



The Student Learning Imperative

Senior Scholars reaffirm the importance of ACPA's 1994 statement

Many student affairs professionals have expressed concern about the July 15, 2008, release of “Rebuilding Campus Community: The Wrong Imperative” by the National Association of Scholars (NAS). The ACPA Senior Scholars offer this brief commentary about the NAS statement and propose ways that we continue to advocate for the importance of student learning in the academy.

Perhaps first, all educators who care about student learning should savor the moment. The “Student Learning Imperative” was a progressive and controversial statement when ACPA issued it in 1994. The numerous scholarly references to the “Student Learning Imperative” are testament to its relevance and its influence on American higher education. The National Association of Scholars’ statement affirms ACPA’s role in bringing the importance of learning to the attention of student affairs professionals as well as educators throughout our institutions. The fact that the National Association of Scholars statement disagrees with the core principles of the SLI, suggests the NAS takes the statement seriously, despite their opposition to the roles that student affairs professionals have played in student learning.

“Rebuilding Campus Community: The Wrong Imperative” is absolutely correct in one of its essential points. Faculty should return to a role of being more engaged with students beyond the classroom. Although the “Student Learning Imperative” commented on the importance of student affairs work in higher education, it also advocated the importance of collaborative relationships with a variety of institutional agents who will help create an integrated learning experience for students. The “Student Learning Imperative” recognized that some of its aims might be perceived as infringing on faculty territory. The point was, as faculty presence continued to decrease (and considerable evidence confirmed that it had), someone needed to bring attention to the trend and propose strategies that would renew the focus on student learning. ACPA did this on behalf of student affairs. Student affairs professionals should increase their effort to engage with faculty, rather than work around them, as we share responsibility to enhance student learning. Our greatest opportunity is to serve as catalysts to involve faculty and students in deeper and holistic learning.

The National Association of Scholars’ statement asserts the importance of liberal education. Student affairs, as a profession, emerged at a time when John Dewey, (an advocate for democratic and engaged learning) and Robert Maynard Hutchins (President of the University of Chicago and advocate for the study of great books in liberal learning) debated the focus of liberal education. Student affairs was most influenced by Dewey and thus sought to foster learning informed through students’ full involvement with real problems in their communities. Dewey and Hutchins’ perspectives are still actively debated in academic circles. The ACPA Senior Scholars align themselves with Dewey’s views about engaged learning. Student affairs should continue to initiate conversations about enhancing student learning; we should listen carefully and engage our faculty colleagues so that their concerns can be addressed, resulting in more effective partnerships to enhance student learning.

We hope that as student affairs professionals you will not simply dismiss the assertions of “Rebuilding Campus Community: The Wrong Imperative.” Rather, we encourage you to realize that our academic communities have to struggle with the important issues of how all members of the academy can work collaboratively to enhance student learning. The National Association of Scholars’ statement has helped bring this concern to the attention of many. The statement demonstrates that the contribution of student affairs professionals, although contested, is being noticed, and it offers clues about the work that lies ahead.

A statement issued on August 17, 2008, on behalf of the ACPA Senior Scholars by (in alphabetical order):

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