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The Competency-Based Movement in Student Affairs:
Implications for Curriculum and Professional Development

Abstract

This paper examines the limitations and possibilities of the emerging competency-based movement in Student Affairs. Utilizing complexity theory and postmodern educational theory as guiding frameworks, examination of the competency-based movement will raise questions about over-application of competencies in graduate preparation programs and continuing professional development, particularly in relation to complexity reduction. Following this discussion, possibilities of utilizing the Student Affairs Competencies to increase complexity and create postmodern curricula will be examined.

Introduction

This article seeks to start a dialogue about the *Professional Competency Areas for Student Affairs Practitioners* (ACPA & NASPA, 2010). For at least the last 100 years, college student affairs educators have uniquely contributed to the educational experiences of students on college campuses, both within the United States and internationally. Colleges and universities aspire to ensure that college student affairs educators working on their campuses are prepared to provide adequate guidance and resources to facilitate student success. Ensuring adequate preparation for educators and practitioners has led to growth in graduate preparation programs and ongoing professional development initiatives. As this growth has occurred, the profession has debated defining adequate preparation for working within the profession (Cuyjet, Longwell-Grice, & Molina, 2009; Herdlein, 2004; Renn & Jessup-Anger, 2008). Many believe specific skill sets, such as budgeting, grant writing, or supervisory and management skills are important. Possessing or being open to certain attitudes, such as viewing education as a lifelong process, valuing the whole person, and understanding how to work with diverse others have also emerged as important foundations for college student affairs educators.

Examining the long-standing debate and evidence suggests that college student affairs educators should possess skills and attitudes encompassing considerably variant and dynamic knowledge bases. Such skills, knowledge, and attitudes are widely applicable across various institutional and work environments. Recently, efforts to reach consensus and consolidate the debate has led to emergence of the competency-based movement in student affairs. First articulated by the Council for the Advancement of Standards (CAS), and now elaborated and codified by ACPA – College Student Educators International, and NASPA – Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education (ACPA & NASPA, 2010), the *Professional Competency Areas for Student Affairs Practitioners* seek to guide the preparation and continued professional development of college student affairs educators.

Overview of the Student Affairs Competencies

In 2010, ACPA – College Student Educators International, and NASPA – Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education, released a jointly adopted document, *Professional Competency Areas for Student Affairs Practitioners*. Initially, this document sought to synoptically capture and synthesize thinking within the field about important knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary for work within the profession. The professional competencies center on ten key areas where student affairs professionals should develop proficiency to be considered an effective practitioner: Advising and Helping; Assessment, Evaluation, and Research; Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion; Ethical Professional Practice; History, Philosophy, and Values; Human and Organizational Resources; Law, Policy, and Governance; Leadership; Personal Foundations; and Student Learning and Development. Within each of these ten areas are lists of skills, values, and knowledge broken into three levels of proficiency: *Basic*, *Intermediate*, and *Advanced* (ACPA & NASPA, 2010). Additionally, the document has three threads – technology, sustainability, and globalism – that are “considered essential elements of each competency area” (ACPA & NASPA, 2010, p. 5), and thus do not function as stand-alone competencies.

Continuing professional development was one of the principal motivations undergirding the establishment of the professional competencies in student affairs (ACPA & NASPA, 2010). Professionals were invited to “determine whether these competency areas directly relate to one’s existing professional community or the community one intends to join” (ACPA & NASPA, 2010, p. 4), and then utilize the competencies to enhance their own continued professional development and learning. It has been suggested that the competencies might be helpful for structuring, measuring, assessing, and accrediting graduate preparation programs and curricula. Further, competencies are now being used, or are suggested as useful for, structuring conferences and professional development series, listing competency requirements in job descriptions, and potentially credentialing college student affairs educators. Critical questions must be asked regarding what I argue is the broad over-application of the competencies in these areas.

Situating the Competencies in Educational and Political Discourse

Historical Lineages of the Competency-Based Movement

Development and proliferation of a competency-based movement in student affairs can be understood as a response to larger societal, political, and historical pressures. Competency-based movements have navigated their way through the entire educational system in the United States since at least the 1980s. Efforts to counter and stem-off growing tides of insecurity about the role, purpose, and outcomes of education have been responsible for many reform movements over the past four decades (Aviram, 2010; Giroux, 2014). What started primarily in the K-12 sector has now reached postsecondary education. Higher education in the United States has been facing an increasingly critical examination in the media, from governmental entities, and from the general public, evidenced by reports on the failures of college and universities to adequately prepare graduates for their role in employment or society (Arum & Roksa, 2011; 2014), perceptions of out-of-control spending demonstrated by an uncritical or untruthful examination of rising tuition prices, and a public increasingly skeptical of the value of a college degree (Aviram, 2010; Delbanco,

2012). The competency-based movement is the latest reform initiative to gain credence in popular discourse, particularly in higher education (Bok, 2013; Selingo, 2013), and is quite naturally understood given recent historical trends in K-12 education and the larger political climate focused on skills based and technical education. Globally, competency-based education and training is gaining traction with a guiding assumption that “everything that is valuable (for education and society) can be expressed in the language of competencies, and that competencies express all that is valuable” (Simons & Olssen, 2010, p. 85).

Competency-based educational models embrace an efficiency and cost-saving approach to education by placing value on student demonstration of proficiency and acquired knowledge, usually measured through standardized assessment practices or the awarding of educational badges and credits based on experience (Porter & Reilly, 2014; Selingo, 2013). In American higher education, the competency-based model has gained traction in recent years. Institutions such as Western Governors University or Southern New Hampshire University have structured their curricula entirely around competencies. Traditional universities, such as the University of Wisconsin, have also embraced competency-based approaches to education (Carlson, 2013).

