



Personal, Academic and Career Development in Higher Education: SOARing to Success

By Arti Kumar; Routledge: London and New York (2007)

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Higher education must aspire to do more than teach the traditional academic curriculum. In today's global economy, our students must learn to make reasoned decisions about their personal lives and careers, and to consciously develop goals and personal planning skills that will enhance their employability. Such is the rallying cry for Arti Kumar in *Personal, Academic and Career Development in Higher Education: SOARing to Success*.

And just what is "SOAR"? It is Self, Opportunity, Aspirations, and Results, "a process model for integrating personal, career and academic development" (p. 13). It functions as "a universal, generic, timeless and personal process that gives rise to content with inbuilt requirements for reflection, personalization and self-management of lifelong and life-wide career development learning" (p. 44). As with many theories of development, Kumar's SOAR is cyclical, a process one can engage in over and over throughout one's life. "Self" refers to the process of self-actualization—developing awareness of one's interpersonal and intrapersonal skills, strengths, weaknesses, and potential. There are three facets to self: Motivation, Ability, and Personality, or MAP. "Opportunity" is broadly viewed as the exploration of various choices (especially regarding career) and the development of life-skills research tools. "Aspirations" refers to the dynamic interaction that occurs between Self and Opportunity. It also refers to a set of skills students develop in problem solving, decision making, and the transformation of decision into action. Aspirations go through a continuous process of development as students learn to assess their mistakes and successes in light of the goals they have set. "Results" come about when students have developed the skills that will demonstrate through self-promotion their proficiency in the job-search process.

This book is directly aimed at audiences familiar with personal development planning (PDP). PDP is an overarching higher education initiative in the United Kingdom designed to develop inclusive, structured processes that are intended to help students achieve academic, personal, and professional goals. Those processes may be a formal element of the traditional academic curriculum, or may be part of the extra-curricular programming of an institution. Kumar's book is divided into two broad sections: the first (chapters 1-3) provides a theoretical basis for SOAR and describes its relationship to PDP, while the second (chapters 4-12) examines each concept related to the SOAR acronym in detail, providing examples of how to apply this model to higher education. Throughout the chapters, Kumar links SOAR to many prominent developmental and psychological theories, from Maslow's hierarchy of needs to the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator. Most chapters also contain sample homework exercises, thoughts about assessment, and specific teaching activities. As Kumar says: "[These exercises] can be revealing if done with sensitivity, and feeds into that dreaded interview question employers sometimes ask: 'How would you (or your peers) describe your greatest weakness?' It also leads to the realization that everyone's greatest strength can at the same time have a corresponding weakness or shadow side" (p. 158). What is true for our students is also true for this book—some of the greatest strengths of this work belie a corresponding weakness.

Most critically, the book lacks a clear description and outline of the SOAR process itself. The author does an excellent job of showing how SOAR integrates with many different types of theories and concepts, but an early chapter devoted solely to an outline and brief description of the theory would

be most helpful. Kumar asserts that SOAR principles may be universally applied to westernized forms of higher education (p. 5), but some portions of the book (including all of chapters 3 and 12) are rather specific to higher education in the United Kingdom, and are of less value to readers outside of that nation. In addition, Kumar's SOAR is strongly focused toward career development and concerns about developing students for future employment. This focus is perhaps a strength (especially for those in career centers or centers for academic engagement), but limits its applicability for professionals looking for more fully integrated models of student development. I also wish that the sample assignments were explicitly marked off from the text—it was very difficult at times (despite the intricate iconography used in the book) to understand where exercises began and where they ended. That being said, it is refreshing that Kumar provided so many specific examples of how to apply the principles of SOAR to the classroom. In the end, each reader will have to individually determine if the depth of integration and abundance of practical course materials outweigh the lack of a clear introduction to SOAR and the confusing nature of the text layout.

In conclusion, I believe this book will be useful for anyone who works in student (and particularly career) development, and for those institutions examining ways to incorporate personal development, career management skills, and a strategy for future employability into their academic curriculum.