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# The Power of Student Affairs Professionalism:

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Past, Present, and Future

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## The Power of Student Affairs Professionalism: Past, Present, and Future<sup>1</sup>

Stan Carpenter

Let me first say how honored I am to be here for the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of GCPA. I worked at Oglethorpe University and attended UGA, finishing in 1979, so my roots go way back here. We live at the cusp of history—the future is bright and looks good for 40 more years of GCPA! Our nation may be on the verge of finally fulfilling our promise of equal opportunity. All around us are the needs for and the fruits of student affairs and higher education. I believe that student affairs has played a large role in liberating our nation from racism and sexism. And we aren't finished—we have to keep working, really, we are just getting started. We can only do that from a firm foundation. With that in mind, let's take a sort of scholarly tour of the last 40 or so years of our business and then talk about what we know and what we still need to know. Then, I'll talk about some threats to professionalism and I'll close by giving you the correct answer for when people ask you what you do.

Let me read you some recent thinking in our field:

12. The so-called extra-curricular activities should be recognized as potential agencies of character development and should be encouraged and directed by the college but without impairing the student's initiative, leadership, organizing ability and sense of responsibility. They should be integrated so far as possible with the work of the curriculum. (Clothier, 1931, p. 13)

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<sup>1</sup> Portions of this article are from the following:

Jablonski, M., S. B. Mena, K. Manning, S. Carpenter, & K. L. Siko. (2007). Scholarship in Student affairs revisited: The summit on scholarship, March, 2006. *NASPA Journal*, 43, 4, Article 11. <http://publications.naspa.org/naspajournal/vol43/iss4/art11>.

Carpenter, S. & Stimpson, M. (2007). *Professionalism, scholarly practice, and professional Development in student affairs*. *NASPA Journal*, 44,2,265-284.

Carpenter, S. (2009). In S. M. Marshall, (ed.), *More stories of inspiration: 51 uplifting tales of courage, humor, healing, and learning in student affairs*. Washington, DC: National Association of Student Personnel Administrators.

Sound familiar? Our forbears read each other's work, advocated more and better research, used what research was available, even outside their own field, and generally behaved like the professionals they were. If their work was frequently prescriptive and descriptive (Schuh, 2002), those things were valuable, reflecting a young field and they advocated better research. Looking back, the work of such leaders as Lloyd-Jones and Cowley is remarkable.

In trying to get at how we got where we are, let me quickly summarize some of the best work that has already been done on this subject. First, Nancy Evans with Robert Reason (2001) tackled the task of a thematic analysis of many of the statements that our field is so fond of, covering several decades, from the SPPV to the Trends project (which I will treat further below). They suggested that groups consistently tended to write about our views of students, the importance of the environment to our work and students' success, the nature of our field and our practice/roles, and our responsibility to society. Not satisfied to demonstrate that there was very little new under the student affairs sun (remember Yoakum), they went on to call for a renewed sense of activism on campuses in service of the values of our profession.

But what does renewal mean? Fried (2002) suggests that such renewal won't look much like the past, that we need to recognize the things we already know and actualize the ways the world is coming to be understood in our work. We have to be more inclusive, pluralistic, open to change, and willing to think in different ways, using new paradigms for practice and for research and scholarship.

Allen (2002) issues a similar challenge, calling for a recognition of interdependence, holism, and systems thinking. She also persuasively argues for renewed attention to the voices of practitioners in our professional literature. This is ironic, since many of the past criticisms of the field focused on the applied nature of much of our scholarship. But, as Fried (2002) pointed out, studies by Davis and Liddell (1997) and Saunders, Register, Cooper, Bates, and Dadonna (2000) show that practice and conceptual articles are losing out to research articles written largely by professors. I read Allen as calling for an addition of the practice voice as a balance and complement to the more traditional research. This could be a role for the *GCPA Journal*.