Perceptions of ensured affordability are one way competency-based programs have sought to corner the alternative education market. Such cost-saving measures usually come at an educational cost, however. For example, Selingo (2013) examined competency-based degree programs at Southern New Hampshire University, where an annual tuition rate of \$2,500 was the goal. Selingo (2013) determined that as the university builds competency-based degree programs, any changes that “pushes the price over that number” (p. 116) results in elimination of potentially educational aspects or benefits for students. Porter and Reilly (2014) state “the effect of competency-based education on costs appears highly conditional” (p. 7), noting that while students may save money in textbook costs or through application of experience toward credentialing, “students save money under this approach only if they make significant progress toward their

degree each semester” (p. 8). Without this progress, students in competency-based degree programs “may end up paying more in tuition” (Porter & Reilly, 2014, p. 8). Further, Porter and Reilly (2014) analyze costs to institutions implementing competency-based models, citing start-up costs, technological infrastructure, and personnel issues (faculty and staff) as significant financial investments needed to ensure programmatic success. Resultantly, the authors conclude while “advocates of competency-based education assert that this approach will yield cost savings to institutions . . . these savings will only be realized in the long-run” (p. 10). While efficiency, cost saving, and an enhanced workforce are often cited as important reasons for a shift to competency-based approaches to education and learning, the practice is also highly critiqued (Giroux, 2014; Selingo, 2013).

It is within this larger framework of competency-based approaches to learning, development, cost-saving efficiency, and education that the *Professional Competency Areas for Student Affairs Practitioners* (ACPA & NASPA, 2010) arose. That the profession of college student affairs educators has embraced the competency-based movement is therefore seen as responsible reaction to the forces acting on large, complex systems of national and global education. Student affairs, as one element within this system, interacts with a large number of elements in a broader system: federal government(s), state government(s), various institutional types, policy and research centers, and individuals with various occupational acumen within and outside of the college environment. Though college student affairs educators often view themselves or are viewed by others as one part of the larger functioning of college and university campuses, framing student affairs as one entity within a larger higher education system and network of interacting elements helps us understand the emergence of the competency-based movement within the profession. As the larger higher education system creates outcomes and intricate measurements of assessment, the establishment of the student affairs professional competencies can naturally be

viewed as the profession's response to larger systemic pressures and developments within the framework of global higher education.

Critical Questions About the Student Affairs Competencies

Is a competency-based approach to education, professional preparation, and ongoing professional development the best approach for college student affairs educators in the 21st century? Does the specification of professional competencies introduce a checkbox mentality to preparation and ongoing professional development? If so, does such a mentality result in reduced appreciation for experiential process as achievement and maintenance of *Basic*, *Intermediate*, and *Advanced* proficiency become duties of responsible professionalism?

Dialogue is needed about the limitations and possibilities of the competency-based movement within the college student affairs educators' profession. While the profession needs standards of good practice, there should be a cautious approach to the broad over-application of competencies in the profession, which I suggest reduces the complexity of work carried out by college student affairs educators. Additionally, a fully standardized set of competencies, even if agreed upon by members of the profession, runs the risk of privileging certain epistemological and ontological frameworks to the exclusion and detriment of others. College student affairs educators have always valued holistic approaches to our practice, and in an increasingly globalized and interconnected world, we must seek to expand, not limit, constrict, or prescribe the skills, knowledge, and values needed to be an effective practitioner.

What follows is an analysis of the currently articulated student affairs competencies, their application to the structuring of graduate preparation curricula and continued professional development, and the limitations and possibilities of such applications. Multiple theoretical discourses will be engaged in an effort to disrupt (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005) the field's current understanding of the competency-based movement. First, insights from complexity theory (Cilliers, 1998; Mason, 2008; Osberg & Biesta, 2010; Simons & Olssen, 2010) will guide my examination of

whether the currently articulated student affairs competencies reduce complexity of the profession through standardization, fragmentation, and overly linear approaches to framing the profession, structuring graduate preparation curricula, and enhancing ongoing professional development. Following this analysis, insights from postmodern educational theorists (Aviram, 2010; Doll, 1993; Lyotard, 1984; Slattery, 2013) will be employed, examining how college student affairs educators may enhance the creative complexity of the profession utilizing the currently articulated student affairs competencies to enhance graduate preparation curricula and ongoing professional learning. Raising these questions, engaging in dialogue, and re-examining the role of the professional competencies in our profession will help ensure college student affairs educators are adequately prepared and committed to working on the college campuses and in higher education systems of the 21st century.

Examining the Competencies Through Complexity Theory

The ideas of complexity theory have developed over the past 100 years, starting first in fields such as biology and physics, and only recently being engaged in the human sciences, organizational studies, and education (Cutright, 2001; Mason, 2008; Wheatley, 2006). In higher education and student affairs, complexity theory has been only minimally discussed, often regarding thinking about leadership (Allen & Cherry, 2000), organizational and strategic policy issues (Cutright, 2001), and as a framework for rethinking student affairs practice (Love & Estanek, 2004). Within the broader field of education, educational research (Mason, 2008) and curriculum studies (Doll, 1993; Slattery, 2013), complexity theory has been utilized to disrupt notions of predictability and linearity, to challenge positivistic research studies as sole contributors to a robust understanding of learning and educational outcomes, and to re-emphasize the importance of education as process, challenging reductionism, standardization, and assessment movements (Mason, 2008; Osberg, Biesta, & Cilliers, 2008; Osberg & Biesta, 2010).

