

Mid-Level Student Affairs Managers: Skill Importance and Need for Continued Professional Development

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The purpose of this national study was to profile mid-level student affairs managers and to determine the importance they placed on professional development skills. The need for further skill development was compared to perceived skill importance. Preferred methods of staff development were also ascertained. Most popular were conferences, discussions with colleagues, and workshops.

Literature about staff development in student affairs began to appear in the 1960s. In his seminal paper written on the topic in 1964, Truitt (1969) outlined a set of recommendations for a structured, in-service development program. Among his suggestions were ideas for enhancing orientation for new staff, increasing staff morale through shared responsibility, encouraging creative staff contributions, encouraging staff leadership in on-going programs, and raising aspirational levels of staff.

Several years later, Stamatakos and Oliaro (1972) deplored the dearth of literature about student affairs staff development. In the 33 years since their admonitions, literally dozens upon dozens of chapters, books, and articles have been published about staff development in student affairs, albeit many are opinions, models, and research limited by small samples and by the regional nature of the studies.

Review of Literature

Among authors who have written about student affairs professional development are Creamer and Shelton (1988), DeCoster and Brown (1991), Delworth (1978), Miller (1975), Rhatigan and Crawford (1978), Winston and Creamer (1997), and Young (1990). Delworth (1978) and colleagues described approaches to interpersonal skill development, as well as uses of materials and manuals. Rhatigan and Crawford (1978) investigated staff needs and found that student affairs personnel preferred discussions rather than reading activities. Creamer and Shelton (1988) conducted a comprehensive literature review about graduate preparation and in-service education. Young (1990) edited an anthology devoted to mid-level student affairs managers and included a chapter on professional development strategies. DeCoster and Brown (1991) offered broad perspectives on the topic and compiled an extensive list of references about staff development.

In 1973 Miller (1975) surveyed more than 500 members of the American College Personnel Association about staff development activities. In rank order his respondents preferred (a) attending workshops away from campus, (b) bringing

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outside experts to campus, (c) presenting do-it-yourself programs, (d) attending professional association conferences, and (e) taking graduate courses. His findings, however, were not conclusive because of a 39% response rate and because his data were not organized by functional area.

Winston and Creamer (1997) wrote an insightful and useful chapter on staff development for their book, *Improving Staffing Practices in Student Affairs*. The authors described the persistent issues in staff development, details about current practices from the literature, a model for development, and their recommendations for practice. Among the issues were a lack of integration with other staffing practices, lack of systematic assessment of staff needs, and questionable quality of planned activities. They recommended that student affairs divisions should have written policies about development activities, that staff development should be connected to improvements suggested in supervisor-staff assessments, that programs should enhance individual goals for development, and that programs should use a variety of delivery methods.

In the interval between 1972 and 1998, several graduate students (Carpenter, 1980; Dickman, 1986; Fey, 1991; Haines, 1996; Ivy, 1981; Kane, 1982; Lemoine, 1985; Merkle, 1979; Volp, 1982; Windle, 1998) focused their doctoral research on student affairs staff development. Carpenter (1980) surveyed student affairs professionals who were members of the American College Personnel Association ($n=200$), National Association of Student Personnel Administrators ($n=200$), and National Association for Women Deans, Administrators and Counselors ($n=200$) with 57% furnishing usable data. Among Carpenter's conclusions were (a) job functions and responsibilities affected development stages and factors, (b) no one professional association provided a better development opportunity than others, (c) those 40 years of age or older placed more importance on development, (d) single women were further along in their development than single men, and (e) married men were more developed than married women.

Dickman (1986) selected 33 student affairs practitioners and seven graduate students from Indiana post-secondary institutions for her quasi-experimental study to examine the effects of a short-term training program on the performance and self-perceptions of student affairs staff. She found that training made a slight difference, but that the type of training did not affect performance as measured by self-ratings or supervisors' ratings.

Fey (1991) used an instrument developed by Kane (1982) with 177 members of the Texas Association of College and University Student Personnel Administrators. The typical mid-level administrator thought Personnel Management was the most important skill category, followed by Leadership, Communication, Student Contact, Fiscal Management, Professional Development, and Research and Evaluation. Respondents felt little need for development of 40 of 63 skill variables, but they thought Fiscal Management needed additional attention. Administrators with doctoral degrees rated Fiscal Management, Student Contact, and Research and Evaluation as more essential than those with other degrees. Respondents preferred

conferences (74%), workshops (58%), readings (47%), and discussions (45%) for their development activities.

