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## The Shadow Curriculum of Student Affairs

*Student affairs is encroaching on areas long held to be faculty responsibilities*

By Martha McCaughey and Scott Welsh

Most faculty members have been asked by those working under the umbrella of the student affairs division to attend workshops on (and even give over instructional time to) matters with which the student affairs staff is concerned, including suicide prevention, sexual assault, graduating in under five years, the use of students' preferred pronouns, and fostering inclusive classrooms—just to name a few. While such training sessions have an important place within higher education, they also suggest a blurring of boundaries between a concern with attending to the broader lives of students on college campuses and the curricular responsibilities of faculty. When the faculty is construed as needing to be responsive to student affairs and student development mandates, such seemingly innocent professional development opportunities can grow uncomfortably close to an encroachment on faculty responsibility for the educational mission of colleges and universities. A broader problem emerges when the style of intellection preferred by student affairs begins to compete with the spirit of questioning and inquiry that guides the educational mission of colleges and universities as carried out by the faculty.

When it comes to social problems, faculty members ask research questions and consider relevant methods. In the classroom, they present contending studies and teach students how to read complicated literatures critically. In contrast, staff in student affairs often see their mission as directly addressing social problems head-on, sometimes beginning with efforts to “clarify collective morals” and almost always concluding with varied attempts to “eliminate systemic injustices and amplify practices that dismantle discrimination against all identities” (in the words of a typical mission statement, from [UNC Chapel Hill's Student Affairs division](#)). While the faculty and student affairs staff each performs important functions on college and university campuses, the intellectual mission of the faculty is often in competition with an unapologetically moral or political mission in student affairs.

The issue with this competition is that student affairs frequently influences students' education through the creation of what amounts to a “shadow curriculum” that faculty are also expected to support, learn, and sometimes teach. We borrow the term *shadow curriculum* from [academic critiques](#) of K–12 education, where scholars have used it to refer to supplemental materials—provided by educational business industries—that are reshaping educational agendas. In higher education, supplemental educational materials and trainings, developed or delivered by student affairs staff, are similarly provided to students inside and outside of the classroom. The shadow curriculum of student affairs is not vetted by the faculty but nevertheless is creeping into the traditional curriculum, challenging the faculty's authority in educational decision-making and undermining the spirit of inquiry. The faculty winds up receiving, rather than steering, a set of curricular imperatives that inadvertently depict us as ignorant of or resistant to the mission of

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student affairs insofar as we remain fully committed to the practice of intellectual inquiry above all else.

As many others have already noted, an overlay of activism in higher education threatens to supplant reason, scholarship, and evidence. Judge José A. Cabranes, a distinguished former university legal counsel and trustee, has identified two very clear dangers to the mission of higher education today: "Increasingly, policy is dictated by two new groups: one is a burgeoning nonfaculty bureaucracy—including professionals allegedly endowed with the expertise to adjudicate interpersonal conduct. The other group consists of a growing number of full-time students who favor activism over education." Many staff members in the student affairs division, impressed by the idea of universities as agents of social change or as vehicles for a moral education, see higher education as a means of advancing political or moral goals. This idea is emblazoned on T-shirts student affairs professionals can buy from the American College Personnel Association (ACPA), which declare, "I AM BOLDLY TRANSFORMING HIGHER ED."

The contrast between how student affairs staff and faculty approach the purpose of higher education is illustrated, for example, by the University of South Florida's [Student Success website](#), which provides students with a list of what the student affairs division calls "anti-racism courses," including Literature, Race and Ethnicity and Schools in Society. These are typical academic courses offered by members of the faculty, who surely teach with all the nuance and complexity faculty members are trained to employ. The presumption on the website, however—and one that is conveyed to students—is that courses examining race or schools take a particular position on contemporary controversies. This view reveals a fundamental misunderstanding of the purpose of a college course and of the faculty's role. The same conflation of course title or topic with an activist intention on the part of the instructor is made by some conservative groups that try to "expose" [the social justice activism](#) on a campus simply by looking for words such as "racism," "equity," and "diversity" on course syllabi. Unlike what student affairs professionals and conservative critics sometimes assume, neither faculty members nor curricula are chosen for their manifestation of social conscience or embrace of political positions. Instead, courses are ideally designed in response to evolving disciplinary questions, and faculty are ideally hired for both their command of their disciplines and their ability to conduct rigorous course discussions that teach students how, not what, to think. We recognize, however, that some faculty members have also [confused the essential activity](#) of understanding social problems and potential solutions with political activism.

