

# **DISABILITY-RELATED COMPETENCIES FOR STUDENT AFFAIRS GENERALISTS: A DELPHI STUDY**

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Lack of disability-related competence by college administrators is recognized as a barrier to equal access and success of students with disabilities. Currently, no listing of disability-related competencies exists for student affairs practitioners beyond disability services. This study examines the perceptions of 20 experts in student affairs and disability regarding disability-related competencies value to student affairs work. Results of the Delphi study provide a set of disability-related competencies that can be used to guide professional learning.

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According to the U.S. Department of Education (2019), 19.4% of undergraduate students report having a disability. Despite the high percentage of students with disabilities on college campuses, data suggests that 66% of college students with disabilities fail to persist to graduation, an attrition rate 17% higher than students without disabilities (Newman et al., 2011). The higher education and disability literature offers a variety of reasons why students with disabilities succeed or fail to persist (Garrison-Wade, 2012; Thompson-Ebanks, 2014; Wei et al., 2013). Interestingly, students with disabilities have reported that student affairs programs and services are beneficial to their educational attainment (Salzer, 2012; Thompson-Ebanks, 2014). Despite the benefits of utilizing student affairs services and programs, research also suggests that student affairs professionals lack disability-related knowledge and that professional development is warranted (Kimball, Vaccaro, & Vargas, 2016; Murray, Flannery, & Wren, 2008; Myers, 2008a).

Encouragingly, research indicates that higher education staff, including student affairs generalists (SAG), recognize their limited knowledge of the population and desire additional education and training (Kimball et al., 2016; Murray et al., 2008). Given that SAG are responsible for ensuring equal access to both services and the co-curriculum as well as for periodic accommodation provision (e.g., housing or medical accommodations; Burke, Friedl, & Rigler, 2010), it is vital they are prepared to do so. Furthermore, failure to ensure equal access to the co-curriculum and to enact specified accommodations is discriminatory, potentially opening the university to litigation (McCabe, 2014), while also breaching the student affairs ethical principle of egalitarianism (American College Personnel Association [ACPA], 2006; Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education [CAS], 2006).

Though the need for disability-related knowledge has been identified, no com-

prehensive and agreed upon set of disability-related competencies (i.e., “characteristics—knowledge, skills, mindsets, thought patterns, and the like—that when used whether singularly or in various combinations, result in successful performance” [Dubois, 1998, p. v]) currently exists for student affairs professionals other than specialists (e.g., disability services professionals). Current competencies are either too broad and lack sufficient detail related to disability (i.e., ACPA/National Association of Student Personnel Administrators [NASPA] *Professional Competencies for Student Affairs Practitioners* [2010], Pope & Reynolds [1997] multicultural competencies), or are too specialized and specific (i.e., *AHEAD Professional Standards* [Association on Higher Education and Disability, n.d.]) to meet the needs of SAG. Although some researchers have suggested knowledge areas, dispositions, and skills that SAG professionals should possess in order to meet the needs of students with disabilities (e.g., Belch & Marshak, 2006; Burgstahler & Moore, 2009), these competencies are usually not the focus of the publication and consensus on important competencies has not been achieved. Given the benefits that SAGs offer to students with disabilities (Fichten, et al., 2014; Salzer, 2012; Thompson-Ebanks, 2014), the research indicating that student affairs professionals should be prepared to support the learning and development of students with disabilities (Evans, Herriott, & Myers, 2009; Kimball et al., 2016; Myers & Bastian, 2010), and the lack of guidance from extant research, a comprehensive and consensus based set of disability-related competencies for SAG is needed. Once developed, the disability-related competencies can be used to guide the training and professional development of SAG. With disability-related competence, SAG will be better able to serve students with disabilities through the development and provision of programs and services, thereby, potentially decreasing attrition rates.

## Methodology

Given the limited scope of the literature on disability-related knowledge, dispositions, and skills in student affairs, the Delphi method was selected to organize and build upon the collective wisdom of experts in the area of student affairs and disability. According to Scheele (1975/2002), a panel consisting of scholars and those whom the research is about (i.e., SAG), is best able to approximate the reality of the human experience in question.