In a qualitative study, Haines (1996) looked at staff development in small liberal arts colleges in Alabama and Georgia and interviewed one senior level student personnel administrator from each of nine colleges. Haines found that staff development was important and valued, but there was little consistent use of needs assessments or planning. Respondents were also unaware of adult learning theory, models, or processes.

Ivy (1981) conducted his study in eight Mississippi public universities with eight chief student affairs officers (CSAOs) and 175 student affairs staff and attempted to determine the perceptions of staff about their development needs. More than 60% of respondents in this study reported little overall need for staff development.

Kane (1982) developed an instrument containing 64 statements in seven categories to compare mid-level student affairs professionals' perceived professional skills attainment with need for further skill development. She surveyed 811 managers from the southeast region of the United States and obtained a 76% response rate. Leadership and Personnel skills were rated very important, and Research and Evaluation was rated the lowest. Large percentages of respondents reported a need for further development in the categories of Fiscal Management (64%), Leadership (60%), Personnel Management (59%), Student Contact (58%), Research and Evaluation (58%), Professional Development (55%), and Communication (50%). The most preferred skill development activities included workshops, conferences, and discussions with colleagues.

Lemoine (1985) replicated Kane's (1982) study with 817 mid-level student affairs professionals at 207 colleges with enrollments of 2,000 or less in the north central region of the United States with a response rate of 63%. Leadership skills were viewed as very important, and Research and Evaluation skills were rated less important. The most preferred development activities were workshops, conferences, and discussions with colleagues.

Merkle (1979) concentrated his efforts on the implementation of a staff development model on student affairs divisions at private colleges. He included 12 CSAOs from the Great Lakes Colleges Association and 13 from the Associated Colleges of the Midwest. He concluded that staff development should have clearly stated goals and should be planned and encouraged, a continuous and on-going process, voluntary, supported by senior leadership, and evaluated.

Volp (1982) used a meta-analysis of literature in student affairs, in business, and in health care and four case studies to determine best practices for student affairs staff development. She concluded that model programs should include (a) support from the CSAO, (b) an institutional norm that suggests personal and professional development is important and is the responsibility of each individual, (c) staff development committees, with balanced representation of departments, in charge of division-wide planning, and (d) formal and informal methods to assess needs.

Windle (1998) modified the instruments of Gordon, Strode, and Mann (1993) and Kane (1982) to conduct her study of managers who had participated in the 1995 NASPA Mid-Manager's Institutes. She used 46 skill-competency statements, organized into the seven categories listed previously. Respondents reported their performance of management skills to be average to above average. Relationship oriented competencies were perceived as higher levels of performance than global skill-competencies. She concluded that mid-level managers were committed to professional development.

Dissertations that were summarized into journal articles were those by Carpenter (Carpenter & Miller, 1981), Ivy (Cox & Ivy, 1984) and Fey (Fey & Carpenter, 1996). Most, however, were not reworked into journal articles, where a wider readership might have benefited from the findings. Many of the studies were delimited to one state or region and included only small numbers of participants; only the Carpenter study was nationwide in scope and included members of the major student personnel professional associations.

Purposes of the Study

To extend the existing literature on student affairs staff development, this national study was conducted to ascertain the professional development needs of mid-level student affairs managers. Purposes of the study were to (a) profile the characteristics of respondents, (b) determine perceived skill importance, (c) compare further perceived skill development needs with skill importance based on selected demographics, and (d) ascertain preferred methods of staff development.

Research questions guiding the study were these: (a) What are the current characteristics of mid-level student affairs professionals? (b) Is there a significant difference among respondents between the relative importance of a skill and need for continuing skill development based on student affairs functional areas; men and women; public and private institutions; degree attained, age, ethnic background, or length of time in position? (c) Is there a relationship between perceived need for continuing skill development and seeking the next desired student affairs position? (d) What activities do respondents prefer to engage in to improve their professional skills?

