

The Program: A Look Back at Indiana University's CSPA Program Through the Eyes of Recent Alumni

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In the past twenty-five years, many studies have addressed graduate preparation programs. Literature on master's-level student affairs programs ranges from curriculum debate to practitioner assessment; however, few published studies examine former students' evaluations of their own programs.

Curriculum questions are a central theme in the literature. Organizational models for student services preparation programs have been offered, containing varying degrees of emphasis on counseling, development, or administration (Delworth & Hanson, 1989; Council for the Advancement of Standards [CAS], 1986). Some research postulates that the benefit of master's work lies in the experiential component -- the opportunities to translate theory to practice and develop personal theories in use (Brown, 1992; Strange & King, 1990). It has also been suggested that the focus of master's curriculum shift from the descriptive to the theoretical, concentrating more on why we do what we do (Manning, 1993). Professional association statements such as *A Perspective on Student Affairs* (National Association of Student Personnel Administrators, 1987), *The Student Learning Imperative* (American College Personnel Association, 1994), and the *CAS Standards* (1986) also contribute to the conversation about the optimal content and process of preparation programs.

Past research includes the history and trends of student affairs preparation programs (Keim, 1991). Additionally, graduate programs have been assessed by chief student affairs officers and other student affairs practitioners (Keim, 1991; Sandeen, 1982). Studies examining whether students are adequately prepared have shown that faculty and employers had different perceptions regarding the competencies of recent graduates (Hyman, 1988; Rhatigan, 1968).

A suggestion for inclusion of graduate input in the assessment process was made by the *CAS Preparation Standards and Guidelines at the Master's*

Degree Level for Student Services/Development Professionals in Postsecondary Education (CAS, 1986). Guidelines indicate that former students should review programmatic objectives and evaluate program effectiveness. Following this advice, the Indiana University Student Personnel Association (IUSPA) curriculum committee administered a survey to recent alumni of the College Student Personnel Administration (CSPA) program. The questionnaire asked alumni to evaluate the value and relevance of course and experiential work to their first full-time position after completing the master's degree. The findings of this study also address perceptions of program effectiveness and what Indiana alumni see as current issues in the student affairs field.

Methods

Subjects

Graduates from the IU CSPA program from 1988-1992 were surveyed, including alumni from both the Bloomington and Indianapolis campuses. One hundred-fifty surveys were mailed; fifty-eight responses were received, for a 39% response rate.

Procedures

Institutions with CSPA programs were contacted and a literature search was conducted to locate evaluation models for student affairs preparation programs. Using this information and consulting with CSPA faculty, the IUSPA curriculum committee developed a survey. The first section included questions regarding alumni's educational background, type of institution in which they are currently employed, and their employment history. The second section asked alumni to evaluate ten required courses on a five-point Likert-type scale ranging from not valuable (1) to very valuable (5). The scale included an option of did not take. Space was provided for comments about any of the courses, as well as comments about elective courses. The third set of questions covered experiential learning opportunities, such as assistantships and practica. In the fourth section, graduates were asked to list the top five issues they currently face in their jobs, the degree to which they would recommend IU's CSPA program, and if they had any advice for changes to the current program. Surveys were mailed during the summer of 1993. No follow-up with non-respondents was conducted. Data was collected, coded, and analyzed during the 1993-1994 academic year.

Data Analysis

Fifty-one respondents attended classes in Bloomington; six attended classes in Indianapolis; one attended both campuses. On average, the number of years between completion of a bachelor's degree and entering the master's program was 2.6. The most time spent between attending undergraduate and graduate school was twenty years.

Mean scores were calculated for the Likert-type questions. The open-ended questions were examined for commonalities, and categories were then developed using the super inductive method. This method allowed groupings to emerge from the data instead of fitting the information into pre-determined categories.

Results

Seventeen percent of respondents had completed or were pursuing a Ph.D. or Ed.D. Ten percent had completed a double major in counseling and three percent had completed the minor in counseling. The functional areas in which graduates are currently employed are listed in Table 1.

Table 1: Areas of Present Employment

Functional Area	% Responding
Residence Life	21%
Other	16%
Career Services	14%
Student Activities	12%
Student Life	7%
Financial Aid	5%
Alumni Relations	5%
Not Employed	3%
Conferences	3%
Admissions	3%
Academic/Education	3%
Student Discipline	2%
Greek Affairs	2%

Residence life positions were most common (21%), followed by career services (14%), and student activities (12%). Seventeen percent of graduates

presently hold a title of director or above. The "other" category included careers outside of student affairs.

