

Pathways into the Profession: Student Affairs Professionals Tell All

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Abstract: Student affairs professionals often find their way to the field on accident rather than on purpose. This study explored avenues used by current student affairs professionals to enter the profession. Content analysis of open-ended responses revealed six themes related to how participants found their way into the profession. Findings can be utilized by student affairs preparatory programs, undergraduate recruitment programs, and higher education professional associations to better serve their target or current constituencies.

Keywords: student affairs, pathways, content analysis

Colleges and universities do not currently offer undergraduate degrees in student affairs, making the field a “hidden profession” (Richmond & Sherman, 1991, p.8). Brown (1987) noted, “people enter student affairs careers by accident or by quirk, rather than by design” (p. 5). In an effort to expose undergraduate students and potential student affairs professionals to the field, professional associations like NASPA (Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education) and ACPA (College Student Educators International) have designated the month of October as *Careers in Student Affairs Month*. During this month, professional associations as well as higher education institutions are encouraged to host programs, distribute marketing materials, and solicit students who may be interested in entering the profession in effort to continue to feed the pipeline of individuals entering the profession. Even with such coordinated efforts to grow the profession, why, how, and through what means professionals discover this hidden profession remains inconclusive. Thus, understanding professional pathways may aid student affairs professional associations and preparatory programs in developing effective recruitment programs. Now, maybe more than ever, with the *Great Resignation* occurring in higher education and other industries due to the COVID-19 pandemic it is imperative we understand the pathways which led professionals to the field in the first place.

Review of Literature

Intentional and detailed analysis of student affairs professionals remains markedly sparse (Biddix, 2013; Daniel, 2011, Harper & Kimbrough, 2005; Turrentine & Conley, 2001; Twale 2005) as well as 10 – 20 years old. Wesaw and Sponsler (2014) examined the career paths and aspirations of chief student affairs officers (CSAO), noting that they are often internal hires and “the pipeline into the CSAO position runs strongly through student affairs divisions” (p. 12). While identifying pathways into CSAO positions, Wesaw and Sponsler (2014) did not identify and describe the original pathway of the CSAO into the field of student affairs. The most recent comprehensive analysis of the demographic makeup of

student affairs professionals is from a 2001 study from Turrentine and Conley. In their research, Turrentine and Conley (2001) pointed out that no unique, authoritative source of information about candidates in the field of student affairs exists, and therefore resorted to using the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) to gather data for graduate students not yet in the job field. Some popular press platforms like Higher Ed Dive (2018), have explored the unrepresentative nature of student affairs professionals compared to college student demographics from a 2018 report from College and University Professional Association for Human Resources. They cite that the field is disproportionately women (71%) and how Hispanic students comprise 17% of the student body while only 8% of student affairs professionals (Paterson, 2018). While some criticize the diversity within the field, others praise it compared to other professions within the academy. For instance, Bauer-Wolf (2018) writes “the student affairs field is demographically more diverse than other college professions” (para 1).

Also sparse and significantly dated is the literature related to factors associated with the decision to enter the student affairs profession (Hunter, 1992; Richmond & Sherman, 1991; Taub & McEwen, 2006). Using content analysis of written responses obtained from 93 students entering a master’s degree program 30 years ago, Hunter (1992) identified six themes students considered when selecting student affairs work: (a) encouragement by those in the field, (b) critical incidents, such as employment in a student affairs area while an undergraduate student; (c) shared values with student affairs professionals, (d) others’ reactions to employment in student affairs, (e) uncertainty about career paths in student affairs, and (f) a desire to improve campus life.

In their study of 300 students enrolled in 24 master’s programs in college student personnel/higher education, Taub and McEwen (2006) noted, “respondents typically became aware of student affairs as a profession late in their careers (junior year or later) and were likely to have first considered it for themselves even later” (p. 210). Results of the study also showed that the majority of respondents were influenced and encouraged to enter the profession by a specific person(s) and were attracted to student affairs for a variety of reasons, including working on a college campus, the ability to do personally fulfilling work, providing programs and services, the ability to continue learning in an educational environment, and the variety within student affairs work.

