Professionals with responsibilities for student affairs can play a major role in the increasing emphasis on academic achievement, student learning, and retention. The outlines of future perspectives on professionalism and personal development can be found in examples from the recent past. The new developments will combine historical perspectives with insights from ongoing changes.

The Crucial Role of Student Affairs Professionals in the Learning Process

J. Herman Blake

In the first decade of a new millennium three propositions are basic to any consideration of the future role of student affairs professionals in higher education:

1. Demographic changes in the larger society and on college campuses mandate a much more comprehensive and creative approach to serving students.
2. Colleges and universities must place even greater emphasis on retention and graduation of students than they place on recruiting new matriculates.
3. Developing research shows that the primary key to retention through graduation is a strong emphasis on student learning; this emphasis is rapidly becoming a sine qua non.

Although many colleges place considerable emphasis on attractive residences, technology, athletic facilities, and cocurricular programs in recruiting new students, the evidence is clear that ultimate success in retention to graduation requires increased emphasis on academic achievement through active student involvement in the learning process.

Given these propositions, student affairs professionals would do well to look to strategies for increasing academic achievement and student learning as keys to a creative and efficacious future for the profession. Beyond strategies for students per se, a new approach also implies new perspectives.
on professionalism and paradigm shifts in the conceptualization of professionals with student affairs responsibilities.

**An Emphasis on Student Learning**

In four decades of administration, teaching, research, and leadership, I have served in a wide range of academic institutions, always placing a strong emphasis on increasing the retention and graduation of underrepresented minority students through academic achievement. The creative participation of student affairs professionals in all of these programs has been an important part of increasing levels of success.

**Initial Efforts in the Teaching-Learning Process.** During the 1970s as a professor as well as principal academic-administrative officer in an undergraduate residential college in a Research I university, I began to explore initial efforts in directly involving student affairs professionals in the teaching-learning process. About one-third of our students were African American, American Indian, and Latino. Although the regular tenure-track faculty were responsible for class offerings, the entire student affairs staff played major supplementary roles.

The goal was to create a social and intellectual environment of high academic expectations of students through carefully crafted programs in which student affairs and academic affairs were thoroughly interwoven.

The director of student activities was a full member of the college curriculum committee and developed an out-of-class program that complemented and promoted the classroom learning. This was an early articulation of the "cocurricular" concept. A psychological counselor enrolled in mathematics and science classes with the students to create a symbiotic relation between counseling sessions with students on test anxiety and their classroom experiences. In addition, the director of housing, the bursar, and clerical staff joined faculty as coleaders of discussion sections of core courses. As a result students found that those with whom they dealt on administrative and personal matters were also those they saw in the classrooms working with them on academic issues. In their professional interaction with students, academic issues would often be discussed. Student affairs professionals became teachers by design rather than default. The academic emphasis that permeated every aspect of the college led to higher levels of student academic achievement and retention to graduation. We created a college culture centered around student learning.

**Creating an Environment of High Expectation.** During the 1980s, as president of a small African-American liberal arts college in the Deep South, the process of intentionally creating a total environment of high academic expectations continued. Working together, faculty and enrollment management staff created a reading list of books required of all entering students the summer before they enrolled. Shortly after new students moved into the residence halls we opened the year with a general convocation in which a panel
of faculty and administrators (including student affairs staff) discussed the key books. New students got their first academic experience before they got their first campus meal. The next day, as a part of orientation, students were required to write a general essay on one of the books—and student affairs staff wrote a narrative evaluation of the essay. New students who had taken the time to read the books during the summer found themselves at an academic advantage over those who had ignored the assignment. The message we conveyed stressed learning as the primary activity and goal of the college environment, and learning would also take place outside of the classroom and traditional course requirements. In the required freshman core course the infusion process continued with movies and other cocurricular activities that emerged from classroom requirements but were available to the entire student body. The idea was to create campus discussions of issues and ideas the students were considering in the classrooms. In some cases professional staff also joined faculty as coinstructors in the core course.

