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Personal Reflections on Campus-Based Professional Community in Student Affairs

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Guest Author

In this essay, the author reflects on elements needed to establish professional community among student affairs practitioners in higher education. Shared values, focus on student learning, collaboration, deprivatized practice and reflective dialogue are key characteristics of professional communities that promote student learning.

Many student affairs practitioners would likely agree that it is becoming increasingly difficult today to remain current with the vast knowledge explosion that is occurring not only within our field but in higher education more broadly. There is much in our field to keep up with: new books, monographs, journal articles, videos, conferences and workshops, and internet-based sites that inundate us with many valuable new ideas, research, theories, and models to guide our practice. I know many practitioners in our field, myself included, who confess how challenging and, at times, frustrating it can be to find (or take) the time from our hectic schedules to stay current even as we acknowledge to our colleagues how important it is that we find the time for our own professional development. While keeping current with the literature in our own field is extremely important, I have, nonetheless, found that reading in areas not directly related to student affairs or even to higher education can also be a valuable use of our limited time as the following will hopefully illustrate.

A few weeks ago I found time to read the lead article in the Winter 1996 issue of the *American Educational Research Journal* which reported on a national study examining the relationship of student learning and school-based professional community among K-12 teachers. The research was thought-provoking and both relevant and helpful as I reflected on the work of student affairs professionals in higher education. For me, this particular study reinforced the value and critical importance of working to create on each of our own campuses a cohesive professional community among our student affairs colleagues if we are to be effective in enhancing

student-centered learning. While the research conducted was very sophisticated and well designed, I was struck by the simplicity of the factors the researchers identified that characterized the professional community found among the schools studied and, surprisingly, how familiar each factor was to me after having been in the student affairs profession for almost 25 years.

In the national study, Louis, Marks, and Kruse (1996) investigated factors that contribute to the development of professional community among elementary and secondary teachers in their own individual school settings and the extent to which the school-based professional community contributes to teachers *collectively* assuming both responsibility for student learning and to the enhancement of student learning itself. A basic assumption underlying this research was that how teachers interact with each other outside their own specialized work areas (i.e., their individual classrooms) is critical to their attempts to reform educational programs and to enhance student learning. The authors acknowledge that teachers have long pursued their own individual professional development and that "teacher professionalism must increase if education is to improve" (Louis, Marks & Kruse, 1996, p. 758). However, while this argument is one that most educators would certainly support, the researchers state that in addition to individual professional development "attention also needs to be paid to the development of professional community: teachers' **collective** engagement in sustained efforts to improve practice" (Louis, Marks & Kruse, 1996, p. 758).

Professional community, within the context of the above study, was described as a critical form of "social capital" needed by educational institutions in order to sustain and enhance the learning environment for students and was defined as "movement toward five elements of practice: shared values, focus on student learning, collaboration, deprivatized practice, and reflective dialogue" (Louis, Marks & Kruse, 1996, p. 760). While these elements are not hierarchical, the researchers found that school-based professional community requires the presence of each element in order to have a positive impact on student learning environments (Louis, Marks, & Kruse, 1996).

As I reviewed and considered the implications of the above research and its findings, questions arose within me about the current state of professional community among student affairs staff at my own institution and, more broadly, on college and university campuses across the country. I began to wonder whether the factors found by the researchers that contribute to professional community among teachers *and* facilitate the enhancement of student learning could be instructive for our work in student affairs? I thought about the response we would receive if we asked staff whether or not they considered themselves to be part of a "professional community" on their own campuses? For example, when considering the elements of professional community described above, would many staff report that, across student affairs departments on their campus (or, even *within* their own departments), there exists a shared set of values, principles, purpose, and/or mission that guide the work of their entire division on a day-to-day basis? Would they report that a sustained *collective* focus on student learning exists among all staff; and, that opportunities to collaborate across departments and to engage in reflective dialogue with one another about their work regularly occur in the workplace? I certainly would hope that some staff would respond in the affirmative to these questions; but, many, I suspect, would also report that they don't really feel part of a professional community on their own campuses although as individuals many would identify with the larger student affairs profession extending beyond the boundaries of their own campuses. Perhaps many would also identify with communities of professionals related to specialized functions and roles served within the field (i.e., admissions, financial aid, career development, residence life, etc.).

