It is not enough to know that we should collaborate with our academic and students affairs colleagues. In order to do so effectively, Jan Arminio, Dennis Roberts, and Robert Bonfiglio suggest that all educators need to take a professional, scholarly approach to student learning.

By Jan Arminio, Dennis C. Roberts, and Robert Bonfiglio

THE PROFESSIONALIZATION OF STUDENT LEARNING PRACTICE
AN ETHOS OF SCHOLARSHIP

W ith the publication of The Student Learning Imperative in 1994, the American College Personnel Association (ACPA) called the higher education community's attention to the importance of focusing on the undergraduate experience and creating a learning environment characterized by purposeful work and shared responsibility for student learning. Recently, in response to a question about what role student affairs educators should play in learning, the ACPA senior scholars corresponded with their organization's membership to reaffirm the tenets of The Student Learning Imperative. They called on the higher education community—faculty and staff alike—to maintain a shared focus on student learning. Seeking to unite historical and contemporary philosophies of education as well as faculty and staff perspectives, the senior scholars discussed John Dewey's conceptualization of a democratic education—a philosophy that asserts, as Dennis Roberts notes in Deeper Learning in Leadership, “that all students should be viewed holistically, that all students should be encouraged to develop to the full limits of their potential, and that learning should be recognized as the result of a variety of rich experiences that take place both in and outside the classroom” (p. 7). Ultimately, The Student Learning Imperative was and is an impetus for dialogue among all campus constituents and a reminder that student learning lies at the heart of our institutional mission.

Reaffirming the Student Learning Imperative

I n this issue of About Campus, Robert Nash and Frank Shushok, Douglas Henry, Glenn Blalock, and Rishi Sriram share approaches to enriching student learning through building on relationships among faculty, student affairs educators, and administrators. As their examples suggest, campuses where academic and student affairs educators work together most effectively have broad representation on campuswide committees.

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and other decision-making bodies, ensure participation of faculty and student affairs educators in a variety of course-based and cocurricular activities, sponsor joint research and scholarly endeavors, and create opportunities for collaborative oversight and decision making on use of institutional resources such as buildings and endowments. A campus that shares responsibility for student learning is characterized by continual, cooperative learning on the part of faculty and staff, a pervasive attitude that the campus is a learning organization, engagement with community and larger societal issues, and a widespread willingness to adapt to changing conditions. Such a progressive and engaged campus fosters learning through every means possible. The examples provided by Nash and by Shushok and his colleagues are just two that the authors of this article have seen replicated in colleges and universities throughout the United States and beyond.

We believe that in the long run, the collaborative organizational paradigm will result in higher education retaining its high value as a community good. This paradigm requires concerted, respectful, and positive involvement that draws educational communities together and provides the richest answers to the important questions asked by Shushok and his colleagues in their article: “What should we teach?” “How should we teach it?” “And to what ends do we teach it?”

As Shushok and his colleagues point out, student affairs educators and faculty best answer these questions by regularly taking time to listen to the perspectives of constituent groups—institutional leaders, students, and parents—particularly in regard to their priorities for learning. These groups’ perspectives are, of course, influenced by other priorities. Even after the ACPA’s publication of documents such as The Student Learning Imperative and Learning Reconsidered (edited by Richard Keeling), presidents were most often kept awake at night not by wondering whether students were excelling in their work toward institutional learning outcomes but by concerns about whether tragedy, crisis, budget cuts, or reporters might be visiting their campus anytime soon.

The context of students’ daily activities and attitudes also affects their perspectives on what, why, and how of learning. It is unlikely that most students ask or care whether rich learning is occurring in the curriculum or the cocurriculum. To most students, their learning experiences are neither academic nor cocurricular; they are college. It has been the authors’ experience that students are likely to define their success as contingent on the opportunity to acquire knowledge and skills from any source that will qualify them for further schooling, offer access to a broader range of employment opportunities than they would otherwise have had, or instill a greater sense of independence than they would have had, had they not attended college.

