

# **STUDENT AFFAIRS PROFESSIONALS' SELF-REPORTED PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT NEEDS BY PROFESSIONAL LEVEL**

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With the 2015 update to the professional competencies document for the student affairs profession, the necessity exists to explore the professional development needs in each of the ten competency areas. This study investigates student affairs professionals' survey responses to determine their self-reported needs for professional development based on the ACPA/NASPA professional competency areas. Specifically, we reviewed the data by professional level (i.e. entry, mid-level, etc.). Findings reveal some competency areas of inconsistency and other clear needs for professional development and emphasis in graduate preparatory programs.

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The student affairs profession values people, and in an era of assessment and accountability, it must also be a profession that values the development and demonstration of competence by those people" (Hoffman & Bresciani, 2012 p. 26). To organize such work of professional development, many professional associations ranging from public health, libraries, information professionals, and others establish competencies or competency areas (Sanghi, 2016) of foci for their respective professional membership. A competency, as defined by Charles Woodruffe (1992), is "the set of behavior patterns that the incumbent needs to bring to a position in order to perform its tasks and functions with competence" (p. 29). Competencies are important as they allow the assessment of essential knowledge, skills, and dispositions expected of any professional within the field (ACPA & NASPA, 2015).

For this reason, American College Personnel Association (ACPA) and the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA) – two of the leading student affairs professional associations - collaborated to establish a common set of professional competencies for student affairs professionals. This collaboration, via a combined task force charged in 2009, sought to review the existing 2007 ACPA professional competencies publication (ACPA, 2007). The current, updated document of professional competency areas, which was released in August 2015, collapsed four existing areas into two and introduced two new areas (ACPA & NASPA, 2015).

The set of professional competency areas is intended to define the broad professional knowledge, skills, and for some competencies, attitudes expected of student affairs professionals working in the U.S., regardless of their area of specialization or positional role within the field (ACPA & NASPA, 2015). Prior to these competency areas, competencies and professional development needs were often explored independent of a common framework. Arguably, the

thirty-year meta-analysis of skills, knowledge, and personal traits conducted by Lovell and Kosten (2000) laid the foundation for the formation of such competency areas. Lovell and Kosten (2000) posit that skills such as administration, management, and human facilitation along with knowledge of student development theory and functional responsibilities were required for success. Their analysis also reviewed populations studied (e.g. graduate students, new professionals and combinations) by researchers (2000). This research demonstrated the breadth of knowledge, skills, and personal traits required for success for student affairs professionals.

Although likely not intentional, but rather convenient, prior research tended to explore competencies by one particular professional level cohort, based on which population was accessible. Thus, the research following the meta-analysis (2000) contains one distinct cohort at a time such as preparatory program participants (Barr, 1993; Cuyjet, Longwell-Grice & Molina, 2009), entry-level or new professionals (Buckard, Cole, Ott & Stoflet, 2005; Renn & Jessup-Anger, 2008; Kretovics, 2002; Waple, 2006), or SSAOs (Cambell, 2015). More recent literature begins to consider the mid-level professionals' unique professional development needs (Fey & Carpenter, 1996; Mather, Bryan & Faulkner, 2009; Sermersheim & Keim, 2005). Some studies began to expand the population to student affairs professionals as a whole (Roberts, 2005). There has also been an interest in certain professional levels evaluating or positing the importance of competency foci of another particular professional level (Herdlein III, 2004). For example, SSAOs and their perceptions of competency needs of entry-level professionals. Therefore, much of the existing literature focuses on a specific professional level within its analysis of competencies.

More scant research transcends professional development needs by professional level and focuses assessing professionals by competency area. For instance, Castellanos,

Goria, Mightorga and Salas (2007) present professional development within the context of self-report of multicultural competence. To further illustrate, multicultural competence was centered in their book *Multicultural Competence in Student Affairs* (Pope, Reynolds & Mueller, 2019). ACPA also released guidance on the development of an assessment competency (Mitchell, 2006). Overall, there is a need identified in the literature to update our understanding of professional competencies and our professional development needs related to them.

