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## Critical Issues for Student Affairs: Challenges and Opportunities

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## **Arthur Sandeen and Margaret J. Barr: Critical Issues for Student Affairs: Challenges and Opportunities (San Francisco: John Wiley, Inc., 2006)**

Reviewed by Rob Thompson, Ph. D.

It is fitting that two such highly respected Student Affairs professionals, at the end of long and successful careers, reflected on their combined experience and informed observations to identify various critical issues that they believe must be addressed in the near future. While the authors admit the issues they identify are not the only issues facing student affairs, they believe these issues will play a significant role in shaping the future of student development in higher education. Their stated purpose is to “stimulate civil discussion and debate” about the nine critical issues presented in the book. The authors’ target audience is student affairs professionals engaged in program review and planning as well as vice presidents and deans looking to answer these questions on their own campuses.

Each of the nine critical issues receives its own chapter in the book. The author’s begin each chapter by defining and discussing the various components of the issue in question. The chapter then ends with suggestions for action. The issues include: the foundation of student affairs; the placement of student affairs within the university organizational structure; student affair’s role in diversity education; attracting and retaining a diverse staff; the affect of various revenue sources on student affairs; student affairs role in non-traditional educational settings; the role of assessment; and defining who has the responsibility for the lives of students.

The authors’ first address the theoretical and philosophical underpinnings of the profession. Their concern centers on the debate on the “true foundation” of the profession, and how differing points of view can cause unproductive and unhealthy debates that distract the profession from the common foundation that bonds the profession together. The differing points of view have assisted in compounding efforts to unify the profession, causing those outside of student affairs to question the legitimacy of the field. After a brief and useful review of the theoretical and philosophical history of student affairs, the authors reiterate that, while the different philosophical approaches of the profession reflect the diverse nature of higher education in the United States, there are two fundamental assumptions that unify and drive the philosophy of the profession. These are the focus on the development of the whole student and the supporting of the academic mission of the institution.

The authors next discuss student affairs place in the administrative structure of the institution. Given the varied programs and activities found in student affairs, the role of student affairs has expanded and become a significant part of university administrations. While there does not seem to be a “best” administrative organizational model, the authors stress the importance of strong leadership in the

student affairs area. Leaders must be committed to student learning, the implementing of new ideas and programs, and be aware of important issues on their campuses.

Chapters three and four tackle the topic of diversity. First, the authors call on Student Affairs professionals to continue to take the lead role in educating the student population on the issues of diversity. They specifically identify this issue as the ideal opportunity to collaborate with the academic side of campus. The diversity issue is a “hot” button on most campuses, and one that requires immediate attention. Closely connected to educating students and the campus community on diversity is the issue of attracting and retaining a diverse staff, which is covered in Chapter Four. The authors rightly note that student affairs is not a profession most people plan to pursue when entering college. The authors identify several key issues that hinder both the recruitment and retention of diverse staffs, including low salary and difficult working conditions.

Chapter Five addresses the important issue of funding for student affairs. This is another important issue facing higher education, as tuition costs increase and constituencies demand higher accountability for their tuition and tax dollars. The authors raise issues worth consideration for senior administrators.

The question of the role of student affairs regarding students studying through various venues separated from the “main campus” is the topic for Chapter Six. What responsibility does the student affairs department have for on-line students, students studying abroad, students on branch campuses, or other education centers separated from the main student affairs operation. This topic is very pertinent considering the vast explosion of “for profit” programs as well as the expansion of on-line offerings.

The issue of assessment is the subject of Chapter 7. While student affairs profession has many fine practitioners, very few formally assess their programs and services. This has become an issue for the profession, and in this age of increased demand for outcome measures, either by legislative demand or institutional need, the profession has not taken leadership in this area. The authors note that this issue is quickly becoming the most powerful force in the decision making processes in colleges and universities. It is an area that is sadly neglected by student affairs professionals, and the authors call on the profession to seize the opportunity to collaborate with the academic side of campus in this manner.

Chapter Eight addresses the issue of who has responsibility for the lives of students. Changing student demographics, fluctuating legal environments, and expanding parent and student expectations merge with the varied institutional missions to create a complex, but volatile topic. Student populations are more diverse than ever with

increased percentages of non-traditional aged students, increasingly racially varied, and an increasing number of students with physical and emotional needs. In addition, society is more litigious than ever before, providing more pressure for the school to assume a larger role in the lives of students. What is the role of the student affairs office in meeting the needs of these students, and how can the costs of increased services be absorbed?

The final chapter looks at professional organizations, noting the recent trend of professional organizations to split into splinter groups specifically representing special interest groups. The authors note that there are currently over 35 national organizations representing student affairs and that leadership in the field is fragmented because of it. In addition, the splintering of student affairs professional organizations causes the professional to lose sight of one of the core issues of concern, the commitment to the whole student. The authors note the need for unity of the professional organizations and a return to the focus on the whole student and improving the learning conditions for the students.

While the book includes many useful insights and discussions on important issues and current 'hot' topics in the field, however, much of what is covered in the book is a rehash of issues that have been consuming the attention and energy of student affairs professionals for some time. The book is successful in identifying and articulating areas that are nearly universal in nature and applicable at some level to both secular and religious institutions. For the Christian, who is engaged in student affairs, the book provides a voice to issues important to the profession as a whole, and in most cases, applicable to the campuses of institutions closely tied to their governing denominations with little adjustment.

Conspicuously missing is any discussion of spirituality and spiritual development in higher education. While the discussion of spirituality cannot be limited to Christianity for a general readership, the absence of the issue does seem negligent. The issue of spiritual development of college students has been receiving an increased interest over the past decade. If the development of the "whole" student is a core issue for student affairs as the authors argue, then this vital issue should at least deserve some discussion.

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academic affairs as the two central areas that contribute to fulfilling the primary objectives of a baccalaureate institution.