OLD WHINE, NEW BOTTLES: UNDERSTANDING HISTORICAL CONTEXT CAN INFORM OUR CURRENT NARRATIVE

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PRELUDE TO A WHINE

It was 1991 when I chose to attend East Carolina University. I was the first in my family to attend college and, quite frankly, many of my family members were suspicious of my choice. There was one interaction, in particular, that stuck with me for some time. I was discussing my college plans with my grandfather and he asked me if I "needed all that fancy book learnin'." He had left school after the fifth grade to work during the Great Depression and built a coin-operated business; distributing pool tables, jukeboxes, and video games throughout Eastern North Carolina. My grandfather was not alone in his critique of college and its value. Many of my family members balked at my desire to attend college.

But I am glad I went. Not only did college introduce me to the value of a liberal arts education, and it also introduced me to the value of student activities. I was a highly involved student, including being president of my campus activities board. These opportunities helped me develop skills which I deploy in my career to this day. Many of the skills organizations like National Association of Campus Activities have valued for years in publications like their STEPS Guide were like a roadmap for life and student success. While stories like the one I share about my grandfather have been around for about as long as college itself, the critiques of college and the value of campus activities, in particular, seem to have elevated itself from a refrain from your grandfather to a common critique parroted by business leaders and senators. My current professional role puts me in a position to work with the private sector as an advocate for higher education. As a trustee for the Florida Chamber of Commerce, I often work with business leaders in matters of economic development and workforce readiness. And while the vast majority of people I interact with have their college degrees, their perceptions of the impact of higher education are not positive. They complain that graduates are not ready for the workplace and that too many college degrees are not worth the paper they are printed on.

CONTEMPORARY CRITICISMS OF CAMPUS ACTIVITIES WORK

A debate currently rages as to the value of higher education, including topics as broad as learning outcomes, employability, safety, and politics. It might seem to a casual observer that the modern college landscape is riddled with criticism and doubt. In her New York Times Op-Ed piece, Ellen Ruppel Shell opined that "college may not be worth it anymore." (Shell, 2018). Publications like these result in an eroding of public confidence in higher education. Up until the 2010s higher education long enjoyed popular support. For decades, overall confidence in higher education zoomed past 60 and 70% (Gallup, 2018). However, in 2018 confidence in higher

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education dipped below 50% with only 39% of Americans saying they have high confidence in higher education (Gallup, 2018). When Gallup drilled down further, they found the three reasons more Americans are skeptical of higher education: 1) it was too expensive; 2) students were not taught skills desired by employers; 3) it was too political, and colleges pushed their own political agendas on students.

Campus activities, in particular, has been criticized for a myriad of shortcomings which may help erode public opinion. Three such critiques are that co-curricular activities do not provide students with the experiences that develop skills needed for the modern workplace; that they foster an extreme and politically liberal environment not inclusive of all political perspectives; and that they maintain a campus environment that is often not physically or psychologically safe, where dangerous behaviors such as binge drinking, sexual assault, and hazing are seen as relatively common and even accepted practices. In one particularly scathing critique of campus activities the criticism seemed to be coming from inside higher education itself. Northwestern professor, Dr. William Hurst called out co-curricular activities as, "Students are so busy singing in a cappella groups, planting trees for the environment and playing intramural ultimate Frisbee that they're being robbed of their education" (Hurst, 2016).

But what do the numbers say? Well, there is cause to be concerned if you are a student activities professional. A quick web search for "college students not ready for the workplace" or "college students lack soft skills" reveals hundreds of stories portraying college students as not ready for the workplace. And they may be onto something; a survey by Strada-Gallup in 2017 polled 32,000 students and 43 four-year institutions. Key findings from the survey included:

- Only a third of students believe that they will graduate with the knowledge and skills to be successful in both the job market and the workplace;
- Only half believe their major will lead to a good job;
- 88 percent of first-time college students say that 'getting a good job' is the reason they go to college, yet only a third of these students strongly agree they are gaining the means to succeed; and
- While 96 percent of chief academic officers at colleges and universities believe their institutions are effective at preparing students for the workforce, only 11 percent of business leaders agree (Strada-Gallup, 2017).

Just as popular a critique is the notion that the college campus has become a hotbed for liberal and non-inclusive thought. Publications as diverse as the New York Times and Fox News routinely report students are subjected to politically biased teaching and messaging. On January 28, 2019, retired New York University Professor, Dr. Michael Rectenwald claimed on the daytime Fox News show "Fox and Friends" that "40% of professors are socialists and 90% are liberal." (Newsweek, 2019) Nearly 1.3 million people watch Fox and Friends daily (AdWeek, 2019). In a 2016 New York Times Op-Ed, University of Chicago student Sophie Downs cited her college using terms such as "safe spaces," "snowflakes," and "trigger warnings" have become part of the American lexicon and preventing students like herself to receive a fair and balanced education (Downs, 2016).

