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Whither Holistic Student Development: It Matters More Today Than Ever

By George Kuh

The things we have to learn before we do them, we learn by doing them.

Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*

Every day it seems one or more pundits or policy makers extol job training as the primary purpose of undergraduate education. But when Change Magazine first appeared in 1969, it was widely accepted that holistic student development is the primary goal of college. Certainly, the present moment differs in many ways from 50 years ago, but the need has never been greater for educating the whole student by addressing one's intellectual, social, emotional, ethical, physical, and spiritual attributes. In this article, I trace the evolution of holistic student development as the centerpiece of the college experience in the 1960s to its current all-too-often overlooked function in postsecondary education, and explain why students, employers, and the democracy all benefit from focusing more on educating the whole person.

The economic recession a decade ago had shuddering worldwide effects, most of them deleterious in one way or another. Among the least welcome and most worrisome was to reinforce the notion advanced by many policy makers, employers, and parents that just-in-time job training must trump other priorities for American postsecondary education (Thomason, 2015).

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This perspective is not ubiquitous, of course. Many eloquent counterarguments have been made, both in the higher education literature (Roche, 2010; Roth, 2014) and the national media (Bruni, 2015). But the volume and pitch of the "higher ed as vocational preparation" position is not abating, with the current U.S. Secretary of Education and many business leaders seemingly tilting in this direction.

Of course, these two functions of higher education—preparation for work and preparation for life—are not mutually exclusive (Carlson, 2018; Hora, Benbow, & Oleson, 2016), with the emphasis on one over the other waxing and waning over time. Captains of industry are not always on the same page as they often endorse Janusian positions. They lament a shortfall in available "skilled workers" while in the next breath expressing a preference for job candidates with a demonstrated capacity for self-directed life-long learning and able to effectively meet the challenges of jobs that do not yet exist.

But somehow the present moment seems qualitatively different than in previous decades, as present moments are wont to do without the benefits of the wisdom and length of perspective only hindsight offers. What is unequivocally the case is that the circumstances of 2018 are much different than the era which ushered in *Change* magazine. For example, in the 1960s development of the whole student as the primary purpose of higher education held sway in most quarters (Astin, 1977, 1985; Chickering, 1969; Sanford, 1962). Indeed, in those days the higher education literature and national media offered nary a whiff of job training as the *sine qua non* of the postsecondary enterprise.

Certainly, as with every previous generation, students a half century ago expected college to improve their chances to get a decent job. But the buoyancy of the era also made it acceptable, according to the UCLA Cooperative Institutional Research Program annual surveys of incoming first-year students (Astin, Parrott, Korn, & Sax, 1997), for students to opt for "developing a meaningful philosophy of life" over making a lot of money as their reason for attending college. Even so, taking into account these particular frequently-cited attitudinal items, college students today generally want from postsecondary education what previous generations wanted: an experience that changes them for the better and prepares them for life after college, preferably without seriously challenging their core values and beliefs.

Whether the 1960s was the "golden era" of American higher education is debatable for multiple reasons, central among them the limited access for students from historically underrepresented groups. More to the point, the landmark texts of that era were pure gold in terms of championing holistic student development. My biased memory (perhaps compromised by time) brings to the surface a treasure trove of classics that described in rich detail the development of the whole student as a central purpose of higher education:

- Arthur Chickering, 1969, *Education and Identity*.
- Kenneth Feldman and Theodore Newcomb, 1969, *The Impact of College on Students*.
- Douglas Heath, 1968, *Growing Up in College: Liberal Education and Maturity*.
- Roy Heath, 1964, *The Reasonable Adventurer.*
- Nevitt Sanford, (Ed.), 1962, *The American College: A Psychological and Social Interpretation of the Higher Learning*.
- Nevitt Sanford, 1967, *Where Colleges Fail: A Study of the Student as a Person*.
- James Trent and Leland Medsker, 1968, *Beyond High School: A Psychosociological Study of 10,000 High School Graduates.*

Each of these volumes made its own seminal contribution. Taken together, this collection is remarkable because it addressed the same general topic—the critical role and responsibility of colleges and universities for fostering holistic student learning and personal development. Indeed, it is difficult to identify a period when educating the whole student—the inextricably intertwined cognitive/intellectual and personal/social attributes—was emphasized to the extent these publications did.

These books were the major sources for demonstrating why and how higher education mattered in the 20th century. And they foreshadowed a steady stream of subsequent tomes echoing the importance of holistic student development, including Alexander Astin (1977, 1985, 1993), Marcia Baxter Magolda (1992), Howard Bowen (1977), Arthur Chickering and Linda Reisser (1993), Helen Horowitz (1987), Matthew Mayhew et al., (2016), C. Robert Pace (1979), Ernest Pascarella and Patrick Terenzini (1991, 2005), and William Perry (1970) among many others.

