Reflective Practice

Competency development of southern African housing officers

Munita Dunn* and Norbert W. Dunkel**

Abstract

The Report on the Ministerial Committee for the Review of the Provision of Student Housing at South African Universities (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2011) has provided a comprehensive review of residences across several housing functional areas. In one of the residence management and administration recommendations it stated, "The professionalisation of housing staff is an urgent priority" (p. 141). This coupled with the report's estimated "current residence bed shortage of approximately 195 815 beds […] with a cost of overcoming this shortage over a period of ten years is estimated at R82.4 billion" (pp. xvii–xviii) will mean the hiring and training of hundreds of housing professional staff to meet not only the demand of the additional residence beds but the training of current housing staff. In 2010 The Association of College and University Housing Officers – International Southern Africa Chapter (ACUHO-I SAC) initiated a Student Housing Training Institute (SHTI) first held in 2011 to meet the demands for professionalising housing staff. The SHTI was organised using a competency development model first used to develop the Association of College and University Housing Officers – International (ACUHO-I) James C. Grimm National Housing Training Institute (NHTI) held in the US.

Keywords

competency, development, housing officers, higher education, professionalisation.

* Deputy Director: Centre for Student Communities, Stellenbosch University; Coordinator: Student Housing Training Institute; ACUHO-I SAC General Secretariat. Email: mdunn@sun.ac.za

** Associate Vice President for Student Affairs, University of Florida; Co-director: Student Housing Training Institute; ACUHO-I past-president.

Competency development of housing officers

In order to develop a self-directed, intentional, professional development programme, one needs to understand the competencies necessary to be successful in one's functional area (Dunkel & Schreiber, 1992). Various studies have provided insight into housing staff competency development.

One of the earliest studies of professional preparation and sources for training chief housing officers was conducted by Taguding (1985). Taguding found on-the-job training (on-the-job competencies) to be the most common source of training compared to undergraduate and graduate school and workshops and seminars.

Campus housing competency development was identified over 20 years ago when Dunkel and Schreiber (1992) completed their 1990 study of housing competencies. They conducted a national study of US chief housing officers to determine the ranked importance of competencies identified as necessary to becoming successful chief housing officers. Forty-nine competencies were identified from a literature review. "The 50 competencies were categorised as (a) administrative including personnel management, planning and projection, and research skills; (b) developmental including communications skills, diversity awareness, and leadership and counselling skills; and (c) foundational knowledge of institutional organisation, the student, and current trends" (p. 21). Table 1 summarises the top 15 rank ordered competencies using the following Likert-type scale: 1 = Serious Importance, 2 = Moderate Importance, 3 = Slight Importance, 4 = No Importance. Of the competencies rank ordered in the top 15, 7 were in the administrative category, 6 were in the developmental category, and 2 were in the foundational category. Dunkel and Schreiber used the results from this study to formulate the curriculum for the ACUHO-I National Housing Training Institute, now in its 23rd year. This "curriculum addressed one of the two goals established early in the development of the institute: (a) To facilitate participants' competency development through the presentation of material that includes opportunities for interactive learning; and (b) To offer participants an opportunity for in-depth planning facilitated by a mentor relationship with an expert in the field" (Dunkel, Schreiber & Felice, 2005, p. 38). During the past 23 years, 770 housing professionals with three to five years of full-time experience have completed the National Housing Training Institute (NHTI). Anecdotally, many of these professional staff are now in senior housing or senior student affairs positions. Research is progressing to identify career advancement correlated with participation in the NHTI.

Brandel (1995) completed a descriptive study to investigate United States chief housing officers' perceptions of Dunkel and Schreiber's (1990) original competencies in relation to effective job performance. Respondents were asked to rate the level of expertise needed to effectively perform the competencies, and then asked to rate their own level of expertise on each competency. Brandel's findings identified 17 competencies that required the highest level of expertise by chief housing officers, as reflected in Table 2.

