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Student Affairs Reconsidered: A Look Back

by Barry Loy

This year marks the 10th anniversary of the publication of *Student Affairs Reconsidered: A Christian View of the Profession and its Contexts* (Guthrie, 1998) - the only endeavor by a group of Christians (8 ACSD members) to produce a distinctively Christian perspective on the profession of student development. The book was written during the last major upheaval of the profession – a time when many within the larger student affairs arena were beginning to question “human development” as the guiding paradigm for student affairs professionals. The acceptance, by in large, of *Reform in Student Affairs* (Bloland, Stamatakos, & Rogers, 1994) and the *Student Learning Imperative (SLI)* (ACPA, 1994) turned student development scholars and practitioners toward the concept of “student learning” and most recently culminated in the publication of *Learning Reconsidered: A Campus-Wide Focus on the Student Experience* (Keeling, 2004) and *Learning Reconsidered 2: Implementing a Campus-Wide Focus on the Student Experience* (Keeling, 2006). Both are monographs that encourage the utilization of campus resources to maximize student learning – the first is primarily descriptive and the second provides a blueprint for action.

Another important document with close ties to the *SLI* and appearing the same year as *Student Affairs Reconsidered* is *Principles of Good Practice for Student Affairs* (ACPA & NASPA, 1997) – a joint effort by ACPA and NASPA to take the *SLI* to a higher level by suggesting learning-oriented principles for those working in student affairs.

While *Student Affairs Reconsidered* gained some attention from the larger profession, receiving positive reviews in the *Journal of College Student Development* and the *Journal of Higher Education*, not surprisingly, given its Christian worldview, it never reached the audiences garnered by the *Student Learning Imperative*. It did, however, champion student learning as the primary focus for the student affairs professional, as did the *SLI*; albeit, with a distinctive Christian slant.

What influence, if any, did *Student Affairs Reconsidered* have on the student affairs profession? More specifically, did it inspire ACSD members to work toward creating “a coherent, univocal curriculum of wisdom-focused student learning that is the intentional byproduct of their fundamental [Christian] beliefs about life”? (Guthrie, 1997 b, p. 74) A related question, and perhaps a little easier to answer is, what impact has the “student learning” movement had on the members of ACSD? In an attempt to shed some light on these questions, I looked for clues within ACSD publications (*Growth* and *Koinonia*) and recorded the most pertinent evidence below.

A Preliminary Manifesto for Christian Student Affairs Practitioners (Guthrie, 1998)

In the winter, 1998 issue of *Koinonia*, David Guthrie lamented the lack of a Christian voice in the national discussion on the merits of student learning as a new guiding paradigm for student development.

Later in 1998 in his keynote address at the ACSD annual conference at Calvin College, Guthrie reiterated this sentiment when he stated, “ACSD has been silent on the

student learning conversations within the profession, personally and organizationally” (Guthrie, 1998). He also added that “the book, *Student Affairs Reconsidered: A Christian View of the Profession and Its Contexts*, has provoked relatively little conversation, has generated even less usage, and some—maybe many—aren’t even aware of its existence, despite the fact that it’s written by eight ACSD members” (Guthrie, 1998).

Collaboration: Putting Student Learning Theory into Practice

(Trudeau and Johnson, 1998)

Trudeau and Johnson (1998) demonstrated great esteem for *Student Affairs Reconsidered* when they chose it along with the *SLI* as foundational documents for defining student learning theory. They referred to the *SLI* and *Student Affairs Reconsidered* as “seminal” works and used them to provide a basis to argue for increased collaboration between faculty and student affairs.

ACSD: Past, Present, and Future (Loy & Trudeau, 2000)

In a *Koinonia* article written as a lead up to the twentieth anniversary celebration of ACSD, Loy and Trudeau (2000) identified *Student Affairs Reconsidered* as the first significant effort by members of ACSD to put in writing some serious thoughts about the Christian faith and the work of student affairs professionals. They also viewed this work as part of ACSD’s contribution toward the wider conversation regarding student learning - “unlike twenty years ago when ACSD simply adopted the prevailing secular view of the day, there has been a movement of ACSD professionals to develop a uniquely Christian perspective” (Loy & Trudeau, 2000, p. 5).

The State of Christian Student Affairs (2001)

In *Growth* (2001) Trudeau, Carpenter, Friesen, and Herrmann, using a SWOT analysis approach, provided a thoughtful commentary on “The State of Christian Student Development”. Using *Student Affairs Reconsidered* and other student learning literature as a foundation, their analysis pointed to both weaknesses and opportunities related to “student learning” and “wisdom development”. The authors described the lack of collaboration between student affairs professionals and faculty members in the pursuit of student learning as an enduring and historical weakness. Conversely, they viewed this “weakness” as an important opportunity given the shift in pedagogy away from traditional lecture based teaching to student-centered approaches - the time was ripe for student affairs practitioners to join with faculty members to improve student learning in and out of the classroom. However, the authors pointed to a corresponding “threat” that could impede “student learning” at Christian campuses – that given strained resources, many student development offices “are forced to focus on providing basic services rather than on the more esoteric application of theory” (Trudeau, Carpenter, Friesen, & Hermann, 2001, p. 12).

A Report Card for Christian College Student Affairs (Guthrie, 2001)

In the inaugural edition of *Growth*, David Guthrie, responding to a request from the editors, evaluated, using *Principles of Good Practice in Student Affairs* as a measurement tool, the state of “Christian College Student Affairs”. In his section on student learning, he voiced his concern that Christian College Student Affairs programs are “still wrestling with what it means to undertake their efforts under the banner of student learning” (Guthrie, 2001, p. 28). Guthrie (2001) went on to express his belief that given job demands and the traditional “ministry” orientation of Christian student affairs professionals, it would be tempting for staff to continue operating without linking student affairs programs to the educational outcomes of their institutions. He closed the section with a quote from *Student Affairs Reconsidered*.