### The Delphi Method

The Delphi method was developed in the early 1950s “to obtain the most reliable consensus of opinion of a group of experts... by a series of intensive questionnaires interspersed with controlled opinion feedback” (Dalkey & Helmer, 1962, p. 1). According to Dalkey (1969), the method consists of three features:

- (1) Anonymous response—opinions of members of the group are obtained by formal questionnaire.
- (2) Iteration and controlled feedback—interaction is effected by a systematic exercise conducted in several iterations, with carefully controlled feedback between rounds.
- (3) Statistical response—the group opinion is defined as an appropriate aggregate of individual opinions on the final round. (p. v)

It has been used within postsecondary education research to identify professional competencies (e.g., Burkard, Cole, Ott, & Stoflet, 2005; Kupferman & Schultz, 2015) and program standards (e.g., Anderson, 1998; Dukes, 2006). The Delphi method also allows for collection of both qualitative and quantitative data so that, in addition to competency ratings, wording of the competency items can be refined across iterations.

### Expert Panelists

Selecting a panel of participants is an important consideration as it impacts the quality and validity of the Delphi outcomes (Day & Bobeva, 2005). In order to both

identify and select experts, this study used a combination of (a) degrees held, (b) publications on disability and student affairs, (c) positions of leadership in student affairs professional association committees focusing on disability, and (d) professional experience. A total of 45 participants representing four groups (i.e., higher education and/or student affairs faculty, Disability Service (DS) professionals, SAG, and leaders of disability-related committees in student affairs associations) were identified and recruited for participation. In total, 20 of these experts agreed to participate in the study.

Publication record was a requirement for eligibility in three of the four panelist groups (i.e., all except the leaders of disability-related committees in student affairs associations group). Therefore, an existing database on disability and higher education publication record, developed by (Madaus et al., 2018), was used to identify the names of potential panelists who published through the year 2012. An additional literature search was conducted to identify other possible participants who published after 2012. The leaders of disability-related committees in SAG professional associations were identified using the ACPA Coalition for (Dis)Ability, the NASPA Disability Knowledge Community, and the Canadian Association of College & University Student Services Access and Inclusion Community webpages. Collectively, this resulted in a list of 45 experts, all of whom met eligibility criteria.

According to Turoff (1975/2002), there is no minimum number of experts needed for a Delphi study; however, Ludwig (1997) commented that “the majority of Delphi studies have used between 15 and 20 respondents” (p. 2). All identified experts were emailed invitations to participate and in total, 19 (42.2%) agreed to participate. One additional expert meeting participation criteria was nominated by an existing panelist, and subsequently joined the study prior to the initiation of data collection. Similar Delphi studies in higher education reported

fewer than 50% of invited experts participating (e.g., Burkard et al., 2005; Kupferman & Schultz, 2015).

### Questionnaire Development

Online questionnaires were employed as study instruments (all questionnaires are available from the first author upon request) and are described.

**Comprehensive literature review.** A comprehensive literature review was conducted to identify publications addressing disability-related competencies for SAG. Academic Search Premier and the Education Resources Information Center (ERIC) databases were used to identify articles, reports, and dissertations (hereafter referred to collectively as publications). The search terms included: student affairs, student services, student personnel, college personnel, disability, knowledge, skills, dispositions, attitudes, competencies, competent, competence, and competency. Forty-four publications were identified and an additional seven articles were identified using an existing database (Madaus et al., 2018) of articles on higher education and disability, resulting in 51 total publications.

One hundred eighty-three recommendations and suggestions for disability-related knowledge, skills, and dispositions were gleaned from the publications. Similar items were grouped according to theme using a conventional content analysis method (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Publications could be included within multiple themes, as many provided multiple recommendations and suggestions for disability-related competencies. The term "disability" was not specifically defined, in keeping with the Association on Higher Education and Disability's *Best Practices in Disability Documentation* (2012), which notes that "determination of a disability doesn't require the use of any specific language" (p. 1) and refers the field to the use of the term within the laws and customs of particular countries. In the case of the present study, the definitions put forth in the Americans with Disabilities Act

and the Canadian Charter of Human Rights were assumed to be the operational definitions used by external auditors and content experts.

Five external auditors reviewed the theme names and descriptions. Each possessed extensive knowledge of disability and/or student affairs and were not serving as experts in the study. Auditor feedback regarding word changes and the combining of themes resulted in a final set of competencies including associated theme names and descriptions. These became the foundation of the Round 1 questionnaire.