Table 1: Top 15 rank ordered competencies as identified by chief housing officers

Competency	Mean rating
1. Interpersonal communications skills	1.09
2. Work cooperatively and effectively with a wide range of individuals	1.11
3. Supervise staff	1.12
4. Engage in effective decision-making	1.12
5. Train staff	1.12
6. Crisis management	1.17
7. Select staff	1.19
8. Short-range goal setting	1.24
9. Mediating conflict	1.25
10. Formulate and interpret policy	1.26
11. Appreciate and internalise a professional set of ethics	1.27
12. Fair and effective discipline of student misconduct	1.27
13. Recognise legal implications of higher education administration	1.27
14. Motivation	1.27
15. Staff appraisal	1.30

Note: Competencies are ranked ordered according to mean ratings.
(Dunkel & Schreiber, 1992, p. 22)

Table 2: Seventeen competencies perceived to require the highest level of expertise

Competency
1. Long-range planning
2. Recognise legal implications
3. Occupancy management
4. Strategic planning
5. Interpret and recognise special needs of ethnic, racial, religious and cultural minorities, gays, bisexuals, lesbians, women, and persons with disabilities
6. Develop and supervise a budget
7. Staff appraisal
8. Articulate characteristics of college students
9. Train staff
10. Formulate and interpret policy
11. Supervise staff
12. Engage in effective decision-making
13. Interpret goals, concerns, and problems of campus to students
14. Appreciate and internalise a professional set of ethics
15. Crisis management
16. Public relations
17. Interpersonal communication skills

(Brandel, 1995, pp. 153–154)

Porter (2005) continued to extend the research on housing competencies by applying Sandwith's Competency Domain Model to senior college housing officers in the United States. She identified 57 competencies which were then rated on a five-point scale (1 = No importance to 5 = Essential). Porter identified the top 15 competency items by rank in Table 3. Porter found "The interpersonal factor was the factor most represented by the top 15 ranked competencies (40%) […] Leadership was the second most represented factor in the top 15 accounting for 27% of all leadership competencies. Thirty–eight percent of all conceptual factors were represented in the 10 competencies that were ranked least important" (p. 71). In comparison, "only five competencies were in Dunkel and Schreiber's top 15: decision–making, interpersonal communication, crisis management, staff supervision, and motivation" (p. 79). Porter's study results were used to revise the curriculum for the ACUHO–I National Housing Training Institute given the changes in the chief housing officer competencies and roles.

In September 2010, the ACUHO-I Southern Africa Chapter convened a forum of chief housing officers (CHOs). These CHOs completed a survey of the 57 competencies developed by Diane Porter-Roberts. The survey (ACUHO-I SAC, 2010) identified which competencies were most important to southern African CHOs to be successful in campus housing. Table 4 identified the top 10 competencies. These competencies were used to develop the curriculum for the ACUHO-I SAC Student Housing Training Institute first held in 2011 at Stellenbosch University.

Table 3: Competency items sorted by rank

Competency
1. Decision–making
2. Interpersonal communication
3. Budget development and resource allocation
4. Crisis management
5. Cooperation and collaboration
6. Personal characteristics
7. Staff supervision
8. Ethics
9. Staff selection
10. Strategic thinking and planning
11. Motivation
12. Organisational culture
13. Interpretation of institutional goals, issues and concerns
14. Networking
15. Assessment of student needs and interests

In 2010, ACUHO-I initiated the Core Competency Project as part of their annual strategic initiatives. This project led to the publication of the *ACUHO-I Core Competencies: The Body of Knowledge for Campus Housing Professionals* (Cawthon, Schreiber & Associates, 2012). The ACUHO-I set of core competencies "is presented using a number of knowledge domains, many of which are further delineated by subdomains. The twelve domains are: (a) Ancillary Partnerships, (b) Conference Services, (c) Crisis Management, (d) Dining, (e) Evaluation and Planning, (f) Facilities, (g) Fiscal Resources and Control, (h) Human Resources, (i) Information Technology, (j) Occupancy, (k) Residence Education, and (l) Student Behavior" (p. 2). The primary purpose of the publication "is to assist the association in planning strategically the educational services it offers members" (p. 3).

Table 4: The 10 competencies of southern African chief housing officers

Competency
1. Application of technology
2. Budget development and resource allocation
3. Facilities management
4. Personnel management
5. Strategic thinking and planning
6. Policy development and interpretation
7. Professional development
8. Assessment of student needs and interests
9. Knowledge of student affairs functions
10. Knowledge of student development theory

History of southern Africa leading to the Student Housing Training Institute

In an issue of the Talking Stick (2009), Dunkel and Jackson describe the commitment of ACUHO-I to respond to needs in the global housing arena they said this: "Student affairs and housing offices increasingly understand the value of a global perspective for staffs and students. This global perspective brings more knowledge and more viewpoints to the table, which leads to better decisions, programmes and services for all students. It is especially important for student affairs offices to work closely with one another to provide for the needs of students from other countries" (p. 44). Additionally, they add, "When a campus president mentions the word 'international' or 'global', that should be a sign to act quickly, without hesitation" (p. 44). ACUHO-I endeavours to do just that: positively impact the experiences of students across the globe, acting quickly, without hesitation.

