

Educating the Whole Student in 2007

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One year ago, a group of 25 students and I boarded an Amtrak train and began the 29 hour ride from Charlottesville, Virginia, to New Orleans, Louisiana. This trip began the second phase of an interdisciplinary January Term course, *Technology and Citizenship*, offered at the University of Virginia (U.Va.). Why, when asked to offer reflections on the 70th anniversary of the *Student Personnel Point of View* (SPPV), am I writing about this experience?

I offer this case study to show that the core philosophy of “educating the whole person,” in the 1937 SPPV, remains the essence of student affairs work. Generational differences, world influences, and institutional factors have changed, and our knowledge over the decades has and will continue to advance. Still, our primary focus should emanate from the challenge of considering the ways in which these elements influence students as they struggle to reach their full potential.

The intent of this article is to remind us that our work, which at times might be thought of as common sense in practice, does not just happen. It is instead the product of our expertise, training, and relationships with students, and the ways in which these factors come together with clarity as we help students connect a sense of self to their intellectual pursuits. The greatest challenge to being effective in this capacity surfaces when we lose sight of our own purpose and confuse roles; when we try to make what might appear simple more difficult. As student affairs professionals, we should be unapologetic about our contributions, which when at their best may go unnoticed. We need to be comfortable within our own roles of stating the obvious, being behind the scenes, and challenging the current approach if there are inconsistencies of theory to practice. I hope, as you reflect through this unique case, you think of your own situations and break down your daily work to make the most of keeping students at the core.

Dr. Patricia M. Lampkin was named Vice President and Chief Student Affairs Officer at the University of Virginia in October of 2002, having served the university in many capacities since 1979. She serves as an adjunct professor in the Curry School of Education's Center for the Study of Higher Education and teaches an undergraduate seminar on honor and ethics. She is the co-author of Mountains and Passes: Traversing the Landscape of Ethics and Student Affairs Administration. Ms. Lampkin is the recipient of several awards from the University of Virginia community, and in 2000 the University of Vermont presented her with the Saba Dignitate (“With Dignity Uncompromised”) Award, which honors alumni/ae who are exceptional educators and leaders in times of change.

Trust and Collaboration

The idea for “*Technology and Citizenship*” was developed following a conversation I had with an academic faculty member in which we were discussing the devastation in New Orleans and how we wanted to help. This conversation resulted in an interdisciplinary course that was cross-listed in three schools—the College of Arts and Sciences, the Engineering School, and the School of Architecture—with a recognized service component for credit. These were not easy boundaries to cross at an institution where service is not yet recognized as credit bearing. The first phase of the course was held at the University of Virginia, and the second phase was practical research on-site in New Orleans. Despite concern on the part of academic administration and risk managers, the course was ultimately approved because of the relationships and reputations of the faculty and administrators who were involved. In fact, the final stamp was not dependent upon a rigorous syllabus but the reality that a student affairs professional was going to be part of the team on-site in New Orleans. The University’s risk manager trusted my judgment and ability to make sound decisions around where we would be sleeping, eating, and working on a daily basis. No matter how much planning took place for this trip, there was a high level of risk involved due to the non-existent infrastructure in New Orleans. The willingness of the University’s academic administration to sign off on the course and trust us to manage the risks allowed a higher level of learning to take place during the week.

Interdisciplinary Learning

The class met at U.Va. during the first four days to examine the city of New Orleans before, during, and after Hurricane Katrina from the viewpoint of the architect, the engineer, the scientist, the policymaker, and the media expert. Students not only examined what led to this terrible disaster but also how each of these fields might approach the rebuilding efforts. Many questions were posed and explored: What is the relationship between technology and citizenship? How did reliance on technology make New Orleans a vulnerable area? What are the key technical, organizational, and cultural factors that contributed to the disaster associated with Katrina? How can we rebuild a city in a way that incorporates the best of architectural and engineering design? As citizens, how can we participate in such discussions as well as in relief efforts? In the evening, we focused on the discipline of human interaction to prepare for the reality that the class would live and work together throughout its week in New Orleans. The discussions focused on establishing ground rules for group living (i.e., we can’t presume to help others if we are not in touch with ourselves) and thinking about how we respond to and manage constant group activity without basic comforts (the high school where we were staying was giving up its auditorium floor for us to sleep during the first week back in session since the hurricane).

We spent time learning how people respond to disasters. What would those around us be experiencing? What safety issues should be considered? How would we make sense of what we learned in the classroom with what we would be seeing?

The topics discussed during these evening sessions are often overlooked in experiences of this type. We did not leave to chance that the group would develop healthy communication and group living practices; we knew we needed to dedicate time and energy to addressing these issues. In assessing the course experience, this aspect was essential to the success of the class and represents the final discipline—the discipline of human interaction—that we live everyday as student affairs professionals. These evening sessions allowed us to address the challenge of assisting the students in developing a broader and deeper human awareness of themselves and others and making the connection back to the knowledge base they were forming. When reality set in and we didn't find hot showers for the first three days, we had in a theoretical way talked about these issues. We established a common language to sort through our own individual differences so the group could move beyond itself and assist those who we were going to help. We had “code words” for needing personal space in an otherwise fully immersed group living situation. Our ability to manage similar circumstances stemmed from our discussions about these possibilities.

After studying the city and ourselves from the viewpoints of these disciplines, we boarded the train to New Orleans to engage in a week's worth of recovery efforts. As the only professor accompanying the students on the train, I spent my time getting to know the students with whom I would be living for the next week. Another professor and a teaching assistant had flown down to do prep work for our arrival.

