

The Purpose of Scholarship Redefining Meaning for Student Affairs

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This article examines the role scholarship plays in today's practice of student affairs. It states that the nature of scholarship changes and adapts to the context within which student affairs is practiced. The article identifies a new purpose of scholarship and seven roles it should play in the literature. Finally, it outlines different ways emergent scholarship can meet the needs of today's practitioner.

Does scholarship change as the field changes? This question drives my approach to this article. Twenty years ago, I was facilitating a workshop on professional development. One of the issues practitioners discussed was how they could keep up with the literature. About five years ago, another workshop on professional development resulted in a different question: This time, practitioners were wondering if the literature was keeping up with their experience. I believe this more recent response is an indication of the changing context of our practice and the perception of our current state of student affairs literature. This article reflects an assumption by practitioners that scholarship needs to change to meet the different demands and contexts of this field and higher education. The usual discussion on scholarship centers on the relationship between practice and research—is practice a form of theory or is research an academic pursuit distinct from practice? I would like to reframe this traditional conversation by first

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focusing on the purpose of scholarship, which is to help the field adapt to the context in which student affairs is practiced. In times where change, the number of tasks, and the volume of interruptions are increasing, what role does scholarship play in helping us sort out what is relevant and make meaning of daily events and our practice? The critical question in any discussion of emergent scholarship is, “Scholarship for what, or, what purpose should it serve?”

The Reality of our Lives

When practitioners share the stories of their work lives, the conversations often go like this: My e-mail messages are multiplying and they just keep coming; it’s almost impossible to keep up. In fact a colleague, who is a dean of students, recently told me he called an e-mail moratorium two years ago when his unread e-mail reached 1,066. While this might be an extreme example, it is indicative of our current lives. Other practitioner concerns include the increasing numbers of students, parents, colleagues, and community members who believe they can tell student affairs practitioners how to do their job. One effect of this press of multiple demands is that each activity seems equally important. Within this multitude of things to do there is a growing complexity in the work with no time left to reflect on what is important (Handy, 1989).

There is a shift in the pace and content of student affairs work. Twenty years ago, there were fewer ways to connect (i.e., phone calls, meetings, and mail) with one another and the amount of these were shaped by the finite amount of time available for a staff member to initiate a memo, meet with others, and respond to requests. When a letter was received, you generally knew that someone took time to draft and edit it before it arrived. The receiving secretary would then prioritize it for the supervisor. This created a natural triage process that helped identify what one should spend time doing. Today this reflective communication practice has disappeared with e-mail and faxes added to the mix.

Cross-boundary communications have also increased the direction from which activities and tasks come. Organizational silos formerly constrained the number of interactions we experienced to people with

whom we immediately worked. Today we live in a world with more permeable and multidirectional communications that come from within and outside the organization (Allen and Cherrey, 2000).

While our work lives have always been filled with variety and challenge, the level of complexity and speed have increased. This has led to the following shifts in our work:

- From a world where one has an ability to prioritize to a leveling of tasks where all communications seem to take on a sense of urgency.
- From a world where communications were two-directional to a world where communications come at us from all directions.
- From a world where relationships are bounded by departments to one that is permeable and relationships transcend departments, divisions, and organizations.
- From a world that made sense of things by focusing on the parts to one that can only be understood through a systems view.

These shifts are not surprising to the practitioner. Has our scholarship, however, kept up with these shifts? In a recent keynote speech, Senge (2000) states that practitioners need to spend 30% of their time reflecting in order to make sense of the world. This suggestion is counter-intuitive for the practitioner. When you have more things to respond to than you have time for, the obvious strategy is to work faster and harder. The counter-intuitive strategy is to step back, scan the environment, and identify the leveraged activities that will help move along the important work and increase your overall effectiveness. Senge's perspective on the importance of reflection and understanding the system points us toward an answer for the question, "What is the role and purpose of scholarship?"

The Purpose of Scholarship

The purpose of scholarship is to provide leadership for the field. Providing this leadership involves fulfilling seven different roles that help practitioners make meaning of their work, increase their understanding of the whole system, identify key relationships within our practice, connect the past with the present and the future, identify what is missing in the present and articulate alternative visions of our

future, identify emergent practices and theories, and create connective wisdom for the field. If our scholarship could help the student affairs field to do this, I believe it would become more useful to practitioners and help lead the field into the future. Below are seven roles scholarship could and should contribute to the field of student affairs.

Create Meaning

We need our literature to help us connect our daily tasks with a larger purpose that is embedded in our work. How do we stay on course when our overall destination is blurred by the activity of the moment? Our literature should help remind us of our core purpose and values in the field of student affairs. By helping us stay connected with this overall destination, it can help practitioners stay focused on what is important over time. Taylor and Wacker (1997) in their book, *The 500-Year Delta: What Happens After What Comes Next*, state that focusing on the ends is the best way to achieve results in a world where chaos-based logic is normal.

