Interview with Elizabeth Griego

With Pamela C. Crosby, Character Clearinghouse Editor

2012 Jon C. Dalton Institute on College Student Values Keynote Speaker

Professional Title: Vice-President for Student Life

Institution: University of the Pacific


Topic of Presentation at the DICSV: “Out to Change the World Through Social Entrepreneurship: Honoring Student Voices”

Background Experience: Elizabeth Griego has held various leadership positions in the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA), including president-elect, president, and she currently serves as past president. She has also served as the president of the California Association of Institutional Research.

She is an active researcher, consultant, and presenter at professional conferences. She has presented at over 60 professional conferences and gatherings and authored over a dozen journal articles and book chapters. Her scholarly interests include the practice of student affairs, assessment of learning, accreditation review, leadership development, and the history of professional women in the U.S. She consults actively with colleges and universities across the country on these and other issues.

1. Tell us about your presentation at the Institute.

My colleague, Spencer Ton, assistant director of the Global Center for Social Entrepreneurship at the University of the Pacific, and I will be co-presenting about social entrepreneurship as a prototype for deep, engaged learning. We plan to incorporate video of some of the inspirational stories and insightful comments of Pacific’s student social entrepreneurs that illustrate their lived experiences as change-makers and community-builders in this country and internationally. We will include a spoken word presentation by one of these students and end with a slide show “Dear World” in which students use their hands and face to communicate heartfelt messages that emanate from their personal vision and mission for the world.

2. You are a past-president of NASPA. What was your most challenging experience as a president of such a large organization? Would you recommend taking on such an extensive responsibility to others?

I was president of NASPA during an unusual time from 2010-2011, when the association was considering merging with the other comprehensive student affairs association, ACPA. Everything about that year was challenging, but I found especially difficult filtering and responding to negative stereotypes that we in the
student affairs profession hold and articulate about one another. Generally, student affairs on our campuses stands for inclusion, encouragement, mutual support, and openness to change. It was disappointing when these values were not modeled in the dialogue about consolidation of the two associations.

Following the unsuccessful vote on consolidation, changes have been made in NASPA to the elected chief volunteer position I held and the title was changed from president to chair of the board of directors. Expectations were clarified and time expectations were reduced at the same time that the role of the chief executive staff officer, now called the NASPA president, were expanded. These changes should relieve the workload for the leader of the board of directors.

I would recommend seeking a national volunteer leadership position like this if the person has something to say about higher education and wants an opportunity to influence policy and practice—I probably would not recommend it as a resume-building experience because the time requirement even after the changes that have been made will be extensive. To be most effective, you have to care about, research, write, and broadly communicate about issues in our profession. The year in which you serve seems very short and work and writing must be entered into intensively. It goes by so quickly.

3  You earned a PhD from the University of California, Berkley in higher administration, where you were recognized as winner of the Outstanding Doctoral Dissertation Award. Your subject of your dissertation was on the personal, academic, and professional life of Clelia Mosher:

a. Briefly describe what makes her such a notable individual and why readers should be interested in reading about her today.

I was interested in Clelia Mosher because she has so much to teach us about the challenges of professional women at the turn of the last century. Those challenges continue to provide background and to contextualize the work of women professionals today. As a physician, researcher, and professor at Stanford University, Mosher saw her “great responsibility” in life as that of arousing her female contemporaries to adopt full and equal participation in all aspects of their lives, including in their aspirations to serve in professions, from which women were excluded at that time. Her research on women and women’s capabilities is fascinating, and her private musings even more fascinating, as we see how difficult it was for educated women to find voice, acceptance, and credibility.

b. How did you first discover her?