**Round 1.** In Round 1 participants completed an electronic consent form, an eligibility screening confirming they each met eligibility requirements, a demographics questionnaire, and the disability-related competencies questionnaire. Experts were asked to (a) review the wording of the competency themes, (b) rate the clarity of the competency themes using 7-point Likert scale from 1 (not at all clear) to 7 (extremely clear), (c) comment on the clarity of the competency themes, and (d) write knowledge, dispositions, and/or skills (i.e., items) for each competency theme. Participants had two weeks to complete Round 1. Competency theme comments were reviewed by the researcher and theme names and descriptions were revised based on panelist data. Knowledge, skill, and disposition items were reviewed and subsequently collapsed or revised as necessary employing conventional content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Items were collapsed to eliminate redundancy and increase richness. Item revision increased clarity by eliminating acronyms, editing grammatical and spelling errors, and removing personalized phrases (e.g., "I think"). Competency theme and item collapse and revision was completed by the researcher and reviewed by five external auditors. Further changes were made in response to auditor feedback.

**Round 2.** In Round 2, the experts were asked to (a) review the revised competency themes and (b) provide written comments

on their clarity. Additionally, experts were asked to rate, using the 7-point Likert scale, the suggested competency items according to how important they believe they should be to SAG work. Subsequently, panelists were given the opportunity to comment on their rating decision and provide suggestions for item revision. Finally, panelists were given the opportunity to write additional disability-related competency items that they believed were important to SAG work, but were currently not included among the questionnaire items. Participants had two weeks to complete Round 2 of the Delphi. Item ratings were analyzed using descriptive statistics. Consensus was defined a priori as 75% of participant ratings falling within two increments of the 7-point Likert scale (Anderson, 1998; Diamond et al., 2014). When consensus was achieved on the rating of importance, the item was dropped from subsequent questionnaires. Items that reached consensus with modal scores of 4 (neutral) or lower were not included in the final listing of com-

petencies important to SAG work. Similar to Round 1, external auditors reviewed the revised statements to ensure accuracy and clarity. Items that reached consensus with modal scores of 5 (moderately important) or higher were included in the final listing of competencies important to SAG work and removed from the following round.

**Round 3.** In Round 3, participants received (a) a revised questionnaire, (b) aggregate quantitative data (e.g., mean, mode, standard deviation, and a frequency table) on Round 2 items, (c) all qualitative comments on Round 2 competency themes and remaining competency items, and (d) their Round 2 ratings for each remaining item. Participants considered their Round 2 ratings in light of the aggregate quantitative data and the panelist comments, and then rerated each item. Again, participants had two weeks to complete Round 3 and procedures for data recording and analysis mirrored the Round 2 procedures.

Items that reached consensus were included with Round 2 competencies, and

Table 1

*Number of Participants in Each Expert Group by Round*

| Expert Group   | Round 1  |      | Round 2  |      | Round 3  |      |
|--|----------|------|----------|------|----------|------|
|  | <i>n</i> | %    | <i>n</i> | %    | <i>n</i> | %    |
| Higher education and/or student affairs faculty                          | 3        | 15.0 | 3        | 15.8 | 3        | 16.7 |
| Disability services professionals  | 13       | 65.0 | 12       | 63.2 | 11       | 61.1 |
| Student affairs generalists  | 1        | 5.0  | 1        | 5.3  | 1        | 5.6  |
| Leaders of disability-related committees in student affairs associations | 14       | 70.0 | 13       | 68.4 | 13       | 72.2 |

*Note.* Percentages do not sum to 100% due to some participants meeting the criteria of expertise for multiple expert groups.

items that did not reach consensus after Round 3 were also noted. An a priori decision was made to terminate the study following three rounds due to feasibility concerns related to the likelihood of increased attrition at the close of the semester following existing guidelines (Schmidt, 1997).

## Results

### Expert Panelists

All participants who agreed to participate in the study responded to the Round

1 questionnaire, 19 of the 20 expert panelists (95%) responded to the Round 2 questionnaire, and, 18 of the 20 (90%) experts submitted data for all questionnaires; however, one expert's data was only partially complete in Round 3. Table 1 presents the number of participants by round and expert group. The experts who did not complete all rounds of the study indicated that they were unable to do so due to increased workload. A description of the expert panelists in each of the three rounds of the Delphi study can be found in Table 2.