Important, lofty questions about learning also need to be asked and answered in the context of expectations of family members who want students to be healthy and safe when they are away from home and of parents who want their children to make a successful transition to a job or graduate school. If presidents seek order
and minimal problems and students and parents hope that the college experience, broadly defined, will lead to a fulfilling life for the student, how should faculty and student affairs educators perceive their roles in this context? It is clear to us that the educative role must be a collaborative one.

**Organizational Models**

Despite compelling arguments in support of collaboration between academic faculty and student affairs educators on behalf of student learning, a level of divisiveness remains. For example, Jan Arminio, one of the authors of this article, asked a graduate student affairs class not to use the phrases “in-class learning,” “out-of-class learning,” or “academic affairs versus student affairs.” The intent was to experience for at least two and a half hours per week what it would be like to operate without these dichotomies (knowing that language reflects and creates reality). Though the assignment was difficult and required frequent reminders, the class was able to avoid using such divisive language. In spite of this temporary success, when the semester was over, students easily returned to language that reflects and continually recreates a divided campus.

However, as Nash’s and Shushok’s examples demonstrate, some campuses have worked to move beyond these polarities, which, as Patricia Hill Collins indicates, tend to privilege one faction over another. While Santa Clara University’s Web site presents “academics” and “student life” as separate links, learning communities are described under student life and are implemented by leadership teams comprising a faculty director, resident director, resident minister, and undergraduate community facilitators. At the University of Maryland, College Park, the director of the Stamp Student Union and the Student Government Association president created the Terp Votes initiative for the most recent national election. They formed a consortium of student organizations and several faculty members that had four initiatives: registering the vote, informing the vote, getting out the vote, and holding forums to answer the “so what” question after the vote. The day after the election, a full-page ad appeared in the student newspaper, asking students, “Now what? What else can you do?” Suggestions offered included volunteering in the community and remaining politically active.

**Student Affairs Scholarship**

Creating organizations focused on enriched student learning requires that each constituent group have a fairly coherent vision of itself. This coherence still eludes some in the student affairs profession, according to Stanley Carpenter, who wrote in 2001 about the professional maturation level of student affairs and described it as a “collection of disparate functions” (p. 302). He noted that faculty members are fragmented by affiliations with colleges, disciplines, departments, and schools but are unified by their allegiance to scholarship. Carpenter promotes a similar emphasis on cohesion for student affairs professionals through scholarship, which he defines as practice that embraces intentionality. Such scholarly practice is also theory-based and data-based, peer-reviewed, tolerant of differing perspectives; collaborative, unselfish, open to change, careful, and skeptical. Scholarly practice pays attention to regeneration through the preparation of new professionals and continuing education of current professionals and is autonomous within institutional contexts. An ethos of scholarship means that student affairs educators not only must be good at relating to students but also must fulfill their obligations to students, peers, colleagues, and institutions.

Peer review is standard practice for academic scholarship and should be embraced by student affairs educators. Peer review should include review of student training and development agendas and campus program schedules. Broadening opportunities for one’s work to be reviewed by peers encourages collaboration and demonstrates other characteristics of scholarship, particularly openness to change and carefulness. When teaching a multicultural counseling course, Jan Arminio was asked by a student affairs educator to allow him to review the course syllabus. Jan’s first reaction was to feel defensive, but she acquiesced. When they discussed the syllabus, the student affairs educator said he was impressed and offered suggestions. Jan felt that her work had been validated, and she acted on one suggestion but not the other.

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Through the process, she remained careful, skeptical, and autonomous, yet open.

Theory-based and data-driven work at the campus level can be informed by national standards, such as the six domains of learning adopted by the Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education. These domains—knowledge acquisition, construction, integration, and application; cognitive complexity; intrapersonal development; interpersonal competence, humanitarianism and civic engagement; and practical competence—can shape curricular and cocurricular development and assessment. Fundamentally, standards ask educators to ask themselves, “What is the educative value of this practice or policy?” and “What am I teaching?”