In many cases, these critiques may be supported by data. A 2018 study completed by Dr. Samuel Abrams of Sarah Lawrence College surveyed close to 900 "student-facing" administrators, including many student activities staff, whose work brings them in face to face contact with students. Abrams (2018) found that liberal staff members outnumber their conservative counterparts twelve to one. This ratio would make college administrators the most left-leaning group on campus; by contrast, the ratio of liberal to conservative professors is six to one (Abrams, 2018).

Critiques of political bias, however, often pale in comparison to actual student deaths and damaging legal and civil suits. Numerous examples of college student deaths and injury from alcohol poisonings, hazing incidents, and high profile sexual assaults raise significant questions about what colleges are doing to provide a safe and functioning campus environment. From 2005 to 2018, 77 deaths in the United States were fraternity related, while several other deaths occurred in situations where students were participating in activities considered under the purview of campus activities administrators (McMurtrie, 2015).

NOTHING NEW UNDER THE SUN

Despite how dire each of these issues is, it may be surprising to many campus activities professionals that none of them are new. Despite the growth in enrollment over time relative to national population, higher education institutions, and particularly campus activities professionals have long struggled to defend their work to those outside the academy in the United States. An article in the Chronicle of Higher Education, "Scholars, Know Thy History," reminds the reader that the issues and conflicts surrounding contemporary higher education in substance are no different than the issues fought over throughout higher education's existence (Cassuto, 2018). Knowing that critiques of higher education are nothing new, campus activities professionals can finally put that history of higher education course they attended in graduate school to work and use our history as a basis for refuting criticisms as being both nothing new and to build a longitudinal case for why our work is important to students. But first, campus activities staff need to review that history and understand its context. We can start with Walter Crosby Eells.

Walter Crosby Eells was a professor of Education at Stanford in the 1920s and 30s. In his opinion piece, "The Criticisms of Higher Education" Eells described how several sectors of society believed colleges were, "aimless institutions that have prostituted themselves to every public whim, serving as everything from a reformatory to an amusement park; they are only service stations for the general public; they are a bargain- counter system presided over by quacks; they are places where pebbles are polished, and diamonds dimmed." (Crosby Eells, 1934, p. 187). He begins with mentioning that many employers and citizens believe that "not more than a quarter (of college students) have first-rate minds" (Crosby Eells, 1934, p. 187) nor do they "think beyond athletics, fraternities, and social trivialities" (Crosby Eells, 1934, p. 188). Eells also mentioned that Greek life is considered "cruel, vicious, stupid, and degrading" (Crosby Eells, 1934, p. 188). Faculty were not spared similar criticism, either. Eells described university curriculum as "a mess of inherited rubbish, the accumulated debris of hit or miss instruction" (Crosby Eells, 1934, p. 188) and teaching methods that are "hopelessly antiquated and a unholy bore" (Crosby Eells, 1934, p. 188), before summarizing his critique with the phrase, "colleges are robbing students of priceless years" (Crosby Eells, 1934, p. 189). Eells wrote this critique in 1934, 85 years ago but he was not the first. In even earlier works like "The Goose Step" by Upton Sinclar (1922) and "Higher Education in America by Thorstein Velben (1918), authors described higher education as generally a worthless and trite experience. There is an old saying that goes, "those who forget their history are doomed to repeat it." (Santayana, 1905).

During the 1930s, a spirited debate took place regarding the relationships between the college experience and the workplace. The country was mired in a depression, and millions of workers saw their lives upended on the unemployment line. As the United States transitioned from an agrarian to a manufacturing-based economy, numerous concerns were raised regarding how to find the talent and create the training needed for this shift. In response, many journal articles written on the subject in the 1930s reported that college served an important role in career development. For example, in 1930, Columbia University researcher David Snedden laid out a 15 point guide to why college has become the main vocational vehicle for new students. These reasons included the changing nature of work and its technical and intellectual nature, and the growing population of lower and middle-class students who were flocking to colleges to find opportunity (Snedden, 1930).

How many universities infused career guidance into their work does look quite different from contemporary career services but did seem to include more staff who mirrored campus activities staff. In his 1938 article "A Guidance Program," author Albert Hill (1938) outlined an initiative at Wesleyan University built on a series of faculty run "smokers" where college men were treated to dinner, cigars, and career-focused discussion with like-minded students who were paired with faculty who have experience in their chosen field. Topics included what working conditions were like, expected compensation and long term employment prospects. Smokers existed at many campuses at the time. Students were expected to participate in one to two smokers per year with the expectation that the student will use this knowledge and network to find employment after college (Hill, 1938).

