

“THEY JUST POPPED UP”: A COMPARATIVE CASE ANALYSIS OF STUDENT AFFAIRS GRADUATE PROGRAMS USAGE OF ACPA/NASPA COMPETENCIES

Dena Kniess
University of West Georgia

Amy French
Bowling Green State University

Abstract

Few studies have been conducted on the use of the ACPA/NASPA Competencies (2015) in graduate preparation programs. To understand the use of these competencies in graduate preparation programs in student affairs, two case studies of two graduate preparation programs at public institutions in the South were conducted. Interviews with graduate program coordinators and focus groups with graduate students and graduate assistantship supervisors identified areas of improvement, including increasing connection with practitioners.

Please direct inquires about this manuscript to: Dena Kniess, dkniess@westga.edu; This study was funded by a NASPA Region III Research Grant.

Graduate preparation programs in student affairs maintain an important role in higher education to train future professionals for careers. These graduate programs vary in the curriculum, length to degree completion, student populations, mode of delivery (online, on campus, hybrid), and foci of the program (administrative, social justice, leadership, theory-based, etc.). However, “all strive to equip student affairs professionals with the competencies needed to aid today’s college students” (Underwood & Austin, 2016, p. 326). The debate continues regarding whether or not entry-level practitioners in student affairs are adequately prepared to meet the demands of full-time professional positions in higher education settings (Kuk et al., 2007). Roper et al. (2016) further complicated this notion by addressing how student affairs leaders have a greater expectation to demonstrate essential contributions to the field and their institutions by “producing evidence necessary to demonstrate effectiveness in achieving desired institutional outcomes” (p. 33).

While perceptions of new professionals’ preparedness in student affairs have been studied from a variety of perspectives, an in-depth analysis of the outcomes of graduate preparation programs has not occurred since the development of the ACPA/NASPA Competencies (2015). These competencies are a tool student affairs professionals can use to guide their work and assess their level of competency within the 10 domains. Student affairs professionals can also incorporate the 10 competencies within graduate assistantship and fieldwork placements to structure graduate students’ experiences and job duties. Using a case study approach, the purpose of this study was to identify how competencies for entry-level student affairs professionals, guided by the ACPA/NASPA Competencies (2015), are operationalized in graduate preparation programs. Two graduate preparation programs in student affairs located in the Southern region of the U.S. served as unique bounded cases for the purposes of this study. Both

graduate preparation programs used the ACPA/NASPA Competency (2015) document as part of the formal curriculum.

Literature Review

The first graduate preparation program in student affairs started at Teachers College at Columbia University in 1913 (Coomes & Gerda, 2016). In 1967, the Council of Student Personnel Associations in Higher Education (COSPA) created *Guidelines for Graduate Programs in the Preparation of Student Personnel Workers in Higher Education* (Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education, 2019). Documents such as *The Student Learning Imperative* (American College Personnel Association, 1994) and *Powerful Practice: A Shared Responsibility for Learning* (American Association of Higher Education et al., 1998) were developed in the 1990’s.

By the 2000’s, professional organizations began to work together to develop guiding documents for the student affairs profession, such as *Learning Reconsidered* (a collaboration between the American College Personnel Association [ACPA] and the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators [NASPA]) in 2004. In 2006, this collaborative approach between ACPA and NASPA expanded to include the Association of College and University Housing Officers-International, Association of College Unions-International, National Academic Advising Association, National Association for Campus Activities, and National Intramural-Recreational Sports Association. This group joined together to craft *Learning Reconsidered 2*.

While the core professional documents of student affairs have shifted over time, they all emphasize “holistic, transformative learning” (Baxter Magolda & Magolda, 2011, p. 4) and prioritize the “importance of applying interdisciplinary theories and empirically based research findings to improving the work of student affairs professionals” (Hirschy & Wilson, 2017, p.86). ACPA

and NASPA joined together to identify key professional competencies that were “gleaned from a review of 19 core documents and recent research findings” (Hirschy & Wilson, 2017, p.4). These competencies “lay out essential knowledge, skills, and dispositions expected of all student affairs educators, regardless of functional area or specialization within the field (p.7).” The 10 professional competency areas include 1) Personal and Ethical Foundations, 2) Values, Philosophy, and History, 3) Assessment, Evaluation, and Research, 4) Law, Policy, and Governance, 5) Organizational and Human Resources, 6) Leadership, 7) Social Justice and Inclusion, 8) Student Learning and Development, 9) Technology, and 10) Advising and Supporting. Each competency contains outcome statements and three levels of proficiency: foundational, intermediate, or advanced.

