Preparing New Professionals: Lessons for Graduate Preparation Programs from the National Study of New Professionals in Student Affairs

Kristen A. Renn  Eric R. Jessup-Anger

The National Study of New Professionals in Student Affairs is a year-long study of the transition of 90 new professionals to their first full-time job in the field. Data collection for this qualitative study was conducted monthly through an online survey system. We report findings of the study that bear on graduate program curricula, administrative practice, and future research. Implications address the content and process of graduate education in higher education and student affairs.

The Association for the Study of Higher Education (ASHE) and the American College Personnel Association (ACPA)—one scholarly association and one professional association—list over 125 graduate programs that prepare master’s level professionals in student affairs and higher education leadership (ACPA, 2007; ASHE, 2002). Cilente, Henning, Skinner Jackson, Kennedy, and Sloane (2006) estimated that master’s level new professionals—first time, full-time staff with 5 or fewer years of experience—comprise 15% to 20% of the student affairs workforce and come directly from graduate programs in student affairs, college student personnel, or higher education. The alignment between graduate program curricula and the work of entry-level professionals has been the subject of some research (e.g., Kretovics, 2002; Lovell & Kosten, 2000; Palmer, 1995), but the role of graduate programs in preparing master’s candidates for the transition to—not just for the work of—student affairs administration is little understood. In this article, we present findings from the National Study of New Professionals in Student Affairs (NSNPSA) that answer the question: From the perspective of new professionals, in what areas should master’s programs in higher education and student affairs prepare graduates for the transition to full-time work in the field?

BACKGROUND: RESEARCH ON NEW PROFESSIONALS AND GRADUATE PREPARATION

Research on new professionals consistently shows that they come to student affairs work from a range of undergraduate backgrounds and work in all types of institutions (Cilente et al., 2006; Hirt, 2006), yet have common experiences related to transition from master’s programs, relationship formation, mentor seeking, and work–life balance issues (Magolda & Carnaghi, 2004; Renn & Hodges, 2007; Richmond & Sherman, 1991). The new professional experience has not changed much over time; Rosen, Taube, and Wordsworth reported similar findings in 1980, before many of today’s new professionals were born. But is the persistence of these issues in and of itself a cause for concern? Not necessarily.

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Concern about new professionals derives substantially from their high rate of attrition from the field. Estimated at 50% to 60% within the first 5 years (Lorden, 1998; Tull, 2006), attrition of student affairs professionals is a longstanding research topic (e.g., Burns, 1982; Evans, 1988; Holmes, Verrier, & Chisolm, 1983; Richmond & Sherman, 1991). Attempts to understand why so many new professionals leave the field have concentrated on job satisfaction (e.g., Bender, 1980; Lorden; Tull) and the so-called bottleneck in the career ladder when individuals in entry-level jobs attempt to move to the next level where positions are less plentiful and openings are not predictable on an annual cycle (e.g., Belch & Strange, 1995; Rosser & Javinar, 2003). It is possible to view this attrition as an unproblematic reality of the higher education workforce and career paths of young professionals; it is also possible to see it as a loss of talent and training in the field. Based on the history of research on attrition the latter view seems to prevail.

Two approaches to addressing attrition have captured the attention of practitioners and researchers: (a) improving supervision and professional development of new professionals and (b) doing a better job preparing new professionals. Supervision of new professionals, beginning with a solid orientation (Saunders & Cooper, 2003), is widely believed to be central to their experience, satisfaction, performance, and intention to remain in the field (Harned & Murphy, 1998; Saunders, Cooper, Winston, & Chernow, 2000; Tull, 2006). Cilente et al. (2006) asked new professionals directly about their professional development needs. Of the needs ranked in the top six, two related directly to supervision (receiving adequate support, understanding job expectations) and the others could be addressed by supervisors (fostering student learning, moving up in the field of student affairs, enhancing supervision skills, developing multicultural competencies). But supervisors can only do so much to support new professionals; if the new staff come to them without professional competencies and knowledge, there is a limit to how much they can do to facilitate the transition to the student affairs workplace.

Research on graduate preparation, the focus of this paper, reveals an interest on the part of program faculty in aligning student affairs/higher education curricula with the needs of the profession. Herdlein (2004), Kretovics (2002) and Lovell and Kosten (2000) explored competencies desired in and required of student affairs professionals. The Council for the Advancement of Standards (CAS) (2006) and ACPA (2003) have offered guidelines for master’s curricula in student affairs/college student personnel, presumably based on a framework of desired learning outcomes for program graduates. In addition to these general areas of competence and learning outcomes, research supports the effectiveness of including information technology (Engstrom, 1997; Renn & Zeligman 2005), diversity and multicultural competence (Flowers & Howard-Hamilton, 2002; McEwen & Roper, 1994; Pope & Reynolds, 1997), spirituality (Strange, 2001), and values (Young & Elfrink, 1991) in the curriculum.