The Present Study

Despite similarities in the findings of the peer-reviewed studies by Hunter (1992) and Taub and McEwen (2006), these are both now considered dated. There remains dialogue and interest student affairs professional pathways and their demographic makeup within popular press articles (Paterson, 2018; Bauer-Wolf, 2018). Furthermore, while Taub and McEwen identified when respondents first became aware of student affairs as a profession, neither study documented antecedent factors such as undergraduate major, thus leaving a void in the literature for current research on pathways to the profession.

This study, conducted as part of a larger study sponsored by the NASPA, Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education New Professionals and Graduate Students (NPGS)

Knowledge Community (KC) was conducted to explore avenues used by current student affairs professionals and higher education graduate students in NASPA to enter the profession. Specific objectives included:

1. Identify common undergraduate majors of current student affairs professionals in NASPA; and
2. Identify major factors influencing an individual's entry into the student affairs profession.

Methods

The population of interest in this study was practicing student affairs professionals. Professionals practicing in student affairs are characterized for the purposes of this study by the definition in ACPA and NASPA's (1992) *Quality Assurance in College Student Affairs: A Proposal for Action by Professional Associations*, which states that practicing professionals may, in addition to participating in continuing education programs in student affairs, have their identity in a related profession and participate in allied continuing professional education. The sample in this study consisted of practicing student affairs professionals who were members of NASPA between January and March.

A single online instrument administered through Qualtrics was used to collect data in this study. The instrument was developed by the researchers based on a review of literature as well as questions solicited from each of the 28 KCs within NASPA. The instrument consisted of 58 questions and included both scale and open-ended questions. The instrument collected information regarding participants' employment status, pre-professional experiences, educational experiences, demographic characteristics, and attainment of the 10 ACPA/NASPA Professional Competency Areas. Content validity was established from the literature, specifically the 2015 ACPA and NASPA professional competencies. To establish content and face validity, the instrument was evaluated by a panel of experts consisting of student affairs professionals not affiliated with the research team with assessment and research backgrounds. Reliability analyses, such as internal consistency, were not appropriate due to the nature of the self-reported data collected.

Due to organizational policies and procedures, researchers were unable to contact NASPA members directly to invite them to participate in the study. Therefore, a snowball sampling technique was employed. Using the KC leadership teams as gatekeepers, each KC chair or co-chair was asked to invite their KC members to participate in the study. Following the Tailored Design Method (Dillman et al., 2009), KC leaders were encouraged to send three standardized reminder emails to the members of their KC encouraging participation in the study. As Dillman and associates (2009) recommend, personalized elements were incorporated within the recruitment emails such as KC name, region, NASPA membership, and at times professional level within the student affairs field. A total of 1,366 self-identified student affairs professionals participated in this study.

Data from questions included in the pre-professional experiences and educational experiences sections of the instrument were used in the present study. To accomplish the first objective, descriptive statistics including frequencies and measures of central

tendency were reported. To accomplish objective two, this study utilized a basic, qualitative study approach (Merriam, 2009). More specifically, content analysis of data from open-ended question responses was employed. "Content analysis is a technique that enables researchers to study human behavior in an indirect way, through an analysis of their communications" (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2009, p. 472). As Patton (2002) noted, "content analysis, then, involves identifying, coding, categorizing, classifying, and labeling the primary patterns in the data" (p. 463).

Prior to analysis, data were unitized such that only one idea was found within each unit of data (Erlandson et al., 1983). A total of 2052 thought units were identified and included in analysis. A "start-list" of codes was created by the researchers prior to coding based on the review of the literature (Miles & Huberman, 1984). While this provided a base for coding the data, the codes were revised, eliminated, or added as necessary. To ensure consistency of the codes, researchers coded the responses collectively. Codes that were considered trustworthy, when saturation of the data occurred, were combined into themes to reduce and generate the meaning of the data (Creswell, 1998; Miles & Huberman, 1984). Thought units that did not fit into a developing theme were set aside. Two common methods of interpreting content analysis data were used: (a) the use of frequencies and the percentage and/or proportion of particular occurrences to total occurrences and (b) the use of codes and themes to help organize the content and arrive at a narrative description of the findings (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2009).

