

Book Review

Learning Is Not a Sprint: Assessing and Documenting Student Leader Learning in Cocurricular Involvement.

Kathy M. Collins and Darby M. Roberts (Eds.).
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Personnel Administrators, 2012. 216 pp.
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The fundamental need for recognition and validity is a common feature of many student development theories. Our work in student affairs strives to provide students with meaning and purpose, while also equipping them with the tools to continue their own professional and personal journey long after their graduation ceremony. Ongoing and heightened interest in assessment can be seen as the professionals' quest for meaning making, where we heed the call for accountability while also, by necessity, raising our collective voice for justification and recognition. The forward of *Learning Is Not a Sprint* pointedly asks hard questions about the profession and our apparent role confusion, especially, "Is it because we have too long focused on what is important to us as individuals and as a profession rather than what is important and prioritized by our institutions?" (Bresciani, 2012, p. 10) Put another way, does our interest in assessment stem from what is important to us as professionals (how we are evaluated as administrators) or what is important to us as a profession (how our students can demonstrate meaningful learning and development)? *Learning Is Not a Sprint*, as an edited volume, shines the spotlight on both sides of this chicken and egg debate.

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The collected writings in *Learning Is Not a Sprint* bring together multiple perspectives on the growing popularity of assessment in higher education and balances these opinions with strategies and best practices for incorporating strong assessment practices into nearly any institutional context. Equal parts evaluation manifesto and practical textbook, the book offers real-world examples of assessment challenges and success stories, while offering lessons learned from administrators at a variety of professional levels. *Learning Is Not a Sprint* covers all of a professional's assessment bases, ranging from the why of assessment as a guiding practical philosophy to the what and how of using assessment tools to further the student affairs mission of supporting the students' academic and personal journeys.

While the book is a much newer and more modern compilation of assessment expertise, the focus on assessment itself is a much older phenomenon. Tracking, recording and evaluating student progress is not unique to post-secondary education, and the desire to compare our achievements to those of other institutions is common. This mostly unidirectional evaluation process has begun to shift, however, in higher education with students who bring a more critical eye and strong personal investment to their learning. As the book describes, this new model of learning and teaching "shifts [the] emphasis of the learning environment from being authority driven to being learner driven" (Hynes, 2012, p. 21). This learner driven environment demands we not only be accountable for learning but also to the learner themselves. Here, the emphasis is on the learner and the fundamental principles behind student affairs as a profession, including purposeful planning, a seamless learning environment and "prepare[ing] students to influence the world, to have the ability to continue to learn and develop, and to make lasting contributions to their respective fields or disciplines" (Hynes, 2012, p. 38).

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In order to influence, learn, develop and contribute, students require well-developed skills in communication, critical thinking, and leadership skills. It is here that the emphasis on assessment shifts from the professional to the profession, much in the same way that the book begins to shift toward a critical examination of student affairs and the state of higher education. Assessment, as many of the authors who contributed to the book will attest, requires a deep understanding of these and other skills beyond a justification of their teaching. The how of student learning is seen as a process embedded in a larger mess of political, social, historical and contextual influences. These same issues that impact student learning impact the profession, to the point where it is difficult to separate the two. While some in the field may argue that students' learning is in fact synonymous with student affairs as a profession, it is our understanding of learning that can shift our focus from the profession to the professional, and from learning to the learner.

Learning Is Not a Sprint, by its title alone, focuses on the act of learning and the outside demands on this process. There are many steps and stages outlined throughout the book, providing structure to what is often a haphazard process. Here, the authors truly emphasize learning and the assessment of student development as a process, attempting to remove some of the magical thinking associated with assessment. Rather than focusing solely on the final product, in this case a neat and tidy learning outcome that has been met or a completed evaluation, the book shines a spotlight on the messy and unpredictable learning process that the profession has often tried to keep hidden. Although the steps and stages

are outlined in neatly numbered lists, each landmark signals another step on what is most often a messy and complicated process. The authors are unafraid to examine assessment with a critical eye, not for another attempt at evaluation or critique, but rather to inspire meaningful discussion about the profession itself. Too often, assessment and evaluation are end products, when they are truly impactful throughout the lifecycle of a student's learning experience. Here the emphasis on the profession is crucial, creating a shared sense of urgency and responsibility for student success.

