

Bridging the Competency Gap for New Professionals

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In the field of student affairs, new professionals are increasingly coming from established graduate programs that emphasize a combination of theory and practice (Winston & Creamer, 1997; Snyder & McDonald, 2001). There is an increasing concern among practitioners that student affairs preparation programs are not adequately preparing students for the realities of student affairs work. At this time there is no consensus within the profession about what constitutes professional preparation within student affairs. Many seasoned practitioners also believe there is a considerable gap between what new professionals know and what they can do, and that this gap is becoming problematic to the career success of new professionals. Despite extensive training in theory and research, many new professionals are not well equipped to manage the demands of face-to-face work in the field. This article discusses the emerging concerns surrounding the issue of student affairs preparation programs, and offers some opinions about what student affairs preparation programs and the student affairs profession can do to address the perceived competency gap. A new focus on competency-based, quality assurance standards, curriculum, and outcomes may provide the key.

"Human Capital is higher education's principal resource, development of which is its raison d'être"(Winston & Creamer, 1997, p. 1). "The quality of educational practice is directly related to the creativity and quality of the performance of the people who conduct the work of the institution" (1997, p. 2). Higher education, and student affairs as the primary provider of student services within higher education, cannot achieve its goals without competent faculty and professionals who are educated and skilled to carry out the process of educating and developing students. In light of this, securing competent professionals who will continue to remain competent throughout their professional lives is one of the most important tasks facing higher education today and in the years to come.

The issue of professional competence is extremely critical for student affairs organizations. At a time when institutional demographics are changing and student enrollments are continuing to increase, students entering college are displaying greater and more complex needs than ever before. A number of recent reports and studies highlight the complex issues students bring with them to college and the escalating

expectations being placed on student affairs staff to adequately address these needs (Saxon, 2001; Goldman & Malloy, 2002; Faenza & Satow, 2002). These issues and the resulting problems they present are often directly responsible for student attrition and for students not maximizing their full potential for success during their college experience. In light of these trends it is reasonable to conclude that the knowledge base and skill sets required to address these complex issues continue to change and require considerable ongoing enhancement.

Most student affairs divisions are currently struggling to deal with these issues in the midst of severe shortages in both fiscal and human resources. Given the downturn in the economy and shrinking institutional resources, student affairs organizations are experiencing enormous pressure to do more with less. In today's fiscal climate, there are little to no resources available to help student affairs staff acquire and enhance necessary skills and resources. In a study of student affairs staffing practices, Winston and Creamer (1997) found that only about half of the student affairs divisions they surveyed had a budget for staff development and about half devoted less than one percent of the divisions budget to staff development activities (p.116). The study also found that staff members are often left on their own to acquire the knowledge and skills they need to be competent professionals (1997). In another study of institutional financial constraints and implications for student service programs, enhancing staff knowledge and providing staff training ranked relatively low on a list of productivity strategies (Rames, 2000). It is becoming apparent that senior student affairs officers and their directors do not have the means to ensure that each staff member receives the level of training and professional development required to ensure continued excellence in their practice.

The lack of professional development opportunities is especially problematic for new professionals. These individuals require socialization and integration into the culture of their new profession, and they are often uncertain about how to forge an appropriate staff development plan for themselves (Snyder & McDonald, 2002; Amey, 2002). New professionals may also discover barriers to their professional development such as costs of program attendance and lack of information about opportunities (Young, 1994).

They are also the most vulnerable to performance expectations that are beyond their ability and confidence levels (Amey & Ressor, 2002).

The Role of Professional Preparation

The transition from college life to the world of work has its share of difficulties and adjustments. This is true for students entering the work force directly from undergraduate and graduate school. Evers, Rush, and Berdrow (1998) describe this process as the "Humbling Effect." During this adjustment process, the reality of the world of work places the new employee in a humbling position of not knowing all they thought they knew. Considerable stress results from not being able to appropriately apply their knowledge in an essentially foreign culture. The results can be discouraging, and at times destructive to future career aspirations. Limited opportunities to grow professionally (Evans, 1988) has been reported as a significant factor related to attrition within the student affairs profession. The transition process can be especially problematic when the expectations from employers are considerably greater than the new employee's level of knowledge and skills (Evers, Rush, & Berdrow, 1998; Amey & Ressor, 2002).