### **Conceptual Framework**

Without a common framework, comparing professional development needs across studies, the progress of the profession, and understanding individual skill development remains difficult. For this reason, the ACPA & NASPA professional competencies (2015) serves as one of two conceptual frameworks for the present study. The second conceptual framework is the Borich Needs Assessment Model (1980).

The ten professional competency areas released in 2015 are presented in Table 1. All of which contain three distinct competency levels of foundational, intermediate, and advanced. "Understanding the nature of the three levels of outcomes is vital to their application in practice" (ACPA/NASPA, 2015, p. 8). This is because foundational outcomes are intended to be a requisite upon which the other intermediate and advanced proficiencies in a competency area are built (ACPA & NASPA, 2015). Each of the ten competencies presented are robust in their explanations of skillsets that transcend functional areas. Additionally, professional levels are presented in order to help gauge current attainment levels of professionals and identify a pathway for professional development.

With the competencies clearly defined by the professional associations within student affairs, a conceptual model is needed to assess professional development needs. The Borich Needs Assessment Model (1980)

enables researchers to purposefully prioritize competencies emphasized in educational and professional development opportunities in the most needed area first, and in each successively less urgent area, if time and funding permit (McKim, 2013). This model's most common form is used to determine "gaps," based on "what is" versus "what should be," in competencies in the research processes (McKim, 2013). Thus, this gap analysis is used to determine in a systematic way professional development needs of competency areas.

### **Research Question**

The current study, although quantitative, is exploratory in nature. There is little known as to which current ACPA and NASPA competencies are important for professional development by different professional levels (entry-level, mid-level and senior leadership) of student affairs professionals and to what extent those professionals feel they have mastered the competencies. This study, as part of a larger study, is one of the first studies to utilize the new professional competencies released in 2015 and is designed to explore the following broad research question: What are the self-reported priorities of professional development needs of student affairs professionals by professional level?

### **Method**

The study was sponsored by the NASPA New Professionals and Graduate Students (NPGS) Knowledge Community (KC). The NPGS Research Committee sought to conduct a demographic study of student affairs professionals as well as to examine the self-reported professional development needs of student affairs professionals. Quantitative data from the larger research project was utilized to answer the research question for this study.

Table 1.  
*ACPA/NASPA Professional Competency Area Descriptions and Levels*

Competency Area	Description	Professional Development
Personal and Ethical Foundations (PEF)	The thoughtful development, critique, and adherence to a holistic and comprehensive standard of ethics and commitment to one's own wellness and growth.	Foundational outcomes emphasize one's values and beliefs in relation to professional codes of ethics and personal wellness. Advanced development involves a higher order of self-awareness.
Values, Philosophies, and History (VPH)	The alignment of one's personal values, philosophies, and history to those of the student affairs profession.	Foundational development is a basic understanding of VPH while advanced development is a more critical understanding of VPH application.
Assessment, Evaluation, and Research (AER)	The ability to use AER processes and methodologies to inform decision making and shape the political and ethical climate surrounding AER uses in higher education.	Professional growth starts with the shift from understanding to application. It is a shift from focusing on separate small scale applications to larger scale applications that involve multiple departments or divisions.
Law, Policy, and Governance (LPG)	The knowledge and application of laws, legal constructs, and governance structure and how they impact one's professional practice.	Professional growth is the shift in understanding from a departmental level to an institutional level that takes into account regional, national, and international contexts.
Organizational and Human Resources (OHR)	The growth of an individual through processes commonly associated with student affairs.	Professional growth is the shift in scale, scope, and interactivity within OHR.
Leadership (LEAD)	The skills, knowledge, and dispositions required of a leader, with or without positional authority. It involves both the individual as a leader and the processes commonly associated with leadership.	Foundational development is knowledge. Advanced development applies the knowledge gained while fostering the development of leadership in others.

