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Highways and Byways: The Career Paths of Senior Student Affairs Officers

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Abstract

The highways and byways, or career paths, to the Senior Student Affairs Officer (SSAO) position differ based on a variety of variables. This study examined several variables including the induction or graduate preparation process, professional pathways, and professional and academic involvement of more than half of current land grant SSAOs. Data for the study were collected through a content examination of their curriculum vitae. Study findings provide an initial baseline with regard to data on those variables examined in the present study for those employed as SSAOs or those aspiring to become SSAOs, and include years in the profession prior to assuming an SSAO position, participation and leadership in professional associations, publication and teaching, and career progression.

The highways and byways, or career paths, to the senior student affairs officer (SSAO) position differ by individual, personal, and organizational variables. Although no common system for tracking career progression to the SSAO position exists, we can begin to examine both the typical and non-typical routes to the SSAO position through the identification of common characteristics by those who have progressed to the SSAO position (Bliming, 1994). Several common characteristics are worth reviewing and are the focus of the present study. These include professional preparation, including degree and discipline, previous employment, types of positions held prior to assumption of an SSAO position, and professional and academic involvement.

The understanding of ascension to the SSAO position is important for several reasons. First, for those working with graduate preparation programs and with aspiring professionals, there is a need to be able to understand the scope and breadth of expectations necessary for long-term career success. Second, professional associations have a need to understand the professional development challenges and opportunities that might result from variations in ascending to the SSAO position. Third, institutional leadership has a need to understand from where their leaders come, and in particular, to understand content diversity as a factor in developing and encouraging leadership. And fourth, to the aspiring student affairs professional, there is a need and desire to benchmark personal attributes and opportunities to understand how a career can coalesce to result in something that provides internal and external satisfaction.

The study was designed to understand the experiences, activities, and credentials of current SSAOs. To accomplish this purpose, the researchers solicited and examined the curriculum vitas or resumes of individuals holding the SSAO position in several key

areas deemed critical by the professional and academic literature base. This enabled the study to serve as a map for others to chart their own course on the highways and byways that comprise their own professional and personal journeys.

Background of the Study: Professional Preparation

Several studies have been conducted in recent years that examined the professional preparation of Senior Student Affairs Officers, often called Vice Presidents, Vice Chancellors, or Vice Provosts for Student Affairs (referred to in this discussion as SSAO). Four such studies were identified in the student affairs and higher education literature, one of which reported that 58% of all SSAOs held doctoral degrees, 40% held at a master's degree, and less than 1% held a bachelor's degree. As Kuh, Evans, and Duke (1983) noted, the most common academic discipline for doctoral study was higher education (25%), followed by counseling (17%), and college student personnel administration (12%). Ostroth and Efird (1984) also profiled the academic preparation of SSAOs by studying 335 individuals in these positions. They found that 50% held doctoral degrees, with 20% holding the terminal degree in higher education, 20% in counseling, and other fields in education 12%. An earlier study (Brooks & Avila, 1974) reported similar results, with 64% of those with the vice presidential or dean of students title holding a doctoral degree (34% held a PhD; 30% held an EdD). The most recent of these studies was Rickard's (1985a) who reported findings consistent with the other three identified here, 53% of SSAOs held doctoral degrees.

Although the type of professional preparation varied by institutional size and type, those with a masters degree often had more limited opportunities when their credentials were compared with those who held doctoral degrees (Daddona, Cooper, & Dunn, 2006).

SSAOs with doctoral degrees have indicated that their degrees assisted them in becoming better student affairs administrators, gave them credibility among their academic colleagues, and equipped them with information and research skills. Most have also indicated that the principle reason for their obtaining a doctoral degree was for advancement within the student affairs profession (Paterson, 1987). SSAOs have been found to be less likely than their counterparts, such as presidents, provosts, and academic deans, in top administrative posts to hold doctorates (Twombly, 1990).

