

Knowledge and Involvement of Student Affairs Officers in Financial Decision-Making: A Challenge for the Profession

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To serve their campuses well, senior level student affairs administrators need to be involved as full partners in institutional decision-making. To do that effectively requires a variety of skills, including an understanding of higher education finance. The role of student affairs personnel in institutional financial decision-making has not been studied. Looking at variables including involvement and knowledge, the authors surveyed senior student affairs leaders to identify the factors that facilitate participation in the financial decision-making process.

In their classic article, French and Raven (1959) discussed the importance of expertise and concluded that special knowledge carried with it influence and power. Kirkpatrick and Locke (1991), supporting the position of French and Raven, wrote that expertise in the form of "knowledge of the business" (p. 49) is a necessary trait of leaders. Student affairs educators, committed as they are to student learning and development, may lack the knowledge or expertise to successfully advocate for the fiscal resources needed to do their work (Kuh & Nuss, 1990; McClellan & Barr, 2000; Schuh, 2000). Understanding how institutional fiscal officers do their work becomes an important challenge for those senior student affairs officers (SSAOs) who recognize that their involvement as informed participants in campus financing discussions helps them gain support for their programs while, as French and Raven (1959) and others (Barr & Desler, 2000; Reisser & Roper, 1999; Sandeen, 1991) suggest, enhancing their ability to influence institutional decisions, thereby increasing their value to their campuses.

Colleges and universities usually are managed using a conservative fiscal approach that minimizes debt. Real costs, however, can occur when opportunities are missed. For example, failure to add housing units or to remodel aging ones could, particularly in a competitive student recruitment market, result in decreased enrollments, high attrition, and reduced revenue. Among the reasons for going into debt is to avoid the costs that can occur if opportunities are lost. Campuses also assume debt in order to fund capital

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projects that are supportive of educational objectives (Forrester, 1988). However, debt is a long-term financial commitment, a fixed cost that may impact the resources available to fund other priorities (Hornfischer, 1997; McClellan & Barr, 2000). If only for that reason, SSAOs need to be involved when institutional decisions related to student affairs are made.

If the use of debt is central to the financial management of campuses and because senior student affairs professionals are to provide broad based campus leadership, it is important to know how involved senior leaders are in the decision-making process leading to the issuance of debt to finance student-use facilities. There are many debt instruments; for our study we selected bonds because they are widely used. In 2001, institutions of higher education issued a record \$18.6 billion in tax-exempt bonds (Blumenstyk, 2002; Fisher, 2002) suggesting that bonds are an accepted and commonly used debt financing tool. Some portion of that debt was issued to finance facilities used to support student life programming and, as a result, some of that debt became a fixed cost assumed by student affairs programs.

The research problem investigated here focuses on identifying factors that determine the extent to which SSAOs are prepared for and involved in the institutional decision making process as it concerns student affairs capital projects. The main research questions developed to address the problem of preparation and involvement were these: (a) How involved are SSAOs in the discussions leading to decisions about financing new student affairs projects on their campuses; (b) to what extent are they knowledgeable about higher education finance; and, (c) what, if any, training have SSAOs received that would prepare them for participation in discussions about the financing of student affairs capital projects?

We also hypothesized that the involvement of senior student affairs officers in institutional decision-making may vary based on the type of institutions at which they serve. And, it is possible that there is a link between the level of knowledge and the extent of involvement in decision-making. These are matters of considerable importance to the broad campus leadership role of senior student affairs professionals.

Methodology

The survey sample was selected randomly from a membership listing of colleges and universities of the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA). NASPA, with more than 8,000 members representing 1,175 campuses (NASPA, 2005), is a leading higher education organization dedicated to matters of student affairs administration, policy, and practice. From the population list of NASPA member-campus, we used systematic sampling until a total sample of 300 institutions was assembled. By searching the Web site of each institution, the SSAO was identified. Three hundred senior administrators were asked, via email survey, to respond to a survey about each of the five variables studied. Survey distribution was

accomplished by inviting participants to complete the instrument online, with the Web address link available in the email (Dillman, 2000). A second round of reminder emails was used to increase response rate.

