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James P. Barber
William & Mary, jpbarber@wm.edu

Daniel A. Bureau
University of Memphis

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Coming into Focus: Positioning Student Learning from *The Student Personnel Point of View* to Today

James P. Barber, College of William and Mary
Daniel A. Bureau, University of Memphis

Although 75 years have passed, it is evident that recent student affairs documents carry the same DNA as *The Student Personnel Point of View*. For example, *The Student Learning Imperative*, *Principles of Good Practice for Student Affairs*, and *Learning Reconsidered* each advocate a holistic approach to student experience and express the relevance of the student affairs educator.

However, the context of higher education today is vastly different from the landscape of 1937. Revolutionary changes in technology and communications, an increasingly diverse student body, and a rapidly internationalizing scope contribute to a much more cosmopolitan environment in 2012. For the last century, the student affairs profession has been responsive to environmental changes. One way in which the profession has evolved is through strengthening its alignment with the goal of learning. Today promoting student learning is central to, not simply a byproduct of, good student affairs practice.

In this essay, we explore the question: How is *The Student Personnel Point of View* related to more recent student affairs guiding documents such as *Learning Reconsidered*? We assert they are related in the emphasis on an integrated learning experience that occurs inside and outside of the classroom; this includes a focus on personal wholeness, i.e., “the student as a person, rather than upon his intellectual training alone” (p. 1) and strong advocacy for “coordination” (p. 5).

Integration of Learning

Integration of learning is a concept at the forefront of American higher education in the 21st century. Undoubtedly, *The Student Personnel Point of View* describes this idea. As explained by Barber (2012), integration of learning is:

the demonstrated ability to connect, apply, and/or synthesize information coherently from disparate contexts and perspectives, and make use of these new insights in multiple contexts. This includes the ability to connect the domain of ideas and philosophies to the everyday experience, from one field of study or discipline to another, from the past to the present, between campus and community life, from one part to the whole, from the abstract to the concrete, among multiple identity roles—and vice versa. (p. 593)

Integrated learning has been a priority for higher education for almost a century, as evidenced by John Dewey’s emphasis on progressive education in the early 20th century, around the same time as the authors created *The Student Personnel Point of View*. Progressive education gained momentum in the 1920s and 1930s and envisioned the mission of education as preparing engaged citizens for life in a diverse democracy. Such ideals are well articulated in student affairs guiding documents since *The Student Personnel Point of View* and specifically over the last 20 years.

Integration of learning captures the spirit of *The Student Personnel Point of View*’s emphases on holistic education and the coordination of services and experiences. This concept also relates to the foci within *Learning Reconsidered* on learning as process and product and documenting student learning outcomes. Intentionality can serve to advance students’ integration of learning; student affairs educators cannot simply hope learning happens but must ensure it is a primary focus of their work. Students do not experience the college environment in a dichotomous way, compartmentalizing learning experiences as either in or out of the classroom; making connections with and for them, across contexts, is a primary role of the student affairs educator today.

Evolution of Student Affairs' Role in Facilitating Learning

In 2001, Evans completed a content analysis of the major guiding documents of the profession. She wrote,

The role of student affairs in instruction was also a common theme in every one of the documents reviewed. Many student affairs professionals erroneously believe that student learning is a new initiative for the field. A careful reading of the SPPV (ACE, 1937/1983a) reveals that student affairs professionals were being called upon to teach and to advise faculty about learning principles and student characteristics as early as 1937. (p. 373)

Instruction to facilitate learning has long been a part of the student affairs role. In part, this was to explain our contributions to the academic mission and provide student affairs credibility in higher education. A look back at *The Student Personnel Point of View* of 1937 illuminates the way in which the authors perceived learning as a byproduct of good services to students and instructors. In fact, the term “learning” itself never appears in *The Student Personnel Point of View* of 1937. Instead, the focus is on instruction. For instance, student affairs should be responsible for “assembling and making available information to be used in improvement of instruction and in making the curriculum more flexible” (ACE, 1937, p. 4). Learning is implicit; however, it becomes more prominent in guiding documents toward the end of the 20th century.

The 1970s found student affairs reconsidering its philosophical and theoretical foundations, which led to an increased focus on student development theories; however, many found this approach flawed, given the lack of connection to the academic purpose of the institution. Although this critique was somewhat justified, learning had indeed been articulated across documents created since *The Student Personnel Point of View*, including Lloyd-Jones and Smith's *Student Personnel Work as Deep Teaching* (1954), Brown's *Student Development in Tomorrow's Higher Education: A Return to the Academy* (1972), and, later, *The Student Learning Imperative* (1996) and *Learning Reconsidered* (2004). Student learning

had always been a part of student affairs' mission in one form or another, but the task of helping students reflect on how their collective experiences resulted in learning was often dismissed due to other priorities.

