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Frank Shushok, Jr. Interviews Charles C. Schroeder

Frank Shushok, Jr., *Virginia Tech*

Executive Editor Frank Shushok, Jr. reflects on *About Campus*'s beginnings
and the current state of student learning in higher education
with former Executive Editor Charles C. Schroeder

An Interview with Charles C. Schroeder

Shushok: Welcome Charles, and thank you for taking time to reminisce and reflect. As you know, *About Campus* is celebrating its 20th year. Since you were involved in the early beginnings of *About Campus*, I'd love to hear about the initial vision and impetus for its creation.

Schroeder: I don't want to be over-broad on this, but I think it might be interesting to provide some history. Back in the 1980s, I was serving as vice president for student development at St. Louis University and was elected president of ACPA. Around that time, the National Institute of Education released a landmark report called "Involvement in Learning." Alexander Astin and a number of noted higher education leaders were focused on the critical need for reform of undergraduate education. This was the first of dozens of reform reports that were issued from 1987 through the mid-1990s. When I read about these efforts in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, I immediately thought this was an absolute, incredible call for student affairs professionals to get out of their silos and to begin to think more deeply and more broadly about the kind of leadership they could provide to their institutions in enhancing undergraduate education. I held a retreat at my house in Colorado to explore what kind of response student affairs could make to this reform conversation.

Initially, our conversation was underwhelming. One person who brought us incredible grist for the mill was Russ Edgerton, president of the Association of American Higher Education (AAHE). After listening carefully for a day, Russ said, "Don't you folks know anything about what is going on in higher education?" That was a great shot across the bow, and got us thinking about why we were meeting in the first place. We came away motivated and with ideas but not much sizzle. We presented a program at the ACPA conference, offered a white paper, but nothing really came of it.

When I had a chance for redemption and served as ACPA president a second time in 1993, there were a number of things happening that were quite interesting, especially around student learning and its relationship to the quality of undergraduate education. Around this time I found my own professional development at the American Association of Higher Education (AAHE) Conference, at which I became exposed to several interesting publications—*Change Magazine* and the *AAHE Bulletin*.

The Bulletin had three essays and came out six times a year. *Change* also was published six times a year, but had much more in-depth essays, all by leaders in higher education, educational policy, and legislators. At the time, ACPA had the *Journal of College Student Development,* a respected, scholarly, empirical journal, and *ACPA Developments*, which was more of an in-house newsletter, and neither one of them focused on major issues outside of student affairs. They were internally focused and helpful to members, but didn't give us a chance to look beyond our organizational boundaries, not only in terms of our divisions on campus, but also as a professional field that, at times, was legitimately criticized for being too internally focused.

During that second ACPA presidency, I had another group come out to my house, including Patricia Cross, Alexander Astin, George Kuh, and Ernest Pascarella, among others, who started to point Student Affairs in in the direction of student learning. It was at this retreat where the genesis of the *Student Learning Imperative* was born, and it was in this context that I convinced ACPA to create *About Campus* in partnership Jossey-Bass. The intention was to combine the best qualities of *Change Magazine* with those of the *AAHE Bulletin*. We had three feature articles and sections such as "In Practice," but they were all conversational and essay oriented. Patricia King and I agreed to be the first co-editors (in fact I wouldn't be an editor unless I could convince Pat to do it because I didn't want to do it by myself) and we were able to move forward by always inviting people that we felt had something unique to say. We invited noted scholars, leaders and people of different disciplines who were authoring interesting books about higher education to write for *About Campus*. So that was how it started.

Shushok: Given the context we just discussed, how much progress have we made toward our collective efforts to strengthen student learning? What are the pressing issues that need our attention today?

Schroeder: I think we've made a lot of progress. I recall as a graduate student reading an essay from a 1905 book called *Trends in Higher Education* by William Rainey Harper. One chapter, "The Scientific Study of the Student" argued that before we prescribe instruction, we'd better know something about the sensibilities, the needs and the patterns of the one who is going to receive that instruction. Clearly over the last 20 years we have learned a lot more about how students

learn, and what kinds of strategies and conditions provoke certain kinds of learning. That said, I think it is more common in curriculum reviews and restructuring to metaphorically rearrange the deck chairs on the *Titanic,* where the content continues to be more important than the pedagogy. That is a missed opportunity for student affairs colleagues, who often know much more about the *process* of learning. I think there are real opportunities for student affairs educators, in particular, to work with academic affairs around the kinds of conditions that tend to promote learning—not only in the classroom but outside of the classroom.