In the late 70s, while writing in my doctoral program about professional women at the turn of the last century, I did a study on women who had taught in the colleges and universities that had incorporated in California in the 20th century. I came across Clelia Mosher as one of the handful of accomplished women who taught under David Starr Jordan, Stanford’s visionary first president. Almost a century later, Stanford historian Carl Degler discovered Mosher’s papers in the university archives. In 1974, he wrote an article for the American Historical Review about Mosher’s private survey of women’s sexual attitudes and practices. Through Degler’s article, Mosher’s survey became known to historians as the earliest data on the sexual habits of American women that we have, predating the Kinsey report by some forty years and essentially debunking commonly-held beliefs about Victorian women’s private lives. Mosher interviewed female faculty, faculty wives, and adult students at Stanford and the University of Wisconsin, querying them about birth control, attitudes toward sex, sexual practices, and their fears and perspectives about sexual intimacy—a fascinating compilation of women’s private lives that would likely have been shared only because Mosher was such an uncommon professional resource: a female physician, so unusual at that time. The Stanford archives contain Mosher’s other research studies, scrapbooks, collections of research
and popular advice columns and also her private papers, altogether a rich treasure trove of her work, influences, inspirations, and also her private thoughts, motivations, and reflections. Before I began systematically reading through the boxes of archived materials, no one else, even Degler, had fully accessed these fascinating materials.

c. Do you see traits that you have in common with her?

I don’t feel at all feel a personal identification with her as a research subject, but I have great admiration for her perspicacity and persistence, especially given the challenges to women in her time.

d. Why did you choose to do historical research (rather than other types of research)?

While I have done a fair amount of social science research, I made up my mind early that my doctoral studies, and choice of dissertation, would be for my own interest and pleasure. Researching and writing about early professional women was a journey of discovery that kept me entranced as I learned about the lives of pioneering women. For most of a year, I took Fridays off work when I was an assistant dean of students at Mills College, and drove to Stanford for a day poking around the archives, which were very open and accessible to researchers at the time. Then, at the conclusion of my dissertation, I joined a group of independent women scholars and spent a year researching pioneering families in northern California from the mid-1800s. We read deeply in the family papers of the Bancroft Library at UC Berkeley and helped one another research aspects of pioneering life that interested each of us. I took on organized education, for example, and others pointed me to passages in the letters, diaries, and family papers they were researching and I did the same for them in their subjects of health care, the arts, etc. Although we never published the book from the family papers research that we envisioned, we spent a fruitful year reading, discussing, sharing, and learning together.

4. Describe your work with “Heal the Children.”

“Heal the Children” is an organization that my sister Martha discovered when she was living in New Delhi, India. Martha was working with a group of international women who helped finance women’s traditional crafts in rural areas of India. One of the more pernicious practices in India occurs when a woman rejects a male suitor and he then ambushes her and throws acid in her face to disfigure her for any other suitor. The woman is often then abandoned by her family as well as her suitor. “Heal the Children” raises funds to bring the acid-burned women to the United States for plastic surgery. I traveled to India and then helped sell textiles and handicrafts to raise money for this project and held fund-raisers in our home to raise awareness and support this organization.

5. You have served as a Deacon for Piedmont Community Church. How do you see your religious experience informing your professional and academic life?

I have a deep spiritual faith that is simply present for me in all that I do and am. The choice to work in student affairs is guided by knowing that meaning and purpose are inextricably linked for me in the privilege of serving students and making a difference in their lives. I begin each of our Student Life thrice-annual retreats by reminding our Pacific staff that our collective job description from public safety officers to administrative assistants to the dean of students is to help students achieve their dreams and aspirations and transform their lives; and if collectively working for students in this way is not religious work, I don’t know what is. Student affairs is the campus entity that works with whole person learning, integrating mind, body, and spirit, inner life with outer life, for the most meaningful, powerful, and integrated kind of learning that there is. We are present with students during their most difficult challenges and most joyful
celebrations. I love it when students talk with me about what matters most to them. When we talk about faith together, I know they are sharing their most authentic and deepest aspects of themselves. I love our profession for giving us the opportunities to have these kinds of conversations on a regular basis.

6. What has been your greatest challenge as a VPSA at University of the Pacific?

My greatest continuing challenge has been to find effective ways to talk about the whole person, integrated learning that we facilitate in student affairs and to ensure that our assessment work and results document deep learning in ways that faculty and other administrators can understand and respect.