The student affairs competencies (ACPA & NASPA, 2010) as currently structured and presented adhere to a strictly linear, fragmented, and standardized format. From the perspective of complexity theory the student affairs competencies are severely limiting and problematic. While there are many concepts within the broad field of study known as complexity theory, non-linearity, unpredictability, and the difficulties associated with fragmenting, reducing, and standardization are particularly important to the present discussion. Each of these concepts from complexity theory will be utilized to undergird a structural examination of the currently articulated student affairs competencies.

Nonlinearity

Nonlinearity challenges the assumptions of empirically based, Cartesian understandings of the world structured on premises of direct linear causation and states of equilibrium (Capra, 1996; 2002). Studies of nonlinear system dynamics demonstrate that small disruptions or iterations over time can lead to large systemic changes, whereas large disruptions may not cause any systemic changes, a concept many will recognize as the 'Butterfly Effect.' Embracing a nonlinear understanding of the world, what Coole (2010) describes as a curvilinear envelopment with the world, also disrupts traditional predictive controls inherent in most Western, linear, positivistic conceptualizations and models. Resultantly, the world becomes unpredictable, probabilistic, non-reductionistic, and inherently more complex - a continuum of possibilities - rather than a world of standardized, dualistic binaries of pre-determinable outcomes.

The linear structuring of proficiency levels – *Basic*, *Intermediate*, and *Advanced* – within the student affairs competencies (ACPA & NASPA, 2010) adheres to an understanding of learning and development as a strictly linear process, where one must follow a series of lockstep experiences, mastering certain skills, knowledge, and attitudinal positions, prior to progressing through the levels of each competency (Aviram, 2010). Explicitly, ACPA and NASPA (2010) state that individuals who self-assess or are assessed at the *Intermediate* or *Advanced* levels of proficiency

“are presumed to also be able to demonstrate the knowledge, skills, and attitudes of the level(s) below their current level of attainment” (p. 4). Such conceptions of skill, knowledge, or attitude attainment are unrealistically situated and not practically accomplished. Experiences throughout one’s professional or personal life may challenge the linear structuring as presently articulated, causing individuals to revisit, revise, or eliminate position and learning that was previously achieved within a certain competency. Further, an individual may operate within multiple levels of proficiency within the same competency, challenging the notion that one moves seamlessly between the three levels of proficiency.

As an example, the “Personal Foundations” competency encompasses a range of skills, knowledge, and attitudinal objectives across the three levels of proficiency that challenge the notion of linearity. In particular, wellness and balance are critical aspects of the “Personal Foundations” competency. At the *Basic* level, an individual is expected to “articulate an understanding that wellness is a broad concept comprised of emotional, physical, social, environmental, relational, spiritual, and intellectual elements” (ACPA & NASPA, 2010, p. 24). At the *Intermediate* level an individual should be able to “identify and employ resources to improve one’s own wellness” (ACPA & NASPA, 2010, p. 24), and finally at the *Advanced* level one should be able to “create and implement an individualized plan for healthy living” (ACPA & NASPA, 2010, p. 25). Within this one example, wellness covers a range of areas – from physical to spiritual wellness. What happens if an individual does not recognize spirituality as important to wellness, but has a firm understanding of physical and emotional health and adequately implements a plan into their life for maintenance of a strong physical and emotional self? Does this person not meet *Advanced* proficiency as a result of their failure to adequately recognize spirituality as an important part of wellness? Or is this person *Advanced*, just not in terms of spiritual wellness? As this one example demonstrates, the large umbrella cast over certain attitudes, knowledge, and skills is at odds with the rigid linear structuring of the currently articulated competencies.

Similar issues arise when examining the linear structuring of competencies in “Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI)” or “Ethical Professional Practice.” In these competencies, the linear structuring has led to certain instances of rhetorically privileging administrative positioning within an organizational structure that might be challenged by some members of the profession. For example, EDI states that an individual at the *Advanced* level should “provide leadership in fostering an institutional culture that supports the free and open exchange of ideas and beliefs, and where issues of power and privilege are identified and addressed” (ACPA & NASPA, 2010, p. 11). While an individual can read a statement such as this in many ways, there is an implied assumption that an administrator with a position higher on an organizational chart becomes responsible for achievement of such an outcome on campus. In my opinion, this statement is not an *Advanced* skill, but rather a dutiful responsibility of all college student affairs educators. Providing leadership and addressing issues of power, privilege, and open exchange of ideas might be adequately recast as a *Basic* competency within the profession. Throughout the competencies there are many similar examples where so-called *Intermediate* or *Advanced* competencies might be better suited as a *Basic* competency, and vice-versa. Thus, there could be considerable debate within and amongst professionals about how competencies are arranged, leading to tension with the currently articulated linear structuring of the competencies.

Fragmentation and Reductionism

Complexity theorists often discuss the difficulties associated with over-fragmentation and reductionism in examining large-scale systems. A popular adage amongst researchers in complexity sciences is that the whole is in the part, but the part cannot build the whole (Capra, 1996; 2002; Cilliers, 1998). Fragmentation and reductionism adhere to a modernist assumption of disconnection between various areas of inquiry and modes of practice. The result of this tendency in the modern world was the rise of strict academic disciplinary structures, and in higher education institutions the siloing of academic and student affairs into separate spheres of practice.

