

Beyond Professional Preparation Programs: The Role of Professional Associations in Ensuring a High Quality Workforce

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Professional associations have an obligation to ensure the quality of professional preparation and practice, to provide continuing professional education, and to recognize those practitioners who take steps to improve their knowledge and practice. To date, no student affairs association has fully operationalized or embraced these ideas. The future of our profession rests on the willingness of those who lead these associations to do more in this crucial area.

Creamer, Janosik, Winston, and Kuk (2001) asserted that quality professional practice in student affairs rests on the knowledge, skills, values, ethics, and character of its practitioners. These attributes are generally associated with formal educational preparation for practice in the field. To many, professional education is synonymous with the preparation necessary to enter a given field or occupation (Smutz, Crowe, & Lindsay, 1986). Creamer et al. (2001) suggested, and many agree, that most professionals in student affairs should hold an earned masters and/or doctoral degree from an established and reputable college or university and that most generalists should hold degrees in student affairs, higher education, counseling, or other fields that specifically address the work they are called upon to perform. Despite some resistance to this quality assurance standard, large numbers of practitioners and employers have embraced it. As an example, in a recent survey of 2,331 professionals belonging to a national student affairs association, 88% indicated they held such a credential. The overwhelming majority of those reporting an advanced degree did so in student affairs, higher education, or counseling (Janosik & Carpenter, 2005). This respondent group represented 34.4% of the sample in the study.

Professional preparation should not stop once the degree is earned. The need for professional development of those who have entered the field without the knowledge or skills provided by such preparation is more paramount. A case for continuing professional education for student affairs practitioners has been made for many years by many people, with a mounting urgency and vigor (Carpenter, 1998; Creamer & Claar, 1995; Creamer & Woodard, 1992; Creamer et al., 2001; Creamer et al., 1992; Janosik, 2002). Smutz, Crowe, and Lindsay (1986) argued that continuing learning is an obligatory part of the professional's role. Staying current

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is a professional necessity, yet for student affair professionals there is no organized way to do so. One could argue that the responsibility of remaining current is that of the individual professional, but the reality is that other professions typically are more prescriptive or at least more facilitative (Carpenter, 2001).

Professional development should be an intentional process, no less important to understand and pursue diligently than our best work with students. Excellent practice depends upon constant preparation. Professionals must learn, do, and contribute throughout their careers (Carpenter, 2003). The use of informal activities, however, such as reading journals, consulting with colleagues, and attending conferences is no longer sufficient to meet the learning needs of today's professional because of the "explosion of knowledge, technology, and public attitudes toward professional competency" (Carpenter, 1998, p. 160). In an era when knowledge grows at a remarkable rate and the half-life of what we know is increasingly short (Moore, 1995), the need for more formal systems seem clear; however, the response to the calls for "assessment of professional competencies and needs, continuing professional education, and recognition and reporting systems" (Creamer et al., 1992, p.3) has been woefully inadequate. The purpose of this paper is to identify the role of professional associations in this process, review several recent attempts to create more formal systems of continuing professional education, and recommend a new course of action for these organizations.

Identifying the Role of Professional Associations

Creamer and his colleagues (Creamer et al., 1992) identified the ethical obligation of professional associations to ensure the quality of professional preparation and practice, and to, among other things, provide continuing professional education, and recognize those practitioners who take steps to improve their knowledge and practice. Clearly, it is in the best interest of the professionals in the field and the associations themselves for these organizations to assume this responsibility.

Three national associations have assumed the primary leadership for this role in student affairs. The Council for the Advancement of Standards (CAS) has developed minimum standards for professional preparation programs (CAS Board of Directors, 1994). The American College Personnel Association's (ACPA) Professional Preparation Commission has created a set of minimum criteria for graduate preparation programs and denotes programs meeting those standards in its directory of graduate programs (ACPA, 1999). ACPA and the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA) provide a wide array of conference activities to their members and other non-member generalists in the field of student affairs. They have also stepped up efforts in recent years to provide high quality intensive experiences at venues across the nation with a variety of themes including level of practice, issues "de jour," and topics of perennial interest such as assessment and diversity.

