A Critical Examination of Student Affairs Research: 75 Years of “Progress”?

Kathleen Gillon, Iowa State University
Cameron Beatty, Iowa State University
Lori Patton Davis

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Kathleen E. Gillon, Iowa State University  
Cameron C. Beatty, Iowa State University  
Lori Patton Davis, Indiana University

The Student Personnel Point of View emerged during a period of legalized racial segregation and great economic turmoil. The Student Personnel Point of View, a foundational document, represented the first effort to articulate a national understanding of student affairs practice and research. We believe it is important for student affairs educators to reflect upon The Student Personnel Point of View at the time of its creation, as well as the changes in the field over time and the important work that remains. In this essay, we revisit the “Future Developments” section of the document in which the authors outline critical research questions for the field moving forward. This section serves as a critical starting point toward thinking whether we effectively answered the research questions identified by the authors and about the progress made since the publication of The Student Personnel Point of View.

Before entering a discussion concerning the progress made within student affairs, we must first define, and then seek a way in which to measure, the very notion of progress. As critical scholars, we believe progress is both fluid and dynamic. Progress neither moves in a complete linear motion nor remains completely static. Progress is a subjective idea, in that some might identify certain advancement as progress, yet others might view that same advancement as for “some, but not all.” Although we offered our take on progress, The Student Personnel Point of View did not explicitly address its definition in the field, and it has yet to be determined. As a result, we cautiously use the term “progress,” acknowledging that its nature is contextual and highly dependent upon who ultimately benefits from its outcomes.

In the “Future Developments” section of The Student Personnel Point of View, the authors issued a call for research in four areas: 1) Student out-of-class life; 2) Faculty-student out-of-class relationships; 3) Financial aid to students; and 4) Follow-up study of college students. No specific committee was responsible for conducting these studies, but, over time, scholars produced studies to address the aforementioned research areas.

When reflecting upon the Future Developments section, readers should not only examine the content but also the words used to construct the discourse. For example, the authors expressly called for the creation of a publication titled “The College Student and His Problems.” The use of the word “his” provides a critical example of who was viewed as the traditional college student in 1937 (i.e., males, White in particular). The focus on “his” problems indicated that whatever issues were identified, professionals could simply apply them to all students. Also, the authors’ use of the word “problems” represented an oversimplified understanding of the complexities of college students. Not only did the authors convey a negative connotation of students’ behavior but also an idea that students are part of an equation to be “solved.” Thus, in this essay, as we discuss the role of The Student Personnel Point of View in advancing the field through research, we are mindful that it simultaneously contributed to inequities.

On the other hand, although the language used to articulate “The College Student and His Problems” is rather problematic in today’s context, we must still consider the purpose of such a publication. The purpose of this document was to report on the state of student affairs within
colleges and universities at a specific point in time and to provide a philosophical framework for operating and proceeding forward in the field. Thus, in the following four sections, we specifically discuss the research agenda outlined in The Student Personnel Point of View within the context of “progress” and provide suggestions for future development within student affairs research.

Student Out-of-Class Life

The authors of The Student Personnel Point of View called for research on student out-of-class life to understand how students engage within the campus environment and in which activities they are most involved. Alexander Astin’s 1993 book, Four Critical Years, highlights the significance of student involvement in the educational process. Astin defined involvement as the extent of physical and psychological energy that the student dedicates to the educational experience. Over time, the understanding of student involvement evolved into engagement and continued to progress more fluidly, inclusive of a range of activities both within and beyond the classroom. Involvement theories, such as Astin’s, encouraged an abundance of research stressing the importance of fostering campus environments that promote student engagement, development, and learning.

Research about student involvement and engagement illustrates significant positive outcomes, including leadership development, strong academic performance, and higher retention and graduation rates. Arguably, explorations of student involvement and engagement within and beyond the classroom have been plentiful, yet heavily centered on the students’ role in engagement. More recent inquiries examine the institution’s role and question how institutional policies and practices influence levels of engagement on campus. More important, emergent research suggests that how institutions engage students has significant implications for an increasing racially diverse student body. For example, Shaun Harper and Stephen Quaye, in their 2009 book, Student Engagement in Higher Education: Theoretical Perspectives and Practical Approaches for Diverse Populations, challenge institutional leaders to focus their efforts on providing educationally meaningful opportunities for engagement. As they explained, a “demonstration of institutional weakness is arguably the mishandling of effective educational practices that could help close racialized gaps in engagement and student outcomes” (p. 45).

