THE NEED FOR COUNSELING SKILLS IN STUDENT AFFAIRS

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Student affairs (SA) professionals have advanced from being generalists to specialists. Protivnak, Paylo, and Mercer (2013) discussed the perceived value of counselor preparation by functional area. We pose that counseling skills are used by student affairs professionals across a variety of functional areas. In the current mixed-method study, 60 individuals across five functional areas completed an online survey indicating the use of counseling skills in their respective roles, and five participants were interviewed to explore counseling strategies used in each functional area. The majority of participants indicated that counseling skills are indispensable.

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Student affairs professionals are expected to fulfill many roles and duties–implement policy, plan programs, advise student organizations, and help students grow and develop. In addition, student affairs work often requires practitioners to engage in conversations similar to that found in therapeutic settings (Harper & Wilson, 2010). The student affairs profession has evolved from a focus on providing services (including counseling services) to a focus on student development to a focus on student learning to a focus on professionalism (Schwartz & Dafina-Lazarus, 2017). In short, student affairs (SA) professionals have evolved from being generalists to identifying as professionals who focus on the specific skills and techniques of their functional area. Both the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA) and the American College Personnel Association (ACPA; NASPA/ACPA, 2015), the two largest professional associations for student affairs administrators, now refer to professionals in the field as student affairs educators. Ultimately, the purpose of this study was to discover if counseling is still considered, by SA professionals themselves, as an integral part of their professional practice.

Background

Following World War II (WWII), the era of mass higher education was just beginning--due to the GI Bill and the Truman Commission, and it continued growing. By 1950, the student population had increased by more than a million students from only a decade earlier (Labaree, 2017) and was starting to become more diverse. Prior to WWII, the student body consisted predominantly of the children, primarily men, of the higher socio-economic strata. After WWII, those arriving on the nation's campuses were more likely to have had significant life experiences (e.g, getting married, becoming a parent, experiencing a loss or trauma). Although those early administrators could have not foreseen the great growth in diversity and the demand for more open campus admissions that is the 21st century higher education environment, they nevertheless recognized the changing demographics of the campus (e.g., veterans, more women, more parents, more economic diversity; Cowley, 1949).

In 1948, the American Council on Education's Committee on Student Personnel Work undertook to reexamine the 1937 statement known as the *Student Personnel Point of View* (American Council on Education, 1937). Under the direction of E. G. Williamson of the University of Minnesota, a committee of a dozen leading thinkers and practitioners in the field (including three women) created a new statement recognizing the tremendous changes that had occurred in the intervening years, including the end to both the Great Depression and to WWII. The new *Student Personnel Point of View* (American Council on Education, 1949) recognized the need to develop the whole person as well as focus on academics. College education should also preserve the ideals of a democracy, recognize the need for international cooperation and understanding, and foster creativity and imagination as necessary features for people to solve social problems. The core features of solving social problems then were added responsibilities to the essential function of student affairs. However, C. Gilbert Wrenn (1951), an early pioneer in the field of student affairs, maintained the primary justification for student affairs is to meet the needs of students, both basic psychological needs and specific needs that arise in the college experience. In the 20th century, it was generally accepted that counseling and counseling techniques were the heart of student personnel work (MacLean, 1949) and "essential to the effective functioning of student affairs professionals at a variety of levels and settings" (Winston, 1989, p. 372). Indeed, for many years, SA preparation was a specialization within counseling programs (Reynolds, 2009), and many SA professionals came from a counseling background.

We are now almost 75 years removed from those early foundational statements, and U.S. institutions are even more diverse in mission and scope and in the composition of the student body (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2018). Whereas early practitioners developed needed skills on the job, lists of professional competencies are now available to guide persons in their understanding of how to assist students across a range of functional areas within student affairs. The complexity of contemporary student life and the increased expectations of the public have implications not only for practice, but also for preparation.

