

REFLECTIONS ON THE GRADUATE EXPERIENCE

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The Higher Education and Student Affairs (HESA) program at Indiana University, Bloomington has an established tradition of preparing students to enter the field of student affairs. Through questions posed on academic and practical experiences, peer influence and preparedness, students were encouraged to reflect on their learning in graduate school. This article serves as an assessment by students of their experiences in the HESA program and how enrollment at Indiana University Bloomington (IUB) has influenced their perceptions of a career in student affairs.

Introduction

The Higher Education and Student Affairs (HESA) program at Indiana University Bloomington has an established tradition of preparing students to enter the field of student affairs. For two years, on average, students are immersed in classroom study, assistantships, internships, and practica enhancing their skills and knowledge to best serve students in institutions of higher education.

For students in the program, opportunities to assess experiences often come through course evaluations or performance evaluations with supervisors in practical positions. In this form, evaluations often delineate what was accomplished rather than what was learned. Through questions posed on academic and practical experiences, peer influence and preparedness, students were encouraged to reflect on their learning in graduate school. This article serves as an assessment by students of their experiences in the HESA program and how enrollment at Indiana University Bloomington (IUB) has influenced their perceptions of a career in student affairs.

Method

Sample

Of the 58 students enrolled in the HESA program during the 1998-1999 school year, 30 students were solicited via electronic mail to answer questions regarding experiences in the masters program and perceptions of the challenging issues in the student affairs profession. The 30 students represent a selective sample; although, the data collected is representative only of the 24 students responding to the survey (80% response rate). The students surveyed were selected to provide the greatest diversity of experiences in the program. Assistantships, race, gender, marital status, sexual orientation, and undergraduate institution were all considerations in selecting the sample.

Of the participants, 15 (63% of sample) were members of the

1999 graduating class and 9 (38% of sample) members represented the class of 2000. Thirteen (54%) women, 4 (17%) students of color, 3 (12.5%) married students, and 4 (17%) students who openly identify in the classroom as gay or lesbian are included in this sample. The assistantships represent various areas of student affairs including: residence life (11 students), career development (2), multicultural affairs (2), greek advising (2), student activities (2), orientation (1), alumni affairs (1), union management (1), marketing (1), and admissions (1). While residence life experiences may appear overrepresented in this study, it is important to note that 31% of current assistantships in the HESA program are through residence life and nearly 45% of students in the program have graduate level practical experience in the residence hall system.

Procedure

Thirty students were contacted to participate in this study. Individual notices on electronic mail were sent to each student requesting his or her participation with the questionnaire included in the notice. The questionnaire posed 13 open-ended questions regarding academic and practical experiences, application and understanding of theory, peer interaction, preparedness, professional development, and issues challenging student affairs professionals. Solicited students were asked to respond with completed surveys via electronic mail or typed responses. A reminder message was sent to encourage maximum participation from the selected students.

Analysis

Student responses to the 13 questions posed represent the data collected in this study. Open-ended responses were reviewed and categorized into themes. When appropriate, percentages were calculated, however, the students' words were the primary descriptor used to assess experiences in the HESA program.

Limitations

There are limitations to this study that should be noted. First, because the study was conducted via email there was no way to determine if the survey was answered solely by the recipient of the email. Thus, answers have the possibility of reflecting others' perspectives. Email also can limit the length of the response and the ability of the researcher to interpret the answers or solicit more information. Second, due to the relatively small size of the program students may have felt some pressure to respond to questions in a particular manner or to participate in the study. Third, due to the importance placed on assistantships in the program some responses may reflect the experiences while in these offices, rather than solely on the academic program.

Results

Academic Experience

Students in the HESA program were asked two questions related to academic experiences: How has your classroom experience prepared you for the field? How have your academic assignments/projects best facilitated your development as a student and practitioner? Overall, (87.5%) students believed that through their classes they had developed both as a student and practitioner. Some of the themes noted in the student responses included:

Understanding of theory and its application to practice was enhanced	45.8%
Belief that oral and written communication skills were enhanced	37.5%
The roles of student affairs and units within the field were clarified	29.2%
Insight into issues of diversity was increased	29.2%
Classwork provided an opportunity to define and explore areas of professional interest	25%
Students received an introduction to new issues important in the field of student affairs	20.8%

While some first-year students noted that they could not determine if classroom experience had prepared them for the field because of limited exposure to work in student affairs (12.5%) and others in the second-year cohort did not believe that academic coursework had enhanced their development as professionals (12.5%), these students each noted that some of the other themes presented above were effectively enhanced through academic experiences. A student commented:

At times, I have felt that the work I was doing for classes...did not seem to apply directly to my career objectives. At the same time...I know that I have used much of my research to assist in shaping my ideas about the field...The classroom experience...has given me a foundation of theory from which to base my observations and interactions.