Prioritization of these types of issues represents progress since 1937. However, professionals and educators must continue to examine student engagement among racially diverse student populations, first-generation college students, student veterans, and low-income students (to name a few). Researchers should gear our efforts not only toward how students engage our campuses but, more important, toward how institutions meaningfully engage students.

Although many ideas reflect the progress made since 1937, the positioning of student affairs professionals as “workers” has not necessarily progressed. The authors of the Student Personnel Point of View stated, “Incidentally, this research would be relatively inexpensive since every campus has individuals that may be found to do the work without compensation” (p. 13). Whereas the authors perceived undertaking data collection of this magnitude without compensation feasible in 1937, the same task is unrealistic in contemporary times. Because the authors of the original document do not explain who specifically will be charged with conducting the research, readers might (mis)interpret that the research is to be completed by student affairs professionals, some of whom may not possess a strong research skill set or may see research-related tasks as work beyond the scope of their position responsibilities. Undertaking the data collection and research suggested by the original authors could become problematic, given the other tasks and responsibilities with which student affairs professionals are charged.

Readers who misinterpret The Student Personnel Point of View and assume that student affairs professionals should be responsible for addressing the research outlined by the docu-
ment’s authors may erroneously disregard the work in which student affairs educators engage. Such disregard occurs in present contexts in which universities and colleges charge student affairs professionals (not simply “workers”) with tremendous responsibilities and do not equitably compensate them. Many student affairs professionals go above and beyond their job descriptions in order to engage students in meaningful experiences, sometimes to a fault, in order to support their growth and development. The willingness to go the extra mile for students may inadvertently lead other campus constituents to devalue the level of effort in the work and assume the “one more task will not hurt” mentality. Student affairs has certainly progressed into a more solid profession since 1937, but we still see a need to consistently shape the field’s identity and carve out a niche where our work is valued and perceived to contribute to scholarly discourse about student involvement and engagement.

Faculty-Student Out-of-Class Relationships

Enhancing the role of faculty in student personnel work was another call for future research and directly relates to student engagement. During the time in which the authors conceptualized The Student Personnel Point of View, the relationships between faculty and students largely centered on academic advising. With the growth of research universities and desires among faculty to focus on scholarship, the lack of faculty time led to more student affairs professionals’ taking on the role of advising students.

Though much of the interaction between students and faculty occurs within the classroom, scholarship on faculty-student relationships suggests a positive effect on student success. For example, in George Kuh’s 2005 article, The Other Curriculum: Out-of-Class Experiences Associated with Student Learning and Personal Development, he indicated meaningful interactions between faculty and students could potentially develop into mentoring relationships that offer multiple benefits to students and contribute to their interpersonal development and growth. Over time, research consistently shows students experience more positive outcomes in college (e.g., persistence, learning) when they participate in opportunities with faculty.

As the field moves forward, we can continue to address faculty-student engagement by examining the contexts (e.g., study abroad, learning communities, service learning, and career development) where faculty-student interactions occur and the role of student affairs professionals in facilitating these interactions. We must begin (or continue in some cases) to conceptualize productive collaborations between student affairs and academic affairs (e.g., learning communities, first-year experience programs, and faculty-in-residence programs) until these relationships become the rule, rather than the exception, if we want to continue the progress with faculty-student out-of-class relationships. We have come far in understanding the role of faculty in engaging students, but there is still work to do in practice and research to understand fully the ways in which increased faculty engagement can enhance student success.

Financial Aid

Numerous historical events affected the ways in which financial aid exists in the United States. Although the original questions posed in The Student Personnel Point of View—“Who should receive aid? How much?”—are still relevant, the questions have become increasingly more complex. Three interconnected issues relate to student aid that inform the work of student affairs educators—access to higher education, student debt, and the funding of aid monies. Given that almost three-fourths of all postsecondary enrolled students receive some form of financial aid, student affairs scholars and practitioners, regardless of institutional role, have some working knowledge of the intricacies of financial aid.