Seeing the System as a Whole

In an interdependent complex organization, understanding comes from a systems-perspective not a parts-perspective (Halal, 1998; Lincoln, 1985). How can we understand the system when our current research practices tell us more about the parts than the whole? Journals from all disciplines have a similar pattern, we now know more and more about less and less. What would scholarship look like that helped us understand the system as a whole?

Identify Key Relationships

We need to become more sophisticated about how variables mutually shape each other. In his book, *The Logic of Failure*, Dörner (1996) identifies why strategic planning so often fails. His premise is that we like to identify a single independent variable in the development of a strategic plan and assume all other variables will fall into line. In an interdependent world, however, we can no have single independent variables that explain the behavior of the whole system. Dörner believes that understanding relationships between variables is what keeps us from overlooking significant dynamics in an organization or

system. It is only with this understanding that we can learn to identify leverage points where solving this problem can also solve another issue over time. Leverage occurs when the resources invested in an outcome are smaller than the impact of the outcome.

Temporal Wisdom

Understanding a system requires seeing it over time and distance. When a tree loses its leaves in the fall, we know through experience it is going dormant and in the spring it will grow new leaves for the next season. This understanding comes from many one-year cycles we have witnessed over time. Our scholarship needs to reflect both a rear view and a horizon view. My grandfather believed a person should look at the horizon for at least 15 minutes each day. He thought this kept a person from getting lost in the daily details of his life. The field of student affairs needs to become stronger—connecting things over time, our past to our present and our present to our future. It is only through this connection that we can see the wisdom in the field that remains relevant alongside the new and emerging ideas that will help us evolve.

Provide Multiple Visions of the Future

Scholarship can provide powerful new perspectives of the future of student affairs and higher education. Many new enterprises and worlds have been created by the words of a writer. Leadership is about change, but for change to occur, a vision of the future needs to be articulated. If there is no real hope for a different future, there is no motivation for practitioners to change their behavior in the present. Therefore, a role of scholarship is to identify what is missing in the present and provide alternative perspectives of the future of the field.

Identify New Patterns and Themes for the Field and Higher Education

Hamel and Prahalad (1994) believe the edge of practice lies in the innovations that occur in our daily work, not best practices. They think best practices reflect a “current state of affairs” not the next stage of practice. In a rapidly changing world, the time it takes to under-

stand and apply best practices increases the likelihood that once applied the organization will still be behind. Tracking innovation, on the other hand, and accelerating the dissemination of new ideas, can actually enrich the field and help the field adapt to new images of it. Hamel and Prahalad go on to say that innovation comes from outside the field not from within it. It is in the cross-pollination of disciplines and experience that new ideas are created.

What implications does this have for our literature and our graduate preparation programs? One example of both innovation and cross-pollination has come from a series of conversations involving gifted practitioners in student affairs (Allen and Goddard, 2001). Gifted practitioners are individuals who innovate on their campuses and are skilled in engaging others in change. One commonality among them is they are highly curious and read outside of the field of student affairs and higher education and apply these ideas to their work. These gifted practitioners are examples of individuals who cross-pollinate ideas between various fields, resulting in innovative practices.

Move the Field from Individual Intelligence to Collective Wisdom

For scholarship to achieve the outcome of creating collective intelligence, it should be generative and connect aspects of knowledge and research into a holistic understanding and deeper wisdom. This primarily answers the question, "How does scholarship move us from data to information to knowledge and understanding to wisdom?" Practitioners today have huge volumes of data and information coming across their desks; what we need is help moving information to meaningful understanding. Our literature currently reflects the problem with research as a whole; generally it reflects data about smaller and smaller aspects of our work. Senge (1997) noted that 80% to 90% of all articles published are never referenced again. This would support the belief that while higher education's research efforts reflect a lot of activity, they do little to create generative knowledge for the field.

What Would Emergent Literature Look Like?

This essay is designed to help us reflect on how scholarship should and could contribute to the field of student affairs and to practitioners. This section identifies a variety of strategies that, if adopted, would change the shape of our literature and also align our research and writing activities with the purpose of scholarship, that is, to provide leadership for the field and accomplish the seven roles that would contribute to an emergent view of scholarship. This kind of scholarship would reflect the context in which we practice today.

Collaborative Research

There are many examples in the hard sciences where individuals have been engaged in collaborative research. Most Nobel Laureates in science have been awarded to two to three individuals who have engaged in groundbreaking work, often across continents. In the hard sciences, master's and doctoral students often take various aspects of complex issues and work together to create a broader understanding of the issues by bringing their work into relationship with other collaborators. What would happen if groups of graduate students, faculty, or practitioners combined to study various aspects of a complex phenomenon? An example of this kind of research led to the book *Involving colleges* (Kuh, Schuh, & Whitt, 1991). A group of faculty and graduate students engaged in a qualitative research agenda to study campus cultures that contributed to student involvement. It is a wonderful example of the kind of collaborative research the field needs. Not only was it collaborative, it also studied a complex issue and helped make meaning for practitioners who wanted to improve the quality of student life.

