

New Student Affairs Professionals: Moving Up, Turning Over, and Burning Out

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The question of whether the field of student affairs constitutes a true "profession" is a long-standing and complex controversy in the literature (Carpenter, 1990). Nevertheless, assuming that "as individuals and as groups we believe ourselves to be 'professionals'" (Stamatakos, cited in Coleman & Johnson, 1990, p.57), then there is a need to examine the factors which affect careers in student affairs. In order to appreciate the nature of the profession, it is crucial to understand the people who are successful in the field as well as those who choose to leave (Richmond & Sherman, 1991).

In recent years, the body of literature addressing the career advancement of student affairs professionals has emphasized the experiences of Chief Student Affairs Officers (CSAOs), even though only a small percentage of practitioners hold these positions (Evans, 1988). Thus, we need to know more about the careers of the larger population of student affairs administrators, particularly the experiences of new professionals. What is the nature of career patterns in the field? How does continuing professional development contribute to job satisfaction? What factors influence decisions to stay in or leave the profession? Such questions are complicated by the nebulous nature of the field as well as the pace of change in higher education (Holmes, Verrier, & Chisholm, 1983). Increasing concern about the high attrition rate in the field indicates a need to address these issues in order to ensure the attraction and retention of qualified new professionals.

The purpose of this paper is to explore the career experiences of new professionals and the factors that affect their success in the field. The issues that will be examined include career mobility and advancement, professional development, job dissatisfaction and burnout, and attrition. Recommendations and implications for the profession will also be discussed.

Career Mobility and Advancement

Richmond and Sherman's (1991) study of graduates from nearly fifty student affairs master's programs indicated that 79% found their positions immediately after graduating, and 72% stated their jobs were in the area of their choice. However, there is growing concern about the increasingly

limited opportunities for mobility within student affairs (Sagaria & Johnsrud, 1988). In fact, only 39% of respondents in the same study indicated they were satisfied with their potential for advancement (Richmond & Sherman, 1991).

One problem is that most organizational structures in higher education are relatively flat, having few levels of supervision (Evans, 1988). Many positions exist at the entry level, but this number decreases drastically at each succeeding level, forming a pyramid-like structure. Furthermore, decreases in retirements and new positions may result in additional barriers to upward mobility (Sagaria & Johnsrud, 1988).

While available data is not sufficient to indicate the true potential for career advancement of new professionals, perhaps most important is the fact that student affairs professionals tend to *perceive* career mobility as limited (Evans, 1988). A primary reason for this is that career paths in student affairs are unclear. Typical patterns of professional preparation and advancement appear to be as diverse as the individuals in the field, making career planning difficult. According to Sagaria and Johnsrud (1988), traditional notions of career paths "may be more confusing than clarifying. Multiple paths seem more the norm than any particular route" (p. 32). Therefore, a definition of career mobility that is limited to upward movement is unnecessarily narrow, in that various types of position change are widely regarded as a means of advancement for student affairs professionals. Position changes take place within and between institutions and may be lateral, functional, or vertical. Accrual responsibility also represents an important means of advancement because expansion or redefinition of a given position often results in an increase in status or earnings (Sagaria & Johnsrud).

Finally, given the limited number of CSAO positions, definitions of professional success should be more broadly defined than simply becoming a dean or vice president. Lawing, Moore, & Groseth (1982) identify two challenges in motivating student affairs staff to remain in the field: "(1) broadening the definition of professional success to allow for those who do not wish to become deans; and (2) helping those who do wish to become a dean" (p. 22). Continued professional development is crucial to meeting these challenges.

Professional Development

According to Coleman and Johnson (1990), the term professional

development is often misused to refer to activities that take place outside of work. However, professional development can occur in the course of daily work and is defined as any "planned experience designed to change behavior and result in professional and/or personal growth and improved organizational effectiveness" (Merkle & Artman, cited in Coleman & Johnson, p. 4). While a graduate degree in college student personnel or a related area provides a fundamental knowledge base, it is only the beginning of the educational process (Stamatakos, 1978). Professional development can assist new professionals in continuing the learning process which is essential in serving students.

Another important aspect of professional development is establishing mentor relationships (Richmond & Sherman, 1991). Mentors can assist new professionals by sharing knowledge, encouraging applications of theory to practice, and providing challenge and support (Coleman & Johnson, 1990). Given the often ambiguous nature of career advancement in student affairs, the guidance of mentors can be essential. According to one study of new professionals, mentors helped ease entry into the field, fostered professionalism, and assisted in identifying areas of concentration (Richmond & Sherman). In addition, supervisors should take active steps to provide counsel that reflects the individual developmental stages of staff members and an atmosphere that encourages professional growth.

Job Dissatisfaction and Burnout

Despite widespread agreement regarding the value of professional development, one study found less than half of student affairs professionals perceived opportunities for personal growth, autonomy, or continued learning in their jobs (Bess & Lodahl, cited in Evans, 1988). Furthermore, Barr (1990) points out that most entry-level positions in student affairs present "less than ideal working conditions" (p. 169). New professionals often find themselves working in environments that are stressful, unstable, confusing, and unpredictable (Evans). Expectations for job performance are demanding, hours are long and erratic, and compensation for student affairs positions is relatively low (Barr). As Stamatakos (1978) states, "With almost masochistic pleasure, student affairs people wallow in unpredictable and continually interrupted professional and personal lives" (p. 329).