Since WWII, graduate preparation programs have proliferated from a handful to well over two hundred (NASPA, 2019). We assume that these training programs are designed by faculty to provide aspiring SA professionals with the tools necessary to flourish as early career staff members. Yet, newer student affairs training programs have de-emphasized counseling skills. Since 1997, the number of stand-alone SA programs (i.e., training programs that are not part of a counseling program) has doubled, with graduates of higher education administration programs increasing from 25% to 75% (Ortiz, Filimon, & Cole-Jackson, 2015). This increase may reflect a change in what is regarded as important in preparation for SA work.

Researchers have noted this shift over the past 15 years. In a 2005 Delphi study examining perceptions of SA administrators, over half of responsibilities identified as typical in entry-level SA work involved student contact or support for student development, and the researchers surmised that counseling/helping skills were important (and expected) competencies for new professionals (Burkard, Cole, Ott, & Stoflet, 2005). Yet, a 2013 meta-analysis of 22 articles noted "a shift in focus from a counseling and interpersonal orientation to an administrative and managerial approach" (Herdlein, Riefler, & Mrowka, 2013, p. 266). Ortiz, Filimon and Cole-Jackson (2015) found a similar result:

> The most common descriptors of program emphasis in 1996 were (in order of frequency) counseling, administration, and student development. When asked about curricula in 2014, most respondents identified two main foci: student development (alone or combined with administration) and social justice (or similar terms). (p.81)

NASPA and ACPA, the two leading organizations of student affairs professionals, jointly published *Professional Competency Areas for Student Affairs Educators*. In this document, counseling is not listed as a specific competency but is alluded to through certain behaviors (e.g., listening, supporting, reflection) of professionals (ACPA/NASPA, 2015).

The change in emphasis from counseling to administrative specialties raises the question of the importance of counseling skills as a component of student affairs training. In their conceptual article, Protivnak, Paylo, and Mercer (2013) discussed the perceived value of counselor preparation for forty-three SA functional areas as identified by the Council for the Advancement of Standards. They then determined which functional areas would benefit from counselor preparation graduate programs and placed them into categories of Indispensable, Important, Helpful, and Unnecessary. Further, they suggested that "future articles could examine one or more of the student affairs functional areas reviewed in [their] article and provide an in-depth discussion of the importance of counselor training and/or employment of counselors" (Protivnak, Paylo, & Mercer, 2013, p. 60). In our research, we seek to determine if the perceptions of SA professionals in six functional areas confirm Protivnak et al.'s groupings of Indispensable, Important, Helpful, and Unnecessary.

Method

A mixed-method design was implemented to answer the research questions.

Research Design

Using a sequential, mixed-method design (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004), we moved from quantitative data to qualitative data to answer our research questions: (a) How important are counseling skills to student affairs professionals? and (b) How do student affairs professionals use counseling skills in their respective roles? We began the study with an online survey that included both open and closed questions. Next, we conducted interviews to gain a deeper understanding from selected participants. Our rationale for this design was complementarity (i.e., seeking elaboration and clarification; Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). Using a mixed design allowed us to compare responses among participants in different functional areas of student affairs, as well as to gain rich information pertaining to specific contexts and settings.

Legitimation

Readers should note the positionality of the researchers in this study to understand the potential for "values and expectations [to] influence the conduct and conclusion of the study" (Maxwell, 2005, p. 108). Both researchers teach in a private university in the southern US. One researcher views herself as a counselor educator, teaching and advising students in the university's graduate program in counseling; she has 13 years of practical work experience in the functional areas of counseling and academic advising. In contrast, the second researcher oversees the university's graduate program in higher education and has over 40 years of university experience in various administrative roles (e.g., Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs, Director of Housing, Associate Dean of Students, Director of Student Center). In effort to minimize researcher bias, we engaged in peer debriefing (Onwuegbuzie, Leech, & Collins, 2008), exploring the potential influence of our respective experiences and perceptions on the study, throughout data collection and analysis.

