

The Continual National Measurement and Assessment of Student Affairs Competencies

Amount of Funding Requested:

\$1,500 for the purposes of research support (graduate research assistant)

Abstract

I have developed a robust, national survey instrument for the purpose of measuring competencies among student affairs professionals. My pilot study instrument was sent to more than 2,000 student affairs professionals from 9 different institutions that represented both public and private institutions across the nation. My sample included responses from 564 student affairs professionals (28% response rate). I conducted focus group interviews to ensure content validity, and I conducted exploratory factor analyses to ensure construct validity. My resulting survey instrument has subscales that measure 13 distinct competencies, plus two subscales that measure perceptions of the campus environment. All scales were found to meet high standards of reliability. Now that I have completed the preliminary research needed to develop and validate this instrument, I request from the ACPA CPP Research Grant Committee funding to help me launch the continual measurement and assessment of student affairs professionals and their competencies.

Purpose and Rationale

The 10 professional competencies advocated by ACPA and NASPA represent a significant step for the profession (ACPA & NASPA, 2010a). Unfortunately, there is little research regarding the extent to which student affairs professionals meet these competencies. For example, although experts in the field developed the initial list of competencies using previous literature (see Lovell & Kosten, 2000), no current research has sought to verify these competencies using quantitative or qualitative data. Furthermore, there is no research identifying areas of strength and weakness among these competencies in professionals. Research on college students steadily increases every year, but there is a relative dearth of research on student affairs professionals themselves. The studies that do exist typically have small sample sizes that make it difficult to generalize to larger populations. I propose using resources from the ACPA CPP Faculty Research Grant to convert a large pilot study into a continual, national study of the profession.

In similar fashion to what the National Survey of Student Engagement (2009) does to examine undergraduate education, research has already been conducted to launch a robust National Survey of Student Affairs Professionals (NSSAP) to better understand the profession and how to advance it. This new psychometric instrument measured professionals across the nation on their self-reported knowledge, skills, and attitudes concerning the 10 professional competency areas for student affairs. The survey was administered to more than 2,000 student affairs professionals from nine different institutions across the nation, with 564 responses and almost 400 returning usable data for analysis. Data gathered from this instrument serves four purposes: 1) Examining construct validity and reliability of the competency scales, 2) Conducting research that examines to what extent student affairs professionals believe they meet these competencies, 3) refining the survey into a robust instrument that can be utilized for continual research studies on student affairs professionals, and 4) launching a continual, national study of student affairs professionals.

Resources from this grant will be used for the next iteration of this study, with the hope of getting a larger, more representative sample using the finalized instrument from the pilot study. The continual measurement and assessment of student affairs competencies will provide empirical data that can help bring to light areas of professional strength, as well as areas of needed professional development.

Review of the Literature & Relevance to CPP Goals

Professionals in student affairs are called upon daily to foster student development and success, manage staff, advocate for resources, and lead with purpose. Although it was once believed student affairs administrators needed little more than counseling skills in order to be effective, administration, management, supervision, and scholarly practice are now considered essential (Cuyjet, Longwell-Grice, & Molina, 2009; Lovell & Kosten, 2000). In fact, the list of demands placed upon student affairs administrators appears to continually grow (Fifolt, Solomon, & Owens, 2010). Herdlein (2004) found that senior student affairs officers desired a plethora of skills from even new professionals, including communication, critical thinking, conflict resolution, planning and budgeting, assessment, collaboration, problem solving, and political skills. In addition, new professionals need to “understand the relationship of student affairs to the teaching and learning process, have the ability to work collaboratively with faculty and academic administration, and have a clear and thorough understanding of working in a bureaucracy” (Herdlein, 2004, p. 65). However, the senior student affairs officers from Herdlein’s study also conveyed shortcomings with their new professionals in these areas.

