

RESEARCH ARTICLE

The role of research and scholarship in the professionalisation of student affairs

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Abstract

In this article the authors first explicate a particular conception of the occupational sociology term ‘professional’ and engage in a short discussion of how student affairs as a field conforms to the definition, and ways in which it might benefit from some intentional reframing. Attention is next directed to the definition of what the authors call scholarly practice and its interaction with scholarly outlets such as journals, conference proceedings and professional development. Reflecting the now longstanding call for student affairs and academic affairs professionals to unite in service of facilitating student development and learning, the authors propose a set of guiding values for student affairs administrators that promote data- and theory-based intentionality of practice. These guiding values also require continual professional reflection and renewal, including actively interacting with journals and other peer-reviewed professional outlets. Particular attention is given throughout the article to the pivotal role to be played at this time in the development of the student affairs profession by the *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa*.

Keywords

professions, professionalism, professional development, student affairs administration, intentionality, scholarly practice, student affairs professional competency areas.

Introduction

Great endeavours frequently spring from great beginnings! That certainly seems likely in the case of this initial edition of the *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa (JSAA)*. Professionally conducted, written and vetted research and scholarship are arguably the essential components of professionalism and professional development. Nothing could be more important at a time when higher education and student development as fields of study and practice come of age in Africa. The purpose of this article is to provide some foundation for the statements above in the already existing literature of student affairs.

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What is a ‘professional’ field or person?

As used here (and in much of the occupational sociology literature), the appellation ‘professional’ has little to do with vernacular meanings. That is, a person who simply earns money for some job is not necessarily considered a professional. Similarly, a high level of performance is not enough to distinguish one’s status as a professional. Rather, professionals are those who are engaged in a profession. Distinct from other occupations, professions are described and delineated by either their particular traits, frequently including the “combination of expertise, collective organisation and collegial control, ethical standards, and work in a ‘public service’” (Brint, 1993; Friedson, 1986); some professionalisation process (Wilensky, 1964) involving a group of people engaging full-time in important work; the emergence of professional associations; the development of a formal, academic course of study and preparation; political maneuvering to establish turf and legal and other sanctions; and an enforceable code of ethics; or simply artifacts of history and convention (Veysey, 1988). Each of these conceptions, while flawed and failing to account for all related phenomena, does imply a measure of power and privilege surrounding professional status, as well as certain labour market implications (Brint, 1993). One model that mediates among these ideas is that of Pavalko (1971, p. 4), who suggested eight continua to classify occupations as either more or less professional. These eight areas are useful especially to young or emerging professions since they provide a road map for progress, as well as some directionality: specialised theory and intellectual technique required; relevance to basic social values and processes; nature of preparation in terms of amount and specialisation of training and degree of symbolisation and ideation required; motivation for work, meaning service to society as opposed to self-interest; autonomy of practice; sense of commitment or strength of calling to the profession; sense of professional community and culture; strength of codes of ethics.

For a job to be considered a profession, it would require a high degree of specialised knowledge and skill, a primarily service motivation, tasks crucial to society, an extended period of preparation, and so on (Carpenter, 2003). For an analysis of the professional status (or lack thereof) of the student affairs field, the reader is referred to Carpenter (2003) and Carpenter and Stimpson (2007). The former holds that “much of the literature and most of the practices of student affairs in hiring, in professional development and associations, and in many other functions so closely mimic those of [other] professions as to be indistinguishable” (Carpenter, 2003, p. 575). The authors of the latter piece concluded that:

Something even more interesting may be occurring with the student affairs profession. Trait or process, reality or construction, the strictures of traditional professions do not fit this occupation very well. [...] It may be that what seems like a poor fit from a trait standpoint is actually an evolutionary move to a new kind of profession, one that keeps the best of community and regeneration while eschewing more limited models of boundary setting such as licensure and preparation monopolies. Is student affairs a profession? For all practical purposes, yes. (Carpenter and Stimpson, 2007, pp. 269–70)

Obviously, this should read “yes, for the US.” It remains to be seen if student affairs practice is able to sufficiently distinguish itself from the rest of university administration in Africa to become professionalised, and if it does, it should be able to progress quickly to profession-like status by using the example of the US.