Based on some of the data on the National Survey on Student Engagement (NSSE) and what appear to be fairly consistent, high-impact, low-cost kinds of institutional initiatives, we've seen an expansion of learning communities, both residential and non-residential, and students involved in a variety of meaningful co-curricular experiences such as service learning and undergraduate research. These things connect, in a more complementary but mutually supportive way, how students spend time in and out of class. This has been a major change, and yet there are still opportunities to facilitate stronger partnerships, particularly in this period of financial stress and resource reallocation.

Shushok: *About Campus* is very much about calling readers to an ongoing, renewed commitment to student learning, and providing practical ways that we, as educators, can "step up our game." Where, and in what ways, do you think higher education professionals need to step up our game?

Schroeder: One of my favorite colleagues at AAHE and the person I sought out when I wanted to get feedback on *About Campus* was a man named Ted Marchese, who served as vice president of AAHE. I invited Ted to speak at an ACPA conference, and Ted was primarily responsible, along with a couple of other colleagues, for moving the higher education focus to assessment. Ted suggested that higher education in general, and in student affairs in particular, tends to be more activity-oriented than results-oriented.

Many efforts, like the programs we produce, should be means to a greater end, yet we often don't use assessment and data to inform, guide, and enhance our practice. We are awash in data. We rarely translate that data into information. I'll give you just one example: I recently worked with a campus and asked them to do a simple, matrix template of their entering class. Their school lost 30 percent of students fall-to-fall. The data revealed that 87 percent of the loss came from students who entered college with a high school grade point average of less than 2.9. They had no clue. If you do not know these sorts of things about your students, you invariably go off in a well-intended, but misguided

CHARLES C. SCHROEDER served as the first executive co-editor of *About Campus* with Patricia King. He served two terms as ACPA president (1986 and 1993) and was the founder and president of the ACPA Foundation. A group he convened in 1993 initiated a discussion that led to the groundbreaking treatise *The Student Learning Imperative: Implications for Student Affairs*, which dramatically changed the professional orientation of both ACPA and student affairs. A former chief student affairs officer and professor of higher education, Dr. Schroeder served as a researcher on two national initiatives: Project DEEP (*Documenting Effective Educational Practices*) and Institutions of Excellence in the First Year of College. In his retirement, Dr. Schroeder engages in part-time consulting and enjoys traveling and spending time with family.

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direction and are disappointed when you don't get the improvement you sought.

One of the biggest challenges in higher education today, therefore, is the huge gap between available data and translating that data into good information that informs and guides policy discussions, enhances practices, and helps get us to the outcomes that are more important today—things like improved time to degree and fall-to-fall retention rates.

Shushok: I'm curious if you have thoughts about what's responsible for that gap between the collection and use of data you described.

Schroeder: I think people are different in the way they tend to validate things. Our mental models are generally the determinants; you know that "seeing is believing" is really "believing is seeing." In the absence of any evidence to the contrary, such as calls for actual accountability, we keep doing what we've been doing. It is rare on a campus that has given NSSE, even six times in the past 12 years, to find a group of academic leaders or department chairs sitting down with a group of student affairs colleagues and looking at the data, in terms of benchmarks such as enriching educational experiences or active and collaborative learning. Together, they could begin to strategize how they could more tightly align certain kinds of in-class experiences with out-of-class opportunities, so they can create a more seamless focus on enhancing undergraduate education.

So the question that arises is, "who is responsible for undergraduate education?" Well, it's not just student affairs, and it's not just academic affairs. It's an institutional emphasis on quality, but because different people own different parts of the process, the "whole" is often missed. In student affairs, we do our own kind of assessments, sometimes with a scalpel when we ought to use a meat cleaver instead. The same is true in academic affairs. So in effect we hit the individual trees but we miss the forest.

Shushok: Charles, you are speaking about a subject that gets a lot of attention in the literature: the need for student affairs and academic affairs to better

integrate efforts. If student learning is everyone's business, and strengthening partnerships between academic and student affairs is important to undergraduate education, can you offer observations about how we are doing in this realm?

