What constitutes a competent student affairs professional? How can we assure quality professional preparation? How can we define our profession for staff and create a driving sense of purpose? The Academy for Student Affairs Professionals (ASAP) at Texas A&M University (TAMU) responds to these critical questions.
In March 2002, Steven M. Janosik, chair of NASPA’s Professional Standards Division, wrote in his paper, *The Development and Implementation of a National Registry for Student Affairs Administrators*, of “the need to ensure a quality workforce, the purpose and role of appropriate professional preparation, and the need to continually update the knowledge and skills of those who practice.” In the last decade, the field of student affairs has engaged in extensive discussions about the most effective ways to encourage professional development and to address quality assurance in the field.

Inherent in the national conversation on professional preparation is a wide-ranging discussion of desirable competencies and characteristics for student affairs practitioners. In recent years, the list has been refined based on the perspectives of new professionals, mid-managers, and senior student affairs officers (SSAOs) and on the skills, knowledge, and personal traits of student affairs professionals over the past 30 years.

The Division of Student Affairs at TAMU responded to the issue of quality professional preparation by developing ASAP. This innovative professional development program was created to address the needs of professionals from non-student affairs backgrounds. The program was borne out of the division’s goal of diversifying staff while ensuring that practitioners share a common knowledge base in the student affairs profession.

The academy consists of a five-day institute led by experienced student affairs professionals and academic faculty. The curriculum offers both core areas (history of higher education, philosophy of student affairs, student development theory, ethics, legal issues, and assessment of student affairs programs) and elective sessions. A pilot of the five-day program was conducted in 2003 with TAMU employees and the academy will open to a national audience later this year. The academy is overseen by a steering committee and the coordinator of organization staff and development within TAMU’s Division of Student Affairs.

**A COLLECTIVE IDENTITY**

The academy intentionally focuses on the distinguishable skills valued by the profession. The program addresses TAMU’s desire to: enhance the competence, confidence, and knowledge base of employees from non-student affairs backgrounds; help individuals from non-traditional backgrounds make smooth transitions into the student affairs profession; and serve as a renewal program for the experienced student affairs staff member.

The overarching aim of the academy is to connect practitioners to student learning and development by instilling a shared wisdom, mutual definition of the profession, and common sense of purpose. The academy seeks to develop a “collective voice” to make student affairs work meaningful to students, practitioners, and the broader campus community.

**From Idea to Implementation**

A task force comprised of TAMU representatives of the major student affairs functional areas spent five months creating the vision statement, conducting a comprehensive needs analysis, establishing program goals, and identifying core competencies. The comprehensive needs analysis included:

- Consultation with content experts in the area of professional development for student affairs professionals.
- Surveys of staff from non-student affairs backgrounds and their supervisors.
- Review of current professional development offerings for student affairs staff.
- Review of survey results from graduates of TAMU’s Student Affairs Administration in Higher Education (SAAHE) master’s program.

Following completion of the needs analysis, content teams refined the curriculum and developed learning outcomes for specific sessions. A steering committee was established to determine the delivery format, formulate program policy, design the program evaluation model, and ensure the program addresses divisional issues and concerns.

Two challenges arose during the creation of the academy. First, targeted employees needed to buy into the academy concept without feeling their skills were deficient or the program was remedial. A thoughtful communication and nomination process promoted academy participation as an honor. Second, several directors and supervisors of ASAP participants lacked academic preparation in student affairs and could benefit from the academy themselves.

Publicity made it clear that the academy was open to all staff levels, and years of experience among participants ranged from six months to 30 years.
THE CURRICULUM: DEVELOPING A COMPREHENSIVE KNOWLEDGE BASE

The academy curriculum was designed not as a compilation of independent competencies, but as a knowledge base in three major areas.

Understanding the Student Affairs Profession
This curricular area, addressing both foundations of student affairs and student development theory, introduces participants to the student affairs profession and the history and culture of higher education, the theoretical foundations of the profession, and standards of professional practice. The backgrounds of student affairs professionals, how student affairs officers approach and make administrative decisions, and the core values that drive the profession are discussed. Participants explore student affairs work from administrative, legal, multicultural, and student development perspectives along with the role of development theory in shaping the student affairs work.

Seminal works in the field are featured, such as *The Student Learning Imperative* (1994), *Reasonable Expectations* (1993), *A Perspective on Student Affairs* (1987) and *The Student Personnel Point of View* (1937).

Management of Student Affairs Programs
This area covers a broad range of management skills for effective planning, development, and administration of student affairs programs. Topics include budgeting and financial management skills, use of technology for delivery of student services, human resource management, legal issues, dynamics of the student affairs administrative environment, assessment and evaluation of student affairs programs, and program planning and development. Participants also have the opportunity to hone their presentation, facilitation, and conflict resolution skills.