During 2005 two South African student housing professionals, Marcelle Rabie and Eric Sebokedi, attended the ACUHO-I annual conference in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, USA. This was the start of the discussion surrounding collaboration and the establishment of a possible chapter within southern Africa. The Southern Africa Chapter of ACUHO-I (the first 'chapter' of ACUHO-I) was established in 2006. The core purpose of ACUHO-I SAC is: "To

collectively transform Africa through student housing communities" and its goal statement is: "Intentionally creating opportunities with value-driven student and staff development, as well as enhancing institutional synergy, through safe student-centred listening, living and learning spaces and facilities, where diversity is celebrated" (ACUHO-I SAC, 2006).

Beginning in 2006, ACUHO-I began sending delegations of ACUHO-I members to southern Africa to work with the ACUHO-I Southern Africa Chapter to share experiences and educational practices. A delegation in 2008 traveled to South Africa to serve as trainers for students and professionals at 17 institutions across southern Africa and to attend and present at the annual ACUHO-I SA conference. Additionally, in 2009 ACUHO-I sponsored the first Global Housing Summit in Hong Kong, China where chief housing officers from around the world gathered to share ideas, experiences and knowledge to enhance what has become our global profession. At the 2010 African Student Housing summit held at Stellenbosch University, attended by a US delegation as well, one of the outcomes was the establishment of a Student Housing Training Institute within South Africa. It was later agreed upon that Stellenbosch University would host for the first three years after which it would be transferred to another tertiary institute within South Africa (Pieter Kloppers, personal communication, May 31, 2013).

Student Housing Training Institute structure and purpose

The first Student Housing Training Institute was held in Stellenbosch, South Africa from April 3–8, 2011. The Institute was hosted by Stellenbosch University at the picturesque Boland College campus. The hosting of the SHTI 2011 was a culmination of three years of research and planning between ACUHO-I Southern Africa Chapter and ACUHO-I. Through the facilitation of the ACUHO-I Executive Director, Sallie Traxler, and the support of the ACUHO-I Executive Board and ACUHO-I Foundation, the hosting of the first SHTI on the African continent became a reality.

The SHTI is a flagship staff development and training programme designed to empower student housing staff with skills and competencies to provide a quality development and service to the student housing community. The Institute aims to address the need for the professionalisation of student housing to contribute to student learning and development, and the increased output of graduates in South African colleges and universities. The training at the SHTI needs to prepare housing staff to develop into deputy directors of housing at South African universities, responsible for the following: financial management; facilities management; student life management; management of services; and contributing to the design of facilities (ACUHO-I SAC, 2010).

The SHTI should therefore be an intense professional developmental opportunity for those who have at least three years' housing experience and who are looking to enhance and continue a career in housing. In South Africa there is no degree preparing professionals for the management of student affairs. A specific course to equip housing professionals is therefore of vital importance within the South African context. The Institute is presented in an intensive block-week format requiring participants to attend daily from 9am to 5pm as

well as extending into the evening for discussion groups, feedback sessions and professional networking. Participants are expected to be committed to the SHTI regime and to attend all sessions without exception (ACUHO–I SAC, 2010).

The Institute is co–presented by a combination of South African and US–based faculty members under the leadership of one of the founders of the National Housing Training Institute, Norbert Dunkel from the University of Florida in Gainesville, Florida, USA. The faculty is constituted by selected practitioners and faculty who have held leadership positions within ACUHO–I; ACUHO–I SAC; NASPA; and ACPA and/or are senior student housing or student affairs professionals, both in the US and on the African continent.

After the first year of having the SHTI, it was evident that the need for more advanced training within the southern African student housing was needed. The SHTI was therefore divided into a Basic SHTI, as well as an Advanced SHTI. First time participants may apply for the Basic SHTI. The Advanced Student Housing Training Institute is a more in–depth workshop for those who have completed the Basic SHTI. Both are conducted simultaneously.

Faculty and participant experiences

SHTI faculty from the US and South Africa (SA) were selected from an application process. Those selected possessed the appropriate levels of experience and knowledge of campus housing. US and SA faculty team presented topics during the 2011 SHTI. In 2012 and 2013 SA faculty began to individually present topics which will continue in future years. Faculty experiences can best be summed up by their testimonials.

Faculty lives were changed from the experience with SHTI.

"For me, this experience was life changing […] it was the students and staff who stole my heart…the thirst for knowledge about student affairs and housing they expressed was overwhelming […] their level of commitment to the student and making their institutions better is something we could all learn from and emulate" (Tony Cawthon, personal communication, May 20, 2012).