The ACPA Senior Scholars published the report of the Trends project in 1999, in the form of a series of brief framing papers built around questions in eight major areas of impact on education in the near and longer term. These eight trends were identified by doctoral students and faculty at the University of Maryland in 1997 through a content review of dozens of higher education reports and documents, a process led by Susan Komives. Questions and issues were

posed in the following large categories: improving access and success for diverse students; affordability of higher education; learning and teaching in the 21<sup>st</sup> century; the impact of technology; the changing nature of work in higher education; collaboration and partnerships; accountability, especially for student affairs; and changing government roles relative to higher education. It is easy to see echoes of our history as a field in this list—many of these issues have been around for a while. However, it is clear that some, such as technology and affordability, are reaching a point of intensity that is unparalleled previously.

I have attempted to give a quick review of some very well qualified scholar's views of the state of scholarship in our field in broad strokes. There are many other sources I could reference and many other approaches to take, but that would probably interest only me. So let me try some summary observations based in part on the work I have detailed and in part on 30 years of observation and reading.

1. Student affairs has been responsive to the fads and flavors of the decade of the social sciences. We can readily trace major influences of scientific management, the rise of psychological measurement, humanistic management, organizational functionalism and conformity, acquiescence to student majority, the rise of student development theory, quality improvement, the new accountability-driven functionalism, and the current focus on student learning and seamless experience in our literature and in our practices. These, and many others that I did not mention, and their sub-fads and spin offs have been incorporated into our thinking as they became popular. It is not clear if we ever completely abandon them or if they simply accumulate, as Blimling suggests (2001).

2. We have always borrowed methods from other fields, as I have argued elsewhere. Major methodological influences come from psychology, counseling, sociology, anthropology, education, business, management, economics statistics, psychometrics, and on and on. This is a good thing, but it is confusing to our students and makes proper preparation of practitioner scholars problematic. On the other hand, I don't see a way out. Our work is so multifaceted that it requires myriad approaches and disciplines for a broad understanding.

3. It is tempting to say that we have simply aped scholarship, but I suspect that the field has "found" or "created" the scholarship, in terms of discovery and application that it wanted, much like organizations create their leadership. Unfortunately, such transactions typically lag reality in a rapidly changing environment and we may be getting further and further behind unless we take steps to really pay attention to our environments and begin to value cutting edge scholarship.

So, that's how we got where we are. We have come a long way to get to this place of beginning the rest of the journey. I would argue that there is a lack of systematic and detailed scholarship that follows an agenda from start to wherever it leads, or better, several agendas. And if there were such scholarship available, and some is being done as I will indicate shortly, would our practitioners be able to read it, even if they had time to do so? Could they tell good from bad and translate it into policy and practice? Many would argue the answer is no.

So, why are we where we are? Schroeder and Pike (2001) tackled the question of reasons why practitioners might not be good at the scholarship of application and posited issues of institutional culture, the tyranny of the immediate, inadequate preparation, motivation and rewards, the tyranny of custom, fear of change, and lack of clear intentional purpose for practice. I would add that, since scholarship and research are frequently not familiar tasks, they are not considered to be as enjoyable or even as necessary as, say, advising a student organization president or planning a program, or any of the thousands of other tasks confronting busy student affairs workers.

The seeming separation of student affairs from academic affairs that has characterized at least the last four decades may be ending, although I am not so sure. In any case, I believe it has led to something of an antipathy for things scholarly. After all, we are the unfaculty, the haven, the refuge from all that "learning". Even if we don't buy that, I think we sometimes enable students to think that way. Given the difference in the two cultures and the endless supply of other ways to stay busy, practitioners don't rely on research and scholarship to guide practice, much less do research themselves, other than the simplest kind of evaluation and what passes for assessment.

Schroeder and Pike (2001) and Malaney (2002) have adequately treated the deficiencies in preparation of students in our preparation programs. They support my opinion that even students from some of our best programs are inadequately trained in research, evaluation, and assessment. Even when they are rudimentarily trained, they frequently lack a conception of the value of scholarship and their obligation to consume and contribute to research in the field. I think this is a historical problem and I think we are making a terrific mistake by continuing to fail to address it. I am not talking only about statistics and other quantitative and rationalistic techniques and models, but also about constructivist and so-called qualitative methods and paradigms. It is my belief that our students by and large don't understand how to systematically gather, reduce, and analyze data in ways that allow guidance to practice. Further, my experience is that they don't recognize good research when they see it, confusing

good writing with good information. Some argue that they don't need to know such things in their early jobs, so we shouldn't focus on them. I would answer that a master's may be all the formal preparation they get, at least for years. We should be preparing them for their third and fourth jobs, even if we buy the initial argument, which I don't.