The interaction of scholarly practice, scholarly outlets and professional development

Having established at a minimum that student affairs as a field of endeavour may be sensibly examined as a profession, perhaps a useful discussion can be had around what might be called a meta-conceptualisation. For example, the field began in the US within a services model, eventually morphing to a more educational, developmental and learning role. The resulting conceptual (if somewhat artificial) separation from faculty and the core missions of the universities has never been satisfactorily overcome and remains a major issue in the US. If, as the call for this special issue of JSAA suggests, higher education and student affairs practices are not quite as ‘frozen’ or hidebound yet in Africa, then it may not be too late to consider a very different kind of mindset. What if student affairs professionals fully embraced a role as practitioner-scholars engaging in practice in a thoughtful and intentional way that is both informed by research and informs research (Komives, 1998)? What if the notion of scholarship expanded beyond just the scholarship of discovery to also include the scholarship of integration, application, and teaching and learning as argued by Boyer (1990)? And what if student affairs practice were approached interdependently with academic faculties and departments rather than independently or dependently?

In a special issue of the *Journal of College Student Development*, Carpenter (2001, p. 304) asserted, “Our work should be nothing less than a combination of discovery, integration, application, and teaching, managed efficiently and evaluated rigorously. Hence, to be effective, student affairs professionals should be engaged in what can be called the scholarship of practice.” In the interest of suggesting that this is a fruitful conceptualisation for student affairs professionals in Africa (and elsewhere), what follows is a brief analysis of ways that professional preparation programmes, professional associations, and especially outlets such as the JSAA could contribute to the adoption of scholarly values by student affairs professionals.

Carpenter (2001) identified 11 core values of scholars that could constitute a scholarship of practice.

Scholarly practice is intentional

Certainly, in student affairs, we intend our actions, but not always in a macro, mission and goal-focused way. We should do so transparently, overtly and publically. We should know as a profession and as individuals what it is we are trying to accomplish and endeavour to align every programme, budget and intervention to our larger purposes. But what are these purposes? That is where the professional community comes into play. Scholars in individual universities preparing new professionals inculcate values, teach skills and shape agendas.

Professional associations, conferences and professional development workshops similarly take on roles as opinion leaders and venues for discussion and refinement of thinking. A recent example of this in the US is the Professional Competency Areas for Student Affairs Professionals published by ACPA: College Student Educators International and NASPA: Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education (2010), a document outlining 10 key competency areas capturing professional skills, knowledge, and attitudes of student affairs professionals. The Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (2012) also provides frameworks for intentional practice through establishing professional standards for various functional areas across student affairs. Eventually, one can conceive of adaptations or entirely new documents similar to these in Africa that address issues endemic to the region. For example, a short period of research into the websites of African universities quickly shows that dealing with tribalism is an issue on many campuses. This is not something that any US competency or research would address, certainly not in the same way. Hence, it must be dealt with in an African professional context.

But no vehicle is nearly as important as well curated, properly peer-reviewed professional journals, because they provide scholarly legitimacy, help to develop the field, and the published material in the journal ideally becomes much of the basis for preparation programmes and professional development workshops. It is easy to conceive of graduate programmes of study aimed at providing African student affairs professionals with theory and research that would allow them to practice at a much higher level, similar to those in the US, yet different in important ways indicated by the journal content. The same could be true of professional development workshops and conference presentations. Of course, the profession shapes the journal, but the large extent to which the journal shapes the profession should not be ignored, for the journal will ideally be an outlet for the best professional writing and thinking, the most forward-looking visions and the most innovative new practices. This function is especially likely in a journal that allows flexibility like the JSAA. Not every valuable piece is a research study, nor every new practice refined. The notion of the reflective pieces contemplated in future issues is noteworthy in this regard. Intentionality, like all professional motivations, should be shaped by many and vetted carefully, but it must be present.

Scholarly practice is theory-based

Student affairs professionals should not only know what they are trying to do, but they should also know why. Good research and scholarship is available for many aspects of practice, including community development, identity development, involvement and engagement, retention, student success and other areas. But, by definition, such things are context- and culture-dependent, and the student affairs field is overwhelmingly situated within the US context and US culture. As such, much of the theory in existence may not transfer to the contexts and cultures of African higher education. As the focus of student affairs continues to grow beyond US borders across the world, higher education professionals are seeking ways to understand how existing theory can inform practice and in what ways existing

theories and models should be re-examined or adapted based on cultural and contextual factors. As just one recent example, student affairs professionals across the prominent higher education institutions in Qatar partnered with student affairs professionals, faculty members and professional preparation students from the US to proactively and intentionally address such issues. This was addressed in part through the Young Professionals Institute, a three-day professional development programme “focused on addressing the challenges facing higher education student affairs in Qatar through inquiry-focused learning communities [...] to increase the understanding of rigorous educational practice in a culturally diverse and organisationally dispersed setting” (Haber and Getz, 2011, p. 474).