"One of the expressions that continues to come to mind when individuals ask me about my experience is incredible and life-changing" (Alma Sealine, personal communication, May 20, 2012).

"SHTI was an incredible opportunity to partner with professionals from across the globe. I am confident the housing professionals in South Africa will do exactly that […] as they transformed my life in less than two weeks" (Lyn Redington, personal communication, May 20, 2012).

"After having experienced SHTI I know that all of us individually and collectively will make positive strides towards civility, kindness and justice for and through the students we serve" (Cathy Bickle, personal communication, April 12, 2013).

"What I never expected was the depth of the experiences I encountered and the profound impact that this has had on my life, both professionally and personally" (Laetitia Permall, personal communication, May 20, 2012).

Faculty presented sessions that challenged and advanced participant thoughts and knowledge.

"The combination of theory and practice; personal and professional mentoring; social and work related experiences will enable one to flourish holistically" (Charmaine January, personal communication, May 20, 2012).

"My colleagues […] were dedicated professionals who provided effective teaching, collegial care […] that gave such focus to their presentations, ensuring that the attendees would leave with new knowledge and inspiration" (Cathy Bickle, personal communication, April 12, 2013).

Participant experiences were exclusively positive over the past three years. Comments from the 2011, 2012 and 2013 SHTI participant evaluations (ACUHO-I SAC, 2011, 2012, 2013) included:

"thanks for taking my professional development to another level […] the realisation that we are transforming housing in SA and that we can make a meaningful difference in our students' lives makes this a landmark experience."

Another participant stated:

"All the materials presented were amazing, especially the competency model and the personnel management […]."

Another stated:

"I have learned a lot and managed to identify some of the competencies that matter the most to performing my duties".

Participants also voiced their observations and feelings regarding the community development that was integral in the SHTI. "It was fantastic networking, relaxing, laughing, eating, and brainstorming with colleagues – to be part of the SHTI family." Another stated, "Great to be among professionals, like coming home – a place where I belong".

Participants indicated whether the SHTI met their expectations. "It exceeded my expectations. I pushed myself and learned more than I could have imagined." One participant stated, "Yes, I wish that my boss could have been here." Another stated, "Yes, when I came here I was blank, confused in some way of my roles, but now I can see that there is light at the end of the tunnel." Finally, one participant stated, "Yes, I acquired new knowledge on the things that I had no interest in and have developed an interest, i.e., budgeting, facilities management and technology."

Faculty and participant experiences have been overwhelmingly positive during the past three years of the SHTI. Their comments and feedback are used to continue to make adjustments to the schedule and curriculum for future years.

Looking to the future

The 2011–2013 SHTIs have provided excellent experiences for faculty and participants through their evaluation ratings, comments and through their testimonials. Conducting research on the participants to identify levels of competence gained, retention of housing staff and the like will be necessary in the future to understand the impact of the SHTI on participants.

Following the success of the 2011 Basic SHTI with 40 participants, an Advanced SHTI was developed for 2012. As increasing numbers of basic participants complete the SHTI a long term plan will be necessary to accommodate for the higher numbers of participants wanting to return to the Advanced SHTI. In 2012 there were 10 returners and in 2013 that number was a capped 16. For 2014 there is a cap for 25 advanced participants. The content and delivery method for the Advanced SHTI is different from the Basic SHTI along with growing numbers of Basic SHTI participants wanting to return for the Advanced SHTI. For those reasons, future years may need a stand-alone Advanced SHTI held at a different time from the Basic SHTI.

It will be important to continue to invite Advanced SHTI participants to return as faculty for future Basic SHTIs. Maintaining a steady stream of participants and faculty will ensure the viability of the overall programme while increasing the faculty availability.

With the estimated dramatic increase in residence hall beds over the next 10 years a comprehensive, national plan for training of the new staff will need to be undertaken. Housing staff participating in the various institutes will possess the knowledge and experience to advance campus housing in South Africa, but will need national assistance in an organised manner to train close to 100 additional campus housing staff each year just to keep up with new staff managing the new residence halls.

Conclusion

The professionalisation of South African housing staff will remain a top priority of the South African Department of Higher Education and Training and the ACUHO-I SAC. The Student Housing Training Institute has created a South African faculty capacity to provide a professional level of training to housing staff for South Africa using a competency-based model. The research is further bolstered by the personal testimonials from faculty and participants on the positive outcomes of such an approach. The SHTI has become a cornerstone to the professionalisation of South African housing staff.

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