Table 2

*Expert Panelist Demographics by Round of Data Collection*

| Demographic  | Round 1  |      | Round 2  |      | Round 3  |      |
|--|----------|------|----------|------|----------|------|
|  | <i>n</i> | %    | <i>n</i> | %    | <i>n</i> | %    |
| <b>Gender identity</b>                                   |          |      |          |      |          |      |
| Man  | 6        | 30.0 | 6        | 31.6 | 6        | 33.3 |
| Woman  | 14       | 70.0 | 13       | 68.4 | 12       | 66.7 |
| <b>Identify as a person with a disability</b>            |          |      |          |      |          |      |
| No   | 9        | 45.0 | 9        | 47.4 | 9        | 50.0 |
| Yes  | 10       | 50.0 | 10       | 52.6 | 9        | 50.0 |
| Prefer not to disclose                                   | 1        | 5.0  | 0        | 0.0  | 0        | 0    |
| <b>Race/ethnicity<sup>a</sup></b>                        |          |      |          |      |          |      |
| American Indian or Alaska Native                         | 2        | 10.0 | 2        | 10.5 | 2        | 11.1 |
| Asian  | 1        | 5.0  | 1        | 5.3  | 1        | 5.6  |
| Black  | 0        | 0.00 | 0        | 0.0  | 0        | 0.0  |
| Hispanic or Latino                                       | 0        | 0.0  | 0        | 0.0  | 0        | 0.0  |
| Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander                      | 0        | 0.0  | 0        | 0.0  | 0        | 0.0  |
| White  | 17       | 85.0 | 16       | 84.2 | 15       | 83.3 |
| Other  | 1        | 5.0  | 1        | 5.3  | 1        | 5.6  |
| Prefer not to disclose                                   | 1        | 5.0  | 1        | 5.3  | 1        | 5.6  |
| <b>Highest degree earned</b>                             |          |      |          |      |          |      |
| Bachelor's   | 1        | 5.0  | 1        | 5.3  | 1        | 5.6  |
| Master's   | 9        | 45.0 | 8        | 42.1 | 8        | 44.4 |
| Doctoral   | 9        | 45.0 | 9        | 47.4 | 8        | 44.4 |
| Other  | 1        | 5.0  | 1        | 5.3  | 1        | 5.6  |
| <b>Nation employed</b>                                   |          |      |          |      |          |      |
| Canada   | 4        | 20.0 | 3        | 15.8 | 3        | 16.7 |
| United States  | 16       | 80.0 | 16       | 84.2 | 15       | 83.3 |
| <b>Institutional type</b>                                |          |      |          |      |          |      |
| Associate's college                                      | 1        | 5.0  | 1        | 5.3  | 1        | 5.6  |
| Master's college or university                           | 4        | 20.0 | 4        | 21.1 | 4        | 22.2 |
| Research or doctoral university                          | 11       | 55.0 | 10       | 52.6 | 10       | 55.6 |
| Other  | 4        | 20.0 | 4        | 21.1 | 3        | 16.7 |
| <b>Primary position</b>                                  |          |      |          |      |          |      |
| Faculty in a higher education or student affairs program | 3        | 15.0 | 3        | 15.8 | 3        | 16.7 |
| Disability services professional                         | 11       | 55.0 | 10       | 52.6 | 10       | 55.6 |

|  |    |      |    |      |    |      |
|--|----|------|----|------|----|------|
| Student affairs professional (other than a disability services professional) | 2  | 10.0 | 2  | 10.5 | 2  | 11.1 |
| Other  | 4  | 20.0 | 4  | 21.1 | 3  | 16.7 |
| Professional association chair (past or present)                             |    |      |    |      |    |      |
| The ACPA Coalition for (Dis)Ability  | 5  | 25.0 | 5  | 26.3 | 5  | 27.8 |
| The NASPA Disability Knowledge Community                                     | 8  | 40.0 | 8  | 42.1 | 8  | 44.4 |
| The CACUSS Access & Inclusion Community                                      | 3  | 15.0 | 2  | 10.5 | 2  | 11.1 |
| Disability publications  |    |      |    |      |    |      |
| 0  | 2  | 10.0 | 2  | 10.5 | 2  | 11.1 |
| 1  | 3  | 15.0 | 2  | 10.5 | 2  | 11.1 |
| 2 or more  | 15 | 75.0 | 15 | 78.9 | 14 | 77.8 |
| Total participants   | 20 |      | 19 |      | 18 |      |

