

Professional Development Credits in Student Affairs Practice: A Method to Enhance Professionalism

Laura A. Dean, Bobby R. Woodard, Diane L. Cooper*

Many professions require members to be involved in continuing education in order to maintain skill levels, to remain current on issues, and often to remain licensed or certified in that field. The same level of continuous professional development does not always occur in student affairs, and there exists no system for documenting such activities when they occur. The purpose of this study is to explore the perceived benefits of requiring professional development credits (PDCs) in the profession of student affairs. Results indicate support for instituting PDCs in student affairs, with differences related to years in the field.

Good professional practice does not happen by accident (Carpenter, 1991). While many professionals in student affairs are committed to continuing their professional development after completing formal schooling, there is currently no mechanism in place to ensure that professional development happens consistently among student affairs practitioners. While there is general agreement that staying current is a professional necessity, the field of student affairs has no organized approach to doing so (Janosik, Carpenter, & Creamer, 2006). Miller and Sandeen (2003) noted

there appears to be a clarion call for a professional entity, perhaps in the form of a structured umbrella-type federation, to speak for the profession as a whole. Until that day comes it can be assumed that the student affairs profession will continue to be viewed as an immature profession. (p. 7)

They went on to suggest that “it would behoove the profession to agree upon, establish, and follow a set of standards for professional development programs that would include expectations for both the process and the content of professional development” (p. 5).

Professional development is defined as an intentional effort by a person to improve his or her individual effectiveness that in turn leads to improved organization effectiveness (Winston and Creamer, 1997). The development of programs for student affairs professionals’ continuing education constitutes an

*Laura A. Dean is an assistant professor in the counseling and human development services department, Bobby R. Woodard is the associate director of campus life and a doctoral candidate in the student affairs administration program, Diane L. Cooper is a professor in the counseling and human development services department, all are at the University of Georgia. Correspondence concerning this article should be sent to ladean@uga.edu.

investment that will result in the enhancement and development of skills through which professionals will meet their organizations' goals (Grace-Odeleye, 1998). Continuing professional development involves information transfer and applications to practice and also places the responsibility for learning, professional development, and career direction on the individual practitioner (Weddle, Himburg, & Collins, 2002). It is important that practitioners search out and identify professional development activities that are relevant to, and supportive of, their personal career aspirations (Miller & Sandeen, 2003). Professional development is a requirement for both personal and professional growth, and professionals must take an active part in the activities that are available to them (Carpenter, 2003).

For the purpose of this research, continuing education units (CEUs) or professional development credits (PDCs) are defined as "a national measure of completion of non-credit professional development learning activities" (Information Outlook, 1997, p. 38). PDCs are used in many fields, such as counseling and teaching, as a method to maintain licensure or certification. For example, the National Board for Certified Counselors (NBCC) requires National Certified Counselors (NCC) to participate in ongoing continuing education in specific content areas in order to maintain the credential (NBCC, n.d.-a). The American Counseling Association (ACA) endorses the importance of professional development for its members (ACA, n.d.); NBCC was initially created as the result of an ACA committee recommendation (NBCC, n.d.-b). Counselor licensure, which is governed at the state level, also typically includes requirements for PDCs in order to maintain the license. Similarly, in public K-12 education, teachers and administrators also have to complete a certain number of continuing education units, depending on the state system, to retain their license and/or certification (North Carolina Department of Education, 2003). Such systems may be used to regulate practice in the profession; however, in other cases, such as counselor certification, the larger purpose is to communicate a level of professional competence to the public, thereby enhancing credibility of the individual and the profession.

Individuals may document professional qualifications using three primary methods: registry, certification, and licensure (CAS, 2006, p. 13). All are forms of credentialing, but whereas licensure is generally a governmental function, registry and certification are typically initiated by non-governmental professional bodies (CAS, 2006). Registry is "a mechanism by which those student affairs professionals who meet a well-defined set of criteria could voluntarily submit their credentials for inclusion" on a list of registered professionals (Janosik, 2002, p. 2). Certification involves an external process through which the individual is evaluated, generally through an examination or review of materials, and determined to have met the necessary standards to be certified.

A number of researchers have questioned why student affairs does not move in a direction of more structure, such as a system of licensure or registry, to help ensure quality practice (Burkard, Cole, Ott, & Stoflet, 2005; Janosik, 2002; Schwartz & Bryan, 1998). For the purpose of this study, participants were asked about their perceptions of PDCs and of licensure, since that is the form of individual credential with which most people are already familiar.

