

# Learning Reconsidered: A New Direction in Student Activities by Del Suggs

**Learning Reconsidered: A Campus-Wide Focus on the Student Experience** was released in 2004 by the *National Association of Student Personnel Administrators* (NASPA) and the *American College Personnel Association* (ACPA). The impact of this publication is as dramatic and deep as a rock tossed into a still pond, and as the ripples radiate out they are impacting student activities. This new philosophy will likely influence student life for years to come, and may very well change the way you approach your job in student affairs.

If you are unfamiliar with *Learning Reconsidered*, here is a too-brief summary: **Learning is a comprehensive, holistic, and transformative activity which integrates both academics and student development.** Essentially, learning in higher education is not about content (learning facts), but about personal development (learning to think and application of knowledge). *Learning Reconsidered* calls for the utilization of the entire campus experience, and the collaboration of “all campus educators” ([www.LearningReconsidered.org](http://www.LearningReconsidered.org)) towards this goal.

What does this mean to student activities? Quite simply, it calls for a change in philosophy, content, and delivery of activities. Truly, it is a return to student activities as a “co-curricular” learning opportunity instead of an “extra-curricular” event. (See “Campus Collaboration: Integrating the College Mission into Programming” in *Student Activities Journal*, February, 2005).

## The Philosophy of Student Activities

Consider the call for collaboration of “all campus educators.” That, of course, includes you. You are a campus educator, whether you realize it or not. I believe that Student Affairs personnel are frequently undervalued by their academic colleagues, who often see student activities professionals as akin to camp counselors or “Julie” from the

*Love Boat* television series. Perhaps some of you believe this yourselves, and view your job on campus to provide a diversion and release from the pressures of campus academics. Ask yourself this question: “Am I as important to this campus as a Math or English professor?”

According to *Learning Reconsidered*: **Yes, you are.**

Student Activities should be far more than stress relief, far more than just entertainment on campus. Student Activities should reinforce classroom learning. But more importantly, Student Activities should provide additional learning opportunities that are not available in the classroom. Student Activities should be a full partner in the comprehensive, holistic, transformative activity of learning.

Understanding your role in learning may call for you to reassess your attitude about yourself and your responsibilities. You must realize that you are a vital part of campus learning. The programs you present should foster the personal development of students, and the transformation of these students into adults who will continue to learn and integrate that knowledge into their daily lives.

You must become the campus expert in the area of Student Development. It’s likely you already are, whether you realize it or not.

## The Content of Student Activities

Does a more emphatic embrace of this new philosophy of student activities call for a change in content? Not totally, although you will find yourself looking at all of your programs and evaluating their academic content. Consider your current programs. Some of them fit perfectly into the *Learning Reconsidered* concept.

You know that any lecturer you bring to campus-- no matter how entertaining the program-- is there for a more important educational purpose.

Lecture programs seek to enlighten. The presenters you bring to campus are experts in sharing their knowledge and point of view. They may do it in a funny, fresh, or exciting way, or they may be boring. Regardless, they are really there to educate.

Consider some of your music programming, especially if you present classical, jazz, or blues on campus. These programs provide a cultural content which your students will be unlikely to find anywhere else. This really applies to any musical genre which is considered out of the mainstream. While your students may hear recordings of this music on radio or television, they are unlikely to witness a live performance anywhere else but on your campus.

However, some of your programs might need to be modified to support the concept of holistic learning. As an example, many campuses present a film series for their students. Unfortunately, these film series are often the same blockbuster movies that were just shown at the cineplex at the local mall. A campus film series should be more than just second-run movies.

Contemplate a film series of important historic films. Your students need to see “*Citizen Kane*” far more than they need to see the latest Adam Sandler film. You should show important documentary films, or the foreign films which are rarely shown by commercial theaters. Collaborate with the faculty in your Mass Communications Department and put together a film series that supports learning-- not just entertainment.

## The Delivery of Student Activities

In embracing the *Learning Reconsidered* concept, you may need to take another look at the way you present your activities. You know that learning is taking place. Are there ways you can change the presentation to increase the retention of knowledge and to improve the educational outcome of the program?

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Again, consider the difference between a “co-curricular” learning opportunity instead of an “extra-curricular” event. What can you do to increase the academic value of the program to your students?

Dave Leenhouts, Director of Student Life at Coastal Georgia Community College, uses a concept he calls “Reflection 1101.” In essence, it consists of a group or audience discussion held immediately after an event. But the purpose is not to critic the performance, rather to discuss the content of the performance. Imagine watching a film, enjoying a comedian, or marveling at an illusionist, and then having a lively discussion following the show. That would certainly allow for a better understanding of the content, and an integration of that content into your students’ thought processes.