As a result of these stressful working conditions, student affairs professionals in the early stages of their careers often experience dissatisfaction and burnout. Studies have identified a myriad of burnout

symptoms, including increased tension, sleeplessness, headaches, boredom, defensiveness, lack of creativity, detachment, physical and emotional fatigue, and apathy (Wiggers, Forney, & Wallace-Schutzman, 1982; Forney, Wallace-Schutzman, & Wiggers, 1982).

Both internal and environmental factors contribute to burnout. Since these factors vary among different people and circumstances, no one remedy is likely to be universally effective; rather, individualistic solutions are necessary. One study identified the fundamental cause of burnout as a perceived lack of control (Forney et al., 1982). People who are effective in avoiding burnout are those who "perceive that they have more control and/or take more control of both external situations, represented by their work environments, and of the internal factors that are related to their own feelings, attitudes and beliefs" (Wiggers et al., 1982, p. 14).

Strategies for avoiding burnout involve taking steps to change behavior or the environment (i.e. external strategies) and developing healthy thought processes and attitudes (i.e. internal strategies). External strategies often involve building new skills, such as time management, communication skills, active planning of leisure time, and relaxation skills. Such skills allow professionals to change negative aspects of the work environment. However, some circumstances cannot be changed; thus, internal strategies are needed in order to cope more effectively. Wiggers et al. (1982) state, "It is often necessary for the student personnel worker to gain control of negative feelings about aspects of the environment that are unchangeable or that he/she decides to accept rather than change" (p. 19).

Many authors argue that burnout is a primary cause of attrition in the student affairs profession (Barr, 1990; Carpenter, 1990; Forney et al., 1982). However, Carpenter emphasizes an important distinction between burnout and other issues of job dissatisfaction: "Burnout is avoidable, whereas poorness of fit may not be" (p. 63).

Attrition

A study by Holmes et al. (1983) revealed gradual attrition from the student affairs profession, reaching a 39% retention level by the sixth year. Furthermore, of the new professionals surveyed, only 20% indicated they planned to work in student affairs for their entire careers. The researchers express concern that their study "raises questions about the long-term stability of the student personnel field" (p. 440), and they emphasize the importance of understanding the decision process leading to professionals

staying in or leaving the field.

A myriad of reasons for attrition in the profession have been suggested. According to Lawing et al. (1982), "In response to the need to know more, to make do with less, to be satisfied yet another year with no raise, and, in general, to be wary of budget officers, staff members feel stressed, voice their discouragement, report feeling mired in a no-win situation, and begin to think seriously about greener pastures" (p. 25). It seems clear that some of the reasons people leave the field are the same factors that cause dissatisfaction for those who stay (Carpenter, 1990). In addition to the perceived lack of advancement opportunities previously discussed, other common reasons for leaving the field include: difficulty of relocation, lack of autonomy and personal growth opportunities, boredom, the need for further education, and salary concerns (Evans; Burns 1982; Wood, Winston, Jr., & Polkosnik, 1985). Stamatakos (1978) suggested that new professionals may experience conflicts between their reasons for entering the field (i.e. idealism and student contact) and what they actually do in their jobs, particularly as they progress to higher levels in the administrative hierarchy. In addition, new professionals may experience disillusionment as a result of "knowing what should or ought to be done and what is not being done" (Stamatakos, p. 326).

Recommendations

As Evans (1988) points out, "Given the time, resources, and energy being invested by students, faculty, and student affairs staff in the preparation of new professionals, the revolving door syndrome evident in the profession is a major concern" (p. 19). Solutions to this problem must address the organizational structure of the profession as well as the personal and professional needs of individuals in the field. Burns (1982) suggests that diversified responsibilities within student affairs positions would contribute to individuals' professional growth and that exploration of alternative career options within the field should be encouraged. Through strategies such as increased contact with faculty, job rotation, part-time employment, combined positions, involvement in teaching, and job sharing, "viable and satisfying alternatives can be offered to staff who may feel stifled or unsatisfied in their present positions" (Lawing et al., 1982, p. 25). In addition, formalized performance appraisal and professional development programs should be implemented to address individuals' personal and professional needs (Evans).

The challenge that lies ahead is to identify and meet the needs of an

increasingly diverse group of student affairs professionals. More research is needed to determine the extent of the attrition problem and its underlying causes. Then strategies can be developed to increase the long-term attractiveness of employment in the profession (Evans, 1988). Such strategies are essential to the recruitment and retention of qualified student affairs professionals. According to Barr (1990), "To do less would mean that we would not be able to serve both our students and our institutions effectively in the future" (p. 168).

New professionals bring an essential enthusiasm and vitality to the profession and to institutions of higher education in general. If student affairs is to reflect its goals of serving and developing students as well as to achieve recognition as a profession, then it must be continually committed to the process of learning and to providing learning opportunities for those who enter and remain in the field.

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