TASK FORCE ON THE FUTURE OF STUDENT AFFAIRS

CO-CHAIRS

Vasti Torres
Indiana University

Jan Walbert
Arcadia University

MEMBERS

Kristen Alley
North Central Missouri
Community College

Dennis Black
University at Buffalo

Michael Cuyjet
University of Louisville

Joyce Ester
California State
University–Fresno

Barbara Jones
Miami University

Brian McCoy
Nichols College

Salvador Mena
University of North
Carolina–Chapel Hill

Myra Morgan
University of Florida

Kent Porterfield
Saint Louis University

Raymond Quirolgico
University of San Francisco

Larry Roper
Oregon State University

Richard Stevens
Shepherd University

Christine Strong
State University of
New York–Potsdam

Elizabeth Whitt
University of Iowa

ENVISIONING THE FUTURE OF STUDENT AFFAIRS

Final report of the
Task Force on the Future of Student Affairs
Appointed jointly by ACPA and NASPA

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ACPA
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In this report, the Task Force on the Future of Student Affairs considers current trends that will have a dramatic impact on higher education in the United States for the foreseeable future and outlines the implications of those trends for student affairs. We begin with a look backward at our past, seeking lessons from our foundations to assist us in moving forward.

LEARNING FROM THE FIELD'S PAST TO SHAPE ITS FUTURE

As in all fields of higher education in the United States, student affairs has been influenced by shifting social, economic, and political trends in its ever-changing environment. At key points across our history, the field's professional associations have initiated efforts to think critically about the nature of student affairs work and its relevance to the mission of higher education. These "calls to action" provided clear direction to assist student affairs in meeting our institutions' and students' needs. The documents produced by these efforts continue to challenge us to focus on the field's future while inspiring us to maintain the risk-taking ideals that have shaped our history.

To assist the Task Force in its efforts, we reviewed the following foundational documents: the 1937 and 1949 versions of *The Student Personnel Point of View* (American Council on Education [ACE], 1937, 1949), the T.H.E. (Tomorrow's Higher Education) project's *Student Development in Tomorrow's Higher Education* (Brown, 1972), *A Perspective on Student Affairs* (NASPA, 1987), *The Student Learning Imperative* (American College Personnel Association [ACPA], 1994), and *Learning Reconsidered* (ACPA et al.,2004, 2006). Although the efforts that produced these documents were prompted by differing circumstances and contexts, five themes are common to all: (1) defining the nature of student affairs work, (2) developing

and expanding theories and research to inform practice, (3) responding to, and increasing, the diversity of students, (4) demonstrating accountability for student learning and success, and (5) designing and ensuring professional development for effective student affairs practice.

DEFINING THE NATURE OF STUDENT AFFAIRS WORK

The Student Personnel Point of View—both the 1937 and 1949 versions—defines the role of student affairs as the delivery of services enhancing educational experiences of college students and defines the context of student affairs work in terms of institutional and societal values. Student services defined much of student affairs until the mid-1970s, when student development—as a theoretical framework, as well as a focus for working with students—created new ways of thinking about the nature of student affairs.

A Perspective on Student Affairs (1987) and *The Student Learning Imperative (1994),* reminded the student affairs field about the importance of grounding our work in the missions of our institutions. The latter document also directed the definition of student affairs work away from student development and toward student learning. While some considered this shift radical, others argued that "the concepts of 'learning,' 'personal development,' and 'student development' are inextricably intertwined and inseparable" (ACPA, 1994, ¶6).

DEVELOPING AND EXPANDING THEORIES AND RESEARCH TO INFORM PRACTICE

The development and expansion of the theoretical and research foundations of the student affairs field has been a constant thread throughout the field's history. The Tomorrow's Higher Education (T.H.E.) project, for example, as represented in the work of Miller and Prince (1977), is almost completely devoted to the explanation and application of theories of student development to the practice of student affairs. *A Perspective* and *The Student Learning Imperative* also called for research about how college students learn and develop, as well as to provide evidence about the contributions of student affairs to student success. Taken together, these documents argue that effective student affairs work—rather than evolving from tradition—must be grounded

in data, in research documenting good practices for assisting students and promoting their success. More recent examinations of the field, such as *Learning Reconsidered* (2004, 2006), continue this message to the field.

