

Founding *About Campus* Executive Editor Patricia M. King discusses her concerns about what she sees as the unnecessary split between the institutional and the individual approach to supporting student learning and provides a forward-looking model to merge the two.

By Patricia M. King

# Enriching the Student Learning Experience: Linking Student Development and Organizational Perspectives

**W**HEN THE IDEA OF FOUNDING A HIGHER EDUCATION MAGAZINE that focused on enriching student learning was proposed by ACPA in 1995, I thought, “A magazine?!” I was energized by the possibilities and quickly agreed to serve as a co-executive editor with Charles Schroeder. I was attracted by the idea of providing an accessible way for student affairs practitioners, faculty, and academic administrators to learn about and exchange ideas to promote student learning. Having a magazine you could carry to meetings and articles that were short enough for busy practitioners to read between meetings or over lunch seemed like a good way to make accessible the thoughtful and innovative ideas that were too often buried in book chapters, academic journals, conference presentations, or staff meeting minutes. As we approach the twentieth volume of *About Campus: Enriching the Student Learning Experience* in 2014, it still seems like a good investment.

I have chosen to use the opportunity of writing this article to share some observations—and concerns—about the work of promoting student learning and how the focus of our efforts seems unnecessarily bifurcated.

In my description, I will frame this fairly starkly in the service of more clearly illustrating the differences I see as problematic; I hope I have not overly simplified what are complex perspectives.

I am occasionally invited to work with faculty and student affairs staff from colleges and universities who are interested in learning more about promoting student learning and success. I typically remind them that they have important insights about this because they know their students and the campus context and have their own assessments about what works well and what doesn't. To emphasize this, I start by asking what kinds of strategies *they* think make a difference by promoting student learning and success in higher education. The strategies they suggest typically cluster into two sets of responses.

## **CLUSTER 1: OFFER AND ENCOURAGE STUDENT PARTICIPATION IN HIGH-QUALITY EXPERIENCES**

1. Encourage students to study and travel abroad.
2. Encourage students to join campus organizations.

3. Offer more volunteering and service learning opportunities.
  4. Encourage and enhance faculty-student interactions (e.g., through undergraduate research programs, use of office hours, and “Take your professor to lunch” programs).
  5. Encourage enrollment in learning communities.
  6. Require senior integrative projects to encourage deep learning, especially in the major.
  7. Encourage active and engaged learning throughout the curriculum and co-curriculum.
2. Learn about students’ backgrounds (including their motivations to attend college and their expectations about the experience) and build this into the experience (e.g., student organization, advising session, class) that brings you together.
  3. Respect students’ social identities (both visible and invisible) and acknowledge them when interacting with students.
  4. Assist students in building strong interpersonal relationships, both across group differences and within affinity groups, especially among students who consider themselves “non-majority” on campus (e.g., first-generation students, LGBTQ students, students who identify by race and/or ethnicity, and students who hold various religious or political affiliations).
  5. Acknowledge the emotional dimensions of learning by helping students understand the source of their stress and experiences that trigger strong emotional reactions, and provide resources to help them manage these reactions.

Broadly speaking, this first cluster of suggestions reflects an emphasis on *the types of experiences* that educators believe students should have; I refer to this as an organizational perspective (although it is also called an environmental- or institutional-level approach). The emphasis is on the focus and value of the experience itself, which the institution adapts as appropriate (e.g., to take advantage of specific geographical resources or local talents), then offers this type of experience to a wide cross-section of students (e.g., all enrolled students, all first-year students). This is attractive to those responsible for implementing institution-wide programs because of their potential to reach large numbers of students through exposure to such programs. A key feature of this approach is that the institutional context is in the foreground; its overarching principle is “encourage student success by offering high-quality experiences.”

The second cluster of strategies focused on students’ characteristics and perspectives such as those on the list in the next section. I refer to this as the student development approach (although it is also called an individual-level approach).

## **CLUSTER 2: FOCUS ON STUDENT CHARACTERISTICS AND RESPOND ACCORDINGLY**

1. Provide clear information and expectations regarding learning goals to students, both the endpoints and steps along the way.

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This cluster of suggestions reflects an emphasis on *student characteristics* that affect student learning and development. The emphasis here is using individual-level attributes to shape and guide educational practice. This approach is attractive to educators who have seen how specific characteristics (e.g., motivation, aspirations, social identities, family background, disposition to think critically and independently, complexity of thinking) affect student success. They focus on constructing their formal teaching and informal interactions in ways that take relevant learner characteristics into account, especially how to support students to achieve increasingly complex and difficult learning goals. A key feature of this approach is that individual learning and development is in the foreground; its overarching principle is “students develop when educators attend to student characteristics.” Importantly, doing so attends to the emotional and relational sides of educating students.

