Student Engagement: A New Paradigm for Student Affairs

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Today more than ever, student affairs must respond to a wide range of demands for accountability and respond to requests to assist faculty in designing the best learning environment for students. Student engagement is a term used to explain a set of beliefs that can guide student affairs as a field in planning and accomplishing this mission. This manuscript discusses how the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) has propagated the concept of student engagement, traces the genesis of student engagement through earlier student affairs paradigms, and outlines a methodology to implement a student engagement paradigm particularly relevant for student affairs practitioners working to create an engaging environment for students.

For decades, higher education has been inundated with demands for better accountability. National reports, such as "Accountability for Better Results – A National Imperative for Higher Education" (National Commission on Accountability in Higher Education, 2005), published by the State Higher Education Executive Officers (SHEEO), created a culture of crisis around the undergraduate experience and lamented the failure of current accountability measures to improve that experience. The SHEEO report identified a number of crises: (a) the nation's higher education system has lost stature among developed countries, (b) 40% of enrolled students fail to graduate within six years, and (c) current accountability systems are not useful, well designed, or effective.

While SHEEO and other similar agencies continue criticizing the quality of undergraduate education, regional accrediting agencies, such as the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS), have modified their reaccrediting process to include greater emphasis on institutional effectiveness. For example, the SACS' Commission on Colleges has made major changes to its reaffirmation procedures by supplementing the task of verifying compliance with core requirements, comprehensive standards, and federal requirements with a focus on future improvement. The reaffirmation process now incorporates an enhanced emphasis on institutional effectiveness demonstrated by the institutional development of a Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP) describing "a course of action for institutional improvement that addresses an issue or issues critical to enhancing educational quality and directly related to student learning" (Southern Association of Colleges & Schools, 2005, p. 5). The purpose of the Quality Enhancement Plan is to direct efforts toward improvement rather than merely documenting past performance. The net result of such changes in reaffirmation procedures by

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regional accrediting agencies is that institutions must demonstrate, in tangible ways, progress in improving the quality of the educational experience, especially at the undergraduate level.

Another complicating factor in the crisis environment of undergraduate education is the numerous publications that rank colleges and universities. One of the most popular is *U.S. News and World Report*'s annual ranking of the best colleges and universities. At its inception in 1983 standings were determined by reputation alone. In 1988, statistical data were added as a source of information (Morse & Flanigan, 2004). These data are primarily provided by the institution on the quality of the entering class; for example, weights are given to such numerical criteria as SAT/ACT 25th-75th percentile scores, class rank, acceptance rates, average freshman retention rate, and projected and actual graduation rates (*U.S. News and World Report*, n.d.).

Student affairs plays a major role in responding to these external demands and in helping design the best learning environment for students. To participate fully in this endeavor, student affairs needs a paradigm that helps craft a learning environment that, while aligned with the academic mission, recognizes the unique contributions that student affairs professionals make to student learning experiences.

The student engagement paradigm, generated through earlier student affairs paradigms, can define the body of beliefs that guide student affairs as a field in planning and accomplishing its own mission. This paper discusses how the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) has developed the concept of student engagement, traces the genesis of student engagement through earlier student affairs paradigms, and outlines a methodology to implement a student engagement paradigm.

Improving Undergraduate Education and the National Survey of Student Engagement

Within the context of demands for improvement in the quality of undergraduate education, the concomitant need for more and better accountability, and the popularity of publications that rank college and universities, Kuh, among others, has long been a major voice advocating for student involvement as a means of improving the quality of the undergraduate learning experience (Kuh & Whitt, 1987; Kuh, Whitt, & Associates, 1991). Tagg (2003), in his book *The Learning Paradigm College,* also advocated for a more active role by students in their own learning. He describes a shift from an instruction-orientation to a learning-orientation by engaging students in numerous learning experiences including what Tagg has termed authentic performances. In this concept, students are actively applying their learning in real situations.

As a result of extensive research, Kuh and his associates attempted to find a more effective way of "thinking about collegiate quality" than currently existed

(Schroeder, 2003, p. 10). One result of this research is the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE, 2004). The purpose of the NSSE, as a new way of thinking about and assessing quality, is to provide data different from other sources, such as those publications that rank colleges and universities by a formula purported to demonstrate quality (Schroeder, 2003).

