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Certification for Student Affairs Graduate Preparation Programs: An Idea Whose Time is Past Due

Aaron W. Hughey
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As many in the student affairs professions are acutely aware, the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) is getting out of the business of accrediting student affairs graduate preparation programs. With the introduction of the 2009 CACREP Standards, the accrediting agency has done away with the category for student affairs professional practice in favor of one that combines student affairs with college counseling. This move has its roots in the “counselor identity” movement championed by many in the counseling community. And while that may help sharpen the focus for the accreditation of counseling programs, it creates a tangible problem for those of us who work with student affairs preparation programs.

The bottom line is that there is no longer any accrediting body that oversees student affairs graduate preparation programs that focus on administration and student development/learning. Now that the 2009 CACREP Standards have been approved, the closest thing we have to formal accreditation is to engage in a voluntary process aimed at demonstrating that our programs are “compliant” with the Council for the Advancement of Standards (CAS) Standards for graduate preparation programs in student affairs. To be fair, there is some value to achieving this designation. It does make a positive statement about the quality of the graduate program to which it is applied. But “compliance” does not carry the same weight as “accreditation” and it is not widely understood by those outside the student affairs profession. In fact, the lack of a formal accrediting process for student affairs programs can put their existence in jeopardy at some institutions.

In order to better articulate and accentuate the point being made here, perhaps a little history is in order. During the spring semester 2008, the master’s degree program in student affairs in higher education at Western Kentucky University underwent an extensive review using the nine Council for the Advancement of Standards (CAS) Standards for graduate preparation programs in student affairs. This process involved the preparation of a comprehensive self-study that was developed by the program faculty using the Self-Assessment Guides (SAGs) as a conceptual framework. Employing a somewhat innovative strategy, the entire process was facilitated online using

Blackboard; it was not necessary to produce hard copies to facilitate any aspect of the review. Extensive documentation of every aspect of the program was generated and data were collected using a variety of mechanisms. Once the self-study was completed, an internal review team consisting of student affairs faculty, practitioners, current students and alumni of the program critiqued the online documents and generated qualitative evaluations and numerical ratings for each item in the SAGs for each of the Standards.

Once the institutional phase of the CAS review process was completed, two external reviewers (one practitioner and one faculty member from two different institutions who were very familiar with the CAS Standards) were invited to campus to conduct an independent evaluation of the program. Prior to their 2-day visit, these individuals were given advance access to the Blackboard site set up to facilitate the review process. While on campus, they examined every aspect of the program and interviewed departmental and program faculty, student affairs administrators and staff, current students in the program, graduates of the program, as well as the department head, dean and provost. Their final report was submitted to the program coordinator about a month after the site visit. The external reviewers also provided a very nice letter that highlighted their conclusion that Western's program was, in fact, "CAS compliant," even though several areas were identified for future enhancement.

A problem became apparent, however, soon after the good news was received. While those within the profession tend to appreciate what it means to be "CAS compliant," many upper level administrators do not seem to share an understanding of, nor an appreciation for, what this designation actually says about the quality of a graduate preparation program. On the other hand, these individuals do seem to value "accreditation" and the accreditation process. They even appear knowledgeable about what "certification" means. What they do not seem to be able to grasp, however, is what it means to be "compliant." This becomes particularly relevant with the realization that it is these same administrators who are primarily responsible for the allocation of critical resources within institutions of higher education.

Please note for the record that I believe wholeheartedly in self-regulation and I am absolutely against the creation of any kind of accreditation process for student affairs preparation programs that even remotely resembles CACREP. What I do think we need is a somewhat more formal system for recognizing programs that do choose to undergo a voluntary self-study and review process using the CAS Standards. I believe this could be done without the extraordinary effort and expense it would take to implement a more bureaucratic accrediting system comparable to CACREP. As evidence for this assertion, please consider the following:

First, the CAS Standards are already articulated and revised/updated on a regular basis. Second, the Self Assessment Guides (SAGs) provide the necessary framework and guidelines for conducting a self-study and preparing a comprehensive report. Third, an appropriate internal review team can be easily identified at the local institution. Fourth, the logistics of bringing an external review team consisting of at least two qualified student affairs professionals to campus are not formidable – the only real challenge being the expense associated with the visit. There could even be a mechanism whereby individuals could be deemed eligible to conduct external reviews by submitting an application to a coordinator and, once selected, added to a list of acceptable reviewers. None of this has to be unduly cumbersome; in fact, the entire process

could be facilitated within the scope of a body such as ACPA's Commission for Professional Preparation. Programs who wanted to pursue this voluntary "certification" could pay a modest fee to the Commission. All other expenses (preparation of the self-study, travel/fees for the external reviewers, etc.) would be paid by the program, department and/or institution.

In sum, I am basically proposing the development and maintenance of a professional record-keeping system that could be used to identify and officially recognize graduate programs that have successfully demonstrated that they are following the CAS Standards. This designation would carry more weight, and be much more of a distinction, than the primarily self-asserted claim that a program is simply "compliant" with the Standards. It would also serve to enhance the value of the degree, both in perception and reality, among prospective students as well as graduates/alumni of the program and the profession at large. Finally, it would help programs acquire additional institutional resources as my experience has been that department heads, deans, vice presidents and provosts are much more likely to provide additional funding to program areas that are nationally recognized and perceived as being more "prestigious."

We need a formal process for recognizing student affairs graduate preparation programs that are actually doing what they purport to do; i.e., preparing competent and proficient student affairs professionals. The challenges ahead for higher education in general, and student affairs in particular, are going to be formidable. Indeed, they already are. Certification would convey credibility and the more we have as a profession, the better able we will be to collectively contribute to a more optimistic future for everyone.

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