As always, this talk is getting out of hand. Computers are so obstreperous! I have tried to discuss at some length how we got where we are and a little bit about why we got where we are. The next natural question, then, is where are we?

I am satisfied that one can find some significant, research based guidance, including historical comparisons and context, in the following broad areas to guide thinking, policy, and practice in student affairs work:

- descriptions of students' behavior and careful analyses of same, including the impact of college on students and the power of involvement and engagement, to nominate only a few critical categories. We know that college does impact students (which is a big deal, in itself).
- research and theorizing about the psychosocial, developmental, and community behavior of students, including some, but not enough, attention to marginalized or underrepresented populations
- some, but not nearly enough on the cognitive development of students, including learning theories of various stripes and their interaction(s) with experiential education
- the effects of several intentional interventions and environmental strategies on students' development, such as residence halls, some kinds of programming, and so forth.
- legal issues including the role of the institution in terms of special relationship to students, liability, duty of care, due process, contract theory, and several other salient areas
- financial aspects of higher education, especially their impact on students in terms of career earning differential, likelihood of attendance, borrowing behaviors, choice of institution, and money available for student affairs endeavors "besides" enrollment management
- economic issues such as the impact of investments in higher education, in terms of diversification, training of workforce, technology transfer, and, to a lesser extent, quality of life
- societal issues including the importance of higher education, higher education's failure/role in the P-12 crisis, conceptions and misconceptions of academic freedom, diversity of thought on campus, what students should be learning and/or are learning, the presence and importance of international students, and the nature of the tension between research and teaching, among many others

- social justice issues including access, the nature of and need for developmental education, inclusiveness (or not so much) of campus environments, higher education's responsibility for change, including impacts on local communities, and specific populations and sub-populations
- the ever-popular self-contemplation of our field, such as the stultifying dull stuff on professionalism (like my work), the roles of student affairs workers, whether they are to be controllers, service providers, developers of students, facilitators of learning, assessors of just about everything, or my favorite, milieu managers

This is not a comprehensive list, but let me move on to some things we don't know, but should:

- we need to know a lot more about how to reconcile our institutional environments and processes with the needs of the diverse populations that are beginning to make up our institutions, or worse are not entering our institutions because of low probability of success or poor fit. If we used to educate 30% of a much smaller high school graduation cohort and now we educate nearly 70%, it is logical to expect that some changes need to be made in our cultures. And while we are at it, let's do some aptitude-treatment interaction work on various kinds of students and venues and teaching modalities. What kinds of students should not be attending community colleges or be involved in distance learning. I don't know the answer to these and other questions, but I do know that Texas, for example, will either raise its college going rate among the fastest growing segment of the population or slip backward into an economic quagmire. We can lead in this research.
- we need to know a lot more about the micro impacts of college on students in a systematic way. We know in a more global or general way that retention and success are enhanced by involvement and engagement, but what about the cognitive and socioemotional effects on individuals and/or subpopulations? We need to measure some things and we need to do some more ethnographic and constructivist studies. What are patterns of effects? How much involvement is too much? How can we tell?
- we need to redefine the whole notion of outcome "measures." Again, much of this work should be constructivist, but we can't be afraid of using psychometric tools. What we need to do is put something in place that will supplant the move to high stakes testing for higher education which will hasten the worrisome trend toward education being seen as information for dollars.

- we need way more longitudinal studies of all kinds, including with students, but also student affairs careers, training, and professional development. Some work has been done, but we don't even have the right measures embedded in the large data bases
- we need more and better ways of demonstrating our importance in enrollment management and quality of life and education on campus. And on and on.....