According to Kuh (Schroeder, 2003), rather than collecting data that primarily relate to the characteristics of the student, the NSSE is a method to help measure how well an institution affects the learning experiences of its students. The NSSE does not measure student learning directly. It assesses "how much time and effort students put into their studies and other educationally purposeful activities" and "how the institution gets students to participate in activities that lead to student success" (Schroeder, 2003, p. 10). By collecting information on the time and effort students spend engaged in certain learning activities, primarily in the classroom or directly associated with it, the survey "link[s] certain student behaviors to empirically validated desired outcomes of college" (Schroeder, 2003, p. 10)

Student Engagement Emergence from Major Student Affairs Paradigms

Over the past 20 years, the student affairs profession has been guided by a series of paradigms that each added their own influence. These paradigms can be labeled student service, student development, and the more recent shift to student learning. Student engagement is the next logical evolutionary step in student affairs' continual quest for a paradigm that defines the profession and guides the work that is done with students. The evolution toward a student affairs concept of student engagement can best be seen through several publications over the past 20 years; Garland's (1985) *Serving More than Students: A Critical Need for College Student Personnel Services*; *Reform in Student Affairs: A Critique of Student Development* by Bloland, Stamatokos, and Rogers (1994); and *The Student Learning Imperative* (American College Personnel Association, 1996). These publications provide a continuum in the struggle by the student affairs profession to define itself. Garland (1985) challenged student affairs to see themselves in a broader, institution-wide picture, aligned and partnered with faculty to increase institutional and student success. Subsequently, student development theory established itself as a means to gain this partnership by focusing on the affective areas of the student while the faculty focused on the cognitive areas, Bloland, Stamatokos, and Rogers (1994) challenged the adoption of student development theory by calling for a return to the essential mission of the academy – learning. During the same period, the profession began to focus on student learning as a legitimate role for student affairs.

Student affairs, therefore, needs a new way of thinking about what it does and about the quality of its interventions in the lives of students. This new way of thinking is about engaging students in structured activities and observable behaviors outside the classroom that can have a direct bearing on student learning

outcomes, but they must first define what they do in terms of student learning outcomes and related student behaviors.

Student Affairs, Student Learning and the Student Engagement Paradigm

What, then, are the connections for student affairs? How do student learning and student engagement relate to each other, and can they establish a paradigm for student affairs that guides the profession and solidifies its role within the student learning environment? The nexus between student learning and student engagement is at the core of restructuring the future role of student affairs in higher education.

Learning has many meanings. Some definitions have a biological frame. Learning is "stabilizing through repeated use, certain appropriate and desirable synapses in the brain" (Leamnson, 1999, p. 5). The National Research Council (1999) reported experiments that showed that "learning imposes new patterns of organization on the brain, and this phenomenon has been confirmed by electrophysiological recordings of the activity of nerve cells" (p. 109). Such research demonstrates that the process of learning actually changes the physiology of the brain.

Other definitions of learning are more abstract but are as transforming. Biggs (1999) defined learning as "a way of interacting with the world" that brings about change within the learner resulting in a new perspective of the world (p. 13). Baxter Magolda and King (2004) described learning as a "complex process in which learners bring their own perspectives to bear on deciding what to believe and simultaneously share responsibility with others to construct knowledge" (p. xviii). These latter definitions focus on the more intangible effect of learning on the person's essential values and on the "light bulb" experience of creating something new.

These definitions have at least two profound factors in common which link learning to the concept of student engagement. The first is that to learn is to change in some intrinsic and significant way. This concept is illustrated by Tagg (2003) who stated, "When we learn we change. We become physically different than we were before the learning experience" (p. 63). The second factor is that to learn is to act; a learner must do something in order to learn. Tagg emphasized that it is not what faculty do that ensures that learning is taking place, it is what students do both internally and externally with information they have been given. To improve the learning environment, Baxter Magolda and King (2004) described this action on the part of the students as "taking responsibility to explore what one does not understand, working to see the 'big picture,' realizing that knowledge evolves, and viewing learning as a life-long process" (p. 1). By acting, being involved, and being engaged, students learn. True student learning, therefore, must involve the purposeful engagement of that student in the process of learning through specific and deliberate behaviors, that is, student engagement.

