

A Realistic Look at the Future of
the Student Personnel Profession

by

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In the twenty years I have been associated with the student personnel profession, the professional literature and convention programs have been replete with discussions of new roles for student personnel workers. I can't think of another profession that seems to have suffered such a continuous identity crisis. Why can't we seem to find our place in the world of higher education?

One possible explanation is that higher education itself keeps changing. While that fact is undeniable, it cannot stand as the sole explanation of our troubles as a profession. As persons, all of us live perpetually in a world of change, and yet most of us move fairly comfortably with the ebb and flow of the change that Burns has called "nature's mighty law." Change, in and of itself, does not necessarily precipitate an identity crisis.

A second possible explanation for our doubt and insecurity regarding the place of our profession in education might be our relative youth. The identity crisis is ordinarily spoken of in connection with youth--but we're not exactly young anymore; we should be approaching professional maturity. The profession has generally been recognized,

on campus organizational charts at least, as meriting equal representation at the vice presidential level with administrative and academic programs. True, we've been plagued by some rather unusual problems in recent years, but the problems faced by academic vice presidents and budget officers are comparable I should think. Thus, the existence of very difficult problems does not necessarily precipitate a questioning of purpose; frequently exceptional challenge elicits a rededication and strengthening of purpose.

Why then do we perpetually seek a change in role while other professions seem more concerned with learning new methods and procedures for carrying out their functions more effectively? We alone seem to be asking what we are supposed to do rather than how we can do our jobs better.

I am genuinely puzzled about our quest for purpose. Rational analysis of the situation tells me that there is an important job to be done, but I am also aware that student personnel offices continue to be abolished or devitalized or redefined. At the AAHE annual meeting recently, I awoke from the reverie that I usually adopt for convention speeches to hear a respected college president predict that by the mid 1980's "The student personnel function, already weakened by changes in life style and the relationship of college to student, will probably disappear" (Marmion, 1972).

Striking closer to home is Father Rehnert's recipe for "self-help" in the fiscal crisis facing Catholic colleges, in which he calls for

"scrutiny of student services to determine which ones can be decreased" (Chronicle for Higher Education, April 10, 1972, p.3). He's right, of course. Everything that colleges are doing that costs money will have to be scrutinized--but worse yet, each program or function will become the competitor of other programs in the fight for survival. Hard choices will have to be made, and unless student personnel offices are performing important functions well, they should be abolished, and they will be.

We know this, of course. And we react with fear and with honest concern that not all decisions will be made with wisdom and educational vision. This threat to our values, our egos, and our jobs has, I suggest, created a fear-threatened profession. And in many ways, we act like the fear-threatened personalities that have engaged the interest of research psychologists.

Psychologists have given considerable attention to studying both the positive (survival) and the negative effects of fear. Some of their insights regarding fear-threatened individuals can be used to help us gain insight into the problems of a fear-threatened profession.

One of the things we have learned about individuals who fear failure is that they tend to set goals that are either too easy or too hard. The failure-threatened individual avoids tasks in which the outcome is uncertain because when he faces a new learning situation, his self-doubts and insecurity lead him to expect failure. He is motivated to defend himself against this threat of failure by selecting

easy, if inconsequential tasks, where success is virtually assured. Or he goes to the other extreme and sets such difficult or grandiose goals that no one expects him to accomplish them and therefore he suffers no loss of face when he fails.

I see this failure syndrome clearly in student personnel offices across the country. Some personnel deans set very low aspirations for themselves and for their staff by concentrating major energies on trivia. If the work is largely invisible and inconsequential, at least it offers no opportunity for a public display of failure.

At the other extreme, I dip into the professional literature or I go to conferences and I see where student personnel workers are going to become the campus climatologists of the future--the experts who will shape and control the learning environment. Clearly, our failure to do much about this admittedly important but grandiose goal is not exactly threatening to us as individuals or as professionals. The setting of unrealistic goals is an observable behavior of fear-threatened individuals or professions.

What then is a more constructive approach? Psychologists describe achievement-motivated individuals as those who are able to focus their attention on improving their performance rather than on protecting themselves against failure. The achievement-motivated person tends to approach tasks that are basically realistic but just a little beyond his present capacity. Thus he is always learning and growing, but he is always taking some risk. While his expectation

for success is positive, he is never quite sure that he will be able to accomplish his goal. Browning said it well, "Ah, but a man's reach should exceed his grasp, or what's a Heaven for?" For an individual, this stance is obviously healthy. The individual places himself in a challenging position so that he has to keep growing and developing, but he does not place himself in such high risk situations that the chances for failure are considerably better than those for success. The analogy for the profession is clear. If we wish to grow and develop, we need to become achievement-motivated, defining our goals realistically, but willing to try new things that offer potential for improving our programs and our competencies.