Practical Experience

Students in the HESA program regard their practical experiences, through assistantships, internships, and practica, as the most valuable component of graduate school for their entrance into the student affairs profession (91.6%). A first-year student wrote:

I think the practical experience is key to developing professionally. That is why I chose IU's program...it allows us to apply what we learn in the classroom to our work and has allowed us to better understand the course material through our hands-on experiences.

This statement is reflective of most of the participants' assessment of the practical experience. Students appreciated their practical experiences as a type of "laboratory" where classroom learning is applied and skills are

developed. The theoretical connections were made clear through practical experiences and further facilitated in experiences where HESA students directly supervised, advised, or counseled undergraduates (54.2%). Furthermore, through practical experiences second-year students noticed that they began to formulate informal and experiential theories in their work with students. Aside from practical opportunities helping students to understand student affairs, program members revealed that the practical requirement of the program provided skills and experiences that will be invaluable as they enter the job market (25%).

While practical experiences were viewed as a powerful and influential component of the graduate program, some students desired more opportunities to reflect on their experiences, intentional conversations in the classroom to bridge theory and practice, and greater resources to facilitate professional development.

In addition to the experience itself, supervisors at practical sites were credited as being influential in professional development (45.8%). Supervisors are recognized as mentors and role models, and often take time to provide students with experiences that are developmental and meet professional goals. The interactions with practitioners in student affairs helped HESA students to clarify values, goals, and expectations of their career in this field. In evaluating her relationship with supervisors, a student explained:

...the supervisors and the type of assistantship or practicum it is can really add or delete from your professional development. If you have a supervisor that makes that a priority, you will grow. If you have a supervisor who thinks you are an extra body to get work done then you will not grow.

Peer Interaction

When asked to reflect on how interactions with classmates have influenced their graduate experience, a student replied:

I have probably learned as much from my classmates as I have from my professors! Sharing individual practical experience with each other has been incredibly valuable-I can use what they have shared in my own work, or can call on any one of them for assistance, as we each have such varied strengths and knowledge.

Approximately 80% of student responses indicated that peer interaction was undoubtedly a rewarding and influential part of the graduate school experience. Student noted that their peers were a support network and that interactions with colleagues enhanced their development academically (39.1%) and professionally (30.4%). More than 60 percent of the respondents (66.7%) indicated that class discussions and group projects were a valuable way to learn from peers and their professional experiences. About one third of the participants remarked that the various

perspectives, identities, and experiences of graduate program members challenged them and encouraged growth around issues of diversity. Another student summarized his relationships with peers:

They have challenged me, intentionally and not, in ways I never expected. They have been a tremendous support network personally and professionally. My peers have valued, challenged, and supported my perspectives, accomplishments and goals, and collectively have played a major role in my development.

In reviewing student responses, three students (13%) found their peer interactions to be lacking or to have little impact on their experiences in graduate school. One student felt that her peer interactions have been particularly negative to her experiences. She wrote:

My interactions with classmates have had no influence on my academic or practical experiences. Since day one in the program, I felt like I had no support group to rely upon. Everyone had their own agendas and through all of this I have felt like a total outsider. I remember when one classmate questioned my being qualified to be in the program and from that point on (which was the first day of class) I felt like maybe I had made a bad decision by coming to IU...I don't think anyone cares...to tell you the truth...there is no interest in a person like me in this program.

Preparedness

Students were asked if they felt prepared to enter the student affairs profession. In assessing their qualifications, 69.6% of participants felt very prepared to enter the field. A student reflected:

I feel that IU's program prepares students extensively in the theoretical arena. I also feel that the practical experiences we have both through assistantships and practica gives us the advantage of "real experience" ...I think IU's program develops the future "leaders" of higher education, not just higher education personnel.

Some students felt only adequately prepared (21.7%), and one student felt that the student-centered focus of the HESA program did not provide him the preparation needed to pursue other areas of higher education such as advancement.

The majority of the students surveyed intend to stay in student affairs (73.9%), one student plans to leave the field, and 21.7% of students may consider other options in deciding on a career.

Challenges

HESA program members were asked what challenges they would face as student affairs professionals. Answers ranged from institutional and societal problems, to challenges of self-esteem, confidence, and motivation. More than 66% of the students felt that understanding and meeting the needs of diverse populations would be the

greatest challenge as they enter the professional world. A student remarked:

Students are changing and the field is not...More and more students from all sorts of places and cultures with all sorts of identities are entering higher education, and we still rely on old models that simply won't apply in all but a handful of institutions.

A quarter of the participants noted technology, financial constraints, and achieving respect for student affairs as a part of the holistic college experience would be a professional challenge. Developing well-rounded students (10%) along with improving student satisfaction (5%) and student retention (5%) were mentioned as challenges that will be encountered.

