

Research and Assessment: A Study of the Competencies Taught and Competencies Sought

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It is an often-stated tenet that academic preparation in student affairs administration is an essential component to becoming a successful administrator in the field (Kuk, Cobb, & Forrest, 2007; Waple, 2006). However, student affairs literature lacks consensus on what skills, knowledge, and characteristics are needed for professionals entering the field (Herdlein, 2004) and what constitutes appropriate curriculum is debated (Waple, 2006). It is a fundamental assumption of the authors that master's level preparation programs focus on preparing students for careers in student affairs. This leads to the question of how effective student affairs graduate programs are at preparing their students for the changing landscape of higher education. With a lack of consensus in the literature, the field often turns to relevant organizations and standard-setting bodies for professional guidance.

Many student affairs administration programs (also known as higher education or college student personnel programs) incorporate the standards set forth by The Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS) within their curriculum. CAS acknowledges that different programs have different foci, but writes, "all [preparation programs] should prepare students to work in a wide variety of functional areas within higher education" (Council for the Advancement of Standards, 2015, p. 344). These areas include foundational studies, professional studies, and supervised practice. Within professional studies, CAS specifies five areas of study: student learning and development theories, student characteristics and effects of college on students, individual and group strategies, organization and administration of student

affairs, and assessment, evaluation, and research (Council for the Advancement of Standards, 2015, p. 348).

A second guide that preparation programs may look to for insight on what skills are considered important is the *Professional Competency Areas for Student Affairs Educators*. This joint publication by the two largest student affairs professional (SAP) associations—The American College Personnel Association (ACPA) and the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA)—was released in 2010 and updated in 2015. The publication consists of ten competency areas (see Table 1), which each include a list of outcome statements on essential knowledge, skills, and dispositions that student affairs professionals are expected to have. The outcome statements are categorized into three competency levels—foundational, intermediate, and advanced. These levels should not be confused with years of experience or title because “...‘all student affairs professionals should be able to demonstrate their ability to meet the [foundational] list of outcomes under each competency area regardless of how they entered the profession’ (ACPA & NASPA, 2010, p. 3)” (ACPA & NASPA, 2015, p. 6).

Existing literature suggests a possible disconnect between what is taught in graduate preparation programs and what is required in the field. This descriptive study attempts to build a platform for understanding what master’s level preparation programs offer related to the specific competency areas of assessment and research.

Review of the Literature

Although previous scholars have studied competencies taught and sought, few have narrowed their focus to assessment and research. This literature review highlights previous research focused on identifying and defining essential skills for practitioners, particularly in the areas of assessment, evaluation, and research (AER). The review

transitions to highlight studies of student affairs program graduates and their preparation.

Essential Skills for Student Affairs Administration

Lovell and Kosten (2000) conducted a meta-analysis of 30 years of research, finding that “...a successful student affairs administrator has skills such as administration, management, and human facilitation; knowledge of student development theory and functional responsibilities; and traits of personal integrity and cooperation” (p. 533). Due to higher education’s continuously changing landscape, Lovell and Kosten recognized that the competencies found to be prevalent through their meta-analysis would not necessarily be the ones deemed important for success in the future. Lovell and Kosten wrote issues in technology, assessment, political skills, and public policy were noticeably absent from the literature. They made the case that, due to a greater need to demonstrate effectiveness of programs and services, “Assessment knowledge is becoming a common staple for today’s student affairs administrators” (Lovell & Kosten, 2000, p. 567).

With scrutiny from the public, the government, accreditors, and budget conscious administrators, utilizing assessment to show the effectiveness of programs and services within higher education is important for increasingly compliance-burdened institutions (Middaugh, 2010; Suskie, 2015). The importance of assessment in today’s growing climate of accountability is also recognized by scholars such as Blimling (2013); Burkard, Cole, Ott, and Stoflet (2004); Hoffman (2015); and Sriram and Oster (2012). As this need to demonstrate the effectiveness of student affairs units on campus increases, so should the number of program graduates prepared to meet that need through competency in assessment.

Prior to delving into the research, one must first understand what is meant by competency in assessment. Assessment, evaluation, and research are three terms often used interchangeably (CAS, 2012) and commonly discussed together as one competency area. However, using these words interchangeably is imprecise because each term is distinct in its definition. Although assessment and research share similar processes, they do differ in two main ways: “...Assessment guides good practice, whereas research guides theory and tests concepts. Assessment typically has implications for a single institution, whereas research typically has broader implications for higher education” (Upcraft & Schuh, 2002, p. 17).

