

Student Affairs Practitioners as Transformative Educators: Advancing a Critical Cultural Perspective

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INTRODUCTION

Student affairs work has witnessed two distinct waves of theorizing. The first wave was framed by the notion of *in loco parentis* and emphasized student conformity to social custom. The second wave has been characterized by the idea of reforming students by applying developmental theory principally derived from psychological theories of human development. Developmental theory eventually displaced *in loco parentis* as the preeminent philosophy shaping the relationship between students and college professional staff, although remnants of parentalism clearly persist.

A third wave of theorizing about students and student life is under way and can be characterized as a “critical cultural” perspective. Its proponents emphasize the need for professionals to develop a critical awareness of the

oppressive effects that different forms of culture have. A critical cultural perspective helps student affairs practitioners understand the power of culture and, in so doing, enables them to engage in campus transformation intended to dismantle oppressive cultural conditions. Practitioners who take such steps can be called “transformative educators.”

The idea of transformative educators is based on theories of educational practice most often described as critical pedagogy, which is grounded in a critical cultural perspective that focuses attention on the role teachers might play in creating democratic classrooms in which students struggle to understand how culture and social structure have shaped their lives. The ultimate goal is for students to develop a critical consciousness, engage in social and cultural transformation, and help create a more just and equitable society. The theoretical tenets associated with critical pedagogy as put forth by Freire (1970, 1989), Giroux (1983, 1988), and Hooks (1994), among others, provide helpful insights into how student affairs practitioners might conduct themselves from a critical cultural perspective. To understand the significance of this perspective, it is helpful to trace the roots of student affairs work.

THE FIRST WAVE: *IN LOCO PARENTIS*

For nearly two centuries, and before the formalization of student services had taken root, college and university staff adhered to the principle of *in loco parentis* (Rudolph, 1962; Veysey, 1965). Dormitory staff and tutors, who doubled as teachers, provided a supportive, protective environment in which students could pursue their academic and religious training without inter-

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ference or distraction. *In loco parentis* encouraged a relationship between staff and students characterized as one of parent to child, in which college and university staff knew and enforced what was best for students. The controlling aspect of early work with students is captured in Upcraft and Moore's (1990) discussion of evolving theoretical perspectives of student development: "The early colonial colleges believed they had a responsibility to act on behalf of parents for the good of their students. Students were considered children, and the institution their 'parents'" (p. 42). Of course, as Upcraft and Moore pointed out, the average age of college students during the colonial years was about 14, so treating them as children made a great deal of sense. Clearly, the early relationship between staff and students was quite unidirectional, as staff created rules, provided direction, and established consequences for students' behaviors.

The unidirectional relationship between college staff and students continued into the mid-1900s, and it is captured in Mueller's (1961) discussion of the nature of student personnel work. For Mueller, student personnel work was a form of teaching in which the staff focused not only on the "giving of knowledge" but also on taking "responsibility for the student's full use of that knowledge" (p. 49). The *in loco parentis* notion formed the basis for the relationship between college staff and students, and shaped the development of college communities. Staff often had the final say regarding how student communities were constructed and controlled. In the face of such control by college faculty and staff, students often reacted harshly and violently (Moore, 1978) and at times sought to construct their own communities and subcultures (Horowitz, 1987).

THE SECOND WAVE: DEVELOPMENTAL THEORY

As the influence of *in loco parentis* slowly weakened, the idea of student learning or, as it was later termed, *development*, took on a much broader context. The intellectual and the spiritual growth of students became the primary two areas that student life professionals were concerned

with as the field of student affairs began to emerge fully (Stage, 1994). Perhaps no statement about the nature of student affairs responsibilities has been more influential than the *Student Personnel Point of View* (American Council on Education, 1937), which directed student affairs professionals to (a) respond to each student as a whole person, (b) attend to individual differences, and (c) work with students at their level of development.

Despite calls throughout the 1950s for more developmental approaches, no real knowledge base upon which to ground work with students existed. As Widick, Knefelkamp, and Parker (1980) put it: "We [student personnel professionals] did not have theoretical models that could effectively describe college students and provide us with a coherent picture of individual development—a theory on which we could base our practice" (p. 75).