Furthermore, the ACPA/NASPA Competencies (2015) encouraged programs to adapt the competencies to their respective campus contexts. These competencies encourage individuals to use the competencies for self-assessment, professional development, and training and onboarding of staff. For graduate preparation programs, the ACPA/NASPA Competencies (2015) recommended using the competencies for program-level and course-level outcomes “as well as setting expectations for co-curricular learning experiences” (p.10). As an individual increases their level of competency, “practitioners need to demonstrate knowledge and skills that articulate, apply, critique, and assess student learning and development theories” (Hirschy & Wilson, 2015, p. 88). This ability to increasingly and expertly apply theory to practice demonstrates the aptitude and ability of professionals to appropriately serve students via practice and policy implementation.

Perspectives on Professional Preparation

Within the past decade, scholars and practitioners have studied graduate preparation programs in student affairs and their effectiveness in preparing new graduates for the field. Studies on

graduate preparation programs in student affairs have focused on the ability to prepare entry-level practitioners from the perspective of senior student affairs officers (Ardoin et al., 2019; Dickerson et al., 2011; Herdlein, 2004), supervisors of entry-level practitioners (Cuyjet et al., 2009), and entry-level and mid-level professionals (Cuyjet et al., 2009; Renn & Jessup-Anger, 2008; Waple, 2006; Young & Janosik, 2007). Cooper et al.’s (2016) literature review on perceived skill deficiencies of entry-level student affairs practitioners identified seven skill deficiencies, including budgeting and financial management, strategic planning, research and assessment, legal knowledge and standards, supervision, technological competence, and institutional and campus policies.

Using the ACPA/NASPA Competencies (2015) as a conceptual framework, Gansemmer-Topf and Ryder (2017) found that mid-level professionals identified how entry-level student affairs professionals needed to understand different institutional contexts, apply content from coursework (e.g., assessment), and possess good communication skills. More recently, Ardoin et al.’s (2019) study revealed senior student affairs officers believed graduate preparation programs prepared students well in foundational knowledge bases such as theory, diversity and equity, assessment, and providing students with opportunities to apply knowledge to practice.

Conversely, graduate preparation programs in student affairs could enhance new professionals’ preparedness by recognizing the complexities of student affairs work and how ideal solutions may differ from what actually occurs in practice (Ardoin et al., 2019; Perez, 2016). Shelton and Yao (2019) identified how student affairs graduate curricula do not comprehensively address serving international students, but graduate assistantships and fieldwork placements provide training and preparation that service this population. In fact, Liddell et al. (2014) recognized that new professionals holding graduate assistantships and enrolling full-time perceived internships and practi-

ca as more influential in areas such as institutional culture, campus politics, and professional expectations. Concurrently, in-class experiences were perceived as influential in areas such as fostering professional involvement and modeling ethical practice. In summary, these scholars found that graduate students are more influenced by practicum and assistantships than coursework.

Moreover, Perez (2017) suggested graduate students' ability for self-authorship, understanding of good practice, and commitment to the field were impacted by fieldwork experiences that either affirmed or dismissed efforts to use internal voice and enact their values and ethics. Marshall et al. (2016) studied the reasons early career student affairs professionals leave the field. Notably non-competitive salaries, attractive career alternatives, work/life conflict, limited advancement, the role of supervisor and institutional fit, and lack of challenge/loss of passion were cited as reasons for departure.

While prior studies have employed both qualitative and quantitative methods to study the perceptions of various constituent groups on graduate program preparation, in-depth case studies of graduate preparation programs remain unexplored. Understanding the curricular and co-curricular dynamics occurring in graduate preparation programs in student affairs can provide further insight into how the ACPA/NASPA Competencies (2015) are integrated into coursework and practical experiences, such as graduate assistantships and practicum experiences.

Conceptual Framework

Perez's (2016) conceptual model of professional socialization into student affairs within graduate preparation programs served as a conceptual framework for this study. Using research from student affairs, the helping professions, and doctoral student socialization, Perez (2016) created a conceptual model depicting student affairs graduate preparation occurring in "multiple

intersecting cultural contexts" (p.43). National, professional, and functional areas (e.g. housing, orientation, student activities), entities along with institutional and individual levels (e.g. social identities, family) impact student affairs culture and entry into the profession. Coursework in student affairs and higher education, in addition to field experiences (e.g., graduate assistantships and practica), occur at the intersection of the cultures described above in this two-dimensional model. Ideally, classroom content and field experiences should reinforce one another as new professionals are learning the "nature of 'good practice' in student affairs" (Perez, 2016, p.44).

