Defining Reflection in Student Affairs:
A New Culture of Approach

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Higher education offers both students and student affairs professionals countless opportunities for personal and professional growth, but often does not allow for reflection on the experience. In this article, a comprehensive definition of reflection is offered to assist student affairs professionals in their work with students. The concept of reflection is incongruent with the fast-paced attitude of students in the millennial generation. By taking deliberate action in role modeling positive reflective behavior, student affairs professionals can better serve millennial students. Reflection is an important skill that many millennial students lack. Strategies such as creating an inviting and supportive environment, modeling behavior, incorporating daily reflection, and continually questioning are suggested as ways to enhance the abilities of student affairs professionals in restructuring, challenging, and changing the culture of reflection on campus.

The idea of "reflecting" or "reflection" is not often a top priority for members of the campus community. The countless academic, professional, and personal opportunities and challenges frequently take precedence over finding time to reflect. The word "reflection" is regularly used across campus without any consideration given to its true meaning. Student affairs professionals rarely have the time to simply digest and unpack the meaning of an experience. Students, especially millennial students, come to college with a foundation for multitasking, not for questioning their experiences (McGlynn, 2005). Lerch, Bilics, & Colley (2006) suggested that "as educators we need to facilitate critical reflection to enable students to move beyond a superficial understanding of their world" (p. 5). Do practitioners need to model the concept of reflection in their professional lives as well? In this article, the author will develop a working definition of reflection and elucidate how a culture of reflection can be created for both student affairs practitioners and millennial students.

Reflection is not a new concept (Dewey, 1938) or a process limited only to the field of student affairs. It has been regarded as a necessity in other fields such as math, science, and medicine (Schön, 1983). The potential value of reflection for students in the education sector, specifically student teachers, has also been well

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documented (Korthagen & Wubbels, 1991). It is often structured into "events" in or around the campus community—tragedies, trainings, and service. Participants are asked how an event made them feel, how it relates to their experience, what issues were raised, and what questions remain. Other opportunities for reflection certainly do occur, but these are the most prevalent times when reflection is titled just that: reflection.

Student affairs professionals often struggle with defining reflection in the context of their jobs and experiences. A clear charge has been made by various professional organizations to reconsider student learning (American College Personnel Association [ACPA] & National Association of Student Personnel Administrators [NASPA], 2004), but it is imperative to take into account one's experiences more frequently. In the publication, *Learning Reconsidered: A Campus-Wide Focus on the Student Experience*, ACPA and NASPA (2004) ask student affairs professionals to "re-examine…widely accepted ideas about conventional teaching and learning, and to question whether current organizational patterns…support student learning in today's environment" (p. 3). In addition to being a partner in teaching and learning to the greater campus community, student affairs must make progress towards a more comprehensive and holistic learning structure. Daily reflection can lead to better decision-making and critical thinking skills which, in turn, allow student affairs professionals to guide students in more effective ways (Short & Rinehart, 1993; Hart, 1990).

As millennial generation students continue to find their way into institutions across the country, it is clear that involvement is an important aspect of their college experience. The millennial generation is defined as students born between 1982 and 2000, typified as: (a) "conventionally motivated and respectful," (b) "structured rule followers," (c) "protected and sheltered," (d) "cooperative and team-oriented," (e) "talented achievers," and (f) "confident and optimistic about their futures" (Elam, Stratton, & Gibson, 2007, p. 23). Some students rarely find the time to reflect on their involvement and experiences. It is critical that they learn lifelong reflection habits from student affairs professionals. Student affairs professionals must be careful when working with millennials because they could easily find themselves on the same path of involvement (or over-involvement) as the students. This will not only help them become more self-aware, but better prepare them to help create the world in which they want to live (Astin & Sax, 1998).

Defining Reflection

By defining reflection, the initial challenge of having discussions around experiences and reflection can be alleviated. Without a clear definition, there is no possibility of movement toward finding the deficiencies in our practices around

reflection. Although there is no all-encompassing definition that clearly conveys the concept of reflection, there are many perspectives from which we can draw to find the definition that best suits our work in student affairs.

For reflection to occur, one must first have some sort of experience. Dewey (1938) provided a useful definition, calling reflection "a transaction taking place between an individual and what, at the time, constitutes his environment" (p. 41). The idea that an experience is a "transaction" also supports Dewey's assertion that "experience does not go on simply inside a person" (p. 33). There is a need for both individuals and the environment in which they are involved to gain something from the interaction. This does not mean, however, that every experience is educational, but that every experience offers the opportunity for reflection on the transaction.

