Skill Development Among Student Affairs Professionals

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This study examined the perception of skill level among new professionals, mid-managers, and senior student affairs officers in NASPA Region III. The instrument contained 72 skill statements in 10 categories. Findings indicate there are differences between the groups for all categories except for technology.

As student affairs professionals have an obligation to be familiar with student development theories, they also have an obligation to understand their own growth and development (Conneely, 1994; Grace-Odeleye, 1998). Within student affairs there are distinguishable skills and stages that professionals attain in their careers (Carpenter & Miller, 1981). Knowing those competencies and stages assists in planning, supervision, and mentoring (DeCoster & Brown, 1983). Professional development allows administrators to achieve these competencies, as the outcome of professional development includes rejuvenation and new ideas, skill attainment, and ultimately, better service to students (Conneely, 1994).

Carpenter (1979) and Carpenter and Miller (1981) found that human development theory was useful in the study of professional development in student affairs. They originally proposed four developmental stages: formative (graduate and/or paraprofessional preparation), application (beginning to intermediate practice with further preparation), additive (intermediate to upper level practice with policy making and increased professional sharing), and generative (upper level practice through retirement). More recent research (Carpenter, 2003) concluded that the generative stage probably did not exist. He concluded that developmental stages can be identified and that growth can be measured to a certain extent.

Research has been conducted to determine competencies or characteristics of professionals in different levels of the profession, usually classified as new professional, mid-manager, and senior student affairs officer (SSAO, also known as chief student affairs officer, or CSAO). New professionals are defined as persons who have been working full time in the student affairs profession up to five years (Scott, 2000). Mid-managers are defined as individuals who (a) occupy a position which reports directly to the CSAO or

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(b) occupy a position which reports to a person who reports directly to a CSAO and are responsible for the direction, control, or supervision of one or more student affairs functions, or one or more professional staff members; individuals usually reporting to a CSAO who manage an administrative unit and normally supervise other professional staff, budgets, etc. (Fey, 1991). Senior student affairs officers are usually defined as practitioners with 10 or more years of experience and division-wide responsibility (including assistant and associate vice presidents, deans, and directors; Scott, 2000).

Randall and Globetti (1992) found that college presidents wanted CSAOs to have (in order from highest to lowest priority) integrity, commitment to institutional mission, conflict resolution skills, decisiveness, motivation, support of academic affairs, staff supervision skills, planning skills, and flexibility. The lowest rated skills included scholarly publications, research capabilities, and facility management.

Fey and Carpenter (1996) found that mid-managers identified leadership, fiscal management, personnel management, communication, professional development, research and evaluation, and student contact as important skills to possess. In addition to those, Scott (2000) included conflict resolution and mediation skills, mentoring, advising student groups, technology management, understanding the big picture, networking, and skills in chairing committees, writing reports, and problem solving.

New professionals have particular needs. Scott (2000) identified these needs as understanding student development theory; learning to apply theory to practice; career development; learning how to network; developing a sense of professionalism; learning how to work with student leaders and groups; skill development; using technology; developing professional ethics; professional association involvement; relating to peers, colleagues, and supervisors; and balancing work and personal life.

In a meta-analysis, Lovell and Kosten (2000) clarified the skills, knowledge, and personal traits that have been researched about student affairs professionals in the past 30 years. Skills included administration and management; human facilitation; research, evaluation, and assessment; communication; leadership; student enrollment and participation; role of educator; and entrepreneurial skills. Knowledge included student development theory; functional unit responsibilities; academic background; organizational development and behavior; federal policies and regulations; and student needs, values, and behaviors. Personal traits included interactive qualities (such as working cooperatively) and individual traits (such as enthusiasm).

As the nature of the student affairs profession has changed in recent years and increased in complexity, new skills have been identified. Diversity (Benke & Disque, 1990), technology (Kruger, 2000; Lovell & Kosten, 2000), and legal issues (Pope & Reynolds, 1997; Scott, 2000) are areas that have expanded in the student affairs profession, leading to additional professional development responsibilities for acquiring these new skills. The primary purpose of this investigation was to assess the self-perceived level of skill development of student affairs practitioners in Region III of the National Association of Student Affairs Administrators (NASPA) in 10 categories.

Method

The population for this study included student affairs professionals in NASPA Region III. For the purposes of this study, the international members, faculty members, duplicate addresses, and those no longer in the region or who did not fit the criteria were deleted, leaving 803 professional affiliates who were sent surveys. Based on the original mailing and two follow up mailings, the final response rate was 62%.

Based on previous surveys developed by Kane (1982), Windle (1998), and Carpenter (1979), a survey was developed to gather data from student affairs professionals about their performance on 72 skills. The previous instruments divided skills into seven categories. This survey included 10 categories with 5 to 13 statements in each category: leadership (13 items); fiscal management (7 items); personnel management (9 items); communication (5 items); professional development (6 items); research, assessment, and evaluation (8 items); and student contact (7 items). Based on current literature, three new categories of legal issues (5 items), diversity (6 items), and technology (6 items) were added. Kane's (1982) earlier instrument yielded a Cronbach's alpha (reliability coefficient) of .72 to .88, and the Cronbach's alpha for this study ranged from .79 to .92.