We used Perez's (2016) model to develop questions for graduate students, program coordinators, and graduate assistantship supervisors, knowing that the ACPA/NASPA Competencies (2015) are used by these groups. For this study, we wanted to understand how the ACPA/NASPA Competencies (2015) were used in the classroom and field experiences. Since the two main student affairs associations, ACPA and NASPA, created and endorsed the ten professional competency areas, it is useful to understand how these competencies manifest within these two sites for graduate preparation.

Methodology

This study used a constructivist approach (Jones et al., 2014) and employed a comparative case study methodology (Merriam, 1988; Stake, 2006). Case study is unique from other qualitative methodologies in that it draws boundaries around a given case, or what is more commonly known as a bounded system (Merriam, 1988). For the purposes of this investigation, two graduate preparation programs in the Southern region of the U.S. served as a unique, bounded case. The researchers also received a NASPA Region III Research Grant to study the use of the ACPA/NASPA Competencies (2015) in student affairs graduate preparation programs.

A major strength of case study research is in the ability to offer particularistic, descriptive, and contextually rich data that is useful in addressing practical problems and connecting them to disciplinary knowledge (Merriam, 1988; Stake, 2006). For this study, we developed an understanding of how competencies were infused into the student affairs graduate preparation program by spending two days at both sites interviewing the program coordinators for each program and conducting focus groups with students and graduate assistantship supervisors. Additionally, we reviewed the master's program handbooks and other programmatic materials such as syllabi, at each site. The main research question guiding this study was: How are the ACPA/NASPA Competencies (2015) operationalized in student affairs graduate programs?

Site and Participant Selection

Central to any qualitative study is a detailed rationale for participant recruitment. We conducted the study at two student affairs graduate preparation programs housed at public institutions in the Southern U.S. Both programs were purposefully sampled (Patton, 2015) as they used the ACPA/NASPA Competencies (2015) to guide their curricula and emphasized translating theory-to-practice through required graduate assistantships and practicum experiences. Although similarities existed between both programs regarding the usage of the competencies and required graduate assistantships, the sites differed in the use of adjunct instructors, the number of required practicum placements, and the program's connection with the division of student affairs.

The program coordinator at each site served as an institutional gatekeeper, arranged the logistics for site visits, and helped recruit participants for the study. The program coordinator forwarded emails to students and graduate assistantship supervisors at each site. Sixteen individuals participated across both sites, and pseudonyms were selected by the researchers to maintain participant confidentiality.

Southeast University

Southeast University's student affairs program began over 50 years ago with the goal to prepare graduate students to serve in the higher education field. The cohort model serves as a mainframe for the program. Southeast University boasts a 39 credit hour program, small class sizes, and routine faculty interactions. This program's faculty completed a curriculum map to emphasize areas where the ACPA/NASPA Competencies (2015) show up. At Southeast University, a program coordinator, five students, and two graduate assistantship supervisors participated in our study.

Mid-South University

Mid-South University's student affairs program has been in existence for over 75 years. This 42 credit hour graduate program prepares student affairs professionals for the field by incorporating theory-to-practice elements into the curriculum and field placements. The program touts its high selectivity for admission as part of the recruitment materials and emphasizes the cohort model. The alumni base is referenced repeatedly in program materials. Similarly, Mid-South's program uses the ACPA/NASPA Competencies (2015) as part of the formal curriculum and as a part of graduate students' culminating portfolio. At Mid-South University, the program coordinator, three students, and four graduate assistantship supervisors completed our study.

Data Collection Procedures

A focus group exclusive to graduate students at each institution was conducted. Graduate assistantship supervisors also participated in an exclusive focus group. Interviews with the program coordinating faculty also occurred. A specific description of the procedures is described in the sections below.

Graduate Student and Graduate Assistantship Supervisors Focus Groups

I (Dena) conducted the focus groups with

graduate students and graduate assistantship supervisors separately in conference rooms at both campuses. Topics for the graduate student focus groups focused on the skills developed as a result of the program, development within the ACPA/NASPA Competencies (2015), and curricular and co-curricular activities that facilitated their understanding of the competencies. I asked questions such as “What skills have you developed as a result of this program?” and “In what ways have you been asked to reflect upon the ACPA/NASPA Competencies (2015) in your coursework?” For the graduate assistantship supervisors focus groups, questions centered around “How do you interact with the master’s program in student affairs on your campus?” and “Are you aware of the ACPA/NASPA Competencies (2015) and how do you use them?” Each focus group ranged in length from 60-75 minutes and was transcribed using Rev.com.

