



# GETTING MORE FROM THE MASTERS: INCREASING SCHOLARSHIP IN CAMPUS ACTIVITIES PRACTICE

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## ABSTRACT

*With so many positions in campus activities requiring advanced degrees, campus activities practitioners begin their careers with a depth of understanding of current scholarship in the field. Once arriving to these positions on campuses, however, many practitioners may be challenged to stay engaged when faced with the limitless priorities of daily work. If the profession were to embrace the value of scholarship, it would require new points of view about the work of campus activities practice from institutions, associations, campus leaders and individual professionals. In the context of changing campus activities practice, I suggest a broader conception of the meaning of scholarship as a way to encourage campus activities practitioners to find closer alignment with the academic community within colleges and universities.*

FOR A LONG TIME, the context used to understand the way students were learning in college was to study what faculty were teaching. However, students describe their time in college citing transformative experiences with faculty in classroom settings as one of many ways they learned in college. The value of co-curricular learning has been documented for decades (e.g., Light, 2001), yet the learning community of the university frequently still evolves without campus activities professionals engaged within it as teachers, scholars or scholar-practitioners. If campus activities practitioners were able to align their work in greater concert with values of scholarship within an academic community, a greater potential might exist to offer the seamless learning environment that so many universities strive to offer. To that end, this article proposes an examination of influences on the campus activities profession as well as the adoption of Boyer's (1990) frames of scholarship in order to position campus activities in greater alignment with values of an academic community.

## CHANGING TRENDS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

The evolution of the student affairs profession could be tracked with a starting focus on "student services," emphasizing addressing many transactional needs of students outside of the classroom. It grew to encompass a focus on "student development," as holistic development beyond class-based content and then added a focus on "student learning" after the publication of *Learning Reconsidered* in 2000. After, the additional frame of "student success" arrived to dominate priorities across institutions in a time where examination of retention practices

was now determined crucial to institutional survival. The early mention of the role of campus activities practice in the 1949 version of the Student Personnel Point of View was one of the earliest references to the need for more intentional approaches to co-curricular activities. At this point, the literature base shifted from a focus on reacting to student dynamics to now acknowledge that intervention from professionals could leverage these experiences to yield some important learning impact. With student success at the forefront, and a continued need to continue to deliver on student services, student development, and student learning, institutional leaders must realize that expertise about students is in higher demand than ever.

Today's student affairs educators frequently contemplate ways to bring the work of student affairs from the fringes of the institution's academic mission and more closely aligned with priorities around student learning. Taking this approach with "student affairs" overall is no small task, as professional literature cites anywhere from 8 to 20 departments that may share goals relating to the student experience beyond the classroom (Dungy, 2003; Kuk & Banning, 2009). Given student affairs departments may range from a childcare center to campus police to athletics to residence life, it is not surprising that a standard or consistent approach is hard to find. While many of these functional areas may need to address similar priorities of alignment with values of scholarship in the academic community, for purposes of this article, I will focus on the possibilities that exist for campus activities.

Alongside the changing student affairs profession, the context of teaching and learning was evolving as well. Although credit-based learning continues to be how most institutions define where teaching and learning take place (Wienhausen & Elias, 2017), other shifts have emerged. Campuses have embraced the positive outcomes of interdisciplinary learning, even though students are frequently left to make meaning and connections between these areas. A focus on the "whole student" has created the opening to the idea that structured practices outside of the classroom, such as through the work of campus activities offices, may make an impact on student learning. Institutional investment in high impact practices has influenced campus outcomes for student learning, frequently without mention of campus activities practice on these lists of key activities (Kuh, 2008). Still, the "getting involved" message rings loud and clear from institutional podiums across the country for its value to the student experience. Even with that focus, campus activities practitioners could be the only ones inspiring students to consider how involvement in co-curricular areas might illuminate classroom-based experiences.

## IMAGINING THE INFLUENCE OF SCHOLARSHIP

Changing demographics and dwindling availability of resources charge a practitioner to innovate by documenting outcomes and developing new approaches to expand the impact of their work. On the other hand, assumptions of practitioners' limitless availability frequently force a comparison between priorities of scholarship and the tyranny of the urgent. In short, what's a professional to do when they realize that they have applied their math formula for deciding how much pizza to order for an upcoming event more often than they have applied their knowledge of student development theory?