**Addressing the Challenge of Nontraditional Students.** In a large urban public university (Research I) in the 1990s, I was responsible for leading the effort to address the academic needs of eight thousand “nontraditional” commuting students. The challenge was to integrate an incredible range of diverse interests and social conditions into an effective program that would promote academic achievement, retention, and ultimately, graduation. Over a period of years we transformed an advising and counseling unit known as University Division into a lower-division academic program. This required vision and leadership from the faculty as well as student affairs. With their cooperation we formed learning teams in which faculty joined with academic advisors, peer counselors, and librarians to create a supportive unit for every class in the new academic program. The goal was to develop a safety net for students that promoted their academic goals through high expectations and their active involvement in the learning process. The creation of learning teams of faculty and student affairs professionals as partners promoted an academic culture in an environment where the social conditions were unique and unlike any of our previous experiences. The faculty-student affairs partnership was crucial to this successful program.

**Integrating Academic Programs and Cocurricular Activities.** As the new century opened I continued my work in a large (twenty-five thousand students), rural, land-grant Research I university. With the experience and knowledge of three decades in diverse academic settings I integrated academic programs and cocurricular activities that resulted in our highest rates of success in retention to graduation of diverse students.

Comprehensive programs of academic courses and faculty-student research coordinated with the cocurriculum extended far beyond the classrooms—integrating administrators and student affairs professionals in creative ways. In one program, student support groups focused on improving learning and study skills were linked to specific courses. Faculty, staff, and administrators found that attendance at the meetings of the support groups...
permitted more effective interaction with students than would take place in their offices or laboratories. Indeed, members of the counseling staff found that participation in the meetings of the student support groups led to discussions—and often private meetings—with students who would not come to their offices.

In another instance I taught a special section of the class Introduction to Sociology. The course was limited to thirty to forty students—recruited to ensure a diverse class. Besides including a good mix of racial and ethnic groups, the class had one student who had just returned from active duty in Iraq, another scheduled for deployment at the end of the semester, and a third who was engaged to a soldier in combat in Iraq. It was a very eclectic group. The meetings were held in the residence hall where most of them lived, and the hall director as well as a senior-level housing staff member were active participants in the course. Once each week I met with these two student affairs professionals for about an hour before class to discuss the assignments, the students, their academic performance, and how we might improve their time on task as well as their learning. What is more, the course met in the late afternoon as a way of encouraging students to go to dinner in small groups and continue the discussions in the cafeteria. We also used other strategies to actively engage students in their learning experience. Student evaluations of the course and their learning revealed that we not only accomplished our goals but the positive impact was far greater than we expected. Students learned sociology—the course goal—but they also learned a great deal about cultural and social differences, as well as respect for individuals regardless of social characteristics.

As a consequence of these and other programs from 1998 to 2005, the six-year graduation rate of African-American students increased by 48 percent to the highest level in the institution's history.

In every venue success was not individual, it was not strictly a result of faculty status of distinguished colleagues or administrative position, nor was it solely a consequence of the actions of student affairs professionals. The opportunity to build meaningful programs of mutual support and cooperation between academic affairs, faculty involved in research as well as teaching, and student affairs professionals in a context of high expectations for academic achievement resulted in higher and higher levels of student success. As I continue to analyze these experiences and their outcomes—particularly for underrepresented minority students—I realize there were two key features in every situation: (1) a campus culture or subculture of high expectations for students emerged from the collaboration and intentional efforts of different campus constituencies that usually operated separately from each other; and (2) ultimately students expanded their sense of self beyond the identities they brought into the academy, shaping their views of academic life and of others as well as of themselves. These expanded identities were even more complex and combined previous modes with strong identification with academic domains. What was often
a conflict-oriented or adversarial process between students and the academic environment became more a culture of cooperation, growth, and learning. The active participation of student affairs professionals was crucial to these extraordinary changes.