Program Coordinator Interviews

In addition to the graduate student and graduate assistantship supervisor focus groups, I (Dena) interviewed the program coordinators at each site. The program coordinator was interviewed because they often are tasked with curricular development, assessment, recruitment and retention efforts, and teaching within the program. Thus, the program coordinator is intricately more knowledgeable about the programmatic materials holistically rather than a single faculty who may teach one or two classes within the program. The program coordinator interviews followed a semi-structured interview protocol and centered on the focus of the program, staffing (including full-time and adjunct faculty), and the use of the ACPA/NASPA Competencies (2015) in the curriculum. The interviews lasted 60 minutes and were transcribed using Rev.com.

Data Analysis

Following Stake’s (2006) multiple case study analysis recommendations, we read through each

interview and focus group transcript and noted where graduate students and graduate assistantship supervisors spoke about the ACPA/NASPA Competencies (2015). We also identified the knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed for the student affairs profession within the transcripts. After reading through the transcripts, we went back through each one and highlighted passages placing initial codes in the margins, known as *open coding* (Merriam, 2009). We used a similar process to code the program coordinator interviews while specifically focusing on the structure and outcomes of the student affairs graduate preparation program. Next, we read through each of the open codes in the transcripts and started grouping the *open codes* into *analytical codes*. From these *analytical codes*, we reviewed the codes to develop patterns and construct themes for each case (Saldaña, 2016). Lastly, we reviewed the themes from each case to note similarities and differences in how both programs approached integrating the ACPA/NASPA Competencies (2015) into the curricular and co-curricular experiences for the student affairs graduate preparation program. Throughout the analytic process, we wrote analytic memos to capture insights on the implementation of standards in each graduate student affairs preparation program (Birks et al., 2008).

Trustworthiness

Finally, we employed multiple methods for establishing trustworthiness within the study including member checks, peer debriefing, and triangulation. We emailed the transcripts to the participants of the interviews and focus groups to ask for feedback and critique in order to ensure they felt accurately represented. Our peer debriefing (Merriam, 2009) provided an avenue for us to analyze the data as a research dyad where we analyzed the transcripts individually before providing feedback to one another and then dialoguing about the analysis to reach a consensus. We reviewed the program handbook and course syllabi offered by the program coordinator. Next, we

triangulated (Merriam, 2009) the study through multiple methods of data collection, analysis, and examination of the document analysis (including program handbook, websites, and course syllabi). The program handbooks included information about the comprehensive exam or final portfolio where graduate students demonstrated their use of the ACPA/NASPA Competencies (2015).

Researcher Positionality

Currently we both serve as program coordinators for student affairs master's programs. We are responsible for recruiting, marketing, and assessment for the program. The programs each use the ACPA/NASPA Competencies (2015) in the proposal for the program and course development. Conversations with other program coordinators combined with our own experiences prompted this project. Even further, our own education in student affairs included coursework in student development theory, legal issues, along with others and graduate assistantship and practicum experiences. While the ACPA/NASPA Competencies (2015) did not exist at that time, we acknowledge that our coursework was designed for practical application through field experiences in order to prepare us for the student affairs profession.

Limitations

Even though we analyzed multiple forms of data, including interview and focus group transcripts and the handbooks for both programs, there are limitations to the transferability of findings from this study. For example, the study was conducted at two public institutions with in-person cohort-based programs, which may not be applicable to one-year and online programs. Additionally, the data from this study relies upon self-reported information from graduate students, graduate assistantship supervisors, and program coordinators. Though I (Dena) stated at the beginning of each interview or focus group that I was not evaluating their graduate program for one specific method of integrating standards into the

curriculum, a desire to represent their program, university, and experiences favorably could have been present in their responses. Lastly, the data from this study was also captured at one-point in time versus a longitudinal study.

Findings

Generally, all 16 participants throughout the study found worth in the ACPA/NASPA Competencies (2015) although the utility, understanding, and application of the competencies and standards varied between the participant type (student, graduate assistantship supervisor, program coordinator) and the different institution. Each participant acknowledged the goal-oriented scaffolds for program development and need to incorporate standards into the curriculum and in paraprofessional practice to prepare entry-level professionals for success in the field of student affairs. One institution incorporated the competencies transparently while the other did so more opaquely.

Southeast University: “It’s Much Like a Web or a Net”

At Southeast University, master's students learned about the ACPA/NASPA Competencies (2015) through coursework, graduate assistantships and practicum experiences, conferences, and their culminating examination at the end of the program. The program coordinator, Megan, stated the faculty in the program reviewed the program for alignment with the ACPA/NASPA Competencies (2015) three years ago before the study was conducted. She said,

In the process of doing that, we took our classes and the major assignments, and we mapped them to the ACPA/NASPA competencies. It was one of those situations where we thought we were hitting on all the competencies, but we wanted to make sure that we weren't missing something.

