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Student Affairs Reconsidered: A Look Back, a response to Barry Loy

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By David M. Johnstone

Abstract

On the tenth anniversary of David Guthrie's *Student Affairs: Reconsidered* (SAR), Barry Loy wrote an article entitled: "Student Affairs Reconsidered: A Look Back." He observed, after identifying a number of seminal works, that many in Christian Student Development have not really engaged or grappled with what it means to be an educator outside of the classroom. In letter format, I have chosen to interact with Barry in his observations with the hope that this is a conversation which is not ignored or forgotten by our colleagues. My purpose is not to disagree but continue the conversation which was started a decade ago.

Dear Barry,

Whenever I see you or your name, I am reminded of the time you took me for dinner at a small seafood restaurant near Gordon College some years ago. I greatly appreciated your hospitality. Even though you were interviewing me, the lessons I received from that time have been long-lasting. Subsequently, any time I see one of your articles, I have been intrigued and interested in your observations.

In your recent reflections on the tenth anniversary of David Guthrie's *Student Affairs: Reconsidered* (SAR), you implied (with what I guess was a little sadness) how Christian student development has not really engaged or grappled with what it means to be an educator outside of the classroom. While your lament resonates with me, I would like to provide a response to your observations in the hope that you will expand on your reflections and perhaps others will enter into the conversation as well. This is an exchange which should not be ignored or forgotten. From the tone of your article, I believe you would welcome interaction.

I am particularly intrigued with your concerns because I wonder if there may not be a slight difference (but many similarities) in perspective between the two of us. I have only been in the field for ten years, graduating the year after *SAR* was published. My relatively short career, in contrast to the veterans who have shaped the tone of student development at their institutions, might provide a place for conversation.

As mentioned before, I graduated from a student development program in 1998, the year after *SAR* was published. I saw my pursuit of student development as an outcome of God's calling, so I naturally linked it to the world of ministry. However, since those initial days, the notions behind Guthrie's book have increasingly permeated my thinking. In your article, "Student Affairs Reconsidered: A Look Back," you made a number of observations (Loy, 2007). Your purpose was to examine how *SAR* and other seminal works have been reflected upon by our colleagues. Your observations were drawn from other articles and, I imagine, from your own contacts, relationships and observations. At the end, you carefully put forth some "*speculative observations*" (Loy, 2007, p. 15). I would like to interact with each of your observations.

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Ministry:

Your first observation was that many of those within Christian student development still perceive their role as one of "ministry" rather than one of engaging students in "learning." I would agree that many of our colleagues are ministry-focused, but I would venture to suggest that these perspectives are not necessarily mutually exclusive. I think many of our peers focus on ministry because a college campus requires tremendous pastoral care. I think of my own campus which recently experienced the death of a student in a horrible traffic accident. The care of the campus required the response of the entire student life division, faculty, and community members; not just campus ministries.

Admittedly, there are times we do neglect the educational mission of our campuses by overly focusing on discipleship (sometimes called mentorship). I don't think ministry and educational imperatives are exclusive of one another. If we particularly broaden education to include experiences outside of the classroom (such as discipleship, wilderness experiences, etc.), learning and ministry come together in a mutually reinforcing way. Those paradigms that challenge us to help students make meaning of all their life experiences are particularly valuable; this is where student development can shine in the educational realm. I believe "meaning making" or giving experiences meaning is an area in which student development easily inhabits; it is an area where learning and ministry mesh together.

Literature:

You went on to mention that many of our colleagues, for a myriad of reasons, do not stay abreast of current literature in our field. I would echo that concern. It saddens me when veterans and rookies alike coast on their own knowledge, and don't glean the wisdom of the research and reflections of others. If I read a particularly insightful and well-written article, I will pass it on to my colleagues (and vice-versa).

ACSD as an organization has three tools for disseminating information and resources: *Koinonia*, *Growth* and the list-serv. I wonder if the creation of online literature suggestions and reading lists might not be helpful; a short list of ten foundational and exceptional articles or books for those new to the field, with a similar list for those already in the field – particularly for those who desire to keep learning and growing. Beyond the information provided by book reviews found in the association's journals, a recommended list could be valuable for our colleagues.

Along this same vein, when other websites of our secular counterparts are examined, they are full of resources placed there by their special interest groups, task forces and initiatives. I wonder if ACSD would consider posting the minutes, thoughts and findings of such organizational task forces and study groups which examine diversity, good practices, etc. We hear about these programs once a year, but I imagine many would find their observations helpful and insightful.