The notion that theories need to evolve and be very carefully adapted across cultural contexts is not necessarily a new one. After all, most of the classic theories of student learning and development in the US were originally based on fairly traditional studies, using samples and populations of white male students. Our theories, research and practices have evolved far beyond these roots and we now know something about how to take culture, intersectionality, context, self-identification and many other factors into account. Similarly, scholars attempting to extend theoretical formulations across borders will need to take great care to assure relevance and inclusivity, but they will not be blazing entirely new trails.

The same sorts of roles as suggested in the above section on intentionality are necessary for theory development and testing, probably even more so. Presumably, a good journal will publish only the theoretical material that can pass muster with the most discerning of minds in the profession. There must be an arbiter, a gatekeeper of the discussion, not to restrict creativity or content, but to filter the conversation and limit it to the serious, eliminating the frivolous or poorly conceived.

Scholarly practice is data-based

For centuries, medicine was practised intentionally, based on the best theory of the times, but was still ineffective. It was data analysis that changed the picture. Assessment should be second nature to student affairs professionals because there is no time to waste on activities that don't work. And yet, as Carpenter (2001, p. 306) puts it:

Perhaps this is because we in student affairs would rather do than prove, workloads are often high, planning time is minimal, and evaluation time is nonexistent [...] data-based decision making is the weakest link in the scholarly practice of our work. If student affairs is to join our faculty colleagues in a true learning partnership, we must get better at using data to buttress planning, evaluation, practice, and assessment. Most faculty use data in their work, and they are more comfortable with others who do the same. They will support ideas that work, but may not support those that do not or are not demonstrated to do so.

It should be obvious that the JSAA and other professional publications will be utterly critical in encouraging and vetting the empirical studies needed to check the applicability of the wide variety of theories and approaches from other parts of the world. Will theories

and practices developed with US students and US context work with African students and in African contexts? Can they be modified successfully? Only carefully collected, analysed and edited data will tell. More importantly, perhaps, only data will let the story(ies) be told and indigenous theories and practices evolve and develop. This will require funding, of course, as well as a fairly high level of sophistication with regard to research methodology. Student affairs practitioners will need to gain higher levels of education and/or partner with university faculty and researchers to do the theory and evaluation work necessary.

Scholarly practice is peer-reviewed

This idea almost goes without saying with regard to a professional journal, but the journal then has a responsibility to help create the ethos of peer review for all professional practice, led by professional associations, but reaching down to the institutional and unit levels. Student affairs practitioners are reluctant to criticise each other, perhaps because of the personal nature of the work. But it is work and it needs to be separated from personalities because the impacts on students are just too powerful. As in other professions, student affairs professionals must constructively evaluate and criticise each other, as this only enhances the work and thus the knowledge and improved practice that comes from the work. JSAA has a crucial role to play in shaping the professional conversation in such a way as to demand accountability for personal practice.

Scholarly practice is tolerant of differing perspectives

Rather than enshrining a narrow view of current convention or fashion, a proper view of scholarly practice provides ready access to new and diverse ideas or concepts. After all, every practice that we use now because it is the accepted way began at some point as an innovation. Just as many of the ideas of Albert Einstein were derided in 1905 and celebrated in 1927, there are nascent ideas, programmes, practices and theories about African college students that are just beginning to be understood or tried. Sadly, unless we use the mores of scholarship, the adoption of these ideas will be random and hit or miss, if they survive at all. Scholars systematically consider all data and thinking available before arriving at a course of action or an informed opinion. Scholars thrive on diversity of thought and practice.

Scholarly practice is collaborative

In every discipline, faculty members understand the nature of the scholarly community. They understand and value the opportunities to consult and discuss approaches and ideas. In medicine, the dictum ‘primum non nocere’ suggests that if one does not know what to do, then one should do nothing and go and find out what to do. This is equally true in student affairs. In novel situations, we should never simply forge ahead on instinct or just do what has always been done, but rather look for opportunities to refine our intentionality. Many minds working on a problem are better than just one, and in student affairs we are really very good at networking and consulting both within our own campus communities and across geographic and institutional lines. What better example of such collaboration can

there be than this very journal, calling as it does on a rich variety of international resources to assure professional best practices in scholarly use of information?

