

Chapter 8

Moving from Theory to Practice: Integrating Personal Learning Networks into a Graduate–Level Student Development Theory Course

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ABSTRACT

While higher education grapples with new and emerging technologies that are changing the way courses and degree programs are delivered, as well as how students and faculty communicate with each other, the field of student affairs has been relatively slow to adapt to this changing landscape. The purpose of this case study is to describe the integration of technological skills and competencies into a graduate-level education course for future student affairs professionals, a relatively new phenomenon for graduate preparation courses. A brief overview of the field student affairs and student development theory is followed by an in-depth description of the adapted course, course assignments using technology, and the results of those activities. Recommendations for graduate preparation programs are provided at the conclusion of the case.

INTRODUCTION

Stoller (2010; 2012) has argued for the inclusion of technological competencies and skills in student affairs graduate programs. When the American College Personnel Association (ACPA) and the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA) developed the list of core competencies for student affairs practitioners in 2010, technology was listed only as a thread to be incorporated into each competency area. In describing technology, the associations simply noted that it should be the “appropriate identifi-

cation and use of technology resources in one’s work” (American College Personnel Association & National Association of Student Personnel Administrators, 2010a, p. 6). The actual competencies do not include clear instruction on how to incorporate technology as a thread.

This chapter will describe the incorporation of informal learning environments into a student development theory graduate course. Student development theory is the foundation upon which student affairs practice is based, and the course often serves as graduate students’ first introduction to the field in their master’s program. Previous

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iterations of this course at the University of Florida have included very little technology, often limited to accessing readings through a library database and uploading papers to a course management system.

When I was given the opportunity to teach the course for the first time, I opted to utilize my background in educational technology to infuse technological competencies and skills into the course (see Jenkins, 2009). I also thought it was important to help students develop their own personal learning networks (Warlick, 2009) within the student affairs field, recognizing the need for graduate students to expand their networks beyond their own institutions. With the growing uses of social networks such as Twitter for professional development, I wanted to help students gain more confidence and competence using these platforms. Course assignments were developed to integrate the foundational areas of student development theory with these emerging areas of practice in the realm of technology.

BACKGROUND

The purpose of this section is to more fully describe the field of student affairs, the foundational aspects of student development theory, and the importance of building personal learning networks within the field.

About the Field of Student Affairs

Student Affairs is the field within higher education dedicated to helping students learn and grow outside of the classroom (National Association of Student Personnel Administrators, 2012b). The field originally emerged to demonstrate an emphasis on the development of the whole person, as well as to support the academic mission of institutions of higher education (Nuss, 2003). Foundational documents such as the Student

Personnel Point of View (American Council on Education Studies, 1937) point to this philosophy of guiding the whole student.

As faculty roles began to shift in the early 1900's, student personnel administrators appeared to take on functions such as student discipline, student government, health services, vocational guidance, and other areas (Nuss, 2003). Today, the field of student affairs includes a variety of roles and career paths. Departments include, but are not limited to, multicultural affairs, student activities, sorority and fraternity affairs, housing and residence education, recreation and fitness, counseling and wellness, judicial affairs, leadership development, career services, new student orientation, support for students with disabilities, and veterans' programs (National Association of Student Personnel Administrators, 2012b).

Two national associations provide much of the professional development activity for student affairs professionals: the American College Personnel Association (ACPA) and the National Association for Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA). Both associations trace their beginnings to the early part of the 20th century: NASPA in 1919 and ACPA in 1924. NASPA originally began as an association of deans of men, while ACPA emerged from deans of women. Today both associations provide large annual conferences, leadership opportunities, publications, research, career development, and knowledge communities (NASPA) or commissions (ACPA) focused on specific interest groups.

In addition to ACPA and NASPA, student affairs professional also have the opportunity to participate in associations affiliated with their specific departments or areas of interest within the field. For example, professionals who work in new student orientation can participate in the National Orientation Directors Association (NODA), while those who work in housing and residence education can participate in the Association of College and University Housing Officers-International

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