7. What advice would you give our readers who are aspiring VPSAs?

Continually seek your highest and best purpose. Go broad and go deep. Obtain a thorough grounding across the different aspects of student affairs, but have a few areas that you research and study thoroughly so you can be a campus and regional and national expert in something you love so much that you will be a continual learner. Ask the questions, what does my university need from me now? What do my students need from me now? Also, seek to find persons to work with and for whom you deeply respect. There is nothing more rewarding than being on a team with persons who have similar values, doing shared work, who are invested in one another’s work and individual success and who care about one another personally. Continually seek your highest and best purpose.

8. What is your favorite story you have experienced as a vice president at University of the Pacific?

I love seeing students connect in ways that develop their purpose and passion. Two students in our leadership class met and discovered their common interest in music. By the end of the semester, they formed a band that played first for a reception for our dean of students, then to open our new University Center, now has four CD’s, played an original composition at TEDx, cut a CD for our community Gospel Rescue Center, and is now opening for India Arie: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gppFCYwE0uc

This just makes me happy.

9. Please describe the purpose of the Center for Social and Emotional Competence and its ongoing work, success, and challenges.

Three years ago, Student Life, with the support of key faculty members, established the Center for Social and Emotional Development. Social and emotional development is the integration of the theory of social intelligence (Thorndike, Gardner), emotional intelligence (Bar-On, Salovey & Mayer, Goleman), and competence development (Boyatzis, Spencer & Spencer) applied toward educational practice and personal growth. The student life director of the Center works with seven faculty fellows and several student life directors in collaborative research and publications and in teaching courses and workshops to develop interrelated abilities to reason about and use emotions to enhance thought and actions. That is, we have found that students who work on developing social and emotional competence learn to pay attention to and use, understand, and manage emotions to enhance self-insight and to develop more effective communication with others. To date, the Center has developed a teaching framework; a reliable and validated survey that assesses student development; a workbook of learning modules and exercises; taught scores of student workshops, class sessions, and five classes centered on social and emotional development; and produced a dozen publications in refereed journals.

10. The interfaith, spirituality, and New Atheist movements are gaining momentum on college campuses today. How do you see University of the Pacific addressing the holistic needs of students...
including their religious and spiritual needs and both theistic and non-theistic perspectives?

Pacific students, when compared to students at similar universities, are comprised of higher than average numbers of first generation and low income students, reflecting the diverse, immigrant-rich California Central Valley from which many of our students are drawn. We know from both the CIRP and NSSE freshman surveys that Pacific students on average, begin their first year of college rating themselves lower than their peers at comparable institutions on measures related to spiritual and leadership development and higher on measures related to career direction and motivation. With this understanding, student affairs works closely with faculty to acknowledge holistic needs of students by providing opportunities to gain religious literacy, engage in interfaith dialogue, grapple with meaning making, and develop intercultural and leadership capacity that includes attention to the spiritual and, where relevant, the lens supplied by religion.

This attention to “whole student learning” begins with a unique Pacific experience: the Mountains Ocean Valley Experience (MOVE), where students engage in a two-day, overnight, service experience with faculty and student affairs staff mentors. Students are asked to intentionally reflect on and share the intersectionality of their identities and reflect on Pacific’s process definition of leadership, their personal goals for their own development, and their goals for their interrelationship with the larger world and their place in it.

The MOVE program intentionally links to the yearlong required general education seminar which is framed by the question, What is a good society?, using both sacred, philosophical, cultural, and secular texts. Most of the student affairs leadership teach formally in this seminar-style course alongside our faculty colleagues. The pedagogy intentionally focuses on individual and group projects, exploring community-based learning opportunities with an emphasis on developing purpose as it might relate to the significant issues found in the Central Valley community surrounding Pacific. Through this course, students begin to understand value systems beyond their own and the related ability to take on multiple or alternative perspectives. By the time they are seniors, students at the .001 level of significance more than their peers at other institutions acknowledge that their learning includes “serious conversations with students who are very different from themselves in terms of their religious beliefs, political opinions, or personal values.” (NSSE) They also report much higher gains in leadership abilities than their peers at other schools (2011 Multi-Institutional Study of Leadership). Other research results provide further confirmation that Pacific’s rich opportunities to engage in leadership activities, experiential learning, and interfaith opportunities have created communities of practice that mutually enrich student understanding and motivation.