... Student learning must be the purpose around which student affairs staff construct and implement their efforts. Residence life programs, student organization activities, disciplinary proceedings, orientation programs, volunteer projects – in short, all those initiatives typically administered by student affairs professionals – must have student learning as their goal (Guthrie, 2001 p. 28)

In Search of the Seamless Curriculum (Barnes, 2001)

In his clarification of the on going student affairs “paradigm” problem, Jay Barnes (2001) echoes Guthrie’s lament from 1998 when he asserts that the response to *Student Affairs Reconsidered* has been more silence than action. With his subsequent questions, Barnes implies that Christian student affairs professionals have done an inadequate job thinking Christianly about their work in student development (Barnes, 2001)

Student Affairs Divisions’ Incorporation of Student Learning at Small Colleges and Universities. (Doyle, 2001)

In his dissertation research, Jeff Doyle (2001) found that Chief Student Affairs Officers (CSAO) at CCCU (Council for Christian Colleges and Universities) institutions ranked the philosophical underpinnings of their departments as follows:

- Number 1 (Student Ministries)*
- Number 2 (Student Development)*
- Number 3 (Student Learning)*
- Number 4 (Student Services)*

Almost half (45 %) of the CSAOs chose “student ministries” as number 1. These findings seem to support the view of Guthrie (2001) and others (Loy & Trudeau, 2000) that Christian student affairs practitioners tend to work predominately out of a student ministries orientation as opposed to student development or student learning.

Student Affairs Divisions' Incorporation of Student Learning Principles at CCCU versus Non-CCCU Institutions (Doyle, 2002)

In his review of literature on student learning, Jeff Doyle (2002) recognizes *Student Affairs Reconsidered* as a primary player in helping to establish student learning as an important new paradigm. He points out the distinctively Christian perspective offered by *Student Affairs Reconsidered* and the significance of its appearance in the same year as *Principles of Good Practice in Student Affairs* (Doyle, 2002).

Doyle's (2002) research findings also indicate that Chief Student Affairs Officers at non-CCCU schools were more apt to ensure that their staff had some formal graduate education in student affairs than their counterparts in CCCU institutions. Perhaps this finding helps explain why many Christian student affairs staff show more interest in "ministry" than "student learning" as a guiding professional paradigm. Many simply lack the educational preparation that would have introduced them to the student-learning model.

While the influence of *Student Affairs Reconsidered* may be hard to measure, the book did, as is evidenced above, elicit a thoughtful response from several members of ACSD. Many recognized the contribution of *Student Affairs Reconsidered* to Christian student affairs as well as to student affairs in general. Ironically, others underscored how most ACSD members had ignored this important contribution. In a recent informal survey (2005) of 24 Christian student affairs professionals, the author found the following:

-Five had heard of Student Affairs Reconsidered and four had read all or part of it.

-Six had heard of the Student Learning Imperative and four had read all or part of it.

-Seven had heard of Principles of Good Practice for Student Affairs and seven had read all or part of it.

-Two had heard of Learning Reconsidered and one had read all or part of it.

In summary, about 20% were acquainted with *Student Affairs Reconsidered* and less than 20% had read part or all of the book.

In closing, here are a few speculative observations that may serve as a stimulus for further research.

- Most of us in Christian student affairs continue to be more "ministry" orientated than "student learning" focused. Dallas Willard as an ACSD keynote speaker probably generates more enthusiasm than David Guthrie, Jane Fried, George Kuh or Susan Komives. In fact, I venture to guess that a good many members of ACSD could not identify the works of George Kuh, Jane Fried, Susan Komives or David Guthrie.

- Whether due to strained resources, lack of interest or training, absence of leadership, or other obstacles, most ACSD members do not care to stay current in the literature of our profession. Rather, they prefer to just provide basic services along with spiritual formation activities, social and educational programs, leadership training, and mentoring. While most do this very competently, they often do it without any tie to resources such as *Student Affairs Reconsidered*, *SLI*, or the *Learning Reconsidered* monographs. In other words, with little connection to the student-learning paradigm that presently guides our profession.

- When hiring, ACSD members tend to put less emphasis on professional preparation in the field of student affairs and more emphasis on hiring staff that have strong relational skills, expertise in spiritual formation, and program management.

- A great majority of entry-level professionals in ACSD do not intend to pursue a “profession” in student affairs. This is supported by the large turn over in the ACSD membership roles each year. It is no wonder that with such a turnover, motivation is lacking to delve into the professional literature of student affairs. Why dig into the professional literature if you are just passing through on your way to another vocation?

- We are primarily a group of practitioners who love working with students and lack the “scholarly” genes that most of our faculty colleagues possess. Most faculty members are scholars who relish the life of the mind. Though we are “bright”, we prefer to be “doers” and are not as reflective and thoughtful when it comes to developing and working from scholarly Christian perspectives of our profession.

All this drives me precariously close to the conclusion that many, if not most, members of ACSD don't really believe that we need a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the literature of our profession, be it Christian or not, to be effective student affairs professionals. Perhaps the old, haunting question about whether or not we truly are a distinct profession or just some sort of hodgepodge comprised of little bits of many different academic disciplines is worth reconsidering. Or, perhaps it is time for another group of ACSD members to join together to contribute a new “Christian View of the Profession and its Contexts”. My vote goes to the latter. If as mentioned earlier, *Student Affairs Reconsidered* is truly a seminal (containing the seeds of later development) work, we can look forward to many more thoughtful reflections on our profession. And given that it has been 10 years since the first, let's get to it.

soli deo gloria

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