All of these volumes (and more not listed here) presented persuasive arguments establishing holistic student development as a very important goal consistent with the purposes of liberal education (Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2007; Astin, 1977, Cronin, 1998; Kuh, Shedd, & Whitt, 1987).

For the purposes of this essay, holistic student development encompasses the following dimensions:

- Intellectual: proficient in acquiring, communicating, synthesizing, integrating and applying knowledge, and learning how to learn and think deeply.
- Emotional: understanding, mediating, and expressing emotions in appropriate ways.
- Social: enhanced quality and depth of interpersonal relationships and civic engagement.
- Ethical: a value system that informs life choices and one's character.
- Physical: knowledge and habits enabling one to maintain wellness and make informed choices about one's health.
- Spiritual: pondering questions that transcend the material or physical world to inform one's sense of purpose and meaning (adapted from Joseph Cuseo, https://www2.indstate.edu/studentsuccess/pdf/Defining%20Student%20Success.pdf).

Granted, honoring holistic student development in word and deed is not a universally held article of faith in the academy. Since Colonial days, educating the whole person has struggled to attain equal footing with cultivating the intellect as a valued purpose of American colleges and universities. Even so, most institutional mission statements include language about, for example, preparing students for active participation in civic life and to act in an enlightened ethical manner; admittedly, few institutions back this up with curricular requirements to solidify this aim. Especially worrisome is that many of those institutions that strive to balance the cognitive-intellectual domains with personal-social development—such as many small independent liberal arts and denominational colleges—are struggling in the current environment to remain viable. The cacophony of voices raising understandable concerns about the cost of college coupled with those urging institutions to emphasize job training makes it even more difficult for liberal arts colleges to persuasively explain their educational purposes.

A Sliver of Optimism Beckons

Institutional type notwithstanding, there is a refreshing counter-narrative to the college-as-vocational-training drumbeat that continues unabated both inside and, especially, outside the academy. Particularly promising is the attention being paid to a constellation of dispositions that tend to be overlooked or deemed unworthy of attention in traditional academic offerings.

It goes something like this: In addition to up-to-date technical knowledge, virtually every field of endeavor in the future will need workers who are proficient in a range of skills. Some of these 21st century proficiencies are familiar time-honored outcomes of higher education such as critical thinking, analytical reasoning, and clarity of thought and expression (Lumina Foundation, 2014).

Other behaviors have more recently ascended in importance, including curiosity, resilience, self-regulation, conscientiousness, flexibility, and the ability to work effectively with people from diverse backgrounds, especially those who hold varying perspectives on how to identify and devise solutions to messy, unscripted problems. Many of these outcomes are reflected in the Essential Learning Outcomes promulgated by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (2007) in the U.S. as well as lists of desired graduate attributes that appear in the qualifications frameworks of such countries as Australia, England, Ireland, Scotland, and South Africa.

Employers from large multinational organizations to small local businesses express preference for a similar set of skills and competencies (Hart & Associates, 2016). Indeed, over the past few years, managers at Google with its more than 75,000 workers (https://www.recode.net/2017/7/24/16022210/alphabet-google-employment-employees-doubled-headcount) determined that their most effective, innovative employees share dispositional attributes that are thought to be characteristic of those who majored in the humanities and social sciences (https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/answer-sheet/wp/2017/12/20/the-surprising-thing-google-learned-about-its-employees-and-what-it-means-for-todays-studenhts/?utm_term=.949a987dada). Among them are:

- Generosity
- Curiosity
- Empathy
- Emotional intelligence
- Effective communication and listening skills
- Collaborative problem solving
- Egalitarian sensibilities

Given the groundswell of interest by stakeholders in insuring that graduates have acquired what often have been labeled ineffable, "soft skills," their affinity with holistic student development is compelling. Even prestigious organizations such as the Institute of Educational Sciences (Zelazo, Blair, & Willoughby, 2016) and the National Academy of Science, Engineering, and Mathematics (Herman & Hilton, 2017) have extolled the value and virtues of dispositional attributes as intentionally cultivated postsecondary outcomes (Kuh, Gambino, Bresciani Ludvik & O'Donnell, 2018). They include:

- *Interpersonal competencies* such as expressing information to others as well as interpreting others' messages and responding appropriately;
- *Intrapersonal competencies* such as self-regulation, reflection, resilience, and conscientiousness; and
- *Neuro-cognitive skills* (Zelazo, Blair, & Willoughby, 2016) such as crystallized intelligence and fluid intelligence or executive functions such as cognitive flexibility (Bresciani Ludvik, in press).