Career Progression

Student affairs professionals make it to the SSAO position from a variety of directions and tenures. Three such studies were identified in the student affairs and higher education literature that addressed career paths to the SSAO position. The first study found of those who are SSAO's, 30% held their first positions within student affairs; 30% started in elementary or secondary education; and 12% in postsecondary positions outside of student affairs. The remaining SSAO's, who started their careers outside of education included: 9% religious service, 8% military, and 7% business (Ostroth & Efird, 1984). The second study found that among new SSAO's 78% were from student services areas, 14% were from academic affairs, and 8% from other disciplines (Rickard, 1985a). The third study found that new SSAO's were appointed from multiple areas. These included 52% from non SSAO positions within student affairs, 28% from outside of student affairs, with approximately half of new CASO's coming from within their institution and the other half from outside of their institution (Ostroth & Efird, 1984). SSAO's career paths generally start with an assistant or associate position, possibly with other stopping points, and a directorship (Twombly, 1990). Ostroth and Efird (1984) also found 24% of

SSAO's served as deans or directors first, 3% served as vice presidents for student affairs and 6% served as deans of men or women. This meant that approximately one third of new SSAOs entered at positions closest to the SSAO post. Of the new SSAO's 50% were employed by institutions with fewer than 1,000 students and only 21% were employed by schools with 5,000 or more.

The path to the SSAO position takes varying lengths of time to appointment. Several studies have examined the length of employment time to the SSAO position. Four such studies were identified in the student affairs and higher education literature that addressed time to the SSAO position. The first study found that the average length of time to the SSAO position was shorter for those employed at smaller institutions, under 2,000 students, (11-12 years) compared to those at medium, 5,000-10,000 students, to large sized institutions, 20,000 or more students, (14-15 years), (Kuh, Evans & Duke, 1983). The number of positions held prior to the SSAO position has also been examined. The second study found that the average number of positions held prior to the SSAO position was four. More specifically, at smaller schools (under 2,000 students) it was an average of two, medium schools (5,000-10,000 students) three and larger schools (20,000 students or more) five (Kuh, Evans & Duke, 1983). The third study of SSAO's found that those in the SSAO position had been at their institutions an average of 9.96 years and in their SSAO positions an average of 6.61 years. SSAO's also averaged 2.2 different institutions prior to accepting their positions. Those at smaller institutions were found to move less than those at larger institutions, as illustrated by 61% of SSAO's found to work at schools of 1,000 or less had only worked for one institution (Ostroth & Efird, 1984). Female SSAO's have been found to work more at smaller institutions than their male

counterparts and more likely to have been appointed from within their institutions (Rickard, 1985b). The fourth study found no differences for CASO's with regard to gender or minority status for the number of positions held prior to the SSAO position. Two positions was the reported mean for males, females, minorities and non-minorities, with 3.28 the reported mean for positions held by males and 3.35 for females (Rickard, 1985a).

SSAO's responsibilities are wide and varied. One (dated) study was identified in the student affairs and higher education literature that addressed SSAO responsibilities. In this study, SSAOs were found to have responsibility for counseling 94%, student activities 91%, health services 82%, student union 70%, foreign students 68%, placement 65%, financial aid 62%, student publications 61%, intramurals 41%, housing 35%, campus police 32%, admissions 30%, intercollegiate athletics 27%, and registration and records 27% (Brooks & Avila, 1974).

Several authors have identified activities or characteristics that should be pursued by those seeking SSAO positions. Some of these included: contemplate family and personal concerns (Cooper, 1999); develop leadership and management skills (Cooper, 1999; Earwood Smith, et al., 1990); gain relevant degrees and valuable experience (Cooper, 1999; Earwood-Smith et al., 1990; Paterson, 1987); seek a good fit institutional fit (Cooper, 1999); maintain strong work ethic and professional image (Cooper, 1999; Earwood-Smith et al., 1990); be dedicated to students (Cooper, 1999); develop professional networks and association involvement (Earwood-Smith et al., 1990; Paterson, 1987); and develop a record of professional presentations, publications and research (Earwood-Smith et al., 1990; Paterson, 1987).