<sup>a</sup> Race/ethnicity percentages exceed 100% as panelists were permitted to select multiple responses (e.g., a panelist may indicate that they are both Asian and White).

## Item Results

The panelists reached consensus on items that clustered into five broad areas: Disability Access and Inclusion (14 items); Disability Related Emergencies and Crises (4 items); Disability Exploration (4 items); Disability Law and Policy (7 items); and Disability Resources (7 items). Each is discussed below.

### Disability Access and Inclusion

Table 3 contains the 14 knowledge, disposition, and skill items related to promoting and evaluating the cognitive, physical, and technological accessibility and inclusiveness of programs, services, and activities for people with disabilities. Panelists believed it was important for SAG to know that ensuring access and promoting an inclusive campus is a responsibility of all college and university employees. Panelists rated knowing emerging issues related to disability and higher education, listening to the personal narratives of students with disabilities and inquiring about their thoughts on-campus access and inclusion, and knowing how assistive technologies may or may not be transferable to different environments as being important to SAG duties.

## Disability-Related Emergencies and Crises

Table 4 contains four knowledge, disposition, and skill items related to working with people with disabilities in relation to emergency (e.g., building evacuations) and crisis situations (e.g., suicidal behavior). Panelists expressed some concern about this theme, which may explain the low number of items that achieved both importance and consensus. For example, some panelists expressed that the theme might promote stereotypes of students with disabilities (e.g., students with disabilities engaging in campus violence). Despite some concern, the four items suggest a need for SAG to have knowledge, dispositions, and skills necessary to create safe and healthy living and learning environments for students with disabilities.

The item “Include and listen to the person with a disability in all emergency planning, as they are expert in their own needs” was of particular note. It suggests that panelists believed it is important for SAG to involve students with disabilities in the development of emergency plans. However, panelists did note that engaging students in these types of discussions may not always

Table 3

## Disability Access and Inclusion

- Advocate for developing a more inclusive and disability-conscious department/institution;
- Be able to describe the resources that do not presently exist or that are not well coordinated that - if improved - could be useful to students/staff with disabilities;
- Be able to identify and address systemic and departmental barriers to inclusion and access;
- Be informed about available technologies and their transferability to different environments;
- Be sensitive and knowledgeable about service animals and emotional support animals;
- Design programs and events that are inclusive, promote consciousness of barriers to access, and challenge current institutional systems that prevent access;
- Listen to the personal narratives of students with disabilities, and ask students to share their thoughts about campus access and inclusion;
- Know that ensuring access and creating an inclusive campus are responsibilities of all staff, faculty and students; not just disability services;
- Know and apply Universal Design as related to physical, technological, learning, and social environments;
- Include disability in diversity programming;
- Foster understanding and empathy for marginalized populations, including people experiencing disabilities;
- Develop multicultural competence; and
- Provide and engage in professional development on current best practices related to disability.



Table 4

## Disability Related Emergencies and Crises

- Include and listen to the person with a disability in all emergency planning, as they are expert in their own needs;
- Know strategies for addressing/preventing bias, bullying, harassment, rape, and other violence against people with disabilities;
- Develop and implement evacuation plans that include people with disabilities (e.g., students, faculty, staff, and visitors); and
- Know campus policies/protocols for responding to disability-related crisis/emergency situations on and off campus, and how to apply intervention strategies/models.

**Disability Exploration**

For the Disability Exploration theme (see Table 5), panelists stressed the importance of understanding self-determination. For example, panelists noted it is both important to know the importance of self-determination as well as the various components of self-determined behavior. Furthermore, they highlighted the importance of student affairs affirming one's right to choose (a) whether to disclose the disability and (b) if accommodations for equal access are necessary. In sum, panelists highlighted that students should have the opportunity, power, and right to make personal decisions.