Despite recognition of the importance of various skills in student affairs and the amount of time professionals spend on administrative duties, scholars note that student affairs administration has received relatively little emphasis in research (Carpenter & Stimpson, 2007; Lovell & Kosten, 2000; Saunders, Cooper, Winston, & Chernow, 2000; Stock-Ward & Javorek, 2003). Research can help professionals of all levels develop in these specified competencies. Such research should be ongoing in order to account for the changes in the culture of the profession over time. Some scholars have conducted studies of student affairs professionals that help to fill this gap in the literature (Burkard, Cole, Ott, & Stoflet, 2005; Kuk, Cobb, & Forrest, 2007; Renn & Jessup-Anger, 2008). However, these studies focused solely on new professionals, and more research is especially needed regarding midlevel to senior professionals (Sermersheim & Keim, 2005). Also, these studies were completed before the publication of the 10 professional competencies; the researchers could not examine these competencies in particular.

ACPA and NASPA commissioned two task forces to lay a foundation for future understanding of the student affairs profession. In its analysis of upcoming issues and changes in the field, the Task Force on the Future of Student Affairs stated that “providing leadership to meet the future effectively requires expanding the definition of student affairs work and focusing on ways that enable all who work with students to do so more effectively” (2010b, p. 8). This project asks the related question: What does it mean to do student affairs work “effectively”?

On July 24, 2010, the board of directors for ACPA and NASPA endorsed a joint publication entitled, *Professional Competency Areas for Student Affairs Practitioners* (2010a). This document aimed to “define the broad professional knowledge, skills, and, in some cases, attitudes expected of student affairs professionals regardless of their area of specialization or positional role within the field” (p. 3). These 10 competencies provide student affairs professionals with the ability to increase awareness of strengths and areas of needed development. The competencies include: advising, research, diversity, ethics, philosophy, human resources, governance, leadership, personal foundations, and student learning and development. Some student affairs graduate programs have already begun to reference these competencies in terms of curricular goals and learning outcomes. Disseminating these competencies is an important step for the field, and the next key step is to examine to what extent professionals report

meeting these competencies. Only then will scholars, practitioners, and national associations know where to focus developmental efforts to improve the profession.

The 10 competencies advocated by ACPA and NASPA are important for the student affairs profession, but they also lead to many important questions. For example, how do we know to what extent student affairs professionals meet these standards? Does level of education (such as a graduate degree in student affairs) or years of experience affect basic, intermediate, or advanced mastery of these competencies for professionals? What do effective divisions of student affairs do to cultivate professional development among their student affairs educators? This research aims to continue a rigorous national study of student affairs professionals to systematically understand the profession and how to advance it. This survey instrument measures professionals across the nation concerning 13 professional competency areas for student affairs (the factor analyses converted the original 10 competencies into 13). In addition, the instrument measures perceptions of institutional culture regarding research engagement in student affairs and collaborations with academic affairs. Data gathered from this instrument will be used to conduct research that empirically examines student affairs professional practice. Competencies have been part of the student affairs graduate preparation conversation for some time. The goals of this study and its potential impact on the measurement of competencies directly pertain to graduate preparation in student affairs, professional preparation, and professional development.

Research Design & Methodology

This research will utilize a quantitative, non-experimental survey research design that stems from a post-positivistic epistemology. Phase 1 of the project was to develop a robust survey of student affairs professionals based upon the 10 competencies endorsed by ACPA and NASPA. A pilot instrument of 122 items was created, and this phase is complete.

Phase 2 of the study was to administer the instrument to institutions across the nation. This phase of the project included purposefully identifying institutions and working with their senior student affairs officers in order to distribute the survey to the entire student affairs division for these campuses. This work led to an instrument that is both valid and reliable. The refined instrument is 95 items measuring 13 competencies, and this phase is complete.

The funds requested from the ACPA CPP Faculty Research Grant will be used for the next phase of the study. In essence, this phase aspires to build upon the foundation of the pilot study by launching a continual national measurement and assessment of student affairs competencies. The survey will be distributed to a random sample of ACPA members, pending approval through the proper forms. Data that is collected from the survey will be used to conduct confirmatory factor analyses and structural equation modeling. These advanced statistical techniques allow for the testing of theory and the development of models based upon statistical findings.