During the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s, research on college students and older adolescents began to inform student affairs work. Developmental theories, derived primarily from psychology and psychology-related fields such as human development, emerged and then influenced the nature and goals of student affairs professionals (Chickering, 1969; Erikson, 1968; Kohlberg 1975; Perry, 1970). Developmental research helped student affairs professionals better structure campus environments to meet the students' needs. A classic example was the work of Sanford (1967), who encouraged student affairs staff to construct campus communities that offered the proper mix of "challenges and supports." As Upcraft and Moore (1990) noted, challenges create a state of incongruence within students, whereas supports help students achieve equilibrium. "Too much challenge is overwhelming; too much support is debilitating. The challenge-support cycle results in growth and change" (p. 46). Later, theorists such as Astin (1984) and Tinto (1987) highlighted the relationship between student involvement in campus life and, respectively, academic performance and persistence.

The work of Gilligan (1982) served as a challenge not only to Kohlberg but to the generalizability of developmental theory, and her

efforts marked the crest of a wave of theoretical work that had begun to revolutionize the human development field and the nature of social scientific thought. Most notable perhaps was the work of Kuhn (1970) and Foucault (1970, 1972, 1980), who both raised serious questions about the universality of traditional scientific paradigms and of truth itself. Other work by feminists, Afrocentrists, critical theorists, postmodernists, cultural theorists, and multiculturalists, to name a few also highlighted the shortcomings of “grand theory”—a theory designed to provide a totalizing explanation of human experience or behavior. This revolutionary trend in social scientific thought resulted in the French postmodernist Lyotard (1984) declaring all truisms to be fallacious. Ignoring the irony of his statement, what Lyotard and other radical social theorists called attention to was the need for more localized understandings of human experience, a call echoed by Geertz (1983) and elaborated in his notion of “local knowledge.” In the remainder of the paper, some themes that cut across diverse schools of thought are discussed, and a critical cultural perspective is presented.

THE THIRD WAVE: A CRITICAL CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE

In recent years, student affairs scholars have begun to question conventional approaches to understanding students, student culture, and student life (Upcraft & Moore, 1990). Some have called for a fundamental change in views of campus life and have suggested that greater attention needs to be focused on issues of cultural diversity if more just and equitable college environments are to be constructed. As a result, scholars have advanced a variety of theories to explain human development in more localized terms—that is, by considering the unique experiences of diverse social and cultural groups (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986; Cass, 1979; K. P. Cross, 1988; W. E. Cross, 1991; D’Augelli, 1991; Rhoads, 1994). Other student life scholars have pointed to a changing ethos in the field. For example, Kuh, Whitt, and Shedd (1987) have illustrated distinct differences between conventional and emerging organizational frameworks for student affairs. Emerging

frameworks are those that challenge the status quo and seek to change college and university cultures. Likewise, Cheatham (1991) has described the need for a fundamental change in the way campus communities are structured, and he has contended that ethnic minorities’ perspectives must be “intentionally incorporated into campus life” (p. 23). Stage and Manning (1992) have presented the “cultural broker” model, in which the goal of building a multicultural campus “is achieved by recognizing and changing the organizational barriers that stand in the way of inclusion” (p. 16).

The student development and student life scholars just cited have alluded to a major change in how the student experience is conceptualized. This change in thinking about students and student life reflects a larger transformation in the social and behavioral sciences that places cultural understanding at the center of theorizing. There are two problems in discussing this changing view of social theory. First, because these ideas are in many ways still evolving, any synthesizing efforts can be only preliminary. Second, because this movement’s roots are so diverse, few can agree that connections exist at all. For example, many feminist theorists reject any connection to postmodernists, whom they see as too abstract and at times nihilistic (Ramazanoglu, 1993). Although significant philosophical and political differences exist among diverse theories derived from feminism, postmodernism, and other schools of thought, some connections—such as a focus on culture and power—clearly are evident. Thus, despite the hazards of a synthesizing effort, a more concise conceptualization of this theoretical wave can benefit student affairs practitioners. For the sake of simplicity, four broad camps may be seen as the principal contributors to a critical cultural perspective: feminism, critical theory, postmodernism, and multiculturalism. In what follows, these four schools of thought are discussed, and points of intersection are considered.

Feminism

Gilligan (1982), one of the first to call attention to male-dominated views of human development, highlighted how a sense of connectedness and

caring may be fundamental to female development. Other feminists have taken Gilligan's work as a starting point to elaborate views of education and social life based on an ethic of care (Larrabee, 1993). For example, Noddings (1984) contended that education has placed too little attention on issues of caring. She argued that educational settings ought to focus more on developing an environment in which students and teachers engage in ongoing dialogues and a concern for one another is central. Noddings maintained that such an education might then achieve some of the developmental and cognitive ends that are so painfully pursued at present.