To designate institution type, respondents selected descriptors they thought most represented their institution's type. Some used more than one descriptor; therefore, the numbers reflect some overlap. Most graduates are currently employed at mid-size or large public institutions (41%). Twenty-four percent are presently with small liberal arts colleges (64% of which have a religious affiliation); sixteen percent are with private, non-sectarian institutions; five percent are with religiously affiliated colleges; and two percent are working at community colleges.

Table 2 lists the mean response rate for each of the ten courses evaluated. On a scale of 1 (low) to 5 (high), respondents rated U552: The College Student, as being the most valuable course ($x=4.29$) in preparing graduates for their first job after completing the program. U545: *Student Affairs Organizations and Procedures or Group Development in Campus Settings* was rated as least valuable ($x=2.88$).

Table 2: Course Evaluation

Class	Mean
U552: The College Student	4.29
U548: Student Development Theory and Research	4.17
G573: Communication Skills	4.17
U553: The College Student and the Law	4.14
U549: Environmental Theory and Assessment	4.02
U544: Introduction to Student Affairs	3.80
U580: Issues and Problems in Student Affairs	3.75
P501: Statistical Methods	3.20
U551: Administrative Practices	3.05
U545: Student Affairs Organizations and Procedures or Group Development in Campus Settings	2.88

Graduates rated highly both assistantships ($x=4.2$) and practica ($x=4.3$) in preparation for the first position in student affairs. Most respondents had more assistantships and practica than those required by the program.

Table 3 lists the top ten issues that IU graduates are currently facing in the field. Sixty-two percent of respondents reported the most pressing issues are

financial. Diversity issues were the second most frequently expressed area of concern (45%).

Table 3: Top Ten Issues Faced by New Professionals

Issue	% Responding
Financial Resources	62%
Diversity	45%
Compensation	22%
Legal Issues	17%
Supervision	16%
Time Management	12%
Motivating Student Leaders	12%
Professionalism	12%
Office Politics	10%
Retention	10%

Alumni highly recommend IU's CSPA program ($x=4.2$). Little difference was found between respondents who took courses primarily in Bloomington ($x=4.2$), compared to those in Indianapolis ($x=4.3$).

Discussion

Responses from the survey yielded some interesting demographics. For example, a wide range of functional areas and staff levels are represented by IU graduates. Seventeen percent are presently serving as directors or deans. This statistic, however, is dependent upon institutional size and departmental organization. Furthermore, the title of director may not convey similar responsibilities across institutions.

In regard to course evaluation, alumni were generous with their replies. For example, with reference to U552: *The College Student*, one wrote, "I still remember it as the best, most interesting, thought provoking course." Others voiced concerns over specific content areas, "I would encourage increasing the credit value to three -- make it one semester and start with creating a sense of self worth among the students, rather than one of guilt or anger. Discussion of diversity issues often focuses on what we as white people [sic] need to learn and feel guilty about, rather than what we can share and learn

about." In fact, due to student and alumni recommendation, U552 was renamed, U546: *Diverse College Students*, and expanded to a three-credit, semester long course in 1991.

The least valuable course, U545 had two titles: *Student Affairs Organizations and Procedures* and *Group Development in Campus Settings* (commonly known as "Groups"). Though some viewed the content and resources as valuable, course organization needed improvement. Respondents indicated that the "textbook is a good reference tool." Once again, faculty responded to student evaluations and recommendations, and phased out this course in 1991.

A few caveats are necessary. Courses were evaluated based on their total value; teaching styles and course content were not evaluated separately. Also, some courses were taught by different instructors over the years. Therefore, generalizations may not reflect the true value of each course. C565: *Introduction to College and University Administration*, which is a required course, was inadvertently omitted and, therefore, could not be evaluated. Finally, potential differences between the Bloomington and Indianapolis versions of the program were not specifically addressed in this survey.

In regard to the experiential component of the program, alumni responses confirmed previous research, which reports that experiential learning has a significant role in preparation. Many comments about practica and assistantships addressed skills that individuals learned from specific experiences. Overall, alumni found the experiences to be valuable even when their permanent positions were not parallel to their graduate work. Respondents emphasized the importance of practica and assistantships in providing opportunities for role models and mentors. The experiential learning component was described as "ideal learning," and "[keeping] me on a high learning curve," and it "allowed for a smooth transition" into student affairs positions. As one respondent remarked, "[these] prepared me for my position in such a manner that instilled both concept and confidence."