To determine how involved and prepared student affairs campus leaders are in the decision-making process that results in the issuance of debt to build student-use facilities, we focused on five variables: (a) Involvement, (b) Knowledge, (c) Training, (d) Years of Experience, and (e) Type of Institution. A Web-based survey developed from a review of the literature was used to collect information about each of the five variables. The first survey question asked if participants had familiarity with the use of a bond for financing a new student affairs-related capital construction project and, if so, which type(s). Demographic questions concerning academic preparation, years in the profession, and institution type were included in the survey.

Survey participants were also asked to gauge their level of involvement in financing discussions and rate their knowledge of bonds and debt financing. For the purpose of providing inferential analysis, a Likert-type scale was used for a variable representing Involvement (survey question two) and a variable representing Knowledge (survey question four). For example, SSAOs were asked to rate the level of their involvement with financing decisions on a 1 to 5 scale, with 1 representing *Uninvolved* and 5 representing *Very Involved*. Participants also had the option of answering *Not Applicable*, a survey design consideration suggested by Dillman (2000). The scale design allows for both Involvement and Knowledge to be considered as interval data and dependent variables for the analysis.

The power behind the inferential analysis design used here was that it enabled us to draw conclusions about certain characteristics of a total population, in this case SSAOs at colleges and universities, using statistical procedures that reveal information about the sample. Sample data were analyzed using analysis of variance (ANOVA) testing with Tukey HSD follow-up. The ANOVA technique was chosen because it allows for testing for significant differences among groups (Turner & Thayer, 2001).

The dependent variables tested were Involvement and Knowledge, and the independent variables were Years of Experience, Type of Institution, and Training. In an additional analysis, Involvement and Knowledge were both tested as the independent variable for a dependent variable counterpart. Bonferroni correction was used to reduce the possibility of making a Type I error due to the problem of compounding alpha (four tests per variable, $P_{\text{adjusted}} = .013$).

Systematic sampling was used to control for internal and external threats to validity. To control for additional threats, the survey was first reviewed by a small group of experts, consisting of both faculty and practitioners knowledgeable in student affairs and higher education finance. The expert group checked the wording of questions and helped confirm the presence of

the main concepts supporting the five variables of interest. Moreover, a computer cookie — a small piece of information stored on the survey participant's computer for tracking purposes (UC Berkeley Library, 2005) — was used in the programming and design of the Web-survey to best ensure that each participant responded only once.

Results

Ninety-six student affairs administrators responded to the survey, for a 32% response rate. Survey respondents were from two-year (17%), four-year (43%), and graduate degree-granting (38%) institutions. Both public (58%) and private (39%) schools were represented. Three survey respondents did not supply institutional information (3%). Eighty percent of survey participants had 11 or more years of experience as student affairs administrators. Of the remainder, 11 participants had six to 10 years of experience (12%) and eight had up to five years (8%).

More than three-quarters of respondents had experience using a bond to finance a construction project during their career. Forty percent of those with experience had used a revenue bond, 35% used a general obligation bond, and 25% used other methods for financing a project or did not know bond type. A majority (53%) reported being either Very Involved or Involved, to the Extent Needed in financing discussions, while nearly one-quarter (23%) of respondents reported being Uninvolved, Not Very Involved, or Involved, but Not as Much as Needed.

With respect to professional training and preparedness, On-the-Job Training was the most frequent response ($f = 43$, 45%). Thirty-two respondents reported having relevant collegiate training, with seven of those possessing a degree in finance or accounting. Nine participants reported attending seminars, while 12 reported no academic or professional training. One-third (33%) of survey participants reported being either Not Very Knowledgeable or having No Knowledge about using bonds for financing campus projects. Fifty-seven percent described themselves as Somewhat Knowledgeable about bond use for financing campus projects. Nine SSAOs (9%) reported themselves as Very Knowledgeable.

Table 1 shows the results of the ANOVA testing. Five of the eight analyses comparing differences among groups of SSAOs yielded statistically significant results. The first group of four ANOVA tests used level of Involvement as the dependent variable. For example, the first analysis shown in Table 1 revealed a significant difference in level of Involvement in discussions leading to financing decisions when SSAOs were grouped by Years of Experience, $F(2,93) = 12.496$, $p < .001$. Tukey HSD follow-up for the first analysis showed this difference in Involvement occurred between those with 10 years or less experience in student affairs administration and those with more than 20 years of experience.