The Changing and Dynamic Role of Student Affairs Professionals in the Teaching-Learning Process

Presidents of colleges and universities face daunting challenges in meeting the needs of an increasingly diverse student body and fulfilling an expansive institutional mission. As they recognize the significance of academic achievement for student retention and graduation they will seek to create social environments that expand the traditional emphasis on extracurricular activities to incorporate a greater focus on student learning. Student affairs professionals will be expected to play key roles in the transformation of the campus environment. Although the traditional focus on activities and programs will continue, the traditional roles of student affairs personnel will face significant changes.

Initially, these new expectations will not fit easily into a job description, other than a call for professional growth and development as a result of new knowledge and understanding and the articulation of new issues in institutional mission. These expectations will require a new conceptualization by student affairs professionals—indeed, a new sense of self-identity as well as an intentional recalibration of their efforts with changes in campus missions and strategic plans. They must begin to envision themselves as promoters of learning and academic achievement in virtually everything they do with students.

Increasingly, administrators will assess student activities and the interaction of student affairs professionals for their learning potential—whether they are formal or informal outcomes. Responsive staff will recognize they do more teaching in their offices, in the residence halls, and in student unions than they ever realized. Even a discussion with a student about a professor or a course can be turned into a teaching experience if it is consciously seen as raising the student's academic performance and the amount of time spent on learning. Such an approach will require a paradigm shift for student affairs professionals.

**Becoming Professionals.** As we look to the future through the past we envision student affairs professionals as individuals who place much more emphasis on their professional status than on student affairs. Thus they will become professionals who practice student affairs rather than the reverse. As such incumbents must view themselves in terms of the mission, values, and goals of the institution, and reconsider how they can promote student learning through their own professional growth. This requires individuals to become more confident in their personal ability to learn and grow and promote that process among students. Such professionals have assigned responsibilities that bring them into close and very personal contact with
students. As a result of their enhanced professionalism they will come to
develop new ways to enhance student learning through student activities.

When I taught the sociology class in a residence hall with the hall direc­
tor as a full participant in the teaching process, the weekly planning meet­
ings became seminars on how teaching, learning, and student affairs could
be integrated into a seamless web of programmed activities. The hall direc­
tor used knowledge of the students' personal circumstances to individualize
the teaching process and create greater student involvement in the class ses­
sions. In addition the hall director worked with me to create assignments that
allowed students to infuse their residential life with study and research ses­
sions that extended the classroom throughout the residence hall and affected
even students who were not enrolled in the class. There was no preconceived
plan about how the class might work. It was a dynamic process of analysis
and assessment of the class and ourselves as class leaders, and constantly
focused on student learning. The hall director had to be a professional with
skills that went far beyond mine as a professor and who could use those skills
and insights to increase my understanding, student active involvement in the
course, and ultimately, student learning. Students completed course evalua­
tions that showed the class went far beyond their expectations of a traditional
introductory course, and they believed their learning had significantly
increased as a consequence. There was nothing in the position description
or written expectations of a hall director that led to such a positive outcome.
It was the consequence of the growth and insights of a professional who was
also a hall director. In the future role of student affairs the emphasis on pro­
fessionalism as well as personal growth of incumbents will become an impor­
tant part of the new paradigm.

Even on small campuses the range of activities developed and promoted
by student affairs is extraordinary. It has been long understood that the groups
and activities are an important part of a balanced and productive college envi­
ronment. Although many activities and programs should rightfully focus on en­
abling students to enjoy their undergraduate experience apart from academic
pressures, professionals with student affairs responsibilities can help their
charges connect the student activities to the academic expectations in such a
way that learning becomes an intrinsic part of the campus cocurriculum.

