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*Through professional associations and graduate preparation programs, members of the student affairs profession identify, communicate, and reinforce professional standards to promote the scholarship of practice.*

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# Student Affairs and the Scholarship of Practice

**Amy S. Hirschy, Maureen E. Wilson**

In *Education and Experience*, John Dewey (1938) proposed that social movements, including education, involve an “arena of struggles, practical and theoretical” (p. v). Through fruitful dialogue and connection, researchers and practitioners can inform each other’s work, leading to practices and ideas “a level deeper and more inclusive” (p. v). Building on Boyer’s (1990) four domains of scholarship, Braxton (2005) called for the scholarship of practice in higher education with two primary goals: the improvement of practice, and development of a knowledge base worthy of professional status for administrative work (p. 286). Through the scholarship of practice, empirically based research findings can serve as a foundation for developing institutional policy and practice and for guiding administrators’ actions. Similarly, researchers who work in concert with practitioners can identify salient, practical problems worthy of empirical study and contribute to the knowledge base.

The purpose of this chapter is to highlight one professional field—college student affairs—as a model for inculcating the value of integrating theory and empirically based research into professional practice. The chapter describes myriad ways that student affairs professionals identify, communicate, and reinforce professional standards to connect scholarship with practice in administrative roles. We examine two intersecting professional spheres: (1) student affairs graduate preparation programs and (2) professional associations, both of which shape the norms and values of future professionals. The chapter offers examples of how another professional field, social work, promotes the scholarship of practice, and the chapter concludes with recommendations.

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## Developing and Communicating

# Student Affairs Values

Growth of U.S. higher education in the 20th century in terms of numbers of institutions and complexity served as a significant catalyst for change in the administrative structures on college campuses. Early student affairs personnel (often called deans, deans of men, or deans of women) served without the support of academic preparation anchored by a common body of knowledge and expectations (Rhatigan, 2009). Between 1900 and 1920, deans of women and men, recognizing the evolving needs of a nascent profession, separately gathered with their respective colleagues at other institutions to “work collectively to establish, maintain, and enhance a professional identity . . . set expectations for members, study the nature of the work, and set long-term goals” (Coomes & Gerda, 2015, p. 32). The early meetings marked the development of professional associations in student affairs and laid a foundation for the curricular content necessary for the future professional practice of college student affairs administration.

Core professional documents periodically signaled tectonic shifts in focus and priorities of student affairs professionals, yet they collectively share an emphasis on supporting college students’ “holistic, transformative learning” (Baxter Magolda & Magolda, 2011, p. 4). For example, American Council on Education leaders presented the *Student Personnel Point of View* in 1937 (and updated in 1949), articulating the principle that student affairs professionals aim to develop the whole student, not just the student’s intellect. These foundational documents acknowledge the interdisciplinary nature of the field and underscore the need for the interplay of research and practice. Later reports reassert the importance of student affairs administrators’ role in student learning and development, partnering with other campus community members to enhance learning, and understanding how students make meaning of experiences within their environments (see *The Student Learning Imperative*, American College Personnel Association [ACPA], 1994; *Powerful Practice: A Shared Responsibility for Learning*, American Association of Higher Education et al., 1998; and *Learning Reconsidered*, American College Personnel Association [ACPA]/National Association of Student Personnel Administrators [NASPA], 2004). To follow-up, ACPA and NASPA leaders collaborated with others in five additional professional associations to create *Learning Reconsidered 2* (American College Personnel Association et al., 2006) and provide practical assistance to student affairs educators on how to implement the ideas from the 2004 issue of *Learning Reconsidered*, such as emphasizing a student-centered learning environment, developing learning goals, and assessing learning outcomes.

Beginning in 1937, student affairs publications have consistently emphasized the importance of applying interdisciplinary theories and empirically based research findings to improving the work of student affairs professionals. Results from two recent national surveys of student-affairs administrators demonstrate support for the shared value of applying theory in administrative practice. First, 87.8% of early-career student affairs professionals (those in the field with 5 or fewer years of experience) who attended master's preparation programs indicated that student development theory informed their work while they were enrolled; 89.6% reported the same outcome since working full-time (Liddell, Wilson, Pasquesi, Hirschy, & Boyle, 2014). In a subsequent national survey of midlevel professionals (those with more than 5 years' experience), 87.9% reported that student development theory had informed their work within the past 5 years (Wilson, Liddell, Hirschy, & Pasquesi, 2016).

