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Self-Perceived Competence of New Student Affairs Professionals

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Self-Perceived Competence of New Student Affairs Professionals

by

Jennifer Smith Schneider

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment 
of the requirement for the degree of 
Doctor of Philosophy 
in Curriculum and Instruction with an emphasis in 
Higher Education, Administration 
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College of Education 
University of South Florida

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to the new professionals in student affairs in American higher education who have so much promise and hold the future of the profession in their hands. I have been encouraged and challenged by their dedication, creativity and compassion. The future of student affairs is secure and I am honored to learn and serve with those who will facilitate its progress.
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I am incredibly grateful for my sweet family who sacrificed so much in order for me to complete my degree. To my husband, Steve, and my children Cameron, Chase and Caris, thank you for making this manageable and for supporting my professional growth. I love you very, very much.

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ABSTRACT

This study was designed to determine the extent to which new student affairs professionals feel competent for the work and to identify the experiences that foster such competence in them. The study also revealed discrepancies in the perceived levels and sources of competence between professionals who have completed either one or three years of full-time employment in student affairs. While some quantitative studies have addressed competence in student affairs professionals, the literature lacks in-depth information regarding the acquisition of competence of new professionals. This basic qualitative study offers rich information about competence development from the professionals themselves.

Participants graduated from five master’s-level student affairs preparation programs housed at large public institutions in Florida. They generally felt competent at the mid-range (intermediate) in the ten areas published by the American College Personnel Administrators – College Student Educators International (ACPA) and the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators – Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education (NASPA). Primary sources of competence were full-time experience in student affairs, graduate preparation programs, and professional development. Those who obtained their degrees more recently reported higher levels of competence than those who have been in the field longer. Other interesting themes relating to competence development emerged, as well. Implications for faculty members in graduate preparation programs, supervisors of new professionals, and those who develop curriculum for professional associations are discussed in Chapter Five.
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Background

The field of student affairs is young and dynamic. In response to the ever-changing nature of higher education, the work of student affairs practitioners has evolved in a number of ways. It has done so to accommodate a philosophical shift to focus on student learning, the increasing diversity of students served, and a growing range of services and programs that have become normative on campuses across the United States.

Early deans were disciplinarians and generally had their roots in the ministry. The profession then entered a phase when there was a focus on holistic student development, but that didn’t resonate with faculty and other leaders. For the past decade student affairs work has been driven by an emphasis on student learning, which is more consistent with the mission of higher education. The skill sets associated with fostering student learning differ substantially from the knowledge and skills that early student affairs administrators needed.

Another dramatic change in the landscape in higher education can be attributed to the increase in diversity and complexity of the student population. Increased access to American higher education has changed the demographic profile of those attending college. Students today represent an array of ethnicities, ages, religions, abilities and values. The knowledge and skills
required to appropriately address the needs of such a complex population vary greatly from those required in earlier generations of those who worked in student affairs.

The complexity of the student body, along with regulatory initiatives, legal developments, and enrollment management pressure, has expanded the range of services and programs offered through student affairs. While earlier generations of student affairs administrators assumed general responsibilities and oversaw a wide range of programs and services on campus, today’s professionals are responsible for highly specialized functions that often target very specific populations.

Another important development in the evolution of student affairs is associated with the readiness of those who are beginning in the field of student affairs. Historically, a person working with students developed skills and abilities based solely upon work experience. Today, newer professionals are expected to almost immediately have a range of skills, knowledge, and abilities that allow them to be effective in the very early stages of their careers.

**Sources of Competence in Student Affairs Work**

The first professional preparation program for student affairs administrators was established in 1914 at Teacher’s College, Columbia University (Thelin, 2003). Since then, over a hundred programs have been established to provide the knowledge, skills and experience deemed necessary for quality work in the field.

Most programs adhere to the standards outlined by the Council for the Advancement of Standards (CAS) in CAS Professional Standards for Higher Education (2012), which provides guidelines for program faculty regarding admissions, curriculum, assessment, and supervised practice experiences. While components of these programs are similar, much of the interpretation
of the CAS guidelines is left to the programs’ faculty, resulting in a wide range of course requirements, faculty assignments, experiential learning opportunities, and course delivery models. Regardless of these variances, an assumption can be made that students who graduate from these programs are prepared for entry level student affairs work.

Once graduates secure employment in the field, they have the responsibility to engage in ongoing professional development. These experiences can be attained in a number of environments, on campus and beyond. While some institutions provide quality professional development experiences, others may assume that such growth will happen more organically through the supervisor relationship and other opportunities entry-level administrators have to collaborate with more experienced professionals.

Professional organizations also provide a platform for ongoing professional development. Annual conferences, organized events by region, online resources and regular publications all provide ways in which student affairs administrators can improve the quality of their work. The two most prominent organizations associated with professional development in student affairs are the American College Personnel Association, College Student Educators International (ACPA) and the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators, Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education (NASPA). These two associations have jointly produced lists of competencies expected of student affairs professionals; the most recent of which will serve as the standard for competency in this study (ACPA & NASPA, 2010).

Competencies

Over the past several decades, researchers and practitioners have developed numerous lists of competencies that student affairs professionals ought to be able to demonstrate
(Kretovics, 2002; Newton & Richardson, 1976; Ostroth, 1975 and 1981; Rhatigan, 1968; Waple, 2006). However, none of them has been adopted across the profession and, since the roles and responsibilities of student affairs professionals are still evolving, many of them are no longer relevant.

In 2010, ACPA and NASPA conducted research to inform the development of a list of professional competency areas for all student affairs practitioners, regardless of their years of experience, title, or functional area. While CAS had provided a framework for organizational effectiveness, it joined with these two associations to form a joint task force that identified individual skills and qualities that would increase accountability and, ultimately, advance the profession.

The joint task force identified and defined ten areas of competence that student affairs professionals should be able to effectively demonstrate at a basic, intermediate, or advanced level. These areas of competence will be used as standards by which new students will evaluate themselves in this study.

1. Advising and Helping – addresses the knowledge, skills and attitudes related to providing counseling and advising support, direction, feedback, critique, referral, and guidance to individuals and groups.

2. Assessment, Evaluation, and Research (AER) – focuses on the ability to use, design, conduct, and critique qualitative and quantitative AER analyses, to manage organizations using AER processes and the results obtained from them, and to shape the political and ethical climate surrounding AER processes and uses on campus.
3. Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) – includes the knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed to create learning environments that are enriched with diverse views and people. It is also designed to create an institutional ethos that accepts and celebrates differences among people, helping to free them of any misconceptions and prejudices.

4. Ethical Professional Practice – pertains to the knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed to understand and apply ethical standards to one’s work. While ethics is an integral component of all the competency areas, this focuses specifically on the integration of ethics into all aspects of self and professional practice.

5. History, Philosophy, and Values – involves knowledge, skills, and attitudes that connect the history, philosophy, and values of the profession to one’s current professional practice. This competency area embodies the foundations of the profession from which current and future research and practice will grow. The commitment to demonstrating this competency area ensures that our present and future practices are informed by an understanding of our history, philosophy, and values.

6. Human and Organizational Resources – includes knowledge, skills, and attitudes used in the selection, supervision, motivation, and formal evaluation of staff; conflict resolution; management of the politics of organizational discourse; and the effective application of strategies and techniques associated with financial resources, facilities management, fundraising, technology use, crisis management, risk management, and sustainable resources.

7. Law, Policy, and Governance – includes the knowledge, skills, and attitudes relating to policy development processes used in various contexts, the application of legal
constructs, and the understanding of governance structures and their effect on one’s professional practice.

8. Leadership – addresses the knowledge, skills, and attitudes required of a leader, whether it be a positional leader or a member of the staff, in both an individual capacity and within a process of how individuals work together effectively to envision, plan, effect change in organizations, and respond to internal and external constituencies and issues.

9. Personal Foundations – involves the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to maintain emotional, physical, social, environmental, relational, spiritual, and intellectual wellness; be self-directed and self-reflective; maintain excellence and integrity in work; be comfortable with ambiguity; be aware of one’s own areas of strength and growth; have a passion for work; and remain curious.

10. Student Learning Development – addresses the concepts and principles of student development and learning theory. This includes the ability to apply theory to improve and inform student affairs practice, as well as understanding teaching and training theory and practice (ACPA & NASPA, 2010).

Problem Statement

There is no board exam or certification process for student affairs professionals. Most job listings, even those of entry level ones, expect that applicants will have degrees in student affairs. CAS standards that are generally acceptable guidelines for curriculum development in graduate professional preparation programs leave plenty of room for creativity and diversity among programs of study. Students who earn master’s level degrees in student affairs may enter the
workforce with a very diverse set of knowledge, skills and work experience, depending on their alma mater.

Variances in curricula, and in the different job requirements across functional areas, have made it difficult for researchers to assess the effectiveness of graduate programs in preparing new student affairs professionals for entry level work. A few, however, have been conducted based on existing areas of competence developed by professional organizations or by specific samples of supervisors used for individual studies. While these projects have made notable contributions to the literature, the majority have been quantitative in nature (Herdlein, 2004; Burkard, Cole, Ott, & Stoflet, 2004; Waple, 2006; Reynolds, 2011; Young & Janosik, 2007; Delworth, Hanson, & Associates, 1980; Hyman, 1988; Sandeen, 1982; Stamatakos, 1981).

Employing institutions, professional associations, and graduate preparation programs should better understand their roles in developing competence in student affairs professionals, particularly at the critical early stages of their careers. Qualitative data adds richness to that which has already been assessed quantitatively. Learning from new student affairs professionals, themselves, about what they know and how they learned it can inform faculty decisions about curriculum design and revision, senior administrators’ decisions about hiring, and officers of professional organizations’ decisions about professional development offerings. Qualitative inquiry has amplified the voices of new student affairs professionals as they reflect on the experiences that have shaped them professionally and the meaning they attribute to those experiences.
Purpose of the Study

This study was designed to determine the degree to which new student affairs professionals feel competent for the work and to identify the experiences that foster such competence in them. The study also revealed discrepancies in the perceived levels and sources of competence between professionals who have completed one or three years of full-time employment in student affairs.

Research Questions

This study was designed to answer the following questions:

1. How do new student affairs professionals describe their level of competence in each of the competency areas defined by ACPA and NASPA?
2. To what extent do new student affairs professionals attribute their competence to the coursework, applied experiences, faculty relationships, and other characteristics of their graduate professional preparation program?
3. To what extent do new student affairs professionals attribute their competence to professional development experiences since the completion of their academic program?
4. To what extent do new student affairs professionals attribute their competence to full time professional work?
5. What other sources of competence do participants cite when reflecting on their experiences as new professionals?
6. To what extent do years of experience affect new student affairs professionals’ perceptions of the source of their competence?
Question Number One was intended to evaluate each participant’s self-reported level of competence in each of the 10 areas identified by NASPA and ACPA as being crucial to the success of new student affairs professionals. NASPA and ACPA have clearly defined what it means for professionals to be competent at basic, intermediate and advanced levels in each of the ten areas of skill they identified (ACPA & NASPA, 2010). Results from each of the respondents have been summarized.

Questions Number Two through Five addressed the sources from which competency was obtained. These varied and will be discussed in detail in Chapter Four.

Question Six allowed the researcher to compare the responses of those who had served in student affairs for only one year, versus those who had maintained employment in student affairs for three years. The researcher assumed that the latter group would attribute more professional competence to experiences outside of graduate preparation programs than those individuals who had recently graduated.

Theoretical Framework

Participants’ self-perceptions were interpreted in light of where they find themselves developmentally in their careers. Donald Super was a career development theorist whose major contributions involve sociological career patterns and their intersection with psychological life stages. He researched various segments of career development such as trait factors, self-concept, and sociological and economic aspects, and then developed a comprehensive description of career development that is depicted in the Life-Career Rainbow (figure).
Super recognized that the markers he chose to use were rigid – that roles may overlap and that age is relative – but his model offers insight into the developmental stage of the new student affairs professionals who will participate in this study.

According to Super’s model, most new professionals are in the establishment process and are being shaped for their careers by various determinants, both personal (academic achievement, intelligence, attitudes, values, self-awareness) and situational (historical change, family, community, employment, school). He suggested that by the time most adults reach the age of 25, they begin settling down in a career and working toward advancement (Super, 1957). That young adults pursue an advanced degree is indicative of the goal-directed behavior Super attributed to this group. They are in a period of transition from the role of student to that of worker, even throughout the course of their graduate programs when they are engaged in class activities, assistantships, internships and practicum experiences. According to Super’s theory, the more adequately they play their role of student and student-worker, the more likely they are to be successful and satisfied in their professional roles (Super, 1980).

![Figure 1. Donald Super’s Life Rainbow](image-url)
Super suggested that the way individuals manage developmental tasks of one life stage directly correlates to their navigation of the next life stage, and that the closer the tasks in the past are to the tasks of the present, the fewer intervening variables exist (Super, 1957). This hypothesis suggests that professional competence would be more often attributed to graduate professional preparation programs by those who most recently graduated than by those who have been in the field longer.

Research Design

In order to capture the rich experiences of new student affairs professionals, the researcher conducted a basic qualitative study using interviews. According to Kvale and Brinkmann (2009), an interview enables the researcher to gather information that cannot otherwise be effectively collected. Interviews are more efficient and interactive; gathering information via observations would take much longer and would be unidirectional. Rapport with the participants in interviews is essential. An advantage of the researcher in this project was that she worked in a functional area in student affairs and that she had instructed in a professional preparation program, which was helpful in building rapport.

Basic qualitative research is grounded in constructivism, as the researcher attempts to understand how people interpret their experiences and what meaning they attribute to those experiences (Merriam, 2009). Through the interview process, the researcher gathered data directly from the personal accounts of participants regarding their professional competence and the sources to which they attribute it. Upon analysis, authentic themes emerged that can inform the way faculty, supervisors, and professional associations design professional development
opportunities for those who are entering the profession. More information about qualitative research and the specific design of this project can be found in Chapter Three.

**Description of Professional Preparation Programs Used in this Study**

Participants in this study were new professionals who had recently attained a master’s degree from one of five student affairs professional preparation programs in Florida. Each institution included in the study was a large, public university with a well-established program in student affairs. At least one full-time faculty member was assigned to each program, with several student affairs practitioners serving as adjunct instructors. All five programs subscribed to the CAS standards and admitted students from across the nation. There were many consistencies in the programs of studies offered by the five institutions, including a broad, introductory course at the beginning of the program and a capstone course at its conclusion. Each of the programs offered courses in both traditional, online, and hybrid formats and included practicum and internship components, although those varied in duration, location, and credit hours earned.

**Definitions of Terms**

For the purpose of this study, the following terms should be defined as described by the researcher:

*Competency:* The knowledge, ability and skills necessary to perform entry level student affairs work as described by ACPA and NASPA.

*Functional areas in student affairs:* Departments and programs in a college or university setting that involve direct service to students outside of the classroom. They include:

- academic advising programs
• alcohol, tobacco, and other drug programs
• career services; counseling centers
• financial aid
• Greek organizations
• housing and residential life programs
• advocacy programs
• international student affairs
• leadership development programs
• orientation services
• lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender programs
• recreational sports programs
• multicultural affairs
• service learning
• student activities
• student government
• student conduct
• disability support services
• education abroad programs
• student unions

*Graduate professional preparation programs*: Master’s degree programs that prepare students to work with college students within the scope of student affairs functional areas in higher education.
**New student affairs professionals:** Individuals who have completed a graduate professional preparation program and who are employed by an institution of higher education, serving in a student affairs functional area for fewer than four years.

**Professional development:** Structured presentations or workshops offered at an institution or at conferences that are intended to enhance professional skills and knowledge.

**Full-time professional work:** The daily, regular performance of duties assigned.

**Delimitations**

This study was limited to new professionals who graduated from one of five public institutions in Florida. Those who graduated from similar programs at other institutions were intentionally excluded so that the data collected can be generalizable to other institutions of similar size and scope. All participants were full-time students who were not employed, outside of their graduate assistantship, throughout their graduate experience.

The sample included only those professionals who had completed either one or three years of full-time work in student affairs. This allowed the researcher to make comparisons between the groups regarding the degree and sources of their competence. The sample consisted of only student affairs professionals who were working in traditional functional areas. While institutions vary in organizational structure, and other areas may fall under student affairs, this study only included those most traditional areas that are defined above. The sample excluded those individuals who had full-time student affairs experience prior to their entering a graduate professional preparation program in order to more clearly define sources of competence.
Limitations

In qualitative studies, the researcher is the instrument and bias is always present. Experts in qualitative research agree that the researcher’s perceptions and interpretations of the data are central to findings and that bias, when controlled, can provide meaningful insight that is not attainable through quantitative measures (Locke, Spirduso, & Silverman, 2007). Punch (1986) suggested that qualitative researchers continuously reflect on their motivations for conducting the study and monitor the consequences created for participants, their conscience, and the purpose of the study. While precautions were taken to ensure that all participants got the same experience and the information obtained from them was objective, the researcher recognizes bias as a limitation of a qualitative study such as this.

Another limitation relating to bias is the researcher’s connection to the profession and, more specifically, to one of the professional preparation programs included in the sample. While the researcher has not participated in any of the graduate programs as a student, she does assist in teaching courses in one program as a part of a doctoral assistantship. Some of the participants had met the researcher before, which may have impacted their responses.

Lastly, because the researcher has participated in hiring new professionals, she has developed her own perceptions of competence that may not necessarily be related to the delineations set forth by ACPA and NASPA that guided the interviews.