In the first example given in this chapter, when the director of student
activities in a small college was invited by faculty to join the curriculum
committee, the goal was to build a creative bridge between academic and
student affairs. The professional seized the opportunity and built a very
effective program as the result of an appreciation of how student activities
could become more learning-centered. The cocurriculum that resulted made
specific links between the two arenas. In a biology course that focused on
the study of cancer the professor and the professional worked together to
organize a series of student presentations on their research to the entire col­
lege community in a special lecture series titled “The Biology of Cancer.”
The presentations were very popular with students. Student presenters
became more known and respected by their peers and the subsequent discussions in the residence halls and cafeteria extended the learning arena far beyond the classroom. The resultant increase in knowledge and confidence of the student presenters as well as the general affirmation of their peers helped create a culture of learning and academic achievement in the college.

The paradigm shift here involved a greater sense of professionalism on the part of the faculty member as well as the staff member. However, it took a creative approach from the student affairs professional to show the professor how the two cultures could be integrated into an expanded learning environment. When both individuals saw that cooperation would lead to enhanced student learning they were able to create an academic environment that extended beyond the classroom. The capacity to transcend the student affairs limits was the mark of a gifted professional with responsibility for student activities.

Thinking Creatively. Given the unique mission of different institutions it is inappropriate to specify how student programs can become more learning-centered. What is appropriate is to recognize that student affairs staff who grow into a new identity—as professionals who have student affairs responsibilities—will begin to recognize the learning potential in many of their traditional programs. Through creative thinking resulting from enhanced emphasis on their professional growth and development they will see how to meet their traditional responsibilities in much more effective, learning-centered ways. The same example presented earlier in the chapter will illustrate this point. In two different institutions we found psychological counselors challenged by the reluctance of minority students to visit them in their offices. However, when one counselor enrolled in a mathematics class, and another regularly attended luncheon meetings of student support groups, they found students more willing to approach them in these more neutral settings. In both cases the psychological counselors participated in academically oriented programs and found they were able to establish connections that eventually resulted in private sessions with students in their offices. The professionals had to change their way of thinking about their responsibilities. When they became more directly involved in student learning programs they reached more students. They claimed this was an effective way to extend the reach of their offices.

Recent developments in the organization of academic programs that are more inclusive also require an expanded emphasis on professionalism in the practice of student affairs. In these developing programs student affairs can be pivotal if incumbents are willing to meet the challenge of professional change and growth. The development of learning communities, programs for “students in transition,” service learning, and other efforts will present challenging opportunities for professional growth by student affairs personnel. In most if not all of these developments the emphasis on teamwork, cooperation, and integrated programs open new and creative opportunities for professionals with expertise in student affairs to make extraordinary contributions. Student affairs strategies that are often second nature can be
expanded to produce learning outcomes if incumbents are willing to expand their thinking through growing professionalism. As a result they can enhance and often transform traditional thinking by faculty about how student learning can be enhanced. Although it is often difficult for faculty members focused on teaching their disciplines to listen to others, effective and creative professionals in student affairs can help these faculty make a greater impact in their teaching with the insights that come from their heightened professionalism.

Conclusion

As we consider the future role of professionals with responsibilities for student affairs in the teaching and learning process, two salient but contradictory proverbs can give us predictive insights.

The philosopher and poet Algernon Swinburne once stated, “All our past proclaims our future.” As we look to the recent past to see outlines of the future we are reminded that student affairs emerged out of the reluctance of faculty to become involved in the “hands-on” aspect of college student life. It is clear that the teaching-learning role of professionals in student affairs will involve new and creative combinations of the hands-on/hands-off process. In some respects the “future” role of professionals in student affairs will be something like “back to the future.”

The wisdom of an African proverb, offering another perspective, is also salient: “You don't build a house for yesterday's rains.” The emphasis on new dimensions of professionalism is crucial because the students of today, and even more, those of tomorrow are very different from those of yesterday. They are much more diverse in race, religion, ethnicity, lifestyle, and many other ways. As we focus on increased student learning as well as a greater sense of “community within diversity,” professionals will have to transcend many aspects of the renewed past as they build an unpredictable future for students.

Effective and creative professionals with student affairs responsibilities will embrace the future while remaining deeply rooted in the past. The challenges are exciting and invigorating.

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