Recent attention to the early career stage has resulted in literature for and about new professionals. Renn and Hodges (2007) reported on issues of transition, relationships, and personal and professional fit for new professionals. Two guides for understanding organizational contexts and transition into the profession, Beginning Your Journey (Amey & Reesor, 2002) and Job One (Magolda & Carnaghi, 2004), complement the empirical literature on new professionals. Yet aside from the Cilente et al. (2006) study of perceived needs for professional development and Renn
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and Hodge's small-scale qualitative study, the perspectives of new professionals on their transition into the workplace—and their preparation for that transition—have gone largely unheard in the empirical literature.

In the 27 years since Rosen et al. (1980) published the results of their open-ended study of the experience of new professionals, the student affairs workforce and higher education workplace have changed substantially. Arguably, graduate preparation in student affairs/higher education master’s programs has remained more or less the same since then in terms of course content and recommended work experience (internships, practicum placements, etc.; CAS, 1986, 2006). Furthermore, master’s students have shifted from a largely “Generation X” to a largely “Millennial Generation” population, signaling a shift in learning styles and expectations (Wilson, 2004). The question we address in this paper, therefore, is: From the perspective of new professionals, in what areas should master’s programs in higher education and student affairs prepare graduates for the transition to full-time work in the field?

The paper is drawn from the NSNPSA, the central question of which is: How do first time, full time student affairs professionals experience their first year on the job?

METHOD

Following a 2005-2006 study of 10 new professionals from one graduate program (Renn & Hodges, 2007), we decided on a national sample; longitudinal, qualitative methods for data collection; and a grounded theory approach to data analysis (Creswell, 2007; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). According to Creswell, open-ended questioning and grounded theory analysis are well suited for studies where the goal is to explore a range of possible experiences among a similar group of participants, as it was in our case. Using a national sample and a time series design, we collected data online from August 2006 to June 2007. Findings we present in this paper relate to new professionals’ transition from graduate school to work and how student affairs graduate programs might improve how they prepare students for this transition.

Sample

We recruited participants through multiple listservs of professional associations and through graduate preparation program faculty. In an email announcement, we identified ourselves as a graduate preparation program faculty member and a doctoral student in higher education and invited participation in a yearlong study of first-time, full-time student affairs professionals. Over 130 respondents completed an initial background survey, and 90 completed the first open-ended prompt (September). Participation declined over time, with, for example, 66 responses in November and 52 in March. It is important to note that some respondents skipped one or more months and then returned to the project; the average number of responses was 5.9. Twenty-nine participants completed one, two, or three prompts; 18 completed four to seven; and 43 completed eight, nine, or ten. In total, we had 533 usable responses from 90 participants over 10 months.

In several respects, demographics of the 90 participants resemble those in the field of student affairs, when compared to Turrentine and Conley’s (2001) analysis of diversity in the labor pool for entry-level student affairs professionals. There are fewer Black and Hispanic/Latino American participants than Turrentine and Conley would predict, but in terms of sex, highest degree earned, and functional area, the sample is representative; in these respects it also reflects the survey samples of new professionals obtained by Tull (2006) and Cilente et al. (2006). Average age
of participants was 24.9 years, against which there are no national data to compare. With 64% of the sample reporting ages 24 or 25 at the beginning of the study it is reasonable to believe that many participants went directly from undergraduate to graduate school, which also mirrors Tull’s and Cilente et al.’s samples. It is important to note that among the 34 potential participants who completed the demographic survey but did not respond to any of the monthly prompts, men and people of color are overrepresented compared to the field; why these participants did not continue past the initial survey is not known. The data presented here includes the 90 participants who persisted in the study, and the findings must be considered in light of the sample’s demographics.

Data Collection and Analysis

The study was conducted entirely online, through surveymonkey.com. Data collection consisted of an initial survey of demographics, educational background, and current job description, then monthly requests for a 300-500 word response to a prompt. Each month, we emailed participants an invitation to answer the prompt and the URL for the survey site. We followed up 2 weeks later with a reminder to nonrespondents and at the end of the month with a final reminder. We tracked individual respondents through a personal

### TABLE 1.
Description of Sample

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code they entered each month. Examples of prompts are:

- Beginning a new job marks a time of transition in roles and relationships. Please tell us something about how you are experiencing these transitions.
- As you reflect upon your first semester of full-time professional work, what aspects of being a new student affairs professional surprised you? What aspects did you feel played out as you thought they would?
- What impact has your professional experience this year had on your perception of the field of student affairs and what you believe it means to be a student affairs professional?
- If you could provide your graduate program (faculty, professional placement mentors, etc.) with insight into how you could have been better prepared to be an effective and satisfied new professional, what would you say?