Specialty groups that organize around the functional areas of student affairs practice also provide professional development activities. The American

Association of College and University Housing Officers – International (ACUHO-I), the Association of College Unions – International (ACUI), and the Association for Student Judicial Affairs (ASJA) are some of the most visible. Clearly, there is a great deal of professional development activity. Carpenter (1988) reported that “sessions are offered, speakers are hired, themes are played out, workshops are conducted [but] . . . with little continuity and less coherence from year to year” (p. 166). Moore and Neuberger (1998) also concluded that, depending on the issue, the quality, timeliness, and relevance of these programs has varied.

These activities, however, fall short of the recommendations made by those concerned less about quantity and more about quality assurance. The quality of these programs varies widely and the learning outcomes are rarely or poorly assessed. Additionally, professionals are not encouraged or recognized for being intentional in their professional development efforts.

Attempts to Create Formal, High Quality Systems of Continuing Professional Education at the National Level

The concern for ensuring a high quality workforce in student affairs is not a new issue. Those wishing to know more about the history of this issue prior to 2000 are referred to Carpenter’s 1998 work entitled *Continuing Professional Development*, cited in this article.

More recently in 2000, NASPA’s Board of Directors passed a resolution asking program planners to include the following information for all professional development activities: (a) the names of presenters and their credentials, (b) the purpose of the training activity, (c) the target audience for the training, and (d) the learning outcomes for those who participate. The resolution was offered as a first step in helping the association and its members think more purposefully about professional development (Janosik, 2002). As a second step, in 2001 NASPA’s Board of Directors adopted a policy statement entitled: *Quality Assurance in Student Affairs: Role and Commitments of NASPA* (Creamer et al., 2001). Among other things the policy statement included commitments to the following:

1. Configure the organization to promote quality in all of its services and programs to members, institutions of higher education, and related educational associations and agencies.
2. Use its resources and talents to offer educational program to members geared toward their continued education and professional improvement.
3. Offer appropriate credentials (or some form of public recognition) to individual members for successful attainment that furthers their knowledge, skill, attitudes, beliefs, and values consistent with the essential attributes necessary for successful practice of student affairs.
4. Augment the creation of mechanisms to recognize and reward individual member learning and development through highly visible professional establishments.

5. Seek collaboration with other student affairs professional organization to create and widely disseminate a common statement of professional ethical standards.
6. Align the organization strategically with other associations with similar purposes to maximize educational benefits to members, institutions, and students. (pp. 12-13).

In 2002, NASPA considered the adoption of a student affairs curriculum based on the work done by CAS on graduate preparation programs and a structured continuing professional education program. Minimum qualifications were established in each of three areas: (a) formal educational preparation, (b) supervision, and (c) continuing professional education. Those who achieved the minimum expectations in these three areas could chose to be listed in a national registry for student affairs professionals (Janosik, 2002). Although pieces of these proposals have been adopted in some fashion and NASPA has adopted the curriculum matrix as a guide, the organization has not fully operationalized or embraced these ideas.

Most recently, ACPA has commissioned a Task Force on Certification and is examining the feasibility of developing the (tentatively titled) National Institute for Student Affairs Certification (NISAC). The Task Force is currently discussing continuing education credits to maintain certification, a career development transcript, and the use of a national examination. These elements were outlined in a draft proposal developed by Blimling (2005), then President Elect of ACPA. The topic was discussed as part of ACPA's 2005 Convention held in Nashville, TN. The concepts surrounding continuing education and the career development transcript received some support while the idea of a national examination was not widely supported. Members of the Task Force continue to discuss these issues.