Schroeder: I think it's a mixed bag. There are certain kinds of catalysts that provoke or promote working across this great divide. One invariably is accreditation. Metaphorically, Paul Revere starts riding through the campus a year in advance of the accreditors, yelling at the top of his lungs, "Who has data? Who has data? The accreditors are coming!" So all of a sudden we all, in our various divisions, have to show evidence that we have been doing things that warrant reaccreditation.

In the absence of that kind of clarion call for action, we're left on our own to seek out opportunities that warrant a collaborative response. Most institutions in most states are being put under scrutiny because their four year graduation rates are abysmal. Students are taking five or six years to graduate. So why is that? How can student affairs examine and address the nature of student experiences that result in a fifth or a sixth year? There are all kinds of opportunities to begin to look at identifying at-risk students and creating opportunities for those at-risk students to perform at higher levels.

We often confuse collaboration with being cordial or cooperative, but it's actually a process whereby we co-create something, and in so doing we have to acknowledge our deeply rooted differences. That kind of outreach is probably the factor in my career as a vice chancellor at a number of schools that I am absolutely convinced made the biggest difference for me as a senior leader.

When I went to the University of Missouri, the first thing I did was I met with each dean. I said, "I'm Charles Schroeder, the new vice president for student affairs, and there are two things I want to ask you. First, what is your impression of the current status

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of student affairs at Missouri? And second and most importantly, what can we do to help you and your faculty succeed? That last question spawned a host of collaborative initiatives, some of which I might have done unilaterally, but understanding things that they valued, issues they were concerned about, problems they wanted to solve, provided an agenda for action from which we both benefitted. However, that required me to get outside of my comfort zone and to understand and respond to my academic colleagues. One of the lessons I learned was that engineering faculty and deans, not surprisingly, are concerned about engineering students. Agriculture faculty and deans are concerned about agriculture students. So by working within the boundaries of those particular disciplines and programs, we got a lot more synergy than we often achieve working at the broader institutional level.

Shushok: Charles, you've traveled to hundreds of campuses and you've seen thousands of worthy attempts to strengthen learning environments for students. Can you offer a few examples of innovative best practices for *About Campus* readers?

Schroeder: Without a doubt, the most exciting and valuable thing I ever participated in was project Documenting Effective Educational Practices project (DEEP). A group of colleagues studied 20 institutions and found a set of promising practices that transcended Carnegie classifications. At Fayetteville State University, for example, we found the philosophy department teaching the freshman seminar. In that seminar each week, they had a professional presentation day, where students came to class in business attire and gave a three-minute speech. The focus went beyond traditional study skills. These students learned etiquette, what it took to speak persuasively and make a good professional presentation. If you went into their career center, you saw a dining room table set with six different spoons and forks (I still have to have my wife tell me which ones to use), and mannequins dressed in formal attire. This program responded directly to the entering characteristics of students going to Fayetteville State. They made a commitment to producing not simply accountants, but accountants who could present themselves well and interact interpersonally with a range of people and in a variety of situations.

Another instance that illustrates a broader, institutional best practice is at the University of Kansas, where the university has a commitment to their students graduating in four years. Entering freshmen get a booklet titled "Graduate in Four." They have traditions and rituals that celebrate graduation.

The emphasis at Kansas, and this is a very important point, is on alignment, where the macro goal is

involvement: "We want students to be involved!" They had four mammoth lecture halls that held up to 1,200 students, and I was sitting in one of the lectures waiting for the faculty member to come out and explain what he planned to cover that day. In the third week of the class, however, the faculty member asked students to raise their hands if they were freshmen, and said, "How many of you are involved in clubs and organizations?" Very few hands went up. He said, "That's unacceptable! By the time I ask that question in two weeks I want to see more hands, and here's why." The reason that I'm mentioning this is that the biggest challenge for organizations around innovation is the absence of alignment across the organization. There's not a clear institutional aspiration, by which a faculty member in a large lecture class, a resident assistant in a residence hall, and other people, can work intentionally toward moving students in the direction of that compelling aim.