Professional and Academic Involvement Activities

SSAOs have been found to be involved in numerous professional organizations within student affairs and higher education. Two such studies were identified in the student affairs and higher education literature that addressed professional association involvement of SSAOs. The first study found 68% of SSAO's to be affiliated with the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA), 45% with the American Personnel and Guidance Association (APGA), later the American College Personnel Association (ACPA), 33% with the American Association for Higher Education (AAHE), 12% with the National Association of Women Deans and Counselors (NAWDC), and 9% with the American Psychological Association (APA). Seventy-six others were listed with each receiving less than 5% by SSAO's (Ostroth & Efird, 1984). The second study of SSAO's found 45% to be affiliated with NASPA, 11% with ACPA, and 6% with no affiliation (Ostroth & Efird). It should be noted that this study was conducted with members of NASPA.

Several studies have examined faculty rank among SSAO's. Three such studies were identified in the student affairs and higher education literature that addressed faculty rank awarded to those in the SSAO position. The first study of 212 SSAO's from NASPA Region IV-E found that 57% held faculty rank. Specifically, 33 held the rank of professor, 36 the rank of associate professor, 24 the rank of assistant professor, 6 the rank of instructor and 11 held other ranks. Of those that reported having faculty rank, approximately one-third were affiliated with departments of education, 12% with psychology, and 10% with humanities. Over 40% of those holding faculty rank were tenured (Kuh, Evans & Duke, 1983). The second study of SSAO's found that 37% of

their appointments included faculty rank of some kind, with 11 tenured SSAO's. In this same study academic rank was held by 41% of males, 27% of females, 37% of minorities, and 37% of non-minorities (Ostroth & Efird, 1984). The third study of SSAO's found 56% held faculty rank. More specifically 35% professor, 29% associate professor, 26% assistant professor, 8% instructor, and 1% lecturer. The departments these SSAO's were affiliated with included 25% education, 16% psychology, 5% English, 4% administration, 4% religion, 4% student personnel, and 41% other (Brooks & Avila, 1974).

SSAO's do publish in academic journals, although less frequently than their full-time faculty colleagues. Two such studies were identified in the student affairs and higher education literature that addressed publications by those in the SSAO position. The first study found 57% of SSAOs to have published at least once, 9% had published books, 14% monographs, and 34% had published at least one article in a professional journal. The average number of books published per SSAO was 1.5, the average number of monographs was 2.6, and the average number of articles was 5.5 (Brooks & Avila, 1974). The second study found that 73% of SSAO's had not published professionally in the national literature. Results also found 8% had 1 publication, 12% had 2 or 3, and 8% had more than 3 publications. Sixty-nine percent of SSAO's who had published indicated that this increased their chances for professional mobility with student affairs. They were also more likely to be employed by larger institutions (Ostroth & Efird, 1984).

Research Methods

The current study was intended to be exploratory and to create a baseline profile of SSAOs based on their presentation of their own accomplishments, records, and actions. Unlike other studies that have focused on perception, the current study was based on individual's documentations and reports of how their careers have unfolded and evolved. This is particularly unique in the study of professional development in student affairs, as the intention was not to profile what individuals thought about or thought what was ideal, but what actually happened. To accomplish this, a listing of all research intensive and extensive land-grant universities was identified, resulting in a listing of 54 institutions. The senior student affairs officer, often identified as a vice president, vice chancellor, or vice provost for student affairs was identified on each institution's internet web site.

Each institutional SSAO was sent an initial email inquiry asking for participation in the study of SSAO career progression and preparation. The email also requested that each SSAO submit, confidentially, a copy of their most recent or current curriculum vitae. The first email request resulted in 12 curriculum vita submissions; subsequently a second email message was sent resulting in seven additional vita submissions. A third email netted another three curriculum vitae submissions, resulting in a total of 24 (48%) SSAOs participating in the study. The response rate was deemed to be acceptable due to consistency with similar studies that have explored career paths of student affairs administrators (Ostroth, et al., 1984, 84%; Kuh, et al., 1983, 75%; Rickard, 1985a, 52%; Rickard, 1985b, 50%; Brooks, et al. 1974, 52%; Randall, et al., 1995, 52%). All emails and data collection took place in the fall 2007 semester.