I next ask the participants to review the two clusters, identify which is closest to their own approach, and then identify concerns they hold about the “other” approach. I find that advocates of the “experience” cluster tend to emphasize that educators can’t control student characteristics: students arrive in their classes and programs “as they are.” Further, they are overwhelmed by the idea of actively considering the

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seemingly endless complexity of individual needs, noting that it is impractical to offer differentiated course sections and services to meet individual needs, and that “segregating” students with “their own kind” is not educationally defensible. They argue instead for general initiatives that reach the majority of students and that expose as many students as possible to high-quality practices and learning environments.

By contrast, advocates of the “student characteristics” cluster tend to criticize “one-size-fits-all” approaches that prioritize administrative convenience or efficiency over learning, arguing that it is foolish to ignore relevant differences among learners, especially when doing so negatively affects student success. Further, they emphasize that any choice of experience should be matched to its ability to achieve learning goals, and that exposure to types of experiences isn’t sufficient and can lead to superficial learning. They argue that educators should understand student characteristics and how they affect the achievement of learning goals.

As a person who appreciates, studies, and teaches about both approaches, I am quick to point out that the ideas in both of these clusters have great merit: most are well represented in the professional literature, and some are well supported by empirical research. These lists provide a strong set of options to consider when revising an existing experience or developing a new initiative. At the same time, I am aware that feelings run deep on this question, that educators commonly align with one “camp” or the other, and that these approaches are typically seen as contradictory. For example, few participants objected to the bifurcated description I used for this exercise, and most found it easy to make a choice between the two.

I was recently prompted to think about the rift between these two approaches and the relationship I saw between them. The occasion was an invitation to participate in a session on organizational learning at the annual meeting of the Association for the Study of Higher Education. I joined a panel of well-known

higher education scholars with expertise in organizational issues. It is an understatement to say that this is not my primary identity as a scholar; I was included based on a class I teach called “Organizing for Learning.” After briefly summarizing some common institutional strategies to promote student success (including those listed in the “experiences” cluster earlier), I emphasized the role of institutional context in making such strategy decisions by acknowledging that they typically reflect institutional priorities, budget pressures, new initiatives and opportunities, the decision maker’s position in the organization, and so on. This framing is consistent with the experiences cluster of strategies listed earlier in the emphasis on contextual features (experiences offered within institutional, administrative, and organizational contexts). I then pointed out what has long been acknowledged in the human development and student learning literature: strategy choices also reflect administrator assumptions and frames of reference about learning processes, contexts, and cultures. In adding this dimension, I had intentionally shifted to the personal characteristics approach, focusing on the characteristics of administrators and educators, not just on the experiences they offered. I used this approach to point out some key connections between human learning and organizational learning, starting with the obvious one: *people* design and implement organizational change, they do so differently as they learn, and their assumptions about what is important can either make or break a planned organizational change. It follows then that principles of human development provide useful tools for enhancing organizational learning: insights into how people learn, develop, make inferences from assumptions, and set and achieve goals could be applied to helping administrators learn to be more effective in designing and implementing institutional change. Similarly, the strategies they endorse to promote student success are likely grounded in their assumptions about what is important in structuring student learning; strategies that resonate the most are likely those that are closest to their

own assumptions about education and what educators can—and should—be doing to fulfill their educational mission. This illustrates an important overlap between the two approaches. In light of their common mission, this observation, and the possibility that they could be mutually reinforcing, I next examine the weaknesses of each and suggest how educators can draw from both and ground their practice more broadly.

## LEARNING FROM BOTH APPROACHES

**ALTHOUGH BOTH APPROACHES HAVE GREAT MERIT**, each has important weaknesses. For the experiences approach, the main problem is that not all experiences are created equal: the nature and quality of programs by the same name (e.g., study abroad, service learning) vary widely. Some are well designed and executed in ways that take advantage of the educational opportunities; others offer only the “entertainment” value (e.g., travel abroad as vacations) and little learning occurs from them. Some encourage and provide opportunities for students to practice deep reflection, raise challenging questions, and teach students how to interpret their experiences more complexly; others simply allow students to passively watch or repeat what they have heard. In addition, student reactions to the same experience vary dramatically. For example, two students can participate in an undergraduate research project (or an intergroup dialogue or a course with a service learning component) and have completely opposite reactions: one student vows to seek out comparable experiences in the future, while another resolves never to step into a lab or talk about race in public again. Or one student thoroughly enjoys it as new, different, and exciting, while another feels her time was wasted because she’s worked at a soup kitchen before and “knows the drill.” During the experience itself, some students appear eager and engaged; others are reticent and withdrawn. *As a result, the experience has variable value and success depending on student characteristics.*

