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EDLF 6030: Student Affairs in Colleges and Universities

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Student Affairs Philosophy Statement

I have spent a fair amount of time considering one of the questions posed earlier in this course: Are we educators? We have revisited this question throughout the semester, and the general conclusion from readings and class discussions is that non-academic staff are indeed educators. Perhaps I have been less enthusiastic to concede this point because it highlights a tension that has been present in my career for several years as I've worked alongside and very closely with faculty. Regardless of my role or job title, I consider my primary responsibility to be that of supporting the academic mission of the institution I am serving. However, it is clear from the literature and from lived experience that student activities, services, and programming are as impactful, if not more, than the content students learn inside the four walls of their classrooms.

We know from the work of Vincent Tinto, Alexander Astin, and others that student success is linked to the quality of their involvement and the strength of their social and academic connections. Arthur Sandeen's work further explores the changing landscape of American colleges and universities, where faculty play a diminished role in the day-to-day lives of their students outside the classroom. In many ways, this has proven to be beneficial to students as practitioners recognize the importance of holistic education that focuses on student development, well being, and identity exploration. Thus, it is the role of student affairs and its practitioners to create and implement services to promote development of all kinds and to compel students to explore their identities and values in supportive environments. All this, in my view, is done most successfully when it happens against the backdrop of a rigorous liberal arts education and a campus climate that promotes open and thoughtful discourse.

We have learned that most student affairs professionals decided to pursue a career in the field after very positive or very negative experiences during their college years. Incidentally, I was drawn to the field after both negative *and* positive experiences as an undergraduate. I

experienced a very difficult transition from my under-resourced high school in a largely low-income community to the competitive university I chose to attend some 640 miles from my hometown. I struggled to fit in, but I found a great deal of compassion, kindness, and care in a number of employees at the university who took a genuine interest in students. There was Cheryl, the department administrator who would talk to students as if they were her equals, exchanging stories about life or the recent concerts she and her wife attended. There was also a married couple, Ruth and Todd, an administrative assistant and director of career services, who, upon finding out that it was my birthday one year, took me to Friendly's for dinner when they found out that I didn't have plans. None of these individuals could cite student development theory, but they were empathetic and compassionate human beings.

The turning point for me came at the end of my junior year when I was hired as a teaching assistant for a visiting professor. The institution did not typically allow instructors to hire TAs, but this particular professor was being courted by the department and they offered him a TA to allow him to commute just once per week from his home in New York City. Suddenly, I felt useful and helpful to students in the class, who, despite being my peers, began to approach me with their problems and questions. I found a great deal of value in my interactions with those students, whether it was listening to their excuses when they asked for extensions or simply giving them space to work through a question raised in a reading. This experience opened my eyes to the world of higher education and the unique role that practitioners play in challenging and supporting students during this stage of emerging adulthood (Arnett).

I believe it is a privilege and an honor to work with young people as they navigate the world and develop into ethical citizens and leaders. It is for this reason that optimism and altruism remain guiding principles for me. If professors and student affairs professionals work to equip students with the tools they need to be engaged and moral citizens, then we have no choice but to be optimistic for the future and the positive impact that our students will have on

their communities. I have chosen to engage students through experiential learning programs, which can be traced back to John Dewey's work advocating for inquiry based learning that removed the perceived barriers between learning and doing. Students learn best, not when they are merely passive recipients of knowledge, but when they learn to apply that knowledge, through experience, to solve problems.

The Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) and others refer to this as integrative learning, and George Kuh categorizes some of these methods as high-impact educational practices. Regardless of the language we use to describe them, the role of student affairs practitioners largely revolves around implementing these kinds of learning strategies into programs, activities, and organizations to center the needs of students as active participants in their education. This focus on students is a somewhat daunting task in a world of increasing complexity, hyper specialization, and rapid technical obsolescence. Placing students at the center of our purpose also means working long days to plan programming around students' schedules and interrupting plans to tackle student issues. I anticipate an imbalance in my work and personal life, but I will gain a great deal of fulfillment from supporting students and being a resource or sounding board as they develop, grow, and flourish into resilient and ethical adults.