Methods

Participants

Participants in this study were 450 mid-level student affairs managers at four-year colleges and universities who were members of the American College Personnel Association (ACPA). They were randomly selected using a table of random numbers from a data-base of 2,731 members who self-identified as student affairs deans, directors, and associate or assistant deans or directors. The sample was 16.5% of ACPA members who were listed as mid-level student affairs managers.

Instrument

The instrument used was originally developed by Kane (1982) and allows for analysis in the categories of (a) Leadership, (b) Fiscal Management, (c) Professional Development, (d) Communication, (e) Personnel Management, (f) Research and Evaluation, and (g) Student Contact. The instrument consists of three sections of questions and contains an initial statement defining a mid-level student affairs professional and a question to ensure that the participant is an appropriate respondent.

The first section includes questions about employment (functional area of student affairs and position title), institutional information (type of institution and enrollment), number of full-time professionals supervised, total number years in student affairs, number years in current position, and next position desired. The second section contains 64 items divided into seven major skill categories. Respondents are asked to rate the items on a five-point Likert scale to determine the importance of each skill, and whether additional development of the skill would be helpful to the individual. In the third section, respondents are asked for demographic data (sex, age, highest degree completed), and whether or not an advanced degree is contemplated.

Collection of Data

In fall 2001, after appropriate approvals (American College Personnel Association; Human Subjects at the home institution) were obtained, the instrument, a cover letter, and a self-addressed stamped envelope were mailed to the sample of mid-level student affairs managers. A follow-up letter was sent to non-respondents approximately three weeks after the initial mailing to enhance responses. Three hundred forty-four instruments were returned with 269 containing usable information. Of instruments that were either non-deliverable or not usable (75), many were from recipients who were not mid-level managers, even though they had identified themselves to ACPA as such. With 75 removed from the original sample, the response rate was 72% (269 out of 375). Titles and institutions of non-respondents were similar to respondents, so no further follow-ups were attempted.

Treatment of Data

Data obtained from respondents were analyzed using the *Statistical Package for the Social Sciences*, including FREQUENCY and STATISTICS subprograms. Frequencies, means, standard deviations, percentages, and ANOVA were used to answer the research questions. All statistically significant differences were tested at $p < .05$.

Results

Characteristics of Respondents

Female respondents (53%) outnumbered males (46%). Caucasians accounted for 83%, African Americans 10%, Other 3%, Asian/Pacific Islanders 2%, and Hispanic/Latinos 1%. Ages ranged from 10% in the 20-29 age category, 38% from 30-39, 36% from 40-49, 16% from 50-59, to 1% over 60.

Respondents most often had earned a master's degree (69%); 25% held doctorates and 5% had a bachelor's as their highest degree; 20% were currently pursuing a higher degree. Sixty-eight per cent were seeking changes in their position; of those seeking changes, 22% wanted to be a CSAO; 20% were seeking a director or dean position within their functional area; 10% wanted to be a director or dean in another area; and 16% sought other positions.

The largest number of mid-level managers were employed in residence life (28%), followed by other (22%), dean's office (19%), student activities/union (15%), and counseling (13%). Three per cent did not identify a functional area. Their colleges and universities had enrollments as follows: less than 2,999 FTE students (33%), 3,000 to 5,499 (15%), 5,500 to 9,999 (11%), 10,000 to 14,999 (14%), 15,000 to 20,000 (9%), and more than 20,000 (16%). Fifty-one per cent of institutions were public and 49% were private.

The total number of years that mid-level managers had worked in student affairs ranged from less than one year (less than 1%) to 10 or more years (66%). Spending from 1 to 3 years were 8%, 4-6 years (12%), and 7-9 years (13%). The number of years in the current position ranged from less than 1 year (10%) to 10 or more years (22%), followed by 1-3 years (38%), 4-6 years (21%), 7-9 years (8%). The number of full-time professionals supervised by the respondents ranged from 0 to 35 with a mean of 5.

Typical mid-level student affairs managers as reflected in this survey were most likely to fit this profile: women (53%); Caucasian (83%); between the ages of 30 and 39 (38%); had earned a master's as their highest degree (69%); were not currently pursuing an additional degree (78%); worked in residence life (28%) at a public university (51%) with an FTE of less than 2,999 (33%); supervised five employees; had been in their present position for 1 to 3 years (38%); had worked full-time in student affairs for 10 or more years (66%); and are not seeking a change in position (32%).