Results

Objective one sought to identify common undergraduate majors of current student affairs professionals. Using the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) 2010 Classification of Instructional Programs (CIP), survey respondents selected the undergraduate major that best relates to or reflects their degree. The CIP is a taxonomic coding scheme for instructional programs. Its purpose "is to facilitate the organization, collection, and reporting of fields of study and program completions" (National Center of Educational Statistics, 2010, p. 1). This system of classification was utilized in a drop-down question format by the researchers due to the various institutional types, degree programs, and major names respondents may have encountered at their individual institutions where they completed their degree(s). This classification system provides a robust listing and organization plus is also sensitive to international classifications by Canada and Europe where participants may have completed their degrees. The CIP-2010 editions utilized for this study contains 47 series, or categories, which organize over 400 majors for respondents to choose from. Series 60, or the major category known as Residency Programs which include medical residencies, were omitted for the purposes of this study. This series was omitted due to the focus on undergraduate degree attainment which the question sought responses. Table 1 presents the top ten frequency counts by the major series.

Table 1. *Frequencies of Top Ten Undergraduate Majors by Series of Student Affairs Professionals.*

Major	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Business, Management, Marketing and Related Support	188	17.26
Social Science	169	15.52
Psychology	152	13.96
Communication, Journalism, and Related Programs	112	10.28
Education	97	8.91
Visual and Performing Arts	86	7.90
English Language and Literature	68	6.24
History	45	4.13
Liberal Arts and Science, General Study	32	2.94
Biological and Biomedical Science	29	2.66

Objective two sought to identify major factors influencing an individual's entry into the student affairs profession. Although some of the themes overlapped, content analysis of the participant's thought units revealed six themes related to how participants found their way into the student affairs profession: (a) undergraduate experience, (b) higher education setting, (c) nature of student affairs work, (d) encouragement by another, (e) career change, and (f) happenstance.

Undergraduate Experience

The first, and the most dominant, theme was related to participants' undergraduate experience. Of the 2052 total thought units, 614 (29.92%) referenced experience(s) during their undergraduate career as related to their entry into the profession. Within the undergraduate experience theme, five sub-themes emerged: (a) overall experience, (b) work in student affairs, (c) student organization/co-curricular involvement, (d) academic experience, and (e) negative undergraduate experience(s).

Some participants shared general comments about their undergraduate experience as a factor influencing their entry into the profession. For example, a Latino, male, senior-level student affairs professional reported that his "undergraduate experience led me to consider entering the field." One Biracial female mid-level participant shared, "Loved my undergraduate experience." Similarly, a White female senior-level participant stated, "Had a transformative experience as an undergrad, decided to pursue student affairs as a result."

Many participants shared that it was because of their experience working in student affairs areas, such as being a resident advisor or peer mentor, as an undergraduate that led them to the profession. "It was an absolute fit after being a Resident Assistant for about 2 months" stated a White male mid-level participant. A White female new professional

shared that she entered the profession because, “as an undergraduate student worker, I worked as a peer academic advisor in the College of Business.”

Involvement in student organizations and co-curricular activities was another prevalent factor described by student affairs professionals in NASPA as influencing their entry into the profession. “I was very involved as a student leader in college” noted a Black male new professional. A Latina female graduate student stated, “I was very involved with organizations and clubs on campus, which I really enjoyed.” Similarly, a White, male, mid-level student affairs professional shared, “As a heavily involved undergraduate student, [I] realized that I could get paid to do the things I enjoyed doing voluntarily.”

Undergraduate academic experiences led some participants to enter the student affairs profession as well. For example, a White female senior-level student affairs professional noted that her entry into the profession “started with piecing together an undergraduate degree,” while a White female mid-level participant noted it was because of an “internship in student affairs in my senior year.”

