

Professional Preparation of New Student Affairs Professionals: The Shared Responsibility between HE/SA Faculty and Senior Student Affairs Professionals

Peggy Holzweiss
Sam Houston State University

Steven Tolman
Georgia Southern University

Our knowledge of college student development has evolved as the profession of student affairs has matured. The importance of student affairs professionals parallels and supports the work of faculty, as “with the new emphasis on an integrated approach to developing opportunities to foster student learning, student affairs has assumed a position of centrality and expertise in the educational process” (Hamrick, Evans, & Schuh, 2002, p. 128). With this position centrality comes a great responsibility to systematically and intentionally prepare scholar-practitioners to hold positions within student affairs. This preparation is critical to the success of the institution; the effectiveness of any student affairs division is a direct result of the caliber of professionals who serve the students and ultimately the institution (Sandeem & Barr, 2014).

Researchers have examined graduate preparatory programs in Higher Education/Student Affairs (HE/SA) for more than a decade for what students should know about the field, what skills they should develop, and what experiences best assist their learning. For instance, scholars determined that preparation programs should cover areas such as theoretical foundations (Burkard, Cole, Ott, & Stoflet, 2005); diversity, inclusion, and social justice (Ballysingh, Hernandez, & Zerquera, 2018; Burkard, Cole, Ott, & Stoflet, 2005; Bureau, 2018; Gayles & Kelly, 2007; Harris & Linder, 2018); history of higher education (Freeman, 2012); and field experiences to apply what has been learned (Freeman, 2012; Kranzow & Jacob, 2018; Liddell, Wilson, Pasquesi, Hirschy, & Boyle, 2014; Kuk & Cuyjet, 2009).

One common theme in the scholarly literature is that HE/SA programs are not fully meeting the needs of the higher education workplace. Criticisms include inadequate preparation for functions such as:

- budgeting and financial management (Cuyjet, Longwell-Grice, & Molina, 2009; Dickerson et al., 2011; Freeman, 2012; Herdlein, 2004; Herdlein, Riefler, & Mrowka, 2013; Waple, 2006);
- legal understanding (Herdlein, 2004; Herdlein, Riefler, & Mrowka, 2013);
- strategic planning (Dickerson et al., 2011; Herdlein, 2004; Herdlein, Riefler, & Mrowka, 2013; Waple, 2006);
- assessment, research, and evaluation (Cooper, Mitchell, Eckerle, & Martin, 2016; Dickerson et al., 2011; Herdlein, 2004; Roberts, 2005)
- professional-level writing (Dickerson et al., 2011; Herdlein, 2004; Herdlein, Riefler, & Mrowka, 2013);
- navigating campus culture and politics (Cooper, Mitchell, Eckerle, & Martin, 2016; Herdlein, 2004; Holzweiss, Walker, & Conrey, 2018);
- supervising (Cuyjet, Longwell-Grice, & Molina, 2009; Tolman & Calhoun, 2019; Waple, 2006); and
- assisting special student populations such as online students (Calhoun, Green, & Burke, 2017) or students with mental health issues (Reynolds, 2013).

The criticism becomes more problematic when considering faculty and senior student affairs officers may have different opinions on what graduate students should learn (Kuk, Cobb, & Forrest, 2007). The faculty have the ability to shape the HE/SA curriculum and senior student affairs officers set the tone and expectations for the supervisors throughout their division.

Challenges in the Academic Environment

The laundry list of what graduate preparation programs should address, along with the perceived failure to meet many needed outcomes, prompted one scholar to suggest the number of

credit hours be increased so that more topics could be included in the curriculum (Herdlein, 2004). Yet this call to expand the curriculum is challenged by the rapid changes occurring in the contemporary academic environment. The desire to streamline higher education and reduce costs leads to actions such as fewer elective courses being offered and faculty positions moving from full-time to part-time. These actions result in programs having fewer opportunities to increase curricula topics. To this end, it is not surprising that a recent study examining graduate programs (Ortiz, Filimon, & Cole, 2015) found that the number of preparation programs increased over the last two decades while the foundational curriculum remained the same. Programs did, however, expand their coverage of issues such as multiculturalism and social justice as well as offering more opportunities for application-based assignments. Yet students still lacked needed skills in written communication and interpersonal relationships (Ortiz et al., 2015).

During the same time period, opportunities to build professional competencies grew more complicated as the average number of program credit hours declined, and instructional delivery formats expanded from face-to-face courses into hybrid and fully online options to meet student needs (Underwood & Austin, 2016). To remain competitive, programs created faster paths to degree completion and more academic choices. As these programs have downsized, they have been forced to eliminate content altogether from removed courses and/or blending eliminated content within other courses (on a smaller scale).

All of the changes in the academic environment strain program resources, especially with faculty time. Faculty have more students to teach, more instructional formats in which to become competent, and less classroom hours to provide the foundational curriculum along with all of the other identified professional needs (Briseño-Garzón et al., 2016; Krug, Dickson,

Lessiter, & Vassar, 2015; Lutes & Davies, 2013). The situation is further complicated with the perspective of senior student affairs officers who may not trust the education provided by online programs or those offering a degree in less than two years of full-time coursework (Ardoin, Crandall, & Shinn, 2019).