We also followed Onwuegbuzie and Johnson's (2006) guidelines for *legitimation* (i.e., validity) in mixed-methods research. Specifically, we used the same participants for both components to achieve *sample integration*, and we carefully planned the interview protocol for the second phase of the study to achieve weakness *minimization* of the first phase. Additionally, we used complementary approaches to achieve *paradigmatic mixing legitimation*. The survey contained open questions as well as closed, with quantitative data pertaining to the perceptions of practitioners. Triangulating data from multiple methods of data collection, coupled with the use of member checking (Maxwell, 2005) with interviewees, served to verify that we accurately gave voice to our participants' perceptions and experiences. We kept a detailed code manual (DeCuir-Gunby, Marshall, & McCulloch, 2011) during data collection and analysis to promote dependability, and we used thick descriptions (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007) to allow readers to assess transferability to their own respective contexts.

Participants

Using stratified sampling, we emailed a survey link to 592 SA professionals from 38 universities of varied sizes and governance structures located in region III of the Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education (formerly known as NASPA) in a variety of functional areas. Both researchers reside in region III and have more knowledge of the universities located in this region. We sought participants from functional areas for which Protivnak et al. (2013) considered counselor preparation to be "important" (e.g., Housing, Student Conduct), "helpful" (e.g., Admissions, Greek Life/Fraternity & Sorority), or "unnecessary" (e.g., Campus Activities). Sixty individuals completed the survey. Their functional areas included Housing/Residential Life (n = 20), Campus

Activities (*n* = 13), Admissions (*n* = 12), Greek Life (*n* = 6), and Student Conduct (*n* = 6). Three other participants reported that they currently worked in administration (e.g., Dean of Students office). Over half of the participants (*n* = 39; 65%) indicated interacting with students 50% or more of each work day. All three participants working in administration indicated this level of interaction. Participants in Admissions (83.3%) Greek Life (83.4%), and Student Conduct (83.4%) indicated higher levels of student interaction than Campus Activities (61.6%) and Housing (40%).

When asked about training received by survey participants, almost half of the participants (48.3%) reported having learned about helping skills through graduate school coursework. Other types of training included staff training (11.7%) and professional development (8.3%). Three participants (5%) indicated having previous experience in the counseling field or via their graduate assistantship, which provided training. Conversely, 25% of the respondents reported no formal training in helping skills. Experience levels in the student affairs profession were as follows: fewer than two years of experience (*n* = 10), 2-5 years of experience (*n* = 22), 6-10 years of experience (*n* = 13), 11-19 years of experience (*n* = 12), and 20 or more years of experience (*n* = 3). Participants were predominantly White (*n* = 48), with some participants reporting as Black (*n* = 8) or Hispanic (*n* = 3). Although one participant preferred not to identify sex, 37 participants identified as female, and 23 participants identified as male.

After reviewing the survey responses, we noted which participants indicated a willingness to participate in a follow-up interview (*n* = 20) and selected one participant per functional area, seeking representation from various types of universities (e.g., public and private, medium and large size). Participants included two White females, one Black female, one Hispanic male, and one White male. Most of the interview participants worked in large (i.e., student body of 15,000 or more), public universities, with one interviewee working at a medium-sized (i.e., student body of 10-14,999), private university. The three female participants, representing Greek Life, Orientation/New Student Programs, and Student Conduct, indicated spending 75% or more of each work day interacting with students, whereas the two males, representing Housing and Campus Activities, reported less frequent contact with students (i.e., 25-49% of each work day and a few times each week, respectively).

