Chapter 5

Reframing as Defining in Student Affairs:
Co-Curricular Learning Through a Different Lens

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this chapter is to introduce the design concept of framing and the ways in which student affairs practitioners can apply the process of reframing in their work with students and in their assessment efforts. Similar to the way designers use frames to define the problem situation, students can be prompted and coached to view their curricular and co-curricular learning experiences in new ways. This chapter applies learning sciences theory and design concepts to student affairs assessment practice, beginning with the importance of reframing for student affairs and student learning. The chapter then employs transformative learning theory and Fink's taxonomy to understand and explain the use and importance of reframing. The authors utilize literature from the design and architecture fields to describe and illustrate the concept of reframing, drawing parallels to how student affairs practitioners can apply these concepts to assess and improve student learning.

INTRODUCTION

Throughout its history, the student affairs profession has demonstrated its ability to reframe its purpose within higher education. This reframing has been the result of distinct but overlapping factors: economic, political, societal, and cultural. Changing student demographics, expansion and industrialization of higher education, waning public trust, and global events such as wars and pandemics have required student affairs to reflect on its value and role within postsecondary institutions. The development of the

Professional Competencies (ACPA & NASPA, 2015), the expansion of ACPA/NASPA organizations through the creation of coalitions, commissions, and knowledge communities, and numerous reports and publications such as the *Student Learning Imperative* (Calhoun, 1996), *Learning Reconsidered* (Keeling, 2004), and *Learning Reconsidered 2* (Keeling, 2006) illustrate how the field has reframed its goals and priorities to serve students and institutions more effectively. The COVID-19 pandemic which began in 2020 forced student affairs to once again reconsider their priorities and reframe how work is done and the measures of effectiveness.

Influenced by changes in postsecondary accreditation agencies such as the Higher Learning Commission, coupled with public pressures of accountability and a scarcity of resources, student affairs leaders have needed to reframe their contributions to students and their institutions. This reframing requires a shift in focus from inputs to outputs. It is no longer enough to document the number and types of programs and services; student affairs divisions must also address questions such as: Who is being served and who is being overlooked in the programs? What are students learning as a result of this program? What is the impact of policies on student success?

This chapter shifts the conversations around reframing from the institutional level to the student level. The objectives of this paper are twofold: (a) outline strategies that can assist students reframe the learning they receive through co-curricular activities and (b) provide suggestions for capturing and documenting this reframing.

MAIN FOCUS OF THE CHAPTER

Students' definitions and sense-making of their learning experiences influence their personal and educational goals and their evaluation of their progress towards these goals (Mezirow, 1997). Within the classroom, students use scores on assignments and grades as proxies for learning and goal achievement. Student affairs professionals also provide significant learning experiences but may lack these formal systems that help students recognize or evaluate their learning (Kerr et al., 2020). Students may fail to consider the learning they gain from their co-curricular activities; thus, overlooking or minimizing the value of these experiences. Additionally, when this learning is not made explicit or documented, administrators and faculty often undervalue the importance of student affairs within their institutions. We posit that through the process of reframing (Dorst, 2010; Schön, 1984), student affairs professionals can address both of these challenges: (a) assisting students to identify their co-curricular learning experiences, and (b) demonstrating the value of student affairs. Reframing affords opportunities for students to design and articulate their own transformative, co-curricular experiential learning opportunities according to their own interests, meanings, and purposes. By documenting this learning, student affairs professionals can illustrate their role in educating students and, subsequently, can more comprehensively demonstrate the value of a postsecondary education.

The purpose of this chapter is to illustrate the power of reframing in enhancing student learning and the critical role student affairs professionals play in this reframing. The concept of framing and reframing has its roots in design education, so the chapter begins with an overview of design thinking and the use of mental frames within design thinking. As this chapter situates reframing for purposes of student learning, the authors draw upon transformative learning theory that supports the claim that reframing can lead to these outcomes in co-curricular environment, and Fink's Taxonomy, which provides a comprehensive view of significant learning as a guide for reframing learning experiences. The chapter then provides an

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