For the student characteristics approach, the main problem is that it is hard to discern which characteristics are educationally relevant, especially when they

move in and out of salience for students over time. When students experience low expectations or unfair treatment based on their gender, race, or appearance (as is reported with disturbing frequency), this is clearly problematic. It is harder to discern when they experience events in problematic ways based on less visible characteristics such as some disabilities, racial and/or ethnic identities, values, attitudes, or limitations of their worldview. Further, whether a given characteristic is educationally relevant depends on the context: some attributes are encouraged and reinforced in some disciplines and ignored in others; some classes and other contexts make students feel safe enough to share personal interpretations, philosophies, or information about their backgrounds, while it would be imprudent to do so in other situations. *As a result, student characteristics are more or less relevant depending on the context.*

Despite the limitations of each of these common approaches, it is my observation that both scholars and practitioners nevertheless tend to identify with one or the other and often feel strongly about which of these a department should have embraced years ago and which one they see as a complete waste of time. It is as if they frame the problem as having to choose between a “one size fits all” education and a “highly individualized” education. This may reflect how they were socialized to think about student learning during their professional training; it likely also reflects their own experiences (successful and not) of trying to improve student learning. If they weren’t invited or encouraged to examine this grounding or these experiences more carefully or critically, they may be unaware of the sources of their assumptions. Many who have tried to implement organizational or cultural changes on campus are keenly aware that firmly held assumptions can make individuals resistant to changing the behaviors that are grounded in these assumptions.

## MERGING THE CLUSTERS

**IN LIGHT OF THIS SHARED WEAKNESS**, it follows to consider *both* student characteristics and

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## Organize courses and experiences in ways that scaffold student learning over time, building on and challenging students to move from basic to advanced levels of knowledge, skill mastery, and personal capacities.

experiences—and how they interact—when deciding what practices to implement and, more importantly, what goals are appropriate in this context. A first step in addressing this issue lies in acknowledging a shared weakness: lack of attention to the other approach. Bill Clinton famously used the slogan “It’s the economy, stupid” as a focus of his 1992 presidential campaign. A similar theme for this essay might be “It’s the interaction, stupid.” (But it’s not nice to call anyone stupid.) An approach to enhancing student learning and success that acknowledges the interaction between experiences and student characteristics would include strategies that not only draw from both clusters, but also illustrate the interaction. In the section that follows, I suggest ways to create more powerful learning experiences by designing high-quality practices that reflect increasingly challenging goals over time, address educationally relevant subgroup characteristics, align educators’ expectations based on those characteristics in the context of high-quality experiences, and then design experiences to meet these goals in ways that scaffold students’ learning and development.

### CLUSTER 3: ADOPT INTERACTIVE PRACTICES THAT LINK TYPES OF EXPERIENCES AND STUDENT CHARACTERISTICS

REVIEWING THE STRATEGIES IN CLUSTER 1, note that some items on the lists are related: the first three are *potentially rich experiences*, points 4 and 5 reflect *experiences that promote peer and faculty interactions*, and points 6 and 7 exemplify *experiences that promote engagement and deep learning*. Similarly, there are themes among the strategies in Cluster 2: the first item on setting and sharing goals provides the starting point for *scaffolding learning* across learning experiences, points 2 and 3 focus on recognizing and *respecting student characteristics and perspectives* in ways that inform educator-student interactions, and points 4 and 5 reflect the value of viewing learning and development as *holistic*, acknowledging the powerful role of identity development and emotions on learning. The examples

below illustrate both clusters in interaction with each other. Look for this integrative principle in the recommendations that follow: scaffold experiences by considering learning goals, students’ level of skills and maturity, and students’ social identities within a holistic framework of learning.

- Examine the student success data at your institution with an eye toward *which* student subgroups are served—and underserved—by the experiences that are offered.
- Organize courses and experiences in ways that scaffold student learning over time, building on and challenging students to move from basic to advanced levels of knowledge, skill mastery, and personal capacities.
- When considering which practices to implement, ask if the intended goals would differ by subgroups. For example, linked classes (i.e., where students are co-enrolled in two required classes) could be used to help commuter or sophomore transfer students meet other students. Linked courses could also be used to assist students who work within a more structured frame of reference (e.g., an engineering or science curriculum) to expose them to less familiar disciplines (e.g., in the humanities or social sciences) and other bases for interpretation, and thus help them develop more complex perspectives on the world and their future roles.
- Invite students to share their emotional reactions to their educational experiences and listen for signs that they are feeling dissonance (about the divergence or convergence of ideas, or relationships, or their sense of identity—whatever was triggered by the experience), as this may signal development in progress, or at least a teachable moment. Show empathy with the struggle and encourage them to verbalize their reactions and what



they were learning from experiencing this dissonance.