Nevertheless, faculty members remain far less likely than student affairs staff to see the mission of universities as "promoting" certain social and political ends over others, or as actively righting certain social wrongs. Indeed, faculty members in institutes, centers, and programs—no less than in traditional departments—govern themselves as disciplinary or interdisciplinary communities, which is the basis for the faculty's oversight of curriculum and academic hiring. The faculty's decision-making authority in these areas (and others) is codified not only in AAUP policy documents but also in many of the faculty handbooks, constitutions, and mission statements under which we work.

A university's faculty, at its best, embodies a spirit of inquiry in all that it does. We formulate questions, gather data, sift evidence, and draw careful conclusions—noting potential problems with even our most well-founded ideas. Academic freedom is the freedom to engage in such measured, careful inquiry. A university is a place in which questions are primary and answers are first and foremost opportunities for further questions. It is this spirit of inquiry that faculty, in their role as teachers, model for students. Faculty worthy of their privileged positions do not abuse the trust students place in them. We resist the temptation to collect disciples, encourage cults of personality, recruit agents for ideological missions, or teach a political agenda as a settled truth. More than providing answers, we teach students how to form and pursue questions. This is because faculty members, situated as we are within disciplines, are keenly aware of the constantly shifting state of what we colloquially refer to as knowledge.

In contrast, student affairs professionals see themselves as educators for the moral development of students. According to the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA), "Opportunities for teaching and development exist everywhere on campus, and it is the responsibility of student affairs professionals to seize these moments and promote positive interactions. Encouraging an understanding of and respect for diversity, believing in the worth of

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individuals, and supporting students in their development are just some of the core concepts of the student affairs profession.” As Lisa Kaler and Michael J. Stebleton wrote in a [NASPA publication last year](#), “student affairs educators must continue supporting students and themselves advocating for social justice.” They go on to state, “Education is not neutral, and neither is student affairs. [Educators at all levels](#) should get comfortable sharing their stances” on “political issues that may be controversial or unsettling” both “on and off campus.”

Offices of student affairs do not exist in the academic realm of questions and the slow, painstaking generation of tentative answers. Instead, they exist in a world of emerging trends and rapidly evolving best practices. Student affairs staff must make difficult judgments about priorities and programming in response to constantly changing circumstances as well as perennial problems. They must also respond to changing federal mandates, regardless of how well-founded they may be in relevant academic literatures. But given their self-perception as educators, student affairs staff can easily misconstrue this work as part of the curriculum.

When student affairs professionals attempt to affect the curriculum, they cross the line where faculty govern and inappropriately conflate moral or political training (if not indoctrination) with inquiry. Administrators defend these initiatives by pointing to one or two faculty members who have signed on and voluntarily engage in them. But make no mistake: these are student affairs–driven initiatives that are not vetted by faculty bodies. Tensions can emerge between student affairs staff and faculty members (in their role as members of academic departments and scholarly disciplines) when student affairs staff attempt to substitute their judgment and well-intentioned sense of emerging trends and best practices for the judgment of faculty practicing within the context of departments and disciplines.

### Examples of the Shadow Curriculum

The first, and most obvious, example of the shadow curriculum is what is often called a residential curriculum. Student affairs professionals who oversee students living in on-campus residence halls have their own educational agenda, learning goals, and material that they teach to students, which they develop and implement independent of faculty curriculum committees. Established in the early 2000s and spread through the ACPA across US campuses, the residential curriculum is, [in the words of one student affairs specialist](#), “a particular approach to designing and delivering intentional learning opportunities for college and university students.” Student affairs staff can attend the Institute on the Curricular Approach (formerly the Residential Curriculum Institute) held annually by the ACPA.

A residential curriculum, according to its advocates, ultimately aims to make students better people. For instance, on our campus, full-time staff aim to teach students “an understanding of their connection to others, ranging from the residential community to a greater global perspective; a greater sense of belonging; and an ongoing understanding of self in the collegiate setting while connecting a sense of purpose to their overall Appalachian experience and beyond their college career.” This is a moral education, akin to personal character development traditionally done at religious colleges. No academic unit or academic policies committee has a say in the development of the residential curriculum, and in our experience the student affairs approach to teaching as moral education or life enrichment is in sharp contrast to the faculty’s emphasis on exposing students to current scholarship, technologies, and methods of investigation.

Trainings and retreats for students constitute another example of the shadow curriculum. One popular model for student retreats is adapted from the [Next Step Social Justice Retreat at the University of Vermont](#), which is intended to teach participants “how to become better change agents and activists against racism, sexism, heterosexism, ableism, religious discrimination, classism and other socially constructed oppressions.” Now taking place on many campuses under various names, these immersive retreats are designed to educate participants about the concepts of social justice and leadership, “empowering” students, in the words of our own university, to “take positive action on our campus.” Using facilitators selected by student affairs staff, these retreats teach students skills for organizing, activism, and becoming a “change agent” on their own campuses. Again, these retreats have a curriculum, and like the residential curriculum, they are not vetted by faculty bodies or university curriculum committees.