Procedure

After receiving ethical clearance from the researchers' university institutional review board, we emailed a solicitation letter and survey link to SA professionals identified from the websites of selected universities, both public and private and of varied size, in the six previously-mentioned functional areas of student affairs. The survey included items regarding participant demographics and how they perceive their use of counseling skills in their respective roles. Data were collected using Qualtrics software and downloaded into both SPSS and ATLAS.ti for analysis. SPSS software allowed us to conduct descriptive statistics and make comparisons between functional areas, whereas ATLAS.ti allowed us to conduct a constant comparison analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) to better understand the participants' use of counseling skills. Specifically, we examined participant responses to questions such as "What, if any counseling/helping skills do you use in your current role?" and "Describe a situation, in the past month, in which you had to use counseling/helping skills," and we organized meaningful units of phrases that described counseling skills and related practitioner skills into codes.

To further understand how counseling skills were learned and applied by SA professionals, we conducted follow-up interviews with five of the participants. Inter-

view questions were uniquely created for each participant and included requests for examples and further explanation of what they had written in their survey responses (e.g., in what ways do you use motivational interviewing?, you provided a great example of . . . how typical is that situation?). After transcribing the interviews and member-checking the transcriptions with the participants, we again used ATLAS.ti to conduct a constant comparison analysis.

Findings

A mixed-method design was implemented to answer the research questions: (a) How important are counseling skills to student affairs professionals? and (b) How do student affairs professionals use counseling skills in their respective roles? Using descriptive statistics, we determined the importance of counseling skills for the participants. We used qualitative analysis of both survey and interview responses to determine how they use counseling skills in their respective roles.

Importance of Counseling Skills

Using a Likert scale, one survey item had participants indicate the importance of counseling skills in their respective roles. The majority of participants (68.3%, n = 41) indicated that counseling skills are "indispensable," and another 23.3% of participants (n = 14) rated them as "important." Four participants rated counseling skills as helpful, and one participant did not answer the question. No participants indicated that counseling skills were unnecessary for their role.

Ratings of importance did not necessarily increase with the percentage of time spent with students. All of the participants who reported spending 25%-75% of their workday with students rated counseling skills as indispensable or important, whereas 89.5% of participants who spent more than 75% of their workday with students rated counseling skills as indispensable or important. Although necessary conditions were not met to employ chi-square statistics, differences between functional areas are noted in the table below.

Interaction with Students and Importance of Counseling Skills by Functional Area

Functional Area	Interaction with Students 50%+ of each work day	Indispensable	Important	Helpful
Admissions (n = 12)	83.3% (n = 10)	50% (n = 6)	33.3% (n = 4)	16.7% (n = 2)
Campus/Student Activities (n = 13)	61.6% (n = 8)	76.9% (n = 10)	7.7% (n = 1)	15.4% (n = 2)
Greek/Fraternity & Sorority (n = 6)	83.4% (n = 5)	66.7% (n = 4)	33.3% (n = 2)	
Housing/Residential Life (n = 20)	40% (n = 8)	73.7% (n = 14)	26.3% (n = 5)	
Student Conduct (n = 6)	83.4% (n = 5)	83.3% (n = 5)	16.7% (n = 1)	
Administration (n = 3)	100% (n = 3)	66.7% (n = 2)	33.3% (n = 1)	

Survey participants were asked what would help them be more prepared to assist students. Not surprisingly, the answers were widespread. Over a third suggested on-going workshops and professional development opportunities covering a wide range of helping/counseling topics. Other suggestions (11%) included the opportunity to interact with colleagues in other departments to gain a broader perspective of the issues that students face and an understanding of resources available for students. Finally, the respondents indicated need for more understanding of particular student populations including students of color, first generation students, international students and generation Z.

How Student Affairs Professionals Use Counseling Skills

The researchers noticed five counseling-related work tasks and 16 types of counseling strategies indicated in responses to survey and interview questions.