INCREASING AND RESPONDING TO THE DIVERSITY OF STUDENTS

The increasing diversity among college students is a theme in all of these foundational documents, some of which focus solely on the changing demographics among all students in higher education while others consider the access and retention of student populations historically underrepresented in college. The most recent of the foundational documents register concerns that, although institutions of higher education provide access to increasingly diverse pools of students, significant achievement gaps remain between students from underrepresented groups and their majority counterparts. Helping our campus communities understand, respond to, and benefit from the diversity of all our students has often been a responsibility of student affairs. The field of student affairs also has had a key role in bringing to light the disparities in students' educational opportunities (Sandeen & Barr, 2006).

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DEMONSTRATING ACCOUNTABILITY FOR STUDENT LEARNING AND SUCCESS

While accountability of student affairs is a common theme in several of the foundational documents, the documents are less clear about the outcomes for which the field should be accountable. Many of these documents convey either the explicit or implicit expectation that student affairs be responsible for the learning and success of college students. Reports published in the past 20 years, such as *Learning Reconsidered,* have increasingly focused on the need to demonstrate—through research and assessment—the ways and the extent to which student affairs programs and services achieve the desired higher education outcomes and contribute to institutional effectiveness. Despite many calls for outcomes assessment and data-based decision making in student affairs, there have been only a few examples illustrating efforts in the field to respond wholeheartedly or effectively to these calls.

DESIGNING AND ENSURING PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT FOR EFFECTIVE PRACTICE

The final theme among the foundational documents focuses on how individuals are, or should be, trained for student affairs work. Some documents see the training of professionals as the responsibility of graduate preparation programs, while others focus on multiple entryways into the field. Both depictions place tremendous responsibility on professional associations for assuring high quality student affairs work.

Professional development offerings have always been a benefit of association membership, yet little has been done to determine the impact of that benefit on the effectiveness of student affairs practice. Commenting on the growth in professional associations, Sandeen and Barr (2006) wrote that the "many specialized student affairs professional associations have formed primarily because the two generalist associations in the field, ACPA and NASPA, have not been able to respond effectively to the needs of these professional staff" (p. 191).

At the close of the first decade of the 21st century, we face another critical moment for higher education and for student affairs.

At the close of the first decade of the 21st century, we face another critical moment for higher education and for student affairs. Current and emerging societal changes press higher education to fulfill its role in securing social and economic justice, sustaining natural resources, and perpetuating democracy. What role will student affairs assume as this future unfolds? The field must seize this moment for self-examination so that it can claim its critical role in a dramatically changing, uncertain environment. In the following section, we elaborate on the context shaping the future of higher education and the student affairs field.

THE INFLUENCE OF TODAY'S CONTEXT ON THE FUTURE

Although many of the challenges of the past continue to play a role in the work of student affairs, significant new pressures face us today. The world is characterized by increasingly integrated economies, connected through an international knowledge network, and linked through communication and information technologies. Millions of higher education students and scholars

move about the world to learn, teach, research, and disseminate knowledge—sharing aspects of culture and furthering understanding of social structures. Although globalization affects institutions differently, all colleges and universities feel the effects of an interconnected global society. The integration of the environment external to higher education has a substantial influence on the success of students and the ability of higher education to meet the needs of an ever-changing student population.

The contextual influences listed below have implications for resources and access, as well as for educational delivery systems. Equally important are their implications for what student affairs must do to provide the leadership the future requires. This list—neither exhaustive nor detailed—identifies environmental challenges that will shape the future of student affairs. (The appendix accompanying this report includes a bibliography of documents reviewed and considered by the Task Force with resources for studying and addressing these challenges; see pp. 18–23 of Appendix.)

GLOBALIZATION

- Increasingly integrated, interdependent economies
- Expanding and highly complex international knowledge networks
- Intensifying availability of communication and information technology
- Movement of millions of students and scholars around the world—learning, teaching, conducting research, disseminating knowledge, and spreading cultural influences

DEMAND FOR HIGHER EDUCATION

- Dramatic increase in demand driven by postindustrial, knowledge-driven shifts in economies
- Expansion of education systems, especially in Europe, Japan, Latin America, India, and China
- Increased pressure on college infrastructures as a result of increased enrollment
- Predicted increase in life expectancies and corresponding increase in world population will create additional demand for higher education

GAPS IN EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT AND ACHIEVEMENT

- Anticipated increases in higher education participation of underrepresented minority and lower socioeconomic groups, creating new opportunities

- Widening gap in literacy and numeracy skills across diverse U.S. school-age and adult populations

- Significant population increases among people of Hispanic or Latino origin, raising the importance of understanding multiple cultures

- Glaring inequities across economic and cultural groups in access to opportunities in higher education

EXPANDING TECHNOLOGIES

- Developing electronic technologies multiply the modes and accelerate the speed of communications