To imagine a more significant influence of scholarship on the campus activities profession, a basic commitment to scholarship in campus activities practice is a first step. Even with that commitment, it will lack impact until we define the body of literature from this part of the higher education field. Exactly what makes up the base of scholarship for campus activities? Is it student development theory? Organizational development? Leadership literature? Something else? Relevant topics for the campus activities practitioner are difficult to find as we lack a connected level of knowledge that brings our part of the profession together. Material relating to the unique role of student organization advising is notably absent, let alone scholarship that informs the broad range of topics that might be relevant to today's practitioner juggling a vast portfolio of responsibilities. Such absence is not all that surprising, as most student affairs literature is not written by current practitioners, but instead by former practitioners who are now faculty in higher education programs (Allen, 2002; Young, 2001).

To understand the context for the unclear base of scholarship for campus activities, it is instructive to consider the range of academic backgrounds of those entering the field. The master's degree in "higher education, student affairs or related fields" is a frequent requirement, but the influence of scholarship from "related fields" includes

a vast range of content. A new professional with a counseling degree may bring a base of scholarship that focuses on counseling techniques supporting students in crisis, while the new professional with a master's in business administration may draw from literature that serves the business operations of the department. After adding a third new professional with a degree in student affairs or higher education, each of these staff members brings a vastly different base of scholarship. While discussion of unified skill development for this work has focused on a competency model (American College Personnel Association & National Association of Student Personnel Administrators, 2015; National Association for Campus Activities, 2018), this focus on practice does not link to the need for alignment in foundations of scholarship as well.

Professional associations have great potential to yield significant influence on values around scholarship. For campus activities professionals, it is important to note that both the National Association for Campus Activities (NACA) and the Association of College Unions International (ACUI) have been citing priorities around scholarship in their association activities for years and making strong progress. While these steps are important, associations must grow these initiatives in the context of engagement opportunities with members, namely the annual meetings and regional conferences. In those settings for these associations, even the most engaged scholar-practitioner is likely to shoulder some responsibilities for selecting, preparing and leading a delegation of a group of students from the university. When responsible for students at professional events, competing priorities most definitely influence how a professional may spend their time. When there is a student emergency, conflict or even an ask to more deeply investigate a certain idea that has been presented, campus activities staff must prioritize such needs and interests of student delegates above any professional development priorities the staff may have.

It is important to add that the breadth of most offices' portfolios presents an especially unique opportunity for association influence. Associations with areas of focus for leadership education, service, fraternity/sorority life, orientation, event management, auxiliary services and more all stand to exert influence on the campus activities professional of today. Each of these functional areas has at least one association primarily focused in this area and, potentially, represents an area for potential engagement with scholarship.

The literature base and the professional associations are one part of the key influences on campus activities as a profession, but the institutional influence is the most significant. It took until the late 1990's for ties between campus activities practice and learning to appear in higher education literature, culminating in publications of *Learning Reconsidered* (Keeling et al., 2004) and *Learning Reconsidered 2* (Keeling, 2006). Those completing masters programs in that era were groomed within the profession with an emphasis on student learning in campus activities practice. Today, those who represent this demographic are now serving in leadership roles in student affairs, representing a wave of institutional leadership with the chance to usher in this shift in focus at the broadest institutional level.

Given the changing nature of campus activities practice, considered alongside the evolving lens of campus activities practitioners, it is time for an honest, modern-day assessment. What preparation is needed for success in these positions that will enable practitioners to make the needed impact? What kind of support is needed from the institution to make that impact possible? The arrival of new priorities around student success and retention, experiential learning, risk management, new and distinct functional areas and types of responsibilities and the expansion of expectations around assessment have all influenced the changing nature of the campus activities profession and its potential to influence student learning. Aside from the challenges with navigating change, it is important to note that this might be a sign that mission and purpose need refreshing on our campuses. In short, if everything that needs to be done at the university that could possibly apply to students can fit within the department, then it has no focus. Until we can establish that focus, a link between scholarship and practice has little chance for success.