OK, this is fun, but maybe only for me. Anyone in this room could come up with such a list. Are there things we could know, but shouldn't? I think we should resist at all costs a simplistic view of "assessment" that focuses on seemingly obvious and uncomplicated measures, in favor of a much more dynamic paradigm of educational impacts. For example, we could know:

- how large our first year classes can get before the attendant stresses cost more in dropouts than they are saving with economies of scale
- why certain kinds and categories of students will continue to be unlikely to persist and succeed in our institution, unless we lower our "standards"
- exactly how much history or grammar or math any given student knows in the junior year compared to the first year. Or at least what they know on the day of the test. At least within reliability and variability limits and about knowledge that began to be outdated when the test was published
- what is the "optimal" flunk out rate for first year chemistry to "weed out" unqualified students
- what is the minimum education and experience we can get by with when we hire student affairs staff

Again, enough of that. We need to argue for moral, sane, and appropriately complex assessment, research, and evaluation. We can argue the case most readily and convincingly if we are actively engaged in such and are using it to inform practice every day. There are several student affairs divisions around the country that have embedded assessment units and the calls for accountability are louder and louder. We have to lead in this or we will be forced into models we know to be deficient. We know better than to look for the \$5 bill here instead of where we lost it, because the light is better here. We can't fail to do the work properly because it is hard or inconvenient.

Professionalism is sometimes a hard sell as something to take seriously for many student affairs practitioners who would rather simply worry about serving students and doing their jobs. This may seem admirable, but is short sighted. If professionalism, scholarship, and professional

development are crucial elements of student affairs practice as has been argued here, then four fundamental challenges to “business as usual” are obvious and need consideration:

1. Intentionality of practice as a challenge to intuition, “natural ability,” and experience. Scholarly practice demands that professionals know what they are attempting to do with clients and groups of clients at all times. Further, they should be able to articulate theoretical and research-based reasons for their goals and actions. Doing what “seems” to be the “right thing” out of good intentions or out of a lack of other ideas is simply not good enough. Instinct, personality, and even successful experience are no substitute for appropriate professional education, reflection, and continual learning and professional development.

2. Peer review of practice as a challenge to individual “initiative,” isolation, and “privacy.” Too much of our practice takes place in the “dark,” out of the view of other professionals. We need to be willing and able to explain our actions and ask for opinions different from our own about issues facing students and student groups. Autonomy of action and practice are important, but always subject to review and change. We need to be more available to one another in non-judgmental, but constructively critical ways. We need to make and seek peer judgments about office, divisional, and institutional goals and missions, about appropriate professional development activities, about necessary qualifications for positions, and a host of other issues, large and small. In addition, we need to make it clear that only student affairs professionals should be offering peer opinion, not those with other kinds of expertise, unless the question is a technical one relating to another specialty. In short, we claim that our field, at a minimum, is professional in practice, but we are not always taking the attendant responsibilities seriously.

3. Consultation and community as a challenge to competition

Educators don’t compete, they collaborate. Professionals make themselves available to one another in networks as small as intra-office ones and as large as international. Although related to peer review, consultation is different, a kind of informed advice and support. Intentionality depends heavily upon consultation, since if one is unsure about what to do, he or she should do nothing until a good idea presents itself, often in the form of a conversation with a trusted colleague. Competition within institutions for resources or influence is cancerous and wrong. At a minimum, it takes energy and time away from students and at worst, it scuttles professionalism entirely. The same can be said about competition with other schools in some sort of nonsensical ratings rhetoric or a race to make almost proprietary strategies for retention and the promotion of success. The growth, learning, and success of all students is the primary

goal of the student affairs profession. Professional, scholarly practice demands that we collaborate and consult. There is no place in our practice for pettiness, competition, or greed in whatever forms.

#### 4. Professional accountability as a challenge to “standards”

Accountability should not be to simplistic goals, written for management bureaucrats from outside the profession, using meaningless or even harmful “measurements” or “ratings” that result in increased injustice and inequity on campuses or in a false kind of success based on profit or efficiency. Rather, professional accountability is to students, peers, and the profession of student affairs work, in the context of the institution in which one practices (Carpenter, 2003). This is not eschew excellent management, but instead to demand it in the sense that efficiency is empty without effectiveness. Assessment should be ubiquitous, but also meaningful, else as a profession “...we rely on superstition, whimsy, tradition, or inertia” (Carpenter, 2001, p. 314).