Competency Area	Description	Professional Development
Social Justice and Inclusion (SJI)	The process and goal of using one's knowledge, skills, and disposition to acknowledge issues of oppression, privilege, and power. It is the goal to meet the needs of all groups.	Foundational development is understanding oppression, privilege, and power. Intermediate and advanced levels reflect social justice in practice and the connections between leadership and advocacy.
Student Learning and Development (SLD)	The application of concepts and principles for student development and learning theory.	Professional growth is the shift from constructing learning outcomes to larger and more various forms of programs and applications.
Technology (TECH)	The use of resources and technology to improve performance in the student affairs profession.	Professional growth is the shift from understanding to facilitation to creating innovative ways to engage students.
Advising and Supporting (A/S)	The knowledge, skills, and dispositions related to providing advising and support to individuals.	Professional growth is the development of advising and supporting strategies.

(ACPA/NASPA Competencies, 2015)

## Participants

The population was student affairs professionals with the accessible population being active members of NASPA in the spring 2016 semester. There were 1,361 respondents to the survey, of which 1,009 were included in the analysis for the present study. Since the survey was targeted toward student affairs professionals within the association, some respondents did not self-identify as presently working in student affairs, and thus were excluded from the analysis. Overwhelmingly, respondents were employed full-time (79%,  $n = 794$ ) with approximately 15% employed part-time and the remaining six percent were shared among self-employed, temporarily employed, out of work, returned, or unable to work. Additionally, the sample contained 98% ( $n = 987$ ) of

respondents who were employed in the United States with 2% of who worked abroad. The functional areas of the participants varied greatly, with the highest representation from Housing and Residential Life Programs (17%) followed by Campus Activities Programs (8%). Within the sample, approximately two-thirds of participants identified as a woman (67%,  $n = 613$ ), 77% identified as heterosexual/straight, and over half were between 22 to 33 years old (57%,  $n = 575$ ). Individuals identifying as White comprised 73% of the sample, and 9% identified as Black/African American, 8% as Latino, 5% as Multi-Racial, 4% as Asian, and 1% as Native American. Furthermore, Table 2 presents the professional level affiliation of responses to the select all that apply question "which best describes your professional level." Professional levels for the present study were chosen because they

parallel professional levels used by NASPA in its membership database. Thus, it was expected that participants would be familiar with the terminology used by the researchers. Due to no respondents identifying as president and/or chancellor, this level is not presented within the tables contained in the findings section.

Table 2.  
*Professional Levels of Respondents*

Professional Level	Percentage	Count
President/ Chancellor	0.00%	0
Vice President	5.45%	58
Assistant/ Associate Vice President	4.43%	47
Senior Level	9.30%	99
Faculty	1.79%	19
Mid-Level	31.20%	332
New Professional	27.16%	289
Graduate Student	19.27%	205
Undergraduate Student	1.41%	15

### Instrument

A 58-question instrument was created and administered via *Qualtrics*. The instrument included questions about student affairs professionals' employment status, pre-professional experiences, educational background, demographic characteristics, and self-reported attainment of the ten ACPA/ NASPA professional competency areas. Both relevance and importance of each of the ten APCA/NASPA professional competencies were rated using a 5-point Likert scale. For relevance, the scale ranged from *no importance to high importance*. For attainment, *no ability to exceptional ability* were presented to participants. We listed each competency and defined them using the definitions provided by ACPA/NASPA (see Table 1). Finally, participants were

asked to respond to the statement, "below is the list of Professional Competency Areas. Please drag and drop them in order of your greatest need (1) for professional development to the least need (10)." A panel of three student affairs professionals, who were independent from the research team, assessed the instrument for content and face validity.

### Procedure

We intended to send the survey to a census of all NASPA members, however, this was not permissible. Instead, we reached out to leaders of the various NASPA constituency groups such as Knowledge Communities and Regions. These volunteer leaders were asked to distribute the survey to their respective constituent membership groups. The initial email to NASPA leaders was sent in February 2016, three reminder emails were sent, and the survey closed in March immediately following the association's annual conference. In tandem to email recruitment, the survey was also promoted to student affairs professionals via research team members' personal social media accounts. These promotions used standardized, pre-approved templates for both Facebook and Twitter. No incentives were offered to participants as it was not a funded study. We recognize that this sampling method does not achieve a true random sample of the population; however, no roster of all student affairs professionals exists to achieve such a sample.