To analyze data, a content analysis was conducted in five distinct areas: formal education, professional entry, career pathways, professional involvement, academic involvement. These areas were identified based on previous research and the literature that was reviewed for the current study, most notably the research of Ostroth and Efirid (1984), Paterson (1987), and Rickard (1985a). Content analysis allows for the construction of a thematic understanding of data in categories and presents data in a manner that emerges from a raw or unfiltered form to something with meaning that can inform consumers of research. To validate study findings, both researchers independently completed the exercise of reviewing each curriculum vita independently and coding each variable in the categories identified by the literature. Upon completion of independent analysis, the researchers cross-checked their coding for consistency and rectified and agreed on the coding of each variable.

Findings

The overall participation level of SSAOs at land grant universities was 48%, a level adequate to provide an initial baseline of information about their characteristics, yet also a level that should suggest caution in generalizations to other SSAOs. Data were examined and reported here in four primary categories: preparation and entry into the student affairs profession (induction), pathway to the senior student affairs position, professional involvement in associations, and academic involvement.

Student Affairs Induction

Nearly all curriculum vita examined listed the highest degree earned as a doctoral degree (91%), and as shown in Table 1, 13 held doctors of philosophy and 8 held doctors of education. Nearly all also completed their terminal degrees on a part-time basis (78%), and the majority (71%) earned their terminal degree in Higher Education/Educational Leadership. Although several institutions graduated more than one SSAO at either the masters or doctoral level, there were no institutions with substantially more graduates in the SSAO position than others. This pattern suggests that degree discipline and EdD or PhD may have been a result of institutional offerings rather than a specific, cognitive intentional decision.

[PLACE TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE]

As shown in Table 2, the largest number of SSAOs started their professional career in student affairs by working in residence life (n=7), and nearly all spent two years or less in their first student affairs profession (n=15). Nearly half of the respondents indicated that they held their first student affairs position prior to completing their masters degree (n=9), and a third of the vita studied indicated that they assumed their first full-time student affairs position immediately after completing their degrees. This is certainly consistent with many housing and residence life offices that will employ individuals on a full-time basis, recruiting them into the position by offering to pay tuition toward an advanced degree. Additionally, many of these same housing and residence life offices currently use graduate assistantships for responsibilities that were full-time professional staff positions 30 or 40 years ago.

[PLACE TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE]

Pathway to SSAO

The wide variety of curriculum vita formats produced some difficulty in determining career routes to the individual's current SSAO position. The result was the focused attention on four areas, as shown in Table 3. Only one SSAO had more than one career position outside of higher education (private counseling), while the majority of respondents (n = 14; 70%) held their entire career in higher education, and the most popular non-higher education area of employment was military service.

[PLACE TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE]

In the SSAO pathway to the current, land grant SSAO, the quickest movement into the position was 19 years, the longest was 33 years, and the average time from first student affairs position to the current SSAO appointment was 25.52 years. On average, these individuals held just over nine permanent full-time positions prior to the SSAO appointment (most was 15 permanent positions, fewest was three), and when interim and acting titles were included, those numbers increased to an average of just over 10 positions (the most positions held was 16, the fewest remained three).

Professional Involvement

Involvement in professional associations varied dramatically from those who were not active members in any professional association, to those who committed large portions of their curriculum vitae to illustrating how they have been involved in the primary student affairs associations. Half of the respondents were exclusively members of the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA; n=12), and seven respondents were members of both NASPA and ACPA; see Table 4.

[PLACE TABLE 4 ABOUT HERE]

The level of involvement in professional associations varied from one individual who held no memberships and was not involved as an officer in any association, to an individual who held 18 officer and/or board memberships over their career. The average level of involvement in officer appointments or board memberships, including both regional and national appointments, was 12.5. Nine individuals also included on their vita an indication that they were an officer in either their NASPA or ACPA.