Data analysis was ongoing. We followed a grounded theory approach, beginning with open coding of each month’s responses, moving into axial and selective coding to develop themes (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Using a constant comparative strategy (Strauss & Corbin), we integrated emerging themes into subsequent prompts.

Trustworthiness and Limitations

Trustworthiness (Creswell, 2007) was established at the levels of data collection, analysis, and interpretation. The online data collection procedure ensured that we had an exact transcription of the participants’ intended responses. A measure of analytic trustworthiness was derived from our separate analyses of the responses and initial open coding; we then compared codes and themes for congruence and dissonance, exploring each for underlying biases on our part. Interpretive trustworthiness came about through opportunities to share the findings with participants and other new professionals at national conferences and local presentations, where our findings resonated with the experiences reported by attendees.

The study’s limitations derive primarily from the nature of the sample (limitations of recruitment strategy, primarily) and the data collection strategy (monthly anonymous responses do not allow for direct follow-up with individuals). Locating new professionals during the summer before they begin their jobs is a challenging task, as they are often changing email addresses and physically moving. Master’s programs, with more reliable contacts for their newly launched graduates, may be overrepresented in the sample as a result, as might functional areas (e.g., housing, student activities) whose professional association contacts were more able to forward our invitation to new professionals in those fields. The online data collection strategy entailed some limitations regarding our ability to follow up with specific individuals to learn more about their responses. Finally, any longitudinal study faces the risk of attrition, and we did lose participants along the way. Incentives for continued participation (a drawing at the end of each semester for a year’s professional association membership) may have mitigated attrition, but our data set was somewhat constrained by including participants who answered every prompt, answered some or most prompts, or dropped out after the initial demographic survey. Those who dropped after the demographic survey were not included in analyses for this article.

FINDINGS

We identified four key themes in answer to the question: From the perspective of new professionals, in what areas should master’s programs in higher education and student affairs prepare graduate students for the transition to full-time...
work in the field? The themes cluster around major challenges faced by new professionals and are: creating a professional identity, navigating a cultural adjustment, maintaining a learning orientation, and seeking sage advice. These themes address the academic and professional content (the “what”) and the process (the “how”) of the transition to the student affairs workforce.

Creating a Professional Identity

Defining and achieving balance, assessing competence, building job skills, proving oneself, and applying previous learning to new settings were major tasks in this category. From the sheer volume of work (“There is a bigger workload than I would have expected”) to the transition from student to professional (“The first month or two of my job, I had difficulty reconciling my new role as a professional career counselor with my former role as an intern and student”), respondents were learning what was required in their new positions and striving to apply what they had learned as graduate students to the new settings. As new professionals acclimated to their first job they often passed through periods in which they alternated between feeling confident, overwhelmed, and at times, wholly unsure of their abilities.

Although an early struggle encountered by many new professionals was defining and achieving balance (“I am working 12 hour days on a regular basis”), by the end of their first year on the job most had navigated this significant hurdle. One respondent wrote, “It’s been hard for me to balance work and family but as the months have gone by, I think I have gotten much better.” Some participants who experienced high workloads and long hours viewed this as a sacrifice that would pay off in the professional future: “In my short time here, I’ve been given, and in many cases asked for additional professional responsibilities . . . all of this responsibility has not come without cost or sacrifice.”

For many participants the transition to full-time employment was substantially eased by previous work experience in positions similar to those held during their first year in the field. One respondent wrote, “I think the aspect that surprised me most was how easy the transition was from a graduate hall director to a full time hall director.” Conversely, some participants were jarred by the transition from graduate student to professional and how little they felt they understood the expectations and responsibilities of their new role.

As I was recently commenting to former supervisors and co-workers, you cannot truly understand the professional world as a grad. I thought I had a good grasp on the paperwork, meetings, and responsibilities of professionals. Although I knew there would be tons of meetings and paperwork I had no idea the time I would spend out of my office and the amount of tasks I would be required to complete.

Variations among new professionals’ opinion of their preparation often depended upon perceived relevance of their earlier experiences in graduate assistantships, practicum placements, and internships. One respondent noted, “The functional field I am in is what I did for my graduate assistantship so I knew what to expect.” Another wrote about the quality of his preprofessional work experience, “Perhaps it was the department I worked in as a graduate student, but I felt incredibly prepared.”