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## **Professional Standards and Guidelines**

The pervasive value of integrating theory into student affairs administrative practice emanates from multiple sources, starting in graduate programs designed for professional preparation and reinforced throughout a professional's career through professional development and involvement in professional associations. Over 95% of early career college student affairs professionals who attended master's preparation programs indicated that their academic programs had a theory-based curriculum, and over 85% indicated that their programs had a practice-based curriculum (Liddell et al., 2014), signaling the socialization of new members of the profession.

## **Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS)**

As a consortium of 41 professional associations representing various student affairs functional areas, the council promotes common professional standards and encourages self-regulation among student affairs professionals responsible for programs and services. In its ninth edition, the *CAS Professional Standards for Higher Education* (Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education, 2015) outline common standards that guide student affairs professionals in higher education as well as the academic programs that prepare them for those professional

roles. CAS standards represent specialized knowledge necessary for competent student affairs practice and offer a guide to develop, assess, and improve high-quality student learning, programs, and services in postsecondary environments. Theories, conceptual models, and research findings drawn from “human development, group dynamics, student learning, organizational management, and administration” (p. 2) undergird the fundamental principles of the CAS Standards, which align into five groups: students and their environments; organization, leadership, and human resources; ethical considerations; diversity and multiculturalism; and health endangering environments.

## **Professional Competency Areas**

Student affairs professional association leaders emphasize the blend of theory and practice through articulating the agreed-upon professional standards for practitioners (ACPA/NASPA, 2015). Leaders within the two largest international professional associations for student affairs educators—ACPA and NASPA—collaborated to recommend 10 areas of competency essential for successful practice in current and future higher education environments. These competency areas address the “knowledge, skills, and dispositions expected of all student affairs educators” (p. 7). Gleaned from a review of 19 core documents and recent research findings, the 10 competency areas on the following list constitute a common knowledge base to guide student affairs practitioners who hold various administrative responsibilities at different types of postsecondary institutions.

1. Personal and ethical foundations
2. Values, philosophy, and history
3. Assessment, evaluation, and research
4. Law, policy, and governance
5. Organizational and human resources
6. Leadership
7. Social justice and inclusion
8. Student learning and development
9. Technology
10. Advising and supporting.

These standards offer guidance and expectations for three levels in each of the professional competency areas: foundational, intermediate, and advanced. The progression of levels reflects the intention to outline minimum expectations for student affairs educators (foundational), acknowledging that through graduate study and professional experiences,

new and seasoned professionals should aim to further develop their proficiencies throughout their careers (intermediate and advanced).

For example, one of the 10 competency areas, student learning and development, “addresses the concepts and principles of student development and learning theory . . . [including] . . . the ability to apply theory to improve and inform student affairs and teaching practice” (ACPA/NASPA, 2015, p. 32). Within each increasing level of competency, practitioners need to demonstrate knowledge and skills that articulate, apply, critique, and assess student learning and development theories. Foundational outcomes for this area include the ability to describe human development theories and models, identify strengths and limitations in applying them, and use theory to improve practice. Intermediate outcomes consist of using theory-to-practice models to inform practice, designing programs and services to promote student learning and development, and utilizing the assessment of learning outcomes in practice. Professionals at the advanced level translate theory to diverse audiences, contribute to the development of theories, and use theory to inform institutional policy and practice.

To reinforce the use of the competency areas in policy, practice, and scholarship in student affairs, several recommendations are offered. Individuals can consult the competency areas to set and assess their professional goals. Supervisors can insert the competency areas into job postings, orientation for new staff, staff development and training initiatives, and performance appraisals. The competency areas can provide an “educational framework” for professional association leaders as they design and implement conferences and other educational experiences for members (ACPA/NASPA, 2015, p. 11). Finally, in professional preparation academic programs, faculty members can integrate the competency areas into specific course learning outcomes, use them to inform their research agendas, and guide their ongoing professional development.