These challenges demonstrate that the way forward for excellent service to students lies in professionalism, scholarship, and continual professional learning and development. Clearly, this requires a commitment, perhaps even a calling, to help students, to be an active part of a professional community, really to be accountable to oneself more stringently and to a broader group of professionals than usually envisioned.

The challenges of professionalism and scholarly practice show that simple activity and hard work are not enough, nor even close. Only continuous reflection, commitment, learning, and growth are acceptable if we are to be of service to our students and our institutions. We owe our profession nothing less.

But none of that is what I wanted to discuss with you today. What I wanted to do was to let the parents and others in the room know the answer to the age old question “Now...what exactly do you mean by student affairs work?” Let me suggest to you that you begin to think of yourself by the broader term “educator.”

Few of us teach in the traditional sense, in a classroom with a restricted subject matter. Rather, we facilitate, we cajole, we encourage, we model, we show, we lead. Our work is no less valuable for its apparent ephemeral nature--each of you committed to this field because of your experience with others in your own education--you valued their efforts and want to influence students as you were influenced. In short, you are educators and heir to a long line of great minds and great spirits. It may seem in the 20th century that education as a profession is devalued, but a bit of reflection tells us otherwise. For we educators are successors to Plato, who

thought education the most important function of society, and Socrates, who refused to compromise in search of truth, and Aristotle, who showed that ideas are the true currency of immortality. All teachers--all educators. For the spiritually minded, Moses, Jesus, Buddha, Confucius, Mohammed--all first and foremost teachers. There is an unbroken lineage from Augustinian to Thomas Aquinas to Da Vinci to Newton to Luther to Horace Mann to Harriet Beecher Stowe to Esther Lloyd-Jones to Martin Luther King and on and on of great teachers who had great impact. In our country, we can trace our ideas from John Locke, who considered education to be the same as life, to Ben Franklin who devoted his fortune to education, to Thomas Jefferson, who understood that only education would save the fledgling Republic. You must understand your intellectual ancestors and learn to live up to the standards set by all the men and women who have gone ahead of you in this country as they created the finest system of higher education in the history of the world. You have been touched by all those that went before and you have been touched in your own educational lives by their heirs. And now, you have joined in the line--what an opportunity--what a responsibility!

- For it is education that separates us from savagery.
- It is education that separates the pluralistic experiment known as the United States from other societies.
- It is education that empowers and allows democracy.
- It is education that allows humankind to survive, even though we have the capacity to destroy ourselves. We have run a desperate race between education and technology since August of 1945 and so far we are winning.
- It is education that will eventually pull us from the dark chasms of racism, and sexism and homophobia and all of the other fearful, ignorant prejudices we harbor.

To those who say that education is one of the problems in this country, I say "You're wrong!" Education is the solution to our problems. The more we learn, the faster, the better off everyone will be.

John Dewey once said that philosophy is the general theory of education, so by extension, education would be applied philosophy. That may be true, but an experience I had years ago that makes think it is something else. I was at my daughter's high school sports banquet. It was time to honor the Spring athletes, the tennis team, the track team, the baseball team and so on. The room was full of 15-18 year olds and the hormones and the muscles and the potential were palpable. And for the first time, they also included the Special Olympians. There were 6 from this high school and the first one laboriously made his way to the front and

stood awkwardly as his accomplishments were extolled--he had won a fourth in softball throw and a third in the 50 yard walk and he wore his medals around his neck and he cradled them in his hands as the crowd looked on. I cried like a baby. After the 6 were honored and the same awards given that the other athletes had earned, the crowd rose for their only standing ovation of the night. And I thought about education. The woman who worked with those kids was called coach, and she truly was, but not as we had always been taught to think. Her job was not about winning, but about education. And I thought about what those kids had learned and what they had taught a roomful of students and parents that night. Education may be applied philosophy, but it is also--and more importantly--applied love.

So, the next time someone you meet asks you what you do--don't hem and haw as we all do in student affairs, knowing they won't easily understand. Instead, draw yourself up, look them in the eye and say:

“I am a guardian of democracy;

I carry the water of life for our society;

I am the bearer of compassion and concern, the dispeller of pessimism and hatred;

I am the bringer of fire to the mind and hope to the heart;

I am the herald of love to all who will listen, to all who would learn.

I am an Educator!”

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