Whereas practical experiences were nearly universally perceived as relevant to a successful transition, academic coursework was viewed by respondents as particularly beneficial when it focused on the application of learning rather than knowledge acquisition. One respondent wrote,
My graduate program was very hands on focused. All class projects had to be real projects that could be incorporated into our work or used real data from our office. I think this perspective really gave us a great start on what professional work would be like.

In contrast, frustration arose among new professionals when coursework fell short of providing them guidance on how to apply their learning in professional settings.

I have found that I understand student development theory quite well, and I have a great grasp on learning disabilities but we spend very little time actually studying how to assist students with what they are going through or how to deal with challenges in the classroom from learning disabilities. I never thought about it prior to graduation but now that I’m gaining experience in a new area I realize that it would have been great to learn how to actually provide assistance to students, especially students with learning disabilities.

New professionals repeatedly discussed many of the essential skills that they believed they lacked as newly minted postsecondary administrators, including working with budgets (“I wish I had more budget training”), advising and supervision, (“How do you supervise and advise student employees?”), assessment and evaluation, and navigating institutional politics (“The sheer amount of politics surprised me”). New professionals were also learning the “lay of the land” (as one wrote), as well as dispositions toward how to manage themselves professionally.

Learning to hold my tongue, to be positive, to appreciate humility, to understanding that there are administrative issues greater than myself, to realize that others have thought of my idealistic goals before and were met with resistance, and that I shouldn’t take everything personally.

In short, they were becoming professionals and creating professional identities.

As asked in the March prompt to provide feedback regarding graduate preparation, one respondent focused on two aspects of professionalism, self-assessment and the transition from student to professional:

I think that it is important for graduate programs to stress that when students do not get praised for their work in a regular fashion (as they do with good grades for example), they must trust that they are doing a good job none the less. I also think that is important that students who have a good rapport with their supervisors, faculty, mentors, etc. be prepared for a culture shock when they are not immediately allowed to put their degree to use and are not immediately trusted to make changes or decisions.

Other new professionals suggested that graduate programs explicitly address the transition in roles from student-as-learner to professional-as-educator. The idea that “it’s not all about me anymore” presented a challenge, if not a shock, to some new professionals.

Navigating a Cultural Adjustment

Whether at the level of institution, department, or students, cultural adjustment was central to many responses. For many participants, trying to comprehend and make sense of their work environments was a frustrating experience: “I think the greatest challenge for me has been adapting and adjusting to the nature of my office.” Although most achieved some semblance of cultural adjustment as they muddled through the first year (“I feel as though I really understand the culture of the Greek Community I am working with and will not waste as much time on the things that do not work as I did last year”), others experienced a deep level of incongruence with the culture of their new institution that stimulated questions of
whether student affairs was the right “fit” for them as a profession. As one of the latter noted, “I know I won’t be able to stay in the field long term.”

Even when new professionals had expected to make cultural adjustments, the magnitude was sometimes greater than anticipated.

I didn’t think adjusting to the culture was going to be the challenge, I imagine adjusting to the actual job, and the different expectations of my supervisor, to taking on a ¼ time position, but I had no idea it was going to be so challenging adjusting to a new culture, I also had no idea that the culture was really this different, I guess you can only tell so much from an interview and speaking with friends who know that college.

In some instances, the change in cultural norms at their new institution challenged respondents’ earlier conceptualization of student affairs work and pushed some to reconsider the nature of their role. One wrote, “The culture here is to not allow [students] to make decisions for themselves . . . It’s been a tough transition coming from an institution that places responsibility on students to make decisions, carry out decisions, and run events.”

As new professionals’ understanding of cultural norms developed, many noted the pervasive role of politics in their organizations. The political nature of student affairs surprised and dismayed many new professionals; one wrote, “I was disheartened to discover the highly volatile political nature of the campus in which I work.” Another respondent voiced dismay in the perception that institutional leaders prioritized politics over students.

Those who make it to the higher paying jobs play politics instead of doing the best for our students. I consider myself a student affairs professional, but those in director and such positions are there because they are student affairs politicians.

Additional challenges occurred for new professionals at religious institutions where they did not share the faith background of the institution. “The school I’m at is very conservative and religious. I’m neither. I’m really nervous about being different and not fitting ‘into’ what I should be as a staff member or part of the community.” Other respondents found challenges in the professional transition from a large public university to a small private college: “It surprised me greatly how little my graduate preparation was useful at a different type of school.”