Significance of the Study

The existing literature regarding the competence of new student affairs professionals is limited and primarily quantitative. This study provides useful information gleaned from the professionals themselves regarding the impact of professional preparation programs and
professional development on the competence of new professionals. By exploring the self-reported competence and experiences of student affairs professionals who are either one or three years into their careers, this study expanded and enriched the bodies of research on graduate program development, in-house professional development programs, and formal professional development offerings by associations. It also provided useful information about the general competency and self-perceptions of new employees to supervisors.

**Outline of Subsequent Chapters**

Chapter Two will provide an in-depth review of the literature as it pertains to the history and evolution of student affairs and the competencies expected of those who do the work. The researcher will also explore career development theory, particularly the work of Donald Super, as a framework for this study. Finally, literature regarding professional preparation programs, professional development, and the effect of work experience on competence will be addressed.

In Chapter Three, the researcher will describe her methodology for this study. A brief overview of basic qualitative research will be offered, followed by an in-depth description of the research plan.

In Chapter Four, the sample will be described along with results. Data will be presented in order of the research questions.

Chapter Five will present implications for the research as they relate to graduate preparation programs, supervisors of new professionals, the new professionals themselves, and professional associations. Suggestions for further research are also described.
CHAPTER TWO: A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Student Affairs

The profession of student affairs is dynamic. Articulating the skills and characteristics necessary for success in the field can be challenging as the work differs from institution to institution, department to department, and year to year. In order to make sense of the complex nature of student affairs today, it seems prudent to reflect on the history and evolution of the profession, and then evaluate the changing expectations of those who have committed their lives to the education of college students outside of the classroom.

At its inception, higher education in America was afforded only to affluent white men who were primarily supervised by the president, faculty, and tutors who lived in residence halls. Faculty and administrators served in loco parentis (in place of the parent) to guide and discipline the young men, both in and out of the classroom. As the number of land-grant institutions increased, enrollment expanded to include women, and students began creatively seeking ways to engage during time spent out of class. They established sports teams, fraternities and sororities, campus newspapers, and clubs, making the responsibility of supervision outside of class a greater task than faculty were able (or willing) to manage (Thelin, 2003).

Early in the 20th century, institutions began hiring deans of women and deans of men to support the president and faculty by assuming the roles of counselor and disciplinarian on campus. Almost immediately, these deans began to seek each other out for professional
development and socialization opportunities. As a result, the *National Association of Deans of Women* and the *National Association of Deans of Men* were established in 1916 and 1917, respectively (Cowley, 1962 as cited in Thelin, 2003). Soon after, the organization now known as NASPA (Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education) was formed, and, in 1929, the *National Association of Personnel and Placement Officers*, which was renamed the *American College Personnel Association (ACPA)*, was established.

As these associations were being formed, a group of college presidents comprising the American Council on Education (ACE) sponsored a research project that identified ways in which colleges and universities were actively aiding in whole student development. In 1937, they developed an action plan in response to the findings of their research. *The Student Personnel Point of View* challenged institutions to tend to the needs of their students beyond academia and defined student personnel work and its relationship to other administrative and academic functions within the institution. *The Student Personnel Point of View* was revised in 1949 to refine the philosophical basis of the profession and delineate a more comprehensive institutional approach to the work (American Council on Education, 1937, 1949).

The student personnel point of view encompasses the student as a whole. The concept of education is broadened to include attention to the student’s well rounded development – physically, socially, emotionally and spiritually, as well as intellectually….The realization of this objective – the full maturing of each student – cannot be attained without interest in and integrated efforts toward the development of each and every facet of his personality and potentialities (American Council on Education, 1949, p.2).
In 1967, *The Joint Statement on Rights and Freedoms of Students* was published by the American Association of University Professors, the United States National Student Association (now the United States Student Association), the Association of American Colleges (now the Association of American Colleges and Universities), the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators, and the National Association of Women Deans and Counselors. This publication documented students’ rights to learn in the classroom, on campus and within the community and validated the role of student affairs administrators. It addressed the rights of students within the context of student affairs, including freedom of inquiry and expression, freedom to participate in institutional government, and freedom of association (AAUP, 1967). In 1992, it was republished with omissions of gender-specific references. The revised edition also included case law to support its claims (AAUP, 1992).

In 1972, Brown was commissioned by ACPA to author *Student development in tomorrow's higher education: A return to the academy*. The purpose of the monograph was to view initiatives being proposed for higher education in light of their implications for student development and to make recommendations for those planning the future of higher education and student personnel programs. This document was fundamental to the philosophical shift of student affairs work from student development to student learning (Brown, 1972).

Another seminal document in the evolution of student affairs was ACPA’s 1994 publication, *The Student Learning Imperative*. Like Brown’s monograph, this document established a learning-oriented focus of student affairs work (ACPA, 1994).

Two documents that have shaped the profession in more recent years are *Learning Reconsidered* and *Learning Reconsidered 2* (Keeling, 2004, 2006). The authors of these pieces
challenged faculty and administrators in higher education to consider the term “learning” in a broad context, encompassing both student affairs and academic affairs, and to educate the whole student. These documents charged student affairs professionals with identifying and assessing learning outcomes, validating the learning process through the experiences of students outside of the classroom.

The establishment of professional associations and the publication of the aforementioned documents are the foundation of the student affairs profession, but, as American higher education has evolved, so have the functions of student affairs administrators. Increasingly heterogeneous student populations have prompted the creation of various programs and services across campuses that address the holistic development of all students. Opportunities for engagement in out-of-class experiences have dramatically increased in number and quality as research has repeatedly found causal relationships between student involvement and persistence, validating the profession and creating a need for qualified personnel to continue the work (Astin, 1984; Kuh, 2007; Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt & Associates, 2005; Miller, Tyree, Riegler & Herreid, 2010; Tinto, 1993).

The profession is complex and the notion of training pre-professional graduate students through a rigid program of study has evoked challenging conversations among faculty and practitioners. Many believe that one’s personal traits make him a better student affairs administrator more than any specific skill set that can be learned in an academic program. Evidence suggests, however, that training through a pre-professional graduate program is critical for a successful career in student affairs (Delworth, Hanson, & Associates, 1980; Hyman, 1988; Sandeen, 1982; Stamatakos, 1981). While specific skills related to a particular functional area can be attained through supervised practical experience, the general purpose of professional
preparation programs is to instill in students general competence that can be applied to any specific area and that should be evident throughout their professional journeys (Sandeen, 1982).

**Competencies**

The success of a new professional in student affairs rests in her relationships with others, her fit with the institution and with the job, and her competence. Researchers and practitioners have grappled with definitions, articulation and evidence of competence in student affairs for years. While each functional area requires unique expertise, most agree that a standardized set of skills, qualities, and attitudes are shared by successful entry-level student affairs professionals.

In 1975, Ostroth suggested that student affairs professionals should possess counseling and administration skills first, then problem solving ability, crisis management strategies, and the ability to maintain positive relationships with others within the institution and beyond. The chief student affairs administrators he surveyed indicated little need for entry-level professionals to have strong quantitative skills (statistics, research, and testing), a finding he struggled to make sense of (Ostroth, 1975).

In a period where quantitative measures of performance are becoming more and more a necessity in the student personnel profession, it seems that the quantitative subjects should rate higher. As accountability is emphasized more and more, skill in research techniques should become ever more important to the professionals in student personnel work. Perhaps the responding administrators, a humanistically oriented group, have relatively little interest in quantitative subjects (Ostroth, 1975, p. 321).

Ostroth’s 1981 project found more professionals concerned about assessment in addition to the competencies described in the first study. While this and a few other skills were ranked
highly as indicators of success (conflict mediation, advising and programming), senior student affairs officers indicated that general abilities were most valued in entry level hires, citing interpersonal communication, leadership, decision making, and working cooperatively with a wide range of people among the greatest abilities sought out in candidates (Ostroth, 1981).

Newton and Richardson (1976) established similar findings among student affairs practitioners. Their study concluded that new professionals should be able to interact in meaningful ways with colleagues and students and that they should possess sufficient administrative skills. Interestingly, the participants in this study did not think new professionals necessarily needed to have the capacity to act as change agents; social and economic issues, political skills within the bureaucracy, activist roles, and emphasis on the rights of blacks, women and other minorities were not rated as being important. This is somewhat surprising given the social climate of that time, as institutions of higher education were invoking affirmative action policies and, for the first time ever, considering diversity as a factor in student admission. Perhaps that, while senior administrators were managing these changes, entry-level employees were not expected to engage in the challenging circumstances associated with them.

Lovell and Kosten (2000) synthesized 30 years of research to determine the skills, knowledge, and personal traits necessary for success as a student affairs administrator. They found that strong administration, management, and human facilitation skills were essential to effective student affairs work. According to their work, successful student affairs professionals must also demonstrate a fundamental knowledge of student development theory, higher education, and functional area responsibilities and demonstrate an ability to work cooperatively and display integrity. As researchers using a meta-analysis approach, they noted the absence of literature exploring the importance of skills and knowledge related to technology, assessment,
politics, and public policy. Some of these areas, however, were addressed by NASPA and ACPA in their competency publications described in detail below.

Two significant projects related to competency were released in 2004. Herdlein (2004) suggested that recent graduates of student affairs graduate programs were not sufficiently prepared for administrative management responsibilities like strategic planning, finance and budgeting. He cited assessment and research skills as necessary for competence, but criticized the writing skills of new student affairs professionals. As practitioners are increasingly required to document program effectiveness, sound feedback on students’ writing is an imperative, and perhaps underemphasized, part of the graduate curriculum.

That same year, Burkard, Cole, Ott and Stoflet (2004) reported that human relations, administrative and management, technology, and research competencies were all critical for entry-level professionals. They also noted personal qualities such as flexibility, interpersonal skills, analytical and critical thinking, problem solving, creativity, and assertiveness as being important for success in student affairs work. The notion of assertiveness somewhat contradicts Newton’s and Richardson’s (1976) finding that a new professional’s capacity for making change was not critical. This apparent increase in personal responsibility is reflective of the growth of the field and the increased expectations of entry-level professionals.

In addition to the ideal skills and qualities of entry-level professionals, Burkard et al. (2004) identified several theories in which new professionals should be well-versed. Astin’s (1984) theory of student involvement, Chickering and Reisser’s (1993) theory of identity development, Kohlberg’s (1984) theory of moral development, and Perry’s (1981) theory of intellectual development were cited as being fundamental to professional preparation. Other
developmental theories that new professionals should know in order to serve students of varying backgrounds and cultures include women’s development (Gilligan, 1982); racial identity development (Cross, 1971; Helms, 1995); minority identity development (Atkinson, Morten & Sue, 1989); and lesbian, gay & bisexual development (Cass, 1979; McCarn & Fassinger, 1996).

Kretovices surveyed 750 college and university employers who were interviewing candidates at an ACPA conference in Washington DC (2002). He concluded that, while employer characteristics and institutional type create nuances in preferred characteristics of candidates, there were some general competencies that were commonly required for entry-level positions. Participants reported that one of the primary characteristics they sought in candidates was a demonstration of helping skills, a quality deemed valuable since the profession’s inception. Somewhat conversely, they did not think that counseling coursework was critical to competence. This implies an assumption that helping skills are innate, or that the fostering of such skills can be infused throughout the graduate curriculum. Participating employers also valued candidates who had relevant experience through their assistantship, practicum assignment or internship; a master’s degree; a personal commitment to diversity; and computer skills. Once again, a demonstrated knowledge of research and assessment was not significantly important to employers in this study.

Waple (2006) identified skills and competencies entry-level professionals had gained in their master’s-level graduate programs and the degree to which those competencies were perceived as useful and necessary on the job. According to Waple’s study, the five skills rated most necessary for new professionals were oral and written communication skills, problem solving, advising students and student organizations, crisis and conflict management, and effective program planning and implementation. The skills learned in their programs that were
ranked least necessary were research methods, the history of higher education and the history of student affairs. It is important to note that these were new professionals self-reporting and that they were asked which skills were “necessary” for their current positions. While new professionals are not likely to be called upon to recite historical professional documents or to recall specific dates and events, learning the history of any profession seems fundamentally valuable, as history almost always shapes the present and future direction of the field. Likewise, these new employees may not be immediately required to facilitate research or assessment projects, but that does not necessarily imply that these subjects should be omitted from the graduate curriculum.

In 2003, the fourth edition of *Student Services: a handbook for the profession* described essential competencies and techniques for entry-level student affairs professionals. Multiculturalism, leadership, teaching, counseling and helping skills, advising and consultation, conflict resolution, community building and programing, and assessment and evaluation were among the skills cited by its authors (Komives & Woodward, 2003). The fifth edition, published in 2010, omitted assessment and evaluation as a competence, but added two additional areas of competence (Schuh, Jones, Harper & Associates, 2010). The first was staffing and supervision; the second was academic and student affairs partnerships. The intermittent presence and omission of assessment and research skills throughout these studies is interesting. The evolution of student affairs has moved from student services to student development to student learning and our competency in the field should be considered through the lens of assessment, intentionality and intended outcomes (Shutt, Garrett, Lynch, & Dean, 2012). Only then will professionals, both new and experienced, know the effect of their work and how well they do it.
According to a Delphi study conducted by Reynolds (2011), student affairs administrators are most helpful to students when they have a strong capacity for listening; building relationships with students; educating; asking questions; providing challenge and support; being honest; solving problems; and knowing the institution, community, and online resources. Participants named the following opportunities and experiences that they felt shaped their capacity to gain helping skills: (a) interaction with students; (b) practice; (c) life experiences and roles; (d) supervisory responsibilities; (e) job-specific training; (f) graduate assistantships, internships and externships; (g) graduate coursework; and (h) collaboration with colleagues. Participants reported that the knowledge and information needed to enhance helping skills include self-knowledge through interaction with others, hands-on practical experience with students, feedback and interaction with supervisors and mentors, knowing best practices and current trends, feedback and interaction with students, communication skills, and self-awareness.

NASPA and ACPA are the leading professional associations for student affairs. Their endorsement of research and practice is well regarded in the field and they have, in recent years, produced a number of documents describing basic competencies effective practitioners should be able to demonstrate. In 1990, NASPA produced this initial list of standards of professional practice:

- Professional Services: Members of NASPA fulfill the responsibilities of their position by supporting the educational interests, rights, and welfare of students in accordance with the mission of the employing institution.
- Agreement with Institutional Mission and Goals: Members who accept employment with an educational institution subscribe to the general mission and goals of the institution.
Management of Institutional Resources: Members seek to advance the welfare of the employing institution through accountability for the proper use of institutional funds, personnel, equipment, and other resources. Members inform appropriate officials of conditions which may be potentially disruptive or damaging to the institution's mission, personnel, and property.

Employment Relationship: Members honor employment relationships. Members do not commence new duties or obligations at another institution under a new contractual agreement until termination of an existing contract, unless otherwise agreed to by the member and the member's current and new supervisors. Members adhere to professional practices in securing positions and employment relationships.

Conflict of Interest: Members recognize their obligation to the employing institution and seek to avoid private interests, obligations, and transactions which are in conflict of interest or give the appearance of impropriety. Members clearly distinguish between statements and actions which represent their own personal views and those which represent their employing institution when important to do so.

Legal Authority: Members respect and acknowledge all lawful authority. Members refrain from conduct involving dishonesty, fraud, deceit, and misrepresentation or unlawful discrimination. NASPA recognizes that legal issues are often ambiguous, and members should seek the advice of counsel as appropriate. Members demonstrate concern for the legal, social codes and moral expectations of the communities in which they live and work even when the dictates of one's conscience may require behavior as a private citizen which is not in keeping with these codes/expectations.
Equal Consideration and Treatment of Others: Members execute professional responsibilities with fairness and impartiality and show equal consideration to individuals regardless of status or position. Members respect individuality and promote an appreciation of human diversity in higher education. In keeping with the mission of their respective institution and remaining cognizant of federal, state, and local laws, they do not discriminate on the basis of race, color, national origin, religion, sex, age, gender identity, gender expression, affectional or sexual orientation, or disability. Members do not engage in or tolerate harassment in any form and should exercise professional judgment in entering into intimate relationships with those for whom they have any supervisory, evaluative, or instructional responsibility.

Student Behavior: Members demonstrate and promote responsible behavior and support actions that enhance personal growth and development of students. Members foster conditions designed to ensure a student's acceptance of responsibility for his/her own behavior. Members inform and educate students as to sanctions or constraints on student behavior which may result from violations of law or institutional policies.

Integrity of Information and Research: Members ensure that all information conveyed to others is accurate and in appropriate context. In their research and publications, members conduct and report research studies to assure accurate interpretation of findings, and they adhere to accepted professional standards of academic integrity.

Confidentiality: Members ensure that confidentiality is maintained with respect to all privileged communications and to educational and professional records considered confidential. They inform all parties of the nature and/or limits of confidentiality. Members share information only in accordance with institutional policies and relevant
statutes when given the informed consent or when required to prevent personal harm to themselves or others.

- **Research Involving Human Subjects:** Members are aware of and take responsibility for all pertinent ethical principles and institutional requirements when planning any research activity dealing with human subjects. (See Ethical Principles in the Conduct of Research with Human Participants, Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association, 1982.)

- **Representation of Professional Competence:** Members at all times represent accurately their professional credentials, competencies, and limitations and act to correct any misrepresentations of these qualifications by others. Members make proper referrals to appropriate professionals when the member's professional competence does not meet the task or issue in question.

- **Selection and Promotion Practices:** Members support nondiscriminatory, fair employment practices by appropriately publicizing staff vacancies, selection criteria, deadlines, and promotion criteria in accordance with the spirit and intent of equal opportunity policies and established legal guidelines and institutional policies.