Megan's quote illustrates where the gradu-

ate curriculum emphasized specific competencies with the realization the curriculum may not capture each one. The graduate student focus groups supported Megan's depiction of the integration of the competencies within the curriculum. Kaleigh, a second-year student in the program, indicated the course syllabi for her classes identified specific ACPA/NASPA Competencies (2015) reflected in the course content. Learning and development within the competencies did not end with coursework. Ana, another second-year student in the program, noted her supervisor encouraged her development in the competency areas by asking questions such as, "What are you wanting to get from this experience?" and "What competency, or what are you trying to learn?" Throughout the two-year program, students were asked to self-reflect on the competencies multiple times. Students were asked to rate their development along the 10 competencies in a spreadsheet and identify competencies they wanted to gain experiences in at a conference, and at the final comprehensive exam at the end of the program.

In terms of their learning within specific competency areas, graduate students described their development along specific competency areas, such as social justice and inclusion, leadership, and advising and supporting. Even though students identified growth along the competencies, they realized they still had more to learn, specifically with diversity and inclusion. Leslie stated, "diversity and inclusion work is never-ending. I think that's just one area where I still feel as though I need to grow." The graduate students also mentioned wanting to improve their knowledge of human resources in organizations and skills with technology as programs and platforms used in their work are always changing.

The program coordinator, graduate assistantship supervisors, and graduate students consistently described the focus of the master's program as "theory-to-practice" and gaining "transferable skills to get into a student affairs position" upon graduation. The graduate assistantship supervi-

sors worked in residence life and described conversations they had with graduate students they supervised regarding assignments, professional development, and communicating with students, staff, and supervisors. While the graduate assistantship supervisors did not place an explicit focus on the ACPA/NASPA Competencies (2015) in their conversations with graduate students, they followed the department's focus on their ACUHO-I competencies for residence life professionals.

The graduate assistantship supervisors noted strengths of current graduate students as their ability to take initiative and work toward continuous improvement of programs. A few areas where graduate students could improve were in realizing change does not happen immediately and maintaining balance by performing their specific duties well compared to undertaking additional duties from the graduate assistant supervisors' perspective.

Mid-South University: "We Really Don't Talk about Them Much"

At Mid-South University, the ACPA/NASPA Competencies (2015) are referenced in the program handbook and on course syllabi, yet they are not openly referenced in course discussions or with the graduate assistantship supervisors or graduate students. When these competencies are mentioned, it is often close to when the graduate student's final portfolio is due towards the end of their graduate program. Sarah, a second-year student in the program, illustrated this in the following quote:

I think of it in a little bit different way. I think that they should have been really intentional. I mean upfront and saying like, "This is what we're focusing on in this program." Because if you look at the classes that we took, they're trying to focus on those. But in our first year, we just didn't know that. ... So now it's hard for me to kind of connect these competencies to the classes that I took because I didn't have that focus before.

Kayla and Carrie, who are also second-year students in the program, further confirmed Sarah's understanding. Carrie further stated, "I was going to say not at all, but that's just my opinion. I would agree with what they both said. I think the connection piece is definitely lacking." The program coordinator indicated the ACPA/NASPA Competencies (2015) are used to frame the program, and graduating students are asked to reflect on what they have learned throughout the program. Charles, the program coordinator, stated that graduating students are expected to demonstrate "integration of professional and personal philosophies, analyze your experiences in relation to leadership, service, inclusivity, peer learning, professional identity, social capital" in their final portfolio. The students recognize this as a charge of the program when they reach the final portfolio but fail to make the connections earlier on in the program.

In the graduate assistantship supervisor focus group, the consensus was that they were aware of the ACPA/NASPA Competencies (2015) yet did not use them. Melissa indicated,

I feel like we don't focus on them much because we have two sets of standards we use in our office, and we have institutional learning outcomes and strategic plans. I think they're all layered up. I think that's where I anticipate that the grad program uses those things because that's their area, but we certainly could use them more. Or figure out who's going to do what.

One area of consensus in the graduate assistantship supervisor was the importance of good supervisors in supporting the overall growth and development of graduate students in the program. Lisa, a graduate assistantship supervisor and graduate of the program, said,

I was lucky that I had really great supervisors in grad school, and they, for better or for worse, really showed me what it looked like to work in higher ed. I probably knew more than I maybe should have at the time, look-

ing back, but I had a realistic view when I left, which I think was really helpful for me.