The remaining two items that panelists indicated were important relate to understanding the breadth of, and variation within, disability types and developing knowledge of disability and Deaf culture/context. Disability is viewed and experienced differently by people based on a number of factors including culture and philosophy (Evans et al., 2005). Furthermore, disability is fre-

quently viewed as a monolithic group despite extensive differences existing between and within disability labels (Peña, 2014). As such, panelists indicated that it is important for SAG to know that a breadth of disability types exist and that students with the same disability diagnosis may experience it differently. Interestingly, panelists did not come to consensus as to whether it is important for professionals to "Know broad classifications and specific types of disabilities including common characteristics, strengths, and associated functional limitations." Explanations for this result include (a) the idea that diagnoses promote the medical model, (b) variation in disability diagnoses and associated definitions, (c) concern about untrained professionals interpreting diagnoses and functional limitations, and (d) the importance of understanding the individual with disabilities as opposed to their label.

Another interesting finding relates to the importance of disability theory to SAG work. Three items (i.e., "know theories

[e.g. Gibson, Troiano] and models (e.g., medical model, social justice model) for conceptualizing disability, including associated strengths and limitations,” “know the strengths and limitations of general human/student development theories, and be able to apply applicable theories to work with students and professionals with disabilities,” and “be able to understand that the meta-narrative of disability identity is damaging and an attempt to create one is antiquated in regards to disability theory”) directly addressed knowledge of disability theory, but none reached consensus. It was suggested by some panelists that additional validation of emergent theories is necessary before they could be deemed important to SAG work.

### **Disability Law and Policy**

Consensus was reached on seven Disability Law and Policy items (see Table 6), which highlight that professionals should develop the requisite knowledge, dispositions, and skills to abide by and understand fundamental aspects of disability laws and disability-relevant institutional policies and procedures. Panelists indicated that SAG should know the fundamentals in order to ensure privacy and to employ hiring practices are not discriminatory. The item, “know when and how to consult with one’s immediate supervisor and institutional legal counsel regarding matters that may have legal ramifications” is also of interest. Although this item may be viewed as relating solely to risk management in a reactive sense, it can

Table 5

#### Disability Exploration

- Know the importance and components of self-advocacy (e.g., self-knowledge, knowledge of rights and responsibilities under the laws, communication skills) for students with disabilities;
- Affirm the individual's right to determine if they want to disclose their disabilities and to decide if they need accommodations for equal access;
- Develop awareness of specific disability group cultures/contexts (e.g., Deaf culture, mental health consumers/survivors), and recognize that students have differing views of these cultures/contexts; and
- Develop a basic understanding of the breadth of disability types represented on campus, and know that not all people with the same disability label will experience the same functional limitations.

also be viewed as a means by which generalist professionals proactively advocate for increasing access. By knowing when and who to approach regarding potential legal matters, generalists may be able to use the law to address issues of access prior to a complaint or grievance.

Of particular note is that panelists were not able to come to agreement as to whether knowing and acting in accordance with applicable laws (e.g., Sections 504 and 508 of the Rehabilitation Act, the Americans with Disabilities Act Amendments Act, the Canadian Human Rights Act) is important to the work of SAG. According to the panelists, understanding and interpreting the laws and their implications for individuals with disabilities should be left to specialist professionals with more advanced training and expertise. However, some panelists did note that knowing the law and relevant poli-

cy is important inasmuch as SAG should ensure they are not engaging in illegal practices or limiting access. The final three items, (i.e., know that disability rights are civil rights; know that students with disabilities are expected to meet the same standards as their peers without disabilities; and be aware that medical and psychological documentation provided by students is confidential, and that the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act and the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act limit what information may be shared with faculty and staff) are basic facts associated with disability law and policy of which SAG should be aware and also do not require an extensive knowledge of the law.