Hiring practices:

Your third observation, hiring practices, did cause me to pause. You indicated a concern that many searches place less emphasis "*on professional preparation*" [emphasis

mine] (Loy, 2007, p. 15) than on skills that were relational, spiritual, etc. This is a valid concern which should also be a challenge to those schools who offer graduate programs in student development. As a hiring manager for the past five years, I have had finalists in my pools that have had graduate degrees in student development. While I consider a graduate degree to be a tie breaker, I have also noticed that many of those whom I have hired without a degree demonstrated a greater aptitude to mentor, interact and train students than those candidates with degrees. I believe that those less formally educated can always learn educational paradigms and theories.

In some ways, I also link this concern with a failure to keep up with current literature in the field. I would love to see developed and posted (or printed), a curriculum for those entering the field; something similar to a standarized professional development plan for new professionals. Could a group of veterans in the field develop an informal (but intentional) semester-long curriculum which introduces rookies to foundational paradigms to student learning, community building, discipline and pastoral care? I think this would be helpful.

Attrition & retention:

Continuing, you indicated a concern regarding how many entry-level professionals do not continue in student affairs, but use it as a temporary position on their way to another pursuit. Referring to previous concerns, you truthfully ask the question, "why dig into the professional literature if you are just passing through…" (Loy, 2007, p. 15). In 2001, Skip Trudeau and others observed that there is a "bottleneck" in the world of student development field (p. 13). I believe this bottleneck affects our ability to place a diversity of folks in areas beyond the entrance-level position. It is a reality due to the limited number of open positions at the mid or higher levels. I think we lose many outstanding colleagues because there is no place for them in an institution; often they must move elsewhere or to another field in order to advance. I don't think this is necessarily negative, but one of the realities that currently exists.

Practitioners & theorists:

"Student life folks are doers." This is a mantra that is often repeated. We love to think, but we need action and purpose to our thinking. Most of us prefer to live in the bustle of the dining commons and the residence halls, rather than the quiet of our minds and books. I don't believe this demonstrates a lack of intellectual discipline, merely a reflection of interest, aptitude or time.

I have also noticed that many of my colleagues (even those formally educated) do not really see themselves fitting into many learning, developmental, and faith theories. Taking time to reflect and envision the application of these theories, we may be surprisingly affirmed by what is being done in our areas. While we may not be intentionally aware of Chickering's or Fowler's theories, it is not too difficult to place many of our programs into those grids. The further challenge is that often these theories become part of their ethos or the lens by which we plan or design our approaches to the co-curriculum.

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More and more, I find that simple (not simplistic) paradigms work the best for my higher education contexts. For example, Jim Mannoia's paedagogical paradigm of learning has a strong focus on the impact of models and community on college students (Mannoia, 2000, p. 81-90). His paradigm makes sense intuitively and intellectually (at least for me). It makes sense in what and how I engage in my role as an educator.

As an aside on this topic of educational and developmental theories, some years ago I was conversing with the provost of a leading Christian liberal arts university. She was cautioning me about assuming that faculty members were trained in paedagogical or developmental theories. While they were extremely well educated in their disciplines, they were not necessarily formally trained to be educators. This comment caught me off guard, but it was a helpful observation.

Some other observations:

While our colleagues might not necessarily acknowledge their indebtedness or recognize the literature you highlighted, I have observed our colleagues demonstrate (in literature, conversations, electronic discussions, program development) a sense that learning is and needs to be purposeful (Guthrie, 1997, p. 43). They have increasingly acknowledged that it should be seamless, integrated or wholistic (Guthrie, 1997, p. 46), and definitely needs to be multidimensional (Guthrie, 1997, pp. 43-44). I believe this might reflect the unacknowledged (and maybe unrecognized) impact of Guthrie's *SAR* and similar literature. The "under the radar" impact of these foundational works might be more present than we recognize.

I hear younger colleagues not only describing themselves as educators, but truly believing they have a role in the educational mission of their institution. I hope that this fact is encouraging. Yet, I have also noticed some confusion about the roles that they play within their own divisions and departments. Some years ago, an observation was made that certain student life divisions house departments with different focuses or missions. This can create incongruence when different areas seek to provide either a student learning focus, a service-oriented mission or a consumer-based approach to students. The writers of this observation identified that this created some dissonance in the divisions they observed (Smith, 2005, p. 472). I wonder if this is not a common concern with which we all struggle, particularly how those in student life define themselves in relationship to an institution's educational mission.

Final comments:

My purpose in responding to your article is not to counter your observations (because I agree with them), but to create a dialectic which will continue a conversation started ten years ago. Thank you for challenging me, our colleagues, and our peers. Reflections like yours motivate me to make assessments about my own way of pursuing student development.

I appreciate and would echo the final statement of your article; I also hope that—*Soli Deo Gloria.* Thanks Barry.

Sincerely, Dave Johnstone

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