

Examining Graduate Preparation in Student Affairs

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The first graduate program in student affairs was established in the early 1900's. Since that time, the primary purpose of graduate education in the field has been to prepare practitioners for various roles in colleges and universities (Penn & Trow, 1987). However, such graduate programs have come under increasing scrutiny. Critics question whether such preparation is relevant to actual practice in the fields; that is, whether graduate programs provide a set of competencies and skills essential to student affairs work. Thus, it is critical to address the issue of whether master's programs in student affairs provide relevant preparation that reflects the needs of professionals in the field.

According to Johnson and Sandeen (1987), "A general theoretical orientation should inform practice" (p.83). Graduate programs in student affairs provide a theoretical knowledge base that can guide and enhance the performance of practitioners in the field, similar to professional preparation in business schools (Goodchild & Fife, 1991). As with graduate programs in business administration, a student affairs curriculum often cuts across a variety of disciplines, including leadership, administration, and the social and behavioral sciences (David, Faith, & Murrell, 1991). The growth of programs in business administration and management indicates a recognition that this type of interdisciplinary training can contribute to the effective leadership of organizations (Goodchild & Fife). A student affairs graduate program curriculum that includes student development theory as well as environmental and organizational theory provides a fundamental framework for understanding student affairs work and guidelines for effective practice.

Furthermore, the increasing complexity of the college environment requires new knowledge and skills for those working in the field. According to Goodchild and Fife (1991), "The day of automatically assuming that a professor or scholar would make a successful dean, vice president, or president is over" (p.3). In the current climate of dwindling resources and an increasingly diverse student population, student affairs professionals must be knowledgeable about such issues as budgets and strategic planning, retention and enrollment management, and the unique needs of non-traditional students (DeWitt, 1991). A comprehensive graduate program in student affairs can equip practitioners with the expertise necessary to meet these challenges. Furthermore, student affairs academicians and practitioners alike are increasingly recognizing the necessity and value of practical work experience. Graduate assistantships and practicum requirements in many graduate programs enable students to acquire valuable experience in various functional areas of student affairs. Such coordination of academic study and work experience is crucial to the integration of theory and practice, thus enhancing professional performance in the field. Indeed, the successful attraction, preparation, and

retention of competent student affairs professionals may well be critical to the future of American higher education.

However, graduate programs in student affairs have been challenged for a variety of reasons, including the lack of a solid intellectual and scholarly base (Davis, Faith, & Murrell, 1991), a perception of programs as being too counseling-oriented (Johnson & Sandeen, 1987), and an impression that preparation programs are slow to respond to changes in society and the institutional environment (DeWitt, 1991). Furthermore, others have criticized the variability of graduate programs across institutions and an inconsistency in the curriculum content and quality (Keim, 1991). This lack of consistency may stem, in part, from the ambiguity of the student affairs field as a whole and disagreement about what components are relevant for professional preparation.

Students in graduate programs often confront a perception among the academic community that student affairs work in general is peripheral to the primary academic mission of higher education (Bloland, 1979). Student affairs professionals have been viewed by some as using "excessive jargon" or as lacking an understanding of the "complexities of higher education" (Johnson and Sandeen, 1987, p.85). In a rapidly changing and increasingly complex higher education environment, the set of counseling-oriented skills traditionally emphasized in master's-level programs is no longer sufficient. Professionals in the field require administrative and management skills, including budgeting, competence in the use of computers and other technology, and strong supervisory and leadership skills (J. Pica, personal communication, October 28, 1993). Opportunities for the development of such skills should be incorporated into both coursework and practical experiences. Furthermore, in order to ensure consistent quality, graduate programs in student affairs must have sufficient support from top administrators who allocate resources and funding (Goodchild & Fife, 1991). Therefore, research documenting and supporting the need for the student affairs profession is essential.

Although graduate programs in student affairs have the potential to provide a specific, degree-related learning experience to those who will assume critical roles in a highly complex environment, this potential has been underutilized (Goodchild & Fife). Given the extraordinarily wide variety of tasks performed by student affairs professionals, it is difficult, at best, for any one graduate program to adequately prepare people for such a diversity of roles (Johnson & Sandeen, 1987). However, Johnson and Sandeen assert that "a core curriculum and essential skills and competencies for the future should be identified" (p.86). Many authors agree that master's programs in student affairs should be regularly reviewed in order to ensure that they are pertinent and effective in preparing leaders to meet the challenges of the future (DeWitt, 1991; Goodchild & Fife; Johnson & Sandeen).

The future success of institutions of higher education depends on their ability to attract and retain effective leaders and administrators. Therefore, the quality of these leaders and the ways in which they are trained are issues of crucial concern.

To debate the question of professional preparation is to insist that it continue to be responsive to changes in students, to change in the role and function of practitioners, to changes in society, and to changes in the art of education for the helping profession"

(Pruitt, 1979, cited in Johnson and Sandeen, 1987, p.79).

Indeed, a continuing dialogue about what constitutes relevant and essential preparation in student affairs is crucial to the ability of the profession to meet the changing needs of higher education.

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The Barriers of Race and Gender: The Experience of African-American Women in Higher Education

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In her famous "And arn't I am woman" speech, Sojourner Truth addresses the compromising position experienced by many African-American women in today's society (Hudson-Weems, 1989). The predicament of this population in higher education, especially at traditionally white universities, reflects similar sentiments. In addition to sharing many of the same racial prejudices as their male counterparts, African-American women also experience the prejudices that beset their gender. Although the number of opportunities in higher education, for both women and African-Americans, has increased over the past several decades, current enrollment statistics indicate that African-American women are not taking enough advantage of these opportunities (Guy-Sheftal & Bell-Scott, 1989).

In an effort to learn more about the experiences of being a "double minority," three African-American women from the Indiana University-Bloomington campus (IU) helped shed light upon the experiences of their population. This paper will discuss previously reviewed literature and propose recommendations for student affairs professionals in regards to working with African-American women.

As student affairs professionals, it is important to acknowledge our personal stereotypes about different student populations. Through challenging our underlying beliefs, we can educate ourselves to better serve these populations. These interviews provided an opportunity for me to examine my own underlying beliefs about African-American women, as well as the image portrayed by society through sources such as the media.

Literature Review

Much of the recent literature reflects the belief that African-American women are deficient in academic preparation for college (Lindsay, 1984; Garibaldi, 1990). Numerous researchers argue that "the quality of academic instruction in many urban schools attended by African-American girls is not comparable to that in many white suburban schools" (Lindsay, 1984, p. 142). Programs such as Upward Bound provide African-Americans from disadvantaged school systems access to an education and college preparatory skills otherwise unavailable.

Researchers address the lack of appropriate guidance and counseling services at both the high school and college levels. When discussing factors that influence the success of African-American women in college, all three women concurred regarding a lack of support from their high school guidance counselors.

This frustration continues at the college level. Small academic programs can create a