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Jennifer Wegner

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## Lessons from Women Leaders: The Impact of Professional Development

Jennifer Wegner

*Professional development is learner-centered, where the responsibility to engage in further educational experiences belongs to the individual and is a critical way to prepare for career advancement. In higher education, cisgender women do not hold the majority of chief student affairs officers (CSAO) positions, which is unexpected given their representation in entry and mid-level positions (Shea Gasser, 2014). This article reviews a grounded theory study conducted to better understand the phenomenon of professional development experiences of women CSAOs and how professional development impacts career ascension of women in student affairs.*

It is important to understand the professional development needed for individual success in reaching the Chief Student Affairs Officer (CSAO) position. Truitt (1969) first identified the need for professional development in student affairs by promoting a variety of activities to strengthen knowledge and skills. In the last 45 years, professional development has become a more formalized system for individuals to pursue their own career development.

Student affairs graduate preparation programs are not able to prepare individuals for the entirety of their career; career preparation is a “life-long learning process” (Carpenter & Miller, 1981, p. 3). With so many options for professional development, student affairs administrators seeking to advance in the field benefit from listening and learning from current CSAOs about the professional development experiences that were most meaningful and why these experiences mattered to them. Research illustrates that professional development is critical for individuals and organizations but there remains a gap as to understanding what professional development experiences are most meaningful for career advancement. Understanding the ways professional development opportunities likely support and influence career ascension for women is a critical first step to seeing the numbers of women serving in CSAO roles increase.

This study sought to explore how professional development experiences impact

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*Dr. Jennifer Wegner is a proud alumna of University of Vermont HESA ('03) and now serves as the Executive Director of the Undergraduate Business Administration Program in the Tepper School of Business at Carnegie Mellon University. She is grateful to contribute and benefit from the scholarship studying women's leadership in student affairs. This article is dedicated to the tribe of women mentors, friends, and leaders who provide wisdom, care, and support in her personal and professional pursuits.*

the career ascension of women CSAOs. This article explores the ways in which particular professional development experiences mattered to the participants.

### Literature Review

Five areas of scholarship informed this research project: the intersections of student affairs professional development, professional competencies that define the student affairs field, women in leadership, career ascension, and adult learning theory.

#### Professional Competencies

Student affairs professional organizations have identified professional competencies to define knowledge and skills within the field. ACPA - College Student Educators International (ACPA) and NASPA - Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education (NASPA) published updated professional competencies for the student affairs field in 2015 that identify knowledge, skills, and dispositions pertinent to any student affairs professional (ACPA & NASPA, 2015). While all 10 competencies are valuable in defining the profession and future learning, the Personal and Ethical Foundations competency reflects the skills and knowledge to define a professional identity and the individual's responsibility to pursue comprehensive and holistic professional development and learning. Competency areas are further elaborated upon by the Council for the Advancement of Standards (CAS) which recognized that continual professional development was necessary for individuals in higher education to improve "leadership ability, competence, and skills" (CAS, 2011, p. 7).

#### Professional Development Within Student Affairs

Carpenter and Miller's (1981) study of professional development in student affairs highlighted that continual and cumulative professional development is necessary throughout one's career. As careers evolve, mid-level professionals expand their professional development plans to include a growing professional portfolio and supervisory responsibilities (Haley, Jaeger, Hawes, & Johnson, 2015).

For professional development to be meaningful, employees must exhibit adaptivity, proactivity, and a willingness to be open to change (Griffin, Parker, & Mason, 2010), among other qualities. Further, meaningful professional development requires an intentional commitment made by the individual to engage in learning and growth (Haley et al., 2015). Professional development is not regulated in a systematic manner in higher education; instead, it reflects the culture, leadership, and values unique to individual institutions.

## **Women in Leadership**

Women's leadership, in particular, has gained significant interest in recent decades as academic scholarship and popular media has sought to define how women lead. Yet, as Gangone (2016) points out, there is no one set of instructions for women to become leaders. Most frequently, women's leadership is described through factors such as self-awareness, courage, resilience, and collaboration (Isaac, 2007; Madsen, 2008). Both Woollen (2016) and Isaac (2007) described leadership as "multidimensional," capturing the many dynamics and characteristics that successful leaders, including CSAOs, are expected to exhibit (Isaac, 2007).

It is important to consider additional conditions that impact women's ascension in leadership positions beyond individual attributes. Ford's (2014) research found that the traditionally male-dominated leadership culture in higher education posed difficulties for women seeking senior positions. Essentially, there remains a question if women are expected and encouraged to serve in senior leadership positions within the academy.

