

A Personal Interview with Dr. Margaret J. Barr

Denise L. Rode

With this edition of *The Journal of College Orientation and Transition*, the editorial board initiates a new feature called “Pillars of Our Profession.” “Pillars” will recognize those faculty members and higher education professionals whose work has been foundational to the development of the National Orientation Directors Association and the fields of orientation, transition, and retention. We begin with the recipient of the NODA “Outstanding Contributions to the Orientation Profession” award in 1997—Dr. Margaret J. Barr, Vice President for Student Affairs and Professor *emerita* of Northwestern University.

Dr. Barr holds a bachelor’s degree in elementary education from the State University College at Buffalo, a master’s degree in College Student Personnel-Higher Education from Southern Illinois University-Carbondale, and a PhD in Educational Administration from The University of Texas at Austin. Her scholarly interests include higher education law and budgets and financial management in higher education.

Throughout her career, Dr. Barr has maintained a high level of professional activity. She has written or edited 7 books and 10 book/monograph chapters, edited the *New Directions for Student Services* series for Jossey-Bass from 1986 to 1997, presented more than 75 keynote addresses and numerous conference programs, and served on a host of accrediting and visiting committees. She has served in a variety of leadership positions for the American College Personnel Association (ACPA) and NASPA—Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education and has received numerous awards for her professional contributions. Her upcoming book, *Budgeting and Financial Management in Higher Education*, co-authored with George McClellan, will be published by Jossey-Bass this year.

A resident of Evanston, Illinois, Dr. Barr maintains an active professional schedule in retirement, consulting on campuses across the country, writing and editing, speaking at conferences and Webinars, mentoring advancing professionals, and providing guest lecturers for the next generation of student affairs practitioners. Her community involvement includes chairing the Evanston Woman’s Board of the Northwestern Settlement Association, as well as serving on the organization’s Board of Directors and as a member of the Investment Committee. She is also involved in the League of Women Voters and the Woman’s Board of Northwestern University.

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In this interview, which took place on October 26, 2009, Dr. Barr reflected on her roots as a new professional in orientation and shared some of the lessons she has learned during her distinguished career. As one of the earliest members of the National Orientation Directors Association, she served as a member of the steering committee (now known as the board of directors) from 1972 to 1974, and was a member of the editorial group which was instrumental in developing the first NODA Journal in 1972–1973. She spoke with *JCOT* editor Denise Rode during this interview.

Dr. Rode: How did you first become involved with the National Orientation Directors Association? What role did you play with this fledgling organization?

Dr. Barr: I was Director of Orientation and Assistant Dean of Students at the University of Texas at Austin. That was the first time I worked full-time with an orientation program, so I thought I'd better find myself some friends who knew more about orientation than I did. When they started to organize the National Orientation Directors Association, I thought that's something I have to get involved in, and I found it to be extraordinarily helpful.

One of the first things that I did in the association was to develop the Orientation Director's Handbook, which at that time was a loose-leaf binder that we gave to new orientation directors, saying, "Here are the things that you ought to be doing in your program and the things you shouldn't be doing." We didn't know about standards and such [then].

Rode: Where did you move after your position as Assistant Dean of Students at The University of Texas? Take us through your career path since that point.

Barr: I became Associate Dean of Students at UT Austin, and I worked on my doctorate while I was there. When I finished my doctorate, I went to Northern Illinois University as Assistant Vice President for Student Affairs and had a range of responsibilities, some of which I knew something about, some of which I didn't. You can always find friends who know more than you do to help, and you can do all right. When my boss was on sabbatical leave, I became acting vice president. After he decided to move to a faculty role, I applied for the vice president position and was selected. From NIU, I went to Texas Christian University as Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs. I was there for eight years and then went to Northwestern University where I was Vice President for Student Affairs and a professor in Education and Social Policy. I retired from there in 2000.

Rode: You continue to be professionally active in retirement. What has occupied your attention over the last ten years?

Barr: I've written a book with Arthur Sandeen, *Critical Issues for Student Affairs: Challenges and Opportunities* [Jossey-Bass, 2006]. Art and I also write a column, Magna Publications, *The Student Affairs Leader*, every month. We get questions

from readers and respond. We're like the "Dear Abby" of student affairs. I serve as a Senior Fellow for *Eduventures*, which is an education research firm in Boston. I also do a lot of consulting for colleges and universities, both locally and nationally, and give speeches. I wrote a monograph for Jossey-Bass [2002], *An Academic Administrators Guide to Budgets and Financial Management*, and am now developing it into a book.

Rode: As you look back at the profession over the years that you've been involved in student affairs, what would you identify as some of the "watershed" moments, events, or documents that have been formative for the profession and for yourself?

Barr: I grew up professionally when *The Student Personnel Point of View* [1937, 1949] shaped much of our student affairs professional practice. The people who wrote the documents were quite remarkable and were way ahead of their time. I was privileged in 1987–88 to be on the committee that wrote the New Perspective on Student Affairs on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of *The Student Personnel Point of View*, which was an interesting project, to say the least.