Respondents frequently acknowledged that in their graduate programs they were taught about the concept of institutional culture, yet the importance of organizational–personal fit did not become fully clear until they encountered it as new professionals. The circumstance most often cited as a location for emphasizing fit was the job search that resulted in their current positions. One respondent suggested:

Give us way more help about job searching, so we would end up at institutions that fit us better . . . And actually integrating the search into graduate school would have been wonderful and very useful. To have us reflect on it, be strategic about it, etc. Even for the people who were not currently searching, but would, undoubtedly be some day. I think this would serve students well now and in many years to come, because to me, choosing the right school and the right job are everything. (And because I didn’t know what I was doing, I accepted a position at a school I sensed was a poor fit, but didn’t know what other options I had.)

Even when new professionals had learned to successfully assess and navigate cultures previously they were not always successful at enacting these previously developed skills as new professionals; “When I was a student at a college, it was much easier to learn the culture.”
Maintaining a Learning Orientation

A third theme that emerged among some new professionals in our study was the development and maintenance of a learning orientation as the primary lens through which they approached their transition. Whether it was dependent upon professional acculturation (“being a student affairs professional means never stop learning about the world of higher ed or the most recent group of incoming students”) or a personal commitment to growth (“I fully wish to use my first year as a learning experience and to grow in my knowledge of the job”) respondents who placed a high priority on learning from their experiences were likely to frame challenging experiences as opportunities instead of setbacks.

I’m sure I’ll botch some things, fumble through others, and get a few things right; ultimately, I’ll end up on the other side of this academic year banged up but more knowledgeable. And I’m ok with that. I can’t expect myself to be a genius at this job immediately.

New professionals with learning orientations often acted as sponges, consistently and critically observing peers and seasoned professionals’ decisions and behaviors and then adjusting their own practice accordingly: “I’m absolutely growing as a professional and continuing to observe others to decide what I do/don’t want to incorporate into my own professional and personal life.”

Respondents also shared that they benefited from reflection, either on their own, with peers, or via conversations with mentors, as they tried to make sense of their professional experiences: “I only figured out my role through trial and error and through a long process of reflection.” Regardless of the process, what appeared to be important was that they used their work experience as a laboratory in which consistently to examine and improve themselves as professionals.

One new professional wrote about learning to learn independently as a graduate student and how this independence translated to positive job performance.

As an undergraduate and first-year grad student (and arguably second year grad student) I would often charge through situations without considering the full impact of my behaviors. For example, I would often not “work the system” appropriately and I took time in this position to learn the system and the politics. I think that this has helped me grow because it has provided me with a balanced and realistic perspective.

This practice contrasted significantly with a participant who, while capable of asking self-reflective questions, appeared to lack the ability to accurately self-assess and learn from experiences without the feedback of a faculty member or a supervisor.

Now in the working world, I’m daily meeting with students and offering guidance, and I’m not sure if I’m doing it right. Am I effectively listening? Am I offering too much advice? Not enough? I feel like I could’ve role-played some of these conversations in class.

New professionals, when asked to provide feedback to faculty in their graduate programs, requested that additional time be spent on providing insights on how to continue to develop professional skills and maintain an awareness of new knowledge and research after graduation. One wrote, “Please make me aware of professional development opportunities out there,” and another asked for “more tools and ways to stay connected to the field and research developments in the field after graduate school.” One recent graduate added, “I wish we could have been given a class that helped us process what we were learning in our assistantships and internships to help us learn from our cohort and get ideas for our future
job.” Respondents wrote that they learned to learn through guided pedagogical experiences that connected research and practice, such as case studies and problem-based learning.

Seeking Sage Advice

New professionals repeatedly discussed the crucial role that mentors and supervisors played in their lives during their transition into the field. We asked participants what they would like to tell their supervisors. One wrote, “Having an ‘elder’—someone to consult—has been wonderful. And you’ve done my self-confidence a world of good.” Early in the transition, many respondents sought out seasoned professionals to provide guidance, support, and a safe harbor during challenging periods: “You serve as my sounding board and let me emotionally throw up all of my frustrations from the week before.” Although many felt that they received considerable support from supervisors, others felt undervalued. One of the latter wrote, “I am learning to deal with a supervisor who does not view her staff as a source from which to pull ideas, but rather her minions.” Regardless of how they described how they felt about their supervisor, the vast majority of respondents shared that their supervisor played a major role during their transition.

Nearly all of the respondents viewed seasoned professionals as key dispensers of sage advice and guidance during their transition. Additionally, new professionals who lacked a guide believed that they toiled more than was necessary. One wrote, “The biggest challenge thus far has been trying to figure out the political/organizational unknowns of the department with little input/direction.” Another shared the need for additional coaching, “Feedback, feedback, feedback. . . . I know that supervisors are often thrilled to simply get us through the training process and off and running in our positions, but more constructive feedback would be fantastic.”