## **Professional Development and Career Impact**

The professional competencies provide a roadmap for analysis of individual strengths and weaknesses and can lead to a professional development plan that is necessary in a changing and competitive environment (Baker, 2009). Different skills are required to ensure success and support is often sought through "professional development plans, supervisors, and career counselors to promote career advancement" (Parker, 2002, p. 83). Developing professional networks—up, down, and across professional roles—also positively influenced professional growth and career development (Cullen-Lester, Woehler, & Willburn, 2016; Madsen, 2008; Robinson, 2016; Walsh & Daddario, 2015). Pursuing professional development demonstrates that an individual has kept up to date in the field and may serve as a differentiating factor with a prospective employer (Baker, 2009).

## **Adult Learning Theory**

For many higher education professionals, their careers will span multiple decades during which they must be prepared "for jobs that do not yet exist, to use technologies that have not yet been invented, and to solve problems that we don't even know are problems yet" (Darling-Hammond et al., 2008, p. 2). Dewey (1963) believed in lifelong learning and recognized that past experiences inform how individuals adapt to present and future situations. Experiential learning values reflection as a way to make meaning and in so doing, often helps individuals learn more about themselves and opening pathways for the future.

## Research Design

The research questions posed in this study were explored using grounded theory research. As a qualitative research design, grounded theory collects data for analysis to generate themes and categories that explain a phenomenon (Chong & Yeo, 2015). Grounded theory research considers the actions and processes over time that helps explain how and why certain professional development experiences impact the careers of women CSAOs (Creswell, 2013). By using grounded theory, a larger understanding about professional development in women CSAO careers was acquired.

### Participant Identification

The criteria used for participant identification was as follows:

- Identified as a cisgender woman;
- Participated in at least four different professional development experiences during her student affairs career (membership in a professional association, mentorship, training and classes, participation in focused professional development events, and leadership development programs);
- Served as the CSAO at a 4-year non-profit institution in the United States; and
- Maintained at least one other student affairs-related position in her career. There were three components of participation: (a) completing an electronic journal, (b) engaging in a 60-minute interview, and (c) reviewing the interview transcript for privacy and errors.

### Participants

There are a few characteristics that all 10 participants share in the study. First, participants were involved in either NASPA or ACPA, with past leadership roles in conferences or institutes. Additionally, eight of the 10 participants reported having teaching experience in a variety of undergraduate and graduate degree academic programs. Finally, seven participants were authors published in various higher education journals or books. The participants represented a range in length of service in the CSAO position, from 20+ years to 14 months in the position. By sharing their experiences and reflections, the participants provided rich descriptions of their professional development experiences and the ways in which those experiences mattered throughout their career growth.

## Results

After identifying the most common types of professional development experiences named by the participants, two themes surfaced from the data: meaningfulness and motivation. There are various reasons why the participants decided to pursue particular professional development experiences. Motivation is both internally and externally driven; the ways in which the participants identify “what” they gained from professional development in large part informed their motivation. To understand the impact of an experience is to make meaning of it. The participants made meaning of professional development and recognized their motivation in three interwoven ways: commitment to learning for self and with/for others, learning specialized content, and relationship building with colleagues.

### **Commitment to Learning for Self and With/For Others**

The participants reflected upon the ways in which they demonstrated the commitment and responsibility to professional development for themselves as well as for others in their divisions and units. This sense of obligation is reflected by Sister, “For me to have banked on someone else’s encouragement of me meant that I was almost surrendering my own responsibility to my own growth. I take the responsibility for my growth pretty seriously.” Samantha grounded her thoughts in the student affairs profession, saying, “I don’t think you become a student affairs professional without some true core belief in lifelong learning. I don’t think you work in higher education, especially a leadership position, without truly embracing the concept of lifelong learning.”

In addition to lifelong learning, participants discussed learning in broader strokes; in particular, the idea that there is simply more to learn was a driving force for the women. Samantha recognized that her commitment to keep learning was informed by her position as well as specialized knowledge, “Being a Vice Provost now, there are really specific things that I want to learn or want to get out of professional development so I go after those experiences.”

Fern, Jessica, Eleanor, and Joan expressed that they wanted their staff members to be the best they can be, knowing that if/when they leave the institution, the staff members’ future performance is a reflection on the college or university they left. What the participants recognized was the multiple benefits of professional development for staff that ripple throughout the student affairs profession.

### **Learning Specialized Content**

The participants described that as their careers continued, the professional development opportunities they sought became more content specific. Three distinct topics emerged from the data: regulatory compliance, social justice and diversity, and Title IX. Increased focus on compliance was mentioned by almost all participants. In her 19th year in the position, Alice described what she needed to know now: “It is a lot of higher education law, a lot of it is compliance and regulatory matters.” Joan recognized that “with every lawsuit, there’s a change in interpretation.” In the first year of her position, the constantly changing legal environment required Megan to “use my time for professional development on mental health and compliance.” Many participants also identified the need to continue learning about inclusion and social justice. Darlene described how her pursuits in studying diversity includes recognizing how “people learn differently and learning to teach to that difference, whether different cultures or styles of learning.”