Professional involvement in the form of conference presentations varied by the comprehensive nature of curriculum vitae examined. Some materials listed no presentations, some listed "selected presentations," reflecting perhaps most recent events, and some were comprehensive listings of refereed and non-refereed, state, national, and international presentations. One of the SSAOs indicating "selected" presentations listed 63 presentations. Another respondent included the statement "topical listing representative of over 1,300 lectures, workshops, and training programs." On average, the vita studied indicated that the SSAO had made 37 presentations, with a range of those listing presentation of six to 123.

There were a wide variety of the types of honors and awards presented to the respondents. These ranged from campus-based appreciation awards to those presented by individual student organizations, such as fraternities and sororities and student government associations. A total of eight SSAOs had received one of the NASPA or ACPA regional awards and seven SSAOs were noted as receiving the NAPA Pillars of the Profession award.

Academic Involvement

Faculty appointments were examined (see Table 5), and although many had adjunct or visiting faculty status, there were some SSAOs who indicated that they had taught at some point during their career (and listed courses), but did not indicate that they held a standing academic appointment in a department. The current examination focused exclusively on the SSAO's current appointment, and 13 of the 24 curriculum vita indicated some form of faculty appointment, including 10 with adjunct appointments and 3 with tenured faculty appointments. The most common faculty appointment was in a Higher Education graduate program (n=6). Additionally, 11 SSAOs indicated that they had graduate teaching experience, and three indicated undergraduate teaching experience.

[PLACE TABLE 5 ABOUT HERE]

SSAO involvement with publication was also examined, relying on what was listed on curriculum vitae. Nearly two-thirds (73%) of those vitae examined listed some publications, with a range of one publication to 53, and an average 11 publications per SSAO. As a note, internal reports were not considered, although they may have had some level of academic rigor or appropriateness to the consideration of academic appointment. Without criteria for determining this, however, these reports and documents were not considered.

A total of eight SSAOs also indicated that they served on an editorial board of some sort, and three also indicated that they had served as academic journal editors.

Discussion

Current study findings provide an excellent initial discussion prompt for questions surrounding what is desired, expected, and asked of senior student affairs professionals, and how those who excel in these positions acquired the skills, competencies, and

backgrounds to assume their positions. Although reporting of information on a curriculum vita may have a level of personal interpretation, these reports do carry a level of personal perception, and this is invaluable in initiating the discussion of career paths and professional growth.

The academic preparation of SSAOs was not surprising, as these findings reinforce the notion that professional performance has more to do with professional promotion than academic reputation or preparation. Somewhat surprising, though, was the thought that most individuals earned their terminal degrees on a part-time basis, and perhaps saw the degree attainment as the securing of a professional credential. This would be reinforced, then, by the finding that few of these individuals held tenured faculty appointments once they reached the pinnacle of their professional careers. This suggests a model of professional growth based on performance, and is underscored by the idea that these professionals have somehow secured an understanding of student growth, learning, and development.

Movement between institutions by those who have reached the SSAO position was common, if not required for advancement to the SSAO position. Only one SSAO was found to have reached the SSAO position without movement to another institution. This SSAO held 3 positions (Assistant Dean, Dean and the SSAO position) at their current institution.

Study findings support that individuals in land-grant institutions are actively involved in their professional fields. Although membership in one association over the other may have little to do with engagement, the substantial number of publications, presentations, awards, and board memberships suggests that the student affairs

professional community expects leading institutions to have leading experts impact their fields. The extent to which professional involvements are directly or indirectly related to assumption of the SSAO position is not known, although most in the SSAO position have established records of professional involvement in common.

The extent to which the career paths to the SSAO position differ by individual, personal and organizational variables among those at non-land grant institutions is not known. A study of the student affairs induction process, pathways to the SSAO position, and professional and academic involvement would be informative and provide data on the similarities and dissimilarities of those who serve as SSAO's at different institutional types. These results may aide those in deciding on their own career paths to a SSAO position in the future. While no common path has been discovered, student affairs administrators can be exposed to multiple paths when weighing their own options as they relate to assumption of the SSAO role.