Embracing an ethic of care has significant implications for how organizational life is structured. As Ferguson (1984) and Iannello (1992) pointed out, organizations grounded in a sense of connectedness and operating from an ethic of care are less hierarchical and less oriented toward instrumentalism (a perspective stressing nearly every aspect of the organization as a means to some predetermined end). A feminist perspective calls attention to process and the manner in which organizational members relate to one another. An emphasis is placed on democracy and egalitarianism as members strive to create an inclusive organizational community.

Critical Theory

Critical theory has its roots in the Frankfurt School in Germany, where Marcuse, Horkheimer, Adorno, Benjamin, and Habermas advanced critiques of culture and society in an effort to understand the shortcomings of Marxist theorizing (Agger, 1991; Benhabib, 1986; Kellner, 1989). Today, critical theory focuses on advanced modernity's power to limit human justice, equality, and freedom. Critical theorists argue that social and cultural groups compete to legitimize their own versions of social reality (Tierney & Rhoads, 1993). In a capitalist-driven society, groups with the greatest access to capital and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986) are best able to define social reality for themselves and for others. This power imbalance limits participatory democracy. The challenge for critical theorists is to unravel the cultural conditions that limit a participatory democracy from taking root.

The concept of democracy suggested by critical theorists is best explained in the work of Dewey (1916), who discussed democracy as "Society which makes provision for participation . . . of all its members on equal terms" (p. 105). Thus, the goal is a society in which all people, regardless of their economic and cultural backgrounds have a voice in decisions affecting their lives.

Postmodernism

Unlike critical theorists, postmodernists make few assumptions about what ought to be. Instead, postmodernists embrace a more relativistic view of social life and question all forms of normalcy that they argue are rooted in one group's ability to assume power or legitimacy over another. The concept of power is central to postmodern theorizing (Foucault, 1978, 1980). The challenge of postmodernism is to continually deconstruct aspects of social relations that, through the deployment of power, have emerged as norms, which by their nature privilege some groups and marginalize others. Postmodernists seek to displace normalcy with multiplicity—multiple ways of understanding, knowing, or being. Difference becomes the driving force in a postmodern vision of society (Derrida, 1973). In terms of a critical cultural perspective, postmodernists are most helpful in understanding how various cultures and cultural groups become elevated over others, thus situating some at the center of social life and others at the margins. In rejecting the normalization of culture, especially the normalization of cultural identities, postmodernists provide a vision in which cultural difference is to be embraced and celebrated. Such a view suggests that colleges and universities seek ways to include previously disenfranchised groups in key organizational decisions.

Multiculturalism

Like postmodernists, multiculturalists embrace the idea of cultural difference and seek to build communities where diverse groups and world-views coexist. Following the earlier discussions of the 1960s about "cultural pluralism" and "diversity," multiculturalism has emerged as a philosophical ideal representing much more than

an inclusionary practice in which diverse peoples are represented within various institutional arrangements (La Belle & Ward, 1994). Today, the idea of multiculturalism not only relates to the inclusion of diverse peoples, but it also depicts an effort to modify organizational structures and cultures. For example, Hill (1991) maintained that, "Marginalization will be perpetuated . . . if new voices and perspectives are added while the priorities and core of the organization remain unchanged" (p. 45). Likewise, Bensimon (1994) called attention to the need to rebuild colleges and universities in a way that fundamentally alters "structures, practices, and policies that create racial, gender, and sexual hierarchies for the benefit of some at the expense of others" (p. 14). Thus, multiculturalism challenges colleges and universities to be more inclusive and to rethink their work with students.

Points of Intersection

Some common threads that connect the preceding four schools of thought apply to organizational settings such as colleges and universities. All four perspectives speak to the issue of inclusiveness in one form or another. Feminists, through an emphasis on caring and a sense of connectedness, project inclusiveness as an ideal, as do critical theorists through their discussions of democracy. And multiculturalists and postmodernists embrace inclusiveness with their emphasis on accepting, even celebrating, cultural difference.

All four schools of thought envision collaborative decision making as the ideal. Feminists and critical theorists embrace participatory democracy, which demands that organizational members collaborate and discuss key issues; and multiculturalists and postmodernists emphasize that previously marginalized groups be intentionally included in organizational decision making as a means to embrace cultural differences.

Finally, these four schools of thought encourage egalitarian relationships and resist organizational hierarchy. For feminists and critical theorists, hierarchy threatens inclusiveness and a participatory democracy, because organizational status differences often have silencing effects. For multiculturalists and

postmodernists, egalitarianism is closely aligned with an accepting attitude toward cultural differences. When majority members of an academic community perceive diverse cultures and cultural groups within that community as legitimate and as equal to their own, then an egalitarian and less-hierarchical climate is more likely to prevail.