- **References:** Members, when serving as a reference, provide accurate and complete information about candidates, including both relevant strengths and limitations of a professional and personal nature.

- **Job Definitions and Performance Evaluation:** Members clearly define with subordinates and supervisors job responsibilities and decision-making procedures, mutual expectations, accountability procedures, and evaluation criteria.
• Campus Community: Members promote a sense of community among all areas of the campus by working cooperatively with students, faculty, staff, and others outside the institution to address the common goals of student learning and development. Members foster a climate of collegiality and mutual respect in their work relationships.

• Professional Development: Members have an obligation to continue personal professional growth and to contribute to the development of the profession by enhancing personal knowledge and skills, sharing ideas and information, improving professional practices, conducting and reporting research, and participating in association activities. Members promote and facilitate the professional growth of staff and they emphasize ethical standards in professional preparation and development programs.

• Assessment: Members regularly and systematically assess organizational structures, programs, and services to determine whether the developmental goals and needs of students are being met and to assure conformity to published standards and guidelines such as those of the Council for the Advancement of Standards for Student Services/Development Programs (CAS). Members collect data which include responses from students and other significant constituencies and make assessment results available to appropriate institutional officials for the purpose of revising and improving program goals and implementation (Standards of Professional Practice, n.d.).

In 2008, ACPA published a comprehensive list of competencies expected to be demonstrated by student affairs professionals. This document contained the competency and its description, followed by a list of basic, intermediate, and advanced behaviors demonstrated by student affairs professionals. The competencies described were (a) Advising and Helping; (b) Assessment, Evaluation, and Research; (c) Ethics; (d) Leadership & Administration/Management, (e) Legal
Foundations; (f) Pluralism and Inclusion; (g) Student Learning and Development; and (h) Teaching (ACPA, 2008).

In 2010, a joint task force, comprised of representatives from NASPA, ACPA, and CAS, was established to identify and define the broad, demonstrable knowledge, skills, and attitudes expected of student affairs professionals, regardless of position or functional area. The information was synthesized based on an extensive review of current literature and research related to professional competencies, standards and expectations that have been sanctioned by the boards of NASPA, ACPA and CAS. Each competency description is followed by a listing of knowledge, skills, or attitudes that student affairs professionals should demonstrate based on competency levels of basic, intermediate and advanced (see Appendix A). These levels correspond to general competence, not one’s current position or role. While all student affairs professionals should hold at least a basic level of competence in each one, it is not expected that all professionals would demonstrate intermediate or advanced competency in all areas (ACPA & NASPA, 2010).

In addition to each individual competency, the task force identified three threads that permeated throughout all competency areas. Technology, sustainability, and globalism were recognized as important concepts within the framework of the competencies.

The ACPA/NASPA Professional Competency Areas for Student Affairs for Practitioners are:

- Advising and Helping: The knowledge, skills and attitudes related to providing counseling and advising support, direction, feedback, critique, referral, and guidance to individuals and groups.
• Assessment, Evaluation, and Research: The ability to use, design, conduct, and critique qualitative and quantitative AER analyses, to manage organizations using AER processes and the results obtained from them, and to shape the political and ethical climate surrounding AER processes and uses on campus.

• Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion: The knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed to create learning environments that are enriched with diverse views and people. It is also designed to create an institutional ethos that accepts and celebrates differences among people, helping to free them of any misconceptions and prejudices.

• Ethical Professional Practice: The knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed to understand and apply ethical standards to one’s work. While ethics is an integral component of all the competency areas, this focuses specifically on the integration of ethics into all aspects of self and professional practice.

• History, Philosophy, and Values: The knowledge, skills, and attitudes that connect the history, philosophy, and values of the profession to one’s current professional practice. This competency area embodies the foundations of the profession from which current and future research and practice will grow. The commitment to demonstrating this competency area ensures that our present and future practices are informed by an understanding of our history, philosophy, and values.

• Human and Organizational Resources: The knowledge, skills, and attitudes used in the selection, supervision, motivation, and formal evaluation of staff; conflict resolution; management of the politics of organizational discourse; and the effective application of strategies and techniques associated with financial resources, facilities
management, fundraising, technology use, crisis management, risk management, and sustainable resources.

- Law, Policy, and Governance: The knowledge, skills, and attitudes relating to policy development processes used in various contexts, the application of legal constructs, and the understanding of governance structures and their effect on one’s professional practice.

- Leadership: The knowledge, skills, and attitudes required of a leader, whether it be a positional leader or a member of the staff, in both an individual capacity and within a process of how individuals work together effectively to envision, plan, effect change in organizations, and respond to internal and external constituencies and issues.

- Personal Foundations: The knowledge, skills, and attitudes to maintain emotional, physical, social, environmental, relational, spiritual, and intellectual wellness; be self-directed and self-reflective; maintain excellence and integrity in work; be comfortable with ambiguity; be aware of one’s own areas of strength and growth; have a passion for work; and remain curious.

- Student Learning Development: The concepts and principles of student development and learning theory. This includes the ability to apply theory to improve and inform student affairs practice, as well as understanding teaching and training theory and practice.

**Career Development**

The notion of career competence is best understood when examined through the lens of career development theory. According to Hansen (1976), career development is a “continuous lifelong process of developmental experiences that focuses on seeking, obtaining and processing
information about self, occupational and educational alternatives, life styles and role options” (p. 46). Four fundamental theories of career development often referenced in the United States and used as the foundation for career counseling are: (a) Holland’s Theory of Vocational Personalities, (b) Gottfredson’s Theory of Circumscription and Compromise, (c) Social Cognitive Career Theory and (d) Super’s Theory of Self-Concept (Leung, 2008).

The most well-known trait factor theorist is John Holland. He posed that behavioral style and personality type highly influence career decisions and success (Holland, 1997). According to Holland, members of an occupational group share similar personalities and respond to situations similarly. Career achievement and satisfaction are primarily determined by the congruence between one’s personality and the job environment. The six personality types defined by Holland are: (a) Realistic, (b) Investigative, (c) Artistic, (d) Social, (e) Enterprising, and (f) Conventional.

Gottfredson has made a recent contribution to career development theory with her Theory of Circumscription and Compromise, which assumes that choosing a career requires a high level of cognitive ability. According to this theory, career development is “a self-creation process in which individuals looked for avenues or niches to express their genetic proclivities within the boundaries of their own cultural environment” (Leung, 2008). She posited that career choices are made through a process of delineation; that individuals eliminate certain alternatives from further consideration through a process of circumscription. According to Gottfredson, children’s career aspirations are based on public aspects of their self-concept, such as gender and social class, rather than private aspects like skills and interests. The developmental stages of the Theory of Circumscription and Compromise are: (a) Orientation to Size and Power (ages 3-5), when the child perceives occupations as something big people do, (b) Orientation to Sex Roles (ages 6-8),
when sex-role norms and attitudes define self-concept, (c) Orientation to Social Valuation (ages 9-13), when social class and status define self-concept, and (d) Orientation to the Internal, Unique Self (ages 14 and above), when internal and private aspects of the adolescent’s self-concept, such as personality interests, and skills, become central to his career development.

Social Cognitive Career Theory postulates a mutually influencing relationship between people and the environment. The theory centers around three core variables which are self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and personal goals. Self-efficacy expectations are shaped by personal performance, accomplishments, learning, social persuasion, and physiological and affective states (Leung, 2008). Outcome expectations are personal beliefs about the consequences or outcomes of behaviors. It is generally hypothesized that an individual’s outcome expectations are formed by the same information that influences self-efficacy beliefs. Personal goals refer to one’s intention to engage in a particular activity or to generate a particular outcome (Lent, 2005). A person’s career choices are influenced by the convergence of his self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and personal goals -- a process in which the person and his environment mutually influence each other.

Donald Super’s Life-Span, Life-Space Theory is based on self-concept theory and developmental psychology as described by Buehler (as cited in Super, 1980). Super established that over the course of the life cycle, self-concept (the recognition of one’s own distinctiveness within the context of her similarities with others) changes and that it influences vocational behavior. Super suggested that self-concept is developed when an individual integrates personal characteristics such as personality, abilities, interests, experience and values into his life roles (child, student, “leisureite,” worker, spouse, etc.) and in various life spaces, or “theaters,” such as the home, the community, the school, and the workplace (Super, 1980).
Super also wrote about the notion of vocational maturity—a term now referred to as career maturity. Career maturity allows an individual to assess her role and level of career development at each life stage and is more related to intelligence than to chronological age. For example, a 14 year old may demonstrate career maturity when he describes a reasonable career goal, but career maturity at 30, when he implements that plan and seeks advancement within his profession, is very different.

Super described five distinct stages in which a person may recycle throughout her life. Each stage comprises substages and tasks that help the individual advance to the next stage. In the first stage, Growth (generally occurring between birth and age 14), individuals develop self-concept, attitudes, and needs, and form general assumptions about the world of work. In the Exploration Stage (generally occurring between the ages of 15 and 24), individuals begin by crystalizing, or dreaming of an ideal career. They then begin specifying, or narrowing down their career aspirations for more detailed exploration. At the end of this stage, as they truly begin understanding their career self-concept, they implement a career choice. This involves obtaining relevant education and being introduced to the profession through practical experience. In the Establishment Stage (generally occurring between the ages of 25-44), individuals develop entry level skills and stabilization through actual work experience. Substages include Committed, when individuals determine that the career is a good “fit” and commit to their future in it, and Advancement, when professionals make a plan to increase responsibility and status within the profession. The Maintenance Stage (ages 45-64) is characterized by continual adjustment to improve one’s position within a career. This stage is followed by the final stage, Decline, in which individuals prepare for retirement (Figure 2).
Critics of Super generally express dissatisfaction with his theory’s lack of cohesiveness. Most have agreed that his work was valid, but suggested that it needed refinement, even after fifty years of research (Osipow & Fitzgerald, 1996; Scharf, 1997). Even Super himself noted that his contribution was “not an integrated, comprehensive and testable theory, but rather a ‘segmental theory;’ a loosely unified set of theories dealing with specific aspects of career development, taken from developmental, differential, social, personality and phenomenological psychology and held together by self-concept and learning theory. Each of these segments provides testable hypotheses, and in due course I expect the tested and refined segments to yield an integrated theory” (Super, 1990, p. 199).

Figure 2. Stages of Super’s Life-Span: Life-Space Theory

While the researcher supports the general idea of Super’s Life-Span, Life-Space approach, the time period of his research is reflected in the approximate ages associated with each stage. Most of Super’s research was conducted during the 1950s and 1960s – a time period
in which few women and only some men pursued post-secondary and graduate education. Today, because many professions require a graduate degree, the Exploration Stage may extend beyond the age of 24. Also, during the time of his research, individuals usually sought out one career and committed to it for the duration of their tenure. While that is still the case sometimes, more and more professionals return to school later in life in order to pursue a second career. Super notes the possibility of recycling through the stage, but this may be more common today than it was at the time of publication.

Super’s work will provide a theoretical framework for this study as the self-concepts of new professionals are considered within the context of their position within the life cycle. As students in graduate preparation programs enter the student affairs profession, they will often find themselves transitioning between the Exploration and Establishment stages.

New professionals who are navigating the transition from Exploration to Establishment must manage a deluge of changes within the context of evolving life spaces. Estimates on attrition rates during the first five years of a student affairs professional’s career range from 39% to 68% (Ward, 1995). While reasons for career abandonment vary, these statistics illustrate the complexity of the lives of new professionals. In Job One: experiences of new professionals in student affairs (2004), Jones and Segawa borrow Robert Kegan’s bridge metaphor to describe the new professional’s transition during the early stages of his career: “A bridge must be well anchored on both sides, with as much respect for where it begins as for where it ends” (Magolda & Carnaghi, 2004, p. 62).
Preparation Programs

Graduate professional preparation programs are intended to foster healthy career development and prepare aspiring professionals for entry-level work. It seems as though many graduate programs that prepare students for a particular profession have some things in common. Pre-professional programs such as education, medicine, and law are intentional in their curricular design. In addition to an explicit core curriculum, there is a practical component that immerses students in the profession. Such programs expect that practice in the profession enhances competence and tend to offer authentic but controlled environments that facilitate practice and learning. Professional preparation programs often expect students to become involved in professional associations and to develop a network of mature professionals. One may assume that a lawyer with six months of experience is probably less competent than a lawyer with six years of experience. The same can probably be said of school teachers, doctors, or student affairs professionals.

Problem-based learning was developed in medical schools first, but has been implemented in a variety of graduate programs including business, education, and social work (Savery & Duffy, 2001). This approach to graduate education is based on Constructivism, which emphasizes the influence of a one’s environment, his own desire to learn, and his social interactions in learning, all of which are congruent with the philosophies of professional education.

The fundamental principles of instruction for problem-based learning are:

1. Anchor all learning activities to a larger task or problem.
2. Support the learner in developing ownership for the overall problem or task.
3. Design an authentic task.
4. Design the task and the learning environment to reflect the complexity of the environment they should be able to function in at the end of learning.

5. Give the learner ownership of the process used to develop a solution.

6. Design the learning environment to support and challenge the learner’s thinking.

7. Encourage testing ideas against alternative views and alternative contexts.

8. Provide opportunity for and support reflection on both the content learned and the learning process.

This model promotes incorporation of practicums, internships and assistantships because they provide authentic environments for learning. It also endorses the use of reflective writing and collaborative group work, all of which are key components of effective graduate preparation programs. Koh, Khoo, Wong, & Kosh (2008) confirmed that authentic, problem-based learning has positive effects on physician competency after graduation. One can make the assumption that the same is true of other professions, as well.

Another essential element in graduate education is the effective use of assessment. Ideally, assessment in graduate programs should be authentic and instructive. It should provide insight into students’ actual performance, as well as their ability to adapt to change, generate new knowledge, and improve performance. Commonly used methods of assessment in medical school and other graduate-level preparation programs are written exercises, assessments by supervising clinicians (or practitioners), clinical simulations, and multisource (or “360-degree”) assessments (Epstein, 2007). By using a variety of assessment methods, faculty and supervisors can assess mastery of knowledge and skills and also provide specific, individual feedback to students as they progress through the program. More traditional assessment approaches, such as
multiple-choice paper-pencil tests, may be necessary from time to time, but tend to cause students to cram, substituting superficial knowledge for reflective learning.

**Student Affairs Professional Preparation Programs**

Student affairs professional preparation programs have been driven by the changing culture of college campuses and the needs of the students who are served there. The first Master of Arts degree in student personnel work was awarded at Teacher’s College, Columbia University in 1914, and was called the Diploma of Dean of Women (Cowley, 1983). Curriculum at that time included personal hygiene, sex education, educational psychology, history of family, educational sociology, the philosophy of education, management of the school, problems in administrative work, psychology of religion, and a practicum (McEwen & Talbot, 1998). By 1948, 50 institutions offered graduate programs for those who wanted to pursue a career in student affairs; 37 of those offered both master’s and doctoral degrees. Essential to mid-century curriculum were counseling skills, knowledge of organizational structures and dynamics, and an awareness of values (Wrenn, 1949).

Today, 156 institutions offer master’s degrees in student affairs administration (103 of which are large public universities), and 48 institutions offer terminal degrees in the discipline. The overall goal of graduate level student affairs professional preparation programs is to provide a thorough theoretical background and knowledge regarding students, higher education, and student affairs. They accomplish this through course work and supervised experience (McEwen & Talbot, 1998).

Most student affairs professional preparation programs adhere to the standards and guidelines outlined by the Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education
(CAS), which address an array of topics ranging from recruitment to program evaluation. CAS was chartered in 1979 as a consortium of professional associations that developed standards of professional practice and preparation for student affairs programs in higher education (Upcraft & Schuh, 1996). CAS also charges graduate programs with sufficiently supporting students by advising, providing resources, counseling students in career placement decisions, and hiring adequately trained instructors. A core element of the CAS standards is curriculum. According to the guidelines, student affairs curriculum should adequately address the following elements: (a) foundation studies; (b) professional studies; (c) student development theory; (d) individual and group interventions; (e) organization and administration of student affairs; (f) assessment, evaluation, and research; and (g) a minimum total of 300 hours of supervised practice in at least two settings. Programs that are CAS compliant tend to produce more competent graduates (Young & Janosik, 2007; Carpenter, Patitu, & Cuyjet, 1999).

The extent to which graduate programs prepare student affairs professionals for the work has been insufficiently researched. A thorough review of the literature has revealed very few studies, most of which are primarily quantitative. Cuyjet, Longwell-Grice and Molina (2009) found that new professionals generally felt as though the knowledge they acquired in their graduate education program sufficiently prepared them for the work. The only area they wished had been more directly addressed was finance and budgeting, which was an important aspect of their jobs as entry-level student affairs professionals. Interestingly, while new professionals agreed that assessment curriculum was important, their supervisors reported that such knowledge was not necessary. Renn and Jessup-Anger (2008) found that new professionals were generally satisfied with their graduate education but that the challenges they faced, and felt mostly
unprepared for, included creating a professional identity, navigating and cultural adjustment, maintaining a learning orientation, and seeking sage advice.

Carpenter, Patitu, & Cuyjet (1999) suggested that a successful student affairs graduate program is founded on the CAS standards, reflects a strong balance between practice and theory, employs a cohort methodology, and consists of students from diverse backgrounds.

Faculty members and internship/practicum supervisors hold critical roles in the development of entry-level competencies of student affairs graduate students (Nelson, 2010). Quality professional preparation programs in student affairs include faculty members with national reputations and students and graduates who become leaders in the field. Programs should form intentional learning communities and offer well-balanced, research-based curricula (Wright & Miller, 2007). According to the ACPA, at least one full-time faculty member should be dedicated to leading the program; however, having adjunct faculty who are full-time practitioners fosters strong relationships between theory and practice (Cuyjet, Longwell-Grice, & Molina, 2009). Strong student affairs graduate programs offer at least four content courses about student affairs, student development and the college experience, require at least one field experience, and include two years (or equivalent) worth of curriculum.