Conclusion

The career paths of those who serve as SSAOs at land grant universities differ by individual, personal and organizational variables. This study of SSAO career paths is important for those preparing administrators through graduate preparation programs; for professional associations; for institutions seeking leadership at the SSAO level; and for student affairs professionals who will ascend to the SSAO position. Results of this study highlighted the induction process and identified the academic and professional pathways leading to the SSAO position. Greater investigation into the career pathways of those who serve as SSAOs at non-land grant institutions would provide a more comprehensive

look at all student affairs administrators serving as SSAOs, regardless of individual, personal and organizational variables.

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Table 1.
 Formal Education of SSAOs
 N=24

Variable examined	Frequency	Percent
Highest degree earned		
PhD	13	
EdD	8	
JD	1	
Masters	1	
Last degree completed		
As full time student	3	
As working professional	18	
Other/can not determine	1	
Highest degree discipline		
Higher Education	12	
Educational Leadership	3	
Counseling	3	
Student Personnel	2	
Administration	1	
Most common terminal degree institutions		
Arizona		Michigan
Boston University (2)		Michigan State
Colorado		New Mexico State
Florida		Northern Arizona
Florida State		Pennsylvania
Harvard		Penn State
Indiana		So. California
Iowa State		Texas A&M
Kentucky		Virginia
Maryland (2)		
Most common masters degree institutions		
Arizona		Kentucky
Boston University		Long Island University
Bowling Green (2)		Massachusetts (2)
Chicago		North Carolina State
Colorado		Northern Michigan
Colorado State		Oregon State
Florida		Southern Illinois
Indiana (2)		Western Illinois
Indiana-Pennsylvania		

Table 2.
Entry to the Student Affairs Profession

Variables examined	Frequency/Value
First position area	
Residence Life	7
Student activities/organizations	3
Greek Life	2
Counseling	3
Judicial affairs	1
Orientation	1
Time in first position	
1-2 years	15
3-4 years	3
More than 4 years	1
Time from masters degree to first position in student affairs	
Held first position prior to degree	9
Position immediately after degree	7
1 year from degree to position	2
2 or more years from degree to position	1

**4 respondents materials were unable to be included in the tabulation due incomplete, missing, or abbreviated materials; or not holding a masters degree.*

Table 3.
Pathways to the SSAO

Variables examined	Value/Frequency
Years from first student affairs position to current SSAO	
Average number of years	25.52 years
Longest to the SSAO	33 years
Shortest to the SSAO	19 years
Number of permanent positions from entry to SSAO	
Average number of positions	9.04
Most positions held	15
Fewest positions held	3
Number of total employed positions (includes interim or acting; excludes adjunct appointments)	
Average number of positions	10.33
Most positions held	16
Fewest positions held	3
Positions outside higher education	
No outside positions	14 (70%)
1 outside position	6
More than 1	1
Most common outside employment	Military service

Table 4.
Professional Involvement of SSAOs

Variables examined	Value/Frequency
Professional association membership	
NASPA	12
ACPA	1
Both	7
Southern Association for College Student Affairs (SACSA)	2
Officer in professional association (combined national and regional)	
Average number of officer/board memberships	12.5
Most officer/board memberships	18
Least officer/board memberships	1
Regional NASPA or ACPA officer	9
Presentations (16 respondents listed)	
Average number of presentations listed	37.70
Most presentations listed	123
Least presentations listed	6
Association Honors	
Regional NASPA or ACPA award	8
ACPA Coeptis/Diamond Honoree*	2
NASPA Pillars of the Profession**	7
NASPA Scott Goodnight Award***	2

*Recognition for outstanding and sustained contributions to higher education and student affairs

**Recognition for those who have served with distinction at the regional and/or national level

***Recognition for outstanding performance as a Dean (noted as SSAO on campus)

Table 5.
Academic Involvement of SSAOs

Variables examined	Value/Frequency
Faculty appointment	
Tenured/Tenure-track	3
Adjunct	10
Discipline of appointment	
Higher education/ed leadership	6
Counseling/Counselor Education	5
Other	2
Teaching experience	
Graduate level	11
Undergraduate	3
Have served/serving on journal editorial boards	8
Publications (18 listed publications)	
Average number of publications listed	11.3
Most publications listed	53
Least publications listed (of those who listed)	1