As for evaluation, Suskie (2009) writes that it can be defined in many ways. When equated with judgment, evaluation is seen as the final steps of the assessment process: interpreting assessment evidence and using the results. Similarly, evaluation is used in the research process when exploring existing literature (“The Research Process,” n.d.). Therefore, since evaluation is conducted in both assessment and research, it should be noted that it is included in both of this study’s sub-competency terms. For the purpose of this study, the AER competency area will be broken down into two sub-competencies: *assessment* and *research*. With this in mind, let us begin to explore the existing literature by looking at the AER based competencies the field expects professionals to have versus the competencies professionals actually have.

Assessment, Evaluation, and Research Competencies

To structure this study, the authors relied on the CAS standards master’s-level preparation curriculum to organize topics in three competency-based categories: assessment specific, research specific, or combination. Within the CAS standards on curriculum (Table 2), five competencies were identified as assessment specific, two as

research specific, and one as a combination. When reviewing the CAS curriculum standards, it is noted that all aspects of AER are important. However, when organized by sub-competency area, more topics are associated with assessment. This is not surprising based on the current assessment and accountability-focused climate within higher education (Banta & Palomba, 2015; Suskie, 2015).

To understand the AER knowledge and skills SAP need for success, one must turn to the field. Hoffman and Bresciani (2010) analyzed 1,759 job descriptions (posted in 2008 in *The Placement Exchange*) for AER competencies in entry-, mid-, and senior-level jobs. The researchers used seven assessment coordinator job descriptions to code sets of themes:

The first set consisted of three families of skills and competencies required of applicants: (a) assessment, program evaluation, and research skills; (b) task management skills; and (c) leadership skills. The second set consisted of three families of job duties outlined in the position descriptions: (a) leadership duties, (b) collaboration and training duties, and (c) core assessment duties such as data collection and management, analysis, and reporting (Hoffman & Bresciani, 2010, p. 503).

Hoffman and Bresciani used these codes to determine how many job descriptions included assessment competencies as requirements or included assessment as part of the job duties.

Their analysis revealed 27.1% of the job descriptions across all organizational levels (entry, mid, senior) included some responsibility for assessment. Positions requiring more years of experience were more apt to include assessment: 0 to 3 years of experience (22.5%), 4 to 6 years of experience (31.8%), and 7 or more years of

experience (41.2%). Hoffman and Bresciani found outcomes-based assessment skills and duties to be important in public and private institutions of all sizes, particularly in the areas of student activities (42.1%), multicultural services (40.4%), and new student programs (40.4%). Finally, the results also revealed that jobs requiring a master's degree or higher required assessment skills and duties at a greater proportion.

AER Competencies Attained in Student Affairs Administration Programs

This section of the review focuses on studies of the self-reported AER competence of student affairs professionals. Waple (2006) notes most SAP preparation programs fall into one of three categories: an emphasis on counseling, a focus on theory and student development, and (the most common) a more general focus on skills and competencies. Regardless of the type of program, the CAS standards state, "The mission of professional preparation programs must be to prepare persons through graduate education for professional positions in student affairs practice in higher education" (CAS, 2015, p. 347).

In order to understand how well graduate programs are doing in training their students to meet the needs of the field, researchers have surveyed new professionals, their supervisors, mid-level professionals, and chief student affairs officers on their perceptions. For example, Waple (2006) surveyed 430 entry-level student affairs staff on the skills and competencies they attained from their graduate programs. Waple found that research methods was one of three knowledge areas in which respondents indicated they attained at a high degree but used to a low degree. In contrast, a number of studies have shown that newly employed graduates feel they lack sufficient preparation in assessment.

For instance, through their longitudinal, qualitative study, Renn and Jessup-Anger (2008) found that respondents repeatedly discussed assessment and evaluation as one of several essential skills they lacked. In a more recent study, Hoffman (2015) surveyed 280 new professionals on their perceptions about 34 assessment skills. The results revealed that respondents viewed all but one of the 34 assessment skills as very important competencies to have for success in their positions. However, when asked about their perceptions of their proficiency in these areas, the results showed that the new professionals perceived themselves as lacking proficiency in all of the 34 skills. These studies, along with Herdlein (2004) and Young and Janosik (2007), highlight the need for professionals with stronger assessment skills.

Purpose of the Study

This review of the literature shows two things. One, assessment skills are deemed important by professionals in the field, and two, scholars are finding that graduates from master's-level student affairs preparation programs have weak proficiency in assessment. In order to meet the needs of a changing profession, student affairs preparation programs need to be responsive to the demands employers face. Although there is not a single set of skills and knowledge required for all entry-level positions, all professionals should at least have foundational knowledge and skills in certain areas (a notion supported by both CAS and the ACPA/NASPA Professional Competency Areas). After narrowing down these areas to focus on AER-based competencies, a review of the current literature has exposed a possible disconnect between the field's expectations and the level of attainment SAP have from their preparation programs. A lower attainment level may be attributed to a variety of factors, including gaps in program curriculum. Researchers (Cuyjet et al., 2009; Herdlein, 2004; Hoffman, 2015; Young & Janosik,

2007) have written about the shortcomings between competencies needed for jobs and the knowledge and skills taught in SAP preparation program curriculum.