As early as 1938, authors Robert Happock and Virginia Tuxill wrote about the growth in academic courses focused on career exploration. In the article they cataloged nearly 90 colleges which offered career-focused

courses, which were designed to "offer a realistic study of occupations and employment trends in a wide variety of fields" (Happock & Tuxill, 1938, p. 357). Around the same time, William Storrs Lee outlined a process where students made meaning and gained experiences in their chosen field through a new and innovative employment structure he titled, "internships." He showcased the new internship program at Middlebury College as "attempts to squeeze out of this liberal education some practical preparation for his career" (Lee, 1937, p. 191). In almost all of these cases the primary contact for students listed as either faculty (most popular) or advising staff (which can be loosely translated into student affairs staff) for these kinds of learning opportunities. Authors such as Karl Onthank (1936) or Daniel Grant (1932) opined that front line staff like the ones we would routinely refer to as campus activities staff provided campus engagement opportunities which can help enhance career development.

Concern over bias and indoctrination to political viewpoints in the classroom have seemingly always been a hot topic in higher education. One of the cornerstones in Joseph McCarthy's Red Scare America was a suspicion that colleges and universities were teaching the tenets of socialism and communism as a form of intellectual revolution on American values and capitalism (Miller Center, ND). John Stewart Burgess wrote in 1938 that in teaching controversial subjects in the classroom, a part of an instructor's job was to seek out and present divergent ideas and theories and not to punish students who present an alternative viewpoint as long as the student has followed the assignment (Burgess, 1938). He went on to argue that time in college should be when students' make up their minds on where they stand on certain issues. To undermine such a process would amount to a sort of intellectual malpractice (Burgess, 1938).

Debates also existed regarding if the college experience developed character and what is the role of administrators in this development. In one of the earliest articles reviewed for this overview, Charles Lingley wrote in 1931 that college was worth more than vocational training and that it is important that "technical prowess must be supported by human qualities" (Lingley, 1931, p. 178) To highlight his point, he spends the better part of his article recounting discussions he participated in during a Dartmouth College fireside chat. The question at hand was, "Does College have any effect, good or bad, on character?" (Lingley, 1931, p. 178). For many campus activities professionals this image of an administrator leading discussions on topics such as character development, leadership prowess, or college impact should be familiar. Campus activities professionals, in addition to their work in developing a slate of programs for students, often are helping students work through both personal and the ideas of the day.

It is an accepted truth in higher education preparatory programs that the work of student affairs provides value to outside-the-classroom experiences related to student success, retention, and career development. These ideas had their roots in early publications nearly 100 years ago. In the 1930s, writers and thinkers were acknowledging the need for students to engage in a robust out of classroom life. For some like John Younger (1931), the need for this out of class opportunity was rooted in the need for students to establish themselves as autonomous humans with the ability to test their professional capacities and end the patriarchal nature of higher education. He argued in 1931 that students have earned the right to govern themselves and lead campus traditions and activities aimed at creating an enjoyable campus life. In another view, W. H. Cowley and Willard Waller comment in their 1935 paper, "A Study of Student Life" that student life, in the words of Yale President Arthur T. Hadley, "the value of education is due to college life even more than to college instruction" (Cowley & Waller, 1935, p. 469), and posit that it is the campus traditions and their effect on students that is the pragmatic core of why college works and benefit students. Many of these traditions outlined in the article like pep rallies and fraternity events sounded much like a slate of campus activities events.

While the voice of support for the work of campus activities has long existed, their detractors were just as active. For example, there were indications that student affairs professionals needed to be better stewards of students' time and development. McCreery and Mott (1938) outlined an early program in Fraternity education at the University of Minnesota after a number of incidents on campus involving their annual "hell week." Even in 1938, there was a sense that college students needed guidance in leading other students, and that critical thinking skills and making better choices could and should be developed. In this case it was in the form of a Fraternity leader course aimed at making sure the recruitment and intake process for these men reflected the

values of the university community (McCreery and Mott, 1938).

In 1936 Karl Onthank opined that training for student leaders, resident assistants, and student government officers was essential because "considering the immaturity and inexperience of most student group leaders, the brief duration of their tenure, and the magnitude and complexity of their responsibility," (Onthank, 1936, p. 118) they need training to "serve their groups with skill, fidelity, and often with distinction." (Onthank, 1936, p. 119) Onthank went on to acknowledge that "one of the most effective ways of improving the quality of student life, with respect to scholarship and otherwise, lies in stabilizing and improving the quality of student group leadership." (Onthank, 1936, p. 119).