Flexibility with Purpose

As the train slowed to our first stop in Lynchburg, Virginia, the conductor came through our car asking if a Joel Morgan was on board. I was thinking, “We are barely out of Charlottesville, and I am already missing a student!” I was quickly relieved to discover that as we looked out the train window, Joel's parents and neighbors had come to see us off. They had signs of support and food packed for our trip. The rest of the train ride, although long, can only be described as natural group bonding.

The type of work we thought we were going to do changed almost daily, depending upon the needs of our hosts. While we were in New Orleans, students helped returning Xavier University Preparatory School seniors complete college applications, pitched in with clean-up and light demolition work at Xavier University,

participated in a city planning meeting, toured the city and levees, completely “gutted” six houses, cleaned a school cafeteria in preparation for reopening, cleaned and salvaged several school trophies, and visited with University of Virginia alumni/ae in the area.

Flexibility became a key element in making this experience successful. The tension in the group would mount when plans changed and smaller groups were altered to fit the tasks. Individuals wanted to express their disappointment. At times you could feel the frustration from individuals of not wanting to adjust the original plans. The human lesson we had discussed—about remembering this trip was not about us but about those we were going to help—came into play every day. Most of the students found great satisfaction in “gutting” houses: it was physical, you could see results, and some of the human stories that were uncovered were life changing. However, on one particular day, our hosts asked one of the groups to clean trophies for one of the schools in which we were working. Given the toxic conditions, the cleaning process was not easy, the work was not fun work, and the students did not see the purpose. Again, the mantra became “this is not about us, it is not our place to judge what is important.”

A year later, one of the students who took the course and graduated is teaching in the reopened school. He said that the trophies are the first thing you see when you enter the school; they are all the school was able to save. By reminding ourselves of the purpose of our journey and being sensible, we were able to keep a constantly changing situation calm and productive. At times when the best laid plans go awry, the most effective problem solvers, organizers, and observers of the human condition are student affairs professionals. We do it everyday as we keep our focus on the end goal of helping students grow and as we allow the situation to determine our path to reach that goal.

Each person in the class kept a journal and participated in a blog to assist in the reflection of the experience and to bridge the academic work with the on-site work. As we faced our last day and needed to move all of our gear at 5:00 a.m. so the floor that we were sleeping on could be set up for an all-community celebratory Mass, I was once again struck by the generosity and flexibility of those who allowed us to come and work. At the very time they were trying to get settled, they welcomed more chaos because they were willing to share their plight. I know if we were asked to use the Lawn (the historical and symbolic center of our University) the night before graduation, the answer would be, “No,” and we probably would not even entertain the reason why. Yet on the week that three schools were forming into one, faculty, students, and their families still living apart or within combined families welcomed us with open arms without thinking about whether their needs might be greater than ours.

It reminded me that when faced with something out of the ordinary or with bureaucracy we should not be afraid to take the risk or ask, “Why not?”, and by all means we should not be one of the individuals looking for reasons to say “NO.” Disasters change people and bring them in touch with what is really important. This experience reminded me to help make connections and observations from the everyday events in order to learn these lessons.

I was also struck with the number of personal and technological belongings we had to move. In many cases we had more individual possessions with us for a week’s worth of work than all of the possessions many of those around us were able to salvage. We discussed this feeling of embarrassment, and many of our students only returned with what they had on their backs so they could at least leave what they took with them for those who were rebuilding their lives.

Millennial Generation

This intense week reaffirmed my belief in our students, their energy and commitment to serving others, and yes, their reliance on technology. I learned that I may need to adjust how I set expectations, but they can be just as high, requiring just as much energy and selflessness from the student, often helping the student to surpass the standard. Their approach may not be as effective or in line with the way I may proceed, but the result is usually better because it reflects their perspective and commitment. I may need to deliver the message differently, model differently, point out issues that seem basic to me, and learn from them on issues that seem basic to them, but as long as we know our end goal, we will have more success when we are discovering together.

I also learned to appreciate the connection that this generation of students have with their parents. In many ways, one of the student’s parents saved this trip. When we arrived in New Orleans and three quarters of the city was still without electricity, working water, and food establishments, it was a set of parents who helped me make the connections and find the resources necessary to keep 25 students safe, healthy, and productive. It was another lesson in knowing our own limitations, when to ask for help and how to enjoy the journey. I do think the next time I think about saving the world, I might realize that street signs and electricity sometimes help you know where you are going!

Lessons Learned

As a 30-year practitioner, this experience highlighted basic practices that I believe are central to the student affairs profession:

- Don’t underestimate our value as risk managers

- Teach and model communication practices
- State the obvious, and keep it simple
- Operate with purpose and with flexibility (these are not mutually exclusive concepts)
- Remind ourselves that we can't tell people how they should learn, but only what we hope to achieve
- Understand the students' attributes and adjust the program to them
- Realize our own limitations, and ask for help when appropriate

While these concepts are fairly straightforward, the challenge is recalling them in the context of our daily work. The pace of university life and the demands and expectations of people can sometimes interfere in our ability to “keep it simple” and remember what's essential. This opportunity highlighted how easy it is to become distracted and lose sight of what we do and why we do it and the importance of focusing on what's at the core of our work.

Resources

In preparing the article, the following documents were reviewed:

The 1937 Student Personnel Point of View and its 1949 revision ; NASPA's 1987 50th anniversary commemorative: *A Perspective on Student Affairs; The ACPA Student Learning Imperative*; the AAC&U National Panel Report, *Greater Expectations: A New Vision for Learning as a Nation Goes to College*; the AAUP *Joint Statement of Rights & Freedoms of Students*; and NASPA and ACPA's *Learning Reconsidered: A Campus-Wide Focus on the Student Experience*.