Counseling-related work tasks. In 40 instances, survey participants indicated the following work-tasks for which they used counseling skills: advisement, crisis response, mentorship (both students and staff), promotion of student leadership, and management. According to the seventh edition of the Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS) Standards (2009), student development refers to those "learning outcomes that occur as a result of students being exposed to higher education environments designed to enhance academic, intellectual, psychosocial, psychomotor, moral, and, for some institutions, spiritual development". (p. 406). Student advising takes place in many contexts within student affairs. An advisor would be one who provides guidance and advice, counsels, and engages in the sharing of ideas and insights (Dunkel and Chrystal-Green, 2017). In this way, advising is distinctive from more therapeutic counseling that involves talking through decisions unrelated to academics. Whereas some participants advised individual students, others advised student groups. In both cases, they identified the use of counseling skills in advising. One participant noted:

> I met with a student recently who is middle-aged and returning to school after being out for many years . . . We spoke through the various issues he's facing and discussed how to get him where he needs to go.

With regard to crisis response, some participants served in an official capacity (e.g., served on their university's care team/behavioral intervention team), and others simply responded to students in a time of need. For instance, one participant reported, "I worked to provide her with hope at a time where she felt everything was crashing down."

Mentorship was another work task that required participants to help students and staff to process thoughts and feelings and make decisions. Examples include "supporting a professional staff member as they worked directly with a student experiencing suicidal ideation" and "using my counseling skills . . . to help them transition to life after college and what that looks like for them." Promotion of student leadership was another work task identified in the survey responses, and management was mentioned by all five of the interview participants. Counseling skills were utilized with staff and student leaders in the following way: "I meet in weekly one-on-ones with those students as well as, group meetings several times throughout the week and then, lots of pop-ins and impromptu check-ins with many of them as they are planning the programs."

Counseling strategies. In response to a short-answer survey question regarding use of counseling/helping skills, respondents reported using the following strategies, which included work tasks as well as counseling techniques, in their respective student affairs roles: active listening (n = 37), mentoring/coaching (n = 32), problem solving/goal setting (n = 31), encouragement/positive reinforcement (n = 11), crisis

response and referral (*n* = 6), basic processing skills (e.g., reflecting, paraphrasing, summarizing); *n* = 1), relationship building (*n* = 6), teaching coping skills (*n* = 5), conflict resolution (*n* = 5), challenge/confrontation (*n* = 5), motivational interviewing (*n* = 4), reframing (*n* = 3), providing feedback (*n* = 2), career guidance and educational advising (*n* = 2), facilitating student agency/decision making (*n* = 2), and the miracle question (*n* = 1).

Additionally, the researchers reviewed qualitative responses to a survey question which instructed respondents to describe a situation, in the previous month, in which they had used counseling/helping skills. The following counseling strategies were referenced: basic processing skills (*n* = 13), goal setting/problem solving (*n* = 13), facilitating coping skills (*n* = 8), confrontation/setting limits (*n* = 7), creating a safe space (*n* = 7), facilitating student agency/decision making (*n* = 6), and crisis response and referral (*n* = 16). The following table presents the examples of each code used to label these counseling strategies.

Table 2

Examples of Counseling Strategies

Code	Examples of Counseling Strategies
Basic processing skills	*They were feeling many emotions (confused, frustration, sadness). I had to provide the ability to hear them out and talk through the decision process.*
Goal setting/ Problem solving	*New student to university came to me to talk about how badly he did his first year at the university. I listened, asked questions, and was able to get him to tell me honestly why he was struggling. We developed a plan of action.*
Facilitating coping skills	*In coaching a student through a situation where she did not obtain a position she wanted in an organization.*
Confrontation/ Setting limits	*I met with a student who totally dropped the ball and stopped responding to any of my emails or attempts to check-in with her, and we had an open and honest discussion about how to handle problems like this in the future in a better and more productive way.*
Creating a safe space	*I provided a space for my student to feel heard and to know that he had an ally though this tough situation.*
Facilitating student agency/ Decision Making	*Just yesterday I had a student concerned with rushing for a sorority in the fall because her friends are all going to do it. We evaluated the options of what could happen if she did, or if she didn't participate. Many of the students in this generation have FOMO, fear of missing out. I had her do a self-appraisal of what she wants out of her college experience. I also reminded her that the choice is up to her, and that sorority recruitment isn't the only networking organization she can participate in at our university.*
Crisis response and referral	*I was able to share with her the resources we had available to assist her including victim services, a service to help her find new housing, our counselling and psychological services on campus, etc. From there, it was focused on helping her understand that while she is going through a tough time, there are tons of people ready to help her through it.*