Carrie, a second-year graduate student, echoed this statement in the quote below when asked about how graduate assistantship supervisors contributed to their development in the program:

So that's probably a two-parter, and I'm thinking about my supervisors. So I had a different supervisor last year than I did this year, and last year was a very rough year. It was like, "I don't even want to do this anymore. I don't want to be in this field. I don't want to support students." It was a very rough time, and I think this year is a whole different, a whole different view. I think she has given me the joy back that I needed for student affairs and showed me there's more to it. And she showed me what a supervisor should be.

Carrie demonstrated through this quote the critical role a supervisor plays in supporting future student affairs professionals in their career aspirations.

The graduate students mentioned a strong focus on "theory-to-practice" within the program and noted their coursework in assessment and research and diversity and inclusion helped build their knowledge and skills in these areas. The graduate assistantship supervisors indicated initiative, solution-oriented, and reliability as strengths, while some weaknesses were balanced in terms of knowing their limits in taking on various projects and communicating with supervisors.

In the interview with Charles, the program coordinator, he indicated the graduate program has a good relationship with the Division of Student Life at the institution, and the division supports the program financially and programmatically as senior-level student affairs officers teach classes in the program. Charles did not mention how or if all graduate assistantship supervisors are integrated into discussions about graduate preparation and competency development.

Discussion

Student affairs and higher education graduate preparation programs are a critical part of the training and development of professionals in the knowledge, skills, and dispositions required by the profession to support today's college students. Both graduate preparation programs in student affairs at Southeast and Mid-South University used the ACPA/NASPA Competencies (2015) to frame their curricula and included references to the competencies on course syllabi.

An area where both universities differed was in their implementation of the competencies throughout the duration of the two-year program. Southeast University included various checkpoints in classes where students would self-assess their development along the ACPA/NASPA Competencies (2015) through course assignments and activities in addition to the culminating final exam. At Mid-South University, the final portfolio was the main area where students in the program demonstrated their development along the competencies.

Both Southeast and Mid-South University had a strong "theory-to-practice" emphasis in the program by applying course knowledge to practical experiences. Ana, a second-year student at Southeast University, illustrated the fluid nature of the learning process by stating she used "what I'm learning in the classroom, apply it to what is happening, and then come back to the classroom, talk about it some more and dig deeper." The graduate students at Mid-South University indicated this as well through the practical applications in their graduate assistantships and practicum experiences.

Interviews and focus groups with graduate students and graduate assistantship supervisors affirmed findings from prior research regarding graduate preparation program strengths in providing strong foundational knowledge in diversity and inclusion, assessment, and applying this knowledge to practice in coursework (Ardoin et

al., 2019; Gansemer-Topf & Ryder, 2017). Additionally, this study re-affirmed the lack of development in specific skills contained in Cooper et al.'s (2016) literature, such as human resources functions (e.g. supervision), technological competence, and change processes.

One new finding from this study was the connection or lack of connection between the graduate assistantship supervisors and the graduate program. One graduate assistantship supervisor from Southeast University indicated supervisors may have individual relationships with various faculty in the program and invite them to conduct trainings in their functional area, yet the division of student affairs was in a state of transition as one of the primary liaisons from the division to the graduate program left for another role at a different university.

At Mid-South University, the graduate students and graduate assistantship supervisors indicated that senior-level student affairs officers taught classes in the program. While this was beneficial, the mid-level professionals supervising the graduate students were unsure of how to connect with the graduate preparation program in order to support their graduate student's development in the competencies.

An additional finding is the importance of consistent messaging regarding the program's foundational standards to students and stakeholders. For example, at Southeast University, students reported how the ACPA/NASPA Competencies (2015) were reiterated throughout their experiences in the classroom, graduate assistantship, practica, and final exams. At Mid-South University, however, student participants wanted more uniform descriptions of the competencies and deeper integration of their use within coursework, specifically. Sarah, for example, said she would have welcomed a clear explanation of the program and its roots because it would have helped her be more focused during her first year in graduate school. Due to this lack of connection, she recounted it difficult to connect competencies

retroactively. Sarah's inability to connect to the competencies illustrates Cooper et al.'s (2016) review of deficiencies that included a need to "better prepare entry-level professionals with regard to research, assessment and evaluation, budgeting and financial management, and legal knowledge and standards" (p. 115.). These scholars encouraged faculty and graduate assistant supervisors to emphasize the need for these skills in the curriculum and practice.