What has perhaps been underrated in the profession, because it's not as "sexy" as some other documents, is CAS (Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education). These standards are useful to people in their administrative roles, helping them to judge their programs and services against aspirational standards and other programs elsewhere, particularly in this era of accountability. CAS will become, in the next 20 years, even more important than it is now. I don't think that many people realize the power of CAS standards to help shape what happens on individual college campuses across the country.

Various documents have been very helpful and useful, but I don't think there is one overall document that captures everything that is student affairs. We are much too broad a profession and much too different in our backgrounds to have any one document as our "guiding light." We need to look at all that there is out there and choose the best.

Rode: Are there any books or resources that you would suggest, particularly that orientation practitioners—new professionals, experienced practitioners, or graduate students—ought to have in their library?

Barr: I think that the handbook that Susan Komives, Dudley Woodard, and Associates wrote [*Student Services: A Handbook for the Profession*, Jossey-Bass, 2003] is an outstanding resource. I would recommend my own handbook [*The Handbook of Student Affairs Administration*, with Mary Desler, Jossey-Bass, 2000] and the third edition of *The Handbook of Student Affairs Administration* edited by George McClellan and Jeremy Stringer. I recommend handbooks because they give the voices of many authors and are helpful in looking at student affairs from a variety of perspectives. One series I would urge people to read is *New Directions for*

Student Services [Jossey-Bass], which comes out quarterly. I edited that series for 12 years with M. Lee Upcraft, and now John Schuh and Elizabeth Whitt are doing a nice job. As an editor, you're always thinking two years ahead of time—what are going to be the issues that we need to pay attention to? It keeps you sharp in your professional practice to be involved with writing. On the whole, *New Directions* is probably one of the best quality monograph series that I have ever seen.

Rode: You have mentioned that *New Directions for Student Services* looks at trends and issues. The book you co-authored with Art Sandeen, *Critical Issues in Student Affairs* [Jossey-Bass, 2006], is one of those books with which graduate students and professionals at all levels should be familiar. What do you foresee for the future in terms of trends and issues related to the profession, particularly to orientation and transition?

Barr: Orientation staff will have to adjust to a change in student population. We have been fighting two wars for a long time, and we have many veterans returning to campus again. Unlike World War II, which drastically changed the landscape of higher education when the veterans came back, these veterans are coming to higher education in drips and drabs, a little at a time. We are not getting the huge influx that the GI Bill brought in the late 40s and early 50s. Veterans are coming with different sets of issues involved in their lives because they have been fighting different wars, more akin to the war in Vietnam than to World War II. These are nontraditional students who are returning and will need some special care. Because there is not a large mass of them, they tend to be overlooked on a traditional college campus. They are not going to be the people that will come and say, "I need to go to orientation," because they have seen the world. But we need to help them know how orientation can help them succeed on campus just as learning how to read radar helps them in battle situations.

The second thing that is happening is that people are being affected by the economy, which is less stable than it has been in decades. There are people going back to school for second careers, trying to look at different ways they can use their talents, backgrounds, and experiences. That means that you have to shape orientation programs in a different way. This again will be a small population of students compared to your total entering student body, but they are an important component and can't be overlooked. There will be many single mothers and fathers who are dealing with the question, "I worked for an automotive manufacturing company my entire life; what am I going to do now?" They are bright, competent, intelligent people who need some help in figuring out a new pathway in their lives. Orientation is going to change from orienting people just to the institution; it will help them get a re-orientation to their lives, with the institution being a part of it.

Rode: Our journal is frequently read by new professionals and graduate students. To some extent, the skills and competencies that are needed for success as an orientation practitioner are similar to those in other areas of student affairs. What

are some of the essential skills and competencies that new professionals need to bring to the table?

Barr: They perhaps bring them [skill sets] to the table, or they can learn them fairly rapidly. That's where professional organizations come in—to give people environments where they can practice the skills and competencies they need in a low-risk environment. We are pretty forgiving of each other in our profession.

Public presentation skills are important. Having oral and written communication skills will always be essential for someone in orientation or student affairs in general. If you can't be organized, you're going to be a very unhappy camper.

Genuinely liking students, not just tolerating students, is important. The former NIU president I worked for said a most profound thing. He said, "Student affairs people, when they are at their best, speak up for students but never down to them." That doesn't mean you always agree with them, but it does mean that you speak up for them on what their needs, wants, and desires are, and have the ability to translate what we know about students meaningfully for our academic and business affairs colleagues in the institution. Just giving them a bunch of data is not going to be very helpful. Being able to say, "This is what it means; this is how you will see this played out on our campus. This is what it means to you as a person who is working with students." For example, students may not be as sophisticated as we'd like in understanding their billing statements. Or they don't understand that they are responsible for managing their finances because that's not where they are developmentally. So we [administrators] have to work with students on that skill. That's what I mean by translating what we know about students into programs or interventions that are meaningful.