- Monitor whether experiences are sufficiently challenging so they stretch students cognitively and emotionally beyond what is familiar. Ascertain who is excited as well as who seems bored and who seems overwhelmed. On the support side, monitor what groups of students accept and benefit from the institutional and personal support to help them stay engaged and what groups do not seem to be benefitting.
- When working with students in given contexts (a student organization, a residence hall floor, an advisory group, a course), create learning partnerships with students that reflect the purpose of the experience and its learning goals, students' perceptions of their relevant personal characteristics and how these affect their learning in this context, and educators' perspectives about how to design effective learning experiences in this context. Then use this information to co-construct learning experiences that reflect their mutual interests and goals. (I elaborate on this suggestion later.)

Note how each of these strategies avoids being either “one size fits all” or “highly individualized.” Instead, they show how high-quality practices can be adapted in ways that take students' characteristics into account. Further, this approach acknowledges that neither environments nor individuals are fixed in their approaches: with proper support and guidance, environments can be adapted to individuals, and individuals can learn to effectively adapt to environments.

## MAPPING THIS INTERACTION

LEARNING IS A COMPLICATED PROCESS, and many factors need to be included in both conceptual models and empirical analyses; further, both our formal conceptual models and our informal mental models should reflect this complexity. My colleagues Marcia Baxter Magolda, Matthew DeMonbrun, Jessica Joslin, and I have recently developed a conceptual framework that provides a fuller picture of factors that affect student learning and development. In addition to personal characteristics and experiences (such as those noted in the two approaches discussed earlier), we include a third element: what students learned from their experience. We see these elements as winding around and through a foundational core of meaning making. This core evolves

from adolescence to adulthood, increasing in complexity and adaptability over time as people mature cognitively, emotionally, and socially. This framework is designed to illustrate the reciprocal influence between meaning making and the other elements: meaning making guides how college students acknowledge and manage their personal characteristics, whether they are attracted to or repelled by given experiences, and how they interpret their experiences and discern lessons learned. Similarly, what personal characteristics are salient, whether these are related to an experience, and what is learned from an experience can affect meaning making. Although this model was designed to capture the role of individual meaning making, the value of co-creating shared meaning between or among individuals offers another lens on this interpretation process. Interestingly, this concept has been promoted both by those who work from a perspective that emphasizes characteristics of the learning context, such as Ximena Zúñiga, Jane Mildred, Rani Varghese, Keri DeJong, and Molly Keehn, and those who emphasize the characteristics of the student, such as Marcia Baxter Magolda and her argument that self-authorship is central to a twenty-first-century education.

In this model, neither experiences nor personal characteristics alone are the key factors; instead, the combination of all four distinct but interrelated components (personal characteristics, experiences, lessons learned from experiences, and meaning making) provides a more powerful approach. Applying this model to what I have identified as unnecessarily bifurcated approaches to promoting student learning, the student characteristics and experiences approaches can inform each other, but also be informed by other factors and the collective interrelationships—all in the context of the institutional mission, culture, and climate. I offer this model not as a definitive picture of how to bridge the experiences and student characteristics approaches, but as an example of a model that intentionally integrates them. The interactionist approach illustrated in Cluster 3 has already been successfully implemented by practitioners who do not buy into a bifurcated view: they intentionally seek to design practices that align program structure and expectations with learner characteristics to meet developmentally appropriate goals, and have done so within programs in both academic and student affairs contexts. For example, Kevin Yonkers-Talz's study-abroad program, Carolyn Haynes's interdisciplinary writing curriculum, and Terry D. Piper and Jennifer A. Buckley's implementation of community standards in housing are among several examples compiled by Marcia Baxter Magolda and me in *Learning Partnerships: Theories and Models of Practice to Educate for Self-Authorship* that illustrate an interaction-

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ist approach through the use of learning partnerships. Kathleen Kerr and James Tweedy have illustrated how to construct a residential curriculum that link student characteristics to rich experiences in campus residence halls; this initial idea has now blossomed into ACPA's annual Residential Curriculum Institute. These examples demonstrate the educational benefits of thinking from a "both/and" instead of an "either/or" approach.

I hope I have successfully demonstrated that it is not only desirable but possible to draw from our understanding of both approaches to enrich student learning. Further, when looking for new ways of thinking about how to improve student learning and success, there is value in looking beyond familiar academic disciplines (here, psychology and organizational studies) to many other possibilities, including fields such as social work, architecture, public health, social psychology, ethnic studies, and women's studies. Intentionally broadening one's perspective can be challenging, but in rising to the challenge of moving away from bifurcated thinking about how to enrich students' learning experiences, we are not only strengthening the educational experiences we offer, but also modeling what we ask of students when we encourage them to broaden their perspectives, take intellectual risks, and figure out the basis of their beliefs and their actions.

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### NOTES

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