A few studies have examined the perceptions of Senior Student Affairs Officers (SSAOs) on the quality of graduate education programs for student affairs professionals. While most were generally satisfied with the curriculum being offered, they reported gaps in skills and knowledge related to fiscal management, legal standards, critical thinking, and assessment (Herdlein, 2004; Dickerson, Hoffman Anan, Brown, Vong, & Bresciani, 2011). Feedback from this particular
group is interesting, since few entry-level professionals have reporting relationships with senior officers.

**Professional Development**

Graduate education is critical for success in student affairs, but ongoing professional development is necessary for advancement in the field. Kruger (2000) suggested, “The very practice and philosophy of student affairs implies ongoing, lifelong professional development” (p. 536). He proposed several methods of professional development that fall beyond the scope of traditional activities. They include professional, scholarly and informal writing; internships; professional presentations; service learning and community service. This supports the idea that professional development should be self-directed and individualized (Winston & Creamer, 1997).

According to Roberts (2007), preferred methods of professional development are discussions with colleagues, engagement in learning experiences with mentors, and participation in professional conference programs. These activities were ranked much higher than less interactive learning activities such as online learning, listening to a major speaker at a conference, or reading literature other than the Chronicle of Higher Education. New professionals in this sample also cited their graduate preparation programs as a source of professional development. Roberts noted the limitations of her study being quantitative and suggested that qualitative studies should be conducted to find out the reasons different professionals develop their competencies through various methods.

Carpenter and Miller (1981) proposed a developmental model of professional development in student affairs based on a career life cycle. This model comprised four stages: (a)
Formative, when professionals tend to see the association as a network and may seek entry-level work through placement services; (b) Application, when professionals tend to spend more time acquiring work experience and are less involved in the association; (c) Additive, when professionals take leadership roles within the associations, contribute to professional journals, and facilitate conference programs; and (d) Generative, when professionals consult others, provide editorial services, and take on senior leadership roles within the associations.

Wood, Winston and Polkosnik (1985) used this model when they researched a group of individuals who had completed master’s degrees in student affairs at four different institutions. They found that those graduates who had left the profession during the first five years scored higher in career orientation and those who were still practicing student affairs remained at the Formative and Application stages of professional development. This may suggest that new student affairs professionals are not receiving adequate professional development experiences once they begin working, or at least that such was the case in 1985.

For many student affairs professionals, associations serve as a primary source of professional development. One of the primary functions of professional associations is to provide development opportunities throughout the career. According to Nuss (1993), individuals join professional organizations for different reasons such as enhancing skills, gaining new perspective, developing leadership skills, developing relationships, and influencing the future direction of the profession. She reported that entry-level professionals are more involved in associations than those who have been in the field longer, which makes sense since new professionals are seeking to develop their professional identities and network in order to find their places within the profession.
While each functional area in student affairs has its own professional association, there are two primary associations for student affairs in the collective. Each one is continually evolving to better meet the needs its members. The American College Personnel Association (ACPA) is headquartered in Washington, D.C. at the National Center for Higher Education. It touts itself as being “the leading comprehensive student affairs association that advances student affairs and engages students for a lifetime of learning and discovery” (About ACPA, n.d.). It comprises nearly 7,500 members representing 1,200 private and public institutions from across the U.S. and around the world. Its mission is to support and foster college student learning “through the generation and dissemination of knowledge, which informs policies, practices and programs for student affairs professionals and the higher education community.”

The National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA), also headquartered in D.C., comprises 13,000 members in all 50 states, 25 countries, and 8 U.S. territories. As the “leading association for the advancement, health, and sustainability of the student affairs profession,” its mission is “to be the principal source of leadership, scholarship, professional development, and advocacy for student affairs” (About NASPA, n.d.).

While these organizations have always offered professionals opportunities to network and learn from their colleagues, more structured approaches to professional development have been implemented in recent years. In 2000, NASPA began requiring its program facilitators to provide the following information: (a) names and credentials of presenters, (b) purpose of the activity, (c) target audience, and (d) intended learning outcomes. In 2001, the Board of Directors adopted a policy statement that delineated its commitment to promote quality, use resources and talents to ensure professional improvement, offer credentials or public recognition to those who demonstrate success in the field, reward learning, and align itself with other similar organizations.
to create mutually agreed upon ethical standards and expected competencies (Janosik, Carpenter & Creamer, 2006).

ACPA commissioned a Task Force on Certification and was examining the feasibility of developing a systematic way to measure competence that would be required for student affairs professionals. The certification would be based on the competencies that were developed by ACPA and NASPA; the same list that will be used to determine the competence of those who will participate in this study (Janosik, Carpenter & Creamer, 2006).

The notion of requiring standardized certification for student affairs has been met with significant resistance from others who argue that the field is far too diverse and that there is no basis for the certification process. NASPA, the larger organization of the two, has had no apparent intention of employing a credentialing process at this time. One can assume that this debate over a common student affairs credential will be ongoing. In the meantime, these associations will continue to provide quality educational opportunities for student affairs professionals without issuing formal continuing education credits.

While attending association events can be energizing and effective, professional development initiatives that are hosted on campus provide a natural environment in which growth can occur. Student affairs staff members cite social events, guest speakers, and short departmental workshops as the preferred approaches to professional development on campus. While many institutions provide such activities, few of them specifically designate funding for programs or have written policies regarding professional development (Winston & Creamer, 1997).
Some institutions have been recognized for outstanding in-house professional development programs. Texas A&M University held an Academy for Student Affairs Professionals (ASAP) which was designed for employees within the Division of Student Affairs who have no traditional student affairs background or preparation, from medical professionals to administrative assistants. Topics were developed based on survey results from professionals of all levels and graduate faculty members. Content generally covered the history and philosophy of higher education, student development and learning theory, organizational politics, and current issues (Komives & Carpenter, 2009).

The University of South Carolina required each of its student affairs professional to generate a written plan that responds to development in one or more core competency areas. These plans, which were evaluated annually, affected salary increases and travel funds. Participation could include attendance at a speaker series, conference attendance and leadership activity, formal coursework community service, and a variety of other activities (Komives & Carpenter, 2009).

The University of North Carolina – Wilmington had a Fellows program, where participants spent five hours a week in a department other than their own, with host mentors providing support. This program encouraged cross-training and allowed participants to learn about other functional areas with which they were less familiar. Learning experiences were reported in the annual Fellow’s Symposium. (Komives & Carpenter, 2009)

Mentoring programs have also become a somewhat popular forum for professional development in student affairs. Cooper and Miller (1998) cited multiple benefits of such programs for both mentors and protégés and suggested that such relationships often exist
informally, but that formal programs permit new employees with fewer connections to access those resources. They recommended that formal mentoring programs should be voluntary, but should be discriminatory based on personal characteristics – not everyone is a good candidate for such a critical role. They further suggested that institutions should provide training for potential mentors so that a set of broadly accepted expectations exists. A time limit should be established for the formal mentor/protégé relationship, although the individuals may certainly (and hopefully) continue to influence each other’s professional development beyond the confines of the formal program.

Regardless of the details surrounding the execution of in-house professional development programming, Komives and Carpenter (2009) suggested that the experiences should encompass some specific characteristics that can be described using the acronym PREPARE. According to this model, professional development activities should be: (a) purposeful, intentional, and goal related; (b) research, theory, and data based; (c) experience based; (d) peer reviewed; (e) assessed; (f) reflected upon and reflected in practice; and (g) evaluated. Their model indicates a need for professional development activities to be intentional. The PREPARE model supports the same principles described by Winston and Creamer (1997), who stated that effective programs attend to staff and organization improvement, derive from a developmental plan, include attention to both process and product, derive from a developmental plan, include attention to both process and product, are anchored in day-to-day work, are multifaceted and ever changing, and recognize maturation and growth in staff.

Winston and Creamer (1997) also recommended that campus-based initiatives should be tied to supervisor-staff member assessments of need improvement. Programs should be based on individual goals for development and program developers should invoke a variety of delivery
methods. This rewards initiative and challenges institutions to recognize the varying needs for
development among a diverse staff.

The Relationship between Experience and Competence

Competence is gained from graduate preparation programs and from well-developed
educational opportunities offered to student affairs professionals on campus and through
associations, but many of the skills and characteristics of solid student affairs professionals are
developed on the job. Job descriptions for senior level positions require extensive experience in
the field, implying some relationship between experience and competence. Some studies have
documented this relationship, validating the notion that competence is gained through direct
employment experience.

Daniel (2011) learned that senior student affairs administrators demonstrated higher
levels of leadership skills than mid- and entry-level professionals. One can infer that years of
experience impact such competence, although other factors may affect leadership development,
as well.

Paloniemi (2006) found that employees value work experience as the main source of their
competence. Experience was considered both as a past and as a present entity; a source of
experience and a way of competence construction. According to this study, experience was also
important for self-confidence, which directly impacts competence. This supports the previously
cited work of Super, who suggested that self-concept plays an important role in career
development and is often developed within the context of the career itself (Pappas, 1978).
Chapter Summary

This chapter provided a comprehensive overview of the existing literature on the profession of student affairs and the competencies expected of those who pursue it. Information regarding professional preparation programs, and, specifically, those intended to prepare student affairs professionals for entry-level work was also discussed, in addition to professional development beyond the scope of graduate programs. Finally, the author shared literature that documents the relationship between employment experience and competence.
CHAPTER THREE: METHOD

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to determine the extent to which new student affairs professionals felt competent for this work and to identify the experiences that fostered such competence in them. The study also revealed discrepancies in the levels and sources of competence between student affairs professionals who had been in the field for one year and those who had practiced for three years. This chapter will describe the research method and process by which the researcher discovered and documented responses to the following questions:

1. How do new student affairs professionals describe their attainment of competence in each of the professional competencies and standards as defined by NASPA and ACPA?
2. To what extent do new student affairs professionals attribute their competence to the coursework, applied experiences, faculty relationships, and other characteristics of their graduate professional preparation program?
3. To what extent do new student affairs professionals attribute their competence to professional development experiences?
4. To what extent do new student affairs professionals attribute their competence to full time professional work?
5. What other sources of competence do participants cite when reflecting on their experiences as new professionals?

6. To what extent do years of experience affect new student affairs professionals’ perceptions of the source of their competence?

**Research Design**

A basic qualitative method was used to answer the research questions. By interviewing participants, face-to-face and with the assistance of Skype – an internet-based video and phone service that allows both parties to see and hear each other, the researcher was able to ascertain the self-perceived level of competence of each participant and the sources from which participants acquired such competence.

A qualitative study is a “systematic, empirical strategy for answering questions about people in a particular social context” (Locke, Spirduso, & Silverman, 2007, p. 96). By using a qualitative study, the researcher attempted to understand observable regularities in what people do or in what they report as their experience.

While experts suggest that there are no such entities as “qualitative research methods” (arguing that there is nothing commonly employed by qualitative researchers that could not be employed in a quantitative study), there are conventions that are closely identified with qualitative inquiry. For example, qualitative researchers work inductively, trying to generate theories that help them understand their data. In qualitative studies, the central problems are to identify how people interact with their world (what they do), and then to determine how they experience and understand that world. Data most commonly take the form of words, although
quantities, frequencies, and graphic representations also can be used (Locke, Spirduso, & Silverman, 2007; Merriam, 2009).

The concept of a basic, or “generic,” qualitative study was first introduced by Merriam in 2001 (Richards & Morse, 2013). This is the most common type of qualitative research in applied fields such as education. It is based on constructivism – an attempt to understanding the meaning of a phenomenon (in this case, competence as a new student affairs professional). Meaning is constructed as humans engage with the world they are interpreting; thus qualitative researchers are interested in how people interpret experiences and the meaning they attribute to those experiences. Although this idea of constructivism applies to all types of quantitative research, other studies have additional dimensions. For example, a phenomenological study seeks to unveil the essence and underlying structure of the phenomenon. Ethnography strives to convey the interaction of individuals with others and with the culture of the society in which they live. A grounded theory study attempts not just to understand, but to build a substantive theory about the phenomenon of interest. In basic qualitative research, uncovering and interpreting how meaning is constructed and how people make sense of their lives and their worlds is the primary goal (Merriam, 2009).

The applied nature of qualitative inquiry makes confidence in its results imperative. Validity and reliability can be approached through careful attention to a study’s conceptualization and the way in which the data are collected, analyzed, and interpreted. Internal validity measures the extent to which a study represents “reality.” Maxwell (2005) suggested that reality can never really be captured, so validity is a goal rather than a product. Validity is also relative. “(Validity) has to be assessed in relationship to the purposes and circumstances of the research, rather than being a context-independent property of methods or conclusions” (p 105).
In a traditional sense, reliability is the extent to which research findings can be replicated. This is somewhat problematic when studying the social sciences since human behavior is unpredictable and dynamic; one person’s experience cannot be deemed more or less reliable than someone else’s. Replication of a qualitative study will not render identical results, and there can be numerous interpretations of the same data. Reliability in this type of study simply ensures that the results are consistent with the data collected.

In this study, a number of strategies were employed to ensure the trustworthiness of the study. Reliability was addressed by the researcher’s use of field notes before, during, and after each interview which collectively informed log entries that documented each significant decision and the interpretation of each discovery. This type of communication record justified the conclusions to which the researcher arrived and what she discovered throughout the process. According to Janesick (2004), the benefits of this kind of documentation are that it (a) focuses on the study; (b) sets the groundwork for analysis and interpretation; (c) acts as a tool for revisiting notes and transcripts; (d) awakens the imagination; and (e) becomes the written record of thoughts, feelings, and facts.

Trustworthiness was also ensured by a variety of other measures. The researcher conducted member checks to minimize the risk of misunderstanding data. She also solicited the assistance of an independent reviewer – someone who independently analyzed the data and compared findings with those of the researcher. The independent reviewer’s findings were consistent with those of the researcher. Her signature of verification is included as an Appendix at the end of this document.
Selection of Participants

In qualitative studies, the selection of participants is rarely random (Locke, Spirduso, & Silverman, 2007). Non-probabilistic, purposeful convenience sampling is common. Because the researcher wished to gain insight from a small portion of the general population, new student affairs professionals, this method of selection made the most sense. In this case, the participants were those who could provide the richest information about the topic, and so they were purposefully selected. Upon receiving approval from the Institutional Review Board at the sponsoring institution, the researcher submitted requests to faculty members from all six student affairs professional preparation programs at Florida public institutions to disseminate invitations of participation to graduates who have one or three years of full-time work in student affairs (classes of 2010 and 2012). The researcher specified the parameters surrounding participation, including the exclusion of those who worked full time prior to or during their professional preparation program, in the invitation and confirmed upon each reply. The original intent was to include the first five qualified graduates from each institution who responded affirmatively, with an attempt to keep the cohorts somewhat equal. Other qualified respondents would have served as potential replacements for people who did not fully participate in data collection. If the researcher were not able to secure three qualified participants from each cohort at a particular institution, respondents from other institutions would have been selected until 30 participants were identified. The Institutional Review Board would only permit the researcher to contact faculty members one time to solicit their assistance in recruiting participants. Only faculty members from five institutions responded affirmatively and the sample ended up being comprised of 23 participants. The sample is described in detail at the beginning of Chapter Four.
Participants were emailed the competencies and list of behaviors associated with each one at basic, intermediate, and advanced levels, as described on the document produced by ACPA and NASPA (2010) (Appendix A). Participants were asked to identify the degree to which they felt competent in each area and were asked to bring that information with them to the interview, which was also scheduled by email.

Face-to-face interviews were scheduled with participants who were working within 100 miles of the researcher’s workplace; all other interviews were conducted by Skype. 14 participants (61%) were interviewed using Skype and the remaining nine (39%) were conducted face-to-face. The researcher does not feel that the interviews held by Skype were compromised in any way. A lightning storm interrupted one interview, but the connection was recovered and the integrity of the interview was not compromised. All interviews were audio recorded and will be kept for two years.

Instrument

For the purpose of this study, competence was assessed using the 2010 document, *ACPA/NASPA Professional Competency Areas for Student Affairs Practitioners*. The behaviors that describe the attainment of competence at each of the three levels (basic, intermediate, and advanced) are in extensive lists, as many as 18 or 20 items. To make the experience for participants more efficient, the researcher solicited feedback from three senior student affairs administrators to narrow the list to only three behaviors per level for each area of competence. This made the document shared with participants less than ten pages, rather than 30 pages in its original form.
Prior to the interviews, participants were sent the condensed list of competency areas and the behaviors descriptive of each one at all three levels (Appendix A). Participants were asked to identify and document the level at which they felt competent in each of the ten areas. Then, during the interview, the researcher asked the following questions:

Demographic information:

1. From what institution did you graduate? In what year?
2. Tell me about your employment history since graduation. (Follow up if participant omits place, functional area, title.)

Each participant’s gender was also noted.