To gain a deeper understanding of how SA professionals use these counseling skills, the researchers analyzed the transcriptions of the follow-up interviews. All five of the interview participants mentioned use of what the researchers coded as basic processing skills. Basic processing skills include techniques such as active listening, reflection, reframing, and empathy. The interviewee from Orientation/New Student Programs explained that counseling comes about from her frequent contact with students: "I spend a lot of time with one-on-one situations with students that are talking about school, their life, their organization or whatever, so there is a lot of counseling involved." Similarly, the interviewee from Housing suggested that his use of basic processing skills was "a typical or daily occurrence" and specified his use of reframing in the following way:

> the very basic fundamental stuff that gets them to even just understand--*oh hey, the way you think about certain things can affect the way that you feel and then can affect the way that you go out into the world and do things*.

The interview participants varied in specific counseling strategies they used. The interviewee who works in Campus Activities spoke most often about facilitating student agency:

> My approach isn't to give them an answer but to give them the tools to discover their own answer. . . . I just kind of ask them *how does it help you this way or how does it relate to other goals you might have?* I just sort of try to get them to give me the answers that will make a case that they can later assess.

Conversely, the interviewee from Greek Life spoke more about her use of assessment and referral skills, explaining "as I am working with a student thinking in my head about where they are and help them get where they need to be and what I need to pull from to do that" and "referring out as needed because I can't be one thing for all people." The interviewee who worked in Student Conduct also referenced use of these strategies (i.e., facilitating student agency, assessment, referral), but she most often (in eight instances) spoke of her confrontation skills. She explained:

> By design, conduct work is to address negative impacts on the university community. So there has to be that challenge of in the moment: *You thought this was fine, but now that we're here having a conversation, do you understand as to how that can impact others in a negative way?*

Discussion

The participants of this exploratory study perceived counseling skills to be important across functional areas. Of the 60 survey participants, 56 rated counseling skills as either Important or Indispensable. Whereas Protivnak et al. (2013) indicated counseling skills were important for Housing and Student Conduct, the majority of our study participants in these functional areas (70% and 83.3% respectively) perceived them to be Indispensable. Further, Protivnak et al. suggested counseling skills as helpful for Greek Life and Admissions but unimportant for Campus Activities. In contrast, 100% of our participants from Greek Life and over 80% of participants from Admissions rated counseling skills as either Indispensable or Important; over 84% of participants from Campus Activities concurred.

Participants' perspectives may have been influenced by the amount of time spent interacting with students. Nevertheless, survey participants in all five functional areas (plus administration) pointed towards counseling skills as central to their positions. Although in lower percentages than their counterparts who indicated a higher degree of student interaction, the majority of participants in Housing and Campus Activities rated counseling skills as important if not indispensable. The qualitative phase of this study provided further insight into why ratings of importance were higher than was suggested by Protivnak et al.

Across functional areas, our interview

participants indicated use of counseling skills in daily work tasks spanning from student and/or organization advising to crisis response. It became clear that SA professionals may be confronted with a challenge that requires counseling skills at any time. That challenge can range from the benign to high risk situations, and the corresponding responses may range from reflection to referral. Mental health problems are on the rise among college students (James, 2017), and the SA professionals who spend the most time with these students are, many times, their first point of contact. They are in a prime position to offer help when equipped with basic counseling skills.