While many of us link our professional identity in various ways with the broader student affairs field (or, with particular national organizations like ACPA, NASPA, ACUHO-I, NACA, etc.), I raise these questions simply because I find myself increasingly questioning, given personal experience and the current climate that exists in many of our colleges and universities, the extent to which professional communities that truly foster student learning currently exist on our campuses within our student affairs divisions.

In conversations with student affairs staff in different departments at many institutions the same familiar stories are conveyed over and over about how low staff morale is in the division, about how little inter-departmental collaboration occurs with programming, about how fragmented communication across departments can be, and about how increasing competition among departments for reduced dollars and other institutional resources has pitted one group against another resulting in unhealthy and dysfunctional outcomes for individuals and for their organizations. More importantly, perhaps, I hear how little meaningful dialogue occurs among staff about their educator role on the campus and about how they can and must work together to facilitate true student learning. Blimling's (1996) recent essay provides an excellent overview of many external and internal pressures on student affairs organizations which, I believe, have unfortunately led many staff to "bury" themselves in their work in their own departments—a bunker mentality that often results in even less communication, collaboration and a shared sense of mission and purpose across departments. These and other forces have contributed and continue to contribute to the erosion of professional community among student affairs staff on our campuses or, at least, present formidable barriers to its creation in the first place.

My intent in raising what, I believe, are important questions about the state of professional community is that I am convinced that as student affairs professionals we have the talent, the knowledge, the skills, and the incentives needed to work together to create among our own staffs a cohesive community of professional educators who collectively have the potential of realizing both our institutions' and our own professional goals related to student learning and personal development. If we are serious about advancing an agenda that places student-centered learning at the core of our collective work on our campuses, then I suggest that careful reflection and discussion among staff about the elements that might contribute to professional community like those found in the Louis, Marks and Kruse (1996) study would serve us and our students well. The sections that follow provide a brief description of these factors with implications for our work on our campuses. These sections are not meant to be prescriptive but, instead, are intended to stimulate dialogue, discussion and perhaps even debate, among student affairs professionals as they consider what is

needed to establish a professional community of educators within their own student affairs divisions on their own campuses.

Shared values

The first element the researchers found in professional communities can serve as a foundation upon which professional community can be constructed in our student affairs divisions. This element is described as staff moving toward a sharing of a common set of values, beliefs, norms, and expectations which guide the core educational tasks that they perform each and every day for and on behalf of their students and their institutions. According to the researchers, members of a professional community thus "affirm, through language and action, common beliefs and values underlying assumptions about children, learning, teaching and teachers' roles; the nature of human needs, human activity, and human relationships; and the organization's extended societal role and its relationship with the surrounding environment" (Louis, Marks, & Kruse, 1996, p. 760).

In student affairs, we are fortunate to have a rich history of written statements from individuals and from our national associations to guide us in reflecting on our mission, purpose, and goals in higher education and, additionally, in discussing the values, assumptions, and beliefs that motivate our work as educators. For example, early in the development of our profession and continuing through the 1960s we relied on the 1937 and 1949 statements of the Student Personnel Point of View (American Council on Education, 1937, 1949) which set out basic values and a statement of purpose for our work. More recent documents include, in part, the Student Learning Imperative (American College Personnel Association, 1994), the draft statement entitled *Defining Principles of Good Practice for Student Affairs* (American College Personnel Association & National Association of Student Personnel Administrators, 1997), the *Reasonable Expectations* statement (Kuh, Lyons, Miller, & Trow, 1994), and the 1987 NASPA *Perspective on Student Affairs*. Each of these statements should serve as the basis for collective staff discussion about what we believe and value about the role and purpose of higher education in our society; what values and assumptions we hold about the students with whom we work; and finally, what our basic assumptions, values, and beliefs are about how students may learn in the college and university environment including what our role is in facilitating that learning (Stamatikos & Rogers, 1984).