Making a Case for Professional Development Credits in Student Affairs

There has long been discussion within the student affairs literature about whether student affairs is a legitimate profession (Bloland, Stamatakos, & Rogers, 1994). Given the continuing education requirements in many areas commonly recognized as professions, this discussion may be exacerbated by the fact that once the professionals in the field complete their initial training, there is no profession-wide requirement to further their education or to continue to remain current on the contemporary issues and best practices in the field. While some institutions do recognize commitment to professional development through funding or merit pay, there is no consistency among institutions about such systems, or any way to denote or recognize publicly those individuals who are committed to a high level of continuing professional development. Miller and Sandeen (2003, p. 2) make a very strong case that student affairs will only evolve “when its practitioners have clearly defined expectations to achieve and standards to guide their practice.” Currently, practitioners must rely on internal motivation to engage in professional development; however, the importance of doing so is supported by the Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS). It appears as one of the CAS Characteristics of Individual Excellence for Professional Practice in Higher Education: “Stays professionally current by reading literature, building skills, attending conferences, enhancing technological literacy, and engaging in other professional development activities” (CAS, 2006, p. 19).

The importance of professional development for student affairs professionals has been frequently emphasized. Carpenter (2003) suggested that “student affairs professionals make it a priority to refine their skills, gain new responses to changing circumstances, and engage in their personal and professional growth” (p. 578). Miller and Sandeen (2003) similarly assert that “professional development is primarily the responsibility of the individual practitioner as he or she becomes increasingly involved in student affairs practice” (p. 1). Although many professionals in student affairs attend professional development workshops and conferences, there is no current method for documenting the skills, knowledge, and abilities that those practitioners develop from participation in such activities. As a result, the individual may benefit, and practice may improve, but there is no organized way to communicate this to the public or campus constituencies.

A significant part of professional growth is involvement in professional development opportunities. Bryan and Schwartz (1998) noted that in order to deliver quality services to students, the professional development of staff members is a necessary tool. Carpenter (2003) asserted that “the point of being a professional is to bring preparation and experience, guided by continual learning, into play in a complex way” (p. 582). While professional associations and sponsoring institutions can provide some support, practitioners must take charge of their own learning (CAS, 2006; Miller & Sandeen, 2003). Carpenter (2003) added that student affairs practitioners need to be intentional in approaching professional development. This type of learning helps to develop well-rounded professionals who may be better equipped to serve the student affairs profession.

While PDCs may require additional work on the part of the professionals involved, as well as additional costs and administrative challenges, it may still be desirable to initiate a PDC system in order to increase credibility of the profession of student affairs in higher education and of individual practitioners within the field. A system involving PDCs would also demonstrate that student affairs practitioners have met at least a minimal standard of competency based on established criteria.

The purpose of this study was to examine the perceived need by those in the field of student affairs for professional development credits (PDC), as well as the perceived benefits of such a system. Much of what is being written in the literature today supports the importance of professional development and recommends ways to systematize it. This study was designed to assess the extent to which practitioners also see the importance of such a system.

Methodology

A 32-item questionnaire was developed to explore student affairs practitioners’ perceptions about the need for, and benefits of, professional development credits (PDCs) in student affairs. A review of relevant literature on professional development, continuing education units (CEUs), staff development, and professionalism was conducted to create the 25 items specifically related to perceptions of PDCs in student affairs. Survey items used a 5-point Likert-type scale to indicate the extent to which respondents agreed or disagreed with each item stem (e.g., “PDCs or CEUs represent a mark of quality assurance for conference presentation,” “PDCs or CEUs should provide the basis for eligibility for salary increases or promotions”). Seven demographic items were included to explore any differences in responses based on sex, race, highest degree earned, current educational enrollment status, work classification, years in the profession, and institution type.

The instrument was externally reviewed by four student affairs professionals with expertise in professional development to establish content validity. The

Southern Association for College Student Affairs (SACSA) listserv was sent an email in the fall of 2005, which detailed the purpose of the study and solicited participation. The members of the listserv were asked to complete the instrument on-line and submit the data through an on-line data collection program (PERSEUS). The received data were converted from the PERSEUS file directly into an SPSS file for analysis.

Results

The SACSA listserv has 744 registered members, and total of 138 surveys were completed on-line (18.5%). As with most on-line data collection processes, the actual return rate is likely to be higher if calculated on the number of requests that were successfully received by listserv members (e.g., not limited by e-mail filters, incorrect addresses, etc.).