The following questions were asked regarding each of the ten competencies and the participants’ self-reported level of competence:

3. At what level would you rate your competence in Advising and Helping as described by ACPA and NASPA – Basic, Intermediate, or Advanced? (Repeat for the nine other competencies.)
4. Why did you rate yourself (Basic, Intermediate, Advanced)?
5. How did you acquire this level of competence? (Follow up: when, where, etc.)
6. What specific aspects of (named source) most impacted your competence in this area?
7. (When area is rated basic) To what extent is it important for you, as a new professional, to improve your competence in this area?
8. Describe the circumstances surrounding your transition from (basic to intermediate/ intermediate to advanced).
The following chart illustrates which interview questions addressed the research questions guiding this project:

Table 1. The relationship between interview and research questions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Question</th>
<th>Competency-Related Interview Questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. How do new student affairs professionals describe their level of competence in each of the competency areas defined by ACPA (College Student Educators International) and NASPA (Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education)?</td>
<td>3,4,7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. To what extent do new student affairs professionals attribute their competence to the coursework, applied experiences, and faculty relationships in their graduate professional preparation program?</td>
<td>5,6,8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. To what extent do new student affairs professionals attribute their competence to professional development experiences since the completion of their academic program?</td>
<td>5,6,8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. To what extent do new student affairs professionals attribute their competence to full time professional work?</td>
<td>5,6,8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. What other sources of competence do participants cite when reflecting on their experiences as new professionals?</td>
<td>5,6,8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. To what extent do years of experience affect new student affairs professionals’ perceptions of the source of their competence?</td>
<td>3,4,5,6,7,8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Pilot Study

A pilot of the interview protocol was conducted with four professionals who had been working full time in student affairs for two years. After the pilot study, interview question 7 was added to improve clarity and to ensure that the participants were able to fully express their level of competence.
Data Analysis

Thematic Analysis involves identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data. The general phases of thematic analysis are:

1. Familiarization with the data
2. Generation of initial codes
3. Search for themes
4. Review of themes
5. Definition of themes
6. Writing results (Braun & Clarke, 2006)

The researcher identified a number of potential themes, or variables of interest, prior to the study, which informed generation of the initial codes. These included:

- The professional preparation program from which the participant graduated
- The experiences associated with the practical application elements of the professional preparation program
- Faculty relationships in the professional preparation program
- Quality of relationships with supervisors
- The type of institution(s) at which the participant is or was employed
- On-campus professional development opportunities
- Involvement in professional associations
- Functional area in which each participant is employed
• Job description and current level of employment (coordinator, assistant director, etc.)

Once the data were collected and analyzed, the researcher organized the information using Atlas-ti, a qualitative software program. Hermeneutic analysis, which is the study of the interpretation of text, was used to interpret the overall patterns of themes that emerged from the interviews (Kavle & Brinkmann, 2009). These themes and their implications are reported in the final two chapters of this document.

Role of the Researcher

The researcher of this study is a newcomer to student affairs. She started her professional career in the public K-12 school system until 2009 when she began her doctorate in higher education. She has recently assumed a role of instructor in one of the target programs. While none of the participants in this study were enrolled in courses for which the researcher assumed primary responsibility, her affiliation with the institution and program may have influenced her perceptions of some study participants.

It is common for a qualitative researcher to have a primary interest in understanding the processes by which results are created (Locke, Spirduso, & Silverman, 2007). The researcher has a vested interest in the outcomes of this study because she values highly student affairs professional preparation programs. Her professional position in career services in higher education has also affected her views about competence in the work place. All of these interests have the potential to influence the study of participants, but should ultimately add value to the qualitative process and the results that were rendered.
Chapter Summary

This chapter described the overall research design and rational for this study. A basic qualitative study using interviews was conducted. The researcher ensured trustworthiness by using field notes, keeping an ongoing reflective log, administering member checks, and engaging an independent reviewer. Atlas-ti was used to organize and report the data attained from the interviews.
CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to determine the extent to which new student affairs professionals feel competent for the work and to identify the experiences that foster such competence in them. Lead faculty members from six master’s-level student affairs professional preparation programs were contacted and asked to help with the recruitment of their alumni who graduated in either 2010 or 2012. Five of the six faculty members responded positively and disseminated the invitation to participate to the appropriate alumni groups. It is not clear to the researcher exactly how many alumni were contacted, nor does she know the accuracy of the contact information faculty members had on hand. The researcher was not permitted by the Institutional Review Board to follow up with faculty after the initial request.

Twenty-four new professionals responded affirmatively and were interviewed. One respondent was eliminated after the interview because his current professional role was not a traditional student affairs position as described in Chapter One. This left a total of 23 participants in the study (N=23). Of the total, 43% (n=10) graduated from their master’s program in 2010 and 57% (n=13) graduated in 2012. Of those who graduated in 2010, 60% (n=6) were female and 40% (n=4) were male; of 2012 graduates, 46% (n=6) were female and 54% (n=7) were male. Therefore, 52% (n=12) of the total sample were female and 48% (n=11) were male.

Respondents graduated from master’s-level student affairs professional preparation programs at five large public institutions in Florida. Of the 23 participants who comprised the
sample, 65% (n=15) graduated from Institution One, 13% (n=3) graduated from Institution Two, 13% (n=3) graduated from Institution Three, 4% (n=1) graduated from Institution Four and 4% (n=1) graduated from Institution Five. The reasons for the disproportionate numbers of respondents from each institution are unknown, although there are several possible explanations. One could be the researcher’s affiliation with Institution One. While she is not an alumna of the program, and she did not teach in the program while the participants were students, she does teach in the program now. The lead faculty member in that program has a particular interest in this research and may have influenced alumni participation more explicitly. The accuracy of records maintained by each program on alumni contact information is also unknown. If faculty from each program only sent the invitation to participate to email addresses associated with the programs, fewer prospects would have been reached. The number of graduates produced by the program at Institution One is also significantly greater than the others, which would naturally impact the number of qualified participants. While this imbalance could be construed as a weakness of the study, the only notable outlier that affected results was related to the competency area of Law, Policy and Governance. The curriculum at Institution Three did not require a course on the topic and the other four did. In no other way did responses from participants from the less-represented institutions differ from those from Institution One. This is likely because the overall structure of all five programs was very similar, as was described in Chapter One.

**Levels of Competence**

Data related to the first research question, “How do new student affairs professionals describe their level of competence in each of the competency areas defined by ACPA and NASPA?” will be described in this section. For each of the ten competency areas, there are
demonstrable behaviors of each at three levels: basic, intermediate and advanced. Overall, participants characterized themselves as being able to demonstrate intermediate competence in most areas as new professionals. Below is a description of their reported levels of competence in each of the ten areas outlined by ACPA and NASPA.

**Advising and helping.** Most participants characterized themselves as intermediate in Advising and Helping. A few suggested that they could demonstrate competence at a more advanced level, but none reported having only basic competence in this area. Some indicated that, while they were confident in their ability to advise and help the general population of college students, they felt less equipped to deal with students who demonstrated signs of clinical mental illness, a skill set that defined competence at the advanced level.

A lot of the [advanced] bullet points have to do with mental health concerns, which I’m not technically qualified for and would not be qualified for as an academic advisor. I’d have to have formal training as a counselor. (Amy)

Participants who rated their competence in Advising and Helping at the advanced level used phrases like “baptism by fire” or “sink or swim” to describe circumstances by which they increased competence, even when such development was not being intentionally pursued.

In my 2 years as a new professional [I have had] some interesting experiences including tornadoes, injury of a staff member…we weren’t sure whether he was going to live at that point, and some really interesting things…that have left me with some competency in this area that I didn’t anticipate happening. Perhaps [that] does not always happen for new professionals in their first two years. [Chelsea]
Most new professionals felt competent advising and helping students in both formal and informal settings. Ratings in this area, along with Leadership, were significantly higher than all others. Participants described opportunities for the development and demonstration of these skills in a variety of settings from the time they were undergraduate students until the time of the interviews. Those who rated themselves at the intermediate level, rather than at the advanced level, may have felt uncomfortable reporting expertise in dealing with students with mental illness or other more complex issues.

**Assessment, evaluation and research.** In this area, participants reported being both basic and intermediate with only a few reporting a more advanced competence. The advanced competencies included being able to design assessment strategies at the divisional and institutional level and designate budgetary and personnel resources to support such projects. Many suggested that they were less competent than they would like to be in this area. Reasons for their inability to demonstrate a higher level of competence were attributed to the fact that assessment takes time and that they don’t feel that their positions within the organizations permit their involvement in assessment projects at the divisional or institutional level.

Because entry-level professionals often serve as the primary point of contact for students, their days are often unpredictable and driven by whatever events or crises emerge. This was a frequently cited challenge for new professionals who were not as competent in Assessment, Evaluation and Research as they would like.

I wanted to do more, but, literally, there’s no time and we didn’t have the people to count, and we didn’t have the people to go out there, so I think it’s something I want to focus on, but then, when I talk to other colleagues of mine who graduated in the same year or
[who are] even a little bit older…everyone wants to do assessment but no one has the time. (Carlos)

Christopher echoed this concern, recognizing that assessment is important, but that it requires intentional effort and commitment.

There is so much that is going on and so to really take the time to reflect and look back and say, ‘What are some of those issues that are happening? And what can we do? And how can we assess? And how can we use that assessment to prove the work that we’re doing?’ That’s something that I don’t necessarily…make the time to be able to do and so when it comes down to practicing it…I could do more with it. (Christopher)

Others expressed interest in assessment, evaluation and research at the divisional and institutional levels, but felt excluded from those conversations. An expressed exasperation with politics and position were reoccurring throughout the study, especially in this area.

I often find myself wanting to do more assessment or wanting to do more...intentionally designed programming…to be more proactive -- collect the data and to use it in a way that makes sense for us -- and I often feel restricted from that because of the hierarchy of our staff and the way by which each of our jobs are crafted. (Raymond)

For the most part, participants felt that they had a solid understanding of the assessment process and rationale, but that they were less able to demonstrate that competence due to time constraints and their position responsibilities. Others at their respective institutions had the responsibility and appropriate training to conduct assessment at broader levels. Almost all of the new professionals interviewed expressed a desire to become chief student affairs officers and
suggested that their competence in Assessment, Evaluation and Research would advance with their career progression.

**Equity, diversity and inclusion.** Most participants characterized themselves as intermediate in the area of Equity, Diversity and Inclusion. Intermediate competence descriptors include developing multicultural training and engaging in fair hiring processes. Only a few participants reported advanced competence, which is defined by one’s ability to ensure that elements of equity, diversity and inclusion are demonstrated throughout institutional mission and goals, as well as an ability to provide leadership in fostering an inclusive institutional culture. Some new professionals had not yet been responsible for hiring staff and described their competence as basic. Tim said, “I’m not managing a process of…hiring or promotion that look at these…I haven’t been put in a position where I’m developing multicultural training. I’ve facilitated them before, but I don’t think that I’m quite there.”

Others who characterized themselves as being intermediately competent in this area suggested that advanced competence would be something they would always strive to attain, but that the notion of fully understanding the experiences of others is ultimately impossible. Amy suggested that, if she has to be intentional about being inclusive, she has not attained full competence:

> It’s something that should be ingrained and it’s still something that I have to think about doing, so I would say..it needs to become something that I just naturally do instead of [my] having to remind myself to include it. (Amy)

From this study, it appears that, for this generation of new student affairs professionals, the area of Equity, Diversity and Inclusion is more complex than any set of competencies might
be able to measure. The notion of cultural competence extends far beyond that which can be learned or demonstrated; it is a mindset and an ideal that will be sought but perhaps never fully attained. While this group of new professionals recognized the imperative nature of equity and inclusivity, it was an area in which they intend to further develop.

**Ethical professional practice.** This competency area addresses the understanding of one’s own ethical code of conduct at the basic level, and then progresses to more advanced descriptions of advising others on ethical issues and ensuring that the division adheres to ethical guidelines when problem solving. While the most commonly reported level of competence in this area was intermediate, several participants characterized themselves as being able to demonstrate Ethical Professional Practice at an advanced level. Most of the participants who reported these higher levels of competence suggested that they had been challenged to confront the behavior of peers earlier in their careers. Darlene described her transition from basic to more intermediate competence during her graduate assistantship:

I did not do anything wrong, but I was present at the time when something happened. I knew it wasn’t the best situation, so I stayed quiet instead of saying something about it. When I was approached by a professional about it, I felt I was going to say something. So I felt like, at that point, it was basic; like I [could] identify ethical issues, but I still was not able to articulate and address [them] right away. But working though that situation, it taught me that I needed to articulate, and I needed to be assertive, to share what I knew without feeling like I was going rat anybody out. (Darlene)

A few who reported lower levels of competence were a bit embarrassed, making sure the researcher knew that they, themselves, were ethical, but that they did not feel comfortable
addressing the ethical decision making processes of others. This validates the use of widely
agreed-upon competencies that are published for various professions. While some professionals
may espouse to some level of competence based on self-construed qualifiers, these printed
descriptions gave specific parameters by which competence could be measured.

I would have hoped that I would’ve been, ‘Yeah, I’m definitely ethical in my practice,’
but I could see that some of the larger scale advanced parts of the competencies seemed a
little bit lofty and I wasn’t sure…if I was able to do that consistently. (Kelly)

Competence in Ethical Professional Practice proved to be elusive for many. While all
were confident in their own ability to make ethical decisions, many struggled with the idea of
confronting the behavior of others. Once again, participants expressed their intent to increase
their competence in this area as they advance in their careers and become more formally
responsible for the behavior and decisions of those they will supervise.

**History, philosophy and values.** Descriptions of basic competence for this area surround
a general knowledge of the history of higher education and, more specifically, student affairs.
The vast majority of participants described their competence in this area as being intermediate.
Intermediate competence is demonstrated by engagement with other professionals, mostly
through participation in professional associations.

I think to me I think this is one that kind of comes with more experience in the profession
and more time in the profession…I have been to conferences and have gotten a little bit
more involved in SEAHO, which is the Southeastern Association of Housing Officers,
but I don’t necessarily think I’ve actively engaged in service. I don’t know that I’ve quite
gotten there yet. (Faith)
Very few participants described their competence in this area as advanced. Advanced competence in History, Philosophy and Values is demonstrated by teaching rising student affairs professionals and contributing to the literature. The participant suggested that, by participating in the interview that informed this study, he was “contributing to the literature.” Of course, this was an outlier response, but reflects the issue of interpretation which is described further in subsequent sections of this chapter.

Participants felt fairly confident in their understanding of the foundations of higher education and student affairs. They had intentions of contributing to the advancement of the profession at some point, but most felt that their present role was to work hard and establish a solid professional network so that they could earn the opportunity to further advance their careers and their professional statuses.

**Human and organizational resources.** Participants also characterized themselves as being intermediately competent in this area. Intermediate-level competence in Human and Organizational Resources is described as an ability to assist others in their development of professional development plans, effectively communicate with others, and develop effective alliances with colleagues who work outside of one's immediate area. Generally, participants did not feel that they were advanced because of their positions within their organizations. Once again, this notion of lacking positional power affected their responses more than actual self-perceptions of their ability.

Sometimes I feel like my position title hinders me from being able to really go into that next level conversation with the stakeholders that are in the room. I’m still an entry-level employee, but I definitely do have an advanced level of understanding of this specific
competency, and so it’s hard to sometimes feel like my voice isn’t being heard in the way that it needs to be heard. (Freddy)

Not only did participants describe how their position within the organization prevented their acquisition of higher level competence in this area, they felt that their place on the career continuum, in general, impacted their ability to demonstrate more advanced levels of competence in this area. Faith described the challenge of being a new professional trying to aid others in the creation of their professional development plans. “I don’t know that I’ve quite mastered supervision to the point of supervising full-time professionals on how they can develop their own professional development plan when I’m still kind of developing that on my own.”

Participants generally felt that they would naturally improve their competence in this area of Human and Organizational Resources as they progressed in their careers. Most agreed that there was little they could do, independently, to learn the skills that reflect competence in this area. More advanced competence would simply come with increased responsibility at work.

**Law, policy and governance.** Participants rated their competence lowest in this area, with most characterizing themselves as basic. None of them reported advanced competence in this area, which isn’t surprising since those competencies are related to the creation of institutional policy, a task that is beyond the scope of any new professional in an entry-level, or even mid-level, position. When asked why she rated herself as basic in this area, Erin replied, “I don’t know that I’m really creating any policy or making a bigger impact; I think that I’m carrying out things that have been determined by others to make sure the institution is in compliance.”
Participants recognized that increasing their competence in this area would become necessary as their careers evolved. They felt comfortable with law and policy as it related to their immediate functional area, but intended learn more about the implications of law and policy within the broader institutional context.

**Leadership.** Leadership, like Advising and Helping, was an area in which participants felt most competent. While some described themselves as being intermediate, and a few reported basic competence, more participants reported advanced competence in Leadership than in any other area. At the advanced level, participants would be able to demonstrate their ability to lead, motivate, inspire and influence others. Advanced competence would also be reflected by their ability to promote a shared vision and implement strategies that account for ongoing cultural changes. This area, more than the others, seems more subjective and is likely influenced by one’s self-concept. Articulating the rationale behind their rating of basic, intermediate or advanced was challenging for many of the participants, as was describing the source of competence, which will be described in future sub-sections of this chapter.

Now that I’m a new professional, I’m an integral [part of] my department and so I have started to practice these intermediate pieces about facilitating consensus, serving as a mentor… As a new professional, I’ve continued to gain skills in this area. I’ve had opportunities to advocate for change and so I’ve had to learn how to do it. I’ve had opportunities to serve as a mentor for students and so I’ve practiced doing that as well.

(Carly)

Reports of higher competence in this area could be attributed to a number of factors, one being the academic discipline of leadership. Several students had taken leadership courses in
college and were well-read on the subject. Since colleges and universities now teach leadership principles in the classroom, new professionals may feel that they have been learning to lead for years and have had many opportunities to apply those principles as graduate students and as professionals. Unlike many of the other areas addressed in the study, participants felt that being a leader was attainable, regardless of job title or the organizational structure.