Other participants cited difficulties or negative experiences as influencing their entry into the student affairs profession. A Latina female graduate student shared, “I had a bad transition into my undergrad because of the climate.” An Asian, Asian-American female graduate student stated, “I struggled throughout my undergraduate experience as a first-generation student and I wanted to give back to students who were struggling in the same ways I did.”

Higher Education Setting

The second theme that emerged as a factor influencing student affairs professionals in NASPA to enter the profession was the higher education setting itself. A total of 373 (18.18%) of the 2052 total thought units were reflective of this theme. Within the higher education setting theme, three sub-themes emerged: (a) the college campus environment, (b) previous experience working in the higher education setting, and (c) the opportunity to continue with and/or finance graduate education.

Participants who made comments related to the college campus environment often noted positive experiences and/or preferences related to college communities. One White female vice president explained that she “loved the college environment and wanted to continue.” A White female graduate student noted, “I did not want to leave the intellectual culture that is inherently intertwined in the field of higher education.” Another White female graduate student shared, “I was on campus at my undergraduate institution [and] a light bulb went off --- I realized that I wanted to work on college campuses.”

The second sub-theme that emerged from the higher education setting theme stemmed from participants having previous work experience in the higher education setting. While similar to the college campus environment sub-theme, it was evident that participants who made comments related to this sub-theme had previous experience working on a college campus. A White female mid-level student affairs professional noted, “I started working at a small community college and realized how much I enjoyed the higher ed environment.” A

Biracial female mid-level participant shared that she had “worked in college admissions for 4 years prior to attending graduate school.”

The opportunity to continue with and/or finance graduate education emerged as the third sub-theme in the higher education theme area. One White female senior-level student affairs professional shared that she “began doing res life as a graduate student to make extra money.” Similarly, a White female new professional explained “I had a graduate assistantship within campus life and then Residence Life.” It appeared that some pathways into the profession were afforded due to tuition remission and/or stipends for student affairs graduate assistantships.

Nature of Student Affairs Work

The nature of student affairs work emerged as the third factor accounting for 354 (17.25%) of the 2052 total thought units included in the study. The nature of the work also had noticeable sub-themes to the researchers. Nature of student affairs work served as an umbrella to encompass the two sub-themes of (a) skill alignment to a student affairs role, and (b) attitude or passions of the nature of the work.

Skill alignment was the more salient of the two sub-themes within the larger theme of nature of student affairs work. To depict the theme, a White female graduate student described her pathway to the profession as simply “it seemed to fit my skills and interests.” Another White male mid-level professional discovered “that I could apply my social work theory and practice to student affairs work.” The concept of skill alignment was named by some respondents as transferable skills. For instance, a White female new professional said, “I felt as though my bachelor’s degree lent me a lot of transferable skills that I could use in student affairs.” Additionally, a White female mid-level professional echoed the transferable skills connection when she shared “when I was given the opportunity to work with adults at a professional school level I was happy to take on the challenge for my transferable skills were well suited.” Transferable skills and their alignment with the nature of student affairs work was an emergent pathway for respondents in the study.

Attitude and passion of student affairs professionals was the other nature of student affairs work sub-theme. This sub-theme was described by an Asian, female new professional who expressed “I was exhausted but exhilarated by this work” as her motivation into the profession. Additionally, a White female graduate student reflected that:

It took me a while to come around to the idea, but the more time wore on, the more I realized how much I loved resourcing students with tools to help them succeed and preparing them to be the best leaders possible.

Similar sentiments for passion and attitude related to the nature of the work were highlighted by a White, female, senior-level student affairs professional. She recalled “this is where my heart is, I just needed my head to figure that out.” Lastly, this sub-theme was captured by a White female mid-level professional that for her pursuing the profession was about “passion over money.” These reflections on professionals’ pathways in the profession describe the nature of student affairs work being their motivation.

Encouragement by Another

Encouragement by another emerged as the fourth major factor influencing interest in the student affairs profession. A total of 345 (16.81%) of the thought units were related to this theme. The theme is broken down into two sub-themes: (a) encouragement by a mentor and (b) encouragement from a network influence. The difference between the sub-themes has to do with the relationship between the information giver and the student affairs professional. These reflections on the impact another person has on current professionals and graduate students describes how other people can influence a person's decision to enter the student affairs profession.