Table 1

Summary Results for the Inferential Analysis (ANOVA) in the Study

Dependent Variable	Independent Variable	ANOVA Significance?	Results of Tukey HSD Follow-up Testing
Involvement	Yrs of Experience	YES $F_{2,93}=12.496$, $p<.001$	$M_{(<10 \text{ yrs})} < M_{(>20 \text{ yrs})}$
Involvement	Type of Institution	NO	n/a
Involvement	Training	YES $F_{4,91}=4.039$ $p=.005$	$M_{(\text{none})} < M_{(\text{OJT})}$ or $M_{(\text{seminar})}$
Involvement	Knowledge	YES $F_{3,92}=13.562$ $p<.001$	$M_{(\text{not very})}$ or $M_{(\text{none})} <$ $M_{(\text{somewhat})}$ or $M_{(\text{very})}$
Knowledge	Yrs of Experience	NO	n/a
Knowledge	Type of Institution	YES $F_{2,90}=5.530$ $p=.005$	$M_{(2 \text{ yr})}$ or $M_{(4 \text{ yr})} <$ $M_{(\text{grad})}$
Knowledge	Training	NO	n/a
Knowledge	Involvement	YES $F_{5,90}=10.835$ $p<.001$	$M_{(\text{uninvolved})} <$ $M_{(\text{involved})}$ or $M_{(\text{very})}$

The second analysis, Involvement grouped by Type of Institution, did not show significance. Third, the ANOVA testing Involvement when grouped by level of Training SSAOs received in finance or accounting also proved to be significant at $F(4,91) = 4.039$, $p = .005$. Follow-up testing revealed this difference lies between those with No Training and both those with On-the-Job Experience and Seminar Training.

The fourth ANOVA test, Involvement grouped by Knowledge level, also yielded a significant result, $F(3,92) = 13.562$, $p < .001$, and the difference among groups exists between SSAOs either with No Knowledge or Not Very Knowledgeable and those who are Somewhat or Very Knowledgeable.

The second group of four ANOVA tests uses Knowledge level as the dependent variable. For example, the fifth analysis shown in Table 1,

Knowledge grouped by Years of Experience, did not show significance. The sixth analysis, Knowledge grouped by Type of Institution, did show significance at $F(2,90) = 5.530$, $p = .005$. Tukey HSD follow-up for the Knowledge by Type of Institution test showed a significant difference between the knowledge held by SSAOs at graduate degree-granting universities and the knowledge level of those serving at either two-year or four-year institutions. The seventh analysis, Knowledge grouped by Training, did not show significance. The eighth and final ANOVA test depicted in Table 1, Knowledge grouped by Involvement level, yielded a significant result, $F(5,90) = 10.835$, $p < .001$, and the difference among groups exists between SSAOs who were either Very Involved or Involved and those who were Uninvolved.

In addition to the inferential analyses depicted in Table 1, an analysis comparing public and private institutions was performed using the *t*-test procedure. No significant differences were found for either the Knowledge or Involvement variables when survey data were grouped in this manner. However, simple correlative analysis yielded results of interest in light of the findings of the ANOVA testing. For example, Involvement was highly positively correlated with Knowledge ($r = .552$, $p < .01$), Years of experience ($r = .460$, $p < .01$), and Type of Institution ($r = .353$, $p < .01$). Knowledge was positively correlated with Training ($r = .215$, $p < .05$), Years of Experience ($r = .226$, $p < .05$), and Type of Institution ($r = .244$, $p < .05$). Inferential observations associated with the ANOVA tests and other analyses are discussed in greater depth in the next section.

Discussion

The survey invited respondents to add comments. One SSAO observed, "This is an important survey because most senior student affairs professionals have limited financial experience. There is a need for greater understanding of financing higher education, not just capital financing." Expertise in financial matters was cited by Sandeen (1991) as a requirement to be met by those SSAOs who expect to play an effective leadership role as members of the campus executive management team. Another respondent, supporting Sandeen's observation, said, "The challenge for senior student affairs officers is to [be] seen as an 'equal player' in the discussions about capital improvement." The results of the study indicate that involvement and knowledge are potentially important factors to be considered when defining the role of SSAOs as campus leaders.