In preparation for writing this article, I engaged in a series of informal conversations with peers and colleagues in an attempt to gain a better understanding of reflection in a practical sense. With these conversations and my own thoughts in mind, I identified the following themes as important factors in the meaning making aspect of reflection:

1. Reflection is both personal and professional.
2. Reflection has the ability to have both internal and external impact.
3. Reflection can be either important or inconsequential.
4. Reflection can act as a bridge between experience and theory.
5. Reflection must be learned.
6. Reflection is like a muscle—it needs to be nourished and exercised.
7. Reflection allows one to find new or different meaning.

It should be noted that these themes come from a student affairs perspective and may not represent themes across all disciplines.

Published definitions offer more themes than can be considered in this short article on the topic. Not only does reflection require constant practice (Hart, 1993), but it is also "a lifetime commitment" (Hart, 1990, p. 164) that "includes open-mindedness, whole-heartedness, and responsibility" (p. 154). Reflection is a process, but also requires action (Osterman, 1990). Kottamp (1990) described reflection as "a cycle of paying…attention" (p. 183) to intent in relation to future and current impacts. These perspectives are supported by the themes that I identified earlier. In comparing the published definitions and my themes, reflection is defined in this article as: a fluid skill that examines both the experience and the process that attempts to provide an opportunity to attach meaning to the experience. By describing reflection as a fluid skill, it is implied that it can be learned and changes with time. It is important to note that reflection in and of itself may

not result in resolution when conflict surfaces.

Reflection can occur both during and after an experience. It is not limited to a time when one has completed or is distanced from an event. The differing times of when reflection can occur are defined by Schön (1983) as reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action. Reflecting while an action or experience is taking place implies that one is not simply using possessed knowledge, but reframing both the meaning of the experience and how one responds to such an experience in the future. Dewey (1938) also made note of this in his work, calling it the "reconstruction of experience" (p. 111). Kottamp (1990) suggested the idea of "stop action," where the action is "literally stopped…and students are asked to reflect on what has just transpired" (p. 186). Schön's other concept, reflection-on-action, is what is commonly understood as reflection. Once removed from an experience, one can attach meaning to the experience by having a chance to rethink and evaluate one's own beliefs. This removal from the action allows for one to give "full attention…to analysis and planning for the future without the imperative for immediate action" (Kottamp, 1990, p. 183). Based upon one's environment, both reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action can provide benefits that the other cannot.

Reflective practice cannot occur until a specific, personal definition of reflection is determined. Although a general definition is offered here, please note that the definition should be adjusted to fit one's personal needs, goals, and experiences. Additionally, it is important to remain cognizant that reflection is a fluid process and will continually change as experiences shape how new situations are approached.

Where Are We Now?

Assessment of the purpose and role of student affairs professionals in relation to student learning has been a topic of discussion since the creation of the field. A comparison document published by NASPA (1989), which included the 1937 and 1949 publications of the *Student Personnel Point of View* along with *A Perspective on Student Affairs* published in 1987, showed the continued push to educate the "whole" student rather than to only teach the student in the classroom setting. The role of student affairs professionals defined by those perspectives is shown to be continually changing in order to better meet the needs of both the student and the institution. This has been true throughout the history of higher education; the needs of the student have been as much of a priority as the needs of institution. If there are no students, there is no institution. Many institutions realized this during the late 1800s and early 1900s, as a number of colleges and universities opened and subsequently closed during this period due to low student enrollment and lack of funds (Rudolph, 1990).

Development of the "whole" student ties into reflection and learning. Specifically, the focus must be on how student affairs professionals encourage student learning and empower students to become active participants in the learning process (ACPA & NASPA, 2004). Some of the questions that arise from this statement include: As student affairs professionals, are we helping our students learn to critically think about themselves, their environments, and the new information they are acquiring? As professionals, do we teach them how to critically think and reflect? Do we support and encourage reflection through our day-to-day practices or strictly within the context of events on campus?