New professionals discussed their struggle with the transition away from the “sheltered” world of graduate school and their “developmental” supervisors and often felt stunned at the abrupt departure of earlier mentors in their professional lives.

I was also surprised at the rate of speed at which all my mentors completely dropped out of my life now that I am no longer a graduate student or at the school I got my masters at. This was probably one of the most devastating occurrences of all, really.

During their transition, when bouts of personal and professional uncertainty were common, many new professionals felt like they were on their own except for their supervisor. While this relationship was often beneficial it also placed a great deal of pressure on a single professional relationship.

Usually, that burden [discussing problems, hopes, and fears] ends up on my supervisor’s plate during our weekly check-ins. I come into her office as a big ball of complaints, insecurities, and frustration. Rarely does she see me in the well-adjusted, composed manner that I try to carry myself in the other 167 hours of the week. I’m afraid she thinks I’m incompetent, over-my-head, and far too stressed out to do this work effectively. But she’s it for support.

During the first year on the job many new professionals became less dependent upon mentors and supervisors as they gained confidence and moved toward becoming self-directed professionals. Some discussed the point in time when they realized their daily work or professional development were their own responsibility, not that of their supervisor or a mentor: “I wanted someone else to tell me what I was supposed to be doing; now I know that part of what I do is to figure out
what I am supposed to do. Internal leadership you could call it” and “I think a big thing that impacted me was realizing how much I would have to create my own experience—that my supervisor and colleagues would at most give me some helpful nudges.” One respondent wrote, “I think one thing that always continues to surprise me is that where I have always looked for someone else such as a supervisor to have the answer...now I’m that someone.” Conversely, by the end of their first year, some new professionals never appeared to have moved to a place of embracing the idea of “internal leadership.”

Summary

As others (Amey & Reesor, 2002; Magolda & Carnaghi, 2004) have pointed out, new professionals have many tasks to accomplish in addition to simply doing their jobs. Participants in our study were working to develop professional identity and navigate cultural adjustments. They were supported in this transition by maintaining a learning orientation and using professional elders. Yet even in these supports, new professionals must transition from a more dependent, student role to an independent, professional peer role where responsibility for job performance is primary and individual development is secondary. In short, new professionals must “grow up” quickly and realize that being in student affairs is no longer just about them. How, exactly, they left graduate programs without this orientation is the sort of question to which we now turn.

IMPLICATIONS FOR CURRICULUM, PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE, AND RESEARCH

The findings suggest at least five major implications for higher education and student affairs curriculum, practice, and research. Implications address both content and process of graduate education, as well as supervision of new professionals.

Make the Implicit Explicit: Use Coursework to Frame Professional Identity and Student Affairs Work

Although nearly all participants wrote about how assistantships, practicum placements, and internships were essential components in their preparation for full-time positions, they rarely—unless asked directly—discussed the impact of the formal curriculum. The finding that experiential learning was critical to future success supports the long-held recommendation (e.g., ACPA, 2003; CAS, 2006) that graduate students should have multiple practical experiences in different kinds of offices to broaden their understanding of the field. This practice also allows students to observe multiple professional perspectives and widen the net of possible mentors as they transition into the field.

Formal coursework’s relative lack of impact—or much lower salience in the lives of new professionals—is disconcerting. One reason for low salience may be that new professionals do not see intellectual preparation for the field as particularly well connected to the work of the field. There may be pedagogical implications, but the data show clear content implications as well. New professionals specifically noted that they needed additional training in practical skills such as supervision, budgeting, counseling, and other administrative tasks. Some new professionals noted that they were unable to use knowledge of, for example, student development theories to develop a program or plan an intervention. They wrote that their graduate programs prioritized knowledge attainment over application (such as through case studies or problem-based learning), leaving them at a loss once they got into the field. Increased focus on competencies—what graduates can do with what they
know—over simply knowledge acquisition—what graduates know—is one implication of this finding. An additional implication involves helping supervisors of new professionals to facilitate new professionals’ transition from learning to know to learning to do. Viewing the first semester or year of a professional’s career as an apprenticeship would be one model of this approach.