Utilizing these concepts of learning, the *Student Learning Imperative* (ACPA, 1996) challenged student affairs professionals to take equal responsibility with faculty for establishing an educational environment that can "motivate and inspire students to devote time and energy to educationally-purposeful activities, both in and outside the classroom" (p. 1). Student affairs continues struggling with operationalizing the concept of student learning in the daily work of professionals and in the lives of students (Baxter Magolda, 1999).

Arnold and Kuh (1999) attempted to explain why student affairs professionals have difficulty adapting to a learning-oriented model by describing the respective "mental models" of faculty and student affairs professionals. These mindscapes place values on very different entities (Arnold & Kuh, 1999, p. 12). Faculty, not unexpectedly, value at the core of their mindscape the essential mission of undergraduate institutions of instruction and scholarship (teaching and research). Distributed beyond the core in increasing concentric circles are the other functions of a higher education institution. In the outermost concentric circle are many entities valued most by student affairs professionals. These values include leadership development, personal counseling, health services, student activities, and other campus and student life issues. The distance often makes it difficult for student affairs professionals to contribute to the instructional mission of teaching and research.

Conversely, when Arnold and Kuh (1999) developed the same concentric circle figure to demonstrate what student affairs professionals valued, at the core were co-curricular activities, residential life, and classes. Within the outermost concentric circle were auxiliary services, facilities management, and faculty research. These two mindscapes, depicting the respective values of faculty and student affairs professionals, are not exactly reversals of each other, but they do illustrate important differences in the world-views of faculty and student affairs professionals. As long as the respective values differ, faculty and student affairs will continue using different languages, and they will find it difficult to collaborate. By aligning their values around learning, both student affairs professionals and faculty can ameliorate if not eliminate this discrepancy.

As student affairs professionals center their values on learning and operationalize learning through student engagement, they create a paradigm shift that can have vast implications for higher education and the undergraduate learning experience. When Kuhn (1970) popularized the word "paradigm," he referred to a set of beliefs shared by scientists that enabled them to focus on creating and developing new knowledge. The world, Kuhn believed, could not function without some "body of intertwined theoretical and methodological belief" (p. 16-17). Kuhn also believed that changes from one paradigm to another were necessary to develop new knowledge that, in turn, created a new set of beliefs, a new paradigm. The confluence of the values of faculty and student affairs professionals is such a shift in paradigms. This shift creates a new body of beliefs that ultimately results in the

creation of new levels of understanding of what learning is and methods for improving the quality of the learning experience for undergraduates.

This process of moving from paradigm to paradigm is reflective of what has been occurring within student affairs as it moved from service to development to learning. By shifting the current paradigm to align it more closely with that of faculty, student affairs professionals and faculty can work from "shared assumptions" (Kuhn, 1970, p. 6) to create a more effective learning environment for undergraduates. By accepting the beliefs that learning, as change, is central to the educational mission of every institution of higher education and that learning requires active participation by the learner, student affairs can begin to merge their core values with those of faculty. This merger does not result in a collapsing of the roles of faculty and student affairs professionals, but it identifies distinctly the common learning outcomes for students and helps faculty and student affairs professionals more effectively define their respective roles in guiding students in achieving those learning outcomes.

The Student Engagement Paradigm

The connections between student learning and student engagement are crucial: learning requires the learner to be engaged actively in the process of learning. In adopting this concept of learning, student affairs professionals need to plan and design out-of-classroom experiences that directly relate to identified learning outcomes. The student engagement paradigm, within the undergraduate experience, can, therefore, be defined by the following set of beliefs: (a) Learning is preeminent; (b) learning requires action of the part of the learner and results in change to that learner; (c) similar types of learning occur throughout campus, both inside and outside the classroom; (d) these types of learning can be identified and articulated as learning outcomes; (f) students engage in a series of behaviors in the process of achieving those learning outcomes; and (g) student affairs interventions can be crafted to optimize the opportunities for students to engage in these behaviors. ("Intervention" is used to denote all possible interactions which occur between student affairs professionals and students, including services, programs, events, discipline/conduct, or sports.)

The Student Affairs Syllabus

Student affairs professionals do not have a framework within which to develop student learning outcomes as faculty do within the structure of the course. Student affairs professionals rarely have cohesive content to be conveyed within a set period of time. Rather than having a consistent group of students who show up at regularly scheduled times, student affairs professionals are working with an ever changing group of students who can show up at all hours of the day or night. There is no easy way to assign some symbolic value, such as a grade, to the quality of the students' accomplishment within the student affairs environment.