Barr and Tagg described a shift in academe toward a “Learning Paradigm” in their landmark 1995 article “From Teaching to Learning – A New Paradigm for Undergraduate Education.” Nearly 20 years ago now, they described a profound change underway in higher education from regarding a college or university as a place to *provide instruction* to seeing it as a place to *promote learning*. Barr and Tagg called this a shift from an “Instruction Paradigm” to a “Learning Paradigm.” They wrote,

In the Learning Paradigm, the key structure that provides the leverage to change the rest is a system for requiring the specification of learning outcomes and their assessment through processes external to instruction. The more we learn about the outcomes of existing programs, the more rapidly they will change. (p. 25)

The shift that Barr and Tagg described has come to fruition, and this environment of accountability centered on achievement and assessment of learning outcomes is where we find ourselves today in higher education.

Although Barr and Tagg focused their discussion on academic affairs, we experienced the same shift in student affairs. To some extent, external pressures thrust the learning paradigm into today's student affairs educator's vernacular. The value of learning as primary to student affairs today gained traction as a result of pressures for higher education to develop and measure learning outcomes and demonstrate the value of a college degree. To ensure student affairs maintains relevance in the modern-day institution, student affairs professionals must articulate learning through participation in the co-curricular and connecting such lessons to in-class learning as our primary function.

The extent to which learning has become a primary focus of student affairs can be considered through reviewing the profession's values. Studying student affairs master's program participants' interpretations of the profession's values,

Bureau interpreted learning as a modern-day value of the profession. Reason and Broido (2010) also indicate that learning has become pivotal to the values and philosophy of today's student affairs work. Earlier examinations, such as those by Young (2003), had not specifically articulated learning as a student affairs value. Yet, learning has been a part of the profession in one form or another from the time of *The Student Personnel Point of View* until today. One participant in Bureau's 2011 study explained how guiding documents have reinforced learning from the earliest days of recognized student affairs work:

Early documents such as the *Student Personnel Point of View* talk about the holistic development of students and connecting learning experiences and things like that, and I think that definitely still plays a huge role in what we do in student affairs. I think that's really what we're trying to do. We're trying to develop people holistically, outside of the classroom, and then I think as we have evolved... Some of the more recent ones that talk more about "well, we're educators now and let's reframe the way we look at things"...while some of the language is outdated, the underlying message of them still holds true. (p. 155)

Guiding documents provide evidence of the prevalent values of the era. They provide historical context and allow us to trace the evolution of the value of learning over time. However, these documents are also action oriented, driving professional practice and reshaping the scope of student affairs work. In the next section, we discuss ways in which *The Student Personnel Point of View* and subsequent documents have influenced student affairs' orientation toward learning.

How a Focus on Learning Affects our Practice

As evidenced by studying the history of the profession, student affairs is a field in which there are varying views on priorities. As we consider how *The Student Personnel Point of View* of 1937 relates to more recent professional documents in the field, it is essential to consider how this lineage of professional statements has shaped our work. The integration of key professional priorities, including student services, development, and learning, has a direct impact on the type of work we do, the ways we interact with students, and how others perceive us on campus.

First, it is tempting to say that the student affairs profession has adopted an entirely new paradigm; however, we assert that learning is not separate from *but rather a model* for the provision of services and the fostering of student development. For example, contrast the description of student affairs practitioners as information curators "assembling and making available information" (p. 4) from *The Student Personnel Point of View* with a quote from *Learning Reconsidered* describing student affairs in a reconfigured view of higher education in which student development is in itself learning: "Student affairs, in this conceptualization, is integral to the learning process because of the opportunities it provides students to learn through action, contemplation, reflection and emotional engagement as well as information acquisition" (p. 11). Returning to the conceptual model of integration of learning, we can envision promoting student learning rising in prominence in our daily work, joining student services and development in the professional repertoire of student affairs. As a result, student services, student development, and student learning inform one another. Roper (2003) illustrated this concept, writing,

As they create teaching situations, [student affairs professionals] can use them to impart whatever knowledge and skills they believe are important for learners to acquire. The obligation of student affairs educators is to identify the skills and knowledge needed by students and to create learning situations that will foster their development. (p. 470)

The learning paradigm strengthens our practice; we do not abandon other parts of the job and previous professional priorities by orienting toward student learning. For example, the emphasis in *The Student Personnel Point of View* was on providing excellent services to improve instruction; today's thrust is to provide thoughtful experiences to promote student learning. However, to maintain learning as central to the co-curriculum, student affairs professionals *must* view themselves as educators. Taking on the perspective of educator and seeking collaboration with other educators (both inside and outside of the classroom) also serves to advance another

priority of *The Student Personnel Point of View*: coordination across contexts. The convergence of academic affairs and student affairs around the learning paradigm represents a significant opportunity to establish stronger collegial relationships across campus and build a shared identity as learning-centered educators.