Derived from these four schools of thought is an overarching framework for building educational communities rooted in an ethic of care and connectedness, democratic ideals, and respect for diverse cultures and voices. In essence, this is the critical cultural perspective. The remainder of this article is focused on the implications that a critical cultural perspective has for student affairs practitioners.

A CRITICAL CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE AND THE TRANSFORMATIVE EDUCATOR

In discussing the practical implications of what it means to view students and the educational process from a critical cultural perspective, the work of the theorists Paulo Freire, Henry Giroux, and Bell Hooks stand out. Some classify this work as "critical pedagogy," or in the case of Hooks, "feminist pedagogy" or "engaged pedagogy." For the sake of simplicity, the pedagogical ideas presented in this section that relate to student affairs work are referred to as a "critical cultural practice."

The work of Freire (1970, 1989) calls attention to the notion that a significant goal of education is to eliminate "the oppressive conditions that make it difficult for people to develop into responsible, loving human beings" (Alschuler, 1986, p. 492). Accordingly, a central point of Freire's work is his critique of "banking education," in which the teacher is positioned as the dispenser of knowledge and students as the recipients of the best of what a society has to offer its younger generations. The banking concept of education situates students as passive learners and restricts their ability to achieve *conscientizacao*—critical consciousness. *Critical consciousness* refers to understanding the political, cultural, and economic forces that situate certain individuals and groups on society's

margins and taking action to eliminate such oppressive conditions. Just as the banking concept of education instills a passive view of students as learners, enacting a democratic form of pedagogy where students and teachers engage one another in discussions about justice, freedom, and equality challenges students to develop a critical consciousness. "Education as the practice of freedom—as opposed to education as the practice of domination—denies that man is abstract, isolated, independent, and unattached to the world"(Freire, 1970, p. 69). Whereas the banking concept of education encourages students to accept the status quo, education for a critical consciousness encourages students to be concerned about social conditions and involve themselves in cultural change that will create a more democratic society.

Giroux and Hooks are perhaps the two most notable theorists who have built on the work of Freire. Giroux (1988) advances the notion of "teachers as intellectuals"—teachers who bring theoretical and philosophical perspectives to the educational process as a means to create a more just and equitable society. Thus, for Giroux, educators have an obligation to recognize the theoretical implications of their work with students and to create an environment where students have the opportunities to learn about and debate the social, economical, historical, and political forces that limit or enhance democracy.

Like Giroux, Hooks (1994) is concerned with issues related to creating an empowering educational experience: "To teach in a manner that respects and cares for the souls of our students is essential if we are to provide for the necessary conditions where learning can most deeply begin" (p. 13). For Hooks, building democratic educational settings in which all students feel a responsibility to contribute is the central challenge of what she describes as an "engaged pedagogy" (p. 15). Like Freire, Giroux, and other feminist writers, Hooks focuses on education as a potential liberating force in students' lives. Therefore, education must focus not only on forces that limit democracy but also on ways that oppressive conditions might be transformed.

Freire, Giroux, and Hooks have presented

an image of a transformative educator who works to establish educational conditions in which students, teachers, and staff engage one another in mutual debate and discourse about issues of justice, freedom, and equality. Such a view of educators has significant implications for student affairs professionals.

THE IMPLICATIONS OF STUDENT AFFAIRS PRACTITIONERS AS TRANSFORMATIVE EDUCATORS

In her application of Freire's work to the field of student affairs, Manning (1994) discussed the role student affairs professionals might play as transformative educators who engage in joint struggle with students to create more democratic communities. Manning was one of the first student affairs theorists to provide a glimpse of what student affairs work might resemble from a critical cultural perspective. In the following seven principles, we advance a vision of how student affairs practitioners might act as transformative educators.

1. *As transformative educators, student affairs practitioners play a crucial role in the way college and university communities are structured.* Typically, student affairs professionals are seen as being concerned primarily with students out-of-class experiences. However, the campus climate and organizational culture within which students learn and grow include much more than out-of-class experiences. If student affairs professionals are to have a significant impact on students' overall development, they must be actively involved in shaping the larger academic community. This requires engaging other faculty and staff in campus change.
2. *Building empowering social and cultural settings is central to the work of student affairs practitioners as transformative educators.* Whereas traditional views of student development often emphasize individual development, a critical cultural perspective challenges student affairs professionals to focus on the social and cultural contexts in which student development is presumed to occur. Individuals do

not develop in vacuums or “pickle barrels” (Wohlwill, 1973). The assumption is that empowering social settings provide the necessary conditions for students to develop to their fullest potential as community members and as democratic citizens.