Skill Importance

Skills were rated by mid-level managers on a Likert scale using the values of 5 (*essential*), 4 (*very important*), 3 (*important*), 2 (*slightly important*) and 1 (*not important*). Means between 3.4 and 3.9 were judged to be very important and those closer to a 3 were determined to be important. The highest ranked skill was Leadership ($M=3.95$), which was rated very important. Also ranked as very important were Personnel Management ($M=3.86$), Fiscal Management ($M=3.66$), Communication ($M=3.64$), Student Contact ($M=3.63$), and Professional Development ($M=3.43$). The lowest ranked skill was Research and Evaluation ($M=3.18$), which was classified as important.

Need for Continued Development

Fiscal Management was the top-ranked skill in which 61% of mid-level managers felt a need for continued development. Research and Evaluation and also Leadership were each rated by 56% as a skill needing improvement. Receiving lesser

percentages were Student Contact (46%), Personnel Management (42%), Professional Development (37%), and Communication (28%).

Table 1

Skill Importance Means in Rank Order

Skill Category	Total Responses	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Leadership	267	3.95	.46
Personnel Management	265	3.86	.65
Fiscal Management	266	3.66	.75
Communication	267	3.64	.64
Student Contact	265	3.63	.86
Professional Development	267	3.43	.72
Research and Evaluation	267	3.18	.88

5=essential; 4=very important; 3=important; 2=slightly important; 1=not important

Table 2

Need for Continued Development

Skill Category	Total Responses	% Yes
Fiscal Management	266	61%
Research and Evaluation	267	56%
Leadership	267	56%
Student Contact	264	46%
Personnel Management	265	42%
Professional Development	267	37%
Communication	267	28%

Significant Differences on Skill Importance

There was a significant difference [$F(4,254)=3.95; p=.004$] between respondents who worked in the Dean's Office ($M=3.80$) or Others ($M=3.81$), compared to those in Counseling ($M=3.30$) on the importance of the Fiscal Management skill. Counselors placed less importance on Fiscal Management than those in the other two categories. There was also a significant difference [$F(4,253)=5.27; p=.0001$] between mid-level managers in the Dean's Office ($M=3.97$) or in Residence Halls ($M=3.75$) in comparison with those in Counseling ($M=3.19$) on Student Contact. Counseling managers placed less importance on Student Contact than those in the Dean's Office or in Residence Halls. A significant difference [$F(1,264)=4.90; p=.03$] was found between male ($M=3.55$) and female ($M=3.72$) respondents on the importance of Communication. Women placed a greater emphasis on this skill than men. There were no differences between managers at public versus private institutions in how they rated the importance of a skill or the need for continued development. A significant difference [$F(2,262)=5.34; p=.005$] was found between those having earned a master's ($M=3.15$) or doctorate ($M=3.38$) in the importance of Research and Evaluation; those with graduate degrees rated this skill category higher than those with bachelor's degrees ($M=2.52$). There was also a significant difference [$F(2,262)=5.42; p=.005$] among these same groups on Professional Development; Master's and doctoral degree holders rated this skill higher than bachelor's degree recipients. There were no differences between skill importance on the variables of age, ethnicity, or length of time in position.

Significant Differences on Continued Skill Development

A statistically significant difference [$F(4,254)=3.55; p=.008$] was found between managers in Student Activities/Union (65%) and those in Counseling (43%) on the need for continuing development of the Fiscal Management skill. There was also a statistically significant difference [$F(4,253)=2.99; p=.02$] between Student Activities/Union managers (62%) and those in Counseling (29%) on Personnel Management. Student Activities/Union managers reported more need for Fiscal Management and Personnel Management skill development than those in Counseling.