"Assessing how I can make a difference and having the confidence to go out and do it" was a challenge listed by one student and reflected by most of the participants in the study. HESA program students pointed to fighting the status quo, avoiding institutional and departmental politics, and finding a niche in the profession as personal challenges. Adjusting to varying institutional cultures as professionals move from job to job was a potential concern for program members, as well as supporting students and their needs while upholding institutional policies.

Students remarked on a desire to be reflective in practice, continuing to learn from experiences and remaining well read on the field. Mostly, HESA students had a desire to "continually be challenged and motivated" in the profession and to "find satisfaction" in the integration of personal and professional lives.

Discussion and Implications

What is learned from this study provides opportunities for prospective students to consider what elements of a graduate program are necessary for a well-rounded experience and for graduate program coordinators to review components of the graduate experience and re-evaluate or redesign them.

What can be concluded immediately from this study is that it is not any one aspect, but the totality of the experience that dictates how prepared students feel to embark on a career in student affairs. The academic and practical experiences of students complement one another and are further developed through an opportunity to share those experiences with a cohort of other students interested in the field.

In reflecting on academic experiences, students found their experiences to be rewarding, especially in the introduction of theory, the enhancement of communication skills, exposure to issues of difference, and the clarification of student affairs and its role in higher education. Moreover, pedagogical practices that encourage classmates to interact and share experiences supplement the academic experience. To further

enhance academic learning and foster professional development, students point to a need for intentional conversations in the classroom to link theory and practice. Through experiences in which students are engaged in exercises that encourage collaborative decision-making and the sharing of ideas and perspectives, students' academic lives are improved. Faculty and students must be conscious of the practical experiences and making connections to what is learned in the classroom. Through these connections, students noted more developed professional and academic experiences. Additionally, in exposing students to issues of diversity and theory, the inclusion of diverse perspectives and experiences of underrepresented groups should also be included. Student affairs graduate programs should also recognize in the recruitment and admission phases, that the interests, experiences, and identities of students broaden the perspectives of everyone in the program. Creating opportunities to insure that diverse experiences are represented in the classroom is necessary to assist future student affairs professionals understand diversity and the needs of underrepresented groups.

Reflections on experiences show that the opportunity to effectively practice the work of student affairs is an invaluable element of the graduate experience. Students considered the practical experiences as the most beneficial aspect of development. Through practical opportunities, students can test classroom learning, discover individual strengths and weaknesses, develop skills, and explore the diversity of the student affairs profession. Multiple professional experiences in various areas of student affairs and higher education should be investigated and encouraged. Experiences in different departments, functional areas, and even institutions afforded students greater marketability during the job search, and helped students define goals for the future. In the practical experience, supervisors are encouraged to help students make connections between class and their work. Supervisors often serve as role models for these future student affairs professionals; the examples they are given in these work experiences may be emulated in the profession. Supervisors should model the best practices and provide students with opportunities to implement those practices in their own work. Graduate programs should work within the student affairs units of the institutions to formulate as many opportunities for practical experience as possible. To enhance professional development amongst graduate students, experiences that fit the varied interests and needs of program members are necessary.

The importance of peers in the graduate experience cannot be overestimated. In social, academic, and practical experiences, the presence of a peer group was an important element of the students' development. Students felt that opportunities where they could share experiences and perspectives enhanced their learning about higher education and student affairs. Formal and informal opportunities for

this dialogue to commence are needed to provide students with this developmental experience. In this survey, most of the participants felt that interactions with peers were positive and influential to their experience, however, this did not apply to all of the students. How can student affairs programs insure that all students are supported in the graduate experience? What role do the peers have in making others feel involved and accepted? In thinking about peer influence, faculty, practitioners, and students alike should incorporate all voices and experiences in the graduate program. These perspectives are valuable to the student experience and may represent the attitudes and feelings of students encountered in professional experiences.

Regarding preparedness, study participants felt strongly that the academic and practical experiences of this program provided the competencies necessary to be a successful student affairs practitioner. The graduate program exposes students to issues and experiences that are applicable and important to working with students. To meet the needs of students who feel they are more administrative focused or interested in other areas of higher education, graduate programs should consider what elements of the experience (whether practical or academic) might expose students to these areas and complement their interests.

Conclusion

Upon reflection of the graduate experience, students believe that it is the complete experience that makes a difference in their development as student affairs practitioners. Academic components, practical experiences, and peer influence when integrated afford students an education that fulfills their needs and expectations as student affairs practitioners. Responsibility for creating an experience that develops competent professionals lies with faculty, practical experience supervisors, and the students themselves. It is the faculty and practitioners who help students develop skills that will make them effective in the field, but it is the students whose drive and motivation create individuals who are leaders in the profession.

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