

Commission for Professional Preparation
Faculty Grant Proposal
March 2015 Award

Faculty Perspectives of Online Graduate Education
in Student Affairs Preparation Programs

**Amount of Funding Requested: \$1500 for the purposes of research support
(transcriber) and mileage expenses for researchers**

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Project Narrative

Rationale for the Study

Graduate professional preparation programs in student affairs reflect a substantial increase in online offerings (less than 5% of programs offered online options in 2008; over 25% of programs offered online options in 2014). Research exists examining the overall experience of students in online programs (Chen & deNoyelles, 2013), the impressions of college officials regarding online education (Parker, Lenhart, & Moore, 2011), and the impressions of hiring officials in student affairs (Connolly & Diepenbrock, 2011). However, researchers have not explored faculty perspectives on the evolution of online learning in student affairs graduate education. Faculty development leaders and instructional designers pursue general faculty perspectives of online learning, but no studies to date explore faculty insights and opinions regarding the rapid growth in online student affairs graduate preparation programs.

Blog posts and commentaries from faculty indicate perceptions tend to run towards more skeptical (Barratt, n.d.; Faries, 2013). Indeed, the ACPA Commission for Professional Preparation (CPP, 2012) noted online education as one of four “hot topics” facing higher education, indicating that online options “serve a specific purpose, but may be viewed as a shortcut to a more traditional master’s degree in the profession.” Student affairs graduate educators often express a desire to explore the lack of diversity among entering professionals. About 80% of those entering graduate programs in student affairs identify as White women; an unchanged percentage even as undergraduate enrollments reflect a far more racially diverse population (Pope, Mueller, & Reynolds, 2009; Sagaria & Johnsrud, 1991). Traditional graduate preparation programs cater to traditional students; leaving out many students who are unable to move to a new (often rural) area and quit full-time jobs (Svoboda, 2012). Online education tends to recruit more racially and economically diverse students —albeit sometimes in a predatory manner.

In the only study found that focused on perceptions of online learning in student affairs, Connolly and Diepenbrock (2011) surveyed 647 mid-level professionals regarding their perceptions of online graduate education in student affairs. They found 40% would not hire an online learner and only 21% believed on-line learning could achieve what they sought from their professional staff. However, their survey only included members of one international professional association, which tends not to include those who work at two-year, for-profit, or regional comprehensive institutions. Indeed, only 4% of their respondents worked at two-year institutions, and a full 74% had degrees in student affairs from traditional on-the-ground program.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study is to explore faculty perspectives of online graduate education in student affairs. Through surveying and interviewing faculty at programs with and without online components, we aim to see how faculty react and/or respond to the growth of online education,

how their perspectives may have changed over time, and the extent to which they accept online learning as a viable route to diversifying the profession.

The idea that traditional student affairs graduate preparation programs do not support those who do not believe they can leave home is not new. Listservs and blog posts throughout student affairs of those whom identify as first-generation college students, working class students, and students of color reflect this frequently. In a recent post to a blog for student affairs and social justice educators (personal communication, October 23, 2014), a Social Justice Training Institute alumni and student affairs administrator wrote:

Yesterday was the 4th time this month I needed to affirm another Latina's decision to consider their family when making a choice about their career. To my Student Affairs community—please stop perpetuating the argument that in order to move up in the field that one must relocate and in many cases leave their family. It is harmful to so many of us that come from communities that have a history of migration, immigration, and displacement . . . Before you tell someone who comes from a community like mine what path they must take to be successful consider the following: can their family see them where they may potentially relocate... think about cost, documentation, etc. "Everyone can Skype these days"... false... keep your class mentality in check...and finally it will be good for your growth... there is truth to this but do you have any idea how hard it is for a plant to grow without roots, especially in a climate that isn't even close to it's natural habitat?

An additional consideration is that traditional, on-the-ground, graduate student affairs programs are not composed of the racial, economic, and gender diversity consistently sought by institutional leaders in undergraduate enrollment. At the same time, the number of online graduate preparation programs and offerings increases annually and continues to serve a diverse population of students who do not see an on-campus program as an option. Perhaps a connection or correlation exists between the amount of diversity within student affairs programs and the options of course delivery systems available.

Study Relevance to CPP Goals

Examining faculty perceptions regarding online education directly relates to the preparation of student affairs professionals. The study is relevant to exploring issues of diversity, creating opportunities for recruitment into the profession, and promoting advanced learning opportunities exploring “the critical values of the profession such as the development of the whole student, diversity, and ethics” (ACPA CPP, n.d., ¶1).

Research Questions

The field of student affairs needs to enrich our knowledge regarding perspectives of online graduate education in graduate preparation programs. Faculty perceptions from traditional on-the-ground programs as well as those who may teach online courses or in fully online programs can add to the scholarship in the field. Research questions for this study include:

- What are faculty perceptions regarding the value of online graduate preparation programs?

- Have perceptions of online graduate preparation in student affairs changed over time? If so, how?
- How do faculty respond to the claim that online learning has the potential of reaching a more racially and economically diverse student body?
- In what ways do faculty perceptions align with results of other research regarding the perceptions of employers, students, or college administrators?