As currently articulated, the student affairs competencies (ACPA & NASPA, 2010) are fragmented and reductionistic, resulting in perceptions of professional life as disconnected and lacking integration (Aviram, 2010). Fragmentation of the competencies leads to belief that the work of college student affairs educators is somehow pursued in disconnected ways. As a result, and for the purposes of example, it is easy to view issues of “Law, Policy, and Governance” as somehow unconnected to issues of “Advising and Helping,” or to minimize the intricate connections between competency areas such as “Equity, Diversity and Inclusion” and “Leadership.” In the real world of practice, all the competency areas are connected. Articulation of the competencies as singular and fragmentary, while pragmatic and practical for the purposes of attempting to synoptically encapsulate the varied work of college student affairs educators, fails to articulate the holistic nature and true intricacies of the profession. The sum of our work is greater than its currently articulated fragmented parts.

Attempts to overcome this fragmentation are evident in the document outlining the Competencies for Professional Practice (ACPA & NASPA, 2010). The areas of globalism, technology, and sustainability are said to weave their way through all of the competency areas, hence are not listed as stand-alone competencies. There are several risks to this approach. First, unless clear objectives are stated related to technology, globalism, or sustainability within each competency area, the importance of integrating knowledge, skills, and attitudes about these varied areas of inquiry become lost. Second, particularly in relation to globalism and sustainability, there are vast conceptual, theoretical, and practical concerns to address. For example, sustainability discourse within ACPA – College Student Educators International, has focused on issues of economic strength, environmental stewardship, and social justice (ACPA, 2008). Globalism requires “recognition of the interconnected nature of nations and regions of the world, while understanding and respecting the uniqueness of each individual culture” (ACPA & NASPA, 2010, p. 5). There is considerable overlap in these two instances between issues of social justice or cultural respect with the stated objectives

of competencies such as “Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion” or “Ethical Professional Practice.” This may be one reason globalism and sustainability are not currently listed as separate competencies. However the ‘threading’ of technology, globalism, and sustainability through all the competencies provides some level of substantiation to the claim made above that the work of college student affairs educators is interconnected and far more complex than the current competencies articulate.

Standardization

The idea of ensuring standardization is rooted in modernist assembly-line approaches to education and professional development (Aviram, 2010). One erroneous assumption of standardization is the belief that to maximize efficiency and productivity everyone needs to possess the same set of knowledge, skills, or attitudes. The student affairs competencies (ACPA & NASPA, 2010) set up a process of standardization within the profession that is incompatible with the realities of the 21st century (Aviram, 2010). The jointly adopted professional competencies also assert this position, stating “all student affairs professionals should be able to hold the basic level of knowledge and skills in all competency areas” (ACPA & NASPA, 2010, p. 4). One potential impact of standardization is minimization or destruction of unique individuality and creativity as people seek to adhere to standardized skills, knowledge, and attitudes in pursuit of meeting measures of proficiency for each competency. Further, there are profound implications for graduate preparation program curricula in pursuing a goal of ensuring *Basic* proficiency for all graduates of programs. The impact of the competencies on issues surrounding graduate preparation curriculum and continued professional development is where this article will now turn its attention.

Examining Impacts of the Competencies on Preparation and Professional Development

Two potential impacts of the competencies movement in student affairs are 1) movement toward a process of accrediting graduate preparation programs solely based on competency-based outcomes, and 2) credentialing student affairs professionals. Questions have arisen regarding the responsibility of graduate preparation programs and faculty to adequately prepare new

practitioners to meet *Basic* proficiency levels in the student affairs competencies (Johnson, Haber-Curran, Collins, Myers, & Broido, 2013). Although ACPA and NASPA (2010) acknowledge “that each knowledge, skill, and attitude mentioned in the competency areas cannot, and perhaps should not, be addressed in a typical graduate program” (p. 4), there is also acknowledgment that “graduate student affairs program faculty may choose to use this document to develop or refine their curriculum to better address the competencies expected of practitioners in the field” (p. 4). Purposefully structuring graduate preparation curricula around the ten competency areas appears to be one enticing, natural outgrowth of the competency based movement in student affairs (ACPA & NASPA, 2010; Johnson et al., 2013).

Competency Based Graduate Education and the Reduction of Complexity

A competency-based curriculum would potentially fulfill the aims of ensuring that graduates of traditional student affairs preparation programs meet *Basic* proficiency standards, while also addressing what is perceived to be the most important and valuable knowledge, skills, and attitudes for work in the profession. Though logical, the over-application of the competencies to graduate preparation programs would reduce complexity, potentially inhibiting the success of emerging professionals, as well as their unique individual contributions and passion for the profession.

Osberg and Biesta (2010) utilize the theoretical tenets of complexity theory to argue against the atomizing and complexity reducing tendencies of modern curricula, including competency-based education. In their view, competency-based approaches to curriculum and learning are reductionist, individualizing, and overly reliant on standardization and assessment (Osberg & Biesta, 2010). Several potentially problematic impacts result. Rather than viewing education as process, education becomes reduced and minimized to learning prescribed content, ultimately proving proficiency through the use of rigid standardized assessments. In this method of education, learning becomes reduced as competition and pressure to demonstrate adequate proficiency of

pre-determined standards gain traction. Ultimately, ensuring standard achievement reduces measurement of proficiency to scores and numbers on standardized assessments, rather than more qualitative and holistic approaches of assessing proficiency.