One way student affairs can begin to build a structure around student learning is by developing a syllabus based on the student engagement paradigm. By working through the development of this syllabus, the student affairs professional begins thinking of new and effective ways to help students learn. The following steps can be used to develop a document that associates the interventions within each student affairs area with specific learning outcomes and related behaviors.

1. Each unit within student affairs identifies a set of student learning outcomes that relates to that area's mission and purpose and connects that area to the institution's over-all mission.

Schmitt et al. (2003) extrapolated a taxonomy based on the statements of student outcomes in the mission statements of a variety of colleges and universities. The list includes leadership, interpersonal skills, social responsibility, adaptability, perseverance, and ethics and integrity. An agreed upon taxonomy provides the areas within student affairs with a consistent set of general learning expectations. Each functional area can adapt these learning expectations to functional learning outcomes specific to their respective responsibilities. Learning outcomes must be measurable. One effective way to accomplish this goal is to connect the learning outcome to behaviors.

2. Each area identifies a set of student behaviors that demonstrates involvement in that area's learning outcomes.

By attaching specific behaviors to learning outcomes, student affairs professionals can determine more quickly if the outcome is likely to be measurable. For example, a student affairs area might include as a learning outcome for leadership that students will appreciate cultural differences. While admirable, determining whether or not students actually do appreciate cultural diversity is difficult to measure because "appreciate" is nebulous. Students may self-report appreciation, but they may be responding in a way they know is expected, a very different learning outcome. Student affairs professionals need to identify those behaviors that can actually demonstrate appreciation. These behaviors might include regular attendance at multicultural events not required of them or meeting, talking with, and socializing with others different in some way from themselves. If student affairs professionals cannot determine those behaviors, they may need to reword or redefine the learning outcome.

3. Each area develops its interventions in a purposeful and deliberative way in order to optimize students' opportunity to participate in those behaviors.

If interventions are designed in a purposeful and deliberate way with specific learning outcomes and related behaviors in mind, the interventions elicit from students the kinds of behaviors desired. For example, a multicultural event can incorporate a reflective component for students in attendance either at the event or as a follow-up. Resident assistants, working with a multicultural office, can hold focus groups after major multicultural events to give students an opportunity to

think and talk about what they experienced and, concomitantly, what they have learned.

4. Each area develops and/or identifies assessment instruments that produce data and information on the time and effort students expend engaged in those behaviors related to learning outcomes.

An advantage offered by the NSSE is that it is one way to obtain from students a self-report of how often they engage in a set of behaviors that have been connected to desired learning outcomes primarily within the classroom (Schroeder, 2003). By defining learning outcomes and identifying those behaviors and activities that can demonstrate a student's engagement in learning outside the classroom, student affairs professionals may be able to develop their own student engagement survey. Doing so would provide student affairs professionals with how effective their interventions are in helping students learn and grow.

Conclusion

Demands for improvements in the undergraduate experience and the need for more effective accountability measures continue to bombard higher education. The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) is one method that is being used as a new measure of accountability to provide information and data that can result in improvements in the undergraduate experience. The NSSE measures the time and efforts students expend in those functions and behaviors that are related to learning. The institution can, in turn, evaluate what interventions within the classroom can improve that time and effort spent on learning activities by students. Thus, student engagement as a concept defines learning as change, involving the active participation by the learner or student.

In addressing the same accountability and improvement issues facing the institution, student affairs must shift its paradigm to align itself more closely with the learning mission of the institution. The student engagement paradigm offers student affairs a set of beliefs that are a natural outgrowth of the earlier paradigms of student services, student development, and student learning. Building on an understanding of learning as a process that changes the learner and that requires the learner to actively participate in the learning process, student engagement connects learning with identifiable out-of-class behaviors. Student affairs professionals must redefine their work in learning terms. This redefinition results in interventions that can be more purposefully designed with specific behaviors in mind, providing a more timely method to evaluate the effectiveness of those interventions on students. The student engagement paradigm helps student affairs meet external accountability demands. It ensures that the total undergraduate learning environment is not in crisis but that it is strong and effective.

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