3. *As transformative educators, student affairs practitioners contribute to the development of campus communities based on an ethic of care and a commitment to democracy.* Empowerment is made possible when students have opportunities to develop a sensitivity to others as expressed in an ethic of care and openness to cultural differences. Such a community also challenges students to see their connection to others and to society and thus encourages a sense of social responsibility. An empowering student experience can be achieved only when the academic community itself is structured around an ethic of care and a commitment to democracy.
4. *Creating conditions in which diverse students, faculty, and staff can participate fully in campus decision making is central to the work of student affairs practitioners as transformative educators.* A commitment to democratic principles challenges student affairs staff to consider diverse voices in making decisions about organizational life. Transformative educators must therefore challenge organizational gatekeepers to create structures and opportunities so that varied constituencies have representation. Merely having members of diverse groups on campus is not enough; also, they must have opportunities to shape their own experiences through inclusive decision-making structures.
5. *As transformative educators, student affairs practitioners respect cultural differences and encourage others to do the same.* A commitment to caring demands that student affairs professionals accept and respect cultural differences and that they work to help others understand and respect differences. As transformative educators committed to an ethic of care and democratic

principles, student affairs professionals must support and protect the rights and liberties of marginalized members of the academic community. This may mean taking unpopular positions such as supporting the rights of lesbian, gay, and bisexual students and staff.

6. *As transformative educators, student affairs practitioners treat students as equals in the struggle to create a more just and caring academic community and society.* From a feminist perspective, hierarchies must be minimized before truly inclusive organizational settings can be built. Thus, student affairs professionals need to foster relationships with students that at times may be best characterized as “engagement with,” as opposed to “service for” or “service to.” Manning (1994) made this point in her discussion of Freire’s potential influence on student affairs.
7. *As transformative educators, student affairs practitioners embrace conflict as an opportunity to transform the academic community.* Because diverse individuals and groups are encouraged to participate in organizational deliberations and decisions, conflicts and disagreements are likely to surface on an ongoing basis. Instead of viewing conflict as a threat to organizational harmony, transformative educators embrace conflict as a way to change the organization. Conflict calls attention to organizational problems and thus serves as an impetus for change. In a community characterized by an ethic of care and a respect for differences, transformation resulting from conflict becomes more likely.

These principles are offered as guides to student affairs professionals who may consider, or perhaps have already considered, what it means to view the transformative dimensions of their work with individual students, student groups, or the larger academic community. These principles are applicable to all areas of student affairs. For example, a residence hall director might choose to embrace these principles as part of his work with a resident assistant staff, as well

as with students in his immediate area. To influence the emergence of a more caring and democratic community, he might also choose to become more involved in other areas of the academic community. He might volunteer his services on various committees in which a critical cultural perspective could prove insightful.

A vice president for student affairs might opt to embrace some or all of the principles as a guiding framework in her leadership of a student affairs division. She could have a far-reaching impact if her commitment to creating a more caring and democratic community influenced other student affairs staff, as well as other staff around the campus.

Specific aspects of the student experience might also benefit from a critical cultural perspective. Disciplinary procedures, housing policies, Greek life, athletics, registration, admission practices, and health services might all be transformed through a focus on an ethic of care and participatory democracy. For example, student affairs practitioners who listen to international students' definitions of pain, injury, treatment, and care, which oftentimes differ from Western perspectives, might transform the way in which health care delivery and health education and promotion are conducted.

CONCLUSION

A critical cultural perspective calls attention to a changing ethos toward how student affairs practitioners understand and work with college students and campus communities. As a third wave in theorizing about college students, a critical cultural perspective challenges all members of an academic community to be more concerned with an ethic of care and a commitment to democratic principles such as justice and equality for all people, regardless of cultural differences. From a critical cultural perspective, student affairs practitioners as transformative educators must continually interpret and re-interpret the organization so they can understand how the organizational culture impedes creation of a caring, democratic community.

The idea of the transformative educator has significant implications for how student affairs

practitioners define themselves in relation to students. The role of the student affairs practitioner is to work alongside students and other faculty and staff to transform college and university settings, and a critical cultural perspective offers a theoretical vision of how student affairs professionals can help make significant organizational changes.

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