Consider having a professor or other expert lead the discussion, especially if that person has good teaching and critical thinking skills. They may be able to contribute another point of view. And use your experience as a campus activities expert to increase attendance and participation: you might try the old stand-by of free food following the performance or event to hold your audience. You know they will stay for pizza.

Understand that not everyone will want to participate, at least not at first. But you may be surprised at the response from your students, especially if the content is controversial or challenges established standards. You may find them staying longer and discussing more than you expected.

### **Like A Guided Tour**

If you’ve ever had a guided tour of a city or museum, then you understand how a docent can turn a simple experience into a remarkable learning opportunity. It is one experience to walk through a museum unattended, reading the displays and looking at the exhibits. It is a totally changed-- and

dramatically improved-- experience to be guided and informed by an expert in the process.

I remember going to the Salvador Dali Museum in St. Petersburg, Florida, walking around being stunned and overwhelmed by these great works of art. However, when I took a guided tour, I began to realize how much I had missed during my first look. The guide pointed out small details in the paintings that I had missed; she explained the symbolism of the objects and subjects of the paintings; and, she gave the historical, cultural, and biographical background I needed to better understand these remarkable works of art.

In the same way, having a contemplative discussion of a program’s content following the presentation on your campus. Guided, reflective discussion is one important way to maximize the learning that occurs at your programs.

### **Seven Student Outcomes**

*Learning Reconsidered* calls for “transformative learning.” This concept leaves behind the idea of learning as simply the transfer of knowledge, and embraces the development of the whole student.

To this end, *Learning Reconsidered* suggests seven learning outcomes that students should achieve. These outcomes relate directly to Student Activities, especially the model of co-curricular programming. Let’s consider them individually, and address the role of activities in producing this outcome.

#### **Outcome Number One: Cognitive Complexity**

**Cognitive complexity** is the development of critical thinking skills. The growth of reflective thinking, effective reasoning, and intellectual flexibility are all prime examples of cognitive complexity. This may be the

basis of the liberal arts education: teaching students how to think.

Certainly traditional classroom teaching, accompanied by readings and discussions, seek to produce cognitive complexity. On many campuses, this outcome is also reinforced through “living learning communities” in residence halls. Many schools also offer the opportunity to study abroad, also helping to achieve cognitive complexity. Development of intellectual capacity and cognitive complexity is the hallmark of higher education.

Consider the student activities programs that assist in the development of cognitive complexity. You can present programs that expose your students to new ideas, programs that make the cognitive gears turn. That would include programs such as lectures on current topics of importance. Consider presenting debates or other issue-oriented programs. These don’t necessarily need to be expensive celebrity speakers-- faculty members may also be effective in presenting a discussion of topical issues such as global warming.

Presenting documentary films is another excellent way to promote critical thinking skills. Whether you show controversial films such as “An Inconvenient Truth” or “Fahrenheit 9/11,” popular films such as “March Of The Penguins,” or film classics such as “Nanook of the North,” the documentary film is an important contemporary educational art form. Exposing students to documentaries can enhance reflective thought.

You may also want to consider using some of the touring popular live game shows. Most of these programs call for critical thinking, and are favorite programs for students. Some of these game show programs can be customized for your campus, and often have a variety of subjects from which you can select.

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Another means of producing reflective thinking and effective reasoning skills is through campus advocacy groups. If your school has a student-driven LGBT awareness program, or other diversity programs, then you are fostering cognitive complexity. The same with cultural advocacy groups such as a Latino Student Union.

The reach of student activities actually extends even further in developing cognitive complexity. Your student Judicial Board, frequently assigned to the Student Activities office, is an excellent means of producing cognitive complexity. In a similar way, students working with the campus media also gain this learning outcome. Whether it's the campus newspaper, radio station, closed circuit cable or broadcast television station, students engaged in operating the campus media have an extraordinary opportunity to expand and develop their cognitive complexity.

### **Outcome Number Two: Knowledge Acquisition, Integration, and Application**

**Knowledge Acquisition, Integration, and Application** is both gaining and utilization of knowledge. Understanding knowledge from a range of disciplines is acquisition; connecting knowledge to other knowledge, ideas, and experiences considered integration; and, relating knowledge to daily life is application. An additional

result of this outcome is the pursuit of lifelong learning, that love of learning we should all seek.