Relationships between Next Position Sought and Skills

Statistically significant differences were found in all seven skill areas for continued development and the next position sought. Significant differences [$F(4,259)=5.37; p=.0001$] for Fiscal Management were between Mid-level managers who were seeking a position as Director/Dean in their current functional area and those who sought No Change and Other. Differences for Leadership [$F(4,260)=4.831; p=.001$], for Personnel Management [$F(4,258)=4.13; p=.003$], and for Communication [$F(4,260)=4.03; p=.003$] were between aspiring Directors/Deans and those who sought CSAO positions, No Change, and Other. Differences in Professional Development [$F(4,260)=4.90; p=.001$] and in Research and Evaluation [$F(4,260)=4.23; p=.002$] were between Director/Dean hopefuls and those who sought No Change. Differences [$F(4,257)=3.17; p=.02$] in Student Contact skill were

between Director/Deans and CSAO aspirants. Mid-level managers seeking Director/Dean positions within their current functional area reported a greater need than their peers for continued development in all seven areas (from 49% to 75%). Percentages for those seeking a CSAO position were from 24% to 61% and for those aspiring to a Director/Dean position outside their current functional area were from 25% to 63%. For those desiring no change, percentages were from 21% to 51%.

Table 3

Percentages of Respondents Who Indicated a Need for Continued Skill Development by Next Position Sought

Skill	Next Position Sought				
	CSAO ^a	D/D in ^b	D/D out ^c	N/C ^d	Other
Fiscal Management	61%	75%	60%	49%	55%
Research & Evaluation	51%	64%	63%	44%	50%
Leadership	51%	63%	52%	51%	51%
Student Contact	32%	63%	61%	41%	43%
Personnel Management	30%	62%	53%	39%	31%
Professional Development	42%	61%	55%	29%	39%
Communication	24%	49%	25%	21%	22%

a. CSAO=Chief Student Affairs Officer

b. D/D in=Director/Dean within Functional Area

c. D/D out=Director/Dean outside Functional Area

d. N/C=No Change

Activities to Improve Professional Skills

Conferences (66%) were the most preferred method for improving professional skills, followed by discussion with colleagues (55%), and workshops (50%). Readings were preferred by 35%, mentor relationships by 34%, and sabbaticals by 31%. Also listed were classes/internships (12%), staff meetings (5%), and other (5%). It should be noted that respondents were allowed to select more than one activity.

Discussion

Characteristics of student affairs mid-level managers have changed in the last two decades. Currently, percentages of women (53%) are higher than in previous studies; Ivy (1981) found 40% women. There were fewer minorities (17%) in this study than in Ivy's (24%), but that may have been because Ivy conducted his study in a southern state. Ages varied only slightly; 53% were over the age of 40, compared with 51% in Fey's (1991) study. There are also differences in highest degrees and years experience in student affairs. Ivy found 58% with master's degrees and 23% with doctorates, while 69% had master's and 25% doctorates in this study. Lemoine (1985) reported six years experience in the field; Ivy found eight years; 10 years was the average in this study, indicating that mid-level managers are an experienced group and are remaining in their positions longer than previously.

Typical mid-level managers seem to be content with a master's degree, as evidenced by the finding that nearly 80% were not seeking advanced degrees. Perhaps this should not be surprising when it is realized that 53% of respondents in this study were women and that more than one-half were 40 years of age or older. These women may be comfortable in their current settings and do not aspire to additional education.

Mid-level managers continue to rate Leadership and Personnel Management as the most important skills needed in their positions. Kane's (1982) respondents ranked Leadership and Personnel skills as very important and Fey's (1991) sample rated Personnel Management as the most important skill followed by Leadership.

Female mid-level managers believe that they are effective communicators. In this study, Communication was rated as the skill requiring least development. Fey (1991) and Kane (1982) reported similar findings.

Research and Evaluation do not appear to be valued by mid-level managers as much as other skills. Research and Evaluation was also rated lowest by Kane's (1982) and Fey's (1991) respondents. Perhaps this finding is a reflection of the graduate programs from which managers graduated. Many College Student Affairs graduate preparation programs do not require research courses and most have dropped their requirements for a thesis or a research paper (Keim, 1991). It is possible that mid-level managers have a poor understanding of research and evaluation and do not grasp the importance of conducting and interpreting research. Based on the authors' 50-plus years experience in student affairs, it is also posited that professional literature may not be read by mid-level managers and if it is read, may not be comprehended.