Encouragement by a mentor represents the respondents who were persuaded into the student affairs profession because of a mentor or role model. A White female mid-level professional described it aptly as, "I was persuaded by a mentor who alerted me of the field and I fell in love with it." A Black female mid-level professional stated, "I had a great mentor that talked to me about the profession and hired me for a grad assistant position." Another White male mid-level professional said, "[I] had an incredible mentor who invested in me personally and professionally."

Encouragement from a network connection is a phenomenon that leads individuals into the student affairs profession. A White female new professional stated, "I was shoulder tapped by the Director of Housing to consider higher education instead of secondary education, the field I was pursuing." An Asian, female new professional describes the nonchalant nature of the network nudge when she said, "I asked my supervisor how did she get her job and she told me about student affairs." "I had friends who graduated a year ahead of me who went to graduate school for student affairs which is primarily how I found out about the student affairs graduate programs," was expressed by a White female mid-level professional.

Career Change

Career change surfaced as the fifth factor influencing practicing student affairs professionals to enter the field. A total of 208 (10.14%) thought units contributed to the career change theme. Two unique sub-themes also emerged to further add dimensionality to the overall theme of career change: (a) uncertainty or dissatisfaction with degree/career, and (b) a second career.

Student affairs professionals cited a career change due to uncertainty or dissatisfaction with their academic degree. The respondents in the study also expressed a similar uncertainty or dissatisfaction with their career. To illustrate, a White female senior-level student affairs professional recalled "[I] intended to become a K-12 teacher, but changed path after experience in higher ed with professionals and opportunities provided to me." Similarly, a White female graduate student expressed "I was planning to go to law school, but in my junior year of college was not sure if that was the right path for me as I was prepping to take the LSATs." Lastly, a different White female graduate student shared "I was dissatisfied with the lack of career and professional development opportunities for music majors at my undergrad." These respondents all shared a career change due to uncertainty around or dissatisfaction with their degree or career.

A second career was also a noticeable impetus for student affairs professionals to enter the profession. A White female mid-level professional indicated that student affairs was her “second career.” Additionally, a White female graduate student explained that “after I retired from the armed forces, I decided to look into higher education administration as a possible career option.” A second career was a noticeable dimension within career change for a prominent pathway into the student affairs profession.

Happenstance

Of the 2052 total thought units, 75 (3.65%) supported the happenstance theme area. Comments from student affairs professionals in this theme area spoke to the “hidden profession” aspect of student affairs work. A White female mid-level student affairs professional explained, “I happened into the profession by happenstance and have been here, happily, ever since.” An African-American male VP commented that he entered the profession “accidentally - my fraternity brother’s wife worked in admissions and encouraged me to apply for a counselor position when I graduated.” One White female mid-level participant commented that “it picked me” while a White female faculty member cited “serendipity” as a factor influencing her entry into the student affairs profession. Another White female mid-level student affairs professional stated, “it sort of landed in my lap.”

The remaining 83 (4.04%) of the thought units were considered outliers. Many of these statements, while confirmatory, did not have enough context provided for the researchers to be able to categorize them into one of the six major theme areas. For example, a White, female, mid-level student affairs professional commented, “after that, I was hooked.” Of these 83 statements, 14 were related more to the nature of questions on the research instrument as opposed to providing a response that matched the actual intent of the question. For example, one participant noted, “For the question above it was super difficult to find the major. Majors should be listed in some order.”

Discussion

The present study sought to (a) identify common undergraduate majors of current student affairs professionals; and (b) identify major factors influencing an individual's entry into the student affairs profession. The implications and recommendations for future study are discussed by each objective and then for the overall study.

Colleges and universities do not offer pre-professional student affairs tracks similar to those offered in medicine or law. Therefore, the purpose of objective one was to better understand the common undergraduate majors of current student affairs professionals, however our sample only included members of NASPA. The identification of common majors will provide those individuals interested in recruiting future student-affairs professionals with a better understanding of the degree programs leading into the profession. Recruiters are often faced with limited time and resources, and an increased understanding of the most common majors may provide for more targeted recruitment efforts that yield higher enrollments in graduate programs.