Leadership in Student Affairs
This component facilitates moving from management to leadership and covers ethical decisionmaking in the student affairs profession, leading in multicultural environments, and change management. This area also provides opportunities for administrators to learn and discuss recent developments in the field. Participants are challenged to engage in out-of-the-box thinking and higher-level analysis related to leadership in a student affairs environment.

Additional Key Components
The Academy for Student Affairs Professionals features four important components:

1) The five-day academy is an intensive experience in which participants are immersed in curriculum, reflection, and collegial sharing.
2) Graduates of the five-day academy are eligible to participate in ongoing professional development seminars.
3) Supervisors attend a session to meet with participating staff to discuss ways to successfully utilize the knowledge and skills learned during the academy.
4) Participants engage in reflective activities, the final product of which is the creation of a strategic action plan detailing goals related to academy content.

CRITICAL FACTORS FOR SUCCESS

A number of guiding principles and characteristics are critical to the success of the academy.

Involvement and commitment of senior student affairs leadership. Senior student affairs leaders nominate participants and ensure their departments are quality environments for ongoing professional growth. This intentional, articulated strategy is aimed at increasing transfer of knowledge and connecting academy work to larger initiatives and practices within the institution.

Focus on reflection, personalization, and implementation of skills. Daily structured activities help participants to not only reflect on professional practices, but also integrate new learning into professional strategies, skills, and knowledge bases.

Collegial sharing. The academy views collegiality and networking as critical for growth. Structured activities aimed at collaboration and sharing are intentional components of the academy process and structure.

Emphasis on professional standards. The ethics, principles, and professional standards of the profession drive curriculum and instruction.

Collaboration between student affairs and academic affairs. Student learning and enhancement of the academic experience are the foundations of the program. Every aspect of the academy—needs analysis, curriculum design, program design, and delivery—is a collaborative effort between student affairs and academic professionals.

Connection to institutional mission. The academy is aligned with TAMU’s Division of Student Affairs’ core values (caring, diversity, excellence, integrity, respect, service) and the TAMU vision, strategic plan, and goals. In addition, the criteria established by the Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS) for student service/development programs are incorporated.
ACHIEVING RESULTS

A program evaluation model was developed to obtain both qualitative and quantitative data from participants in the first academy.

Participant Evaluations
Participants completed written evaluations of each session as well as overall program evaluations. ASAP strengths cited include the opportunity to network with colleagues, curriculum, credibility and quality of the faculty, organization of the academy to foster a cohort feeling, and applicability of academy content to participants’ jobs.

Pre- and Post-assessment Ratings
Participants rated several learning outcomes based on the degree to which each is integrated into their professional practice. Participants rated themselves prior to participation in the academy and at the conclusion of the five-day experience. The rating scale ranged from not integrated into practice to fully integrated.

◆ Sixty-seven percent of participants reported that knowledge of higher education history was not integrated in their practices at all prior to attending the academy. Most participants indicated that they are preparing to integrate this area into practice.

◆ Although participants indicated that they routinely made ethical decisions prior to attending the program, the academy experience confirmed and reinforced participant use of ethics in decisionmaking.

◆ Prior to the academy, most participants used student development theory only minimally in their practices. Participants indicated a greater commitment to integrate student development theory into their work.

Participants also noted greater understanding of legal decisions, higher education culture, and the dynamics of the student affairs administrative environment.

More importantly, evaluations confirmed that the academy met desired outcomes as demonstrated by the fact that participants grew in their knowledge of developmental theory, student affairs values, and principles and expressed a desire to apply these in their work. Increased networking was another documented success—a reminder of the importance of overcoming the isolation commonly inherent in the professional environment. Finally, three participants decided to pursue an advanced degree in the field as a result of their participation. “If it weren’t for ASAP, I would not have even considered getting my Ph.D. in higher education administration,” says Olvera. “ASAP not only changed the way I approach the field, but it has literally changed my life path. I now understand what it means to be intentional in the field.”

Dennis Corrington, TAMU’s director of recreational sports and academy participant with more than 30 years of professional experience, commented nine months after the program, “The academy opened my eyes about how to best respond to the needs of this generation of college students. For someone outside the profession, the history of higher education was particularly interesting as was the information on legal issues.”

WHAT IS A COMPETENT STUDENT AFFAIRS PROFESSIONAL?

While implemented locally, ASAP is a manifestation of an ongoing historic and national conversation in which professional boundaries and characteristics continue to be defined and communicated. It is clear that effective professional development programs for student affairs staff must, in a substantive way, continue to ask “What constitutes a competent student affairs professional?” TAMU plans to continue to contribute to this broader conversation.

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