These and similar initiatives encroach on territory that the AAUP—and the general academic community—has long held to be faculty responsibilities. There is nothing properly academic about

these shadow curricula. Rather, students receive a set of moral, political, and social lessons from a retinue of “advocates,” “educators,” and “liaisons” informed by extradisciplinary literatures concerning “student success” and “social justice.”

While the faculty may be accused of undermining “education” by not carrying out the mission of student affairs, we cannot be a conduit for their catechism. It may seem innocent enough merely to allow student affairs staff to speak in our classes or for faculty members to attend their trainings or provide academic credit for student affairs–led trainings. But faculty approach curriculum design differently from the way student affairs staff do. We teach students the content of an academic discipline or a field with the aim of inquiry and exploration. If we continue to allow the line between the faculty and student affairs staff to be blurred, then we will be lending our tacit approval to the shadow curriculum in higher education.

### Defending the Spirit of Inquiry

To underscore how and why the shadow curriculum damages the university’s ability to serve the public good, consider the fate that would befall faculty members who fraudulently present themselves as experts in a field in which they have not been trained. Such conduct would violate the public trust—without which our entire institution has no credibility and, ultimately, no ability to supply the data that assist governments and organizations in solving social problems (including the social justice projects championed by student affairs). In order to reclaim the central academic mission of the university as well as the central role of the faculty in achieving that mission, the faculty must keep its eyes on the purpose of the university and defend the important role of the faculty in academic governance.

If we were allowed to present a workshop to the people in student affairs who deliver workshops to faculty and students, we would want to tell them the following:

First, faculty engage in inquiry; we question, debate, and ask for evidence. To treat us as heretical or hostile for questioning a supposition or assertion is to suggest that we must stop being faculty members and start privileging ideology over inquiry. Scholars may very well conduct research or teach about matters that trouble people—such as school shootings, climate change, or cancer. But changing students’ moral commitments is not part of our responsibility and, in any case, does not help us—or our students—to understand troubling issues better. Faculty members help students develop intellectual abilities, not a particular political ideology or moral disposition. Just as we are not in the business of teaching students what religious views to hold, we are not in the business of teaching them what political positions to take or training them on political intervention strategies. When the curriculum is politicized and moralized, we shut down constructive debate and lose the critical perspective that allows us to evaluate costs and benefits of various solutions to problems. Both the faculty and student affairs should defend a spirit of inquiry in every aspect of the educational process—including in those instances where moral certainty or an activist orientation tempts us all.

Second, the university is a place for inquiry and deliberation, not a vehicle for implementing social change. Unlike religiously affiliated or sponsored colleges, secular colleges do not state an aim to build “good Christian men,” and they do not require that students affirm religious or moral commitments as a condition of attendance. Public colleges and universities are defined by a different set of values—namely, serving the public good through truth-seeking in teaching and scholarship. Public institutions teach students regardless of their values or beliefs, and do not require them to profess any creed or declare any faith or allegiance. If public institutions start requiring students to espouse a certain set of values—either before or after enrollment—then they become secular versions of religious colleges.

Third, decisions that affect or relate to the curriculum or instruction should not be imposed on the faculty but rather developed by curriculum committees and other appropriate faculty bodies. Although student affairs staff appropriately have primary authority in a number of areas, such as student conduct, residence life, extracurricular activities, and new student orientations, the AAUP’s 1966 *Statement on Government of Colleges and Universities* makes clear that the faculty should have “primary responsibility for such fundamental areas as curriculum, subject matter and methods of instruction, research, faculty status, and those aspects of student life which relate to the educational process.” Campus initiatives affecting the education of students should be faculty-driven and based on faculty expertise. Advancing a free-floating shadow curriculum that is not

vetted by faculty review committees threatens, rather than supports, the core academic mission of the university.

If we want to preserve the primacy of the ethos of intellectual inquiry, which depends on faculty primacy in the governance of the curriculum, we must better understand our unique roles within a modern university. Student affairs has the laudable task of supporting the *extracurricular* social and institutional context while the faculty fulfills the university's educational mission. The spirit of inquiry is most seriously threatened when the ethos of training overtakes the ethos of inquiry and truth takes on the appearance of the easy or obvious. Although all higher education professionals have long encouraged students to reflect on ethical questions related to community engagement, citizenship, and social problems, any such work that is done in a *curricular* fashion must be done by the entity charged with curricular responsibility—namely, the faculty. If education is to continue to be a site of inquiry-based, academic exploration, then the shadow curriculum of student affairs—in which education is reduced to moral, political, or social training—must be brought into the light.

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