

REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

Socialisation and Professional Identity: Reflections of an Administrator's Pathway into Student Affairs in the United States

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Abstract

Pathways into student affairs careers may not always be clear or well defined. Often, student affairs professionals experience unconventional beginnings. Formal and informal relationships with faculty, staff and students in higher education may eventually inspire a career in student affairs. This process of socialisation positively influenced my development as a student and continues to shape my perspectives about college student development as a professional. My professional identity, influenced by the student affairs socialisation process and reflective practice as a professional in higher education, are discussed.

Keywords

socialisation, professional identity, competencies

An Unconventional Beginning

Professional journeys in student affairs are seldom direct or clearly defined. The pathways, however, are often filled with ongoing interactions and relationships with individuals in helping roles that serve to deepen understanding of the importance of student affairs professionals in the lives of students. For me, this realisation came about unconventionally, and eventually through ongoing dialogue with peers and mentors encountered as a student, and continues to be reinforced through reflective practice as a professional in higher education. The purpose of this article is twofold. Firstly, the influence that student affairs professionals had on my career choice is acknowledged. Secondly, the significance of the student affairs socialisation process in the development of professional identity is discussed. A phenomenological approach is used to explore the ways in which student affairs professionals impacted my overall learning and development. According to phenomenology, knowledge and understanding occur in the everyday world and meaning is made from our subjective experiences (Byrne, 2011). Using this qualitative approach, my “lived experiences” as a student and a professional in higher education are explored with the goals of identifying and describing lived experiences (Schwandt, 2007).

My awareness of student affairs began over thirty-five years ago when many institutions had not yet fully articulated or developed distinct academic programmes to educate student

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affairs professionals. While attending a four-year college, I worked part-time at a two-year community college, distributing attendance folders for faculty when they arrived to teach their evening courses. A benefit of this job was the opportunity to talk with faculty and staff who took an interest in me. My career path, at that time, was undecided even though my education, training and skills were directed toward a career in business.

Although I knew that my interests matched careers that would provide opportunities for me to interact with students, my knowledge base about student affairs and higher education administration as academic disciplines was non-existent. This lack of awareness made it difficult to ask questions about a major or a career that was unknown to me. Furthermore, since I was a commuter student and worked off-campus, my involvement in on-campus activities was limited. Tinto (2014) noted that many college students in the United States do not live on campus and are also employed full time, limiting student involvement in co-curricular activities. Any involvement in supportive networks that I may have experienced occurred in the classroom through faculty and student interactions. Therefore, my entry into the student affairs profession parallels discussions of professional pathways for student affairs practitioners in that, “People enter student affairs careers by accident or by quirk, rather than design” (Brown, 1987:5). My introduction to student affairs and my entry into the student affairs profession may be considered an accident, but surely not a mistake.

Student Affairs as a Career Option

Through my interactions with people working in student affairs at American colleges and universities, I felt the impact of caring administrators and staff on my overall development. I also realised the importance of the services that student affairs professionals provided to students on a daily basis and began to see myself in the role of a helping professional. Although my interest in student affairs was emerging, several mentors encouraged me to seek further education towards a career in business. Like many college graduates at the time, I was at a crossroads of career decision-making. The struggle to connect interests, education and skills with a professional career resulted in unanswered questions and some confusion. In reflecting on my discussions with faculty, I now realise that many people I met during those critical years were unaware of the path to becoming a student affairs professional. Therefore, not only were they unable to suggest student affairs as a career option; they were also unable to suggest ways for me to explore my interests in ways that would assist with career decision-making.

Fortunately, things quickly changed when I was introduced to the dean of students at a large, private research university. My plan was to meet with the dean to discuss applying for a graduate degree programme in marketing or accounting; however, during our two-hour meeting my life was changed. Not only did she learn about the work I had done with students and faculty at a two-year community college, she could see how excited I was when talking about these experiences. She talked with me about student affairs as a career and encouraged me to apply for the master’s degree in student personnel administration. My graduate education would begin my pathway into the student affairs profession.

Brown (1987) described a pattern in which the decision to pursue student affairs as a career choice tends to occur later in the college years or after the completion of a bachelor's degree. Exposure to the profession as a career possibility results from interaction with a mentor or role model (Brown, 1987). In my case, the dean of students served as my mentor/role model and exposed me to the student affairs profession as a more realistic choice for a career. Key in this interaction was the time she devoted and concern she showed towards me, as well as her willingness to assist me in my development.

When I began my graduate studies in student personnel administration, I was given the opportunity to learn about student development theory and practice. Having a graduate assistantship in a residence hall was instrumental in helping me to connect student development theory learned in my classes with real-life experiences. I gained a wealth of knowledge by spending time with diverse students in the residence hall, where every day had its unique opportunities and challenges. This work experience also gave me the opportunity to build on-campus relationships that I had missed as a commuter student. Having experienced student life both as an on-campus and commuter student increased my awareness of the needs of both student populations. I began to see how students' needs differed depending on their life experiences and how their ability to connect with the campus environment was influenced by their perceptions of self and others.