Over the last twenty years, greater emphasis has been placed on hiring new professionals within student affairs with at least the master's level of graduate education. Winston and Creamer (1997) found that, "A combination of good professional preparation, and experience plus good fit between staff members and institution is standard number one" for staff hiring (p. 88). Kretovics (2002) found that a master's degree in Student Personnel/Student Affairs ranked second only to relevant assistantship experience in graduate school as the most important criteria used by hiring personnel for entry level student affairs positions.

One of the assumptions attributed to professional graduate education is that the stress and adjustment time frame is greatly reduced by the exposure graduate students have to practica and internships in work-like settings. During such an experience, the student is exposed to some of the cultural nuances and other unspoken expectations within the work world and they are directly exposed to the types of expectations they will encounter once they acquire their first job (Weidman, Twale, & Stein, 2001; Evers, Rush, & Berdrow, 1998). These experiences are thought to level the humbling effect

once the student acquires a full-time job (Evers, Rush, & Berdrow, 1998). The assumption has been that these experiences should place a graduate from a preparation program in a stronger position to be successful as a new professional. Within student affairs, new master's level professionals are generally hired with the understanding that they will "hit the ground running" (Winston & Creamer, 1997; Ambler, Amey & Reesor, 1994; Amey & Reesor, 2002). The assumption on the part of most college hiring personnel is that a new staff member is "qualified" for the position and therefore, should be able to perform according to expectations. However, there is often a gap between what the new student affairs graduates are supposed to know and what they actually can do. New inexperienced staff members often find themselves having to learn on the job and their success and/or failure largely depends on their ability to adjust and to learn quickly (Amey & Reesor, 2002). The new professional's success or failure may be dependent on the size of the gap between what they have learned through their graduate program and the expectations of their new employer (Evers, Rush, & Berdrow, 1998; Amey & Reesor, 2002).

What makes for good professional preparation is becoming a serious question among many hiring practitioners within student affairs work. At this time, there is no consensus within the profession of student affairs as to what constitutes professional preparation. There is also growing concern among many practitioners that student affairs preparation programs are not adequately preparing students to face the changing demands of the student affairs profession. New master's level professionals may be knowledgeable about theory and research, but many are not appropriately skilled in their ability to apply this theory and research to everyday practice (Amey & Reesor, 2002).

Others argue that student affairs preparation graduate programs are not effectively integrating all of the necessary components that provide a foundation for student affairs graduate students to become competent new professionals. While graduates may know student development theory and have a sound understanding of counseling techniques, seasoned practitioners see increasing disparity in these new professionals' understanding of management theory, assessment skills, and their ability to apply theory to practice (Amey, 2002). The experiential component of degree programs is particularly variable, however, most notably in the extent to which classroom skills and

work experiences are mutually transferable" and adequately prepare students for professional practice (Amey, 2002; Ambler, Amey, & Reesor, 1994). There is also evidence that increasing numbers of graduates have not acquired the level of interpersonal and decision-making skills required to work in a diverse and multicultural campus environment (Pope & Reynolds, 1997). Many new professionals also appear to know little about how organizations function and how change and political processes work within higher education settings (Amey, 2002). Informal conversations among employers of students who graduate from student affairs preparation programs reveals an increasing concern that these gaps are becoming more profound and are beginning to place their organizations at risk. If new student affairs professionals are not equipped to deal effectively with a wide spectrum of issues and they suffer dissonance from serious role ambiguity (Amey, 2002), they will not be able to meet the needs of students or address the multiple and complex demands from the university. This disparity may place new professionals at risk for errors and failures that can cause harm to students and the university. "New professionals will not likely find many quick fixes for eliminating the gap between expectations and realities as they survive and thrive in their organizations" (Amey, 2002, p.19). What can and should be done to address these issues?

Quality Assurance Among Graduate Programs

The Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS) (2001) has provided a set of standards and guidelines for master's level student affairs administration programs. The leadership of the Student Affairs professional associations, the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA) and the American College Personnel Association (ACPA), have endorsed the CAS standards as a good start for addressing the expectations of graduate preparation programs, especially with regard to the specific professional knowledge component of the preparation. While the CAS standards give guidance to the curricular content of preparation programs there is no professional requirement that a graduate program must adhere to the standards. Graduate programs that wish to be listed through ACPA and NASPA are only asked to indicate whether they have done a self-study utilizing the CAS standards. There is no required outside evaluation process to verify that programs

comply with the standards, nor is recognition given to those that do meet the standards. A second and closely related issue focuses on the content and the focus of graduate preparation programs. What does or should a graduate preparation program in student affairs look like? What should be taught in a preparation program and what type of professional practice experiences should programs provide for students?