As Magolda and Carnaghi (2004) made clear, and Amey and Reesor (2002) also addressed, new professionals encountered unexpected degrees of institutional politics. Respondents expressed frustration, annoyance, and confusion in the face of organizational dynamics that were at times opaque. Trying to ascertain how things got accomplished—and understanding why certain things did not—seemed to take up a great deal of new professionals’ thinking about their work. In spite of courses and experiential learning, many new professionals in our study seemed to lack an accurate understanding of “how colleges and universities work” (Birnbaum, 1988). Although graduate programs may focus on best practices in student affairs and instilling a commitment to accomplish these practices, there may not be enough discussion about how and why postsecondary institutions change (or do not). As Amey and Reesor argued, more curricular and experiential learning emphasis on organizational change may be needed so that new professionals who see themselves as change agents also understand how change happens and their role as a new professional in that process. Beginning every in-class case study with the instruction “You are the Vice President of Student Affairs at X University . . . ” may not help graduate students prepare themselves as change agents as well as, perhaps, some of the content. There is at least one example of such an initiative in the field (see Rogers, Magolda, Baxter Magolda, & Abowitz, 2004), but evidence of widespread adoption of a learning partnership model (Baxter Magolda) does not appear in the data. Given the ways that new professionals with orientations toward internal leadership or self-directed learning described coping with challenges in the workplace, we recommend continued exploration of this aspect of graduate education and transition to full-time employment.

Provide a Compass: Prepare Graduates to Read and Navigate in New Organizational Cultures

Our data show that new professionals feel unprepared to read and navigate in new organizational cultures. Echoing the findings of Renn and Hodges (2007), some participants who struggled to adapt to the culture of their new institution felt that they had not adequately considered organizational “fit” during their job search; some felt that their graduate programs had not prepared them for finding a good professional fit and then reading and adapting
to the new organization. Faculty might argue that it is not their job to teach graduate students how to find a job at a compatible institution. But as educators in professional preparation programs, a substantial element of our work relates to socializing graduate students for the world of work in their chosen field, whether it is student affairs or another area of higher education administration or policy. How that socialization is incorporated into the formal or informal curriculum is a matter for individual programs to consider, but judging from the number of new professionals who felt adrift, there is a gap in professional preparation. Explicit attention not only to learning organizational theory but also to learning how to use it in relation to one’s work might address some of this gap.

A strategy we recommend to improve graduate preparation is the inclusion of institutional diversity as a topic in both classroom and experiential learning settings. New professionals who found themselves in institutions very different from their undergraduate and master’s institutions expressed particularly high levels of frustration trying to read their new organizations. Because the majority of graduate programs in higher education and student affairs are at public universities with enrollments larger than 10,000 (ACPA, 2003; ASHE, 2002), most new professionals are socialized in these contexts, though many end up working in other types of institutions. Westfall (2007), for example, recently called for additional focus on preparing new professionals for work in small college settings; Hirt (2006) captured the idea in the title of her book, Where You Work Matters: Student Affairs Administration at Different Types of Institutions. We recommend including course readings and case studies that incorporate diverse institutional types (public and private, 4-year and 2-year, selective admissions and open-access, large and small, urban and rural), field trips to institutions different from the one where the degree is being earned, visits from professionals from a range of institutional types, practicum/internship placements in a variety of institutions, and attention in the graduate admissions process to including students from diverse institutional types. We further recommend an explicit focus not just on knowledge attainment about the impact of various institutions and cultures on professional practice, but on how new professionals can apply this knowledge to accomplish organizational goals.

Expect Individual Responsibility for Professional Development: Cultivate a Lifelong Learning Orientation

It was clear in our data that some new professionals were learning to take personal responsibility for their own professional development. They understood that being a student affairs professional was not the same as being an undergraduate or graduate student, when someone else was responsible for providing learning and developmental opportunities. Yet our participants expressed frustration and sometimes sadness at the realization that faculty and mentors were no longer there to create learning contexts and provide regular feedback. We recommend that graduate programs focus on developing a learning orientation towards professional work, where students learn not only how to do the work of various functional areas and how to apply theory to student affairs practice, but also to use classroom and experiential learning contexts (e.g., assistantships, practicum placements) to understand their own learning and professional development styles. Strategies for cultivating this orientation include purposeful reflection on practice through journaling or regular meetings with a mentor and a small group of peers.

A key element, as we see it, of these
strategies is to build into them progressive degrees of individual responsibility, so that when new professionals begin their jobs—often without knowing anyone at the new institution, sometimes as the only new professional on the staff—they have a set of techniques they can use to begin to build networks for professional support and development. The proclivity of new professionals for online communication through digital social networking (as evidenced through our data and personal observations) may be an underutilized resource in preparing graduate students to take responsibility for their own support and development. No matter the medium (in person or online), the message must be delivered that new professionals need to be prepared to create conditions for and manage their own learning without the support and regular feedback of faculty and mentors. Explicit attention to this need could be included in graduate programs through self-assessment, reflection, introduction to the range of professional development options (e.g., seminars, publications, professional association networks, conferences), and accountability for creating a personal plan for ongoing learning after graduate school.