Although many authors have studied competencies in student affairs before (Burkard et al., 2004; Cuyjet et al., 2009; Herdlein, 2004; Hoffman & Bresciani, 2010; Kuk et al., 2007; Renn & Jessup-Anger, 2008; Waple, 2006), this study focuses specifically on AER by dividing the topics into two categories: assessment and research. The purpose of this descriptive study is to explore the AER-based curriculum of SAP preparation programs. These results will be used to consider if the curriculum may be a contributing factor to the documented issue of SAP lacking in assessment competencies.

Methodology

The NASPA Graduate Program Directory lists 143 master's-level student affairs preparation programs across the United States. This list was used to pull contact information for program coordinators, whose email addresses were verified via program websites. An electronic survey was distributed to all 143 contacts. Respondents were asked to complete a short questionnaire about their program, provide a copy of their program requirement sheet, and upload copies of AER course syllabi. More specifically, participants were asked for a syllabus from a representative section of their research methods courses, assessment courses, and courses that blended AER content. Unlike program requirement sheets, course syllabi provide a variety of data, such as course descriptions, learning outcomes, required texts, assignment details, and more. In essence, syllabi can be thought of like contracts, which inform students of what to expect in terms of learning and workload (Bers, Davis, & Taylor, 1996).

Surveys were completed by 31 programs, yielding a 21.68% response rate. Of those that responded, 29 programs submitted syllabi for review. A total of 45 syllabi –

22 research methods courses, 21 assessment courses, and two blended courses – were collected. Nine randomly selected research methods course syllabi and nine randomly selected assessment course syllabi were used to generate codes. The coded themes were broken down into three topic areas: research specific topics, assessment specific topics, and blended topics (see Table 3).

Blended topics were generally elements that could not be categorized with a single discipline (e.g., communicating findings is critical in both assessment and research). Some may see topics that appear to be blended, but are coded within a single area. This is because coding was done with context in mind. For example, goals and objectives were coded as assessment specific, yet one could argue that researchers can also use goals and objectives. While this is true, the purpose of writing an assessment objective is different from a research objective. This gets back to the differences between the two concepts, which is worth repeating here: “...Assessment guides good practice, whereas research guides theory and tests concepts. Assessment typically has implications for a single institution, whereas research typically has broader implications for higher education” (Upcraft & Schuh, 2002, p. 17). With that being said, the syllabi that listed goals and objectives did so within the context of assessment. In total, there were nine research topics, 14 assessment topics, and six blended topics. These codes were used to conduct a content analysis (Krippendorff, 2004) on the 45 submitted syllabi.

Results

Of the 31 programs that responded, 90.3% (28) required research methods courses, 67.7% (21) required assessment courses, and 6.5% (2) required blended courses. It is important that many research courses made at least a passing reference to

assessment. When taking the required blended courses into account, 96.8% (30 of the 31 programs) required at least one course with research methods content, versus 74.2% (23 of the 31 programs) that required at least one course with assessment content. All of the 31 programs offered at least one course with research content, while four programs indicated that they do not offer a course in assessment. Turning to the content covered in the 45 syllabi, research methods topics were amongst the most popularly taught themes.

Research Course Syllabi

Figure 1 shows the most commonly taught topics from research course syllabi. Perhaps not surprising, research topics dominated the research course curriculum. All six of the blended topics (i.e., communicating findings, data analysis, instrument design/development, reliability, statistics, and validity) were represented frequently. The only assessment topic represented in the common content list was assessment in general. Based on the syllabi, it appears most research courses that covered assessment did so very briefly. For example, one course discussed the differences between assessment, evaluation, and research on one day of class.

Assessment Course Syllabi

Figure 2 shows the most commonly taught topics in the assessment course syllabi. As one might expect, assessment topics, such as outcomes, assessment planning, and accreditation, dominated the assessment courses. Two research topics – qualitative and quantitative designs – and four of the six blended topics were on the list of the most commonly-covered content. The two blended topics not on the list were validity and reliability, which could reasonably be covered within statistics.

Themes by Course Type

Finally, Figure 3 shows the most popularly taught themes across all of the AER course syllabi. Five of the top 12 were research topics: qualitative designs, quantitative designs, general research design, research questions, and literature review; three of the top 12 were assessment topics: assessment, outcomes, and assessment plan; and four were blended topics: data analysis, communicating findings, instrument design/development, and statistics. Figure 3 provides a visual representation of the small number of research syllabi that incorporated assessment topics into the curriculum. In contrast, assessment syllabi included research topics – specifically those related to research design – more often. This is likely a somewhat unsurprising finding, given that assessment planning and data collection often relies on the same concepts as research, but are used for different ends (Upcraft & Schuh, 2002).