These findings may be specifically of interest to higher education and student affairs human resource professionals, master's and doctoral student affairs preparatory programs, NASPA's Undergraduate Fellows Program or its ACPA counterpart, Next Gen. Many of these initiatives also seek to diversify the profession. This study suggests that in order to achieve this goal, diverse recruitment should not only occur within graduate admissions, but should begin earlier with the recruitment and selection of student paraprofessionals and student leaders. These student leaders, paraprofessionals, and graduate students should include students who come from traditionally underrepresented and historically disenfranchised populations including racial and ethnic minorities, those who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, asexual or queer, and those with disabilities. These efforts should also include individuals who hold undocumented status within the United States, are considered low-income, and may be first-generation college students. Future research examining the recruitment and selection policies and procedures should be conducted to determine who is being targeted and who is being left out.

Future scholarship related to understanding common undergraduate majors of current student affairs professionals should consider a more condensed listing of majors. While the present study used IPEDS CIP listings, some respondents cited difficulty identifying their major within the list. Enabling the ability for two or more undergraduate degrees should also be examined. Similarly, a fill-in-the-blank survey item could also achieve this recommendation.

Similar to Taub and McEwen's (2006) study, a disappointing aspect of the present study was the inability to examine whether different factors attracted professionals of color into the field. Future research should consider factors for various demographic characteristics (e.g. race, sexual orientation, disability status). Conditional or branch logic within the survey instrument could display questions to unique demographic populations. Additionally, professionals who are not within the United States do not have the same requirements or pathways into the student affairs profession. Future research should focus specifically on the nuances of professional pathways in countries outside of the United States. This aligns with an increasingly global focus of colleges and universities and higher education professional associations. International students are also a unique demographic of interest as visa status and work sponsorship may impact their pathway into the profession.

Objective two sought to update and further clarify major factors influencing an individual's entry into the student affairs profession. The present study's findings possess similarities and distinctions from previous studies conducted by Taub and McEwen (2006) and Hunter (1992). Hunter's critical incidents, improving campus life, and encouragement by those already in the field were not uniquely discovered in the present study; however, similarities or sub-themes capture similar sentiments. The majority of participants in Taub and McEwen's study were influenced to enter the profession by a specific person(s). While encouragement by another was a factor influencing participants in the present study to enter the profession, the undergraduate experience of participants in the present study was found in more thought units than encouragement by another.

Limitations

Overall, the present study aids current student affairs professionals to understand well-established avenues and pathways to enter the profession for recruitment and retention purposes. A number of suggestions for future research stem from this research. While we believe this study to be sound, we note three limitations. First, the present study suggested major pathways into the profession, but also acknowledges varied pathways to enter the field. This study, or studies with a similar aim, should be repeated every 10 – 15 years to capture demographic changes and shifts into the profession. We acknowledged the dated literature in this area. With this study in a similar cadence, future research can draw on more contemporary scholarship. Second, respondent data is limited by the nature of self-report and therefore meta-major categories afforded by IPEDS categories may be incorrect. This is because respondents may not be familiar with the umbrellaing or difference in terms and classifications from their own collegiate academic structure and nomenclature. Third, thought unit analysis in the study resulted in outliers ($n = 83$, 4.04%) which may reveal more diverse pathways into the field with a larger sample. Additionally, a limitation of the study is that the sample was predominantly composed of members belonging to one student affairs professional association. Future scholarship ought to expand participant recruitment efforts to include other student affairs professional organizations, snowball sampling utilizing popular social media platforms, and student affairs professionals who may be embedded in the academic affairs structure.

The student affairs profession continually works to improve its legitimacy and prominence in the higher education community. In order to continue this important work, pathways to the student affairs profession are important to understand. With more awareness and visibility, the once hidden profession may secure an important seat at the table for future student affairs professionals.

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