## **Graduate Preparation Programs**

Entry to full-time employment in the field of student affairs typically requires the credential of a master’s degree. Student affairs master’s level graduate preparation program curricula are often guided by the CAS standards, whereas some counselor educator programs with a specialty area in college counseling and student affairs are accredited by the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs. Although the curricular requirements of these two organizations differ, areas of overlap include an emphasis on students developing the knowledge of foundational theories, the skills to apply them to practice, and the use of

multiple data sources to inform programs and services that solve problems in higher education settings. Finally, to provide apprenticeship opportunities for the application of theory in professional settings alongside established mentors, the curricula of both types of programs require students to complete internships (Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education, 2015; Council for the Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs, 2016).

## **Professional Associations**

Currently, dozens of student affairs-related professional associations exist, including two large, generalist student affairs professional associations: ACPA and NASPA. Many others focus on a particular, specialized functional area such as housing, orientation, academic advising, fraternity and sorority life, or financial aid.

Professional associations reinforce the scholarship of practice by providing structure and opportunities for the generation and dissemination of knowledge sources too numerous to catalog, but we highlight some of the ways they promote the scholarship of practice. These associations sponsor the development and exchange of scholarship through funding research grants, providing writing awards, encouraging research paper presentations and poster sessions at professional meetings, and publishing scholarly work in journals, books, and other media. Also, student affairs-related publications examine the process of how theory can and should inform professional practice (see Blimling, 2011; Patton, Renn, Guido, & Quaye, 2016; Reason & Kimball, 2012). A second way professional associations support the value of integrating scholarship with practice is to require conference presenters to identify appropriate theoretical frameworks and provide research evidence in scholarly paper proposals. Similarly, rubric criteria for writing and excellence awards often include application of research, theory, or assessment. In exchange for accessing its membership for survey research, some associations expect researchers to report the findings and implications of the study to the membership in the form of a conference program or publication.

Another way professional association leaders promote the scholarship of practice is by fostering meaningful interactions among practitioners and faculty. Graduate preparation faculty members partner with professional associations in student affairs by serving as officers, committee and task-force members, and leaders in other varied roles. ACPA's Commission for Professional Preparation, ACPA's Emerging and Senior Scholars, and NASPA's Faculty Council and Faculty Assembly all serve as bodies that recognize and or represent faculty in the associations.

To foster connections with faculty and other researchers, the Association of College and University Housing Officers-International (ACUHO-I) sponsors both a funded research grant program and a larger multi-institutional research grant designed to investigate larger questions related to the field. Additionally, they have added “Just in Time” symposia to their educational portfolio, which are programs designed to quickly respond to the educational needs of members who work in a mercurial environment. In a recent Just in Time initiative, ACUHO-I partnered housing practitioners with authors of the most recent edition of *How College Affects Students: 21st Century Evidence that Higher Education Works* (Mayhew et al., 2016), the third volume of a series that synthesizes research on college impact. The purpose of the day-and-a-half symposium was to focus on the findings related to students who live on campus and then consider ways the research could apply to practitioners’ campuses using theory-to-practice process models. Finally, participants recommended future research areas that ACUHO-I should explore (Association of College and University Housing Officers-International, 2016).

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## **Integrating the Scholarship of Practice: Strategies From Social Work**

Examining how other professions integrate scholarship into practice can provide new insights into strategies to integrate the scholarship of practice. Accordingly, we consider the field of social work. Both education and social work have been classified as social and creative professions (Chynoweth, 2008), sharing characteristics of applied, nonparadigmatic (or soft) fields (Biglan, 1973). Professionals in applied fields tend to be more concerned with the ways in which knowledge can be useful in practice than are professionals in pure fields, such as physics or philosophy. Highly paradigmatic (or hard) fields share a consistent body of theory that is subscribed to by all members (Kuhn, 1962). In soft fields, there is less agreement on the problems and methods of inquiry of the discipline, compared with hard fields, such as chemistry or engineering (Biglan, 1973).