Fiscal Management was a skill needing enhancement, which was identified in this study and also by Fey (1991) and Kane (1982). Many graduate preparation programs have no specialized courses dealing with finance (Keim, 2002). Most programs undoubtedly have units on fiscal management within administrative courses, but graduates do not feel comfortable with their knowledge of fiscal matters.

Mid-level managers seeking advancement value professional development and desire opportunities to develop their skills. Most upwardly mobile professionals are interested in improving themselves for additional responsibilities or for their next position, so the desire for development was anticipated from this group of managers.

The functional area of mid-level managers is associated with different desires for professional development. This finding is similar to those of Carpenter (1980) about job functions affecting developmental stages and functions. Managers in Student Activities/Unions reported a need for development in Fiscal and Personnel Management, while managers in Counseling/Career Counseling did not place as much importance as other groups on the seven skills in this study and were least concerned with their need for continued development. It is likely that counselors are dealing with skills other than those included in this study.

Overall, the most preferred development activities found in this study differ only slightly from previous studies. Conferences, discussions with colleagues, and workshops continue to be the most popular activities. These findings parallel those of Fey (1991), Lemoine (1985), and Miller (1975). The problem with these activities is their expense, and in times of financial difficulties in higher education, few can be afforded.

Recommendations

Student affairs hiring officials need to determine whether a change is needed in the demographics of mid-level student affairs managers. Are the characteristics of female, Caucasian, 30-50 years of age, holders of master's degrees, 10 years experience in the field, appropriate? If changes are deemed necessary, CSAOs and their personnel committees need to make shifts in hiring and promotional practices. Achieving demographic changes within the Student Affairs profession via the hiring process could be challenging, however. According to the results of a study by Turrentine and Conley (2001), the numbers of women in the Student Affairs profession will continue to grow substantially while other minority groups can be expected to grow only slightly.

The perception of many managers that they do not need continued staff development is also of concern. Less than 50% thought they needed training in Student Contact, Personnel Management, Professional Development, and Communication and only 56% felt a need for enhancement in Leadership and Research and Evaluation. Raising aspirational levels of staff, as suggested long ago by Truitt (1969), continues to be important and will challenge CSAOs to encourage creative professional activities. Broader perspectives are also needed for many mid-level managers in order for them to understand the importance of skills to the profession as a whole.

Recognizing that many mid-level managers are not seeking a change in position, CSAOs and supervisors must make conscious efforts to engage these professionals in activities and projects that challenge their growth and support their future development. Additionally, CSAOs and supervisors should strive to provide

intentionally structured opportunities for those managers who are seeking advancement. As suggested by Winston and Creamer (1997), "Staff development programs must be flexible and responsive and attend to unique needs and varying levels of maturity and development of staff members" (p. 243).

Graduate preparation programs should reevaluate the emphases that they place on Fiscal Management and Research and Evaluation in their curricula and take appropriate steps to increase the level of appreciation for these skills. Finance courses should be added where none exist and Research and Evaluation should be embedded in all existing courses, even in programs that have discontinued thesis requirements. According to Carpenter and Miller (1981), "If the student affairs profession is to remain credible . . . , then research and evaluation must be given a higher priority" (p. 228).

Professional associations, CSAOs, supervisors, and those in charge of planning conferences, workshops, and other developmental programs should be cognizant of the areas of desired skill improvement of mid-level managers, as well as those areas deemed deficient. With financial exigencies, institutions might use resources closer to home; in other words, bring in speakers who do not require extensive travel arrangements. Speakers should also be able to invigorate an audience and should involve attendees in the sessions. Discussions with colleagues could probably be improved with better organization and coordination. Rather than a CSAO or other top level officer planning and executing these discussions, mid-level managers themselves should be in charge of them.

Lastly, additional research should be conducted about mid-level student affairs managers. In utilizing Kane's (1982) instrument, it became evident that the document was too lengthy (7 pages), and somewhat out-of-date (several skill categories seemed to be overemphasized and some newer skills were missing). Consequently, it may be an appropriate time to retire that survey and develop a new one.

Certainly a more in-depth look at a sample of female managers is warranted to determine the reasons for their lack of motivation for advancement. Research of managers in specific areas (i.e., Student Activities, Residence Halls, etc.) should be encouraged, as well as more large scale national studies.

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