**Personal foundations.** This area of Personal Foundations addressed work life balance. At the basic level, professionals would define wellness broadly and would articulate meaningful career goals. Most participants characterized their competence in this area as intermediate. At this level, professionals would identify dissonance in life and take appropriate steps to respond to such dissonance. Most participants felt that, while they had not yet arrived, they were beginning to recognize the need for such balance. They noted that this kind of discretion comes with experience.

This one really came from being able to recognize work life balance and when things were out of balance and then explaining the processes for how I get work done…I think that this probably didn’t actually even happen until my second year of full time professional life. My first year and in graduate school, my work-life balance was very, very much skewed towards work, and still is to some extent. It’s a very personal concept. But I think that I’m much better about creating boundaries for myself and knowing when I need to take some time, or to take a break. Now in my second year…I know when to say I’m not being productive anymore and I need to take a break. (Maria)

Many of them recognized that this may grow more complex as their personal and professional lives evolve. They expressed appreciation for their ability, at this point, to find
work/life balance and work out the incongruences before their lives, jobs, and expectations become more critical.

Whenever I leave work, I truly leave work because, at the end of the day, I’m just Coordinator [Tara], not Vice President [Tara], so I can afford to leave work and whatever emails I get are not going to be dire. They can wait until the next day or until the weekend is over. (Tara)

None of the participants described their competence in this area as advanced. Advanced competence in Personal Foundations is demonstrated by the ability to seek adequate challenges and mediate incongruences between one’s personal and professional life. Perhaps participants recognized, to some extent, that their personal and professional lives would become increasingly complex.

**Student learning and development.** Only one participant described her competence in Student Learning and Development as being advanced; most others characterized themselves as being intermediate. Intermediate competence is defined by one’s ability to apply theory to practice and to assess learning and progress toward the fulfillment of the departmental and institutional mission. Participants felt that they were able to apply theory to program development and other tasks to which they were assigned within their departments, but again felt that their professional responsibilities and their place of position within the organization prevented them from reaching an advanced level of competence. At the advanced levels, professionals use theory to inform institutional policy and practice and communicate learning effectiveness to the larger campus community.
“Utilize theory to inform divisional and institutional policy.” I realize and recognize [that], if I were to do that right now, that’s somebody else’s job description… It’s just that hierarchy that prevents me from being able to go much further. So yes, it’s important, because someday I think I’ll need it or want it, but right now it’s probably better that I just hang tight. (Raymond)

While participants seemed comfortable with their understanding of basic theory and their ability to use those theories as a basis for programming within their areas, they did not feel empowered to make broader applications at the divisional and institutional levels. Students felt that they had the knowledge and ability to demonstrate advanced competence, but had not yet had the opportunity.

**Sources of competence**

As participants reflected upon the source of their competence in each area, they did so within an overarching context of confidence. This notion of confidence and self-concept is what Super described in his narratives. He suggested that over the course of the life cycle, self-concept (the recognition of one’s own distinctiveness within the context of her similarities with others) changes and that this self-concept is developed when an individual integrates personal characteristics such as personality, abilities, interests, experience and values into his life roles (student, employee, spouse, etc.) and in various life spaces, or “theaters,” such as the home, the community, the school, and the workplace (Super, 1980). It is somewhat intuitive that experience and maturity-- in any educational, professional, or even personal “theatre” -- would build both competence and confidence. There is a reciprocating effect as confidence improves competence
and vice versa. As new professionals become more aware of their abilities and their challenges, they are able to better navigate their professional journey with grace and confidence.

When analyzing the interview text, several central themes emerged among each of the ten areas. These major themes were not surprising. Most participants attributed their competence as student affairs professional to the experiences they had gained in full-time student affairs work; in their graduate programs; and in professional development experiences, primarily through their involvement in professional associations. Other sources of competence worth noting were family and upbringing, undergraduate experiences, and independent professional development activities such as reading or engaging with other professionals via Twitter or Facebook. Each of these will be further explored in the next sub-section.

**Graduate professional preparation program.** The data in this section address the second research question, “To what extent do new student affairs professionals attribute their competence to the coursework, applied experiences, faculty relationships, and other characteristics of their graduate professional preparation program?” Master’s level graduate professional preparation programs played a significant role in the development of competence among new student affairs professionals, superseded only by the influence of full-time professional work. Aspects of the graduate experience that contributed most powerfully were the opportunities for applied practice such as assistantships, internships, and practicum; coursework; and participants’ relationships with others including supervisors, faculty, and graduate cohort members.

**Practical application.** Assistantships, internships and practicum experiences were cited as being the most significant contributors within the graduate experience, especially in the areas
of Advising and Helping; Leadership; Student Learning and Development; Assessment, Evaluation and Research; and Ethical Professional Practice. Students who learned about theories and strategies that drive success in student affairs in class, and then had an opportunity to implement that which they have learned under guided supervision, indicated that they were able to acquire and demonstrate competence. Some participants, like Carlos, were explicit in describing the relationship between the assistantship and coursework.

I think it definitely started in grad school because of classes. It was a mixture in grad school because [I was] learning about it in class, but then [I was] actually practicing it in an assistantship at the exact same time. (Carlos)

**Coursework.** Coursework was mentioned as a strong contributor to competence in several areas, as well. Law, Policy, and Governance; History, Philosophy and Values; Assessment, Evaluation and Research; and Student Learning and Development were all areas in which coursework and curriculum played a central role in the development of competence. While all of the graduate programs included in this study required courses that addressed the history and evolution of student affairs, assessment, and student development theory, not all of them required a course that addressed legal issues in student affairs. Those who lacked coursework in this specific area recognized that their competence was weaker because of it. Carly shared, “I didn’t take a law class in graduate school, and…I feel that lack now….I realize there’s a hole there.”

Kelly also described how she thought law would be best learned in the classroom:

I didn’t take any kind of law, policy, or governance course in my [graduate] program, so it’s not something that came up for me… I’m very limited in this area… This is
something that would be great to be in the classroom and learn…being able to understand the legal trends that are out there to ensure we’re not violating students’ rights…I think some of this is definitely more classroom kind of knowledge. (Kelly)

Supervisors. The role of the assistantship supervisor was also critical in the development of some competence. Victor and Andrew both described how their supervisors contributed to their competence:

[My assistantship supervisor] is also very interested in theory so as soon as we started talking about those things, she was always very intentional about bringing that back into the actual practical work I was doing in my assistantship, so that’s where I’d say it’s a balance between [coursework and my assistantship]. (Victor)

I think [my assistantship supervisor] allowed me in grad school to get my competence to the advanced level where I was really comfortable to seek out things that would challenge me and she really helped me with my balancing my work and my personal life. So I would say she was instrumental in getting me from intermediate to advanced in my grad program. (Andrew)

Classmates and the cohort model. Another aspect of the graduate preparation programs that was cited as a source of competence was the relationship between participants and their peers or fellow cohort members. When participants were asked to clarify their response of “grad school” as a source of competence, many suggested that they learned a lot outside of class, and outside of the structured environments that were in place for practical application, and simply learned from their classmates. The cohort model seemed especially formative, even when loosely configured by required courses when electives might be pursued outside of the program. While
this was not as strong a contributor as the other more formal aspects of the graduate experience, it seemed worth noting.

Each of the above-mentioned aspects of graduate programs was discussed often as a source of competence. While these were cited independently during their explanations of competence acquisition, it was eventually clear that the holistic combination of all of these factors within participants’ graduate experience was really what helped them develop the skills they needed to become successful new professionals.

My in-classroom demeanor is one of an external processor, so I enjoy taking part in discussions in the classroom, and that’s how I felt like I learned best from my cohort peers -- was engaging in discussions with them, so kind of getting into some of these nitty gritty things, because that’s one thing that our program really did very well. What I tell people about [my graduate institution] is we really did talk about theory to practice, so we would talk about things like campus culture in the classroom, and I would be able to engage in critical discussion with my cohort and with our professors, and then take that back to my assistantship and understand, again, why what I was learning in the classroom was important and how I could apply that to my professional practice, and then taking what I saw in my graduate assistantship and saying, you know, “This is what I saw; this is what I’ve learned. What do you guys think?” (Carly)

**Faculty.** Participants’ relationships with faculty members were scarcely mentioned as a contributing factor in competence development. A few participants named faculty in their conversations about competence development, but it was almost always within the context of the classroom. For example, Christopher remembered a particular faculty member saying, “There
will be politics wherever you go. They will be good and bad and it’s all about how you play them.” The effect of that particular faculty member was powerful, although she was mentioned only briefly as he described his competence in Human and Organizational Resources.

**Professional Development.** Research question Number Three addressed the extent to which new student affairs professionals attribute their competence to professional development experiences since the completion of their academic program. While full-time professional experience and graduate school were, by far, the most often cited sources of competence in student affairs, professional development was also viewed as a contributor. Involvement in professional associations was the most often referenced form of professional development. About half of the participants reported being active in professional associations and most of them defined their engagement in terms of conference attendance. While only three indicated that they were part of a NASPA Knowledge Committee (an interest group within the NASPA association), those who were involved cited it as a significant source of competence in some areas.

On-campus professional development opportunities were also mentioned, but less often than formal, associational conferences. Some departments in some institutions invest significant resources into these programs and, for this population, they seem to be rather effective.

Other forms of professional development cited by participants as sources of competence were post-master’s coursework (a few had begun pursuing a Ph.D. and others had simply elected to take courses on their campuses); reading professional publications such as the *Chronicle of Higher Education, Inside Higher Ed*, or the *ACUHO-I Talking Stick*; and participating in online
professional development such as Facebook groups, Twitter #SAChats or reading blogs related to student affairs.

[It is] that continuing education piece -- so whether that’s reading the Chronicle of Higher Education or the ACUHO-I Talking Stick when I can get my hands on it or Inside Higher Ed, or some of the things like the Student Affairs Chat or the Student Affairs Facebook groups, almost that peer social network and also the digital blogosphere… It’s pretty important to be invested and be connected to those cutting edge issues.” (Jack)

**Full-Time Professional Experience.** Research Question Four addressed the extent to which new student affairs professionals attributed their competence to full time professional work. This was, by far, the most common source of competence development and the strongest theme. When participants suggested that their full-time jobs in student affairs were the source of competence, they were encouraged to describe specific aspects of the work that were most instructive or impactful. Several sub-themes emerged from these conversations.

**Functional area.** The functional area within student affairs in which participants were employed appeared to be significant in competence development. Specifically, participants who were working full-time in housing reported higher competence in many areas, especially Advising and Helping, Human and Organizational Resources, and Leadership. Faith and Jack describe how their experiences in the residence halls have fostered their competence development in Advising and Helping:

I’m a [residence] hall director, so I deal with roommate conflicts on a regular basis and…part of my professional development within my department here has been related to conflict management styles… I have had 14 RAAs the last two years, and then I also work
with a number of residents [who] live in my building, so I think I’ve been successful in helping them get through their jobs…their life career counseling… I think that just comes with experience --the more you do it, the more you learn from your students and you learn from yourself. You learn how to get away from the one size fits all approach because one size fits all doesn’t work for all students and so being able to figure out that has helped me. (Faith)

I think a lot of it has really been on the job…[during] my time as a hall director at [graduate institution] and my time here professionally as an area coordinator [in housing]…. Conflict resolution and management and mediation-- a lot of those skills are sort of hands on things from being an RA and being a grad student and being a professional rather than a classroom setting or even really a training setting. I think it definitely comes from doing rather than necessarily learning. (Jack)

Conversely, participants in housing seemed to struggle more with Personal Foundations, an area that addresses work/life balance.

Working in residence life, it can be challenging because most days I can’t leave my apartment without someone needing something from me. I can’t make it to my car without someone wanting to chat or say hello or ‘I need this from you,’ so it’s a difficult balance because sometimes you can’t escape it. (Faith)

Working in housing, it’s one of those things where you’re working long hours at times. You have some seasons where you’re working 60 hour work weeks or 80 depending on what’s going on during any given time…especially when you live on campus, it’s a [different] story. You live where you work… I go to the gym in the area that I work, my
church happens to be where I work. For me to have that balance is so important, so when I need to check out and go off campus for a while, or hang out with people outside of campus, or to do something off campus that’s not related to what I do currently, that’s very big. (Christopher)

Professionals working in housing, an area with breadth of duty and demand, reflected broader levels of competence than the norm. For instance, a professional working in residence halls may be required to have competence in Advising and Helping because they often work one-on-one with students in distress. Leadership is an area in which staff in housing may feel confident because they direct the activity of a large group of students and are responsible for their safety and welfare. Human and Organizational Resources is a third area in which residence hall staff need to become competent because they often supervise a large number of undergraduate and graduate staff members and encounter a number of challenging personnel matters. On the other hand, new professionals working in academic advising, an area with a rather narrow scope of responsibility and requirement for skill reflected a more specific set of competencies in which they felt skilled. For example, the frequency with which they are called upon to practice advising and helping skills is such that their competence in that area might be quite strong compared to other new professionals who only occasionally advise students. Further, those working in advising have little opportunity to develop competence in Human and Organizational Resources, Leadership, or Personal Foundations.

**Employment Transition.** Nearly half of the new professionals who were interviewed for this project had changed jobs at least once since graduation. Those who had assumed more than one professional role, either in a different institution or within the same institution, also reported
higher competence across the board. This makes sense, since those participants would perform various duties and work with students in multiple capacities.

**Institution type.** Participants who worked in smaller institutions also reported higher levels of competence in most areas. These students were expected to perform in multiple areas and these broader job descriptions seemed beneficial to their competence. The areas of exception were Assessment, Evaluation and Research and Student Learning and Development. Suggested reasons for this are discussed further at the end of this section.

**Committees.** Committee work also emerged as a source of competence across several areas. Participants described working with people outside of their immediate areas and how that allowed them to learn new things and further develop competence in areas that may not necessarily be addressed in their everyday roles. Chelsea described the advantages of committee work:

> I work a lot in committees…and I pride myself on being able to identify opportunities to collaborate to better enhance our work. And so that recognition of how the formation of alliances, and that you’re not working in a vacuum, is the reason why I identified that I was in the intermediate level competency.” (Chelsea)

The engagement of new professionals in various tasks and problem solving groups seem critical to overall competence development. By serving on committees, or engaging in other collaborative efforts, new professionals learn about the issues affecting students and other professionals on campus and open themselves up to opportunities that foster competence development.
Supervisors and mentors. Participants were challenged and supported by supervisors and/or mentors during their first few years of full-time student affairs work. These relationships were often cited as sources of competence, as well.

I had a conversation with [a mentor]. She’s retired now, but she’s still going at it, doing key notes and things like that. I asked her, ‘Why do you do it? Why continue?’ She literally looked at me and…said, ‘I’m not done giving back…giving back to the profession.’ Honestly, that meant a lot to me knowing, at her age, she still wants to. That’s hopefully the dream and the goal. (Christopher)

Supervisors and mentors play a key role in new professionals’ development of competence. Those who have experience in student affairs can be a living example of the competencies that new professionals pursue and can serve as an integral support system as new professionals navigate their way from basic to more advanced levels of competence in each area.

Other sources of competence. The fifth research question sought to identify other sources of competence that have informed the work of new student affairs professionals. While full-time professional employment, graduate education and professional development were the most cited sources of competence, others emerged with enough frequency to warrant discussion.

Participants often cited personal characteristics as sources of competence in specific areas of competence like Ethical Professional Practice; Equity, Diversity and Inclusion; Advising and Helping; and Leadership. Religion, upbringing, and “a personal interest” in certain topics were mentioned when participants discussed how they initially acquired competence. Given the nature of student affairs as a profession, this seems reasonable. While many of the areas are strictly skill-based, there are certain personal characteristics that drive others. It is not difficult to believe
that participants’ upbringing or church affiliation would inform their competence in these particular areas. This notion of one’s upbringing informing his competence in Ethical Professional Practice is described below:

I think this one I would say that I gained those skills throughout my entire upbringing, and so I guess that’s an important thing to understand. I was raised in the Catholic church and went through Catholic school and so the conversation about personal values, personal ethics, personal morals, has always been a conversation that I’ve been having, but then as an openly gay male in the catholic church, the balance between ethics and morals became very pronounced….Articulating a personal code of ethics in general, has been something that I’ve done for a long time. (Victor)

For many, being able to identify particular sources of competence in an area that has been valued and practiced by them for so long was difficult. Raymond expresses this inability to articulate a specific source of competence of his ability to advise and help:

I don’t know if I can pinpoint any one thing as much as just an accumulation of time in the profession mixed with a little bit of my personality. I’ve always felt very comfortable having conversations with people, and I suppose you could chalk it up to the fact that I’m an older brother and sometimes I feel like I just give unsolicited advice to my younger brothers and that sounds similar to some of these descriptive qualities in the Advising and Helping competency. (Raymond)

Participants also cited their undergraduate experiences as sources of competence in many areas. This makes sense since students often discover their interest in student affairs when they serve as undergraduate leaders. Undergraduate experience was most frequently cited as a source
of competence in the areas of Advising and Helping, Leadership, and Personal Foundations. Rachel said, “I definitely think some of the leadership skills and awareness of other leadership styles really came from when I was an undergraduate student, as a student leader.”

The impact of the undergraduate experience was echoed by Tim:

I have kind of a jump start on ethical decision making because I was a Greek in undergrad, so really kind of thought about….’What do ethics mean?’ and ‘How do we apply them to a mission of the organization?’ It was at a very small scale… I could parrot the values of my organization but I don’t know if I could really tell you what my own were at that point.” (Tim)

While full-time experience in student affairs, the graduate school experience, and structured professional development activities were cited as the primary sources of competence, several factors impacted the success of the new professionals who were interviewed. Many of them described formative circumstances early in life that contributed to their competence as a professional. This holistic perspective is supported by Super’s theory of career development (Super, 1980). Multiple factors, both extrinsic and intrinsic, have contributed to the competence of these new student affairs professionals.

