

Whose Students Are They: Mine, Yours, or Ours?

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To clarify, I do not pretend to know of the entire scope of higher education, its many proponents, key players, and their take on this topic. This is simply my informed opinion based on a few years of observation. Secondly, I have no personal vendetta against anyone who use the pronouns listed in this article. I promise that you are not the mortal enemy.

With that out of the way, I believe it is about time that I reveal the nature of this topic. Contrary to my activator theme, I have had this topic on my mind for months and have not chosen to act upon it. To be honest, I have wanted to write it since February 2013 and only recently brought it to light in my personal blog. I know it is a sensitive subject that very likely will invite dissent. My hope is that it engages professionals from all over the profession. After a conversation with a professional colleague at a conference this past summer, he reassured me that I was not alone in my perspective on the matter. In fact, a Dean at his institution reinforces this very concept.

On par with the title of the article, I want to ask a critical question of all student affairs and higher education professionals (especially those who work with fraternity/sorority members). The average college community is teeming with students of all ages and backgrounds, but whose students are they really? As a graduate assistant in a leadership department and a former consultant for a national fraternity, I have met my fair share of student affairs/higher education professionals. The overwhelming majority of those professionals use an egregious amount of first person pronouns in the possessive case to describe students. For example, in a typical situation, if I was describing to you a group of students that stopped by my office, I might say, "My students are having an issue with (insert topic)." Obviously, there are other pronouns available at that point in time, including "our," "your," "students I work with," or just avoiding any pronoun in the first place; I could just call them a group of students.

This tendency to use pronouns that proclaim ownership over students troubles me. I understand why it happens in some circumstances. One instance that stands out is if you consider an elementary school teacher: they will say "my students" because they interact with a very select group of students each and every day. There are very few extraneous students who show up at their door to ask for advice (unless they are a coach, advisor, or hold some other extracurricular position). Therefore, claiming "my students" tends to make sense because there are limited outside influences within the school who play a daily role in the lives of those students. Plus, we all want to take pride in our careers. Therefore, it makes sense to place your name over something or someone when you have put in a lot of effort to help them. It is no secret: we are constantly searching for validation of our profession.

As I am sure most professionals would agree, higher education is a much different environment than an elementary school, including a variety of interpersonal influences on each student. On a typical college campus, the average student will interact with any number of these individuals in a given week: professors, student affairs professionals, professional mentors, organizational advisors, academic advisors, collegiate coaches, librarians, counselors, success coaches, admissions representatives, financial aid representatives, athletic trainers, nurses, house moms/dads, desk attendants, deans, and even University trustees. Each person plays a critical role in student development. Within that list resides the pronoun issue. If one of those individuals interacts with a student on a regular basis, naturally, they likely tend to refer to them as "my student." However, it is clear that on any given day in the life of a college student, there are upwards of 15 individuals or departments who are making decisions on behalf

of that student. In some cases, those actions are taken without that student's explicit knowledge. Regardless of the transparency displayed, the college environment is built upon a very vital notion: a complex network of professionals who are advocating for the success of each and every student on or off campus.

So shouldn't we be referring to them as "our students?" Sure, each one of us interacts with a select group of students, and we become very proud of our impact on their lives. However, we are naïve if we believe that we are the only ones on campus who make an impact on their lives. From the day that we are hired into our position overseeing fraternity/sorority students, we are linked with everyone in the community in the role of accepting the responsibility of student success, acting upon it, and are ultimately responsible for any and all positive or negative outcomes. I imagine a college campus where professionals alike refer to their overlapping student networks as "our students" because then it subconsciously informs every person in that community that what is truly important is the sum of its parts, not the ego of each professional faculty and staff member. Once we move away from terms that signify ownership or possession over others, we indicate a relationship of mutual influence, which seems like a healthier route for everyone involved. Students do not want to feel like they are property of campus professionals.

I am not saying that the use of "my students" is never warranted in any circumstance. There are certainly times when we are in a conversation and describing a student may necessitate that depiction. But I have heard over and over again within the field that it is not about "us" as higher education professionals. We constantly tell each other that it is always about what is best for students. We forfeit our time and energy for students who often have no awareness of the sacrifices we make. Some would call this foolish; we call it admirable (and justifiably so). But, when we start taking sole credit for the success of students with our everyday vocabulary, then I think we devalue the efforts and impact of our campus colleagues.

After reading this, I know some of you may remain skeptical. For the lack of a better maxim, you are probably calling me a grammar dictator. Despite my apprehension to agree with anyone who is a product of the Analytic philosophy, there is a good chance you are correct in some capacity. Maybe the use of pronouns is not that big of a deal. It is possible I am completely off my rocker, and I am shaking a tree without knowledge of what could come falling down on my head. Despite your individual outlook on the matter, I am asking all of us to consider the message that we send to our colleagues and to the students themselves when we use certain vocabulary. I have made a concerted effort to replace any presence of the use of "my students" with phrases like "the students I work with" or "the students I teach." Those statements work for me, but I encourage you to find something that works within your personal lexicon. Whatever action you choose, let's make sure our pronouns align with our intentions. Recognizing the hard work done by professionals all over our college campuses should be a core value of our role as student development professionals.