An example of theory-driven educational policies that bring together the work of faculty and student affairs educators is experiential learning, including internships and service learning. Student affairs educators often create the procedures for students to apply for and obtain academic internships and course-based service-learning positions. Measures of learning as a result of internship or service-learning participation are also often jointly created and assessed. When advisors of student organizations and facilitators of leadership and service education know about curricular content, they can help bridge the gap between the content and its application. Similarly, according to Karen Kurotsuchi Inkelas and Jennifer Weisman, collaboratively designed and administered learning communities create conditions that are highly conducive to student success. In residential learning communities, students find interaction with faculty, frequent peer discussions of both social and academic topics, and a supportive residential environment. These outcomes are the result of student affairs educators and faculty working together to create the processes and environment for students to be actively immersed in learning content.

Learning Immersion

Regardless of the functional areas within which one works, we believe that all educators must continually ask students, “What have you learned at this institution that could provide insight into what you are doing now, struggling with now, or questioning now? What have you discussed in class or read that adds meaning to what you are doing? What lapses have you observed in the administrative or interpersonal behavior of your university’s leadership that you commit to avoiding in your future work?” These questions are apropos in courses, in cocurricular programs, during behavioral interventions, in conflict mediation, during career exploration, in personal counseling, and in all other educational settings. Seeking answers to these questions puts into practice Marcia Baxter Magolda’s principles for bridge building, which situates learning in students’ experiences, validates students as knowers, and helps student participants mutually construct meaning.

Another way that student affairs educators can demonstrate seriousness about creating partnerships that foster student learning is through development of appropriate hiring, supervising, training, and professional preparation processes. Past practices have not always been exemplary in this regard, according to Roger Winston, Vasti Torres, Stanley Carpenter, David McIntire, and Brent Petersen, who note that “good chemistry,” “sense of humor,” “personality,” and “conventional lifestyle” are often characteristics considered necessary to accomplish student affairs work (p. 15). The authors suggest that these traits are inadequate for meeting the challenges faced by educators in higher education today and recommend that hiring authorities be more purposeful in selecting educators who demonstrate the scholarship ethos that Carpenter describes. Whether candidates are being considered for entry-level or senior positions, they should also be able to demonstrate that they understand the complexity and serious purposes of higher education and that they are prepared to commit to being lifelong learners and contributing scholars. Above all, amid administrative mandates and day-to-day challenges, educators must remain diligent about fostering student learning.
What remains critical today is that each educator take responsibility for knowing the research on student learning and engaging with colleagues to make sure that this essential information is understood.

A Tradition of Partnerships

Student Affairs Educators and faculty share responsibility for creating and sustaining optimal learning environments for students, a purpose that has been advocated since the inception of American colonial colleges. Every philosophical statement about student affairs that has emerged since the publication of Student Personnel Points of View in 1937 has reinforced the centrality of student learning; these statements change only as new approaches to learning emerge. The Student Learning Imperative was based on evidence that the commitment to undergraduate student learning on many campuses had deteriorated. What was critical in 1994, when this statement first appeared, and what remains critical today is that each educator take responsibility for knowing the research on student learning and engaging with colleagues to make sure that this essential information is understood. As shared understanding emerges, cooperative relationships will be established that provide opportunities to improve the practices that benefit our institutions and our students.

In summary, we offer four keys to sustaining and enhancing partnerships for student learning. First, all educators need to clearly identify and professionally fulfill the various roles that are essential to student learning. Second, all educators must advocate for a respectful campus culture and recognize that the best in student learning cannot be fostered unless environments that support learning have been created. These respectful, learning-rich environments are characterized by risk taking and initiative. Third, in order to create effective learning environments, all educators must be able to take advantage of the contributions and gifts of others. The motto “all hands on deck” recognizes that institutions best accomplish the immensely important goal of higher education when each person can contribute his or her special expertise and point of view. And finally, all educators must seek opportunities to clarify their work, listen carefully and respond to what others value, and continually improve. All educators must recognize that dialogue, collaboration, self-examination, and reflection are essential to maximizing the ability to foster learning across every institution.

NOTES