Based on the work of Carpenter (1979), the following scale was used for participants to rate their self-perceived skill level:

1. I have not begun working on this yet.
2. I have begun working on this.
3. I am actively working on and concerned with this.
4. I am still working on this, but I am less concerned with it than I once was.
5. I feel that I have essentially mastered or accomplished this.

Results

Table 1 indicates the means and standard deviations of the skill categories by administrative level—new professionals, mid-managers, and senior student affairs officers. An Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was computed to compare

Table 1

Differences in Skill Attainment Perceptions by Administrative Level

Skill Category	New Professional (n=86) M (SD)	Mid-manager (n=332) M (SD)	Senior Student Affairs Officer (n=58) M (SD)	F	Eta²
Leadership (n=475, df=2,472)	3.10 (.61)[a]	3.78 (.62)[b]	3.93 (.54)[b]	48.16*	0.17
Student Contact (n=476, df=2,473)	3.13 (.68)[a]	3.93 (.70)[b]	3.96 (.67)[b]	47.34*	0.17
Communication (n=476, df=2,473)	3.36 (.68)[a]	4.03 (.68)[b]	4.23 (.67)[b]	39.43*	0.14
Personnel Mgt. (n=475, df=2,472)	2.22 (.83)[a]	3.66 (.84)[b]	4.04 (.72)[c]	120.85*	0.34
Fiscal Management (n=474, df=2,471)	2.14 (.83)[a]	3.32 (.92)[b]	4.01 (.73)[c]	89.05*	0.27
Professional Dev. (n=474, df=2,471)	2.74 (.73)[a]	3.50 (.93)[b]	3.70 (.76)[b]	29.37*	0.11
Research, Evaluation, & Assessment (n=473, df=2,470)	2.18 (.88)[a]	3.23 (.95)[b]	3.86 (.72)[c]	65.36*	0.22
Legal Issues (n=475, df=2, 472)	2.32 (.84)[a]	3.43 (1.01)[b]	3.81 (.79)[c]	55.87*	0.19
Technology (n=475, df=2,472)	3.50 (.82)[a]	3.46 (.82)[a]	3.57 (.78)[a]	0.51	0.00
Diversity (n=475, df=2, 472)	3.20 (.95)[a]	3.65 (.85)[b]	3.83 (.83)[b]	11.58*	0.05

*p<.001

M=Mean, SD=Standard Deviation

Note: Across each row, different superscripts indicate statistically significant differences in the means between administrative level by skill category.

the means of the administrative levels for each of the skill categories. The F statistic indicated that the means are far apart relative to the variation within each group for all of the categories except for technology. The Eta-squared statistic is the percentage of variance explained by group membership (administrative level). The Tukey HSD (Honestly Significant Difference, alpha = .05) was used for post hoc analysis to determine significant differences between each administrative level in the 10 skill categories, noted by the superscript after the standard deviations (Glass & Hopkins, 1996). Different subscripts in each row represent statistically significant differences.

The highest rated individual skill for all administrative levels was "maintaining appropriate levels of confidentiality" in the communications category, with means ranging from 4.08 to 4.62 on a 5-point scale. New professionals rated their mastery highest in technology (examples include "using technology to find information" and "developing services for distance learners") and communication (examples include "writing effective correspondence and reports" and "effectively communicating with the media"), while they rated their skill mastery lowest in the area of fiscal management ("analyzing financial reports" and "projecting future priorities and needs"). Mid-managers rated themselves highest in communication and student contact (examples include "advising student groups" and "including students in policy-making decisions"), while they were actively working on the area of research, evaluation, and assessment (examples include "utilizing results of studies" and "developing a comprehensive assessment plan") and fiscal management. The senior student affairs officers rated their skills highest in communication and personnel management ("training staff using appropriate instructional techniques" and "evaluating professional staff"). SSAOs, while having somewhat mastered many of the skills, rated their technology skills lowest.

Overall, the new professionals rated their mastery level lower than mid-managers and senior student affairs officers, except for the technology category (which revealed no statistically significant difference). For all categories except technology, the mid-managers were closer in their scores to senior student affairs officers than they were to new professionals. For all categories except diversity, the mid-managers had a greater standard deviation than the new professionals or senior student affairs officers. The largest difference between new professionals and mid-managers was in the personnel management category.

Discussion

All professionals perceive themselves to have fairly strong communication skills. The highest rated individual skill for all groups was "maintaining appropriate levels of confidentiality," which makes sense given the student

affairs environment. Technology was rated the highest among new professionals and lowest among senior student affairs officers, perhaps because new professionals have been exposed to computer resources more than SSAOs.

The results of this survey support the professional development stage theory, which suggests that staff members should achieve a mastery level to successfully progress to the next level. Other than for the technology area, the administrative levels proceeded in a stair-step fashion. That is, at each administrative level, the self-reported competencies were higher than at the previous administrative level. As professionals progress through their careers, they have more opportunities to apply theory and knowledge, continue learning skills, and take responsibility for educating and developing others.