### **Disability Resources**

Items in the Disability Resources Theme (see Table 7) suggest that panelists believed

Table 6

#### Disability Law and Policy

- Know when and how to consult with one's immediate supervisor and institutional legal counsel regarding matters that may have legal ramifications;
- Know the process associated with requesting and using reasonable accommodations on one's campus; and the policies and procedures for filing grievances and appealing accommodation decisions;
- Be able to provide accommodation for any event, process, or service;
- Know and engage in hiring and supervisory practices that are accessible and inclusive of people with disabilities;
- Know that students with disabilities are expected to meet the same standards (e.g., admission, accountability) as their peers without disabilities;
- Know that disability rights are civil rights; and
- Be aware that medical and psychological documentation provided by students is confidential, and that the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) and Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) limit what information may be shared with faculty and staff.

that it is critical for generalist professionals to be keenly aware of the disability-related resources that exist on campus and in the community and also know how to refer students with disabilities when necessary. Several panelists noted that respectfully referring students to resources is important regardless of whether the service is disability-related, but others suggested that the referral should be made with consideration given to other factors (e.g., desire for privacy, stigma associated with disability, etc.) because some students may have chosen not to disclose. Additionally, one panelist expressed concern over situations where a

referral may not be warranted. Not all students with disabilities need or want to use services. For example, a student with a learning disability may not choose or need to use counseling services, academic support services, and/or DS; therefore, a referral to such an office may not be appropriate.

Panelists also believed that it is important for SAG to possess a willingness to engage in collaboration with DS offices, disability culture centers, ADA office, and other disability-related offices. Collaboration could expand the services and programs related to disability, meet specific needs of individuals with disabilities, and include disability in the

Table 7

#### Disability Resources

- Collaborate with campus partners to develop programs, services, and practices that address the needs of students with disabilities from diverse backgrounds and cultures;
- Develop skills needed to establish collaborative relationships with professionals on campus and in the community in order to address the needs of students, faculty, and staff with disabilities;
- Know how to appropriately and respectfully make a referral to services; and, when necessary, make direct contact in collaboration with a student;
- Know your colleagues and resources on campus and in the community; what they do; and how they can serve students, faculty, staff, and visitors with disabilities;
- Know that disability services is a resource that should be included in training, education, outreach and planning;
- Know that disability services offices/professionals vary in approaches and philosophies; and
- Know the role of faculty and staff in the services structure (e.g., assisting students with supports for functional limitations, not diagnosing).

discourse on campus diversity. DS offices are frequently understaffed and underfunded (Barber, 2012). Collaboration among divisions and departments can increase programming efforts, address issues related to inhospitable disability-related campus climate, and meet needs beyond those related to minimal access.

### Discussion

Despite calls for collaboration, disability-related topics receive little attention from student affairs preparation programs and mainstream higher education and student affairs journals (Evans et al., 2009; Peña 2014). The result is that student affairs professionals lack disability-related knowledge (Murray et al., 2008; Myers, 2008). Moreover, disability-related competencies that meet the needs of SAG do not exist. The 36 knowledge, disposition, and skill items developed in this study were written and verified by a panel of expert panelists using a three-round Delphi process. It resulted in a list of disability-related competencies that can guide the professional development and professional preparation of all SAG in order to meet the needs of students with disabilities broadly.

The results guide SAG in the development of disability-related proficiency in order to effectively meet the needs of students with disabilities and complements existing competencies (e.g., ACPA/NASPA *Professional Competencies for Student Affairs Practitioners* [2010], Pope & Reynolds [1997] multicultural competencies, and the AHEAD Professional Standards [n.d.]). Although the identification of disability-related competencies is a first step in better serving students with disabilities, benefit for students will happen when such knowledge results in practices driven by relevant dispositions and skills. Formal and informal conversations and trainings and presentations at professional conferences are needed to (a) promote stakeholder acceptance (e.g., professional associations), (b) promote the employment of the competencies into pro-

fessional preparation and development programs, (c) develop disability-related competence among SAG, and (d) encourage the use of the disability-related competencies in practice.

Student affairs programs, services, policies, procedures, and office/institutional climates also merit examination by disability-competent generalists. As noted, students with disabilities indicate that student affairs programs and services are beneficial to their educational attainment (Fichten et al., 2014; Salzer, 2012; Thompson-Ebanks, 2014), so further review of these programs by disability-competent SAG is worthwhile. Among the questions that SAG could ask include: Are student affairs programs, services, policies, procedures, and office/institutional climates equitable, accessible, and inclusive of individuals with disabilities? Do they meet basic legal and policy standards related to disability? Do they promote safety for all students, including those with disabilities? Furthermore, new programs, services, policies, and procedures can be developed using the disability-related competence possessed by generalists.