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I could give you a lot of other examples, but what I found and what I championed in the DEEP Project was what we ended up calling "positive restlessness." These high-performing schools were never satisfied, they always wanted to do better, and my takeaway from that was if you don't have a sense of an improvement-oriented ethos, and some commitment to a culture of evidence, then regardless of what other activities you sponsor, you're probably not going to create the kind of self-perpetuating, performance-based learning organization you desire.

It's the culture. And the way people think about who they are and what they're doing. And asking

fundamental questions: "Are we making a difference?" "Are we making enough of a difference?" "How do we know?" If we don't define what a difference is, and we don't ask the question of how are we doing, and use evidence periodically to say, "We are on track," or "We are off track," then I'm not sure whatever you do makes that much difference.

Shushok: That's very thought provoking. Let me change gears and give you an opportunity to think about the converse. What do you see that we continue to do, over and over and over again, that you think ultimately erodes our potential impact on students and their learning?

Schroeder: I think sometimes we suffer from the tyranny of custom. We find comfort and a degree of security by doing the same kind of things the same way, often unexamined. I grew up professionally working in residential life. Fortunately, I had an opportunity when I was young at Auburn to break the mold and do things that people would say was heresy. In some cases, people actually said they were heresy, such as at St. Louis University when we eliminated the resident assistant position in residence halls. How could we possibly have residence halls without RAs? It forced people to think deeply about who benefits from RAs? And we found that the primary beneficiary were RAs. They had their own lounges, they got all the attention (not to say they weren't helpful), but our attention as professionals was much more tilted in the direction of a staff orientation than a student orientation.

We tend to think more about developing and enhancing the role of our staff than we do enhancing the role of students, particularly when it comes to student agency and student governance—where students really do have meaningful influence and involvement in things of critical importance, not only to them but to the institution.

Shushok: Charles, knowing that *About Campus* readers influence just about every corner of higher education, what hopes do you have for us collectively as we traverse the bumpy terrain that is the twenty-first-century learning environment?

Schroeder: My sense is that higher education changes dramatically all the time. I remember some of the subjects we used to write about 20 years ago: "Higher education is changing dramatically—look at all these challenges we are struggling with!" Well, some of those things are true today, and maybe more pressing in some ways. Clearly, when you look at the major things society is concerned about with higher education, number one is cost. It is incredibly costly to go to college, especially at a time when the demographics are shifting so dramatically that access and affordability are more important today than they were

30 years ago. So what can we in student affairs do to work with our institutions to enable students to afford, benefit from, and pay for their education, particularly in terms of time to degree? For example, some schools are experimenting with three-year degree programs. We ought to be at the tip of the spear in encouraging some of those things.

Clearly, we spend a lot of time and focus on student learning, as we should. But there are three platforms of stability that are critical to students. The first is their financial stability. We need to have much tighter linkages with financial aid and others to help make sure the students at risk financially are identified and attended to. The second is academic stability—are our students getting the right courses in the right sequences with the right calibration in order to succeed? And the third is social stability—are they making social connections, getting the sense of belonging, those kinds of benefits?

We need to work more seamlessly with new student populations, different demographics, and a wider range of academic and financial needs, and begin to respond to those challenges in more strategic and tactical ways.

So all those are institutional issues that really cry out for leadership from "boundary spanners," and student affairs professionals are and can be the greatest boundary spanners in the institution. We're really not connected to or anchored in academic affairs, or administrative services, or business affairs. So, if we take seriously the goal of enhancing undergraduate education, all of us, not only student affairs but academic affairs and others, have to get in the mode of cross-functional cooperation, communication, and collaboration. We need to work more seamlessly with new student populations, different demographics, and a wider range of academic and financial needs, and begin to respond to those challenges in more strategic and tactical ways.

Shushok: I have a question from the audience: What was your most meaningful moment in your position with ACPA?

Schroeder: Well, ACPA had a role to play, but I think clearly the creation of *The Student Learning Imperative*, which was fundamentally authored by George Kuh, but was basically a collaborative effort among a variety of higher education leaders, many of whom were not in student affairs. I think that tilted the axis a bit, and got folks in student affairs to think more broadly about their potential contributions in the academy. The problem we have, for the most part, even though we espouse a kind of talent development, is we don't practice it in our advising systems, which are narrowly tailored to course selection, registration and those kinds of things. But I think our embracing student learning really came through using student engagement as the venue; it gave us a language that faculty identified with, and it gave us a method (engagement) which they understood. So I think that's where we started to make some of the boundaries a little more permeable, and that's where I think ACPA started to see itself more as a leader.