Based on their low means, new professionals need the most improvement in fiscal management; research, evaluation, and assessment; and personnel management. Their responses indicate that they have begun working on these areas; they probably have not had the opportunity to gain competence in these areas early on in their careers. As mid-managers progress in the profession to the SSAO level, they probably need greater experience in fiscal management, personnel management, and legal issues.

While professional preparation programs have focused on preparing students to be new professionals, there is a broader implication. Professional preparation programs can use this information to update curricula to better reflect the current skills practitioners expect for new professionals, as well as to instruct on the skills needed to progress in the profession. This survey can be a diagnostic instrument used throughout one's career to determine areas for improvement.

Professional associations provide many opportunities for professional development regardless of administrative level. Because the terms new professional, mid-manager, and senior student affairs officer are somewhat subjective, professional organizations may want to more clearly define the terms in order to develop programs to meet specific needs. Institutes, such as the New Professional's Institute or Mid-Manager's Institute can use this information to create appropriate learning objectives. Professional associations could provide tracks at conferences to meet the needs of each administrative level. Functional associations must also develop specific programs to assist staff in learning necessary skills to be competent in specialized student affairs areas.

Administrative levels are difficult to absolutely define simply through length of service, practitioner preparedness, and continuing education. The skill factor

can depend on institution size, institution type, individual experience, academic background, individual and institutional financial resources, and continuing education programs. Those factors may provide insight as to appropriate learning interventions for individuals throughout their careers.

One benefit of student affairs is the diversity of functional areas and people who enter the profession, but that is also a challenge as associations and institutions try to meet the development needs of their members in a consistent, cost-effective manner. The complexity increases when one considers variables such as preparation program, size and type of institution, years in the profession, functional area, administrative level, skill requirements, and current issues in student affairs. The various professional associations should continue to discuss continuing professional education to resolve the issues identified, because they are in the best position to take the lead in large-scale changes in the profession.

Divisions of student affairs play an integral part in educating their staff members. Ideally, senior student affairs officers will express their philosophy, expectations, and values surrounding student affairs. Student affairs divisions should develop a planning committee that is empowered to develop programs, promote education, and meet the overall needs of staff. Financial and human resources need to be provided to develop quality programs. Planning committees should also be familiar with adult learning concepts in order to meet the specific needs of their audience.

On a division or department level, particular skills should be identified by function and administrative level, and senior staff can make decisions about the structure and content of continuing professional development opportunities and accountability. Thus, staff development could take place by administrative level to meet individual and group needs and improve the quality of staff members serving students.

The results of this research add to Winston and Creamer's (1997) Integrated Model of Staffing Practices. This model illustrates the relationship between recruitment and selection, orientation, supervision, staff development, and performance appraisal within the institutional culture and environment. It provides information about specific skills used at specific administrative levels, which affect supervision and staff development performance appraisal at the very least. Using the results of this survey or individual administration of the survey can assist staff members in choosing the right position or determining areas of improvement, and institutions can use this to assist in training and development efforts.

While professional preparation programs, professional associations, institutions, supervisors, and individuals are involved in the professional

development process, individuals are primarily responsible for their own development. Individuals can use the instrument from this research as a self-assessment tool for developing a professional development plan that focuses on their own needs.

Future Research

In terms of additional research, this survey could be used within different populations, such as other NASPA regions, to see if it yields the same results to be more generalizable for the profession. In addition, it could be used within one functional area or within one administrative level. Several of the similar previous studies focused on middle managers, but future research could also focus on new professionals or senior student affairs officers or the transitions between levels. Also, as student affairs professionals practice internationally, research could be conducive to survey people working outside of the United States or those people who were educated outside of the country.

Some of the reliability and validity measures came from previous use of similar surveys. More applications of this survey will improve evidence of validity and reliability for the repeated questions and the new questions added to this instrument. In addition, the skill-related questions could be factor analyzed to determine if those skills are in the correct categories and relevant to the student affairs practitioner. The three new categories added to this survey (legal issues, technology, and diversity) need additional research to determine if the skills described are comprehensive, meaningful, and appropriate.

It might be interesting to compare professionals who have a student affairs preparation program degree and those without. Many skills do not seem unique to higher education or student affairs. This research could give an indication of what, if any, additional training and continuing education that non-student affairs educated staff need as they participate and interact with those who possess a student affairs degree.

Student affairs mid-managers were the largest proportion of NASPA Region III members answering this survey, which may be related to the definition used for this study. Defining mid-management is difficult. The definition of new professionals seems to be based on time in the profession, while senior student affairs officers are defined by the scope of their position. Further defining mid-managers will help define their needs and what education is needed to meet those needs.

A qualitative methodology should be used to gain rich and deep information from professionals about what skills they see themselves needing to master, how they prefer to learn, and what professional development means to them. This line of inquiry would provide more personal stories and inductive

information to enhance the quantitative results. Looking at the topic from multiple perspectives could provide ideas about professional development plans, association activities, and institutional priorities.

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