Sources of competence by area

As participants described their competence at each of the ten competency areas, themes emerged within each one. In this section, sources of competence will be described for each of the ten competency areas respectively.
**Advising and helping.** In Advising and Helping, full time employment in student affairs was cited most often as a source of competence, although graduate assistantships were often cited, as well. Competence in this area can be learned and practiced in every functional area of the profession, so participants felt like they had been honing these skills for a long time.

I have sharpened my listening skills with students, and…during my time as a graduate assistant, I felt like I had mastered the skills but, over my course of time working as a professional, I feel like I have sharpened my skills… I feel like I’ve been able to help serve my students for individual growth and really their future needs [sic]. (Darlene)

Participants described formal advising roles, like serving as an academic advisor or an advisor of student organizations, but also described informal advising and helping roles like those that are often found in housing or fraternity/sorority life. In each instance, students described meaningful conversations with students in crisis, students who were struggling academically or socially, and those just needing affirmation in their journey. It was clear that their experiences advising and helping are what drive their commitment to students and to student affairs.

**Assessment, evaluation and research.** Almost every participant suggested that the primary source for competence in the area of Assessment, Evaluation and Research was graduate coursework, which makes sense. Many also sited full-time employment as a source of competence, although that depended heavily upon their job description and duty assignments. Most suggested that they learned the basic methods of assessment in class and then honed those skills when they began creating and implementing assessment projects as full time student affairs professionals.
I had two classes in graduate school that focused on research…and I learned a lot about…how to write learning outcomes, how to construct a survey, how to collect data, how to do all of those different things. I also had experience in my graduate assistantship. Everything that we did we assessed -- all of our programs -- and that was one of the things I wanted to get more experience with in grad school was assessment, and so we worked with a company called Student Voice…and I was able to learn a lot through working with them. How to write questions for surveys and responses…. That’s something I’ve been able to bring to my position here… A lot of my colleagues didn’t have an assessment class, or they may have had a research class but didn’t have an assessment class in graduate school… There [are] a lot of people that I’ve worked with that don’t know how to write learning outcomes and I’ve taught them [sic]. It’s kind of become a joke that…I always have my little learning outcomes sheet, my little formula that I have from grad school that has been so helpful, and so I’ve been able to share that knowledge and get better at it and develop with my colleagues in that area. (Faith)

All of the programs whose alumni participated in this study have coursework on assessment. New professionals acknowledging their coursework as a source of their competence in this area is intuitive. Those who have had the opportunity to practice that knowledge in the field have probably developed higher levels of competence.

**Equity, diversity and inclusion.** This competency area was primarily developed through full-time employment experiences, assistantships, and graduate coursework. Since the competence descriptors address hiring practices and the development of multicultural trainings, many participants described their attempts to hire graduate students and professional staff who represent the general student population in race, gender, ethnicity, and sexual orientation. They
also described various trainings that are facilitated in their areas that promote cultural competence.

I’ve done a good amount of work in cultural programming [in my previous] position. I worked with the Intercultural Affairs Office to create the Male Empowerment group, which was for students of color, and through that experience…I actually got a chance to be involved in a lot of their programs that they would do throughout the year. I would describe myself as being intermediate because, when it comes to hiring processes in housing, it’s been something that I’ve had to become very vocal about in every position that I’ve had and every year that I’ve been a resident director…. I think people are looking for quality candidates, but not necessarily looking at, “Is it fair to have representation on our staff that is representative of our student population?” So being very vocal about that and making sure that we are reaching out to students of color to make sure that they are involved in the selection process from the recruitment process all the way through selection… I want to make sure that I’m fair to all candidates….looking at what we have as far as our student population diversity and making sure it’s reflected in our hiring processes and who we select. (Freddy)

When Janice was asked about how she acquired competence in Equity, Diversity and Inclusion, she responded:

I guess having to experience different situations firsthand…. [such as] racial discrimination among roommates…and not really knowing how to handle it and having to go to my supervisor at the time, and then just seeing myself grow to being the
supervisor and actually being someone who promotes diversity on campus. I’ve seen a growth in that.

Assistantships also served as a formative platform on which participants developed this competence.

I have practiced that…as a graduate student…working in student activities in programming. It behooved us, and the students [whom] we advised, to create programming that is inclusive…and we also have kind of a call from campus... We get paid through student activity fee money, so it is our imperative to create programming that is inclusive. (Carly)

A third source of competence in this area that was often cited was graduate coursework. Each master’s-level curriculum required a course that addressed diversity. Charlie reflected on his experience in the classroom. “[My graduate] program had quite a few good courses on diversity and various multicultural issues, and so that helped… I think that was definitely [where I acquired] my basic knowledge.”

Andrew acknowledged that there were several courses that helped to shape his perceptions of diversity and inclusion in the workplace.

We had a lot of conversations about [Equity, Diversity and Inclusion] in grad school. I think our Diversity class, Theory and Group, all in that second semester of the first year, really drove home all of those concepts and really laid the foundation for what we’re doing here at [my employing institution]. (Andrew)
All of the programs whose alumni participated in this study have courses related to diversity or multicultural issues in higher education, so it is understandable that the new professionals attribute some of their competence to their graduate programs. However, work in the field, whether as a full-time professional or in an assistantship, appears to more strongly contribute to competence in this area. Employing diversity issues seems more valuable than studying diversity as an abstract concept.

**Ethical professional practice.** When participants described their acquisition of competence in Ethical Professional Practice, they named various sources. Many referred to their upbringing – to parents, church, and culture – as a primary source of competence. Other sources included full-time employment, assistantships, professional development, undergraduate experiences, and their colleagues, supervisors and mentors.

While it seems that some participants confused ethics with morals, most of participants’ competence was attributed to their upbringing. Several were raised in church or attended private schools where ethical decision making was part of the curriculum. Many felt that they were innately ethical and had a difficult time pinpointing a particular time or source of competence development.

I don’t know if it’s student affairs specific or even grad school specific, but I think just my personal development in becoming a young adult… I think it’s just much more of a personal process than it was on one particular job or in one particular class. I feel like ethical is kind of how I was raised to think about things…so I don’t think that was really job specific or at one specific point in my life. (Rachel)
Assistantships were noted as a source of competence in this area, as well. While several specific examples of competence development were given, like the decision of whether or not to print class papers on the department printer, the overall experience was formative.

I think, as a graduate assistant, that was a great way for me to sort of develop what was going to be my personal code of ethics. That two year period was the transition from “I’m no longer a student leader; I’m now transitioning to a professional so I need to carry myself as being a professional,” being mindful of little things like friend requesting students on Facebook or social media, interacting with students outside of campus, things like that. I used that two year time period to set up my foundation and then, as a new professional, [I am] sort of just growing in it. It’s adapted and evolved since then.

(Tara)

One other defining transition in several participants’ Ethical Professional Practice development happened during their undergraduate experience. Students cited their roles as resident assistants, their majors (Women’s Studies, Religion, Music), and their involvement in on-campus organizations as sources of competence. Tim described the role of his involvement in a Greek organization in his development:

I was a Greek in undergrad, so I really kind of thought, “What do ethics mean and how do we apply them to the mission of the organization?” It was at a very small scale…’undergrad ethics’ is the best way to put it… I could parrot the values of my organization but I don’t know if I could really tell you what my own were at that point.”

(Tim)
Participants attributed their ability to make ethical decisions to a variety of sources and a combination of experiences from childhood to their current positions.

Some of it was in the [graduate] program, but a lot of it was primarily just being on the job. I mean, you do learn about a lot of the aspects of what is considered to be unethical, what is ethical in the classes, but I think a lot of this is from just engaging with others and discussing various issues at hand. (Raymond)

Understandably, the respondents in this study attributed the development of ethics to lived experience rather than as subject matter that they were taught. Whether those lived experiences took place early in life or in settings that have nothing to do with higher education, they are still important because it seems as though their personal ethics became the framework for their process of ethical decision making at work.

**History, philosophy and values.** Participants described their acquisition of competence in History, Philosophy and Values much more consistently than they did for Ethical Professional Practice. The basic descriptors relate to a general knowledge of the history of the profession, which was almost exclusively acquired in the classroom during their graduate program. The intermediate level describes an understanding of the trends and values of the profession today. This is mostly demonstrated by involvement in professional associations. Most participants felt fairly competent at both of these levels.

My graduate program taught me the basics of student affairs and the history of it and then [a professional association] kind of helps me understand the emerging values of the profession and helps me engage with others in the field. (Andrew)
The advanced area of History, Philosophy and Values describes one giving back to the profession through teaching and by contributing to the student affairs literature. Only one participant suggested that he was advanced in this area. When asked to explain, he suggested that his involvement in this research project was, in fact, a contribution to the literature.

Most of the participants expressed an expectation of advancing their competence in this area. Since the vast majority intend to become senior administrators, this would, theoretically, become more feasible as they advance in their careers.

**Human and organizational resources.** Competence in Human and Organizational Resources was almost exclusively acquired through full-time employment experience. While most described their student affairs roles and how they had learned to hire, fire and supervise, a few cited experience prior to their entering the student affairs profession. For example, Carlos said, “I think a lot of it came in my professional career, even in the first year. You know, managing the politics of an office.”

While some participants described the role of graduate school in their acquiring basic competence, most recognized that increasing responsibility in professional positions were the primary sources of competence development.

A lot of the Human and Organizational Resources piece has come with me expanding my job responsibilities as a new professional -- starting to manage staff, starting to manage more resources than I did as a graduate student. So, having this professional practice, having the opportunity to supervise for the very first time, having to take ownership of my professional development versus it being dictated to me by my graduate program or
by a supervisor… As I have had more opportunity to practice these things, I have felt more comfortable. Being thrown in the deep end and then learning how to swim. (Carly)

Coursework was also cited as a source of competence in Human and Organizational Resources. Courses that address campus ecology, politics, and group processes all contributed to participants’ development in this area.

In graduate school…I had a Higher Ed Environments class and we focused a lot on political environments and organizational culture. How do you navigate that and how do you learn that? As a new professional, what is your role going to be in that? You have to learn your place in the organization and I think I’ve been able to do that. (Faith)

Like most areas, basic competence in Human and Organizational Resources was acquired in the classroom. As participants employed that abstract knowledge in practice, their competence increased.

**Law, policy and governance.** Competence in Law, Policy and Governance was developed almost solely in the classroom. All but two of the participants had a law class and cited it as the primary source of their competence. The two who did not take a course in law and policy, because it was an elective in their graduate program, expressed some regret for not doing so.

I didn’t take a law class in graduate school and…I feel that lack now. It’s not that I have issues on a daily basis where I would need to be able to think about legal precedent or anything like that, but just thinking about my future professional practice, I realize there’s a hole there. (Carly)
Participants also cited their roles on campus as being a source of continued development in Law, Policy and Governance. Those who acted as conduct officers, advisors of student organizations and Greek organizations, and those in the residence halls were required to learn and invoke certain laws and risk management strategies, supporting their further development of this competence. When asked how he acquired intermediate competence in Law, Policy and Governance, Raymond responded:

Law class, and I think it was reassured in the Office of Fraternity and Sorority Life. There [was] a couple of examples…one in which we had video evidence of a group hazing and the students came in and told us they didn’t know anything about it. That really challenged me because you’ve got students that violate the law right in front of you, you’ve got video evidence of it, and there were a lot of conversations that were had with Student Rights and Responsibilities, with the police department, with our own office in terms of the policies they violated with us, with the national organizations. So I grew a little confidence with that. The reality is, I still feel like I need reassurance in that area. Every time that I encounter something I feel like a total millennial, like “Did I do that right? Was that right? Am I good?” And so I just think that it’s so complex and complicated and ever-changing that I don’t know that I’ll ever reach advanced.

(Raymond)

Competence in Law, Policy and Governance is developed through the acquisition of knowledge and content, rather than skill, so it make sense that coursework that delivered content associated with legal issues was a principle source for participants. For example, receiving on-the-job training on the Family Educational Rights to Privacy Act (FERPA) brings into practice what may have been learned as a concept in a course on law in student affairs.
Leadership. Leadership is another area where the sources of competence varied, but participants cited full-time employment, undergraduate experience, and their graduate assistantship most frequently. When asked how she acquired competence in Leadership, Maria responded:

I can say grad school only because you work with case studies, and then my assistantship…I’ve had opportunities working with student leaders, telling them what their strong points are and what they need to improve upon. We learned about that in class and how that could affect students. I feel it started in grad school, but I didn’t start doing it until I started working professionally. I never had to sit at the table and think through, creatively, about possibilities or anything like that until I started working professionally. (Maria)

Tim also shared the progression of his leadership development:

I worked in student leadership programs before I worked in residence life so, as a grad, I was very much in the basic level and even moving towards intermediate. I was a student leader in [undergraduate] college, and so transitioning to being a grad mentoring students (I worked as an advisor to student organizations when I worked in leadership programs) so [I was] able to manage conflict in that sense with student leaders and then very much able to see the sides of somebody that may need a little extra help, so very much in the intermediate stage. Moving into advanced was when I moved into residence life…where some rough situations happen, but [I] really felt much more comfortable in my crisis response role. With that confidence came more skill sets and feeling like I was at an advanced level. (Tim)
Complimentary to coursework, and the content of professional development experiences, competence in leadership is clearly associated with practical experience at work.

**Personal foundations.** The ability to manage work life balance was primarily acquired through full-time employment. Functional area and job responsibilities were cited as primary contributors within employment. For example, those in housing found this area more challenging, since they live where they work and vice versa.

One participant described the “on call” nature of his position and how expanding life roles make the balance even more challenging.

[There is] a lot of incongruence, or conflict, [from] the demands of my time professionally and I don’t get to shut it off. So that doesn’t always sit well with the spouse. If we want to go out for an anniversary and I’m on call, we can’t go. And it’s inconvenient to carry the radio to dinner at a restaurant, so, although I am aware of all those things, I certainly haven’t done enough to smooth them all over.

Expanding life roles and life changes were significant contributors to participants’ competence in Personal Foundations. While some who had fewer responsibilities outside of work described their competence as intermediate, or even advanced, others who had recently begun living with their partners, or those who had children felt less competent in their ability to demonstrate adequate balance.

Supervisors also played a role in the development of this competence, even though they were mentioned less often as a source. Some participants described times when they were told to go home, or they were encouraged to attend family events during work hours. Supervisors may have a vital role here, advocating for balance and encouraging new student affairs professionals
to be well-rounded. It would seem that, in this profession, where holistic health is valued, work life balance would be more easily achieved. Unfortunately, new student affairs professionals, especially those who aspire to become senior administrators (almost all of the sample in this study), feel the need to immerse themselves in the work and struggle with defining lines since hours are unpredictable and the students they serve have needs that extend beyond the typical work day or work environment.

It is likely that maintaining work/life balance will become more challenging for this group because both their professional lives and their personal lives may become increasingly challenging.

**Student learning and development.** The primary source of competence in Student Learning and Development was master’s-level coursework. Each of the participants’ graduate programs required a course on student development theory and promoted the development of learning outcomes based curriculum and programming. Participants also credited the practical application requirements of their graduate program such as the assistantship, practicum and internship. In these environments, participants were able to apply that which was being learned in the classroom under the guidance of their supervisors. When asked to describe his acquisition of competence in Student Learning and Development, Andrew responded with the following statements:

In grad school I was able to learn a lot of student learning outcomes and our classes were structured around creating student learning outcomes and how to asses those… I worked for St. Joseph’s University for my practicum experience and there I was able to do the third bullet to a tee: “create and asses learning outcomes to evaluate progress toward
fulfilling the mission of the department, the division, and the institution.” St. Joe’s has a great program of figuring out how your learning outcomes align with all of those things: department, division, institution, and I was able to help them work through that in my time there and so I think that was really where a lot of my competence came from.

While initial competence came from graduate school and applied practice during their graduate experiences, full-time employment in student affairs afforded participants more opportunities to independently develop and assess programs and services based on student development and provided practice so that their competence increased. Almost all of the participants expressed an intention to continue to invoke theory and learning outcomes in program development and recognized that doing so would become easier with more practice.

My two jobs in student affairs have revolved around programming. I’m looking at what it means to apply theory into practice, to design programs that promote students learning and development, create and assess learning outcomes -- I’ve done that. I started that minisculely as a grad student because I didn’t have enough responsibilities in the job, but I definitely see myself doing that… It was a mixture in grad school because you’re learning about it in class, but then you’re actually practicing it in an assistantship at the exact same time… When I became a professional staff member, I got to choose the models. (sic) (Carlos)

Theory to practice is what is engrained in your mind in grad school, but my professors really focused on you know becoming practitioner scholars. You don’t have to be a scholar practitioner but you do have to be a practitioner scholar but it’s important to understand theory, it’s important to understand the literature and what the literature is
saying in order to influence the work that you do and I think it’s important to understand that because if you don’t understand it then what are you using to justify what you’re doing or how do you know what’s been helpful with students in the past. And being here I’ve been able to put those skills that I’ve learned in graduate school into practice. (Faith)

The development of competence in Student Learning and Development was consistent with several other areas of competence in that participants suggested that they developed competence through the ability to apply coursework in a practical setting, either in their assistantships or in their full-time roles.

A comparison of the cohorts

The final research question addressed the extent to which years of experience affect new student affairs professionals’ perceptions of the level and source of their competence. The sample included graduates of master’s-level professional preparation programs at five public institutions in the state of Florida. Participants either graduated in 2010 or in 2012 so, at the time of the study, each one had completed one full year or three full years of full time professional work in student affairs.