Second, the strengthening of the learning paradigm may reflect a natural maturation of student affairs as it has sought to contribute relevantly to modern-day higher education. As we grow and develop as a profession, we have become more skilled at integrating our own skills, knowledge, and values in our work with students. Baxter Magolda and Magolda (2011) wrote, “Articulating learning goals for all student affairs functions is a necessary first step. Thus it behooves leaders of student affairs divisions to encourage staff to use their intellectual curiosity to integrate and apply multiple knowledge sources to guide practice” (p. 13). Assessing these outcomes continues to strengthen learning as core to student affairs functions. The expectation that student affairs professionals will educate students and document the extent to which learning occurs is not likely to cease.

Additionally, the learning paradigm requires professionals to adopt a different approach to our historical and modern-day function. Reason and Broido (2010) wrote “The movement [to student learning will] change what we do and how we see ourselves professionally. Student affairs professionals now focus on learning outcomes and creating curricula to guide the achievement of those outcomes” (p. 92). Fortunately, there is evidence that professionals foster learning experiences. Martin and Seifert (2011), for example, reviewed data from almost 4,000 students across 19 institutions as a part of the Wabash National Study of Liberal Arts Education. Data analysis focused on students’ responses to questions about interactions with student affairs staff and the facilitation of student learning outcomes of critical thinking, academic motivation, need for cognition, and positive attitude toward literacy. The findings revealed interactions with student affairs staff were positively associated with

academic motivation, need for cognition, and attitude toward literacy but had a slight negative association with critical thinking.

Finally, the students’ demands will influence how we enact student learning and the vehicles we use to serve them. The diversity of the American college and university campus today creates a dynamic environment for learning. As evidenced in *Learning Reconsidered*, the tenets of progressive education, including educating for life in a diverse democracy that influenced *The Student Personnel Point of View* of 1937, are more relevant today than at any point in the last 75 years. Students’ world view influences their approach to integrated learning. Finding ways to support diverse students’ approaches to learning, including infusing technology into learning experiences, will provide student affairs professionals with more opportunities to strengthen their role as educator and the profession’s connection to the value of learning.

Concluding Thoughts

Student affairs began as a result of students’ out-of-class activities needing increased attention. Such functions rendered student affairs to a position of relieving faculty of managerial responsibilities outside of the classroom. The functions of student affairs began with an inclination toward services and counseling, delicately balancing student autonomy with a need for adult supervision. This origin in student services and counseling is a strong foundation from which to continue building our learning-oriented mission today and in the future.

The Student Personnel Point of View positioned student affairs professionals as helping students form links between, in, and out of classroom experiences, in which student learning was an expected byproduct of successful delivery of student support and services. Student affairs professionals were to fill this role through providing “instruction” on a range of issues. We believe *Learning Reconsidered* is the ultimate realization of the role of student affairs professional as “instructor” and considers how this function has evolved into “educator.” This is similar to the

paradigm adopted by many faculty members who have moved to more interactive and integrative ways to help students learn.

However, academic affairs and student affairs each has a separate and strong organizational press. The inclination is to resort to what we have historically known (academics teach and conduct research, while student affairs professionals support the affective needs of students and advise activities outside the classroom) rather than focus on an integrated paradigm. Using the model of integrative learning can move the student affairs profession closer to learning as its current and hopefully long-standing *raison d'être*.

Although not always positioned as primary, promoting student learning has long been a part of student affairs work. Upon reflection, the view of the student as a whole person and the advocacy for coordination across areas to enhance student experiences as articulated in *The Student Personnel Point of View* of 1937 is manifested the learning paradigm and remains solidly at the heart of student affairs work. Such principles are easy to identify in more recent professional statements. The learning paradigm of student affairs has not necessarily replaced previous professional priorities articulated in *The Student Personnel Point of View* and other early guiding documents; instead, student learning has become the reason for rather than the byproduct of student services and student development.

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