The relationship between classwork and the experiential component of the program was not fully examined in this survey. Thus, the question of transferability of classroom knowledge to assistantship and practicum experience could not be attained. It is also difficult to assess preparation since individuals use different skills for different positions, and they bring a variety of experiences before they enter the program. Those experiences may influence how valuable any particular course or practical experience was to an individual.

One way of keeping course material current is knowing what issues professionals face in the field. Financial concerns, the most pressing issue, included themes such as: budget problems, cuts, university and state fiscal crises, fundraising, lack of staffing, collapsing of positions, doing more with less, economic restructuring, and fiscal responsibility. These results were not surprising. Higher education has been facing financial difficulties for several years, and it is clear that student affairs has not escaped downsizing. However, student affairs professionals must be fully aware of the current fiscal trend, and should be prepared to find creative and unusual ways to do more with less and fund existing programs and new initiatives.

Another issue of major concern of recent graduates was diversity, which included themes such as: gender, racism, age, support programs for minority students, and incorporating Americans with Disabilities Act standards. As non-traditional students, students of color, women, and students with disabilities attend college in increasing numbers, it is imperative that an atmosphere of acceptance and an environment conducive to learning be promoted. Several responses about the importance of diversity education were received. Issues and challenges IU alumni face concerning diversity include dealing with "isms," developing "diverse programming for a diverse population," and the "lack of minority student awareness by the administration." Alumni are also struggling with how to take students beyond a simple understanding of diversity issues.

Overall, it appears that IU graduates were quite pleased with the quality of preparation they received in CSPA, with most recommending the program. For example, "I loved my program, loved my profs...valued the experience; as abstract as theory can be, I've needed it for practical everyday planning, writing, and implementing."

Suggestions for improvement included: "The program...is very residential, traditional-age specific, because of IU...[It] needs to focus on the incoming students -- returning, older, commuter." Another suggestion was to increase opportunities for learning by bringing in "speakers or emphasizing perspectives from other than mega-state universities. How about women's colleges, voc-techs, religious, small privates, ag colleges? Encourage field trips or day-in-the-life shadow experiences at other universities in the midwest." Alumni also want faculty to be realistic with both prospective and current students: "Be realistic in telling students about the low pay, long hours, continual lateral movement and difficulty attaining high status without a doctoral degree. Also remind them of the rewards and benefits of working

with people who are changing and growing and seeking goals and objectives not yet clearly defined by them."

New professionals are advised to take advantage of opportunities. "I've learned that the key to success as a new professional is a diversity of experience and not necessarily classroom experience." These sentiments which reflect the importance of applying theory to practice have been echoed by many in the field (Brown, 1992; Strange & King, 1990).

Recommendations

Alumni provide direction for the future by critiquing the curriculum and relating important issues faced in the field. Course evaluations have traditionally provided a method by which faculty obtain feedback from each graduating class. Faculty have also met with students personally to solicit opinions and recommendations. In program creation, organization and evaluation, it is imperative to incorporate not only the perspectives of those training and hiring, but also those of the student and entry-level practitioner. Toward this end, it might be wise to survey recent alumni on a biannual basis.

By identifying current issues faced by alumni practitioners, faculty may consider modifying the program or adapting course offerings to address those issues as part of the curriculum. Given this information, students may take a proactive role in learning more about current issues and locating opportunities to face these issues in a safe environment.

There are several areas of interest that may provide a source for future research. It would be interesting to discover if gender is a basis for difference in responses. Another study could examine differences in the value placed on experiential education and coursework by alumni who enrolled in the program immediately after completing an undergraduate degree, and those who spent time in the workforce before returning to school.

Conclusions

Due to the positive evaluations received, it is evident that Indiana University's CSPA program's goals are congruent with student affairs professionals' needs. By analyzing student comments with regard to courses, faculty have been responsive to adapting the curriculum. Our results confirmed what previous research has indicated -- an experiential component integrated with a strong theoretical foundation is critical to a quality CSPA program. Finally, by identifying key issues in the field, alumni have underlined problems which are currently being addressed in the CSPA curriculum.

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