One result of this reduction in complexity is the creation of what Simons and Olssen (2010) call the double-bind of individual and collective responsibility. Competency-based education simultaneously centers the individual as primarily responsible for adequate demonstration of learning and proficiency while also placing new totalizing responsibility for ensuring such demonstration into larger collectives, such as faculty, academic programs, universities, or entire systems of education (Simons & Olssen, 2010). Failure to meet standards or adequate demonstration of proficiency within certain competency areas becomes both an individual and collective problem. Individuals become ensnared in an increasingly competitive, high-stakes work and professional development environment, where failure to meet various levels of proficiency within each competency is often seen as personal failure. Conversely, academic programs that fail to ensure all their students meet proficiency are also seen as failure, and thus engage in constant reform initiatives to ensure student proficiency attainment. Institutions, including colleges or universities and individual academic programs, also become engaged in reform processes designed to ensure competency achievement within their students, graduates, or employees. Thus, “it is possible to switch permanently between (defining) individual problems and suggesting ‘collective solutions’ or between (defining) ‘collective problems’ and (suggesting) ‘individual solutions’ in view of stability or complexity reduction” (Simons & Olssen, 2010, p. 88). One result of this double-bind is exertion of control. Aviram (2010) refers to this process as the double-talk of reform – a constantly revolving game of students, academic programs, and institutions seeking proficient achievement, but an incapability of ever ensuring such proficiency is attained.

There is evidence that rigid competencies and standards have deleterious effects on learning, evidenced by the vast discussions over the impact of programs such as “No Child Left

Behind” and “Race to the Top” in K-12 education. As Biesta (2010) notes, “complexity has provided a language for articulating the fact that educational processes and practices tend to be characterized by nonlinearity and unpredictability and by a fundamental gap between ‘input’ (teaching, curriculum, pedagogy) and ‘output’ (learning)” (p. 6). Many educators acknowledge that individual engagement with learning occurs in creative, unpredictable, and non-linear ways. Competencies, through their rigidity, hierarchy, control, and predictability, tend to limit some of the unique nature of the learning process.

Given the reductionist nature of competencies, their overt reliance on standardized assessments, and their inclination toward hyper-competitive individualization, student affairs should be careful about over-application of the competencies to a strict structuring of graduate preparation curricula. As Biesta (2010) points out, “complexity allows us to see order, stability, structure, and ‘simplicity’ – if this might count as the opposite of ‘complexity’ – as the exception and deviation from what is considered to be the normal course of affairs” (p. 7). The history of the college student affairs educators’ profession adequately demonstrates why the work of the field is not easily reduced to a set of competencies. Cuyjet, Longwell-Grice, and Molina (2009) recognized that “because student affairs professionals practice in a variety of institutions and perform increasingly complex functions, the field may need to accept that there is not a single way to prepare professionals, nor a definitive set of professional education standards” (p. 105). This point was also articulated by Aviram (2010), who noted that in a postmodern world

all professionals are obligated to work within a social network of knowledge support which enables them to cope with the ever-increasing flood of knowledge, changes, and the need to multitask. Thus, connectivity in all the senses of the term has become a major prerequisite for professional survival and success. This loosens the grip of modern fragmentariness on the professional environment. (p. 124)

Ensuring that professionals are prepared to meet the demands of the 21st century higher education environment will ultimately require “uprooting the prevailing curriculum, which is necessarily disciplinary in content and hierarchical, linear, and fragmentary in structure” (Aviram, 2010, p.

238). Essentially, ensuring that graduate preparation curricula do not become overly rigid, hierarchical, linear, or incapable of reacting to a constantly shifting and dynamic higher education environment is of paramount importance.

Several additional concerns arise in relation to the over application of emphasis on the competencies to structuring the curriculum in preparing future professionals. Chief amongst these concerns is the failure of currently articulated competencies (ACPA & NASPA, 2010) to include technology, globalism, or sustainability as stand-alone competencies. Although technology, sustainability, and globalism are listed as threads that should be addressed within each of the larger ten competency areas, an over reliance on the articulated competencies document could lead to such topics being unaddressed in the curriculum. For example, ACPA – College Student Educators International recently released a professional competencies rubric, outlining the various skills, knowledge, and values needed for each of the core competencies. While this document does address issues of technology and sustainability in relation to a few competencies, there is no mention of issues related to globalism at the *Basic* level of skills. If the rubric were being utilized to develop curriculum, globalism, a core area considered important to the profession, would not be included in the planning and execution of the curriculum.

Continued Professional Development and the Reduction of Complexity

Fenwick (2003, 2010), whose work has focused on competency-based education and professional development, examines the benefits and challenges of applying competency-based educational approaches to continuing professional development. Notable amongst her research findings is discussion of challenges associated with disrupting competency-based approaches to professional learning and education once it is enmeshed in the standards and practices of an educational environment. She states that

once a particular enunciation of educational standards has become assembled. . . it might function as an ‘immutable mobile.’ That is, it becomes locked into a contained object such as a written statement. This object appears to be inevitable and complete. (Fenwick, 2010, p. 59)

The jointly adopted ACPA and NASPA professional competency standards are quickly becoming one such “immutable mobile.” The codification of the competencies becomes, in some ways, totalizing.

The area of credentialing becomes particularly problematic in relation to the student affairs competencies. Credentialing or certification procedures create reductionist tendencies by promoting a process of learning rooted in demonstration of proficiency, usually through passing a standardized set of examinations (Aviram, 2010). Recently, discussion of minimizing time to degree completion in higher education has led to discussion of students demonstrating proficiency by accumulating badges, and the Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) movement is rooted in privileging of proficiency. There are potentially grave impacts of this movement in the continued professional development of college student affairs educators.

The over-application of competencies to the ongoing education, learning, and professional development of practitioners, especially if applied in contexts of accreditation of graduate preparation programs or credentialing of college student affairs educators, risks reducing the profession to mere checkbox mentality, ultimately minimizing and reducing learning. Professionals, rather than truly being engaged in a process of learning for personal benefit or to enhance one’s own professional development, may become unengaged, completing requirements to check off boxes or pass assessments demonstrating competence. Should such a technocratic approach (Aviram, 2010) to advancing in the profession take hold, true learning and personal professional growth might not occur since professionals would simply be performing for the sake of enhancing their status in the profession, most likely for job promotion and/or income purposes.