Freeman (2012) introduced an additional challenge by calling for preparation programs to be flexible and incorporate contemporary needs into the curriculum. However, the academic environment is filled with obstacles that work against this suggestion. Higher education preparation programs face many of the same circumstances that plague the rest of the nation including pressure to increase enrollment past manageable numbers, institutional policies that require significant time to approve curriculum changes, and shifting student demographics that demand additional services, resources, and time. Due to ongoing budget cuts, all of this must occur with a decreasing number of full-time faculty to address the needs.

Shared Responsibility for Development

Scholars emphasize that the entire field of higher education should collaborate when it comes to preparing new professionals (Cuyjet, Longwell-Grice, & Molina, 2009; Herdlein, Riefler, & Mrowka, 2013; Hirschy, Wilson, Liddell, Boyle, & Pasquesi, 2015). While faculty receive most of the criticism when new and mid-level professionals are not performing as expected, development is truly a shared responsibility. Faculty introduce graduate students to the foundations of the field and provide meaningful learning activities to build knowledge and skills. But then students graduate and shift to learning within the work environment. When done well, administrative leaders, supervisors, and colleagues closely guide and mentor new professionals in their development for at least the first full year of employment. Professional

associations also contribute continuing education through activities such as workshops, conferences, and publications.

As an example, let us examine one commonly mentioned deficit in new professional development. There is regular criticism that preparation programs do not provide the needed skills in budgeting and finance (Cuyjet, Longwell-Grice, & Molina, 2009; Dickerson et al., 2011; Freeman, 2012; Herdlein, 2004; Herdlein, Riefler, & Mrowka, 2013; Waple, 2006). Graduate preparation programs often serve young professionals who have never held a full-time position in higher education or who may have an entry-level, bachelor-level position in areas such as admissions or financial aid. The curriculum may provide a course in budgeting and finance which introduces basic concepts such as where higher education funding comes from, what expenditures are common, and what contemporary issues are challenging financial management on college campuses. The students then graduate and move into full-time positions requiring a master's degree, but these positions do not typically have budgeting as part of their responsibilities. After a few years in these positions, the new professional may seek a mid-level position where budgeting is required. It is likely that they no longer remember all of the lessons of their budgeting course and will have trouble transitioning into financial responsibilities and learning the institutional budgeting processes. It may be assumed that the individual's graduate program did not provide adequate preparation when the real problem is a lack of continued application of knowledge and skills.

While individuals should be mindful of their own development needs, it is also up to higher education leaders to help new professionals continue their learning. As noted by Cuyjet, Longwell-Grice, and Moline (2009), "These young practitioners are works-in-progress. Mid-level managers must plan on providing the specific training and professional development these

new professionals want and need in order to become the fully functioning student affairs professionals of which they are capable” (p. 114). It is up to administrators who work with new graduates to pick up where preparation programs leave off and provide opportunities for continued training. Using the previous example in budgeting, these opportunities could include activities such as assigning new professionals to budgeting committees, discussing the unit budget with them, explaining how resource decisions are made, and sending them to workshops about how the different processes and systems work at their specific campus. Arguably, SSAOs should be actively involved in this development by communicating expectations that mid-level leaders intentionally provide these opportunities to their staff.

Implications for the Future

As higher education professionals, we like to emphasize a seamless learning environment for students as they move in and out of their classrooms and develop into workers and citizens (Keeling & Associates, 2004). Yet we are not role modeling this practice with our own emerging professionals. As a field, we need to be more strategic about creating a community of practice that purposefully guides new professionals into the different stages of their careers.

On the national level, this begins with regular conversations between senior student affairs officers (SSAOs) and preparation program faculty. Setting aside time at conferences for all SSAOs and faculty to gather and discuss trends in the work and academic environments would increase understanding of what needs may exist. Professional association leadership can sponsor these meetings, provide data on trends, and facilitate the discussions.

On the institutional level, program faculty could host an annual meeting with administrators such as directors, deans, and other SSAOs and learn more about the needs of the division and its departments. Together, administrative leaders and faculty could identify existing

competency needs for all division staff and develop resources and/or periodic training opportunities. It would also provide faculty with insight into how the curriculum could be updated to better address emerging needs. There is an inherent benefit for programs to have adjunct faculty who serve in these SSAO positions as they can straddle both worlds to have an impact on professionally developing the next generation of higher education leaders.

This article should serve as a calling not only for collaboration between HE/SA faculty and SSAOs, but for an engaged partnership that is symbiotic and seamless. In doing so, HE/SA faculty and SSAOs have the opportunity to “provide graduate students with the academic and theoretical scaffolding needed to meet the ever-changing needs of the contemporary college student” (Tolman & Calhoun, 2019, p.77). No longer can faculty simply “handoff” students once they graduate from HE/SA programs, nor should SSAOs assume new professionals are fully prepared for their roles. Faculty and SSAOs should work together to help these new professionals fundamentally view themselves as scholar-practitioners in which they will embark upon life-long learning and professional development. The intentional and on-going partnerships between faculty and SSAOs will commit to fostering this learning and development and inviting new professionals to become full members of the higher education community.

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