Further, demonstrating clear connections back to the professional standards throughout the program is necessitated according to the findings of our study. Perez (2020) compared constructions of professionalism between two student affairs graduate preparation programs and identified that one program clearly socialized students by demonstrating the professional competencies while the other did not. Perez found that the second program's lack of clear definitions of professionalism caused students to define it for themselves; however, in both programs, the students found the concept of professionalism "constraining" (p. 8).

Implications for Research and Practice

Both student affairs graduate preparation programs in this study had a primary goal of preparing students with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions for effective practice in the field (ACPA & NASPA Competencies, 2015). While the programs differed in the implementation of the competencies within the curriculum, there are three key recommendations from the study intended to improve competency development within graduate preparation programs in student affairs and to strengthen the connection between theory and practice.

Schedule Formal and Informal Opportunities to Demonstrate Competency Development

Assignments and self-assessment guides are one way for students to self-assess their devel-

opment along the ACPA/NASPA Competencies (2015). Another way to assess development along the 10 competency dimensions is to include graduate assistantship supervisors in providing feedback along the specific competency dimensions. Establishing agency for the supervisors could deepen their level of connection with the graduate program and knowledge of the competencies. Including mid-level professionals' perspectives by inviting them as guest speakers to classes or for structured mentoring opportunities could help graduate students identify a realistic version of the skills needed at the mid-level and strengthen their connection to the curriculum. Updating job descriptions to integrate the tasks in connection with competency areas under focus could prove beneficial for students to understand the direct connection between practice and theory. Establishing a feedback cycle, formally or informally, can be mutually beneficial for graduate students, graduate programs, and graduate assistantship supervisors.

Include Change Management Perspectives in the Curriculum

An area of improvement noted by graduate students and graduate assistantship supervisors includes information on change management and processes, so students have a realistic idea of the pace of change at institutions and what to expect in entry-level positions. Ardoin et al. (2019) included this recommendation in their study as the senior student affairs officers (SSAOs) noticed students had trouble adapting when the ideal version of student affairs work presented in coursework differs from the realities of the work. Student affairs work varies from institution to institution, and understanding the policies, politics and advocating for change requires knowing your campus, your role, and how to influence staff and supervisors.

Developing Self-Awareness

In addition to development in the ACPA/NASPA Competencies (2015), graduate students need to understand themselves, especially re-

garding their own limits and abilities. Graduate assistantship supervisors from both focus groups indicated their students tended to assume a lot of responsibilities without considering their own capacity for the specific tasks. By taking on more responsibilities than they were able to handle, graduate students experienced burnout. There is a need for professionals to model the way for entry-level professionals as they are shepherded into the field. Graduate assistantship supervisors can help students by setting and role-modeling realistic expectations for work and coaching their graduate students on how to decline opportunities if it is not within their job description and/or is too much with their current responsibilities.

Conclusion

The case studies of competency development at Southeast and Mid-South University illustrated how the ACPA/NASPA Competencies (2015) are implemented in their respective curriculums. Though graduate students, graduate assistantship supervisors, and program coordinators used the competencies in coursework, one-on-one supervisory conversations, or culminating activities, the competencies remain underutilized. Increasing collaborative activities, such as feedback to graduate students on their development within the ACPA/NASPA Competencies (2015), could improve students' knowledge and skill. Further studies should be conducted at graduate preparation programs at regional comprehensive universities, private universities, and online programs to provide additional perspectives on competency development at different institutional types.