Involvement

One of the research questions was designed to investigate how involved SSAOs were in institutional discussions leading to financing decisions for student affairs-related capital projects. The analysis revealed significant differences among survey participants in their level of involvement. The first significant difference was based on experience. Specifically, there was a significant difference in the level of involvement between those leaders who

had 10 years or less experience and those with over 20 years of senior level administrative experience. For those who have been in senior positions for 10 or fewer years, fully 90% were either not involved or not as involved as they felt they should have been. Sixty-nine percent of those who held senior positions for more than 10 years and who had experience with bond financing reported that they were either very involved or as involved as they needed to be. The lack of involvement by those less experienced respondents appears quite straightforward, and is perhaps due to simple deference to seniority and administration etiquette. However, as we illustrate later in this discussion, lack of knowledge may motivate self-exclusion from these important institutional discussions.

We found that the student affairs leaders who were most involved in the decision-making process gained information on financing from either on-the-job training or seminar sessions. A respondent said it well: "I'm always interested in learning more, but I find very few places to gain this other than through experience." This finding may run contrary to traditional notions of professional training and preparedness, usually obtained during the process of graduate education. As practitioners gain experience, our findings suggest they also gain involvement. There is a risk: on-the-job training takes time, opportunities for involvement in the decision-making process may be missed while the SSAO is busy gaining experience.

Although there was no statistically significant difference in level of involvement based on type of institution, many of the senior leaders at two-year colleges reported being either not involved or not as involved as they felt they needed to be when financing that impacted student support facilities was arranged. However, their colleagues at graduate degree granting campuses reported being at least as involved in those decisions as they needed to be. This result may be an indication of fewer student services specific building projects at two-year institutions. Fifty-nine percent of the respondents at two year campuses, compared to 97% of those at graduate degree granting universities, reported being a member of a student affairs administrative staff when student services related facilities were constructed, suggesting institutional type influences opportunities for participation. However, only 24% of the respondents had not, at any point in their careers, been on a campus when student services facilities had been planned and built. There is, then, the strong likelihood that senior student affairs administrators will, at sometime, have the opportunity to contribute to the institutional decision-making process leading to the financing and construction of a student support facility.

We looked at the question of involvement from a fourth perspective, with knowledge as an independent variable, and found that student life administrators who were not very knowledgeable or who had no knowledge reported significantly less involvement in financing decisions versus those who were somewhat or very knowledgeable. Knowledge and understanding appear

to be key for SSAOs to gain membership at the decision-making table, even when the discussions are about student affairs related facilities.

Knowledge

A research question was designed to explore the notion of knowledge of bonds and debt financing. As with involvement and years of experience, we anticipated that there would be a relationship between knowledge of financing and years of professional experience; however, no statistical relationship was established. One of the participants noted that “most senior student affairs professionals have limited financial knowledge” but that is an observation that we were unable to substantiate. Additional study will be required to explain this unanticipated result.

The results obtained on the dependent variable, Knowledge, when grouped by Institution type, were similar to the result obtained when Involvement was the dependent variable. Student affairs professionals at graduate degree granting universities reported significantly more knowledge about financing, including debt financing, than did practitioners at two- and four-year campuses. The number of community colleges expanded by threefold during the 20 years prior to 1975 but that growth has slowed (Cohen, 1998). However, student enrollments at two-year campuses continue to grow (Gerald & Hussar, 2001), suggesting that new facilities, including those that support student services, will be needed. The fact that senior student affairs professionals at these campuses are not involved and are not knowledgeable is an area for further research.

A research question was designed to measure the impact of training that SSAOs have received in finance or accounting. Although a positive correlative relationship was found to exist between Knowledge and Training, respondents who reported having taken courses as an undergraduate or graduate student in finance, accounting, or related fields did not differ significantly in terms of financing knowledge from those respondents without that academic background. It may be that higher education finance, and particularly debt financing in the higher education environment, are specialized fields and that on-the-job training or focused seminars are more frequently used training formats, an observation that compliments the findings discussed above in the Involvement section.

Finally, using Knowledge as the dependent variable, grouped by Involvement acting as an independent variable, yielded results that indicated that those who characterized themselves as involved or very involved reported a significantly higher knowledge level versus those who were uninvolved. This result is consistent with what was reported above using the same two variables and supports the conclusion that knowledge about financing is a key to gaining involvement when financing decisions are made.