One of your goals in programming should be to integrate student classroom learning into the facilitation of activities. We're talking about combining co-curricular learning and experiential learning.

The most basic way of implementing this outcome is with your programming board. Assign tasks to your board members that both utilize and enhance their classroom curriculum. Your business majors in accounting should be dealing with the programming board budget. Your marketing majors should be developing the promotion and advertising for your programs. These examples enable your students to apply the knowledge they've gained in the classroom in another area, giving them an opportunity to both integrate and apply the knowledge they've gained.

Consider also utilizing your faculty with this outcome. Invite your marketing professors to teach your publicity committee how to succeed. Ask mass communication professors to help your board create a worthy film series. Reach out to your faculty, and include them in your teaching and learning.

Also, special teams and activities contribute to this learning outcome. Whether it is participation in a "Model United Nations" program, "Brain Bowl," or other team competitions, these sorts of programs lead to knowledge acquisition and application.

Campus literary magazines also foster knowledge acquisition, integration, and application. A number of other arts-based clubs and groups do, too, such as drama and theater organizations, dance and performing arts groups, along with music groups and choirs, encourage the use of knowledge often gained in a classroom in a non-classroom setting.

### **Outcome Number Three: Humanitarianism**

**Humanitarianism** is the understanding and appreciation of human differences, cultural competency, and social responsibility. Through these academic terms comes a concept that many programmers have been at the vanguard for decades: celebrating diversity.

You know how your programs celebrate diversity. Plan more opportunities for student activities to both reflect and explain the diversity of cultures on your campus. Present festivals which present the culture and heritage of your international students, and allow all your students to gain an better understanding of those cultures. You can include that most common of all bonds: food. As your students learn about other countries and peoples, they gain an true insight into their culinary history. Think about how related food and culture are. Don't all cultures celebrate with a feast or banquet?

Consider bringing in international artists to perform. You can often find grant support from arts organizations for such programs, so it can be very cost effective. Likewise, you can present programs of visual arts, featuring international artists.

Be sure you consider all types of diversity. This included ethnic and racial diversity, religious diversity, and more. Consider, too, identity diversity such as GLBT programs. Helping students to understand about different people is teaching them to appreciate the human race. You should foster a respect for the differences among students at your school.

Of course, you are already doing more than just presenting a festival or programs about different cultures. There are so many other programs that you do on campus that develop humanitarianism. International studies, studying abroad, and exchange programs have long targeted humanitarianism. And consider this:

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interdisciplinary course presented by your campus often develop humanitarianism. Remember those courses that you took in college which included the study of great literature and art from a specific culture? What was it called? Of course-- **Humanities**.

### **Outcome Number Four: Civic Engagement**

**Civic Engagement** is the commitment to public life, and a sense of civic responsibility. This includes encouraging "communities of practice"-- an academic term for what we would call a service club or organization. It would also include engaging in principled dissent, that is, learning to disagree on principles and ideas in a civil manner, a powerful concept which is endangered in the modern world.

You are already developing civic engagement. Your students probably build houses for Habitat for Humanity. They go on Alternative Spring Break trips to help rebuild New Orleans and the Mississippi coast. They walk in the Relay for Life for the American Cancer Society. They might hold a dance marathon for a children's hospital. Many students are actively engaged in their community.

Consider organizing additional campus service projects. While Habitat for Humanity does a wonderful job in building houses and communities, there are other worthy options. An organization called "Love Works" takes volunteers to rehab existing but substandard housing, adding wheelchair ramps for elderly homeowners, and more. Create food drives, voter registration drives, anything that promotes students to reflect on their responsibilities to the world at large.

But there are many other areas that contribute to civic engagement. Student governance groups-- in all their incarnations-- develop civic engagement. Student Government Association, Residence Hall

Association, Commuter Student Association, even leadership roles in campus clubs and organizations encourage civic involvement and responsibility. Include service on student judicial boards, too. How about neighborhood involvement, such as serving on the PTA at their local school (don't forget non-traditional students). Even sports clubs and intramural teams lead to civic engagement.

You are also likely to have an emerging leaders program on campus. You may present a leadership development program series, or even hold a leadership conference. This all works towards reaching the civic engagement outcome.

Student protests on campus, like it or not, is a clear indication of civic engagement. Perhaps you can soften the reaction of the administration to your campus protesters if you point out that they are actually demonstrating a mastery of the civic engagement outcome as called for in *Learning Reconsidered*!

Consider using touring artists who advocate service projects and causes. You will find that many artists will give you a discounted fee in exchange for the opportunity to support a cause they believe in.