In my next graduate assistant position, I worked in a dean of students' office assisting with student programming and working collaboratively with various student-serving units. These experiences helped me to gain invaluable skills as I began to understand the essential roles that admissions, financial aid, student activities, housing and residence life, student disabilities and career services played in student life. I also learned that student affairs professionals' roles and responsibilities include addressing the needs of students on a daily basis through non-academic and out-of-classroom services, particularly services that foster academic and social integration.

While this position spanned a two-year period which is relatively short in terms of engaging with the full scope of the large private university system, I gained a firm foundation for the launch of my professional career in higher education. The socialisation experiences I was exposed to in graduate school played a critical role in preparing me for my early career in student affairs. Hirschy, Wilson, Liddell, Boyle and Pasquesi (2015) emphasised "the importance of authentic experiences that heighten self-awareness and a deeper understanding of themselves as practitioners in the profession" (p. 778).

Transferable Skills in Student Affairs

Working in student affairs in several different college environments provided me with essential skills that I would later use in my career as a university administrator. With a master's degree in student personnel administration, I obtained my first full-time job as an Area Coordinator in residence life at a private university with approximately 8,000 students. I lived and worked on-campus for three years, where my primary role and responsibilities were to help to instill positive norms and to foster a supportive campus environment for a population of diverse students living in the residence halls. I also assisted in providing

experiences for student learning outside of the classroom through student programming. Learning quickly that student affairs professionals wear many hats, I also delved into the area of student conduct. Working in student conduct was informative and taught me that this was not an area that I wanted to pursue. Rather than adjudicating students who violated college norms, I knew I would rather provide students with learning opportunities that assisted in maximising their development as leaders in society. These experiences helped me to understand the importance of community and the need for students to value diversity, equity and social justice as important aspects of their collegiate learning and preparation to live in a global world.

My career in student affairs advanced further when I was promoted to the position of assistant director in housing and residence life at a public university with approximately 10,000 students. It was in this position that I sought to expand my experience of working with on-campus students. Consistent with Wilson, Liddell, Hirschy, and Pasquesi (2016), the role and responsibilities of my mid-level professional student affairs position focused on providing programmes and services that enhanced students' educational and career goals. While in this position, I also managed a residence hall and served as a mentor to undergraduates, particularly students who worked as resident assistants (RAs). As a result of interactions with student affairs mentors, many of these students chose student affairs as their profession. Reynolds (2009) considered mentoring as an aspect of supervision an essential component of student affairs practitioners' personal and professional development.

Looking to enhance my experience in residence life at the university, I became involved with a residential academic support programme where I assisted students who were on academic probation and at risk of being removed from on-campus housing. This experience broadened my interest in working full-time with students on academic and retention issues in college. I successfully transitioned from working in the area of student residence life to working as an academic counsellor at a public urban university with approximately 12,000 students, and subsequently as an assistant director of an academic support programme at a large research university with approximately 35,000 students. In these positions, I provided support to students in all phases of their daily campus life, which included recruitment and first-year orientation through matriculation and graduation. As a result, I was able to interface with many different student affairs/services such as Admissions, Housing and Residence Life, Student Activities, Advising, Career Services, Financial Aid, Registrar, Bursar's Office, Student Conduct, Student Disabilities and Campus Police. The student affairs competencies and skills that I developed continued to guide my approach to working with students. I valued each student as an individual and recognised the potential impact of my role and responsibilities on his or her overall development. I was committed to serving students and helping to make their college experience rewarding no matter in which unit (student affairs or academic affairs) my position was situated.

These experiences further strengthened my professional identity and my commitment to working as a member of a team of professionals in support of students. Using the knowledge, skills and dispositions that I had developed as a student affairs professional and through my work in academic support services, I eventually obtained a director's

position managing off-campus continuing education programmes for a graduate school of education at a large public university with approximately 60,000 students. Working closely with faculty and staff in developing and marketing programmes and professional development courses, I reflected back on my earlier professional experiences and how these experiences had influenced my personal and professional development. I had reached the point in my career where my education and training in business (marketing and advertising) dovetailed nicely with my current work. The culmination of my many years working in student affairs, managing programmes and effectively dealing with crisis situations, along with the opportunity to be entrepreneurial gave me a sense of work fulfillment. The skills I developed in my various positions and my commitment to support students had prepared me for the increased responsibility at each higher-level position.

Multiculturalism and Global Learning

In integrating multicultural awareness, knowledge and skills necessary for effective student affairs work, Pope and Reynolds (1997) helped to advance the student affairs profession by conceptualising a dynamic relationship between seven core competencies that included:

- Multicultural Awareness, Knowledge and Skills
- Helping and Interpersonal Skills
- Assessment and Evaluation
- Teaching and Training
- Ethical and Legal Experience
- Theory and Translation
- Administrative and Management Skills

These competencies were designed to more effectively assist students in understanding their culturally biased assumptions, and to work effectively with racially and culturally diverse students in addressing current social issues on campus.

Although all student affairs professionals should have basic awareness, knowledge and skills in the seven areas, some professionals will develop more expertise in a particular area than what would be described as the basic and expected competence (Pope & Reynolds, 1997:268–269).