References

- American Association of Higher Education/American College Personnel Association/National Association of Student Personnel Administrators. (1998). *Powerful partnerships: A shared responsibility for learning*. Authors.
- American College Personnel Association. (1994). *The student learning imperative: Implications for student affairs*. Author.
- American College Personnel Association/National Association of Student Personnel Administrators. (2004). *Learning reconsidered: A campus-wide focus on the student experience*. Authors.
- American College Personnel Association/Association of College and University Housing Officers-International/Association of College Unions-International/National Association for Campus Activities/National Academic Advising Association/National Association of Student Personnel Administrators/National Intramural Recreational Sports Association. (2006). *Learning reconsidered 2: Implementing a campus-wide focus on the student experience*. Authors.
- American College Personnel Association: College Student Educators International [ACPA]& NASPA: Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education [NASPA] (2015). *ACPA/NASPA professional competency areas for student affairs practitioners*. Authors.
- Ardoin, S., Crandall, R. E., & Shinn, J. (2019). Senior student affairs officers' perspectives on professional preparation in student affairs programs. *Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice*, 56(4), 379-393.
- Birks, M., Chapman, Y., Francis, K. (2008). Memoing in qualitative research: Probing data and processes. *Journal of Research in Nursing*, 13(1), 68-75.
- Cooper, J., Mitchell, D., Eckerle, K., & Martin, K. (2016). Addressing perceived skill deficiencies in student affairs graduate preparation programs. *Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice*, 53(2), 107-117.
- Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (2019). *CAS Professional Standards for Higher Education* (10th ed.) Author.
- Cuyjet, M.J., Longwell-Grice, R., & Molina, E. (2009). Perceptions of new student affairs professionals and their supervisors regarding the application of competencies learned in preparation programs. *Journal of College Student Development* 50(1), 104-119.
- Dickerson, A., Hoffman, J., Anan, B.P., Brown, K., Vong, L., & Bresciani, M. (2011). A comparison of student affairs officer and student affairs preparatory program faculty expectations of entry-level professionals' competencies. *Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice*, 48(4). 463-479.
- Gansemer-Topf, A.M. & Ryder, A. (2017). Competencies needed for entry-level student affairs work: Views from mid-level professionals. *College Student Affairs Journal*, 35(1), 40-54.
- Herdlein, R.J. (2004). Survey of chief student affairs officers regarding relevance of graduate preparation of new professions. *NASPA Journal* 42(1), 51-71.

- Hirschy, A. S., & Wilson, M. E. (2017). Student affairs and the scholarship of practice. *New Directions for Higher Education*, 178, 85-94.
- Hirschy, A. S., Wilson, M. E., Liddell, D. L., Boyle, K. M., & Pasquesi, K. (2015). Socialization to student affairs: Early career experiences associated with professional identity development. *Journal of College Student Development*, 56(8), 777-793.
- Jones, S.R., Torres, V. & Arminio, J. (2014). *Negotiating the complexities of qualitative research in higher education: Fundamental elements and issues (2nd ed.)*. Routledge.
- Kuk, L., Cobb, B., & Forrest, C. S. (2007). Perceptions of competencies for entry-level practitioners in student affairs. *NASPA Journal*, 44(4), 664-691.
- Liddell, D. L., Wilson, M. E., Pasquesi, K., Hirschy, A. S., & Boyle, K. M. (2014). Development of professional identity through socialization in graduate school. *Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice*, 51, 69-84.
- Marshall, S. M., Gardner, M. M., Hughes, C., & Lowery, U. (2016). Attrition from student affairs: Perspectives from those who exited the profession. *Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice*, 53(2), 146-159.
- Merriam, S. B. (1988). *Case study research in education: A qualitative approach*. Jossey-Bass.
- Merriam, S. B. (2009). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation*. Jossey-Bass.
- Patton, M. Q. (2015). *Qualitative research and methods: Integrating theory and practice*. Sage.
- Perez, R. J. (2016). A conceptual model of professional socialization within student affairs graduate preparation programs. *Journal for the Study of Postsecondary and Tertiary Education*, 1, 35-52.
- Perez, R. J. (2017). Enhancing, inhibiting, and maintaining voice: An examination of student affairs graduate students' self-authorship journeys. *Journal of College Student Development*, 58(6), 833-852.
- Perez, R. J. (2020). Comparing constructions of professionalism in student affairs graduate preparation programs. *Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19496591.2019.1699106>
- Saldaña, J. (2016). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers*, 3rd ed. Sage.
- Shelton, L. J., & Yao, C. W. (2019). Early career professionals' perceptions of higher education and student affairs graduate programs: Preparation to work with international students. *Journal of College Student Development*, 60(2), 156-172.
- Stake, R. E. (2006). *Multiple case study analysis*. The Guilford Press.
- Renn, K. A. & Jessup-Anger, E. (2008). Preparing new professionals: Lessons for graduate preparation programs from the national study of new professionals in student affairs. *Journal of College Student Development*, 49(4), 319-335.
- Underwood, S. J., & Austin, C. E. (2016). Higher education graduate preparation programs: Characteristics and trends. *Journal of College Student Development*, 57(3) 326-332.
- Waple, J. N. (2006). An assessment of skills and competencies necessary for entry-level student affairs work. *NASPA Journal*, 43(1), 1-18.
- Young, D., & Janosik, S. (2007). Using CAS Standards to measure learning outcomes of student affairs preparation programs. *NASPA Journal*, 44(2), 341-366.
- Young, D. G., & Dean, L. A. (2015). Validation of subject areas of CAS professional studies standards for master's level student affairs professional preparation programs. *Journal of College Student Development*, 56(4), 386-391. <https://doi.org/10.1353/csd.2015.0037>