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Positioning the Journal of Student Affairs Inquiry

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Abstract

In this piece, the editor in chief discusses the vision of the Journal, and places the Journal in the space of inquiry as a productive possibility in the development of the field of student affairs assessment.

The field of student affairs is in an interesting and possibly productive moment in higher education in the United States. Employers are asking, more and more, for “soft skills” from our students upon graduation. External stakeholders as well as internal stakeholders in the university are asking for evidence that their investment is one that is “worth it” as the cost of college increases. Funding for higher education is decreasing from traditional sources, and more universities are making efforts to substantiate tuition, federal, and state dollars through various types of outreach for new financial streams that are sustainable in the long term.

Some are skeptical of the value of higher education, and, given this perspective, it is essential to provide a space in which a narrative about that worth can be present and heard in the cacophony of critique of our institutions of higher education. This is a space of opportunity, one in which the realm of assessment in student affairs can construct and forward a narrative that highlights learning at the center, with worth and return and investment as one part of that learning; but not the ultimate measure. After all, the soft skills employers are asking for are really about students of our universities and colleges being holistically developed – prepared for not just a job, but a career, and in most cases, life itself. As the world becomes increasingly complex through the great amount of information one is exposed to, it will become critical that our graduates are able to negotiate not only their own interests and approaches to this information, but also the perspectives and ideas of others, as well.

Assessment in student affairs provides a unique space in which we can augment the efforts to help foster holistic development in students during their short time with us (and in some cases, when they choose to join us in the project of higher education). We are among those who seek to tell the story of student learning outside the classroom, and those who seek to understand what it is that students are getting out of college that may not be taught or integrated into the classroom alone. Within this space, the *Journal of Student Affairs Inquiry* was launched, as a place to allow this dialogue to flourish, and answer and help operationalize a narrative around what the worth of college is from a more holistic perspective, not just solely as a function of external perception of what it should be.

Ultimately, this is a space in which the student voice of what learning is can be highlighted as a complementary (and sometimes challenging) narrative to the skepticism around higher education. Assessment itself is not enough. We need research, evaluation, *and* assessment to create and mirror a complementary narrative of student learning. How students learn is as important as what students learn, merely focusing upon the “what” may not wholly capture the diversity of student learning that does occur on and across our campuses. Some have even

argued that because we have spent so much time focusing on the “what”, we have not really learned that much at all about student learning since we have been assessing. What we need in this landscape is a space that honors the voice of students and tries to narrate this story of learning along the way.

Which brings us to this moment in the history of student affairs assessment. As a discipline, as John Schuh tells us in his article, we have a very vibrant history in student affairs assessment, one that formed from evaluation and is now where we are today. The accountability framework has been a strong influence in the shaping of our identity as a field, of course, and Schuh calls us to be vigilant and rigorous moving forward, as most likely, this framework is not going to go away.

Larry Roper calls us to see the history and application of assessment and look to the spaces beyond the traditional spaces as areas of growth and hope. He describes the space of inquiry as not only a space in which we can do assessment, but challenge our own approaches, and tie assessment to not only impact, but also of innovation. This, he argues, will attract new funding streams that will ultimately augment our funding models as we move forward. However, he also argues that we owe it to those participating in our inquiries to hear how what we are doing benefits them. Finally, according to Roper, inquiry provides a space in which folks engaged in the process of inquiry can be leaders on their campuses for asking these difficult and important questions.

Marilee Bresciani-Ludvik examines new areas in our approach to thinking about student learning that inquiry allows us to explore. She challenges us to think beyond traditional approaches, looking at how findings in neuroscience, an area of heavy research, can teach us about topics that may substantiate and alter the way in which we conceive of student learning. She also encourages us to sit with the unknown in our spaces of inquiry, rather than ignore the unknowns. After all, her research finds, without looking into the unknown (that is, brain structure), we would not have thought to look at how the brain structure is changed during episodes of deep learning.

The intent of this *Journal* is to open up new spaces, understandings, and learning about learning itself. *The Journal of Student Affairs Inquiry* is aimed at advancing the scholarship of assessment practice in student affairs. The term inquiry has been chosen intentionally to represent the ongoing reflection upon and implementation of assessment efforts in student affairs. All too often, assessment is seen and approached in segmented chunks rather than ongoing and perpetual processes in which practitioner scholars engage in deep learning. Inquiry involves reflective and reflexive efforts to address universal and local contexts of

assessment, evaluation, and research germane to student affairs.

Inquiry represents an effort to transcend strict divisions of assessment, evaluation, and research. To that end, *The Journal of Student Affairs Inquiry* invites contributions that advance the field of assessment in student affairs, whether focused on assessment and evaluation of effective practices and student learning, or on the discovery of new knowledge. Ultimately, *The Journal of Student Affairs Inquiry* serves as a space to advance the discipline of assessment in student affairs. Thank you for joining us in this conversation.