I believe our profession already has a solid foundation of values, beliefs, principles, and assumptions that can and do guide our work and that systematic reflection on these values among all student affairs staffs will facilitate the establishment of the first element needed to form a genuine professional community among student affairs professionals on our campuses.

Collective focus on student learning

The researchers in the 1996 school-based study reported that "an undeviating concentration on student learning is a core characteristic of professional community" (Louis, Marks, & Kruse, 1996, p. 760). On our campuses, this concentration requires that student affairs staff actively and systematically evaluate the ways in which their programs and activities promote student learning, "as distinguished from simply focusing on activities or strategies that may engage student attention" (p. 760). The Student Learning Imperative (SLI) (American College Personnel Association, 1994) and the draft Principles of Good Practice for Student Affairs (American College Personnel Association & National Association of Student Personnel Administrators, 1997) are excellent resources for assisting us to recenter our work around important learning goals and objectives that are consonant with our institutions' missions. The SLI, for example, posits that "if learning is the primary measure of institutional productivity by which the quality of undergraduate education is determined, what and how much students learn also must be the criteria by which the value of student affairs is judged" (p.2). To evaluate what we do on a daily basis in student affairs with learning outcomes criteria is a tremendous challenge for us but one that we are certainly capable of meeting. It is evident to us as well as others on our campuses that our programs do result in significant learning for students. In order to create a professional community on our campuses among student affairs staff, this critical element of maintaining a concerted *collective* focus on student learning must be addressed.

Collaboration

The third element reported to contribute to professional community involves the extent to which teachers within their own school setting genuinely collaborate with each other on educational activities. A collaborative spirit among staff leads to the sharing of expertise across

programs and departments. "Collaborative work also increases teachers' sense of affiliation with each other and with the school and their sense of mutual support and responsibility for effective instruction" (Louis, Marks & Kruse, 1996, p. 760). This concept of collaboration is one with which many student affairs professionals are familiar. It seems that our literature and conference programs are filled with recommendations for increased collaboration among staff and faculty, among students and staff, and among staff, faculty and students. We have long recognized how important it is to open channels of communication and collaboration between ourselves and faculty; and numerous authors have called for greater collaboration between student affairs and academic affairs. Both the Student Learning Imperative and the draft Principles of Good Practice for Student Affairs reaffirm the need for greater collaboration. For example, the Principles state that "collaborative decision-making and strong work relationships demonstrate a healthy institutional approach to learning by fostering inclusiveness, using multiple perspectives, and affirming shared educational values... Partnerships designed to advance student learning, meet student needs, and further the achievement of similar institutional goals, offer good opportunities for collaboration" (American College Personnel Association & National Association of Student Personnel Administrators, 1997, p. 38). With the increasing focus on collaboration among student affairs programs and academic affairs units and with students, we must not lose sight of the need to continue to find meaningful ways to collaborate **within** our student affairs units as well. While forging educational partnerships with other constituencies on and off campus is important in creating student-centered learning environments, we must also remember that creating educational partnerships with each other within our student affairs organizations is also very important to creating professional communities on our individual campuses.