The respondent group was 62% female and 38% male. Seventy-eight percent of the sample were Caucasian, 16.3% African American, 3.1% Hispanic, 1.6% American Indian, and 0.8% Asian American. Years in current position ranged from 1 year to 37 years, while work classifications were reported as follows: 19.7% entry level professionals, 26.5% middle-level managers, 27.4% senior student affairs officers, 16.2% chief student affairs officers, and 10.3% faculty members. Forty-three percent of the respondents had earned a doctorate, 47% had earned master's degrees, and 9% had received bachelor's degrees. Twenty percent of the respondents said that they were currently enrolled in graduate courses, with 52% of those responding enrolled full-time and 30% enrolled part-time (the remaining 18% did not specify full- or part-time study). The respondents enrolled in graduate study included 41% enrolled in a doctoral program and 52% enrolled in a master's program. When asked whether the respondents were employed at a private or public institution, 22% stated private, 67% stated public, and 11% did not respond.

Overall highest and lowest ranked means for the survey items are seen in Table 1. In general, mean responses for most items suggest general agreement with the items. There were, however, no statistically significant differences found on the item responses by sex, institution type, highest degree earned, enrollment in graduate courses, or classification. A number of items did show a statistically significant correlation with number of years worked in the field (see Table 2). In all cases, those newer to the profession more positively endorsed the items' subject matter.

Table 1

Top Five and Bottom Five Ranked Means

Item	Mean	SD
Professional development credits should be offered in a formal format, e.g. conference session	1.75	.86
Professional development credits should be available at the institutional, regional, and national levels	1.80	.98
Professional development credits will aid practitioners in student affairs to remain current in their profession	1.85	.79
Professional development credits can provide institutions with a history of practitioners' professional development activities	1.86	.79
Professional development credits should provide practitioners with alternative approaches to currently used practices	1.91	.93
Without the awarding of professional development credits, it is difficult to document the skill, knowledge, and abilities that student affairs practitioners develop from attending professional development activities	2.80	1.06
Student affairs administration graduate preparation programs should be responsible for providing continuing professional development opportunities	2.82	1.16
Student affairs administration preparation programs should continue to encourage alumni to attend professional development activities to alumni throughout their careers	3.05	1.08
The addition of professional development credits to student affairs will assist in having student affairs more recognized by academic affairs	3.08	1.17
The student affairs profession should consider establishing a licensure system for practitioners	3.42	1.12

1=Strongly agree to 5=Strongly disagree

Table 2

Items Related to Professional Development Credits that were Significantly Correlated with Years of Professional Experience

Items	<i>r</i>	<i>p</i>
Professional development credits for student affairs practitioners would require the active exploration and examination of new ideas and concepts	.289	.001
The accumulation of professional development credits needs to occur as a continuous process	.220	.009
Professional development credits represent a mark of quality assurance for conference presentations or workshops	.253	.003
Professional development credits should be available at the institutional, regional, and national levels	.322	.000
The additional work that professional development credits would require of practitioners is a desirable process that would give the student affairs profession more validity in higher education	.242	.004
Professional development credits confirm that practitioners have attained the learning outcomes that were intended by the professional development activity	.262	.002
Student affairs administration graduate preparation programs should be responsible for providing continuing professional development opportunities to alumni throughout their careers	.192	.024
The addition of professional development credits to student affairs will assist in having student affairs more recognized by academic affairs	.175	.041

One additional item on this questionnaire stated, “The student affairs profession should consider establishing a licensure system for practitioners.” The mean for this item was 3.42 (SD=1.12), indicating that while support for professional development credits is strong, support for licensure as the vehicle for credentialing is limited. There was, however, a strong statistically significant relationship for this item based on years in the field (Pearson correlation = .412, $p=.000$), again indicating that the longer one has been in the field, the less likely he or she is to agree with this statement. Results also indicated that if a licensure system were to be created, respondents preferred a national system (item mean=1.95, SD=.83) over a state system (item mean=2.98, SD=.89) to handle the process.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore the perceived benefits of professional development credits (PDCs) to professionals in student affairs. By having such a process, professional development could become more systematic for practitioners in the field and could lead to greater professional accountability and credibility. With student affairs activities being broad in scope, practitioners are required to have a diversity of skills to be effective in their positions (Miller & Sandeen, 2003), and a PDC system could help to document such competencies.

This study only included membership of one regional professional organization, yet a recent survey conducted by ACPA's Task Force on Certification showed overwhelming support for a more structured professional development process for those working in student affairs (Janosik, Carpenter, and Creamer, 2006). The NASPA Board of Directors has also indicated conceptual support for a system that recognizes professionals through inclusion on a registry, as well as a curriculum structure for professional development (Janosik, 2002).