There are several risks to this potential reality. For emerging professionals, primarily those going through graduate preparation programs, an unnecessary focus on achieving *Basic* level proficiency would overrule potentially valuable learning through experiential and reflexive processes. For professionals in the field, there are also potentially minimizing and serious risks should universities adopt policies requiring demonstration of *Intermediate* or *Advanced* levels of

proficiency of competencies in hiring and promotion decisions. Rather than truly learning or seeking to advance personal understanding in many of the competency areas, professionals may simply check off required activities to prove their own proficiency. Though this eventuality may not apply to all or even a majority of professionals in the field, it is worth examining whether this unintended consequence could arise. Potential impacts on the profession, and more importantly, students with whom college student affairs educators work, should also be clearly examined.

In the broad scheme of applying the student affairs competencies to ongoing professional development in the forms of conferences, professional development seminars, or other professional development opportunities, some critical questions for the field might include:

- a) What issues of power are evident in the formation and dictation of the competencies?
Whose knowledge is most valued?
- b) What are the consequences of certain skill sets or epistemologies not being included as stand-alone competencies? For example, technology, sustainability, and globalism, which currently are situated as 'threads' but are often forgotten without specific associated competencies.
- c) Do we devalue or miss out on critical dialogues, ways of knowing, or ways of being by too closely aligning conference proposals, presentations, preparatory curricula, and continuing professional development with competencies?
- d) How do we balance individual versus collective responsibility for attainment of competencies?
- e) How does the competency-based movement open spaces of negotiation, where students, faculty, and practitioners open up new possibilities for what is important to know, value, and practice in the field of student affairs?

The final portion of this article addresses this final question.

Enhancing Complexity of the College Student Affairs Educators Profession

Up to this point, the competency-based movement in student affairs has been examined with a focus on how over-application of the competencies can reduce complexity of graduate preparation curricula and continued professional development. Despite these possibilities, the competencies should not be eradicated or dissolved. Rather, it is important for the profession to carefully examine the potential reduction of complexity, as outlined above, while also recognizing a need to continually enhance the complexity of the field through professional preparation and ongoing professional development. In this sense, the competencies can also be utilized as a springboard to enhance the complexity of the profession in the 21st century.

Competencies can serve as a creative force. Fenwick (2003) argued that competency-based professional development is not always deleterious to ongoing professional growth, primarily since competencies often increase professional commitment to continued learning. Her application of complexity theory to discussions of competency-based education posited that a third space is opened up through the introduction of competencies, what she referred to as “spaces of negotiation” (Fenwick, 2010, p. 60). While Fenwick (2010) recognized that one goal of competencies has been to control variation of learning in classroom and work environments, “generative spaces of possibility” (p. 62) have arisen as people grapple with the application of competencies to their own environment. Here, complexity theory affords us an opportunity of imagining how the competency-based movement in student affairs allows practitioners, students, and faculty the leverage of creating new dialogue and understanding of the knowledge, skills, and values needed to be an effective college student affairs educator and practitioner. This is one argument for the continued presence of competencies within the larger field of student affairs.

Creating a Postmodern, Complex Graduate Preparation Curriculum

In seeking to understand how the currently articulated student affairs competencies might be utilized to actually enhance the complexity of the field, it is helpful to turn to the work of some

postmodern curriculum theorists who have utilized the tenets of complexity theory to re-imagine learning in the 21st century (Aviram, 2010; Doll, 1993; Slattery, 2013). William Doll (1993) and Aharon Aviram (2010) each outlined tenets of postmodern, complex curricula that emphasize learning as a process based in experience, connection, and focused on interdisciplinary understanding. Doll (1993) believes postmodern curricula require richness, recursion, relationship, and rigor, while Aviram (2010) believes in creating curricula focused on Autonomous Oriented Education (AOE). Utilizing these frameworks, multiple possibilities emerge for creating a dynamic, postmodern, complex curriculum based on the currently articulated student affairs competencies (ACPA & NASPA, 2010).

Present articulation of the student affairs competencies provides a foundation for many of Doll's (1993) postmodern curricular ideals. Possibilities exist for faculty in graduate preparation programs to create the dancing curriculum articulated by Doll (1993) by focusing on process and experience, rather than simply strict curricular, structured course offerings. Therefore, rather than creating academic courses solely around the core competency areas (for example, courses on "Leadership," "Human and Organizational Behavior," or "Assessment, Research, and Evaluation"), the curriculum may be imagined as a series of community-based experiences where students and faculty negotiate the topics of discussion to center on issues particular individuals are experiencing in assistantship and real-world environments. Such an approach would not view learning and induction into the profession as a series of fragmented, disconnected units devoid of contextual realities. Rather, the classroom-based experience would center on "a mixed and multivariate integration of rich, open-ended experiences; as a complex mosaic ever shifting its center of attraction as we shift ours" (Doll, 1993, p. 38). The currently articulated student affairs competencies (ACPA & NASPA, 2010) would be lived holistically, allowing students to understand and integrate knowledge and learning in more comprehensive, interconnected, holistic ways. Issues of fragmentation and reduction discussed earlier could be eliminated through such an

educational approach, as emphasis is placed not necessarily on achievement of competency levels (*Basic, Intermediate, or Advanced*) or skills mastery, but toward integrating real-world experiences with important knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary for being an effective college student affairs educator. Ultimately, this approach to structuring the curriculum provides the opportunity of seeing the connections between all the competencies and threads as currently articulated in the student affairs competencies document (ACPA & NASPA, 2010).