One of the things I did as president of ACPA was to move ACPA into One DuPont Circle. But the first couple years there, they might as well have been in Katmandu. Here they were in the epicenter of national education policy, but they really weren't using and developing relationships with the American Council of Higher Education and some of the other groups at One DuPont Circle. So I think that has given ACPA a greater voice in higher education policy, if they're willing to take that opportunity and try to influence the important issues that affect students, particularly for undergraduates.

Shushok: Another question from the audience: What would you say are the opportunities that technology presents now—how would you say it could be best used in the area of student development and the other areas of student learning we've discussed?

Schroeder: I think there are fantastic opportunities. The things that I like most are electronic portfolios, where we with our academic colleagues actually go through a process of defining the desired outcomes of the first year of college, and communicate those in ways that students understand them, and then begin to help create road maps and pathways to get them from where they start to the end of the first year. Then, we metaphorically look at the second, third, and fourth years as second, third, and fourth quarters of a football game. With an e-portfolio, a student can conceivably say, "Dear Dr. Shushok, I'm excited about working for you at Virginia Tech. You have a great division of student affairs. I know I can make great contributions. I have a 3.4 GPA, but if you really want to know who I am, click on this hyperlink and see my best work year by year at Kennesaw State University in Georgia."

Bob Brown, in the early 1970s, came up with the co-curricular transcript concept, but now students are so tech-savvy, giving them a tool that enables and impels them to reflect on experiences and outcomes, which we have made explicit so they understand, gives them a road map to get the most from experiences we say are too important to miss, both inside and outside the classroom. Using clickers in class, using technology in the residence halls, where you've got study groups who are part of a learning community, students can really continue to work together and do things that are much more interactive. So I think the sky's the limit on technology.

Shushok: One final question from our audience: "As a student in a higher education program, I am required to join one professional organization. So as a new student affairs professional, how can joining an organization benefit me?"

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Schroeder: Well, most professional organizations provide some form of direct or indirect professional development. For example, *About Campus* is a tool that should help you become better acquainted with some of the broader kinds of issues going on in higher education. You can also, however, choose to get involved with a commission, or a state division, or a variety of other opportunities where you could become more engaged with like-minded professionals, and in the process begin to see things that you could contribute to the association and the association could contribute to you.

There are other potential benefits, some of which are more reactive, where you're receiving benefits, whether or not you are going to engage with them. The other benefits are proactive, when you seek out professionals who can give you some perspective on things that are of interest to you. Or you may become involved in projects where you can provide leadership,

which could give you access to some other opportunities in the organization. Most professional organizations, although it's been a while since I've been in the ACPA or at conferences, have some formal mechanism by participating in conferences for acquainting and incorporating new professionals into the fabric of the organization.

When I went to Auburn after I got my doctorate, I was director of Magnolia Dormitories, the only men's housing complex at Auburn. Well, the man who hired me, Harold Grant, was walking with me one day and said, "How would you like to coordinate ACPA's 50th anniversary conference in Atlanta?" I said, "I don't think I can do that, I've never done anything like that in my life!" He turned to me and said, "You need to be more assertive, son, you can do that!"

We ended up having the largest number of attendees in the history of the association, and that was my entree, not by design but by default, into continuing a 30-year relationship with ACPA. So, that was more of a serendipitous something that my mentor and good friend Harold suggested to me, but it really resulted in me learning a tremendous amount about the field and about higher education that I would not have learned had I not taken that first step into the deep end, and said, "OK, I'll try it." So you never know when some of your choices actually have better benefits and greater kinds of return on investment than when you first start them.

Shushok: Charles, we want to thank you for your honest opinions and experiences. Hearing you discuss some of the truly historic events in the evolution of student affairs and the initiatives for student learning and engagement in which you were involved has been a real honor. We wish you all the best in your continued work, and we look forward to hearing more from you in the future.

NOTES

Harper, W. R. (1905). The trend in higher education. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.