According to survey participants, the most frequently-mentioned counseling skills included active listening, mentoring/coaching, and goal setting. Although we see mentoring and coaching to be work tasks rather than actual counseling skills, some participants listed them as central strategies in response to the survey question "What, if any, counseling/helping skills do you use in your current role?" Conversely, active listening and goal setting are considered to be common therapeutic counseling skills, both of which are needed in mentoring and coaching, as well as other work tasks required by SA professionals. Active listening and goal setting skills come as no surprise as one aim of SA professionals is to help students feel safe while challenged to explore their options, whether for a student programming project or a student crisis, thus facilitating student self-authorship. That is an essential mission of student affairs.

Even those professionals in functional areas which Protivnak et al. (2013) classified counseling skills as only Helpful or Unnecessary shared instances in which these skills were important. For instance, an interview participant from Greek Life discussed dealing with the "fall out" after a serious violation of policies had occurred. This individual used counseling skills to engage students, both individually and in groups, to resolve the situation and uncover "restorative opportunities." Additionally, an interview participant from Campus Activities consulted with students one-on-one as part of a student leadership institute, and students presented concerns that required processing. During these individual meetings, the SA professional used counseling skills to help them through their respective situations. It is reasonable to suppose that students are sometimes just seeking a trusted person with whom to share concerns or difficulties, and those conversations turn into unexpected counseling interactions. It would be fair to say that in many (most?) instances, counseling opportunities picked the SA professional rather than the reverse.

Although the study respondents used counseling frequently in their work, they often did not discuss it as counseling *per se*. Okun (2002) suggested that the term "helper" be used to discuss the role of student affairs professionals. Although professional counselors are clearly helpers, Okun also identifies human services workers as helpers. Most student affairs professionals who are not therapeutic counselors would fall into this category. More recently, Herdlein et.al. (2013) conducted a comprehensive literature review and reported that human relationship skills were of primary importance, but managerial and administrative competencies were also seen as important by mid-level and senior student affairs professionals. Herdlein et al. also noted a mismatch of learning objectives in graduate preparation programs between faculty and student affairs practitioners. The practitioners favored having recent graduates ready to apply knowledge to practice. Faculty, on the other hand, were more focused on providing knowledge without a particular regard for application to practice.

No doubt the change in vocabulary of the updated *CAS Standards* (2015) and the professional competencies identified by NASPA and ACPA have resulted in less emphasis on counseling in student affairs literature and position descriptions. There may be an effort to distinguish between a "counseling"

job and a student affairs position that may use some counseling skills. It seems more likely that SA professionals will define themselves as "admissions officers" or "housing professionals" rather than counselors. As a consequence, the skills and techniques that are used to assist/advise students are viewed as competencies of a particular functional unit, not counseling. Indeed, NASPA and ACPA (NASPA/ACPA 2015) suggested the term *supporting* rather than helping or counseling as an essential competency for student affairs educators. They maintained that this designation is used "to better distinguish the role of student affairs educators from those of counselors, psychologists, nurse practitioners, among others" (p. 5).

The role of the student affairs educator is not to provide therapeutic or formal counseling services; rather, student affairs advising work is more relational and facilitative in nature. This role distinction, as defined by the profession, appears to be supported by our participants. They do not try to substitute for a professional counselor when that is called for, but they do act as a bridge to more formal counseling. Harper et al. (2010) suggested that "strong helping skills not only enhance student affairs professionals' ability to provide the best assistance but can help them identify and communicate the boundaries of their roles" (p. 9). Certainly, participants in this study made it clear that they referred to counselors better equipped to help students through serious difficulties. The expression of mental health problems among students is a growing phenomenon. Nance Roy (2018) made clear that the number of students experiencing mental health issues far exceeds the number who seek help in a college counseling center. Roy proposed that colleges adopt a public health model to meet the challenges. With appropriate training, SA professionals can be better equipped to respond to students, thereby reducing the load encountered by college and university counseling centers.