WHY UNDERSTANDING OUR HISTORY IS IMPORTANT

If there exists ample evidence that criticisms of the past remain consistent with the criticisms of today, why is this? It is inarguable that universities and their spaces for campus activities represent amazingly complex and interesting places. There seems to be a duality of higher education that is evident to many who make a career out of it. On one hand, virtually everyone in the United States has had some contact with higher education – through enrolling themselves, or attending athletic events, or even by knowing someone close to them who was in college. Such experience provides most at least an idea of how colleges work. Those ideas then lead them to form opinions. Unlike many other industries, higher education feels familiar to almost everyone.

However, little seems to be known about what actually happens on a college campus, much less how what happens occurs. Because of the nature of higher education (e.g. systems of tenure, research completed on subjects unfamiliar to the public, complicated and opaque funding processes), few outside college campuses understand the process of higher education. When something is misunderstood then most people will fill in the gaps with their own conclusions. Such limited direct knowledge combined with the relative ubiquity of higher education in the U.S. results in universities being an easy target for stereotyping. To address these continued misunderstandings, administrators in spaces like campus activities must do better job at communicating the value of their work in more rigorous and relevant quantitative and qualitative ways than they have done in the past. Universities are great at producing data. Can they also become proficient in setting narrative backed up with better and more descriptive data?

ARE STUDENT STORIES THE ANSWER?

Campus activities professionals have focused so much on reductive quantitative assessment whether it measures how many students attended an event, enjoyed a campus concert, were involved on campus tit is so easy to be engulfed by numbers. However, usage and satisfaction assessments do not tell the story that deep assessment, which includes qualitative and quantitative assessments do (Creswell, 2018). So why are we still limiting ourselves to numbers, percentages, and other forms of numerical data when there is a compelling narrative to be formed? Now is the best time to tell our student's stories through better data. Telling a student's narrative is much more powerful through open-ended questions or quantitative assessments compared to surveys that only provided limited answer options that for example range from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree." When students demonstrate and reflect on knowledge gains the results can be mutually beneficial.

It is important all assessments measure the right thing and tell the most accurate and descriptive story. Qualitative research provides a unique opportunity for depth. Narrative research captures the detailed stories or life experiences of a single life or the lives of a small number of individuals (Creswell, 2018). This kind of assessment can be important for student leaders because it allows for them to process experiences. These kinds of assessments are also well suited for student activities professionals because we typically work with fewer number of students and their experiences tend to be more intense and complimented by learning assessments and narrative.

Some universities today are doing incredible work in catching the student narrative and assessing quality over

quantity in the student experience. Two examples are Stephen F. Austin State University and Texas A&M University. Stephen F. Austin's Certified Student Leader program is one that maximizes students' co-curricular experiences along with their ability to translate those experiences into coveted skills that employers seek. Six of the ten National Association of College and Employers (NACE) competencies are incorporated into the Student Leader program. By way of these competencies, students can reflect and incorporate these skills into their resumes and cover letters post-graduation. At Texas A&M, the Student Leader Learning Outcomes (SLLO) Project provides staff the tools necessary to use with student leaders across campus for those students to be able to assess and reflect on their leadership experiences. A Texas A&M student will garner these seven skills through the program: the depth of knowledge required for a degree; critical thinking; effective communication; personal and social responsibility; social, cultural, and global competence; engagement in lifelong learning; and working collaboratively.

While good data and storytelling are important, a cautionary tale exists. When we review the kind of data that provides narrative we also need to be prepared for the criticism and possible confirmation of our critics' base assumptions. Because we may not have critical mass in terms of narrative there may be missing pieces that are not going to be helpful to our cause. For example, in 2016 Campus Labs completed a research project called Project CEO (Griffin, Peck, LaCount, 2016). Project CEO measured the self-confidence students had in certain NACE skills desired by employers. While this is not a qualitative study the results were telling. Students who had worked off-campus rated their skill level in soft skills substantially higher than those students who worked on campus. Such results stand in stark contrast to stereotypical advice student affairs professionals have been giving their students for years. Conventional wisdom states that working on campus allowed for more study time, better hours, and less stress. Here, qualitative research can help fill in gaps and explain why an accepted rule of student development may not be as true as we thought.

CONCLUSION

Higher education can be an enigma. While we thought that higher education is groundbreaking, innovative, and forward-thinking, we may be more prone to falling back to old habits. It is important to know your history, not just because it is informative but because it can be used as a guide for how to interact with a skeptical public and even lead us to better ways of assessing our students learning. There is a saying; "old wine, new bottles." It centers around the idea that wine does not change its properties because it is in a new bottle. It may look fancier, but in the end, it's the same old whine. Student affairs professionals need to know when to throw the old whine out and when the vintage add flavor to our work.

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