### **Outcome Number Five: Interpersonal & Intrapersonal Competence**

**Interpersonal & Intrapersonal Competence** is the development of personal attributes such as identity, self-esteem, confidence, ethics and integrity. It also includes the development of meaningful relationships, and the ability to work with others.

Once again you will find student activities on the cutting edge of this outcome. Every time you present a motivational speaker, you are teaching in interpersonal and intrapersonal competence by teaching student to set and achieve goals. Your students are

developing their own sense of values and integrity from these programs. Your leadership retreats do more than teach your student leaders the campus procedures on room reservations and food service. They help your students learn to work with other students, and lead to the development of meaningful relationships.

When your students work together on your program board, and are certainly gaining in interpersonal and intrapersonal competence. They are gaining self-confidence and self-esteem. They are learning ethics and integrity. It's really another fine example of experiential learning on your program board.

There are also so many paraprofessional positions on campus which develop these competencies. Residence hall assistants, peer tutors, orientation leaders, and all those workstudy jobs promote the development of interpersonal and intrapersonal competence.

Teaching your students to work together, to cooperate, to delegate, and to complete their assigned tasks are all excellent ways to facilitate this important outcome.

### **Outcome Number Six: Practical Competence**

**Practical Competence** is, in many ways, life skills. The importance of managing your personal affairs, health, and wellness cannot be overstated. Effective communication and vocational competency are truly the fundamentals of a satisfying life.

Understanding and implementing economic self-sufficiency is a skill that will be utilized throughout the life of a student. Practical competence also includes such things as prioritizing one's leisure pursuits, that includes knowing when to put down the Wii controller, or walk away from the xbox.

Some examples of programs that improve practical competency include

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wellness programming and health fairs. First Year Experience (FYE) programs are also prime examples, teaching everything from balancing a checking account to using the library.

Other good examples of these programs are such things as club sports and recreational programs. Learning to enjoy exercise and fitness programs contributes to a healthy life far past the college years. Even such offerings as food service programs which encourage healthy eating, and offer a diverse menu, can result in improved practical competence.

Consider other opportunities to enhance practical competence with your programs. There are many excellent speakers on finances and fiscal matters for students, addressing the pitfalls of credit card debt, student loans, and poor credit. Look at bringing in speakers on alcohol and drug abuse, as you are likely aware of the prevalence of binge drinking and recreational drug use on most campuses. Even suicide awareness programs would be beneficial in learning these practical, real-world skills.

### **Seventh: Persistence and Academic Achievement**

**Persistence and Academic Achievement** include managing the college experience to produce personal and academic success. This leads logically to academic goal success, such as attainment of the degree or certification sought by the student. And, while *Learning Reconsidered* does not view matriculation as the ultimate measure of success in learning, we all know that graduation and academic achievement do play an important role in student success.

There are many opportunities for your student activities office to contribute to this outcome. The experiential learning your programming board is gaining is a powerful example of both persistence and achievement. Honoring board members who maintain a high GPA is

another opportunity to encourage academic achievement.

You might consider sponsoring bridge programs and peer mentoring, both leading to enhanced academic performance. Promoting faculty and staff mentoring can contribute to improving student retention and result in better learning.

There are many other occasions for you to enhance this outcome. There are many lecturers and speakers who address learning skills and retention, testing skills, and much more. Motivational programs to inspire degree completion is another means of increasing academic goal attainment.

Consider also support groups which work with returning and non-traditional students, and programs which encourage academic persistence. And reach out in other ways with your programming, perhaps providing parenting programs and child care services. These programs, aimed at your non-traditional students, will go a long way towards increasing students' persistence. The increase in academic achievement will be a result of your programming efforts.

### **Presenting Holistic Programs**

What *Learning Reconsidered* says about your activities programs is simple, straightforward and to the point: you should be enhancing holistic learning on your campus. Consider it a challenge to you, the campus expert on student development, to craft, hone, and create programs which lead to the transformation of students on your campus.

You need to practice **Intentional Programming**. Plan your activities and events like it is a curriculum. Seek out programs that encourage collaboration between your students, faculty, and staff. Add a reflective component to your programs, to enhance the learning opportunity of every program you present. Bring in artists, speakers, and

special events that contribute to the seven learning outcomes discussed.

**Learning is a comprehensive, holistic, and transformative activity which integrates both academics and student development.** It calls for a change in philosophy, content, and delivery of activities. *Learning Reconsidered* calls for the utilization of the entire campus experience, and the collaboration of "all campus educators." First and foremost, that includes the Office of Student Activities.

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