Implications for Training and Supervision

Which opportunities walk through the door of a student affairs practitioner's office is unpredictable. Students may want to share the joy of a personal success, or they may want to express the difficulty in managing a personal challenge. In either case, the effective practitioner must help the student relate their experience to their personal goals. The practitioner must use a variety of skills and techniques to provide appropriate responses to students who present a panoply of experiences.

Survey participants frequently invoked their own experiences as a guide to determine how they would respond to students in challenging circumstances, and some participants did not report having any training to guide them in handling such situations. How then do SA professionals with little experience respond to the issues that students bring to them? Our findings from the survey indicate that about half of the survey participants learned counseling/helping skills from a graduate preparation program. Of course, this means half of the respondents learned their skills elsewhere. Because counseling/helping skills are rated as important cross functional areas, it is incumbent on supervisors in these areas to systematically assure that counseling/helping skills are part of the staff toolbox. For many SA professionals, that means graduate preparation programs serve as a foundation for learning and practicing helping skills. But for others, either staff development programs or close supervision become necessary settings for skill development.

Participants indicated the challenges of working with a complex and diverse student body, suggesting a need for SA professionals to possess a higher level of helping skills. Indeed, many participants expressed a desire for training on helping topics. Other participants recognized the need for a better understanding of specific subgroups of students. Adjustment concerns or a sense of isolation, for example, may be exasper-

ated by the intersection of identities that a student brings to the interaction. Likely the melding of counseling/helping skills and cultural awareness occurs by experience, and yet, it was clearly an area for which participants thought more training was necessary. We believe it remains an appropriate focus of both preparation programs and staff development programs.

Conclusion

No study is without limitations. Indeed, our response rate of 10.1% is low according Dillman, Smyth, and Christian (2009), who reported a common response rate for online surveys at 12.7%. It is possible that individuals who value counseling skills or have a counseling background or previous training in counseling were more likely to participate in the study, and we suggest caution in generalizing based on relatively small sample (N = 60). Whereas we asked where survey participants received their training in helping skills, we could not ascertain whether their coursework was part of a counseling-focused student affairs program or an administratively-focused higher education program. Nevertheless, our findings strongly confirm the value of counseling skills among SA professionals. The need for counseling skills is evident across functional units and in varying situations - sometimes structured, often not. In short, whether a practitioner is described as a provider of services, a catalyst for student growth, or a student affairs educator, a mastery of counseling skills is an essential attribute for successful practice.

Further our findings confirm the work of other scholars that student affairs preparation programs have a key role to play. Reynolds (2011) stated that regardless of the close history of student affairs and counseling professions, preparation programs do not, in most cases, prepare future practitioners to offer direct assistance to students. "Graduate preparation in student affairs has typically often offered only one counseling-related course that may not address the unique helping issues on college campuses" (p.368). This problem is complicated by the increase in behavioral and mental health issues.

Despite the importance of counseling skills in the daily work of SA professional--importance recognized by SA administrators (Burkard et al., 2005), administrative skills and knowledge appear to be more central to many higher education preparation programs. Herdlein et al.'s (2013) meta-analysis noted this shift. So who will take responsibility for ensuring that new SA professionals have these needed skills? Is it higher education preparation programs, student affairs departments within colleges and universities, or the new professionals themselves? Because there were participants who reported receiving no training in helping skills and other participants who relied on unrelated experiences, we maintain that a primary responsibility falls to the graduate preparation programs in student affairs and higher education.

Although administrative functions are pertinent as well, a blend of administrative and counseling topics may best prepare new professionals for the student affairs field. Many higher education faculty have access to a wide range of colleagues who have expertise in counseling and/or psychology at their institutions. Interdisciplinary collaboration can inform course content that shapes a graduate student's understanding of student development, building relationship and communication skills, and learning how best to facilitate agency in the students with whom they work. By having a blended curriculum, student affairs/higher education programs may help students to see that their professional life is a blend of what you know and how you do things. In short, SA professionals need to have not only the administrative knowledge and intellectual understanding of their field, but also the helping strategies needed to serve their students.

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