Discussion

Scholars recognize the importance of assessment in today's growing climate of accountability (Blimling, 2013; Burkard et al., 2004; Hoffman, 2015; Sriram & Oster, 2012). However, previous studies suggest new professionals are not being prepared to meet present-day assessment demands. Studies have identified an incongruity between the level of research-related knowledge early career professionals have and its importance within early-career student affairs roles (Waple, 2006). In contrast, scholars have shown a deficit between the assessment knowledge that new professionals have and what they need (Herdlein, 2004; Hoffman, 2015; Renn and Jessup-Anger, 2008; Young & Janosik, 2007). In many cases, research is being taught in preparation programs, while assessment competencies are being sought in practice.

The descriptive analysis of 45 AER course syllabi shows a higher number of research topics across all three types of AER courses reviewed. These results correlate with what has been presented in the above literature, providing ex post facto validation for this content analysis (Krippendorff, 2004). Furthermore, comparable results for the number of programs offering courses in research and assessment were published in a recent qualitative content analysis by Cooper, Mitchell, Eckerle, and Martin (2016). Of the 136 master's-level preparation programs, Cooper et al. found 66.9% of programs offered research-specific courses, 34.6% offered assessment courses, and 9.1% offered evaluation-specific courses. The researchers included a competency if it was required (as a course) or mentioned in their program description, and relied on program websites to craft their participant group.

In comparison, the results from this study found that 93.5% of programs offered research-specific courses, 87.1% offered assessment courses, and 6.5% offered blended courses. Research courses were offered at a higher rate than assessment courses, and this study also revealed research courses more frequently served as a program requirement than assessment courses. Cooper et al.'s inclusion of an evaluation course category ensures a difference in balance between their study and this one. Nevertheless, Cooper et al. and this study's results show master's level SAP preparation programs are offering more research courses than assessment courses.

It is understood that there are a number of topics that are very important for new professionals to learn about during their graduate preparation. Further, there may be structural requirements imposed on programs that are within a college of education-related (or other) disciplines. While it might not always be practical for a program to have a required assessment course, one option would be for programs to have

assessment content inextricably linked to the research methods course (Hoffman, 2015). This could be accomplished by altering the curriculum of research methods courses to include outcomes and assessment planning, among other topics. With research courses sometimes being taught through different departments, programs will need to be creative in how they achieve this cohesive class structure.

Limitations

This study had several limitations of note. First, only syllabi submitted to the researchers were reviewed. Even though 31 programs participated in the survey, only 29 submitted documents for review. Second, the coding used to analyze the syllabi does not account for the length of time or depth professors spend on a topic. Third, the results of this study only account for the topics listed in course syllabi. Finally, it is possible that the title and intent of the study discouraged programs without AER courses from participating. Since it was not possible to eliminate these extraneous factors in the document analysis, it is important that these limitations are considered when reviewing the results.

Implications

The results of this study have implications for several segments of the field, including future researchers and master's-level preparation program coordinators. Both quantitative and qualitative research on the sub-competency areas of AER needs to be conducted. Research should be done to better understand the needs of the field *and* career aspirations of master's students. The field can answer the question of which specific assessment skills new professionals are lacking, while current and former students can answer the question about career aspirations (i.e., do master's students want to prepare for an entry-level position or a career in research?). The answers to

these questions can help programs better meet the needs and demands of the field *and* their students.

Upon reviewing the results of this study, it is possible that some master's-level SAP preparation programs will feel the need to evaluate curriculum. However, it is important for each program to first consider its mission and unique qualities alongside the career aspirations its master's-level students have. If students are more interested in terminal degrees and research, then a heavy emphasis on research *is* appropriate. However, if students are seeking entry- or mid-level positions in the field, then the curriculum can be reasonably tailored to prepare students for their future employment. The knowledge and skills needed for positions in higher education are not a one-size-fits-all model, which presents a challenge. Students from the same cohort can find themselves in starkly different positions upon graduation, but it is still the job of the preparation program to adequately prepare them. Although this can make creating a comprehensive curriculum challenging, the *Professional Competency Areas for Student Affairs Educators* and the CAS Standards can be a starting place for curriculum review.

Conclusions

This descriptive study attempted to explore a disconnect between the AER competencies taught and the AER competencies sought. The results revealed more research methods courses were offered (and required) than assessment courses, despite employers' desire to hire new professionals with preparation in assessment. It is hoped the results of this study will prompt program coordinators to evaluate their AER curriculum. For programs that currently lack curriculum in assessment, identifying the purpose of the program will be important. If master's-level SAP programs are meant to prepare students for entry- or mid- level positions, then their graduates should be

adequately prepared to meet the challenges of a higher education environment subject to assessment and accountability demands.

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