Build a Culture of Feedback and Accountability: Promote Effective Use of Supervisors and Mentors

Although new professionals sometimes experienced a rough transition from being the focus of learning environments to being responsible for creating those environments, we do not recommend decreasing support to or making life harder for graduate students as ways to narrow the gap and thus ease the transition. Indeed, based on our data we recommend building on the support that students already experience to help them learn to seek effective feedback and support from supervisors and mentors. A common theme in our data was that in graduate school the support was already in place, but in the field new professionals had to find it for themselves as, for example, “internal leadership.” We suggest that graduate programs could promote this development by creating opportunities for students to develop accurate self-assessment, to read a work environment, to reflect on work-related expectations, and then to act on that analysis. In the more supportive environment of a graduate program, aspiring student affairs professionals could learn these skills before having to apply them in the higher risk environment of the first full-time job.

Our data show that some new professionals have unrealistic expectations of supervisors and mentors, and sometimes are unclear on the difference between them, how to use them effectively, and how to read professional boundaries. A few new professionals seemed not to understand why supervisors were more concerned with their employee job performance than with employee development, and a few felt betrayed by work environments that were not at all what they had expected based on information gleaned in job interviews. More often, though, new professionals were simply unsure how to use a supervisor to get feedback on job performance and how to find someone to be a mentor. We recommend that graduate programs devote explicit attention to helping students understand the wide variation in supervisory styles, effective ways to communicate within these varying relationships, and strategies for cultivating mentors. Research literature on supervision and mentoring could be useful in this effort.

We would be doing our participants a disservice if we did not raise the issue of supervising new professionals. Although it is outside the scope of this paper to include a detailed analysis and recommendations, it is clear from our data that the quality of supervision of new professionals in student affairs varies from exceptionally good to
downright awful. Emerging research on supervision in student affairs and supervision of new professionals in particular (Janosik et al., 2003; Tull, 2006) may lead to improvements, but how to improve supervisory practice now is unclear. Supervision is not typically included as a competency for graduate programs, because many entry-level professionals do not supervise full-time staff. Where one is to learn to be a good supervisor is left to the individual, with relatively few resources. When supervision of new professionals is neutral or good, the results seem to show positively in our data. When supervision is bad, there are still lessons for new professionals to learn from it, but how long those individuals will stay in their positions—or in the field at all—may be influenced by their poor experiences with supervisors.

Be Data-driven: Use Best Practices in Research and Assessment to Understand Learning and Professional Development Outcomes of Individual Graduate Programs and in the Field as a Whole

The ACPA (2003) and CAS (2006) standards for graduate education in student affairs are useful guides for curriculum development and assessment, but they do not replace the need for individual programs to understand what students have learned and what they take with them into the first job. Longitudinal cohort studies of recent graduates can be an effective means to understand how they have transitioned to the workforce, what they are using from the graduate program, and how they are making sense of their work in the context of graduate study (and vice versa). Early to mid-career professionals are excellent sources of information on the “staying power” of graduate education. Technology makes keeping track of graduates easier than ever and can also facilitate data collection through online surveys, email, and so forth.

Periodic surveys of the field (e.g., Herdlein, 2004) provide useful information on competencies, curriculum content, and expectations of recent graduates, but they do not typically provide detail on individual professionals’ experience. There is no evidence that the attrition question can be answered through these studies. Better understanding the transition from graduate school to early career may provide insights beyond the competency-based approach to researching new professionals. Studies of new professionals’ self-perceived needs (Cilente et al., 2006) and the NSNPSA provide the perspectives of new professionals themselves, offering some possibilities for understanding how graduate programs might improve preparation for work.

CONCLUSION

As the five themes highlighted here illustrate, the experiences of new professionals have something to tell faculty about how better to prepare graduates for their first jobs. They imply an imperative for faculty and graduate students to take a holistic approach to early career, considering graduate preparation and the transition to the first job as a seamless learning experience. Explicit attention to the development of a professional identity and what professionalism entails is one area for exploration. Another relates to how well programs prepare graduates to apply what they learn about organizational fit to something as personal—and important—as the job search and entry into full-time work. Getting students to think about graduate school as the beginning of a lifelong process of professional learning and development, rather than as a discrete experience that ends with commencement, is a third area to consider. Fourth, preparing students to work with supervisors and to find mentors is an important implication of this
study. Finally, we argue that in addition to the course and experiential content of master’s programs (as, for example, guided by CAS, 2006), graduate preparation in higher education and student affairs should include explicit attention to the processes of transitioning to full-time work and a renewed focus on developing new professionals who are capable of self-directed learning.

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New Professionals