Consistent with changing students' needs, student affairs educators' ten competencies have been revised and updated with social justice and inclusion now included among the domains of knowledge, skills and dispositions needed for effective practice (ACPA/NASPA, 2015). Given the diversity of today's students, professionals may be expected to have several areas of competence in order to effectively address students' needs.

According to Bresciani (2008), students must know themselves in order to work with culturally diverse others. To this end, Reynolds (2009) stated, "Cultural issues are central to most of the important conversations on our campuses, such as admissions policies, core curricula, campus violence, and how diverse students related to one another" (p. 111). Through reflection of student diversity and the importance of community as central to

the collegiate environment, I decided to focus on creating learning opportunities that deepened cultural understanding. My interests were aligned with transformative learning, global education and study abroad for U.S. adult learners.

To better understand issues of equity, power, privilege and oppression in society, I developed a special topics course for graduate students that evolved into the South Africa Initiative (SAI). The components over the years have included a three-credit graduate cultural immersion course to South Africa, a distinguished lecture series, community service-learning projects, and educational and infrastructure support for South African schools. As a result of these activities, partnerships were developed in South African townships and rural schools, with non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and with several U.S. companies. Through these collaborative efforts and intercultural exchanges, students were able to develop culturally relevant knowledge, skills and dispositions for community as well as global citizenship.

The need to increase students' cultural awareness, cultural knowledge and the development of cultural skills is evidenced with increased focus on the internationalisation of higher education (Kortegast & Boisfontaine, 2015). Although the internationalisation of student affairs is relatively new, it has become well recognised (Gansemer-Topf, 2013). There is an increased focus on assisting U.S. students in graduate programmes to develop intercultural competencies in professional preparation and development (Haber & Getz, 2011). To this end, I developed a field placement to enable student affairs graduate interns to develop intercultural competencies through direct engagement in South Africa. The field placement also provides students with the opportunity to develop core student affairs competencies and skills that assist with developing and administering study-abroad programmes.

My interests remain focused on working with students who are engaged in study abroad in South Africa. I also found that students' experiences with multiculturalism and diversity from a global perspective were deepened with an international cultural exchange between South African and U.S. undergraduate student leaders. Students from the United States and South Africa attending the 2015 Global Leadership Summit at the University of the Free State and the 2016 Leadership-for-Change programme at Rutgers University reported that lived experiences and direct cross-cultural interactions on each respective campus increased understanding and appreciation of the college student experience. With the increased cultural diversity of students on college campuses, multiculturalism, diversity and social justice must be an integrated component of college student learning and development. Interacting with students at the various campus environments in South Africa and the U.S. has increased my own cultural competence and enhanced my understanding of socio-cultural and identity factors influencing student development.

Conclusion: Impact of Socialisation and Professional Identity

Student Affairs professionals play a critical role in developing the next generation of student affairs leaders. They are considered to be experts on student development and

the environments where students are educated (UNESCO, 2002). Socialisation into the profession can occur early in a college student's life, influenced by meaningful interactions with student affairs professionals. These experiences can begin the minute a student steps onto the campus. Our role includes recognising the students who might be able to contribute to the profession. Years ago, it was the dean of students who recognised that I might be a person who could contribute to the field of student affairs. It only took that one meeting for me to connect my interests to a career in student affairs. As the student affairs profession has become more formalised with pathways into the career, it may be easier to help students to identify the degree programmes and training that will prepare them with the appropriate knowledge, skills and dispositions for effective work with students.

A professional identity as a student affairs educator has guided my work with students throughout my career in both student and academic affairs. My educational foundation and subsequent experiences in residence life prepared me with culturally relevant knowledge, skills and dispositions to work effectively in a variety of educational settings. These competencies and skills have kept me current with the changing developmental needs of today's college students. My lived experiences and lessons learned on my professional journey continue to guide my relationships with students and with colleagues in higher education. Along the way, there have been challenges, successes, and opportunities that allowed me to grow in my professional roles and take on increased responsibilities that support student learning and development. Although my professional titles have changed over the years, my student affairs professional identity continues to shape my perceptions of my role as "helper".

I used personal narrative in this article to provide an in-depth understanding of the ways I was socialised into the student affairs profession. My reflection is based on my perspectives of an American student affairs practitioner who has worked in higher education in the United States. I continue to work to increase my cultural awareness, knowledge and skills through study-abroad projects in South Africa and with international educational partnerships in higher education. While I have been able to make meaning of my experiences that have been relevant to my personal and professional development, I recognise that my subjective experiences may be biased based on my own limitations in interpreting my reality. My experiences and the way that I have made meaning from my interactions with others may not be generalisable to practitioners working in differing educational settings both locally and abroad.

As the foundation of student affairs has become more well defined, and the profession is now internationalised, it may be interesting to explore the lived experiences of students who more recently have chosen student affairs as their profession. What were the key socialisation processes and what factors contributed to the development of professional identity? Also, it may be interesting to examine whether there are similarities or differences in the lived experiences of student affairs professionals in different types of institutional settings. Exploring the relationship between dimensions of personal identity (race, gender,

sexual orientation, etc.) and socialisation into the profession may also help to identify how meaning is made from one's lived experiences.

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