We highlight four key approaches that social work leaders employ to promote the use of evidence-based practice. First, the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) and the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) share multiple website resources with members so that social work



students and professionals can easily access current research findings related to their work. One resource for such practices is the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration federal agency (2016), which coordinates the National Registry of Evidence-Based Programs and Practices (NREPP). The purpose of the NREPP initiative is to promote the use of scientifically established behavioral health interventions to practitioners and the public. Over 350 substance-abuse and mental-health interventions are rated based on six criteria. Second, CSWE encourages social work faculty members to incorporate evidence-based practice and evidence-supported treatments into their courses. CSWE collects and publishes model syllabi that demonstrate various ways that colleagues address these topics in social work academic preparation programs (CSWE, 2016). Third, the CSWE's (2015) Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards for Baccalaureate and Master's Social Work Programs were approved by both the Commission on Accreditation and the Commission on Educational Policy. Of nine outlined competencies necessary for successful practice, nearly all mention assessing outcomes, applying theory, or using research evidence to inform practice or policy. Two specifically relate to the scholarship of practice. Finally, several social work institutes publish Internet-accessible evidence-based mapping interventions; manual-guided, evidence-supported treatment plans; and policy recommendations (see Institute of Behavioral Research, 2016 and the Social Work Policy Institute, 2016a, 2016b). It should be noted that the emphasis on evidence-based practice has its critics. Some social workers are concerned that the evidence-supported treatments may not adequately address the needs of diverse populations and that not all practitioners may be trained to implement them competently (Barth et al., 2012).

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## Recommendations

Integrating the scholarship of practice is a core value of student affairs educators, yet potential exists for improvement. Essential knowledge in student affairs is intellectual curiosity and the “capacity to continually reflect on the intersections of knowledge and action” (Baxter Magolda & Magolda, 2011, p. 5). The ability to access, integrate, and apply multiple sources of knowledge is key to successful student affairs practice. Thus, we offer the following recommendations.

## **Access**

We recommend three strategies to increase access to existing research findings related to college students. Acknowledging that the student affairs field is multidisciplinary, the knowledge base could benefit from systematically compiling research findings about college students and postsecondary education from other disciplines (e.g., psychology, sociology, cultural studies, political science). Second, the Institute of Education Sciences' What Works Clearinghouse (WWC; 2016) offers a summary report of high quality research on various education interventions. The purpose of the WWC is to provide educational practitioners with an objective, rigorous review so they can make evidence-based decisions. In 2016, the WWC published postsecondary-related intervention reports that address outcomes of ACT/SAT test preparation and coaching programs, first-year experience courses, developmental education, and summer-bridge programs. Third, editors of professional journals and doctoral dissertation advisors could investigate the criteria for a study's inclusion in the WWC systematic review of research. If the criteria were more closely aligned, additional student affairs research studies would then be included.

## **Integrate**

A mechanism designed to summarize research findings and publish research briefs on relevant topics for practitioner audiences may encourage more integration of empirically based research in practice. Professional associations could feature such briefs on their websites as a resource for members. Second, student affairs supervisors could require that proposals for funding new projects provide supportive empirical evidence and/or require rigorous evaluations for continued funding and resources. Third, professional preparation faculty can adjust course assignments to enhance students' knowledge and skills related to finding and evaluating empirical evidence.

## **Apply**

Professional development opportunities to learn techniques of applying scholarship to practice could support professionals in progressing from foundational to intermediate and advanced competency levels. Student case-study competitions could require that participants support recommended actions with theory and or empirically based research. Finally, partnerships among professional associations bring coherence to

the field's identity and professional standards. Similar collaborations to deepen the knowledge base and communicate the findings to both internal and external audiences may more effectively inform campus colleagues, the general public, and policy makers of the role and contributions of student affairs educators.

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## Conclusion

Although the student affairs profession adapts to constant change, characteristics of the roles of the early deans that were shaped by the “resources devoted to the program by the institution’s administration, the urban or nonurban setting of the campus, and the composition of the student body” (Williamson & Darley, 1937, p. 47) still ring true with contemporary professionals. Fortunately, student affairs educators now benefit from the support of professional associations, graduate preparation programs, a coherent set of professional standards, and a body of knowledge that informs professional practice. Intentional, collaborative efforts to expand the knowledge base and communicate theories and research findings in accessible ways for practitioners to inform their work will further foster the scholarship of practice and advance “deeper and more inclusive” practices and ideas (Dewey, 1938, p. v) in student affairs work.

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