I believe that the most urgent task facing the profession is to turn our attention from the defensive stance, which protects our collective ego against failure, to a positive attitude that advances the profession as well as higher education. I suggest that we do this through setting realistic goals and formulating specific programs to accomplish them. I intend to talk today about the future of student personnel as an achievement-motivated profession. Only in that framework will we learn and grow as a profession, and only in that way will we make the contributions to higher education that we are capable of making.

The formulation of realistic goals is not a simple task. It seems to me that the goals must meet three major criteria.

1. They should flow with, rather than against, the currents of higher education in general. I would not predict success, for example, for the dean of students who triples his budget request this year--regardless of how brilliant his program.

2. They should take advantage of the background, training, and interests that we possess as a profession--which is not to deny the need for most of us to stretch and grow a bit to improve our capabilities.
3. The formulation of student personnel programs should conform to the general rules of accountability. In simplest terms, the requirements of accountability are three-fold.
 - 1) the goals should be broadly recognized as important by the academic community,
 - 2) a specific program should be formulated to accomplish the desired ends,
 - 3) the effectiveness of the new program should be evaluated and the results used for continuous improvement.

Now having made the task of goal setting really hard for myself, what would I suggest?

Let us begin with a blending of the first and second criteria that I have just given for setting realistic goals--that we flow with the trends of the times and that we select goals appropriate to our talents and training. One of the greatest evolutions of all time is taking place in the characteristics of students attending colleges and universities. Since our expertise and interest lie in serving students, a concern with what we can do to help new students adjust to colleges and at the same time to help colleges adjust to the presence of these new groups on campus seems a natural. Indeed, it seems a necessity.

For the first time in the history of higher education, we are faced with almost overwhelming diversity in the characteristics of the student body. Institutions everywhere are having trouble, consciously or unconsciously, adapting to these new demands. Traditionally, we are geared to serving a student body that in a national sample would consist largely of white academically-able males from the upper socioeconomic strata who are between the ages of 18 and 25. We may need to be reminded, but no one needs to be told, that the trend that is taking place in higher education today that has the greatest potential for permanent and far-reaching impact on all higher education is the egalitarian pressure for universal higher education--a postsecondary system of education that will serve the needs of all the people.

New Students to higher education in the decade ahead will consist of much greater proportions of students from the following groups: ethnic minorities, students with poor academic records, women--especially those from the lower socioeconomic levels, and adults. Each of these groups has needs that are not being met by traditional education. I propose that a critical role for student personnel workers is to serve as the consumer advocates for these New Students. While the methods need not be those of Nader's Raiders, the basic procedures will have much in common with those used by the notorious champion of the consumer. Fundamentally, we need to know in what ways our colleges fail to give students maximum value for their time, energy, and money. And we need to assume some leadership in creating the necessary reforms.

An accountable plan for action might go like this. Student personnel professionals should become the sources of accurate up-to-date information about the needs and characteristics of students on their campus. It has been amazing to me to discover how little college faculty and administrators know about their students. I talked with a community college dean recently who told of an older woman who, while eating lunch in her car in the parking lot, noticed many other women doing the same thing. This woman student was returning to college after her youngest child was in school; she preferred to bring her lunch, and she felt awkward and strange with the younger students in the noisy cafeteria. Reasoning that other women shared her loneliness, she asked the dean if she could get a list of names so that she might contact others who shared her interests and anxieties. The computer turned up 800 women 25 years of age or older in a community college student body of 3,500. As the dean confessed, "We were simply amazed." But his new knowledge led to new questions. What courses were they taking? Why? What did they want from their education? How were they managing the scheduling of classes, the use of the library, their anxieties about returning to the classroom? How were they doing academically? What was the attrition rate for this large group of students who had appeared quite unheralded within what the dean thought must be the last few years? This is an extremely simple and obvious illustration, but it is a real-life story of how the needs of an important subgroup of new students can be ignored unless an educational advocate exists who knows the characteristics of the students and how to formulate services and programs to meet their needs.

There are numerous ways to get information about students. In this example, the registration cards were sorted to reveal a subgroup that someone thought might be significant. The same information might have been less accidentally obtained through the annual use of professionally or institutionally prepared student characteristic questionnaires. In practice such profiles have not been nearly as useful as they could and should be because once the statistics are compiled, they gather dust on the shelf. No one looks at the data with some imaginative hypotheses about what the existence of students with such characteristics should mean to the college program. I learned enough from descriptive information about students who graduated in the lowest third of their high school class to think that a book should be written about how education has failed them (Cross, 1971).

