

Involving Colleges in Developing Future Leaders

I think I have discovered a guide for enriching my instructional activities in post-secondary occupational education (PSOE). If I can make it past the atrocious grammar I observed in a lengthy quote from Earl Paul's new book, *So You Want to Be a Leader? What Every College Student Should Know*, I think the volume will provide me with insight and awareness of learners' perspectives to draw upon when designing and delivering courses devoted to development and retention of personal and workplace skills. Paul, who apparently has several years' experience as a college advisor, specializes in leadership and soft-skills development. Both topics present challenges to PSOE students and instructors.

According to Wilson (2007) in her review of the volume, Paul emphasizes "(1) leadership is learned, for the most part, and (2) students must read, study, observe others, and take on leadership roles to develop leadership skills" (par. 10). Wilson notes Paul places a premium on an individual's character and its importance to developing and manifesting leadership skills.

Throughout *Involving Colleges*, Kuh, Schuh, Whitt & Associates (1991) provide a detailed scheme and evidentiary support for the benefits of using every college experience – not just formal instruction – as a learning opportunity. While the authors do not specifically address leadership and character, they discuss colleges' transmission of core values to, and "high expectations for achievement" from, their students (p. 55). The authors promote campus pluralism (p. 64), which provides multiple opportunities for student leaders to emerge. They devote several pages to "student responsibility," which encompasses developing character and independent judgement through "honor systems," "ladders to success," and varying degrees of "autonomy" with complementary "safety nets" in place for guidance (pp. 137-142).

Wilson (2007) notes there are thirty-nine topics in Paul's book section entitled "Leadership and Character," including "integrity, making excuses, going back on your word, leading by example, passion, delegating, and self-discipline" (par. 5). In the PSOE environment, a plethora of students have undeveloped or missing skills in these areas. While the vocational orientation of PSOE curricula generally does not provide for courses to address leadership or character, instructors have ample opportunities to incorporate classroom ethics, collaborative learning, directed/individualized study, course contracts, and similar learning activities that promote leadership and character development.

Wilson (2007) describes some of the social skills that “seem to be declining in our society, but nonetheless are skills students should possess to help them in their lives and careers” (par. 6). Paul describes his experiences as a presenter on topics such as “punctuality, table manners, thank you notes, courtesy and respect, and effective public speaking ... many students want to hear about ... because some have had little, if any, exposure to them and their importance” (par. 6). I can speak from personal experience as a soft-skills program developer, long-time formal instructor, and informal mentor, when agreeing with these statements. Soft-skills among PSOE students, especially, seems to be a wasteland. Without intervention, these students not only will be unable to acquire suitable employment, they will be unable to retain it and experience the career and personal success they desire.

According to Wilson (2007), Earl Paul concludes the book with a section entitled “Other Stuff,” in which he discusses “smoking, tattoos, peer pressure, voting, and exercise” (par. 7). Wilson acknowledges these topics are not directly related to character and leadership development, “but life’s decisions, when viewed holistically, influence students more than they may realize” (par. 7). Wilson comments on the statistical research Paul presents in this section to support his recommendations to young readers.

Because it is written in students’ vernacular, Paul’s text could be used as a guidebook for schools wishing to implement soft-skills counseling or training programs. Books such as this can provide unlimited ideas for student affairs professionals as they determine needs, design programs, implement learning opportunities, and evaluate their results in the often-nebulous universe of developing students’ inter- and intrapersonal skills. According to the highly acclaimed *Involving Colleges*, these skills are easily reinforced through outside-the-classroom activities – the natural habitat of student services professionals!

Resources

- Kuh, G. D., Schuh, J. H., Whitt, E. J. & Associates. (1991). *Involving colleges*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Wilson, C. (2007, April). A new resource for student leadership development. *Learning Abstracts* 10(4), n.p.
- Available on-line at www.league.org/publication/learning/edition.cfm