Moral Values 101 or How to Make Community Learning a Priority in Learning Communities

A review of

Putting Students First: How Colleges Develop Students Purposefully

by Larry A. Braskamp, Lois Calian Trautvetter, and Kelly Ward


Reviewed by

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These [10 profiled] institutions are not just fostering “engagement” (as if simply being engaged in something, anything, were enough), they are helping students define their vocation, their calling, something to be engaged about.
(from the foreword by Wergin, p. xi)

Putting Students First: How Colleges Develop Students Purposefully is an unusual choice for a PsycCRITIQUES review, as the book is not a traditional work in psychology. In fact, it is not even a nontraditional work in psychology. This is a book about higher education—a higher calling in higher education, to be sure—one dealing with creating a purposeful and meaningful life for college students during and after their four-year sojourns. Psychologists should be interested in this book, however, if they teach at a college or university where the students seem intellectually listless and adrift in and outside the classroom or if a “sense of community” is institutional rhetoric rather than a daily, lived reality. Real engagement for students must be an ongoing process, not an occasional, scattershot practice.
The problem is our problem. The day-to-day demands faced by many faculty members conspire to derail efforts to put students first in the manner advocated by this thoughtful book. Close, dedicated, interactive pedagogy occurs less often than perhaps it should because of competing pressures on faculty time and resource constraints. Consider these familiar trends: Elite institutions are now about the business of recruiting star researchers who are rewarded with lighter teaching loads but forced to pursue grant monies (Bok, 2004). Close relationships are fostered with graduate students who carry out mentors' agendas, not with undergraduates, whose presence once gave purpose to the university. Prestigious liberal arts colleges (or those aspiring to the label in *U.S. News & World Report*) have aped this model in the sense that the pressure to publish is high, often equal to the emphasis traditionally placed on teaching effectiveness. Attention to the third leg of the academic tripod, service, suffers unless an institution has a well-defined niche that somewhat downplays scholarly pressure—something that a handful of comprehensive schools intentionally craft (see Keller, 2004) but many other institutions, especially those lower in higher education's food chain, cannot. Many state-funded or regional institutions, especially the larger ones that were once known as “teachers' colleges,” lack the financial resources and often the mission to focus on holistic student development. The hands of faculty, like their schedules, are tied by large class enrollments, heavy teaching loads (e.g., four or more classes per semester), underprepared students (due in part to open enrollment), and outdated or maintenance-deferred facilities, among other real and dispiriting challenges. And, of course, I have not even mentioned the joys of petty departmental politics or rivalries among “colleagues,” which are humorous from afar (see Russo, 1997) but painful to live through.

There may not be a Greek chorus forming, but the authors of *Putting Students First* are not alone in their concerns about the pedagogical fare for students and how students are faring when it comes to basic learning (see, e.g., Bok, 2005), not to mention the learning of values. What should we do? The authors—Larry A. Braskamp (Loyola University Chicago, emeritus), Lois Calian Trautvetter
(Northwestern University), and Kelly Ward (Washington State University)—wrote this book to illustrate how the faculty, administrators, and staff at 10 institutions (Bethune-Cookman College, Creighton University, Hamline University, Hope College, Pacific Lutheran University, The College of Wooster, Union University, University of Dayton, Villanova University, and Whitworth College) seek to link heads to hearts by emphasizing three related themes. First, any educational institution is an intentional agent, attracting particular types of students and then shaping them to become what is valued by the institution. Second, student development is moral as well as intellectual; one is lessened without the other, and material wealth, power, and other cultural trappings should not be equated with leading the good life. Finally, the development of students is the responsibility of the faculty and other members of the community (e.g., student affairs and coaches), not in the sense of catering to but by nurturing the “whole” student.

The authors are not offering a one-size-fits-all solution here. Their perspective is purposefully narrow, focused on certain types of institutions with certain types of goals for their students and the (relatively) long-term inhabitants of their quadrangles—the faculty, administrators, and staff. To help students holistically, the authors advocate collective, intentional attention toward creating a purposeful life on campus by focusing on the four Cs: culture, curriculum, cocurriculum, and community. Indeed, four of the book’s seven chapters are devoted to the four Cs. Space limitations prevent me from exploring these further except to emphasize that the fourfold framework is designed “to help campus leaders think practically about investing in students” (p. xx). To aid leaders, the four-C chapters close with questions designed to spur on-campus conversations about holistic student development.

That Potentially Off-Putting Element: Being Faith Based

Some readers will be put off by the fact that the authors intensively studied 10 “faith-based” institutions, so I believe it is important to take note of this issue. Although it’s true that faith-based or
“church-related” schools often follow a particular mission, presuming some sense of lock-step orthodoxy or even common religious conviction would be a mistake; with few exceptions, a dimension of diverse opinion, if not a climate of disagreement, can be found on most campuses. That being said, I do wish the authors had included one or two decidedly secular institutions that have kept the (forgive me) spirit of their denominational founders. They might also have discussed a non-Christian school, but these are minor quibbles, really. The profiled schools each have a historic mission that resonates to some, but by no means all, people, which is a point worth remembering, as it probably explains why such a wide variety of colleges have flourished on our shores.

I urge nonreligious skeptics to read around the church-related issues if they are bothered by them (such issues are not belabored in the book and, indeed, are often beside the point). I will also direct skeptics to the recent Higher Education Research Institute (2006) report on Spirituality and the Professoriate, which touts the fact that more than half of faculty members believe that it is important to help undergraduates develop moral character and values (not to mention that 8 of 10 academics declare they are “spiritual”). My point is that such concern is certainly present at but not limited to the sorts of institutions discussed in Putting Students First. The desire to help students think through and to develop their own values about what matters and why is clearly gaining some momentum in academe.

In the interests of full disclosure, I should note that I teach at a liberal arts college that is loosely affiliated with a religious denomination. I say “loosely” because the ties are now in name and history rather than practice, as my college, like many (most) liberal arts colleges today, is secular and proud of that fact, thank you very much. Yet some virtues related to the founding denomination's piety (e.g., collegiality, consensus seeking, and a regrettable modesty) remain subtle forces in the college's life. Faculty at similar institutions can probably identify comparable forces on their campuses. The question is whether the forces are being used constructively to benefit students.
Creating Communities, or Who Should Care, Anyway?

Aside from pointing to a salient problem in the culture of American campuses while also offering some hope, if not immediate redress, this book could be a tonic on some campuses. I began this review by noting that although this work is unusual for PsyCRITIQUES, psychologists should still be interested in it. They should, in a word, care, whether as individual actors seeking to tend their own intellectual gardens in the classroom or as collective agents of change in their departments or wider institutions. Psychologists have the requisite skills to argue and perhaps demonstrate that a “good education” is about learning to live a “good life,” that the goal of higher education is higher learning, not simply preparation for a career. The work of Csikszentmihalyi (1997; Gardner, Csikszentmihalyi, & Damon, 2001) makes this point clear. Learning to live, not merely pursuing a livelihood, is a worthy goal. As educators, we have a responsibility to guide our students in their pursuit of this goal. Many hands—and hearts—will make light this work.

References