Method

The principles of qualitative research derived from postmodern philosophic traditions underpin the methodology for this research project and provide an overarching conceptual structure for this study. Qualitative research is an appropriate approach when the goal is to understand meaning, context, and process (Maxwell, 2005). We emphasize a feminist, critical, and constructivist paradigm assuming multiple perspectives; that the researcher and participants co-create mutual understanding (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Reinharz, 1992). Qualitative methods connect with feminist and critical epistemology because qualitative research allows the researcher to understand experiences from participants' frame of reference. Bogdan and Biklen (2007) indicated that qualitative research influenced by critical theory examines issues of reproduction and issues of production. We seek to encompass the ways of knowing built on an individual's point of view, their personal interpretation, and the ways in which they create meaning for any given situation (Bogden & Biklin, 2003; Creswell, 2007). A postmodern view posits that, "...truth is made, not discovered. That is to say that reality, while certainly "existing 'out there', is always and everywhere socially constructed" (Nash, 2004, p.7). This study provides "an attempt to understand the meaning of events and interactions to ordinary people in particular situations" (Bogden & Biklin, 2003, p. 23). As researchers, our place in the process is consequential; we will account for our presence within the reporting of observations and interactions. We recognize that whether in a social context or in a research framework, we interpret and construct meaning through experiences to define our reality (Bogdin & Biklin, 2003).

This construct of reality affects personal and professional perspectives as we designed our survey questions and interview protocol. We initially plan to gather descriptive data through a national survey in order to gain a "big picture" of the perspectives within the field from the directors of student affairs graduate preparation programs. Our hope is to represent the voice of faculty found through individual interviews of instructors and professors. We recognize this is critical to gaining an understanding of the perceptions of student affairs faculty regarding graduate online education.

Participants. An important consideration for us is to have a sample of faculty from a variety of rank levels, whom have varying experiences with online education, and at programs that are more traditional in their program offerings as well as those that offer online options.

Data Collection. We will conduct a survey of the program directors listed in the ACPA Directory of Graduate Programs in Student Affairs (see Appendix A). An analysis of the faculty survey, will increase our understanding of the topic and issues, enhancing our initial interview protocol (see Appendix B). We will seek up to 30 interview participants using the ACPA CPP listserv (CSP Talk) to deepen our understanding of faculty perceptions. We will conduct online

interviews, lasting no more than an hour, using Skype or Jabber. We will develop the interview protocol from our analysis of the faculty survey.

Analysis. We will use a constant and comparative method, analyzing data acquired through the survey responses and interviews conducted and allowing constructs regarding online education to emerge.

Budget

Project Budget Item	Amount Requested
Professional Transcription	\$1000
Rationale In order to move forward with expediency, we would hire someone to professionally transcribe the 25-30 faculty interviews	
Project Budget Item	Amount Requested
Travel mileage for Researchers	\$500
Rationale For researcher meetings (researchers are located in adjoining states)	
Other costs Additional costs for data collection, analysis, and dissemination (i.e., researcher time) will be supported through the principal investigators' institutions	
Additional grant funding to support a graduate student and researcher summer funds being presented one home institution in Fall 2014	
TOTAL BUDGET REQUESTED	\$1500

Project Timeline

Proposed Timeline for the Study Research Activity	Completion Date
IRB Proposals Submitted to respective campus committees	January 15, 2015
Survey invitation sent to Student Affairs Graduate Program Directors	January 31, 2015
Analysis of survey information; Interview Protocol developed (based on initial themes)	March 16, 2015
Recruitment e-mail to faculty participants sent	March 23, 2015
Interviews of faculty participants	May 1, 2015
Data Analysis completed	June 15, 2015
ACPA and NASPA conference proposals submitted	Sept 1, 2015
First manuscript for publication submitted	January 15, 2016
Potential ACPA & NASPA Presentations	March 2016

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Appendix A Survey Questions

1. Which of the following descriptors accurately describes your program offerings (check all that apply):

- Completely on-the-ground/in-person courses
- Some online learning options, but largely on-the-ground courses
- Fully online courses
- Online certificate options
- Fully online degree options
- Other:

2. Which of the following areas are included in your degree programs (check all that apply):

- Counseling
- College student development
- Higher education administration
- Student affairs administration
- Other:

3. Who teaches your courses (check all that apply):

- Ranked faculty
- Primarily adjunct faculty
- Other:

4. Can you share your:

- Average class size:
- Average cohort size:
- Department size (# of ranked faculty, adjunct/contingent faculty, other staff):
- Percentage of students of color:
- Percentage of first-generation students:
- Percentage of students over 30:
- Percentage of part-time students:

5. To what extent do you agree with the following statements (Likert scale of 1-5, strongly disagree to strongly agree).

- *Student affairs professionals need an in-person graduate school experience.*
- *Student affairs professionals need an in-person graduate school experience in order to work at a ground-based institution.*
- *Students can learn ACPA/NASPA competencies through online learning.*

6. Can you share the name and contact information of any of your currently faculty members who would be willing to talk with us about online graduate education in student affairs? This person could be a staunch supporter or detractor, or anyone in between.

Appendix B
Initial Interview Protocol

These interview questions may change after we receive and analyze the initial survey results.

1. To what extent do you agree with the following statements (Likert scale of 1-5, strongly disagree to strongly agree).
 - *Student affairs professionals need an in-person graduate school experience.*
 - *Student affairs professionals need an in-person graduate school experience in order to work at a ground-based institution.*
 - *Students can learn ACPA/NASPA competencies through online learning.*
2. What are your perceptions regarding online graduate preparation programs? Do they have value, or not? What factors add or detract from their value?
3. How many years have you been teaching? Have your perceptions of online preparation for student affairs changed over the time you've been teaching, and if so, in what ways?

Does it matter if the program is offered by a for-profit or non-profit institution?
Does it matter if the students are working full-time in student affairs?
Does it matter if the program has an on-campus cohort as well as online offerings?
4. Some research proposes that online learning has the potential of reaching a more economically and racially diverse student body. What are your reactions to that statement?
5. Are there any courses in a graduate preparation program that cannot or should not be offered online? If so, which ones?
6. Have you taken any online courses? If so, describe your experience. If not, why not?
7. Have you taught any online courses? If so, describe your experience. If not, why not?