Not so incidentally, that is another source of knowledge about groups of students. The literature abounds with information about ethnic groups and more recently women, and more recently yet, adults. Much of the literature is simply descriptive. It needs to be translated into action. And this task requires a high level of professional expertise which can, I suggest, be provided by student personnel workers who understand students and colleges well enough to propose realistic programs that will maximize the fit between student needs and college offerings.

Many student personnel workers are frightened away from research and the collection and interpretation of data. But research of the type I am proposing is nowhere near as esoteric as many non-researchers have been led to believe. Most personnel workers spend more time than most

researchers using one of the major research tools--the interview. But personnel staff fail to use it to maximum advantage. They are inclined to see the interview either as a counseling session or an administrative matter. Rarely do they ask the troublesome questions about what the college could do to alleviate the problem of the student before them and hundreds like him. I have been critical of the one-to-one counseling orientation of many personnel workers who view their task as one of helping the student accept whatever it is that the college happens to offer (Cross, 1971). The counseling orientation of helping the student adjust to what is may have been appropriate in the 1950's when students were selected for their potential to profit from what the college offered; it is not appropriate in the 1970's with its emphasis on open admissions. If we lead people to believe that useful and meaningful education lies beyond the open door, then we have an obligation to do everything in our power to deliver on our promise. Interviews with students can certainly be used to assist the student with his immediate problems, but they should also serve as a valuable source of insight to possible institutional modification. But interviews alone are not sufficient. I suggest that information brought to light by the experience of one student needs to be verified through research that portrays the total situation accurately and is convincing and persuasive to faculty and other policy makers. The educational advocate then must go beyond the collection of data to formulate a specific proposal for implementation.

I suggested earlier that the first rule of accountability is to define a task that is perceived as important by the academic community.

Serving the educational needs of groups of students who are new to higher education adequately meets that criterion. Certainly anyone or any profession that can demonstrate effectiveness in providing equality of educational opportunity to groups of people who are arriving in college on the crest of the egalitarian wave need not worry about identity or roles or survival in the years ahead. Having picked an important and realistic function and having established the personnel office as the possessor of adequate information about it, the next steps in educational advocacy are to design some specific solutions and to constantly evaluate and monitor the results. Let me illustrate these functions with some examples.

As some of you know, I have been especially interested in the impact of the new open admissions policies on higher education. Following my own prescription, I first sought a good description of the characteristics of these New Students to higher education. I defined them as those graduating in the lowest one-third of the high school graduating classes, since it is the inadequate academic preparation of these students--whatever their racial or socioeconomic characteristics--that poses the major challenge to higher education. In the 1950's and early 1960's very few of these students entered postsecondary education; today over half of them are planning to continue their education beyond high school. A capsule description of these students as a group would go something like this.

The majority of them are the white sons and daughters of blue-

collar workers, although a significant number are from ethnic minorities. Two-thirds are first generation college students; their parents have had no experience with college. These young people don't read much outside of school. They prefer to spend their time watching television, rapping with friends, or creating things with tools for the boys or cooking and sewing for the girls. When New Students are asked what they do best, they mention talents that are not developed in school, whereas traditional students are most likely to select activities such as reading or working with numerical concepts. Thus I conclude that these New Students have been unlikely to find rewards for good performance within the school system. If they want praise and even self-respect, they will probably have to find it elsewhere. It is not surprising then that these students are vocationally oriented and are attending college to get the credentials that lead to better jobs. They don't seek intellectual stimulation from their classes, nor do they anticipate discovering the joy of learning; they just hope to survive and to protect themselves against too obvious failure. Statistically, only 16 percent of these New Students score in the top one-third on the Intellectual Disposition Scale of the OPI compared to 60 percent of the traditional students that higher education was designed to serve (Cross, 1971).

But these New Students don't blame the school system for their lack of success; unfortunately, they blame themselves. They are basically conservative young people who believe in the puritan work ethic. Broadly speaking, they respect the authority of the school and the state, and they believe that hard work is the way to get ahead

and that people get what they deserve in this life. Many of them are already working at part-time jobs both because they need the money and, I suggest, because they need the psychological boost that working at a job gives them. There is some evidence to indicate that they learn job-related material well because it is usually concrete and its usefulness is apparent.

Now, what should all this suggest to us about the educational needs of New Students? What it seems to have suggested to many is that New Students need remedial education to prepare them for the traditional college curricula and counseling to increase their motivation for intellectual study and financial aid to permit them to pursue study full time. In other words, it suggests that if we can make New Students more like traditional students, they will do better in a system geared to the needs of traditional students. The logic is probably irrefutable, but it is not the only alternative.