When the authors of The Student Personnel Point of View of 1937 challenged scholars and practitioners to further study financial aid, they could not have fully understood the complexity of researching such a topic. During a time prior to significant federal involvement, primarily institutional and private monies composed financial aid.
in the late 1930s. An introduction of legislation in the mid-20th century, such as the Servicemen’s Readjustment Act of 1944 (i.e., the G.I. Bill) and the Higher Education Act of 1965 changed ways in which U.S. institutions of higher education extended educational opportunities to those who might never have been able to attend an institution of higher learning. Thus, many touted financial aid as the great equalizer of college access.

As early as 1976, scholars such as Bruce Fuller wrote about financial aid’s ability to provide access to postsecondary education for students who have been historically marginalized, specifically low-income students, as well as students of color. Clearly, some could perceive this connection between financial aid and access as a movement forward. However, 30 years later, in 2006, Laura Perna noted that despite the dispersing of over $100 billion in multiple sources of aid, college access remains stratified by both socioeconomic status and race/ethnicity. Her observation reinforces the notion that progress may actualize for some, but certainly not all.

According to Pascarella and Terenzini’s 2005 book, *How College Affects Students*, one of the problems that hinders progress is that loans have replaced grants as a result of the new program rules in the 1992 Reauthorization of the Higher Education Act. Don Heller observed that by the start of the new millennium, the number of students taking out loans, as well as the number of dollars borrowed, doubled. Another issue identified by Heller 10 years later was a shift in the dissemination of institutional aid from need based to merit based. If the students with the greatest need do not display the highest levels of academic achievement, then the incapacity of a financial aid system truly to provide equitable educational opportunities to those who might not have been able to attend college negates students’ equal access. As loans become the primary or only source for financing college, student aid quickly becomes student debt, forming a greater barrier for college access.

We agree that financial aid changes over the decades and more sophisticated scholarships provide educators with a lens for critically analyzing aid in relation to college access and student debt. However, the progress in this area is limited. Historically, financial aid determines who enrolls in college and, ultimately, who belongs (White students, both middle and upper income) and who does not (students of color, low-income students, first-generation).

**Follow-up Study of College Students**

The fourth study proposed by the authors was an investigation into the lives of college students’ post-graduation, specifically exploring what effect college had on their vocational and personal adjustments. Today, scholars often refer to this area of study as “College Student Impact,” the role of college in facilitating both personal and professional postgraduate experiences. Several researchers compiled and disseminated information through numerous publications, such as Feldman and Newcomb’s 1969 book, *The Impact of College on Students*, both the 1991 and 2005 editions of Pascarella and Terenzini’s *How College Affects Students*, Astin’s 1977 *Four Critical Years* and, later, *What Matters in College?: Four Critical Years Revisited*, and William Knox, Paul Lindsay, and Mary Kolb’s 1993 *Does College Make a Difference?: Long-Term Changes in Activities and Attitudes*. Although these texts explored a variety of ideas related to college and post-college experiences, the literature as a whole has and continues to focus heavily on vocation and economic return.

For example, studies focused on the economic difference between a postsecondary degree and a high school diploma, the economic value of college in relation to specific majors, and the relationship between undergraduate institutions and occupational attainment. Thus, our attempt to understand the scholarship and practical implications of life after college seems primarily embedded in capitalistic ideologies rather than in how college prepares students for engaged citizenry. Although the data related to vocation and economic earnings is relevant, it also reinforces higher education as a mere training ground for occupations. More research on other indices, such as health, political engage-
ment, and critical reflection, would support the espoused values of higher education, which exceed occupational training.

Conclusion

As we reflect on the movement of student affairs scholarship, we acknowledge that there has certainly been progress. In fact, researchers explored each of the recommended areas, producing scholarship intended to inform and improve educational practice. The considerable growth of the field in terms of the scholarship produced as well as the publication venues for research creates continual opportunities to address the authors’ concerns. Whereas The Student Personnel Point of View authors could not identify existing agencies to pursue scholarly efforts, the field now boasts a range of professional organizations and associations with members who have committed their careers to exploring college student experiences. However, we must remember that although progress is visible to some extent, there is still room for significant work and additional accomplishments. Now is the time for student affairs educators, researchers, and leaders to push the boundaries of scholarship and practice by expanding our knowledge of the complexities of college students, their identities, and their experiences. Moreover, our goal should be to outline a national agenda that considers students’ experiences but equally focuses on the role of societal structures in facilitating student outcomes (many times inequitably). Finally, research needs to serve as a consistent catalyst to promote educationally meaningful practices that support student success.

REFERENCES