Before an attempt can be made to help students reflect, student affairs professionals must take steps to critically examine their own practices concerning reflection as well as the obstacles that are both internally and externally present. Brown, Podolske, Kohles, and Sonnenberg (1992) showed that the external barriers to being reflective include "the demands of others, the institutional culture, multiple job responsibilities, and the lack of trustworthy colleagues as resources" (p. 311). The same authors also stated that some personal barriers are "lack of energy and attention, poor decision-making, failure to set priorities, and inability to manage volatile emotions" (p. 311). There is not a conflict between these barriers, but they work together in adding to the difficulty of making reflection practical. One should consider internal and external barriers to better understand and find ways to work with and around those barriers. If student affairs professionals fail to recognize the barriers, they cannot make reflection-in-action part of their practice nor can they effectively encourage and empower students to also practice reflection.

It is imperative that reflection become a skill that student affairs professionals continually incorporate into their day-to-day experiences. Hart (1990) expanded upon the original concept introduced by Weick in 1978, where the relationship between the amount of reflection and experiences greatly increases the ability to make choices and think critically in the future. Hart analogized Weick's original model to that of a toy for children: a small frame that holds a matrix of metal pins. When an object is pushed on one side of the pins, it creates both a negative relief inside the pins and a positive relief on the opposite side. The more metal pins or spines, as used by Hart, the more accurate the depiction of the original object. In relating this to reflection, the impacts (both positive and negative) can be more clearly determined if there are more experiences from which to draw. Having a multitude of varied experiences will allow us to better work in a mode of reflection-in-action rather than simply reflection-on-action (Kottamp, 1990).

In 2004, ACPA and NASPA published a document that emphasized a focus on reconsidering how the whole student learns and is taught. It is a charge to student affairs professionals to work in collaboration with the institution in helping shape

a student's course of development. Not only is collaboration needed between student affairs and the academic realm, but the entire institution must reexamine and assess whether it is serving the needs of the student or the institution (Schroeder, 1996).

The Millennial Generation

Institutions today are filled with the students of the millennial generation. They are a new breed of students that have strengths including "goal orientation, positive attitudes, a collaborative learning style, and multitasking" (McGlynn, 2005, p. 14). These students also have had very active childhoods where free time was seen by parents as a place in which to schedule opportunities for involvement (McGlynn, 2005; Zemke, 2001). To simply say that they were busy is an understatement based upon how structured and scheduled their lives most likely were. As college students, their need for constant involvement continues and, in some cases, these students feel they are entitled to opportunities and experiences at the collegiate level. This can make it difficult for student affairs professionals to assist them in their development. McGlynn (2005) offered a different perspective:

> Many of our college students expect individual attention, extra help, and other institutional resources to be provided in order to help them with any difficulties which they encounter. Understanding the culture of our students may help ease our frustration with what we might perceive as being their sense of entitlement. (p. 14)

Due to the tendency of these students to be over-extended, student affairs professionals are faced with having conversations about involvement levels and burnout as part of the developmental process. It also highlights the fact that a stronger emphasis on reflection in both the academic and student affairs settings would be mutually beneficial to all. To create a more critically conscious culture, students must become aware of the number of experiences they are having upon which they have no opportunity to reflect. If student affairs professionals can successfully assist students in becoming mindful of their involvement, the process of reflection can truly become a part of their day-to-day lifestyle. McGlynn (2005) stated "the use of examples which students can relate to and asking students to develop their own examples are ways to create meaning between students' life experience and the material which we want them to be learning" (p. 16).

In many cases, the millennial generation does not feel as though an experience is worth their time if there is no learning or advancement opportunity (Zemke, 2001). This suggests that students today reflect to an extent, but that they reflect differently than previous generations. The combination of technology and the

millennial generation's "go, go, go!" attitude creates an "online" sense of reflection, where students have the internet, email, discussion forums, online classes, etc. at their disposal at any time of the day for reflection. Students are being presented with online classes and electronic bulletin boards that act as a complement (and in some cases, as an additional requirement) to the classroom discussions. The notions that entitlement and less focus upon reflection in their pre-college education also have an effect upon reflection. Students today have a greater sense of entitlement than previous generations which does hinder their ability to think about their impact on the world and others. It is not that students are not open to reflection, but it is that practitioners must motivate students in seeing reflection as an essential part of the learning process (McGlynn, 2008).

Implementing Reflection

There are multiple strategies that can be used to implement reflection. The ideas mentioned below are the consistent themes and suggestions made by the sources examined in this article.

Create the environment

By promoting an environment where students are active participants in designing the curriculum, students have a higher investment in its success. Schroeder (1996) suggested that this can be done intentionally in order to create a place where learning can happen and meaning can be attached to both old and new experiences (Lerch et al., 2006). Collaboration among students, faculty, and student affairs professionals is also important as common goals and objectives can be developed to better serve all constituencies.