Scholarly practice is unselfish

Of course, the wellspring of collaboration is sharing, and scholars share their work. Very little knowledge is proprietary among faculty members, and the same should be true among student affairs workers. Certainly, institutions compete in various ways, but our fundamental work is to facilitate the growth, development and learning of students. When we find better ways to do that, sharing is required ethically, just as it would be in medicine. This is not to say that professionals should not give credit where it is due, in informal and formal ways, such as literature citations and the like, but it is an ethical call to generosity. Again, this and other journals and professional publications, conference presentations and professional development workshops are prime examples of how professional sharing should be done. The very existence of JSAA shows the importance of sharing with the professional community.

Scholarly practice is open to change

“Scholars are eager for change, because change leads to new and better practice” (Carpenter, 2001, p. 309). Diverse and novel ideas can be incorporated into current research conceptualisations or worldviews with greater or lesser facility, but true change shifts entire models or paradigms, ideally for the better. Scholars live for this – they love to apply their ideas to the new landscape. For decades student affairs professionals have been at the forefront of advocacy for social justice and appropriate representation of all segments of society in higher education. Now that these things are increasingly happening, it is clear that our institutions and our practices have to change. Scholarly practice is designed for this somewhat unstable environment. Student affairs professionals need to be able to systematically try out innovations and carefully and properly evaluate their usefulness. Sentiment and tradition must earn their way – scholars will change to new ways if they work better or add value. The role of JSAA will increasingly be to report on the front lines of the change we seek – to identify what is working and what is not.

Scholarly practice is careful and skeptical

Being open to change and diversity does not mean throwing out proven concepts and practices on a whim. There is little need to elaborate more on this concept since it is fundamental to much of the foregoing discussion and has been treated sufficiently therein. It suffices to call for systematic, peer-reviewed, data-based examination of new or innovative theories and practices. Again, this is exactly what a professional journal such as JSAA is for, and indeed without carefully peer-reviewed publications such vetting is quite unlikely to happen.

Scholarly practice pays attention to regeneration

Student affairs workers are notoriously devoted to students, so much so that other activities come to be thought of as peripheral or unimportant. But just as doctors and lawyers have elaborate professional associations and continuing education requirements, there is a certain

amount of what might be called professional infrastructure and overhead that needs to exist for student affairs to continue as a profession. In fact, since entry and continuation in our field are not formalised, “a larger (not lesser) obligation falls to knowledgeable practitioners to socialise the younger or less experienced to the values and practices of the field, and to encourage professionals to stay current” (Carpenter, 2001, p. 310). The future of our field depends on this regeneration. We will find a way to come to more agreement on the necessary initial preparation of professionals and what they need in terms of ongoing professional development or we will cease to be relevant on our various campuses. JSAA has a critical role in this conversation in Africa, as do professional associations and professional preparation programmes. In this vein, reward structures in student affairs organisations and in higher education institutions must be modified to recognise that “teaching, publishing, presenting, editing, mentoring, supervising, and supporting colleagues to do so are critical aspects of professional practice, even though they ostensibly take time and energy away from practice with clients” (Ibid.).

Scholarly practice is autonomous, within institutional contexts

In the US, this is where the listing of these scholarly values slightly diverges for student affairs professionals. Student affairs professionals by definition work in institutional contexts and have serious obligations to respect associated missions and values in ways that are quite different from their faculty colleagues, who can rely more heavily on academic freedom, especially when they are on disciplinary ground. On the other hand, institutions do not typically tell accountants, lawyers or doctors in their employ how to practise and they should not do so unnecessarily with student affairs professionals. If we really do have expertise and can demonstrate it in a straightforward, professional, systematic, scholarly fashion, then we should be allowed to put our professional opinions into play and be willing to be held accountable for the outcomes. Again turning to Carpenter (2001, p. 310),

Scholarly practitioners understand this complex interplay and learn to respect their boundaries. But they practice their craft as autonomously as possible by making decisions primarily for the benefit of students, relying upon theory and research, remaining accountable to peers, providing professional feedback, acting ethically, and enacting the values of the profession generally. Scholars exercise professional judgment.

Professional journals and associations certainly help to provide legitimacy to sometimes controversial actions and practices.

Conclusion

The authors of this article have attempted to present one way of conceptualising professional practice, a particular way that privileges the role of professional journals like JSAA and other professional norm-setting organisations and activities. In the US, the student affairs profession and professional practice evolved over time, in some ways for the better, in some for the worse. In Africa, it seems that choices may be still open, that professionals there can

learn from past missteps and intentionally forge the path ahead. In any case, the work that we do is so important that nothing should be left to chance. Perhaps thinking of ourselves as scholars at least gives pause for careful consideration.

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