This type of change needs leadership, so it is important to mention supervisors as a final area of influence on professional engagement with scholarship. Individuals are quick to perceive the behaviors and examples set by their supervisors as cues for whether or not scholarship is connected to any part of the work of the department

(Kane, 2014). In this study, few professionals cited talented supervisors who were able to help them grow in their understanding of how theory integrates with practice as well as how a research study might shed new light on a decision or new direction the department may consider. However, many supervisors were identified as not framing intentional expectations around the integration of scholarship and practice. Some study participants even described a collective “eye roll” that comes when trying to bring a discussion of published work into a staff conversation. Senior student affairs officers were also part of the dialogue, but with a range of engagement in scholarship themselves and presenting questions around the relevance of scholarship to the work of campus activities practice.

What if a body of scholarship about campus activities were used to support and shape that focus, highlighting the needs of the functional area and used with all student affairs educators, regardless of the discipline they studied? Those with student affairs degrees might come together with those with backgrounds in business operations, counselor education or other fields and deeply investigate ties with scholarship in light of shared experience with practice. Resting on this approach would require campus-based professionals to understand the scholarship of the profession and be able to engage with their new colleagues in this way through the onboarding process. Now that much of higher education has acknowledged the need for successful onboarding of new staff; this area could be built into extended onboarding practices.

## A MORE INCLUSIVE FRAME OF SCHOLARSHIP

In seeing the term “scholarship,” it is easy to only visualize journal articles, books or some other array of published work. Ernest Boyer (1990) led the call to reframe scholarship and how it is integrated into consideration of faculty tenure and promotion by advocating for a more inclusive approach to scholarship. While his goal to reframe the gridlock on the inherent values of tenure and promotion has yet to take hold in the academy writ large, his frames offer potential for campus activities practitioners to find both a fit with scholarship as well as possible points for alignment within the value of scholarship in an academic community.

The scholarship of teaching is, as defined by Boyer, the search for innovative approaches and effective practices to build skills and to disseminate knowledge, with the actions of the teacher as the focus (Boyer, 1990). If we examine the learner’s lens instead, a good amount of literature shares that students are learning through engagement with the work of campus activities practice without reference to a “teacher” who is offering these experiences. If students are learning, how might things change if campus activities practitioners made the leap to say that they are teaching?

Boyer’s second frame called the scholarship of discovery focused on how the scholar creates new knowledge. Formally conducting research was one part of this, but the entire notion of creating new knowledge can go beyond a sole focus on academic research. Creation of new knowledge could be happening through settings where students exercise leadership, including the work in student organizations and campus events.

His third frame of scholarship identifies the scholarship of application. Boyer defined this as the act of applying knowledge to solve real-world problems. The notion of “applied learning” is strongly linked to the work of student employee supervisors, for example. Applying knowledge in real-life situations happens daily in campus activities practice. How many times has the average practitioner helped to apply knowledge about conflict resolution in order to address stalling points in project planning?

Finally, his frame called the scholarship of integration brings new understanding through the integration of ideas. The role that student organization advisors play in mentoring, coaching, or advising practices with student leaders frequently helps them to make meaning of these experiences and connect learning from different areas of the student’s experience. What if these advisors were able to do this in service of advancing student progress along aligned learning outcomes across the institution?

There is no debate that faculty should be teaching classes, as the physical plant staff will be the best to take good

care of the campus buildings and the finance staff is the best to shape the institution's financial plan (Manning, Kinzie, & Schuh, 2014). Framed under the light of a call for a more seamless student learning experience for students, alignment between the work of campus activities practitioners and the academic mission of our institutions can be seen as adding value. Before that can be examined, it requires acknowledgment that campus activities sometimes represents something portrayed as at odds with academic priorities (Carpenter & Stimpson, 2007; Dalton & Crosby, 2012; Love, Kuh, MacKay, & Hardy, 1993).

A call for alignment does not dictate a move for every campus activities department to report to the Provost. Rather, it could shift the constant engagement of the question of whether education outside of the classroom is equally important or secondary to the classroom learning focus of an institution. Instead, we would instead frame the work in student affairs in the context of membership within an academic community. We would examine the values of an academic community and assert our unique version of a relationship to scholarship and, in turn, conduct the work of campus activities in a manner befitting scholars (Carpenter, 2001).

## WHAT IF WE MADE A COMMITMENT TO SCHOLARSHIP IN CAMPUS ACTIVITIES PRACTICE?

In a study of campus activities staffs at four institutions recognized for exemplary campus activities programs, Boyer's frames of scholarship were applied to understand more about campus activities practitioners' engagement with scholarship (Kane, 2014). This collective case study explored these frames of scholarship, finding active engagement with the scholarship of teaching, periodic engagement with the scholarship of application and integration and very little engagement with the scholarship of discovery. Through a reframe of scholarship that expands beyond the idea of traditional notions, campus activities practitioners can see a connection to their work and set goals to expand their engagement with this key value of the academic community.