- Expanding distance education offerings increase demand for services beyond traditional timeframes

- Enlarging social network systems have implications for teaching, learning, and education services

- Increasing electronic media venues enhance the capabilities of student organization and dissent beyond public physical acts

ECONOMIC FLUCTUATIONS AND HIGHER EDUCATION

- Restricted public funding—not keeping pace with rising costs of higher education, leading to greater reliance on tuition and fees as well as private support

- Intensified pressure for educational access, affordability, higher quality, and better outcomes

- Shift of education cost to the individual; requiring greater accountability for student services to be seen as central to the educational core

- Creation of legislative initiatives that include unfunded mandates and compliance requirements

While listed as discrete, these influences are interdependent and responsible for creating the societal turbulence professionals in the field must adapt to if

student affairs work is to remain viable. Thinking within the context of these influences, the Task Force has derived a set of implications for the future of the student affairs field.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FUTURE OF STUDENT AFFAIRS

The turbulence in the context of student affairs described above requires a thorough—yet expeditious—examination of our purposes, roles, structures, and resources to determine their efficacy and sufficiency. Although the history of the field is replete with calls for forward thinking and risk-taking in the name of doing student affairs work in new ways under new conditions, too often change is upon us before we have prepared for its impact. In many instances we greet change by doing what we always have done, only better. At no other time in history has the incentive for real change been more powerful or the consequences for not changing more significant. The field's ability to survive and thrive rests on our willingness to look at our work in a new light, focusing on the implications of the globalization of education and technologies, of the demands for access and success in higher education for a dramatically changing student population, of revolutionary delivery systems, and of unprecedented economic fluctuations. The implications we share here focus on two broad ideas: rethinking student affairs work and having a unified voice for the student affairs field.

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RETHINKING STUDENT AFFAIRS WORK

Rethinking student affairs work means redefining roles and structures, ensuring success for all students, creating partnerships without borders, making data-driven decisions, and broadening the meaning of "the campus."

Redefining roles and structures.

The ways we define our field, the scope of our work, and our roles in fulfilling the missions of our institutions must change. We can no longer afford, for example, to build metaphorical fences between "student affairs professionals"

and others who also are engaged in fostering student success. Providing leadership to meet the future effectively requires expanding the definition of student affairs work and focusing on ways that enable all who work with students to do so more effectively. In this expansive view of student affairs work, existing structures—institutional divisions, reporting lines, hierarchical notions of whose work matters—are of questionable value, as well as having little to do with students. What would student affairs work "look like" if it were organized for the success of today's students and today's higher education?

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Success for all students.

History, culture, and economic structures continue to influence collegiate participation. Despite increasing demands outside and inside higher education to increase access and participation in higher education, significant gaps in enrollment, achievement, and completion persist between "majority" students and those from historically and currently underserved populations. Of all the barriers to participation, cost tends to be the most significant, and funding limitations have direct consequences on both individuals and institutions.

Retention and degree completion continue to be considered the strongest indicators of educational progress, yet the diversity of learners in higher education brings these traditional measures into question. Attention must be paid to student engagement, to the quality of the learning environment, and to academic and social supports provided to diverse students attending higher education institutions. Sixty years of research on college impact demonstrates that the most important factor in student success—more important than incoming student characteristics—is student engagement, i.e., students' investment of time and effort in educationally purposeful activities.

Institutions play a critical role in student engagement by creating environments, opportunities, and conditions facilitating—or inhibiting—student success. As the race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, national origin, and age of college students change more dramatically than ever, we need a clear understanding of

who our students are to create conditions for their success.   Student affairs professionals must become more skillful in working with diverse learners and more attentive to policies that create barriers for those who may not fit the traditional image of a college student or of how college is experienced. Treating all students the same is not acceptable; true access to success must be ensured.

Partnerships without borders.

In the new view of student affairs work, on-campus partnerships continue to be essential and challenging. Breaking down internal silos, while critical, is not enough. The mobility of students and the diversity of their experiences require a rethinking of the nature of student affairs collaborations. In order to successfully meet the needs of our students and institutions we must move beyond the campus to form partnerships with community agencies, government entities, and private industries. Student affairs units on some campuses, for example, have worked with local social service agencies to create campus services (e.g., food banks, child care, safe housing) for homeless students and their families.

The implications of the globalization of higher education include the need to think differently about the language and cultural practices used in student affairs work.

Meeting the needs of our students and institutions also demands creating partnerships beyond local, state, and national boundaries. Undergraduates from outside the United States are coming to our campuses—and U.S. students are studying abroad—in unprecedented numbers. The implications of the globalization of higher education include the need to think differently about the language and cultural practices used in student affairs work.