There is no consistent approach to curriculum content among student affairs preparation programs. Some programs focus on counseling, some on student development, and others on management and administration. In fact, the curricular focus of programs is largely left to the expertise and prerogatives of the faculty providing the program and the history and focus of the program over time. Programs labeled student affairs preparation programs are incredibly diverse in terms of content. If one were to examine the curriculum of the more than 175 student affairs preparation programs listed through ACPA and NASPA, one would find it difficult to identify more than a handful of programs with the same general core curriculum and with the same overall curricular orientation and performance expectations. While some variation in programs is to be expected and strongly encouraged, one should also expect to find some agreement regarding a core of professional knowledge content that would be accessible to all students within programs labeled as student affairs preparation. While the curriculum is an essential element of professional preparation, it is the interaction of course content with a variety of carefully constructed experiential learning opportunities that provide the context for the development of professional competency. It is through work-like practica and internships that graduate students have an opportunity to learn how to apply theory to practice. The CAS standards set an expectation of a minimum of 300 hours of supervised practice, consisting of at least two distinct experiences. But once again, not all preparation programs require these types of experiences and there is no professional requirement or stated expectation that they do so. At present, there is no professional source that differentiates preparation programs that require practicum experiences from those that do not, and there are no consequences for not providing these experiences.

There are also no guidelines or standards that specify what should be included within a practicum or internship and there are no performance measures to help guide the

expected outcome of a practical experience. As a result, there are no professional quality assurance standards for a practicum experience. While the number of hours associated with practical experiences are important, there should also be some professional guidelines that stipulate what constitutes a quality experience. There also should be guidelines as to how a student and the program supervisor or advisor might evaluate the quality of such an experience. Simply having 300 hours of practicum experience does not assure the student has had a skill building experience or that a student can adequately apply the theory they studied in the classroom to real world issues they will face in the field. Complying with these standards and guidelines should also be a requirement to be labeled as a student affairs preparation program.

In some programs where practicum and or internships are required, experienced and appropriately trained personnel are not always adequately supervising the experiences. As a result, these experiences may not provide students with in-depth, best practice opportunities to integrate with their classroom learning. One of the most important aspects of a practical experience is to have the opportunity to watch and model behavior and approaches under the supervision and guidance of a seasoned professional who is familiar with professional standards and competent to demonstrate best practices. It can be counterproductive and, at times, professionally damaging for students to have inappropriate supervision during a critical learning experience. Unsupervised or poorly supervised practical experiences do nothing to ensure that students have the required and expected level of professional skill to survive in a professional role.

Even in many highly respected preparation programs, required practical experiences are not generally tied to competency-based outcomes. As a result, students are not always provided constructive ongoing feedback that will assure them of a realistic assessment of their skill level. They also may not have the opportunity to adequately reflect on how their particular experience integrates with the theory they have learned in the classroom. In such cases, students may graduate with a thorough understanding of theory but they may not always have the type and level of experience that enables them to integrate and apply theory to real life situations as new professionals in the field.

Developing tools and processes that enables students to tie their classroom and practical experience together in a reflective and integrated way will significantly strengthen graduate programs. Focusing such efforts on competency-based assessment and feedback will enable students to become better equipped to enter the changing expectations of student affairs work. They will have a clearer sense of what they know, what they can do, and what they still need to enhance through professional development and experience in the field. Although more student affairs professionals are being hired with master's level professional preparation, there is currently no professional assurance that institutions are competent new professionals. Since there are no consistent standards for professional preparation among student affairs preparation programs, there can be no level of quality assurance regarding professional competence within the student affairs profession. Presently, there is no guarantee that competent and consistent professionalism will be gained by hiring a new professional with a master's degree from a student affairs graduate program. This is problematic because higher education institutions have a need for competent professionals. New master's level professionals cannot be assured that they are adequately prepared to enter the field and meet the expectations of their employer. What does the profession of student affairs need to do now and in the future to be assured that graduate preparation programs are adequately preparing new professionals for their future role in student affairs?