We extracted the data from *Qualtrics* and questions related to attainment and relevance of each professional competency were inputted in the Borich Calculator V1.4. Plus, the same extracted data were inputted in *Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS)*.

To answer the research question, we primarily used the Borich Calculator based on the Borich Needs Assessment Model (1980). Incomplete responses to the attainment and importance questions from the sample of student affairs professionals were excluded

due to the calculator's inability to compute scores with unmatched pairings (eg. an attainment score and a matching importance score) for each competency. Of the full sample, 727 respondents completed all questions for the analysis. Additional MS Excel calculator sheets were created for each of the eight professional levels with participant representation. Respondents who indicated multiple professional levels such as mid-level and graduate students were included in both/all professional level analyses. In addition to the calculator, we used the same data to run valid percent to determine the level (i.e. foundational, intermediate or advanced) of self-reported attainment of each competency by professional level.

Finally, SPSS was utilized to run descriptive statistics of professional develop-

ment needs by professional level. The mean of the respondents' rank-ordered listing of professional development needs were compared to the Mean Weighted Discrepancy Score (MWDS) of the Borich Calculator. This proposed triangulation of professional development needs provided more credible and valid findings.

### Results

Based on results from the Borich Calculator, the top three professional development needs across all professional level respondents based on the gap analysis were (1) Assessment, Evaluation and Research, (2) Social Justice and Inclusion, and (3) Law, Policy, and Governance. The top three rank-ordered professional development needs across all professional level respon-

Table 3.

*Mean Weighted Discrepancy Scores for Student Affairs Competency Areas (n = 727)*

Rank	Competency	MWDS	Ability			Importance		
			M	SD	Mo	M	SD	Mo
1	AER	2.80	4.09	1.028	5.00	3.22	.987	3.00
2	SJI	2.43	4.31	.931	5.00	3.64	.919	4.00
3	LPG	2.34	3.93	1.136	5.00	3.20	1.092	3.00
4	PEF	2.25	4.59	.675	5.00	4.03	.789	4.00
5	LEAD	2.23	4.47	.762	5.00	3.90	.817	4.00
6	OHR	1.80	4.14	1.013	5.00	3.56	.999	4.00
7	SLD	1.80	4.15	.970	5.00	3.66	.935	4.00
8	A/S	1.62	4.26	.946	5.00	3.84	.911	4.00
9	TECH	1.43	3.78	1.011	4.00	3.36	.964	3.00
10	VPH	.95	3.88	1.022	5.00	3.61	.939	4.00

dents were (1) Assessment, Evaluation and Research (M = 4.23), (2) Law, Policy and Governance (M = 4.43), and (3) Social Justice and Inclusion (M = 4.62). Table 3 depicts the Mean Weighted Discrepancy Score (MWDS) for all competencies ranked from one - need for most professional development - to ten - being the least need for professional development - across all professional level respondents.

To explore the primary research question, the top three MWDS were reviewed alongside the top three ranked-ordered competencies for professional development by the professional levels. Table 4 presents these findings.

Finally, Table 5 presents the current perceived level of attainment (i.e. foundational, intermediate, and advanced) based on the highest percentage of respondents for each professional level. Across all respondents, the highest percentages of perceived attainment level were advanced for PEF (56.64%), intermediate for VPH (41.97%), intermediate for AER (48.08%), foundational for LPG (55.89%), intermediate for OHR (42.76%), intermediate for LEAD (49.66%), intermediate for SJI (47.29%), intermediate for SLD (46.95%), intermediate for TECH (48.30%), and finally advanced level for A/S (51.12%).