Institutional and national student affairs leadership has a role as well. Though lacking detail, reference to the importance of SAG knowing about disability already exists in the ACPA/NASPA *Professional Competencies for Student Affairs Practitioners* and the Pope & Reynolds [1997] multicultural competencies. Thus, disability-related knowledge, dispositions, and skills should be valued by student affairs leaders so that disability-competence becomes an expectation of SAG and is used in practice. This can be reflected in job descriptions and hiring decisions. Similarly, professional associations should emphasize the value of disability-related competence. Currently practicing SAG also need disability-related competence. Opportunities to incorporate relevant knowledge, dispositions, and skills include: (a) increasing the frequency of disability-related articles in professional journals and other association publications,

and, (b) offering relevant professional development opportunities at conferences. In order for students with disabilities to benefit from increased professional disability-related competence, support certainly begins with student affairs leadership and subsequently that competence can move from paper-based documentation of competence to practice in higher education student affairs settings.

### **Areas for Future Research**

This study should be considered a starting point for further investigation. Additional qualitative and quantitative research is necessary to further validate the identified disability-related competencies. Of particular importance is the need to determine which competencies SAG should exhibit prior to beginning an entry-level position. Additionally, professional development trainings and/or student affairs professional preparation curricula related to disability competence can be both developed and evaluated. Lastly, the extent to which SAG with disability-competence impact outcomes (e.g., graduation rates, GPA, satisfaction) of students with disabilities can be measured. As the landscape of higher education evolves, the disability-related competencies for SAG should be updated. Changes in attitudes, law, technology, student affairs theory and practice, and demographics will necessitate ongoing examination of the competencies in order to ensure that they provide current professional guidance.

### **Limitations**

Despite the advantages of the Delphi method, several concerns are worthy of note. The quality of a Delphi study and the validity of its results depend on the expert panel, however agreement on specific criteria for determining expertise does not currently exist (Hsu & Sandford, 2007). It is possible that other researchers may have included other experts. Furthermore, caution should be exercised when applying the findings of this, and all, Delphi studies. Giv-

en the number of disability and student affairs experts, their aggregate judgment may not reflect particular beliefs of the various groups represented by the experts.

Of particular note is the fact that the experts are primarily White women. In fact, the vast majority of panelists who meet criteria for inclusion likely identify as White women, which speaks to diversity challenges within this field. Given that the diversity of the panel is limited in terms of racial and gender identity, it is possible the level of importance attributed to items may not be reflective of professionals from other identity groups. This may be particularly true of items that are associated with diversity. For example, consensus was not achieved regarding the importance of knowing how disability interacts with other forms of identity. Furthermore, items that convey novel and emerging ideas that may reflect non-dominant discourse on disability may be statistically marginalized as well. As such, competencies that reflect new ideas and emerging theories of identity that have implications for the diversity of students with disabilities may be omitted from competencies that reached consensus.

Finally, much of the literature on higher education focuses on students with disabilities as a collective group rather than by specific disability type (Peña, 2014). When disability is examined by disability type, however, some disabilities are reflected in the literature with greater frequency than others (Madaus et al, 2018). Therefore, the disability themes upon which the resulting items were developed may not capture the full range of knowledge, dispositions, and skills important to SAG work with all disability types. As such, generalists are encouraged to remain student-centered in their approach and thus cognizant of their individual differences.

### **Conclusion**

College students with disabilities have reported that student affairs programs and services are beneficial to their educational

attainment (Fichten, et al., 2014; Salzer, 2012; Thompson-Ebanks, 2014). Unfortunately, SAG presently lack disability-related knowledge, dispositions, and skills (Kimball et al., 2016; Murray et al., 2008; Myers, 2008), and thus, this study addressed this gap by identifying 36 disability-related knowledge, dispositions, and skills important to SAG work, which were written and verified by a panel of experts in the area of student affairs and disability. The field of student affairs can use these results as a starting point for developing training programs, which can, in turn, be used to equip all SAG with disability-related knowledge, dispositions, and skills. Hopefully, with increased disability-related competence, SAG will better serve students with disabilities, thereby improving their college outcomes.

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