Further, an experiential and process-oriented curriculum allows individuals to develop their own particular pathways through graduate preparation programs or continued professional development. Aviram (2010) believes that personal articulation of learning goals is an important goal of postmodern curricula. In this view, forcing all students to learn standardized content does not adequately prepare individuals to work in complex, postmodern work environments. Utilizing the student affairs professional competencies (ACPA & NASPA, 2010) to focus on individual learning plans through the curriculum allows students in graduate preparation programs to develop their personal autonomy, a sense of personal professional identity, and engage in dialogical relationship with their peers. Additionally, it recognizes the importance of viewing students as co-creators of knowledge, capable of educating themselves and their peers, and also changes classroom dynamics.

The student affairs competencies (ACPA & NASPA, 2010) can assist in the structuring of classroom and professional learning environments where individuals view themselves as part of larger communities of responsibility, emphasizing not just autonomy, but interdependence. In a postmodern classroom, all individuals are valued as co-creators of knowledge. Citing Patti Lather, Slattery (2013) notes that postmodernism allows for “deconstruction of master narratives that impose knowledge through unequal power relations where students must be subordinate and submissive to teachers, and then moves to the emancipation of both teachers and students who have been disempowered by this structure” (p. 28). Faculty become responsible for creating

conditions that foster discussion, dialogue, and disequilibrium (Doll, 1993) in the learning environment, leading to transformative and increasingly complex learning experiences. This shift in classroom relationships between teacher and student emphasizes community over competition (Slattery, 2013). Essentially, “in postmodern schooling, teachers, administrators, and parents will recognize that they are not experts with all the answers but fellow travelers on the lifelong journey of learning” (Slattery, 2013, p. 115). This is an important outcome of preparation and ongoing professional development: helping students and professionals view themselves as part of a larger community.

This focus on community (Slattery, 2013) impacts the structure of classroom lessons and curriculum development. Doll (1993) argues that a syllabus or curriculum should be open-ended enough for perturbations or new interests from the classroom or experiential environments to become focused and subsequently explored. Recursion, a process focused on reflection, becomes important in a postmodern classroom. Students and classrooms use the process of recursion to reflect on historical experience as they self-organize toward greater complexity. Slattery (2013), calls this the proleptic, synthetical moment, stating that educators “must recognize that while the present is conditioned by the past, every moment is also full of future possibilities for change and new direction” (p. 282). The process of recursion adds richness to the curriculum, through the lived experiences of individual learners, along interdisciplinary lines, and through shifting interpretations, viewpoints, or understandings. In a postmodern classroom “pressure is not produced to ‘succeed’ quickly, when in this atmosphere the details of the anomaly can be studied (maybe even played with), and when time (as a developmental factor) is of sufficient duration to allow a new frame to emerge” (Doll, 1993 p. 166). This is important in the context of the currently articulated student affairs competencies (ACPA & NASPA, 2010). Students and professionals might not benefit from time constraints placed on achievement of *Basic*, *Intermediate*, or *Advanced* levels of competency, for example. Thus, utilizing graduate preparation programs to ensure achievement

of *Basic* proficiency within all competencies may not, ultimately, be educationally or professionally beneficial.

Such awareness significantly changes the charge of faculty. Just as students are seen as valid co-creators of knowledge, the role of faculty shifts from 'teacher' to 'learner,' and more importantly, allows faculty to take on the role of mentor and tutor (Aviram, 2010). Rather than focusing solely on creating content for courses, designing syllabi, or attempting to create standardized forms of assessment to measure student progress, faculty can become more engaged in helping individual students meet their personal learning goals while recognizing, articulating, and advancing their own ongoing professional development. Faculty would shift from being specialists in only a few content areas toward being individuals with their own personal and professional learning goals. In this way, faculty would not be bound to teach the same courses term-to-term or year-to-year, but would work with students in constantly co-creating knowledge, thus expanding and enhancing their own continued learning and professional development and engagement.

The postmodern curricular approach also allows us to imagine different ways of structuring the experience of students in graduate preparation programs. Rather than students taking a series of courses with different faculty, students could be placed in small communities of learners, paired with one or two faculty mentors to guide them through the course of their entire graduate experience. Many benefits would accrue from this approach. First, faculty would thoroughly engage with students through the course of their entire graduate experience, rather than simply in one or a few courses and semesters. This would allow for faculty to truly serve as mentors (Aviram, 2010). Further, students in a community of learners can take responsibility for enhancing their personal learning and the learning of their peers. The intense relationships and interactions within smaller groups of engaged learners allow students to build truly meaningful relationships, an important part of postmodern professional life and of the postmodern curriculum articulated by

Doll (1993). Finally, students and faculty will engage topics that touch on all articulated student affairs competencies each term, as necessary and appropriate for individual learning, rather than fragmenting the curriculum into a series of content areas. In this regard, the curriculum and learning become integrated, emergent, complex, and contextually or environmentally relevant, enhancing learning and preparation in important ways.