Deprivatized practice and reflective dialogue

The final two elements that contribute to professional community are combined here because both elements share much in common. Deprivatized practice involves practitioners moving comfortably out of their own classrooms, offices, or departments and into the classrooms, offices, or departments of their colleagues in order "to share and trade off on the roles of mentor, advisor, or specialist" (Louis, Marks, & Kruse, 1996, p. 760). The researchers found that "peer coaching relationships,

teamed teaching structures, and structured classroom observations are methods used to improve both classroom practice and collegial relationships. In this way, teachers also come to know each other's strengths and can therefore more easily obtain 'expert advice' from colleagues" (Louis, Marks & Kruse, 1996, p. 760-761). Being a reflective practitioner implies a certain level of self-awareness about one's work and "by engaging in in-depth conversations about teaching and learning, teachers can examine the assumptions basic to quality practice" (Louis, Marks & Kruse, 1996, p. 761).

These elements require that student affairs staff take action to tear down the walls of their departmental "functional silos" (American College Personnel Association, 1994) where such barriers exist and, thus, to "deprivatize" their own work and that of their departments on the campus. With deprivatization, staff need to construct bridges between programs and departments where the specialized expertise, experience and talents of every staff member can be openly shared and discussed. Collectively, student affairs staff have much to offer one another by working to take full advantage of each others' strengths, acquired knowledge and unique experiences. In this way they can truly learn from one another. For example, the Student Learning Imperative and the draft Principles of Good Practice for Student Affairs both emphasize the need for student affairs staff to use various methods of research, assessment and evaluation that will inform the work they do on the campus in fostering student learning. Not every staff member, understandably, has all the expertise needed to conduct research and/or to evaluate and assess all programs; however, by working together and by actively sharing expertise across departments, staff will be **collectively** engaged in sustained efforts to improve their practice which is a key outcome of professional communities (Louis, Marks, & Kruse, 1996).

Conclusion

The five elements described above — shared values and norms, collective focus on student learning, collaboration, deprivatized practice, and reflective dialogue — all are important for the development of professional community among student affairs staffs on our individual campuses. Previous research conducted with school teachers has shown a positive relationship between the development of professional community

and student learning. Other factors that also support movement toward a professional community among educators include supportive institutional leadership, institutional openness to innovation, respect both within the division by staff members as well as external respect for the work of the staff, regular feedback on one's work, and support for continuous professional development for individual staff (Louis, Marks, & Kruse, 1996, p. 763). Recent developments within the profession related to a renewed focus on student learning, on good practice in student affairs, and on the educator role for student affairs professionals are very encouraging in that the values and assumptions that ground these developments are the very ones needed to establish professional community among student affairs staffs on our campuses.

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Supplemental instruction programs: an effective way to increase student academic success?

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This paper explores the effect of supplemental instruction programs on student academic success. Combining study skills and techniques in peer-led interactive study sessions, supplemental instruction programs aim to equip students with more advanced learning tools. Advantages and disadvantages of supplemental instruction programs are presented. The paper concludes with an outline of some factors which should be considered prior to implementing supplemental instruction programs.

At the Indiana University-Bloomington (IUB) campus, between 8 and 10% of students fail to meet the academic requirement of maintaining a cumulative grade point average of 2.0 each semester (Moir and Beverstock, 1994). In response to the poor performance of students, IUB and other institutions have implemented supplemental instruction (SI) programs. The program identifies academic courses in which large numbers of students consistently receive low letter grades or withdraw from class. The intention of the SI program is to change the way students learn in order to increase their success.

The first SI programs were developed at the University of Missouri at Kansas City in 1973 by Dr. Deanna Martin (Widmar, 1994). An ancient Chinese proverb states "Tell me and I forget, show me and I remember, involve me and I understand". This proverb succinctly explains the concept of supplemental instruction. The goal of SI is not merely to raise the grades of students in problem courses, but rather to supply students in these courses with effective study skills, to enable them "to become more active, engaged and independent learners" (Zaritsky, 1994, p.2).

SI programs aim to increase student performance and retention by targeting traditionally difficult academic courses where high rates of D or F grades or withdrawals are consistently reported. All students enrolled in the problem classes are invited to participate in SI study sessions, which meet at regular times beginning the first week of the semester. Students receiving high letter grades in previous semesters are selected as SI leaders.