The current study supports those research findings with regard to the perceived interest in implementing professional development credits for our field. Of the 25 survey items regarding the need for and potential benefits of PDCs, respondents indicated agreement or strong agreement with 17 of them. Respondents agreed most strongly with statements indicating that PDCs should be delivered in structured formats and should be widely available. They believe most strongly that PDCs will aid practitioners to remain current and to explore alternative approaches in their work. All of these responses reflect interest in an intentional, formalized system and recognition that such a system would not only document participation, but would have positive effects on practice. There was less support for the idea that a PDC system would assist in the recognition of student affairs by academic affairs; respondents' focus seems to be on individual development and practice, rather than on any potential effects on perceptions from those outside the field. Respondents also support the benefit of PDCs' providing institutions with a history of practitioner's professional development activities. This history could be useful in evaluating performance as well as in evaluating applicants for professional positions. Support is stronger for a national system, rather than a state-based one; this may reflect career patterns in student affairs, which often include a number of moves, and a related desire for a system that accommodates these patterns.

Respondents are less supportive of the role of graduate preparation programs in offering professional development activities to alumni or others. Again, this may be reflective of career patterns that often result in long-distance moves and the recognition that PDCs, to be achievable, need to be readily available

and accessible. The strong agreement with the statement about availability at the institutional, regional, and national levels supports this.

In particular, this study shows that new professionals are especially interested in PDCs and are more supportive of the concept of licensure. Those newer to the field were more likely to agree with statements suggesting that PDCs would require exploration of new ideas, assist with quality assurance for presentations or workshops, confirm that practitioners have attained intended learning outcomes, and assist in the recognition of student affairs by academic affairs colleagues. The newer professionals indicated at a higher rate than their senior counterparts that the additional work required would be worth it for the desirable outcomes, perhaps reflecting more comfort with structured requirements such as those they recently experienced in their graduate preparation. Similarly, they were also more supportive of the concept of licensure in student affairs, when compared to the limited support for licensure in the overall group. This difference in level of support for PDCs and licensure may reflect the effect on younger professionals of the increasing professionalization of the field, emphasis on standards and outcomes, and related impact on preparation program curricula; if so, it is likely that such support will only increase with time. If, on the other hand, the difference is related more to changes in perspective that result from experience in the field, then the difference in perspective between younger and more experienced professionals will continue to exist. Further research is needed to better understand these trends as the discussion in the field continues and to explore ways to address the professional development interests expressed by newer professionals.

Janosik, Carpenter, and Creamer (2006) recommended that:

The major national student affairs associations should work collaboratively to develop criteria for a continuing professional education credit (CPEC) program for professional development. This is an absolutely critical need. If the national associations in student affairs do not do this soon, they will find themselves irrelevant, because some organization, perhaps a for-profit will. It is equally essential that no one association come to "own" professional credentialing and professional development. This owning has to be a profession wide function. (p. 233)

This study demonstrates general support for this concept among student affairs practitioners.

Limitations and Suggestions for Further Research

Use of the SACSA listserv to solicit participants created both advantages and limitations for the study. SACSA is an individual membership organization, with student affairs professionals at a variety of levels. The membership cost is

modest compared with other professional associations, which may encourage a broader range of professionals to belong. On the other hand, as an individual membership organization, there is the possibility that members represent people already committed to professional development, as evidenced by their choosing to belong to a professional organization. Further study should employ sampling strategies designed to minimize such possibilities, and, as mentioned above, to expand the participants beyond the region and membership included in this study. Also, the response rate in this study was very low. Since on-line survey research has limitations related to accuracy of email addresses and other system issues, future studies should be designed to include more deliberate samples and increase response rate. As it stands, generalizability is limited due to the regional nature of the sample, the low response rate and small size of the sample, and the nature of the group (i.e., individuals who choose membership in an association and who choose to participate in the listserv).

Based on the literature in the field, this study was designed to assess the extent to which practitioners support PDCs and credentialing. The survey questions were stated in positive terms, reflecting the support for professional development in the literature, and responses to them were generally positive as well. Thus, the study can be described more accurately as assessing levels of support for various statements based on current literature than as attempting to fully describe the range of attitudes about professional development credits and related issues.

Finally, this study focused on a specific definition of professional development credits and on the question of licensure, rather than other forms of credentialing. Other discussions in the field have focused on certification or registry as approaches that may be feasible and appropriate (Janosik, 2002; Janosik, Carpenter, and Creamer, 2006); future research could further refine the perceptions of practitioners regarding the various forms of credentialing.