Table 4

*Mean Weighted Discrepancy Scores and Ranked Importance by Professional Level*

Professional Level	n	Top Three by MWDS	Top Three by Importance Rank-Order
Undergraduate Students	6	VPH (4.75), LEAD (4.67), A/S (4.17)	LPG (3.73), AER (4.18), A/S (4.91)
Graduate Students	150	AER (2.95), LPG (2.75), PEF (2.69)	LPG (4.36), SJI (4.62), AER (4.63)
New Professionals	220	AER (2.85), SJI (2.78), PEF (2.53)	AER (4.29), LPG (4.44), SJI (4.76)
Mid-Level	260	AER (2.71), PEF (2.08), LPG (2.05)	AER (4.11), LPG (4.61), SJI (4.88)
Faculty	14	PEF (2.37), SJI (1.74), AER (1.53)	AER (4.47), TECH (4.50), SJI (4.55)
Senior Level	70	AER (2.80), SJI (2.41), TECH (1.95)	TECH (4.27), AER (4.28), LPG (4.48)
Assistant/Associate Vice President	33	AER (2.22), LEAD (2.15), LPG (2.01)	SJI (4.00), LPG (4.20), TECH (4.49)
Vice President	42	AER (2.74), LPG (2.42), LEAD (LEAD)	LPG (3.78), TECH (3.85), AER, SJI (3.93)

Table 5. Perceived Level of Attainment of Professional Competencies by Professional Level

	Competency									
	PEF	VPH	AER	LPG	OHR	LEAD	SJI	SLD	TECH	AS
Under-graduate	INT (54.55%)	ADV (44.44%)	INT (54.55%)	FDN (54.55%)	INT (54.44%)	INT (63.64%)	INT (63.64%)	ADV (55.56%)	INT (45.45%)	INT (45.45%)
Graduate	ADV (50.39%)	INT (48.73%)	FDN (55.80%)	FDN (72.93%)	FDN (55.80%)	INT (58.47%)	INT (41.53%)	INT (56.28%)	INT (48.63%)	INT (55.74%)
New Professionals	ADV (50.48%)	INT (43.45%)	FDN (51.92%)	FDN (67.31%)	FDN (45%)	INT (62.17%)	INT (44.94%)	INT (56.93%)	INT (46.07%)	ADV (49.52%)
Mid-Level	ADV (54.39%)	INT (46.04%)	INT (51.76%)	FDN (46.69%)	INT (48.88%)	ADV (49.66%)	INT (47.60%)	ADV (47.30%)	INT (47.60%)	ADV (56.42%)
Faculty	ADV (60.53%)	ADV (55.26%)	INT (55.26%)	FDN (62.50%)	ADV (42.11%)	ADV (65.79%)	ADV (47.37%)	ADV (63.16%)	INT (65.79%)	ADV (60.53%)
Senior Level	ADV (61.18%)	Tied INT/ADV (37.65%)	INT (51.76%)	INT (45.88%)	ADV (52.94%)	ADV (62.35%)	INT (52.94%)	ADV (43.53%)	FDN (48.39%)	ADV (55.29%)
Assistant/Associate Vice President	ADV (83.87%)	ADV (58.06%)	INT (58.33%)	INT (47.22%)	ADV (54.88%)	ADV (61.29%)	FDN (44%)	ADV (58.06%)	FDN (52%)	INT (58.33%)
Vice President	ADV (73.81%)	ADV (57.14%)	INT (57.14%)	INT (52.38%)	ADV (59.52%)	ADV (64.29%)	INT (59.52%)	ADV (52.38%)	FDN (58.33%)	ADV (45.24%)

FDN = Foundational  
 INT = Intermediate  
 ADV = Advanced

## Discussion

Our findings have tangible connections to inform practice and future research. First, an overarching recommendation is presented. Second, recommendations for practice will be discussed followed by recommendations for future research.

First, the congruent findings between the two professional development needs assessment methods serve as the basis for an overarching recommendation for both research and practice. The researcher comparison between the rank-ordered professional development needs and the gap analysis operationalized by the Borich Calculator suggest internal reliability between the methods. This congruent analysis might suggest similar significance in evaluation between methods of analyzing student affairs professionals' professional development needs. Overall, this alignment provides credence to emphasize AER, SJI, and LPG when catering to combinations of professional level cohorts. Thus, professional development sessions that center education and development on these three competency areas would satisfy most student affairs professionals most of the time. Additionally, if a division of student affairs, graduate preparatory program, or another setting which might cater to only one professional level, findings presented in Table 4 provide a starting point to prioritize particular competency areas. For instance, senior administrators like AVPs ought to emphasize AER and LEAD if they coordinate a professional development institute intended for their peers. This overarching recommendation also legitimizes the growing need for TECH and SJI competencies in the field. This is because the updated professional competencies document recently added these two competencies and these two competency areas are identified by respondents as professional development needs in some of the professional levels. For instance, Muller, Grabsch and Moore (2017) discuss how TECH and SJI competency areas are not predicated on years of experience or a doc-