Data-driven decision making for accountability.

Pressures to ensure that all students achieve the desired college outcomes are driving many countries to consider enacting policies to address quality assurance in higher education. In the process, government officials and higher education leaders struggle to define meaningful outcomes that can encompass diverse and complex institutional missions, student demographics, and the nature of our work.

Calls for assessment and accountability are not new. What is new is the magnitude and seriousness of the demands that all aspects of higher education provide clear evidence of effectiveness and efficiency. In this environment, the demand for evidence that colleges actually provide the learning and development they claim to provide has never been stronger or clearer. The use of high-quality data to support decisions about policies, programs, and practices is increasingly expected. This climate of evidence-based accountability promises to be particularly challenging for student affairs.

The assessment movement in higher education is several decades old, but it has primarily focused on aspects of teaching and learning traditionally considered the purview of the faculty and academic affairs. Examples of a culture of evidence in student affairs— such as outcomes-based planning and assessment or the systematic use of assessment data to support decision making—are few and far between. This must change. All student affairs practitioners, regardless of functional area, must approach their work with the assumption that all aspects of it must be supported by evidence gathered through accepted modes of assessment and consistent with the research about college student success.

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Broadening the meaning of "the campus."

The mobility of students and the diversity of their experiences also require a rethinking of where higher education (and student affairs work) takes place and by what methods. According to a National Center for Education Statistics report (Parsad & Lewis, 2008), 66 percent of institutions offered some type of distance education for their students. Distance education courses accounted for 12.2 million registrations. As students demand more flexibility, traditional approaches to providing education and services will be called into question. Without changes to brick-and-mortar offices, the services provided by student affairs may be deemed not critical to the education of this growing population.

A UNIFIED VOICE FOR STUDENT AFFAIRS

One voice to represent student affairs is critical to creating the desired future for the field. The existence of two comprehensive student affairs associations creates infrastructure issues that preclude that common voice. Division of the field's leadership in this manner means that the field's voice is fragmented rather than collective, competitive rather than collaborative, and duplicative rather than efficient. For these reasons, this Task Force endorses the creation—through a unified effort—of one common voice to coordinate and represent the student affairs field.

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In the spring of 2009 the Task Force began to explore how a common voice could be achieved by requesting the governing bodies of both ACPA and NASPA to charge their executive directors with considering the structural alignment of the two associations. The co-chairs of the Task Force also asked these executive directors to speak with their counterparts in professional associations of other fields in higher education and of specializations within student affairs; the Task Force co-chairs also spoke with elected leaders of these associations. The consensus from all these conversations was clear: the leadership of other higher education associations support the concept of a single, unified, comprehensive student affairs association.

Discussions with the executive directors and presiding presidents of both associations indicated that many structural elements can be aligned rather quickly, yet all discussants recognized that the alignment of programs to lessen duplication cannot be done without a commitment from the governing bodies. Therefore, the two associations continue to function as competitors until some form of organizational restructuring is complete. Meanwhile, this level of competition and the related duplication of programs, resources, and efforts do not serve the profession well.

Assessing and responding to the field's professional development needs must include its associations' reflecting on current practices in professional

development. Particularly important is an evaluation of where offerings are redundant and the extent to which this redundancy is effective and/or efficient in meeting the needs of the profession. Proprietary organizations sell expertise in higher education and student affairs, without collaborating with national associations, because the growth in needs is not met through competitive efforts. The leadership mandates of professional associations go beyond those borne by individuals and institutions. Associations serving professionals in student affairs must ponder the unprecedented challenges now facing higher education and reframe association issues to acknowledge student affairs professionals as leaders in institutional success. Doing so will require considering how professional development is conceptualized, organized, and delivered to make the most of available expertise and resources.

A common voice can promote and represent student affairs to external and internal stakeholders and can provide a unified representation of the profession.

A common voice can promote and represent student affairs to external and internal stakeholders and can provide a unified representation of the profession. Unified, the organization can also link other student affairs specialty/functional area associations and model the stronger links needed among these functional areas on campuses.

Creating a unified, comprehensive student affairs voice is not within the purview of this Task Force; this process must be driven by the governing bodies and elected leaders of each association. Nevertheless, our examination of the context and future of student affairs leads us to the inescapable conclusion that a unified voice for student affairs provided through a single, comprehensive association is vital to the field's future and ought to be assiduously pursued.