Rode: Ethics is a key concern in many professions these days. What sorts of ethical issues do you see for student affairs, and/or specifically for orientation and transition?

Barr: Students can tell very quickly if someone is a fake or is not being responsive and responsible to them. So you need to be congruent in what you say and do with people. You need to live your life the way you expect others to live their lives. You need to understand that you cannot be a party to that which is a conflict of interest. Someone might come to you and say that if you just let them have five minutes in the orientation program to present something that will help students study better for the rest of their lives, then they will give you 5 percent of their profit. That's not ethical; it's a conflict of interest. No one ever came and asked me that, but I wanted to be able to say "no" to them if they ever did.

Rode: As institutional budgets are diminishing, orientation programs are looking off campus for support for the t-shirts that our orientation leaders wear or for the lanyards that hold new students' orientation name tags. We walk a fine line sometimes when corporate sponsors want time on our orientation agenda, time

with our student leaders, and other types of access to students.

Barr: You need to know what you are really promising and [you must] deliver what you promise. And you need to do what's right, fair, and honest. Northwestern University has a motto, "Whatever things are true, whatever things are honest, ... think on these things." That's what being a student affairs professional is about.

Rode: So tying into the core values of the division and the institution you represent is important in orientation practice. What do you know now that you wish that you knew when you were a new professional starting out?

Barr: That I'm neither as powerful or as un-powerful as I thought I was at that time. That you teach in everything you do. That you don't have to just be a good classroom teacher; you have to teach honesty and good behavior in your interactions with students. You are careful not to gossip about students in the hallway or in the cafeteria because their secrets are safe with you. In that way, you are demonstrating honesty and responsible behavior to people. We as professionals sometimes want to be friends with students; it is not our job to be their friend. Our job is to help them understand their potential and how they can contribute to their own growth and to the greater society. Friendships are sometimes a nice by-product of that, but that's not why you are in student affairs. So often our young professionals are so close in age to the students that they are walking a fine line for them [in this area]. But they carry a special responsibility.

Rode: You emphasize the educative function of the student affairs professional—we teach in how we conduct ourselves professionally and in how we live our lives.

Barr: Our "classroom" is just different than that of our academic counterparts.

Rode: Could you pick out one or two of your fondest memories, or points in your career, or perhaps an interaction that had a profound impact on you and perhaps set your course?

Barr: That is a hard question. We are shaped by a constant number of interactions from day to day. There was an old Joni James song called "Little Things Mean a Lot." I believe that in student affairs it's not just one interaction but a series of interactions; it's watching a group of [student] orientation leaders go from being really excited that they are chosen to be on the orientation staff to being effective leaders of people coming to the institution for the first time. That's always an amazing thing. I always felt that students teach us as much we teach them, when you listen to the individual stories of courage that students have or the adversities they overcome. They also have their wonderful sense of humor. As a young professional I took myself far too seriously, and the students taught me how to laugh about it. If you make a mistake, you pick yourself up and start all over again.

Rode: As you think back to the decades of students that you worked with at various

institutions, how have you seen students change over the years? What's remained the same, and what's changed?

Barr: They have changed in their technological sophistication. I just read a graduation speech that a friend of mine gave in Texas. She talked to the graduates about becoming an active verb in their lives—to do, see—and not to be an adjective, such as being cute, or responsible, or nice. Students know more than I do about technology—I will never understand why one wants to Twitter. But students are much more sophisticated and knowledgeable; they are exposed to so much more than I was when I went to college. I was pretty naïve as a freshman.

Rode: You were only 16.

Barr: Yes, but I was a very naïve 16-year-old. Television was relatively new; we didn't have access to the Internet. Students now know so much more than we do, but they have not lived so much more. So they are having bigger struggles in some ways because of their greater exposure to knowledge without having the life skills to deal with all that knowledge.

I think students have changed in their relationship with their parents. There's a dichotomous group of students going to college now—the ones who have overly involved parents and the ones whose parents are not at all involved in their lives—the “helicopter” or “bulldozer” parents on one hand and absent parents on the other hand. And both of those kinds of students are being impaired by those relationships. However, there are lots of parents who are doing it right.

Rode: To what constituencies are orientation professionals responsible, and are any of those constituencies top priorities?

Barr: This can vary from day to day and week to week. You have a responsibility to your students, their parents, and to your institution. Your job is a constant balancing act between the institution and the needs or wants of your students.

Rode: What's the value of professional associations for the orientation or transition professional?

Barr: They are very important. Professional associations let you try out some of your skills and competencies in the less judgmental environment; you're not being looked at for promotion or salary increments. You can get a lot of personal reward by being involved. For me, one of the best things that happened by being in professional associations was having a large network of friends that I could call if I was faced with a conundrum in my professional practice. I was able to get their perspective as some of them have lived through the same issues in their lives. Professional associations also stretch you. They give you opportunities to be better organized and to communicate better. They can be a constant in your life as conditions change around you.