Also, data will be used to answer the following research questions regarding student affairs professionals and professional competencies:

- Comparisons among types of institutions
- Comparison between levels of experience
 - Relationship between experience and scores on competency subscale

- Comparison between departments/functional areas (student activities vs. residential life)
 - Relationship between functional areas and competency strengths/weaknesses
- Comparison between levels of education
 - Relationship between education and scores on competency subscales

Findings from this research will be shared through ACPA annual convention presentations and articles submitted to the *Journal of College Student Development*, *Developments*, and *About Campus*. The ultimate goal is for the National Survey of Student Affairs Professionals to become an ongoing, nationwide empirical study of the profession.

Relevance of the Research

Carpenter and Stimpson (2007) write that the challenges of scholarly practice demonstrate that “simple activity and hard work are not enough, nor even close. Only continuous reflection, commitment, learning, and growth are acceptable if we are to be of service to our students and our institutions” (p. 281). A primary purpose of the National Survey of Student Affairs Professionals will be to provide the much-needed data to conduct such reflection, thereby leading to improvements in our graduate preparatory programs, divisions of student affairs, and professional associations.

The NSSAP also has implications for future research. Fried (2002) suggests that student affairs administrators will improve practice by creating opportunities to field test new approaches and creating feedback loops between practitioners and researchers. This research will provide a foundation for future research and dialogue about the practice of student affairs. Future research could examine trends in student affairs professionals in particular competencies and whether various variables influence mastery of the competencies. Scholars and practitioners can also explore what interventions and professional development opportunities help student affairs professionals to increase their mastery in these areas. Research from a social constructivist epistemology can match the breadth of this study with depth from future studies that pertains to the meaning of the competencies for faculty, graduate students, new professionals, and senior administrators. Such research will help to further expand and develop our field, ultimately leading to more effective research and practice.

A foundational purpose and critical interest of ACPA is to enhance the practice of student affairs, particularly in terms of leadership, administration, and organizational management. This goal was the impetus behind the formation of the 10 competencies. It is also the impetus behind the creation of a credentialing implementation team. The current, proposed research project aims to promote this goal by forming a comprehensive and continual study of student affairs professionals, from those who are new to the field to those who serve as senior student affairs officers. Results will highlight strengths of current professionals in comparison to standardized competencies, as well as areas of needed development, contributing much-needed knowledge regarding the profession.

Budget:

The most important support I need for the study of student affairs competencies is graduate student research assistance. I have gifted students who I believe could contribute much to this project, but my institution does not have the resources to provide me my own research assistant. I received a previous, internal grant that supplied me with an undergraduate student to help with my pilot study. This student was of vital help, but this next phase of research is more complex and thereby requires a graduate student who is studying higher education and student affairs. In addition to the help I will receive to make this ongoing assessment a reality, I believe the graduate student will gain an important experience in how to conduct research that matters to the field. I will purposefully seek to hire a student who is interested in pursuing a doctorate in higher education and student affairs.

In addition, I received a grant from NASPA Region III to start a website – www.studentaffairsresearch.com – that will highlight the work I am doing on competencies. Studentaffairsresearch.com will also be used to highlight the research others have done on the student affairs profession.

Budget Item	Amount From Other Source	Other Source	Amount Requested from ACPA CPP Grant
Funding to create website (studentaffairsresearch.com)	\$500	NASPA Region III	
Graduate research assistant (stipend)			\$1,500
Total	\$500		\$1,500

Total requested from ACPA CPP Faculty Research Grant: \$1,500

Timetable

Spring 2013:

- Request and receive approval through ACPA Research Application Form
- Send instrument to professionals across the nation through ACPA membership list

Summer 2013:

- Collect, import, and clean data

Fall 2013:

- Statistical analysis of study data on 13 competencies
- Confirmatory factor analyses and structural equation modeling

Spring 2014:

- Present research at ACPA annual convention in Indianapolis
- Submit articles to *JCSD*, *Developments*, and *About Campus*

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