Implications

A credentialing system would help to convey that practitioners have met at least a minimal standard of competency, based on established criteria. Janosik (2002) proposed a professional development curriculum that would include a variety of methods for increasing professional competence. With the development of PDCs, the profession of student affairs would have a system in place to begin credentialing practitioners in the field. This study indicates that practitioners support many aspects of a profession-wide professional development system. A PDC process would help seasoned professionals to stay abreast of new literature and methods and assist them in updating their skill base. Such a process resulting in a related credential would help communicate professionalism and credibility of practitioners and of the field as

a whole to various constituencies. A PDC system would also be valuable for staff recruitment and selection, since both employers and candidates could indicate the priority they place on professional development. Finally, a PDC system would also create a foundation on which to conduct research on professional competencies by offering a consistent framework against which to examine accomplishments and differences among professionals.

Conclusion

This study shows that there is a perceived need for and interest in a system of professional development credits (PDCs) in the field of student affairs, particularly among those newer to the field. Research that builds on this study and on previous work by ACPA and NASPA must go forward as we continue to look for methods to increase the professionalism of practitioners and of our field. Creating means for professionals to document and communicate their professional development will help bring to fruition the cycle of student affairs professional development and growth: learning, doing, and contributing (Carpenter, 2003). The profession can only grow stronger as a result.

References

- American Counseling Association. (n.d.). *About us*. Retrieved July 23, 2007, from <http://www.counseling.org/AboutUs/>
- Bloland, P.A., Stamatakos, L.C., & Rogers, R.R. (1994). *Reform in student affairs: A critique of student development*. Greensboro, NC: ERIC Counseling and Student Services Clearinghouse.
- Bryan, W. A., & Schwartz, R. A. (1998). Some final thoughts about staff development. In W. A. Bryan, & R. A. Schwartz, *Strategies for staff development: Personal and professional education in the 21st century* (pp. 95-100). New Directions for Student Services, No. 84. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Burkard, A., Cole, D. C., Ott, M., & Stoflet, T. (2005). Entry-level competencies of new student affairs professionals: A Delphi study. *NASPA Journal*, 42(3), 283-309.
- Carpenter, D. S. (1991). Student affairs profession: A developmental perspective. In T. Miller & R. Winston (Eds.), *Administration and Leadership in Student Affairs* (2nd ed.; pp. 253-280). Muncie, IN: Accelerated Development.
- Carpenter, D. S. (2003). Professionalism in student affairs work. In S. Komives & D. Woodard (Eds.) *Student services: A handbook for the profession* (4th ed.), (pp. 573-591). Jossey-Bass: San Francisco.
- Council for the Advancement of Higher Education. (2006). *CAS professional standards for higher education* (6th ed.). Washington, DC: Author.

- Grace-Odeleye, B. (1998). A model for staff development in student affairs. In W. A. Bryan & R. A. Schwartz (Eds.), *Strategies for staff development: Personal and professional education in the 21st century* (pp 83-93). New Directions for Student Services, No. 84. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Janosik, S. M. (2002). *The development of a national registry for student affairs administrators*. Washington, DC: National Association of Student Personnel Administrators.
- Janosik, S. M, Carpenter, D. S., & Creamer, D. S. (2006). Beyond professional preparation programs: The role of professional associations in ensuring a high quality workforce. *College Student Affairs Journal*, 25(2), 228-237.
- Miller, T. K., & Sandeen, A. (2003). *Professional development: Principles and perspectives*. Savannah, GA: Southern Association of College Student Affairs.
- National Board for Certified Counselors. (n.d.-a). *Guidelines for maintaining your credential*. Retrieved December 17, 2006, from <http://www.nbcc.org/guidelines>
- National Board for Certified Counselors. (n.d.-b). *History of NBCC*. Retrieved December 17, 2006, from <http://www.nbcc.org/about>
- North Carolina Department of Education (2003). *Come help us develop young minds. Teach in North Carolina*. Retrieved December 19, 2006, from http://teach4nc.org/teaching_professionals/
- Schwartz, R. A., & Bryan, W. A. (1998). What is professional development. In W. A. Bryan, & R. A. Schwartz, *Strategies for staff development: Personal and professional education in the 21st century* (pp. 3-13). New Directions for Student Services, No. 84. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- The CEU: The standard for high-quality continuing education (1997). *Information Outlook*, 1(12), 38.
- Weddle, D. O., Himburg, S. P., & Collins, N. (2002). The professional development portfolio: Selling goals for credentialing. *Journal of the American Dietetic Association*, 102(10), 1439-1444.
- Winston, R. B., & Creamer, D. G. (1997). *Improving staffing practices in student affairs*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.