their work in the context of wisdom-focused student learning that is based on Christian moorings, we do not want to minimize the importance of understanding student affairs as ordinary service. After all the dust settles in the thoughtful pursuit of student learning initiatives that reflect their biblical commitments, Christian student affairs professionals must continue to distribute room keys, help students pack and unpack, and provide them with seemingly mundane, if not trivial, information about drop-add deadlines, linen pick-up, quiet hours, and student-organization reimbursement procedures. We suggest that these tasks and others like them are not insignificant undertakings. Rather, student affairs staff at Christian colleges must view them as opportunities to fulfill their callings not only as professionals but as humble servants of God and persons as well. In an effort to help students learn and grow in wisdom in ways that conform to biblical patterns, student affairs practitioners at Christian colleges must not neglect their obligations simply to serve students.

Conclusion

That some colleges and student affairs professionals do not emphasize student learning, are not consciously aware of or are self-deceived by their ultimate commitments, pay scant attention to connecting beliefs and practices, and function with more than on curriculum are all readily apparent observations. To these realities, however, we add one more: students learn in college. In fact, through both in-class and out-of-class experiences, they may learn that college is not about learning; they may learn that college is not about coming to terms with their own beliefs, commitments, and perspectives – Christian or otherwise; they may learn that institutional mission statements are virtually irrelevant to institutional learning practices; and, they may learn that academic affairs and student affairs divisions have competing agendas. We wish that such learning did not occur; we particularly lament that learning of this sort occurs on Christian college campuses. Perhaps it is precisely because students may learn in these ways that our work as Christian educators is imbued with such critical importance – namely, to offer an alternative way to experience learning in formal classrooms, through student initiatives, and in college coffee shops. To that end, we hope that, in some small way, this book will engage Christian colleges and Christian student affairs practitioners (and perhaps other colleges and student affairs staff), to champion student learning as their primary concern, and to create a coherent, univocal curriculum of wisdom-focused student learning that is the intentional byproduct of their fundamental [Christian] beliefs about life. Then, perhaps the hope expressed so clearly by Long (1992, p. 221) may become more manifest:

Learning belongs to the leavening and sensitizing dimensions of public life. It is at its best when it enlarges horizons, magnifies the capacity for empathy, commends the importance of dialog, and recommits us to search for life in working viability with others and with an awareness of that which individuals and groups experience as a ground for their most essential being. The importance of practicing the life of learning in that way in the company of a committed guild will never be outdated.

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