Model behavior

Student affairs professionals cannot simply encourage students to become aware of their involvement but must be aware of their own involvement as well. As students work to define themselves within the institution, they look to student affairs professionals for guidance and, in some cases, role modeling. As they see student affairs professionals working to create and cultivate change on campus, students will examine the methods and processes which are successful and incorporate them into their own activities and experiences. Students will benefit from seeing student affairs professionals use each interaction as an opportunity for reflection.

Incorporate reflection daily

By allowing experiences to advance critical thinking skills, one can respond in situations more clearly and definitively. Additionally, by having reflected on one's own experiences, the student affairs professional will be more effective and successful at guiding students and providing leadership. It is important to remember that reflection can happen at any time, during any event—not just tragedies, trainings, and service events—but in the classroom, in the residence hall, on the field, and in the community. Reflection should be encouraged to happen anywhere one sees fit.

Continually question

In order to maximize reflection, one must continue to question beliefs and recognize assumptions both internally and externally. Professionals must also consistently update their definitions of reflection and their process of reflection. Challenging routine and traditional processes will allow the student affairs professional to determine whether their work is meeting the needs of both the student and the institution.

Future Directions for Research

The intersection and impact of different types of identities could influence how individuals view and process reflection. There does not appear to be current research in this area and it could provide interesting results. One example could focus on how gender affects the level and authenticity of reflection. Cultural and religious traditions could also impact how and when individuals reflect. Does identity impact reflection or teach one how to reflect? Just as each identity impacts how one views and experiences the world, it may also impact how it is reflected upon.

The difference between individual reflection and group reflection was also not identified within this article. Group dynamics and methods such as tracking, or non-judgmentally noting how privilege and oppression occur in daily interaction, play into how an experience is processed and how one may respond in the future. The opportunity to be aided by others who are also reflecting can add more layers of processing and understanding. Alternatively, group reflection could result in less self-reflection, whereas the attachment of personal meaning to a specific experience is non-existent.

The information presented speaks strictly to student affairs professionals and focuses primarily around events on campus—tragedies, trainings, and community service or service-learning events—but does not examine other areas where

reflection may be a consistent and useful theme. A complete examination of the institution as a whole (both academic curriculum and co-curricular activities) could offer more examples and uncover additional facets to the concept of reflection. Areas such as career development and planning, athletics, and counseling would surely provide more insight and could help to better define reflection within the institution.

Further research is also needed around the differences in use and definition of reflection by students and student affairs professionals. If we do not understand how students currently define and use reflection, student affairs professionals cannot begin to dictate solutions based upon their own perception of the students' needs. Students must be active agents in developing the learning process, not simply participants within it. How student affairs professionals view and develop reflection may be very different from what any particular student needs developmentally, so it is important to be open and cognizant of the differences.

Lastly, this paper does not explore the impact of consistent recruitment of the same students for involvement purposes and how their growth could be helped or hindered due to this phenomenon. Once strong student leaders are found on campus, it is often difficult for student affairs professionals to look outside of that group to find new students to get involved. An examination around student leader burnout and reflection could provide a new lens and method with which to approach student development.

Conclusion

Reflection is a challenging philosophy, not only to define, but to implement into daily practice. It continues to be a difficult area for both students and student affairs professionals to grasp and define as a necessity in daily work. Student affairs professionals must attempt to reflect both on-action and in-action to become more effective. The more experiences that student affairs professionals gain and reflect upon will result in a better ability to critically examine future experiences. The belief that reflection is only part of events and not an area that can be collaborated upon is outdated. Reflection should be viewed as a way to form new and creative partnerships with different stakeholders across the institution. Not only can it provide insight into ways of enhancing the student experience, but it can create a new sense of meaning for practitioners. Reflection will help create more capable student affairs professionals who are better able to work in a variety of capacities with students.

Because of the attributes of the millennial generation in institutions of higher education, there is a need for student affairs professionals to assist students in becoming more critically aware of their involvement levels. If that can be ac-

complished, there is a direct opportunity to engage the student in reflection. This is a process of growth for both the student and the student affairs professional. The millennial generation needs guidance in becoming reflective and learning how to view their world through a critical lens. It is from this critical analysis that students will find meaning in their experiences. Ultimately, reflection will lead not only students, but student affairs professionals as well in their quest for meaning.

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