What the research on New Students suggests to me is that we need many more programs of cooperative education--part-time work and part-time study. We need to look at the interests of New Students in jobs and the concrete useful application of knowledge as an advantage instead of a disadvantage. We need to provide connections between the classroom and the application of useful knowledge and we need to recognize the psychological importance of providing opportunities for high levels of performance and solid achievement in a wider range of learning tasks. I have serious doubts about the benevolent wisdom

of providing full financial assistance to enable New Students to spend full-time at educational tasks that they find onerous without providing the opportunity for self-development and independence that they may find in jobs. I believe that if we were to spend the same amount of money and time locating and creating jobs in the community that have a real potential for learning that we spend on remedial education, counseling and large financial grants, we would be developing the strengths of New Students and offering them the opportunity for self-development through focusing on their strengths instead of forever on their weaknesses. I can't really blame a young person who is exposed to the constant well-meaning kindness of counselors and teachers who strive earnestly to "improve" his abilities and attitudes, for splitting the scene.

I particularly commend cooperative education programs to private colleges that are seeking a distinctive mission and a way out of their financial plight. Father Reinert has warned that financial aid to students will have to be cut. Why not emphasize the financial as well as the educational advantages of cooperative education? If your college is enrolling substantial numbers of New Students, your role as educational advocate might consist of designing a plan for cooperative education.

This is but one example of the ways in which research about student characteristics can be used to formulate specific programs designed to meet the needs of a defined subgroup of students. Other examples can easily be given for other groups of students.

We are doing some research now at Educational Testing Service that will identify the barriers that higher education at the national level has quite unthinkingly erected against the full participation of mature women who wish to return to college. With a little thought and some conversation with the women who have made it across the barriers of your college, you might serve as educational advocates for the removal of what have proved to be some quite formidable and totally unnecessary administrative barriers if your institution decides that education for this subgroup is within their ability and their mission.

Many of you will be able to identify student groups in your campus now whose educational experiences are not all that they should and could be. As the radio commercial goes, "If you can't think of anything you can do, think harder." As you talk with students, listen for the clues that provide insight for the improvement of educational programming. Select a good survey instrument of student characteristics and attitudes and ponder the meaning of the data and the trends that are taking place in the composition of the student body from year to year. Discussion of these issues in staff meetings would, I believe, lend to livelier, more achievement-oriented personnel and, incidentally a better image on the campus, than would the usual review of the latest problems with the registration of social events and the advising of student organizations--or at the other extreme, vague discussions of student development and campus climatology.

The role of educational advocate that I envisage for student personnel workers, however, is even more ambitious than the identification of the problem and the formulation of a solution. While I am convinced that these alone would constitute an extremely valuable contribution we, as student personnel workers, can go even further. In the case of programs for cooperative education for example, I think the talents and experiences of student personnel professionals are admirably suited to working with the community to establish appropriate student jobs, to the placement of students in educationally meaningful jobs, to the supervision and evaluation of the work experience, and to the financial aid implications of the program for students. All of these are functions in which we claim expertise and they are services we are performing anyway--but we are performing them largely as a service to students and not as an integral part of their learning experience. It seems to me that the real future of personnel work lies in its marriage to the curriculum. We have suffered too long from the isolationist stance that says we are responsible for the out-of-class experiences of students.

The final reality-based goal that I suggested for student personnel workers of the future stressed the importance of evaluation. Since Paul Dressel will give you the best word you can get on that issue, I will not discuss it here. I do wish to say, however, that no new program should be introduced and considered a final product. Evaluation is the key to improvement, and new, as well as old student personnel programs should be subjected to analyses of their importance and effectiveness. The silver lining of the cloud of financial

distress is that we are forced to think about the value of what we're offering.

In summary then, I have suggested that student personnel workers should set their aspirations for the challenging task of helping institutions provide for the educational needs of the very diverse subgroups of students that will be entering your colleges in the decade ahead. Nationally, these groups are broadly identified as those from the various ethnic minorities, women from the lower socio-economic strata, students who have not done well in traditional education, and adults who are the vanguard of the life-long learning movement. Your local situation may suggest other groups or you may recognize sizeable subgroups that you wish to serve within the groups that I have mentioned.

Of course, we will continue to try to humanize education by serving students individually, but that goal is not the distinctive province of student personnel offices. This is not to deny the importance of student personnel workers assuming the leadership in using research on student development wherever possible. It is to emphasize the importance of formulating specific programs that have the potential for attaining a defined goal. We can no longer afford to content ourselves with carrying out the administrative trivia for the campus or of speaking of vague goals and high-sounding promises that are not firmly grounded in the realities of accountability.