Specific programmatic thrusts that incorporate the intentional design of religious and spiritual needs are illustrated by Pacific’s participation in the White House Interfaith and Community Service challenge and the University-wide attention to foster children in our community. Pacific also supports an Interfaith and Social Justice Residential Learning Community, where students of any faith, and no faith, explore meaning and purpose in a variety of ways. Internships through the Multicultural Center, Multifaith Chapel staff, and Career Resources Center provide students opportunities to dive deeper amid an environment that supports their exploration.

11. Perry Glanzer and Todd Ream in their book on Christian identity (2009) identify five sources of evidence that demonstrate that colleges are taking moral education seriously: (a) clear moral mission; (b) the prevalence of appeals to moral ideals in marketing the school; (c) the integration of ethics into the curricular realm; (d) the integration of ethical ideals and language into the co-curricular realm; and (e) the integration of efforts being made in the curricular and co-curricular realm (p. 133). Do you think University of the Pacific is taking seriously students’ moral education?
If so, what general evidence can you provide for our readers?

Pacific’s three-year exploration of core values, foundational values, and aspirations contained in our seminal planning document, Pacific Rising, has established the following tenets as being central to the Pacific experience: passion for teaching and learning, learner focus, whole person education, responsible leadership, relationship-based learning, and community engagement. As stated in the opening paragraph of Pacific Rising, these “are behind everything we do and cannot be compromised. They are stated to be inclusive of the entire University community from undergraduate to graduate and professional students, from staff to faculty, from alumni to friends.” These concepts find their way into the mission statements of our 9 schools and are prevalent in our student affairs co-curricular planning documents, forming a coherent set of constructs to guide our shared academic and co-curricular work.

Perhaps most significantly, in addition to the yearlong freshman general education seminar described above, all Pacific students participate in a capstone general education course, Pacific Seminar III, that examines students’ learning about the characteristics of “a good society.” Students’ evaluations of this course reveal the impact it has on their thinking and outlook. One of the features of the course is a required ethical autobiography that also attends to the role of ethics, morality, spirituality and religion in how students think about themselves and see their future. This ethical autobiography for many students is the synthesizing experience of their undergraduate education. This essay often becomes the heart of Pacific’s growing experience with comprehensive e-portfolios, a student life pilot project, widely used in co-curricular programs and piloted with our dental school.

Following a yearlong, University-wide public process led by student life that examined leadership, Pacific adopted its own definition of leadership, understood to be an ethical act of inspiring others to achieve a common purpose or goal. Pacific’s formal leadership curricula requires that students recognize themselves in this definition as leaders and that they achieve some clarity about their own strengths, values, motivations, and, ultimately, purpose in the world. In a similar regard, Pacific’s approach to the development of intercultural capacity focuses on students gaining greater self and social awareness—and in both cases, an expansive empathy for others. The development of leadership and intercultural learning are two of Pacific’s University-wide goals and are pointedly placed in various classroom-based and co-curricular learning settings.

12. Some critics think that students should stick to work that relates only to their academic education. In other words, it is the not the business of higher education, at least public universities, to teach students to be good citizens, virtuous people, or caring souls. How would you respond to these comments?

Narrow education is just not enough. Student affairs was founded on the premise that colleges and universities abrogate their responsibility to their students—and to their communities—if education stops at cognitive knowledge. Information can be learned, but it must also be applied in effective, ethical, responsible ways. A university education should ideally strive to touch the soul and spirit of our students and awaken their sense of meaning and purpose. It should help prepare them for respectful relationships, deep connections, effective communication, felt responsibility for their environs, and leadership in civic and community roles. Therefore, not only academic knowledge is needed, but also the full preparation for the types of roles, advocacy, and agency needed by the organizations students will join and by the communities in which they live. Our shared work as faculty and student affairs educators is to help students integrate all aspects of their learning from competence in their discipline to the personal, motivational, communicative, and critical and creative thinking realms that are so often listed as university-wide outcomes. Students who are able to develop their capacity to understand themselves, the world
around them, build meaningful relationships, and foster positive change have an advantage in school, work, and life (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whit, & Associates, 2010; Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, & Hayek, 2006).