### **Relationship Building with Colleagues**

Each participant spoke at length about the ways in which professional development experiences offered an opportunity to build relationships with colleagues in similar positions at other institutions. It is easy to understand why the women saw relationship building as an essential element, as well as a critical outcome, of professional development. Samantha captured this idea, “It’s about not feeling so alone... these colleagues would be there to support me so it’s this very interesting collegial feeling that’s nice to have out there in the world that isn’t necessarily on your campus.” The singular nature of the position requires CSAOs to look beyond their campus for their positional counterparts.

**Relationships in action.** As the women in this study talked about the relationships they shared with fellow CSAOs, they often described behaviors and actions symbolizing what they “did” within these connections. Eleanor identified that, “How’s it going? What’s going on in your campus?” are two simple questions that often begin her conversations with colleagues. The participants also described actively engaging in networking. Networking identified by the participants resulted in tangible actions that benefitted them as individuals and their institution. Sister discussed that her relationships offer “the possibility to reach out to other people and say, ‘I would encourage you to apply for this position.’”

**Gender identity.** There were several times wherein the participants spoke about relationships with other women CSAOs. In her discussion about what makes the interaction between women meaningful, Fern offered, “I do think as women we need to encourage other women, especially other women to advocate for what it is that they want and need. And to recognize they know themselves better than anyone else. It’s okay to ask.” A level of trust must be established in order for

the encouragement that Fern speaks about to happen. Ruth shared a sentiment that nicely captures what so many of the women spoke about in describing their relationships with other women CSAOs. “If I was with women and getting to share the connection with just women and their experiences, it was like a thirst I didn’t know I had.” The relationships that the participants shared with other women spoke to a distinct community that offers a unique sense of support, encouragement, and care.

**Support and care.** The most frequently described outcome of relationship building was the support and care participants received through their connections. Finding community with others who understand and sympathize, who know the joys and challenges of the CSAO position was a shared experience among participants. Eleanor’s reflection that, “It’s a lonely, lonely job,” is teased out further by Fern, who stated that, “No one else really knows the challenges, the pressures, the complications of being a vice president except another vice president. We need each other.” Almost all of the participants discussed the ways in which they relied on relationships in times of challenge and turmoil on their campus. Samantha offered, “I know when a crisis happens on a campus, sometimes I just want to pick up the phone and call the vice president and say I know exactly what you’re going through and whatever I can do to help.”

### **Discussion**

The results of the study informed a theory that suggests for women to be motivated to engage in professional development, they have to believe it will hold meaning for them. The responsibility to take ownership of their learning was a prominent refrain among all the participants, which is the embodiment of self-directed learning theory with learning managed entirely by the learner (Merriam & Bierema, 2014) and is also rooted in the ACPA and NASPA (2015) professional competencies. The women shared Dewey’s (1963) commitment to lifelong learning as demonstrated by the many different professional development experiences that they engaged in throughout their careers.

Participants spoke with care and appreciation about the relationships that formed out of professional development experiences. The sharing of experiences, of gathering together to talk about common concerns, or of simply appreciating and benefiting from support. The job can feel lonely, as the only person on a campus who has the CSAO responsibilities and portfolio.

### **Limitations**

With any research, limitations are present and this study is no exception. The theory is limited in usage as a qualitative study with only 10 participants. Another



limitation is that the study did not collect social identity information beyond gender. By not taking multiple and intersecting identities into consideration, there is a gap in better understanding professional development through social

identities. Additionally, there are many other factors that influence career ascension for women CSAOs beyond professional development experiences (McNair, et al., 2013; O'Neill & Bilimoria, 2005; Taylor-Costello, 2009). Therefore, the study is automatically narrow in focusing on just professional development and limits contributions to understanding women CSAO experiences.

### **Conclusion**

It is clear from the literature and the data that women must take ownership of their own professional development and career trajectory. A professional development plan should be an essential element of a portfolio, just like a resume, and it should be frequently reviewed. Along with the professional development plan, it is important for women to consider if they are willing to invest personal resources to pursue specific professional development opportunities that might not be fully supported by their institution.

This study also provides insight into how institutions and professional associations can develop programs to empower the next generation of leaders. For CSAOs in particular, the ability to gather and share common experiences is important and should continue. This study affirms the value of the CSAO community and encourages relationship-building to continue. Given what the participants shared, opportunities to connect and learn with/from other women are important throughout the career path. With the broad portfolio of the CSAO position, there will always remain knowledge to acquire and professional development experiences to pursue to ensure that these senior officers are well-prepared to lead on their respective campuses.

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