A Competency Based Foundation for Professional Preparation

As a profession, student affairs work has historically been based on the ability to apply theory and research to practice. In the 21st century, both theory and practice will continue to evolve and so will the expectation placed on student affairs practitioners. The authors believe it is safe to predict that student affairs work will likely continue to exist as long as we have students. However, what student affairs will look like and in what context it will be performed is likely to change significantly. Anticipating and adapting to change will continue to be an essential and a constant activity within most Student Affairs divisions. The future will likely require many of the same skill sets utilized today, but there are sure to be others that have not yet been envisioned or invented. How student affairs practitioners continue to prepare for the future is indeed a

daunting task and one that will require keen communication between practitioners and preparation faculty. A new focus on the questions and issues surrounding quality assurance within professional preparation and ongoing professional development of practitioners is paramount.

As the profession discusses staff development in today's higher education climate, it should be mindful that staff members need to be both specialists and generalists. They need to be able to apply the theory and skills of today to their specific applications, and they also need to be broad based enough to be able to adapt to the world of the future. The professional competencies that graduate students acquire have to be effective in the world today and expandable and adaptable in the world of tomorrow. Adapting a competency-based approach to professional development and professional preparation may be a way to address the challenges facing preparation programs. "Knowledge changes quickly. Skills can enable individuals and in turn, organizations to learn, critique, and use new knowledge" (Evers, Rush, & Berdrow, 1998, p. 4).

In their work, *The Base of Competence*, Evers, Rush, and Berdrow (1998) suggest there is a set of general skills that form a base of competencies that are needed to be able to thrive in the work place and serve as a foundation for life-long learning. This model provides a possible foundation from which to consider a competency-based model for student affairs preparation programs. The model (1998) suggests that there are four bases of professional competencies: 1) managing self, 2) communicating, 3) managing people and tasks, and 4) mobilizing innovation and change. The authors suggest that these four base competencies serve as the foundation for the acquisition of discipline-based knowledge and also provide the skill sets necessary to apply specific knowledge. These same four base competencies, along with the specific content knowledge components articulated within the CAS standards, might serve as a guide for the development of a set of core competencies required for new student affairs professionals. In fact, many of the questionable deficiencies attributed to new professionals are components of these four skill sets (Amey & Reesor, 2002).

These competencies could guide the development of the curriculum and pedagogy of preparation programs. A competency based model for graduate preparation might also include the curricular components outlined within the CAS standards, specific practical

experience standards, supervisory guidelines for practical experiences, and competency outcome measurements. Through the use of these guidelines and standards, combined with a focus on specific skill development and supervised experience in skill application, the profession might be able to develop a common understanding of what constitutes a core for professional preparation within the field of student affairs.

Recommendations

With dwindling resources within Student Affairs divisions, the profession's leadership has to become collectively visionary in its approach to providing staff development to professionals, especially new professionals. It must assume a leadership role in determining how preparation programs are to educate and develop competent professionals. It is the responsibility of the profession, not individual graduate programs, to establish the expectations for professional graduate education. Leaders within the profession need to decide which skills should be taught through preparation programs and which skills can be augmented and enhanced through on-going professional development activities. It is up to the leaders of the profession to ensure that there are measurable quality assurance standards for professional graduate programs as well as ongoing professional development activities. At the same time, preparation programs need to come together to develop a common understanding of what constitutes appropriate professional education and training for student affairs practitioners. They must find some level of agreement regarding what constitutes the core curricular and experiential requirements of student affairs preparation, and what can and should be varied within a program.

Preparation programs must collectively address the issues surrounding professional standards and quality assurance and how they should be regulated. Programs also must develop some collaborative mechanism for graduate program evaluations and feedback to ensure that the CAS standards and other quality assurance standards will be implemented and adhered to within preparation programs. Without a common core of knowledge and skill on which to build professional competence and assure quality within the profession, it will be difficult for the profession to maintain a stream of competent professionals to continue the work of student affairs.

The discourse around professional competence and quality assurance must begin. The future of the profession rests in its ability to provide competent professionals that ensure quality services and educational programs for students. Student affairs graduate programs are the foundation for providing the development of these competencies. It is critical that the professional practitioners, the professional associations' leadership, and graduate program faculty work closely together to close the competency gap. A new focus on competency-based, quality assurance standards, curriculum, and outcomes may provide the key.

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