It is not hard to identify why progress on the issue of ensuring quality has been slow. Carpenter (1998) cites a lack of consensus about what constitutes appropriate professional practice, who best should control or prescribe practices on individual campuses, the proper role of professional associations, jurisdictional disputes among generalist and specialized organizations, and diversity among others (p. 162). Merrily Dunn, a member of the ACPA Task Force on Certification, listed the cost of attending programs, testing concerns, organizational control and power issues, discrimination, and lack of consensus on core competencies as some of the issues raised by ACPA members who attended the 2005 conference session on certification (M. Dunn, personnel communication, April 4, 2005). These are not trivial issues and should not be minimized. It must be noted, however, that professions with similar concerns have overcome them. Teachers, counselors, social workers, nurses, accountants, doctors, and lawyers are required to maintain their skills and knowledge levels through some system of continuing education. Other groups of professionals, such as the Association of Higher Education Facilities Officers (APPA), have created certificate programs that can be taken voluntarily during the course of several years at their association's annual summer

conference as a way to show professional development. These are only a few examples of a large and growing movement across a wide array of professions and occupations.

There may be much more support for such an idea among student affairs professionals than some might think. In a survey recently conducted by ACPA's Task Force on Certification the overwhelming majority of respondents ($N = 2,331$, response rate = 34.4%) supported defining a more structured system for professional development. Specifically,

1. Ninety-two percent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that it would be helpful if associations would define a professional development curriculum based on professional core competencies.
2. Ninety-three percent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that it would be helpful if associations offered some conference programs and regional workshops based on this curriculum on a consistent basis.
3. Eighty-three percent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they would support an effort to certify attendance at professional development programs that met a set of agreed upon standards by assigning continuing professional education credits to them.
4. Eight-six percent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they would participate in a program where continuing professional education credits could be voluntarily earned and recorded as a record of professional achievement.
5. Eighty-four percent of respondents favored creating a program where they could create their own career development transcript.
6. Eight-six percent of respondents indicated support for the creation of a program where members, on a voluntarily basis, could seek professional certification by their association based on their academic preparation, experience in the field, and continuing professional education. (Janosik & Carpenter, 2005).

While these results come from only one professional association, there is no reason to believe that findings from other assessments completed by other organizations would be significantly different. Accountability systems and quality assurance programs have or are being adopted in all kinds of organizations, all types of disciplines, and all professions. The notion that such mechanisms cannot be created in student affairs is naïve and borders on unhealthy denial. To the contrary, these preliminary results indicate there is widespread support for a continuing professional education and professional credentialing model that has been used by other professional associations and discussed by many in our own profession for decades.

A New Direction

To ensure a quality workforce, professional associations must agree upon and develop an intentional plan for continuing professional education. At a minimum, we believe such a plan should include consideration of the following:

1. Professional associations should adopt a student affairs curriculum driven by the work already completed by the CAS or something similar. Janosik (2002) developed a curriculum matrix for use by NASPA, and it is being used as a guide for some professional development activities. A slightly revised version is shown in Figure 1. Such a curriculum should be used as the primary framework for all professional development activities. Conference themes or building programs around a standing committee structure or hot topics of the day should be a secondary concern or focus. While the two are not mutually exclusive, the curriculum-driven approach is necessary because of the history of our associations and their conferences. Adhering to themes and rewarding creativity for the sake of being different can actually weaken a program proposal and distract from its substance. "Hot" issues come and go, and the skills and underlying theory and research to address them linger.

2. Executive directors of these professional associations should be given more responsibility and authority for developing a consistent and coherent professional development program built around this curriculum. The proportion of the program that is eligible to be affected by the annually changed conference committee and its chair should diminish dramatically, if not disappear altogether. Along with this responsibility should come accountability. The executive directors should be respected educational leaders as well as managers. There should be advisory committees to help with this programming, separate from, but reporting to, the boards of directors.

3. The major national student affairs associations should work collaboratively to develop criteria for a continuing professional education credit (CPEC) program for professional development. This collaboration 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.

4. Groups such as preparation program faculty, ACPA's Senior Scholars, NASPA's Faculty Fellows, and the Southern Association for College Student Affairs' (SACSA) Scholars should be encouraged to develop a special CPEC program for those who enter the field without formal academic preparation. Further, allied professionals, such as nurses, accountants, and similar individuals working in student affairs divisions should have a modified and limited program of study available that would give them a better knowledge of the field and their clientele.

