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Putting Students First: How Colleges Develop Students Purposefully

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L. Braskamp, L. Calian Trautvetter, & K. Ward; Putting Students First: How Colleges Develop Students Purposefully (Bolton, Massachusetts: Anker Publishing Co., Inc, 2006)

Reviewed by Jeffrey P. Bouman

What is college and who is it for? These are few of the questions that lie near the heart of a centuries-old dialogue in American higher education, and they inform much of the motivation behind the book *Putting Students First: How Colleges Develop Students Purposefully*. Veteran administrator and professor Larry Braskamp, with two highly experienced colleagues, Lois Calian Trautvetter and Kelly Ward, looked at 10 “faith-based” or “church-related” colleges (the terms are interchangeable) and found out that there are many ways in which small, faith-based institutions are well-positioned to lead the academy in its contemporary quest for holistic education because they never abandoned the original commitments of the academy in the first place, namely education for both *wisdom* and *knowledge*.

As the title suggests, Braskamp and his colleagues make the case that institutions of higher education should set out to nurture both cognitive and affective aspects of students, their heads and their hearts, in order to better prepare them for lives of meaning and purpose. By implication, higher education has not done this particularly well of late, and the colleges from the sample stand in contrast to recent “business as usual” in higher education, what has turned into an exclusive education of the head – the authors use the phrase “forming and informing” to describe the dual goals that have always served to guide institutions of higher education.

My own sense after reading the book was that it would have been better titled *Ten Colleges that Develop Students Purposefully and Holistically: How Faith Commitments Shape Student Develop Practice Across Colleges and Universities*. In addition to the question of what priority to give students in the higher education context, the book addresses four additional tensions in today’s academy: mission and market; individual gain and the public good; faith and knowledge; and compartmentalization and community. Indeed, these tensions nicely sum up the myriad complexities faced by leaders in higher education.

The ten institution sample represents a broad cross-section of the many different manifestations of faith-based higher education. These were:

Bethune-Cookman College, an historically black Methodist college in Daytona Beach, Florida; Creighton University, a Catholic-Jesuit university in Omaha, Nebraska; Hamline University, a Methodist university in St. Paul, Minnesota; Hope College, a college affiliated with the Reformed Church in America in Holland, Michigan; Pacific Lutheran University, a Lutheran university in Tacoma, Washington; The College of Wooster, a Presbyterian college in Wooster, Ohio; Union University, a Southern Baptist university in Jackson, Tennessee; The University of Dayton, a Catholic-Marianist university in Dayton, Ohio; Villanova University, a Catholic-Augustinian university in Villanova, Pennsylvania; Whitworth College, a Presbyterian college in Spokane, Washington.

The authors used Personal Investment Theory as a conceptual framework, and augmented this with what they call the 4C framework. Personal Investment Theory allows three elements of students' experience to be considered simultaneously: internal (sense of self), external (patterns of behavior), and sociocultural. The 4C framework emerges from this third element as four "C" concepts that the book explores in some depth: Culture, Curriculum, Cocurriculum, and Community. After setting a context in which the authors argue that the winds of change are blowing across the academy (from a "sage on the stage" to a "guide on the side" mentality), the authors spend a chapter on each of these concepts, and sprinkle in specific examples from the sample institutions along the way.

Culture is summed up as mission and leadership, location, faculty, and creative tensions between support and challenge within institutions. Colleges and universities that seek to provide a holistic education for their students will pay close attention to their stated purpose, their legacy and history, their geographical location, the nature of their faculty, and to "the dual role of support and challenge... to the holistic development of students where the goals extend beyond cognitive and skill development into values, civic responsibility, and faith development" (81).

Curriculum is described as the institutional bedrock where goals meet practice. The institutions studied provide multiple examples of how the practice of teaching and learning has changed alongside the way we now understand the nature of knowledge. The authors argue that post-modernity has brought with it a variety of opportunities and challenges in regard to how institutions define, prioritize, and transmit knowledge. One professor is quoted as being challenged by the image of being a vending machine into which students put money in exchange for the commodity, "which is me" (107). Indeed, the commodification of the professoriate is a concern that institutions must recognize and deal with or risk inadvertently losing their core identities. If our purpose shifts from training students to make a difference in the world to providing entertainment on students' journeys into privileged lives, we have lost our way. A recent strategic planning conversation at my own institution made the case that our purpose is never to simply employ people and to graduate students. Without a specific mission and purpose related to the nature of knowledge and the objective of its attainment, our institutions should cease to exist.

Another area discussed related to curriculum is the "pedagogy of engagement." The idea that students learn better through interaction with their learning environment beyond reading and listening has been around since the guilds of the medieval universities, and more recently enjoyed an advocate in the work of John Dewey during the early part of the twentieth century. After a few decades of drift toward more passive learning, active, engaged learning is making a comeback, and the authors give helpful descriptions of service-learning, community-based service and research, January and May terms, study abroad, and student research opportunities.

The *cocurriculum* is described as a set of bridge activities that enable students to find intersections between their classroom and out-of-class learning experiences. The authors list the mutual reinforcement of learning, campus rituals, residence life, student leadership, relationships with coaches, professional staff, and campus ministry, faculty interactions, and immersion experiences as the most common environmental or active ways of cocurricular learning.

Community is acknowledged by the authors as a potentially overused concept, and they give good examples of how to deal with this overuse. They define it as “what people do to create hospitable places to work and study” (160), and they discuss both its internal and external manifestations. In brief, campuses have to figure out how to both provide a hospitable, inclusive and close-knit learning and working environment along with creating multiple bridges and exchanges between campus and the external community. For example, “developing community” will be interpreted in vastly different ways by residence life staff members (internal) and alumni officers (external). It is important for campuses to be able to create small communities for students to belong to, and to be places where strangers can enter and feel like there is room to belong.

My hunch is that most readers of *Growth* will read the book appreciatively. The authors make a thoughtful case for the kind of work that has been done by student development professionals for some time. They also provide a welcome voice of appreciation for a thoughtful, committed Christian approach to the work of student development, a good example of principled pluralism, in the world of student development, something that has been largely absent in my experience in national settings. Where I think the book most challenges student development professionals is in their efforts to provide the kind of humble partnership that the academic divisions of their colleges need.

A member of ACSD since 1989, Jeffrey P. Bouman received his B.A. in Sociology from Calvin College, his M.A. in Student Personnel from Slippery Rock University, and his Ph.D. in Higher Education from the University of Michigan’s Center for the Study of Higher and Postsecondary Education. He is currently the Director of the Service-Learning Center at Calvin College in Grand Rapids, Michigan.