Valuing dispositional learning attributes acknowledges that cognitive and personal development are inextricably intertwined and inseparable, consistent with holistic student development and its doppelgänger, liberal arts education. These and related outcomes can be acquired through academic offerings designed to do so, though most institutions do not offer majors or minors in these areas (maybe a badge or two are on the horizon?!?). But all too often, dispositional attributes are developed serendipitously typically through various kinds of out-of-class experiences, on and off the campus.

Of course, educating the whole person is not exclusively or even primarily a function of the curriculum. Indeed, on most campuses the student affairs and related functions are assigned and—in most cases—happily assume responsibility for providing opportunities for students to explore and develop their multiple talents through a multitude of out-of-class activities, such as organizational leadership, campus employment, peer tutoring and so forth.

Honoring Experience and Experiential Learning

Another recent trend congenial to re-establishing the value of holistic student development is—ironically—the push to formally acknowledge collegiate-level learning through experience in non-academic pursuits. Who knew the Aristotle epigraph and—by association—the study of philosophy would be so timely and trenchant!

One of the byproducts of the movement to value experience and experiential learning is the positive influence of participating in a high-impact practice (HIP) on a range of desired outcomes (Kuh, O'Donnell, & Schneider, 2017). That is, a HIP done well typically induces students to practice and over time cultivate the skills and dispositional learning attributes that employers, and others assert are essential for success during and after college. As a result, doing a HIP:

a) Is associated with unusually positive effects on a variety of desired learning and persistence outcomes;
b) Situates students in circumstances that require applied, hands-on practice necessary for deep, meaningful, integrative learning over an extended period of time;
c) Has *salutary effects* for students from historically underserved populations in that students get a boost in their performance;
d) Shrinks the psychological size of the institution because students get to know well at least one faculty or staff member and a small affinity group of peers: and
e) Has cumulative, additive positive effects on learning and persistence when students participate in multiple HIPs during their undergraduate program.

Indeed, as I and my colleagues have argued, participating in a HIP is replete with developmentally powerful opportunities to apply, reflect and integrate what one is learning (Kuh et al., 2017). In fact, the HIPs framework seems to be an especially promising approach for helping ensure access, equity, and educational quality. Moreover, there is good reason to expect that participating in a HIP or types of other activities with HIP-like features would put students in settings where they encounter messy, unscripted circumstances and need to expend effort on tasks that will test their resolve, experiences that employers highly value.

Examples of effective experiential learning activities, which are at the core of a well-implemented HIP, have been explained elsewhere (Hesser, 2015), including in *Change* (Coker & Porter, 2015). And informative presentations of effective experiential learning policies and practices that further holistic student development pepper the annual meeting of the Society for Experiential Learning and its publications (http://www.nsee.org/).

Naysayers, including those emphasizing that college is for job training, are quick to point out that many of the dimensions of holistic student development are attributes that students come to college with and are either immutable at this point or not the role of the 21st century university to address, given all the other priorities and pressures facing postsecondary institutions. This position is curious for two reasons.

First, many studies using most measures of these dimensions show that on average students do exhibit positive movement while they are in college (Mayhew et al., 2016). That is, college does matter in these important areas, even if institutions themselves do little intentionally to address them programmatically. The extent to which maturation contrasted with what students do during college induces these developmental changes is a discussion worth revisiting (Trent & Medsker, 1969).

The second reason the position of naysayers is curious is that they almost always will encourage their children or family members to pursue (at least) a baccalaureate degree at the kind of college or university that values holistic student development. There is scant evidence that people who support the notion college should be primarily for vocational preparation advise their own offspring or other relatives to obtain the training typically associated with a postsecondary certificate or certification signifying short-term "job ready" competencies.

Unsurprisingly, a recent survey of college and university presidents (https://www.insidehighered.com/system/files/media/2018_Presidents_Survey_Final.pdf) posed no questions about whether holistic student development is among their strategic priorities or featured in their institutional missions. It is almost axiomatic that enthusiastically talking about educating the whole person is akin to declaring liberal education as a primary purpose of postsecondary education, a sentiment that has not played well for several decades in the national media and policy circles. But when the concepts and outcomes associated with liberal education and holistic student development are conveyed in plain English, employers prefer workers with these attributes, and parents want the same for their children.

Last Word

The world needs more institutional leaders, employers, parents, workers, and policy makers who exhibit the characteristics of the whole person—people who use the full range of the examined human experience when making decisions, interacting with others in the workplace and community, raising their children and caring for their family, and tending the commons. In the era when *Change* was born, colleges and universities and their students benefitted from many thought leaders both inside and outside the academy who championed holistic student development as a legitimate, valued purpose of higher education. We desperately need many more of similar ilk to step forward now to persuasively lobby for and remind us why programs and practices that are congenial with developing the whole person are not just desirable but *essential* for individuals to thrive and the democracy to survive. C

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