Postmodern, Complex Possibilities for Continuing Professional Development

The currently articulated student affairs competencies (ACPA & NASPA, 2010) also afford opportunities for rethinking assessment, measurement, and credentialing within the profession. There is a tendency for assessment measurements to be individually focused. Yet, the student affairs competencies (ACPA & NASPA, 2010) challenge our profession to rethink assessment beyond the individual. For example, Morrison (2008) asks how assessment might capture collective knowledge and skill, as opposed to focusing simply on individual achievement. Thinking of assessment beyond the individual, particularly in relation to the application of competencies within the profession, would allow for creative new approaches to measuring the proficiency of campus environments. Further, rather than navigating toward standardized assessment measures within the profession for purposes of credentialing, assessment of individual effectiveness as a practitioner could continue to be measured by local professionals in campus environments. This will allow the profession to continue welcoming professionals who may not have been trained in traditional student affairs graduate preparation programs. Ultimately, this approach enhances the profession by ensuring diversity of perspective, lived experience, and accounting of local context(s), all critical aspects of complex and postmodern working environments.

The student affairs competencies as currently articulated (ACPA & NASPA, 2010) state that each individual professional can utilize the document to enhance their own personal and professional development, recognizing their own interests and needs as a professional. This approach to utilization of the competencies aligns with Aviram's (2010) Autonomous Oriented

Education (AOE), a postmodern vision of reinventing education and learning for the 21st century. Aviram (2010) emphasized that constantly shifting work environments require individuals to continually seek new ways of operating, but that one must also follow their interests. One way of developing interests is having exposure to various vocations, people, and networks of tutors and mentors that facilitate individual personal growth as “autonomous, moral, and dialogically belonging people” (Aviram, 2010, p. 285). The student affairs competencies provide exposure to college student affairs educators seeking the cracks, folds, hollows, or labyrinths (Coole, 2010; Fenwick, 2010) for maneuvering within the profession, while simultaneously “finding the contestable lines and sites where they can invent themselves differently” (Fenwick, 2010, p. 64).

As professionals pursue their own career and personal interests, the student affairs competencies may provide some of the critical questions necessary to discover new interests, understand personal autonomy, while engaging moral, dialogic, interdependent conversation with others in the profession. In this way, the competencies enhance complexity of the profession through recognition “that cognition, identities and environments emerge together through multiple dynamic, nonlinear interactions that are recursive and continuously experimenting with possibilities” (Davis & Sumara, 2006, cited in Fenwick, 2010). In essence, many of the articulated knowledge, skills, and attitudes within the current student affairs competencies (ACPA & NASPA, 2010) align with Aviram’s (2010) discussion of ensuring individuals in the 21st century are capable of operating in a postmodern, complex world, most especially by emphasizing that professionals retain a focus and emphasis on areas of learning and development appropriate for their own personal professional goals and identity, as well as the environment(s) where they conduct their work (Fenwick, 2010).

Additionally, the currently articulated student affairs competencies (ACPA & NASPA, 2010) may open conversations about new ways of working within the profession. For example, the threads of globalism, technology, and sustainability disrupt and challenge many of the skills,

knowledge, and attitudes needed to be a competent, autonomous, dialogical practitioner. As the profession continues to increase international membership and deal with issues of globalism and internationalization, viewpoints from cultures with different epistemological and ontological roots may challenge objectives of certain competencies, such as those in “Leadership,” “Human and Organizational Resources,” or “Law, Policy and Governance.” The college student affairs educators’ profession is strongly rooted in Western and American ideals that could be challenged by non-Western, Southern, Eastern or indigenous epistemologies and ontologies. Interactions between professionals globally are just one example of how the competencies can be used to increase the complexity of the profession. Similar conversations can occur in the areas of technology and sustainability.

Further, other threads of importance may emerge within the profession to challenge the knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed to be an effective college student affairs educator in the 21st century. For example, as college student affairs educators grapple with creating the most impactful, dynamic, and experiential learning experiences for students, one new thread that should be introduced within the profession is knowledge of Curriculum Theory and Pedagogy. Introduction of this thread would articulate an understanding that being an effective practitioner may involve awareness of various pedagogical approaches to engagement and learning, rooted in various curricular and educational philosophies. College student affairs educators already recognize the importance of Curriculum Theory and Pedagogy in several competencies (for examples, “Student Learning and Development” or “History, Philosophy and Values”), yet the profession may decide that more fully articulating such an area would enhance the work of professionals in the field, or expand the field into new territory. In this particular instance, adding the thread of Curriculum Theory and Pedagogy may actually break down barriers between the traditional silos of Academic Affairs and Student Affairs, and open conversations on college campuses and within society about the interconnections, networks, and complexity of 21st century educational endeavors. In these

ways, the student affairs competencies create dialogue within the profession, demonstrating interconnections, challenging rigid hierarchy, fragmentation and siloing, and creating the disequilibrium necessary to ensure that our understanding of what it means to be a college student affairs educator in the 21st century is vibrant and emergent, not stagnant.

Conclusion

College student affairs educators have consistently sought to ensure that professionals in the field are adequately prepared for their work, and that continued professional development remains a focus of professionals in the field. The emergence of the ACPA and NASPA (2010) *Professional Competency Areas for Student Affairs Practitioners* is the latest attempt to synoptically capture all the knowledge, skills, and attitudes believed to be necessary to effectively work within the field in the 21st century. Standards and competencies are important, but should not be totalizing. Discussion of their application to various arenas of student affairs – professional development, conferences, graduate preparation programs, curriculum development, or job creation – should be critical, deliberative, engaging, and approached with an understanding of their potentially complexity-reducing impacts. In a higher education environment of constant fluctuation, analyses and insights from complexity theory and postmodern curriculum theorists afford us the opportunity to examine the competency-based movement from multiple vantage points, with a critical eye toward ensuring professionals are prepared for the work they do, without infringing on the possibilities for the learning and critical thinking necessary to continually emerge, change, and transform the field and practice of college student affairs educators.

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