

Reflecting on Program Learning Outcomes

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Author Note

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Attending graduate school at San Diego State University was a choice. This choice was the result of a series of decisions made during the end of my second year. This was a time for change; I had just finished an honors organic chemistry sequence, and completed all of my medical school requirements. I was enrolled in summer school at the time and had just started training for my new role in student government working with student services, as well as a new job at the Center for Student Involvement as a Student Involvement Leadership Consultant at the One Stop desk. At the time, I was taking courses to fulfill a philosophy general education requirement and a visual arts minor requirement. Even though it was a small course load, I found myself busy from daily meetings with campus administrators in student government and interacting with student organizations at One Stop. While the courses were intellectually engaging, everyday I went home with a smile on my face because of the work that I was doing. No matter how much work I had outside of class, I couldn't help but notice how happy my work made me. For once, I was doing something that made me happy—something that made me smile. This was also a time when my conversations with my advisor, mentor, and good friend Heather started. Heather had worked with me while I met with the student groups that I advised in student government, informing me of outcomes-based advising and best practices. I found joy in the craft of helping students reach their own conclusions and developing leadership skills in the groups that I worked with. This revelation in my interests and passions, made me realize that I wanted to continue working with students after college. It was through this process that I had found my passion and love for Student Affairs.

When I made the decision to transition into student affairs, the conversation with my parents, family, and friends was a rough one. As it stands in the American education system, Student Affairs is already difficult to define and ambiguous. In Asian culture, this ambiguity is

amplified, as the fundamental ideology of student development is foreign to many. Even to this day, my parents are still convinced that I'm now going to graduate school to become a teacher. My friends have become accepting of the idea with time. Many critiqued that I had too scientific a mind, one that shouldn't go to waste. It was with time that they realized the level of critical and reflective thinking required in order to be truly successful in a field that was difficult in a very different way.

With time, I knew I wanted to find a program that wouldn't disappoint me or the people who had finally come to support my endeavors. I found San Diego State University to be fit for me because I wanted a program that would align with my goals and values. These goals and values were espoused in both the program cornerstones as well as the Program Learning Outcomes (PLO). It was through this alignment process that I was able to select and craft academic and professional training and opportunities in the program. The PLOs can roughly be divided into areas involving theory (PLO 1, 2, 3, 4) and practice (PLO 5, 6, 7, 8) with overlap of both areas found in some of them. Before being made aware of these outcomes, I opted to take three courses during fall semester, Educational Leadership, Student Affairs in Higher Education, and Methods of Inquiry. I also took on two separate assistantships so that I would be able to gain a broader spectrum of experience.

Although my original expectation when I first started the program was that all of my theoretical education would occur in class and my practical education would occur through assistantships, I have found this expectation to be incorrect. In fact, I have found that my assistantships have provided much of the foundations to understanding theory while my coursework has provided me with the tools needed to engage in practice, and it is through these conjoined experiences that I'm able to develop a strong sense of theory and effective sets of skills that will help me succeed as a Student Affairs professional.

Having started the coursework for the program approximately eight weeks ago, I have found that the coursework prescribed for the program includes all the pieces needed to build a strong foundation for the theory that makes up the field. The pieces alone, however, do not make up a strong theoretical understanding for the field; it is through a process of discussion and reflection that I have found myself successful in not only understanding, but fully immersing myself in the theory of student affairs and the foundation of the field. It is with this process that the pieces come together to create a picture, a story to tell. With this idea in mind, I think it is critical to not just absorb information that is provided in class, but also to actively engage and understand its impact.

On the other side of theory, I have found that many elements of practice in the field are difficult without prior experience. For example, not too long ago, I was strongly impacted by the death of a student in the community that I worked with in my assistantship in Greek Life. While it was important to navigate the situation personally, I also needed to learn how to help other students seek out the resources necessary to support their processing of the situation. Through practical experience in dealing with situations that I did not have background in, I was able to know that when specialized knowledge or skill is required in a situation, it is in the best interest of the students to guide them in a direction that would provide the best possible outcome. This statement was true even if it meant directing them to another resource. This was difficult as I felt a need to fight the urge to tell students that I would be able to help them through a situation.

The practical experience mentioned above also helps make the point that practical experience is important in processing theory. Specifically, this experience has helped me navigate some of the foundations of the field discussed in class, and understand the way Student Affairs has shaped itself. The experience specifically helped me develop a sense of the values found in Student Affairs professionals, such as a need for altruism and protecting a sense of

community. Thus, these values become clear and apparent through my practice and become part of my reflection. In doing so, practice begins to help utilize the building blocks I receive in class and make it a part of who I am as a professional.

On the other hand, my course work also informs my practice in my assistantships. Through case studies and group discussions, I am better able to understand the different elements of a project or situation. For example, through understanding leadership frames, unique institutional cultures, and assessment techniques, I was able to create an effective and informative benchmark report a few weeks ago. By understanding the importance of understanding an institution before judging it, I was able to better navigate unique structures and policies from other institutions to create a report that was informative to my supervisor.

Because of my work in assistantships and coursework, I understand the importance of both academic and professional training. This understanding has allowed me to appreciate the importance of information integration. Specifically, the process of consolidating what I learn in class with what I do on a daily basis informs my understanding of my profession and my practice. This integrative process allows for me to learn patterns and skills as building blocks to assemble a bigger picture. Instead of pigeonholing myself as someone who evaluates social management policies and handles data and paperwork, I am able to see myself as someone who analyzes and integrates information to create impact, a skill typical of a leader, not a manager. It is with this understanding and continued education in both theory and practice that I am able to fulfill the PLOs of the program and further grow as a Student affairs professional.