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Any emphasis on a profession, however, also demands a critical, and often closer, examination of the professionals working in the field. *Learning Is Not a Sprint* does devote attention to those responsible for creating, facilitating and assessing the exchanges and dialogues critical to positive student development. Here, the authors offer a series of practical tips and timely advice for professionals. The emphasis shifts again from learning to the learner; from the profession to the professional. A commitment to learning is described as a shared responsibility, leaving no one from coordinator, administrator, dean and principal behind. This is particularly true in assessment, as any shared responsibility for the act of assessment itself and the implementation of resulting recommendations must include the students who are impacted by the process.

Far more than other areas in student affairs, assessment acts as an underlying theme across all other projects and programs, not only evaluating student learning but, as the cycle goes, contributing directly to the learning process. As the authors note, both “the documentation and the observation by the student affairs professional ... is needed to assist student leaders as they learn, develop, and grow” (Starcke & DeLoach, 2012, p. 92). This discussion is particularly appealing to those currently working in assessment as well as all professionals in student affairs, as it states the importance of assessment in the very cause most professionals chose to take up when they entered the profession. Rightly so, the chapter on “Assessing and Documenting Student Learning” concludes with the statement, “We must always keep in mind that the learning experiences and feedback that occur through interpersonal exchange and authentic mentoring have far more impact than any assessment strategy” (Starcke & DeLoach, 2012, p. 93). This is perhaps the most critical lesson of the book, highlighting the most important role of assessment; continually refining the day-to-day interactions that make up students' in class and co-curricular learning experiences.

The students discussed in *Learning Is Not a Sprint* represent a diverse array of demographic characteristics. The theories used and examples presented are based on a wide range of student experiences. While this diversity is an important attempt at mirroring the student populations many professionals currently work with, the book often conflates the example of “students” with “student leaders.” At several points throughout the chapters, students are referred to as “student leaders,” described by one of the authors as “students [who will] influence the world ... have the ability to continue to learn and develop, and ... [will] make lasting contributions to their respective fields or disciplines” (Hynes, 2012, p. 38). Several of the theories presented around student learning and development are also leadership development theories that, while certainly relevant to any and all students, are often used to explain and support the learning of those students who have taken on a defined leadership role at their institution.

While the definition noted above is inclusive of any and all students, the book goes on to describe assessing the learning and development of students participating in defined activities, programs, roles and events. It is possible that this emphasis was intentional, as the authors echo the notion that “students tend to focus on the formal academic curriculum and do not easily identify the opportunities that are available to them for learning outside the classroom or across campus” (Holzweiss, 2012, p. 61). The emphasis on those students who can be more easily evaluated in predetermined roles with more intuitive learning outcomes ignores many hidden or unintentional learning moments that happen outside of the more traditionally defined student leadership programs.

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While several authors discuss the need to validate and differentiate the profession from academic affairs, confining a discussion of student learning to defined roles and positions is no better than the in-class learning that we often fight to be seen apart from. In arguing to be distinct from a process that is seemingly overtaking our importance and uniqueness in higher education, the book instead draws the same lines in the sand by creating a set and elevated subsection of students to focus on. While the learning of students who are not involved in these roles outside of the classroom is certainly more difficult to assess, limiting our effectiveness as a profession to these defined, resource intensive opportunities only serves to limit the scope and scale of our potential impact on the student experience.

Learning Is Not a Sprint is poised to become a seminal work in the student affairs literature, highlighting the importance of assessment for the parallel and equally important roles of professionals in advancing student learning while striving to elevate and celebrate the contributions of the field. More than ever, student affairs must not only continue to deliver high quality programs and services but also provide concrete evidence of a very disordered process. For the good of our students, we must adopt the patient, forward thinking attitude espoused by the authors to walk

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the blurry line between fast-paced, constant change and the slower, more subtle, long term transformations that can be overlooked without more deliberate attention to assessment. In treating assessment as part of, rather than apart from, our work in student affairs, the authors present a crucial shift in mindset from assessment "because we have to" and toward assessment "because we must." The combination of practical advice and a professional call to action follows a more unique approach to writing for an audience of administrators, ensuring that a call to action carries manageable, and measurable, strategies while these strategies are presented within a compelling framework denoting the importance of these methods in supporting students. *Learning Is Not a Sprint* is an essential and highly recommended part of a professional's library. Its call to action must be heard if we are to move forward, collectively, in answering the hard questions facing the profession.

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