Limitations

Limitations for this study include those inherent in the research design, characteristics of the variables, and the sample. For example, due to the voluntary nature of the survey, administrators choosing to participate were, by definition, self-selected; it is not known how the characteristics of these volunteer participants differ from those who decided not to participate. An important limitation derives from the fact that the dependent variables used for the study, Involvement and Knowledge, were treated as singular items when, in practice, these variables have multiple dimensions. Another limitation arises from sample size in that the total sample for this study represents less than two percent of all SSAOs in the United States. Therefore, while providing a general understanding of campus finance from a student affairs perspective, the sample is not sufficiently representative of all SSAOs working in the profession. This research should be considered preliminary and suggestive of how leaders with similar characteristics view certain matters of campus finance.

Implications

Building on Sandeen's (1991) observations, senior student affairs leaders who are not prepared to participate fully in financial discussions and the related decision-making processes limit their ability to serve the institution. If those discussions involve facilities related to student affairs programming, under-prepared and non-involved senior administrators will be disadvantageously positioned and unable to serve the best interests of their programs. At multiple levels those decisions are too important to the advancement of the goals of student affairs programs on every campus to be left to persons who are not part of the program.

Twenty years ago, Pembroke (1985) scolded student affairs professionals for "not being prepared to effectively confront the resources battle that inevitably erupts on any college campus" (p. 84). His recommendation was that by becoming more involved as operational managers, student affairs leaders could become fully participating members, "equal partners," of the institution's management team. And, more recently, the effective management of resources was cited as good practice in student affairs (Blimling, Whitt, & Associates, 1999). This study suggests that not all senior administrators have heeded this advice. An implication of that failure is that under-prepared SSAOs may not be involved when decisions are made that impact their areas of responsibility. Being left out of that decision-making loop has both short and long-term negative consequences that will impact the ability of the senior student affairs administrator to provide effective campus leadership. In addition, SSAOs who lack the knowledge expected of those who participate in financial decision-making, even when the decisions impact student affairs programs, are likely to be less effective advocates for those areas.

Recommendations for Practice and Research

Acquiring the skill sets needed to be knowledgeable financial managers and full partners when financing discussions are held and decisions are made is a matter of adaptation that can be readily accommodated. One way is on-the-job training, an approach that, while effective, represents some risk for the practitioner. There are senior student affairs leaders who have mastered the fundamentals of financial management; they could serve as colleague mentors. For example, a knowledgeable and experienced respondent, who would make an excellent mentor-resource, reported that, "Although I have had experience with bonding residence halls, student recreation facilities, student unions etc., I gained the most experience in establishing a 501(C)3 non-profit foundation to build an off campus apartment complex for students in a public/private partnership."

Conference based seminars provide an ideal format for enhancing professional skills. Our study suggests that a finance or accounting background does not significantly impact practitioner knowledge; however, including higher education finance as required course work in practitioner graduate programs would be one way to emphasize the importance to role expectations of an understanding of finance and financial management. Chief financial officers are a resource; they are likely to welcome questions from an interested colleague. There are published resources that serve as important references. *College and University Business Administration* (Grills, 2000), presents a comprehensive approach to higher education finance theory, policy, and practice; the *ASHE Reader on Finance in Higher Education* (Yeager, Nelson, Potter, Weidman, & Zullo, 2001) and Paulsen and Smart's (2001) *The Finance of Higher Education*, are useful resources across a broad variety of issues. There are other helpful, basic publications: *Financial Management for Student Affairs Administrators* (Schuh, 1990) and Barr's (2002) *Academic Administrator's Guide to Budgets and Financial Management* are but two such examples.

Whatever knowledge gathering, skill enhancement processes are used, there clearly is a need for senior student affairs officers to become better at and more involved with fiscal resource management. There is also a need to better understand the interaction of the components that comprise the complex roles of student affairs practitioners (Hirt, Kirk, McGuire, Mount, & Nelson-Hensley, 2003), the end purpose being to assist those who are preparing to assume those duties to gain the knowledge and experience necessary to be equal partners and campus leaders. Woodward and Komives (1990) made the point that to be competent and effective leaders, student affairs professionals need "mastery of core and specialized competences" (p. 228). This study, building on the work of Sandeen (1991) and Schuh (1990), focused on one competency; further research directed at identifying others will add to the understanding of the role of senior student affairs officers, helping to inform

graduate level preparation programs, as well as conference workshops, and research activities.

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