A goal of supporting the academic mission of colleges and universities has been described for decades through priorities of increasing faculty collaboration and partnering with academic affairs administrators. While there are many success stories of these partnerships, the cultural norms around campus activities professionals' engagement in these partnerships range from partnerships of convenience where the role of campus activities practitioner is as a logistical partner or funding supporter. The call for alignment with values of scholarship in the academic community would draw campus activities practitioners into a different type of collegiality with academic partners.

To make this partnership more possible, we can take some concrete next steps:

***As Boyer said, reframe scholarship.*** Given advanced degree experiences held by most practitioners in campus activities, we can and should frame our work in a manner befitting scholars. We can decide how we will engage with each other and determine the applicability of the scholarship of teaching, discovery, application, and integration to our work. Our students deserve opportunities to recognize knowledge gained from their own involvement in campus activities that advances their learning. For our institutions, we can then support an expanded view of scholarship that is in line with the evolving nature of teaching and learning as well. The fact that students are enjoying themselves does not mean the institution should ignore the learning taking place.

***Engage current practitioners in ongoing skill development related to multiple frames of scholarship.*** Even those with advanced degrees may still believe that there are limits on their ability to contribute to scholarship (American College Personnel Association, 2008; Kane, 2014). Ongoing professional development will increase competence and confidence. Departments and campus leaders can work with professionals to design professional development activities to expand their ability to interpret survey results or how to do literature searches on current topics in the field, to name a few possible examples.

***Design onboarding experiences to include scholarship for entering professionals.*** Similar to the large number of faculty who arrive at teaching with little background in how to teach, if campus activities professionals are to



engage with the scholarship, institutions and associations can guide this development. We can develop reading lists and learning experiences for professionals to expand their familiarity with the body of literature that affects our part of the higher education field.

***Expect the integration of scholarship and practice at the association, institution and individual practitioner levels.*** Setting intentional expectations for how campus activities work is done can come from middle managers, senior student affairs officers and campus activities professionals alike. A new frame that includes scholarship would encourage the senior student affairs officer, the first-year professional and the mid-level Director to all work together to exchange scholarship on a regular basis. Senior leaders can set a strong example by pursuing their own ideas and making space in other workloads of their staff that will make their projects possible.

***Create the content that is missing.*** The missing voices of practitioners in student affairs literature result in key perspectives on the student experience that are absent from our collective professional dialogue. We must support a pipeline of scholarship that gets practitioners involved in the many forms of scholarship, including the scholarship of discovery. Experienced scholar-practitioners can shape the future of our profession by engaging new professionals and mid-level managers in partnership in research projects and publications.

***Support the scholar-practitioner.*** This commitment would also mean that our colleagues who are investing in contributing to scholarship in some way could be celebrated and recognized. This work should not take place in the rare moments in between campus responsibilities. As the scholar-practitioner takes more of an identity within the field, the collective “eye roll” would hopefully be replaced by the expectation that scholarship serves as a part of the everyday culture within a campus activities department.

## ENVISIONING THE FUTURE

The climate in higher education today could be perfect for campus activities practitioners to lead this next step in the professionalization of the field and finding a place for scholarship in our profession. With studies like the Gallup-Purdue index citing the incredible impact of co-curricular involvement on wellbeing in post-graduation life, institutions across the country could be even more ready to leverage the impact of the work of our profession. The knowledge of students that is needed for our institutions to become “Student-Ready Colleges” (McNair, T. B., Albertine, S. L., Cooper, M. A., McDonald, N. L., & Major, T., 2016) is present in each campus activities professional that brings a strong foundation for her work to the job every day.

The time is right for the work of the campus activities profession to step away from the sidelines and embrace more active membership in the academic community. Through engagement with scholarship and active practitioner voices shaping the literature of our field, the study of the college experience will come closer to accurately telling the story of how students learn on our campuses. In turn, campus activities practitioners may realize even more potential from their identities as educators. Our students deserve nothing but the best of us as we work to inspire the best possible impact from their college experience.

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