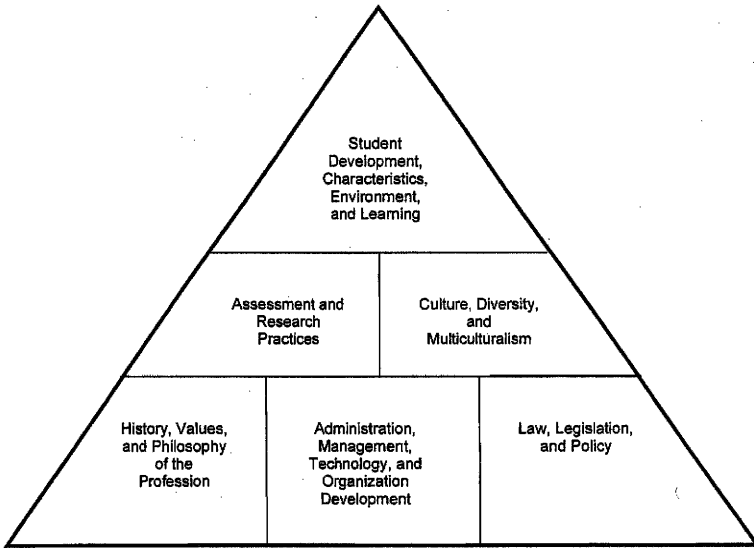


Figure 1. The Student Affairs Professional Development Curriculum

5. Professional development activities reflective of prescribed criteria and therefore qualifying for appropriate CPEC credits should be developed and offered in a wide variety of delivery modes at national, regional, and state conferences; stand alone workshops, and distance education programs using lectures, interactive video, the internet, and CD ROMs. There should be adequate formats to address the needs of all professionals that wish to participate, cutting across all barriers of budgets, travel, remote location, and cost. Everyone should have access of some kind.

6. Any marketing description of a program meeting these criteria and offered for credit (and not every program would have to be) should include (a) the names of presenters and their credentials, (b) the purpose of the training activity, (c) the target audience for the training, (d) the learning outcomes for those who participate, and (e) the place of the program within the professional development curriculum. Some sort of appropriate peer review mechanism should be used to make decisions about whether programs would qualify and whether participants have completed the necessary work. CPEC programs should be evaluated on the accomplishment of their learning outcomes not on the satisfaction with the speakers or the quality of the handouts received.

7. Members who participate in the CPEC program and achieve a required number of credits should be recognized with some seal of approval, or certificate, and/or listed in a directory that acknowledges their intentional efforts to improve their skills and knowledge. Members receiving such distinction might be designated with some special status or given reduced memberships rates as incentives. Regardless of the mechanism, it should come to be thought of as normal and expected to participate in professional development of this type on a regular basis. In fact, to maintain the level of status called for above, professionals would need to participate in a prescribed amount of continuing professional education annually.

Conclusion

All professional associations have an obligation to ensure the quality of professional preparation and practice and to improve the skills and knowledge base of their members. We maintain that professional associations in student affairs have been too passive on both counts. The future of our profession rests on the willingness of those who lead these associations to do more. If national associations cannot agree on how to implement a continuing professional education program, regional associations should develop them as models for the rest to follow.

Further, we clearly recognize that part or the entire model may not be adopted immediately or perhaps at all. The exact template is not as important as the need for certain underlying principles to be actualized. Whatever process of continuing professional education is eventually adopted must be (a) profession-wide in scope and content; (b) firmly founded on the principles of professional peer review; (c) research and theory based that is regularly and rigorously reviewed by expert

thinkers and writers in the field; (d) accessible to all and responsive to diverse needs in terms of content, delivery, and learning styles; (e) voluntary, but involve a recognition mechanism which will come to be the expected standard; and (f) challenging. If these criteria are met, the profession will be well served and our various clienteles, especially students, will benefit.

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