toral degree; laying the foundation to the idea that graduate programs might not be infusing these two competencies in the curriculum to the desired level required by the field. Plus, St. Clair (2007) discovered that SJI competency attainment is not necessarily connected to a professional's social identity. Perhaps professional levels would better explain professional development needs and attainment level. As noted by the overall MSWD and ranked-order needs along with the graduate student needs, finding ways to raise the competency level social justice and inclusion is desired by respondents.

In terms of practice, more targeted recommendations are made to professionals, faculty, or administrators in charge of professional development opportunities and those responsible for administering graduate preparation programs. First, administrators in charge of offering professional development might use the study's findings to plan their professional development offerings catalog. Planners might consider the primary professional level make-up of their division or population they serve. They might also choose to divide up professionals by levels which have similar professional development needs in order to maximize effectiveness. With this context, professionals might also emphasize different competency areas. To illustrate, a student affairs graduate student association could consider that LPG is the top competency area to emphasize. The graduate student association might invite in mid and senior level professionals to discuss how policies and the institutional governance structure effect their work. For professional association professionals in particular, professional level institutes might consider the findings from attainment level or the professional development importance findings when designing curriculum. For instance, a mid-level manager's institute might choose to emphasize AER due to its prevalence on both scales of professional development importance. This institute might choose to begin curriculum on the first day reviewing intermediate lev-

el AER competency (i.e knowledge skills and dispositions) and end the institute with a select number of advanced knowledge frameworks, skills or dispositions. Finally, for practice, a re-evaluation of which competencies are being taught in student affairs and higher education oriented graduate degree programs is recommended.

Additionally, with the release of the 2016 ACPA and NASPA professional competency rubrics, this tool might provide a mechanism for assessing more consistently a professional's actual ability to perform a competency rather than a self-reported attainment level. This tool for practice was released after this study's recruitment period; however these rubrics might aid researchers and practitioners the ability to further define or assess competency areas across professional levels. Rubrics may be valuable tools to administrators and practitioners who lead professional development efforts for their division of student affairs (ACPA & NASPA, 2015).

For future research, new methods for measuring competencies is warranted within the student affairs profession. The release of the ACPA/NASPA Professional Competencies Rubrics (2016) in October of that year is an important tool to aid both practitioners and researchers in measuring competency attainment. As this tool was not available at the inception of the study, we utilized Borich Needs Assessment Model (1980) related to attainment and importance of each professional competency. Future research might consider incorporating all three of the competency dimensions presented in the model as this study did not include the consequence competency - which is a professional's actual ability to perform the competency. Utilizing the Borich Model (1980) might result in an ability for student affairs to more systematic analyze professional competencies in a more generalizable way. This systematic analysis did reveal some discrepancies in priorities for professional development. To explain, Vice Presidents' MWDS indicated LEAD as a needed compe-

tency area, but rank-ordered needs did not include LEAD in the top four competency areas. Which is more important? Is one professional development needs assessment more reliable than others? These questions and this discrepancy might serve as a foundation for future research. Finally, it is important to make note of the overall number of respondents for each professional level in the study; a sample of 43 for Vice Presidents might be considerable in size, but undergraduate students with a total of six is not useful to generalize beyond the present study.

### Conclusion

The current study examined student affairs professionals' self-reported attainment and importance of the ten ACPA/NASPA professional competencies and found that some discrepancies in professional development needs by professional level exist. Thus, professionals can be consulted to determine their own professional development priorities, but more sophisticated methods to analyze such professional development needs is warranted. The findings from this study provide a foundation for further research to better understand why certain disparities exist and offer a springboard for each student affairs professional level to focus on for professional development. In addition, the findings might guide the work of student affairs preparatory programs curriculum and student affairs leaders in charge of professional development prioritization for their work.

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