Think Pieces

If our identity is formed in part by what is in our literature, our publications become an important leverage point to help the field evolve. What would happen if we designated one article in each issue of the *NASPA Journal* to help us envision alternate views of the future of higher education and student affairs? These articles could extend our timeframe into the future rather than focusing on the present. A key aspect of leadership is the ability to see what is missing in the present

and envision a different future. Our literature can provide leadership to our field, if it saw its role to do so. An example from a past *Journal* that reflected this approach was NASPA's 75th Anniversary Papers published in Winter, 1993. This issue included four articles that could enhance the collective perspective of the field.

Create a Criterion for All Articles to Include Multidisciplinary Thinking and References

What if we believed our future depended on our ability to access and use knowledge from different disciplines? I find this suggestion somewhat paradoxical in a field that probably has staff members who reflect the highest degree of diversity in undergraduate majors working closely together within a college environment. It is paradoxical that despite this reality, when we write about ourselves we often stay within the discipline of higher education and the specialty of student affairs. Graduate preparation faculty who would use at least one book for each class from outside the field could help support this goal. Encouraging multidisciplinary approaches to learning in our classrooms thus can become a model for this kind of exploration in practice.

Increase the use of Qualitative Research and Action Research Methodologies<H2>

While this kind of research takes longer to accomplish, it often provides an enriched and deeper understanding of the topic being studied. To enhance our understanding and gain holistic knowledge, we need methodologies that create that kind of knowledge.

Create a Cadre of "Story Tellers"<H2>

Oral history has a long tradition with indigenous cultures. In student affairs, many of the innovative practitioners often do not write, because they are too busy "tinkering" or innovating. We need to create new ways to bring their voices to the field. Currently practitioners are like the blue notes in a jazz composition (Sorenson & Hickman, 2001). A blue note indicates a space where no music is played to allow the other sounds to have more richness. Thelonious Monk used blue notes when composing his jazz music to create the nuance, phrasing, and rhythm of the spaces between the formal notes. Our practitioners, while contributing to practice, are like these silent spaces in our literature. How might we bring their wisdom to our literature? One strat-

egy is to identify a group of individuals who would gather stories from the field and weave together the themes and patterns of these stories. This would help us capture what is happening in the lived experience of the field. Existing NASPA knowledge communities would be a wonderful framework for creating a cadre of storytellers.

Create a *NASPA Journal* or Scholars' Environmental Scanners Group

If we need a broader understanding of the environment around us, then we need to create a mechanism to continually scan it. One strategy would be to identify a group of individuals who like to scan the external environment, bring them together to share perspectives, and write an annual article that would share their broader understanding and the implications they see for student affairs and higher education. In *Competing for the Future*, Hamel and Prahalad (1994) state that for strategic planning to be effective, organizations should gather 90% of their environmental scan from outside their field and industry. If we were to use this as a benchmark for higher education, most of our institutions would fail.

Another strategy to help broaden our understanding of the environment would be to radically expand the required reading for our master's and doctoral students. Over time, this strategy would raise a group of practitioners who naturally thought in a new way. For example, what if our graduate preparation faculty, to prepare students to see a broader picture of the field of student affairs and higher education, used this "90% outside of the industry" criterion?

Summary

My lens of leadership has informed the role and purpose of scholarship I have presented in this article. Scholarship can and should provide leadership for the field. It is through our scholarship that we seed the conversation around practice. What we choose to publish can anchor us in our daily details and the past—or provide images of possibilities and increased understanding. The leadership position is to do latter, not the former.

Scholarship that meets the purpose outlined in this article diverges from traditional scholarship in student affairs. Emergent scholarship is created out of connections and integration, not false distinctions between research and practice. The world around us is complex and is only understood from many perspectives held in tension long enough to figure out the whole. Remember the story of the five blind people who are holding onto different parts of an elephant—an ear, tail, leg, trunk, and underbody. Each individual believes his or her experience shows the whole picture of an elephant. It is only through holding the tension between their different viewpoints, however, that they finally realize an elephant is much more than their individual experience. Like the individuals holding onto the elephant, our literature needs to bring a wider variety of perspectives into relationship with each other. The emergent literature of our field needs to embrace writers, storytellers, quantitative and qualitative researchers, innovators, practitioners' experience, and multiple forms of experience and knowing. It is through this collection of diverse perspectives that deeper wisdom comes that can fulfill the role of scholarship in our field—one of contributing meaning, challenge, and vision, and provide leadership to all of us.

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