Although we have described these implications in broad strokes, we know that individual practitioners may view their roles differently. In the next section we examine the potential of these implications to influence how individuals and divisions of student affairs view their daily work.

IMPLEMENTING PRACTICES THAT PROMOTE CHANGE FOR THE FUTURE

None of us has a crystal ball to divine the future. What is clear, however, are the challenges presented by our current contexts: new conditions, changing so rapidly we cannot control them. Some years ago, management expert, Peter Vaill (1989), described this organizational environment as "permanent white water . . . you never get out of the rapids" (p. 2). Also clear is that at no time in history has the incentive for change been more powerful or the consequences for not changing more significant. Kuh (1998) tells the story of firefighters—in separate incidents, 45 years apart—who, although they were just steps away from safety, lost their lives because they would not abandon the equipment they were carrying; carrying it was what they had always done. These twin tragedies provide an apt metaphor for our task here: In the face of dramatically changing conditions, holding onto one's equipment—be it axes or assumptions, tool packs or favorite practices—can threaten survival.

If control is impossible as we create the future of student affairs, if environmental turbulence is unprecedented, and if continuing to do what we always have done—even "working smarter"—can be fatal, then what options remain? For negotiating permanent white water, experts on organizational change and effectiveness, both outside higher education as well as inside, consistently offer the advice encapsulated in this simple motto: "Mission matters." That is, never lose sight of the fundamental purpose for which your work exists and the core values it honors. Focusing on the mission—of an institution, of a student affairs organization—can be trusted to guide decisions in challenging times about actions to take and actions to avoid, tools to keep, and tools to drop.

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Given that advice, offering a specific list of "next steps" based on the context and implications described here would be unproductive. Contexts and conditions differ from institution to institution, region to region, country to country. Instead, we offer some questions to student affairs professionals—

institutional entities and individual practitioners as well as the comprehensive student affairs associations—to assist them in focusing on what matters, not just for survival but for a future worthy of our field and our students.

STUDENT AFFAIRS PRACTITIONERS AND INSTITUTIONS

Leading—and responding to—change in turbulent times requires a clear focus on your core mission.

- What is your mission? What values and commitments support your work?

- How can you be true to your mission and values in turbulent times?

- What would an organization committed to success for your students and your institution look like, and how will you create it?

- What should you (and your institution) protect, and why? What must change, and why?

- What alliances and conversations are necessary? In what ways are you prepared and not prepared to have those conversations or form/use those alliances?

- If you were to organize and structure your work according to your core purposes and values, what would it look like, and why?

Consider the challenges created by conditions in the external environment.

- In what ways can the challenges be viewed as opportunities? How can you use the opportunities creatively?

- In what ways are you prepared to be successful in difficult times? What will you need to do?

- What leadership does your institution need from you right now? In what ways are you prepared to provide that leadership, and in what ways are you not?

- What must you know and be able to do to serve your institution in the ways it needs? What must you learn?

- What resources—e.g., from professional associations—would assist you?

COMPREHENSIVE STUDENT AFFAIRS ASSOCIATIONS

Leading—and responding to—change in turbulent times requires a clear focus on your core mission.

- What is your mission? What values and commitments support your work?

- How can you be true to your mission and values in turbulent times?

- In what ways do your current structures, roles, practices, and assumptions assist and/or hamper you in living your mission and values?

- If you were to organize and structure your work according to your core purposes and values, what would it look like, and why?

Consider the challenges created by conditions in the external environment.

- In what ways does each of these affect your members and the field you serve?

- What does it mean to serve the student affairs field in the context of rapid change and these critical challenges?

- In what ways can the challenges be viewed as opportunities? How can you use the opportunities creatively?

- What must change, and why? What should you protect, and why?

- What alliances and conversations are necessary? In what ways are you prepared or not prepared to have those conversations or form/use those alliances?

- What is the most efficient and effective way to organize to meet the needs of the student affairs field?

RETHINKING OUR TOOLS, CREATING OUR FIELD'S FUTURE

Despite the innumerable challenges—even peril—in this look at the future of student affairs, when we reflect on the vast potential in our field's membership, we must conclude this final report on a hopeful note. In his recent book, *How the Mighty Fall*—which traces the decline of formerly "great" organizations—Jim Collins (2009) exhorts: "our research shows that it is possible to build a great institution, even in the face of chaos, disruption, uncertainty, and violent change. We are freed by our choices" (pp. 120–121). In creating the future of student affairs our choice is clear: We must focus on our missions and the values they embody while rethinking the tools—the assumptions, structures, roles, constituents, and partners—that enable us to live by and manifest our core purposes.

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