The difference in competence between the two groups seemed counterintuitive to the researcher. The less experienced cohort (those who graduated in 2012) reported a higher level of competence than the class of 2010. This is true of all areas except Equity, Diversity and Inclusion and History, Philosophy and Values. It is difficult to make assumptions about the difference reflected in these two competency areas. Perhaps, since the higher levels of competence in Equity, Diversity and Inclusion are marked primarily by fair hiring, those more experienced professionals may have simply been exposed to more opportunities to hire, train and
fire. Since intermediate and advanced indicators in the latter area describe involvement in professional associations and giving back to the profession, it could be that the 2012 cohort had simply had more opportunities to engage in these activities.

![Graph](image.png)

Figure 3. Self-perceived competence by cohort

The greatest gap between cohorts was in Ethical Professional Practice. It may be that those who have recently entered the field have clearly defined ethical parameters by which they practice. They have established rules for interacting with students, for spending their time on the job and, as time progresses, special circumstances challenge those pre-established codes of ethics. Tara described this developmental process and how she was challenged by others in a professional development session.

[At a conference] there was great activity where they had a continuum and they made a statement and said, “If you agree with it you stand on this side; if you don’t agree, stand on the other; and, if you’re not sure, stand in the middle.”  One of the questions was, “If
you were working with a student and they were of age, would you go out and drinking
with them?” and I was like, “Absolutely not!” and I went to the ‘no’ side and I was
shocked when some people were like, “Yeah, I would,” or in the middle so, for me, that
sort of got me thinking, “Okay, there is no right or wrong answer, it’s just about what is
going to be best for me.” (Tara)

The two cohorts described their levels of competence differently throughout the study. In
Chapter Five, the researcher will discuss possible explanations for the difference in competence
between the cohorts.

Other findings

While data responding directly to the research questions are addressed above, some other
themes emerged throughout the study that impacted findings. Those factors will be addressed in
this section.

Functional area. When participants were asked to rate their competence in each area, the
functional area(s) of student affairs in which they had been employed seemed to matter. Housing
was a notable factor, in that those who had experience in housing seemed to report higher levels
of competence than those who did not. Student affairs professionals who work in housing are
expected to demonstrate a broad range of skills. The Association of College and University
Housing Officers – International (ACHUHO-I) has produced its own set of core competencies
that housing professionals are expected to reflect. The competency areas outlined by ACUHO-I
include Ancillary Partnerships, Conference Services, Crisis Management, Dining Services,
Evaluation/Planning, Facilities Management, Fiscal Resources and Control, Human Resources,
Information Technology, Occupancy, Resident Educational Services, and Student Behavior
Because these housing-specific competency areas are so diverse, it is not surprising that housing professionals feel more competent in the more general competency areas outlined by NASPA and ACPA. Housing professionals described higher competence in many areas, but it was most pronounced in Advising and Helping, which addresses crisis management; Human and Organizational Resources, since they hire and fire a large professional and student staff; and Leadership. As noted before, this group generally reported lower competence in Personal Foundations.

**Varied experiences.** Several participants described involvement in various professional opportunities, which appeared to improve competence. For example, those who had experienced a job change described higher levels of competence in most areas. Of those who had assumed more than one professional position, most had changed institutions, as well, leading to even more competence development. One should not assume that switching jobs regularly promotes competence development, but it is worth noting that those who had varied experiences over a few years did report higher levels of ability.

Generally, participants who worked at smaller institutions tended to report higher levels of competence, as well. Student affairs professionals at small institutions have broader range of responsibility and touch several areas of the institution under a single job title. Collaboration is not only more feasible at small institutions, it is often expected, and that seemed to promote a higher level of competence in the professionals who worked there. The areas of exception were Assessment, Evaluation and Research and in Student Learning and Development. Those who worked at smaller institutions seemed to struggle with the support they needed to advance their competence in these areas.
I think working at a small school…one of the downsides is that you don’t have an opportunity to be as intentional as you’d hope because you’re spread so thin. Your department is responsible for so many functional areas of student affairs that you can’t be as intentional with each individual program. (Andrew)

Finally, those who pursued tasks outside of their department, through committee work or task forces, reported higher levels of competence in many areas and attributed some of their acquisition of competence to those external experiences.

Exposure matters. Participants in narrower functional areas, such as academic advising, who had little or no opportunities to engage in professional activities outside of those areas reported less competence than those who had experienced a more dynamic career. This observation will be further explored in Chapter Five as implications are discussed. It would seem prudent for new professionals (especially those in large institutions) to be encouraged and supported in seeking experiences outside of their immediate functional areas in order to foster development.

**Gender.** While gender was not addressed by the initial research questions, differences in participant responses were difficult to ignore. Males reported a higher level of competence in all areas except History, Philosophy and Values. This difference is not unlike that which has been reported in other studies where gender is a factor in self-reported competence (Markus & Oyserman, 1989; Rohmann & Bierhoff, 2013; Emmanuel, Adom, Josephine & Solomon, 2014).

Since student affairs is inclusive of women, even in senior administration, the discrepancy is disconcerting at first glance. It would seem that, in a profession where women are valued as leaders, young female professionals would feel confidently competent in their ability to
do the work. As the participants shared, though, it seemed as though the female participants were more reflective and their responses of lower competence may have been well-founded, given their experiences and opportunities thus far. Conversely, some male participants seemed to give more exaggerated examples of competence. For example, when explaining his advanced competence in History, Philosophy and Values, one young man suggested that his participation in this study was a way in which he is able to demonstrate his commitment to making a significant contribution to the literature. Another student suggested that he attained advanced level of competence in Ethical Professional Practice while he was taking classes in his graduate program because an instructor challenged him to think through the ethical implications of receiving gifts from students.

Advanced may have come in grad school when we had the Law class with [instructor’s name] and he frequently talked about what is ethical practice in student affairs and when can we receive gifts from students or from guests or clients or any of that stuff, and I think that’s when it really got to advanced [sic]. (Andrew)

Figure 4. Self-perceived competence by gender
**Interpretation of competencies.** Another interesting factor that emerged throughout the study was the interpretation of each competency by participants. While their instructions were to determine the level at which they could “demonstrate competence today,” many struggled with the notion of being able to do something versus having done it. This further supports the gender difference and intersects with self-confidence and personality. Several participants suggested that they were intermediate or advanced in some areas but that their positions or politics simply prevented them from demonstrating that competence on a regular basis. This, along with the aforementioned notion of confidence and personality, made analysis more complex and is worth noting.

Sometimes I feel like my position title hinders me from being able to really go into that next level conversation with the stakeholders that are in the room. I’m still an entry-level employee, but I definitely do have an advanced level of understanding of this specific competency, and so it’s hard to sometimes feel like my voice isn’t being heard in the way that it needs to be heard. (Freddy)

Another example of this is when participants were reflecting on their competence in History, Philosophy and Values. Advanced competence is described in terms of contributions to the literature surrounding trends and issues in student affairs. Some participants suggested that they do some writing, but they would not consider that a contribution to the literature, while others suggested they had been writing since graduate school, which served to advance their competence in this area. When asked to describe his acquisition of advanced level competence in this area, Victor replied,
Contributing to the research and scholarship of the profession -- that’s something that has been encouraged all the way through the…entire student affairs program at [Institution One]. That’s really something that I felt like we were pushed towards and we were driven towards, and it’s something that has really stuck with me since. (Victor)

Participants’ personalities impacted the study in a couple of ways. First, those who were more animated tended to rate their competence higher. They expressed excitement for the work and probably immersed themselves in it. People with big personalities likely volunteer for extra duty and make a point to engage with others outside of their immediate work areas, which would intuitively increase competence simply by exposure to different issues on campus.

Another aspect of personality that impacted the study was that some participants were very talkative, while others were more reserved. The talkers gave numerous examples of ways in which they were able to demonstrate competence in each area and cited multiple sources for each. Those with more reserved personalities tended to give only one or two examples and cited fewer sources of competence. This doesn’t weaken the study, but is an example of the diversity of new professionals in this study and in student affairs in general.

Summary of the Chapter

This chapter described the results of the study. Participants generally described their competence as being at the intermediate level, reporting the highest levels of competence in Advising and Helping and Leadership and the lowest levels in Law, Policy and Governance. Full-time employment, graduate education, and professional development were the main themes that emerged throughout the study although others, such as undergraduate experience and upbringing, were cited as well. For most of the competency areas, development began in the
classroom and was improved through practice, either in practical application components of the graduate program or in full-time student affairs work. Implications for these findings will be discussed in Chapter Five.

Table 2. General levels and sources of competence by area.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Competency Area</th>
<th>General Level of Competence</th>
<th>Primary Sources of Competence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Advising and Helping</td>
<td>Intermediate/Advanced</td>
<td>Full-time employment in SA Practical application</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assessment, Evaluation and Research</td>
<td>Basic/Intermediate</td>
<td>Coursework Full-time employment in SA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equity, Diversity and Inclusion</td>
<td>Intermediate</td>
<td>Full-time employment in SA Practical Application Coursework</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethical Professional Practice</td>
<td>Intermediate/Advanced</td>
<td>Upbringing (Family, Religion) Full-time employment in SA Supervisors and graduate faculty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>History, Philosophy and Values</td>
<td>Basic/Intermediate</td>
<td>Coursework Professional associations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Human and Organizational Resources</td>
<td>Intermediate</td>
<td>Full-time employment in SA Previous employment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Law, Policy and Governance</td>
<td>Basic</td>
<td>Coursework Full-time employment in SA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership</td>
<td>Intermediate/Advanced</td>
<td>Full-time employment in SA Undergraduate experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Foundations</td>
<td>Intermediate</td>
<td>Full-time employment in SA Life changes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Learning and Development</td>
<td>Intermediate</td>
<td>Coursework Practical application Full-time employment in SA</td>
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CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Summary of the study

Problem statement. The notion of competence in student affairs is a bit elusive since there are no enforced standards -- there is no board exam or certification process for student affairs professionals. Most job listings at universities, even those of entry level ones, expect that applicants will have degrees in student affairs. The parameters established by the Council of the Advancement of Standards are generally applied to curricula in graduate professional preparation programs, but they leave plenty of room for creativity and diversity among programs of study (2009). Students who earn master’s level degrees in student affairs may enter the workforce with a very diverse set of knowledge, skills and work experience, depending on their alma mater.

Variances in curricula across the country, and in the different job requirements across functional areas, have made it difficult for researchers to assess the effectiveness of graduate programs in preparing new student affairs professionals for entry level work. A few, however, have been conducted based on existing areas of competence developed by professional organizations or by specific samples of supervisors used for individual studies. While these projects have made notable contributions to the literature, the majority have been quantitative in nature (Herdlein, 2004; Burkard, Cole, Ott, & Stoflet, 2004; Waple, 2006; Reynolds, 2011; Young & Janosik, 2007; Delworth, Hanson, & Associates, 1980; Hyman, 1988; Sandeen, 1982; Stamatakos, 1981).
Employing institutions, professional associations, and graduate preparation programs should better understand their roles in developing competence in student affairs professionals, particularly at the critical early stages of their careers. The qualitative nature of this study added richness to that which had already been assessed quantitatively. Learning from new student affairs professionals, themselves, about what they know and how they learned it will hopefully inform faculty decisions about curriculum design and revision, senior administrators’ decisions about hiring, and decisions of officers of professional organizations about professional development offerings. This study amplified the voices of new student affairs professionals as they reflected upon the experiences that have shaped them professionally and the meaning they attribute to those experiences.

**Purpose of the study.** This study was designed to determine the extent to which new student affairs professionals feel competent for the work and to identify the experiences that foster such competence in them. The study also revealed discrepancies in the perceived levels and sources of competence between professionals who have completed either one or three years of full-time employment in student affairs. It also unveiled other differences among participants based on criteria such as gender and the functional area in which they worked.

**Research questions.** This study was designed to answer the following questions:

1. How do new student affairs professionals describe their level of competence in each of the competency areas defined by ACPA and NASPA?

2. To what extent do new student affairs professionals attribute their competence to the coursework, applied experiences, faculty relationships, and other characteristics of their graduate professional preparation program?
3. To what extent do new student affairs professionals attribute their competence to professional development experiences since the completion of their academic program?

4. To what extent do new student affairs professionals attribute their competence to full time professional work?

5. What other sources of competence do participants cite when reflecting on their experiences as new professionals?

6. To what extent do years of experience affect new student affairs professionals’ perceptions of the source of their competence?

**Method.** These research questions were addressed by a study in which data were collected during one-hour interviews with new professionals who graduated from master’s-level student affairs professional preparation programs in Florida in either 2010 or 2012. Twenty-three participants who represented five graduate student affairs programs comprised the sample.

Participants were asked to rate their level of competence using the set of competence areas published by NASPA and ACPA (2010). The ten competency areas are Advising and Helping; Assessment, Evaluation and Research; Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion; Ethical Professional Practice; History, Philosophy and Values; Human and Organizational Resources; Law, Policy and Governance; Leadership; Ethical Professional Practice; and Student Learning and Development. For each area, there are descriptors for three levels of competence – basic, intermediate and advanced. They were also asked to describe how they developed competence in each area. The data were analyzed and organized using Atlas-ti, and several themes emerged.
Principle findings. The most frequently reported level of competence across all areas and each graduating classes was intermediate. Participants considered their competence in Advising and Helping and in Leadership as being highest and Law, Policy and Governance being lowest.

After they reported their self-perceived level of competence, participants were asked to describe the source(s) of their competence in each of the areas. Full-time employment in student affairs was the most frequently cited source of competence. Most participants attributed their competence development to their functional area or job description, but others mentioned relationships with supervisors, mentors and colleagues and work with other professionals on campus through committees or task forces.

Participants also cited their graduate education as a significant source of competence. The aspects of the graduate programs that most impacted competence development were assistantships and other opportunities they had for practical application. Coursework and their relationships with supervisors, mentors, and members of their cohort were also often referenced as sources of competence.

Professional development was also mentioned as a way in which participants developed competence, although this was cited less frequently than full-time professional work and graduate school. Participants described their professional development experiences through affiliation with professional associations, conference attendance, on-campus professional development programs, or individual activities like reading or engaging in social media.

Some other sources of competence were mentioned. Participants’ undergraduate experiences, employment experience gained prior to their entering graduate programs, and more
personal experiences like their upbringing or religion were all credited with some level of competence development.

The two cohorts that participated in the study reported different levels of competence. Those who graduated from their master’s-level graduate preparation program in 2012 reported higher self-perceived competence than those who graduated in 2010. In other words, those with less experience reported higher levels of competence. The cohorts reported similar experiences in their acquisition of competence in each area.

Overall, the difference in competence between the cohorts might be explained by simple humility. It is easy to believe that recent graduates from reputable graduate programs, such as those that are represented in this study, would feel well-equipped for the work. Their courses, along with the structured opportunities for applied practice, make them feel that they are competent and that their experiences are vast and have effectively prepared them for the tasks they will encounter as new student affairs professionals. It is also easy to imagine their self-perceived competence being challenged by increased responsibilities. As new professionals advance from primary entry-level positions, such as coordinator, into those with increased responsibility, such as assistant director, their spheres of influence broaden and they have the opportunity to “sit at the table” with those who are more experienced, and more competent, than they are. Investigating the reasons for the gap in self-perceived competence between cohorts extends beyond the scope of this study, but the notion of expanding responsibility and a broader peer group seems to be a reasonable assumption.
Implications for practice

This study can inform practice for various groups associated with student affairs. In this section, implications for faculty members in master’s-level graduate programs, practitioners and supervisors in student affairs, and those developing professional development programs for professional associations will be discussed.

Graduate professional preparation programs. The information gleaned from this study could inform the work of those who make decisions about the curriculum and experiential learning opportunities for graduate students in student affairs professional preparation programs. The implications regarding opportunities for applied practice, coursework, faculty relationships and the overall structure of the program are profound.

Assistantships and other opportunities for practical application. The most impactful aspect of participants’ graduate programs was their assistantship. Participants recognized the value of learning concepts in the classroom and then having the opportunity to apply those concepts under the guidance of their supervisors. Participants who had assistantships in areas unrelated to student affairs or with supervisors who seemed less engaged knew it and articulated the gap between their experiences and the more meaningful experiences of their peers. Because the impact of the assistantship is profound, program coordinators should be selective regarding assistantship opportunities for students and ensure that assistantship supervisors are aware of their roles in the students’ learning process. Assistantships that are in student affairs and aligned with the program’s curriculum and with the professional competencies will provide students with a more meaningful experience.
**Coursework.** Coursework played a key role in the development of all of the competency areas, although participants described its impact in some areas as being greater than others. Participants cited classroom learning as a primary source of competence in the areas of Assessment, Evaluation and Research; Equity, Diversity and Inclusion; History, Philosophy and Values; Law, Policy and Governance; and Student Learning and Development. Competence in these areas warrants a deliberate effort to learn content and then apply it in practice. For example, in order for participants to create and implement programs that are based on student development theory, they first needed to acquire the content. Coursework provided an opportunity for that transfer of knowledge and equipped them to use theory as a basis for practice. Faculty should be mindful of the key role coursework plays in these specific areas and ensure that students demonstrate mastery of content so that they can then appropriately apply it. It may even behoove faculty to use the basic competency descriptors as a framework for course syllabi.

Areas that were indirectly impacted by coursework were Advising and Helping; Ethical Professional Practice; Human and Organizational Resources; and Leadership. For these areas, coursework was a supplemental source of competence. It would seem unreasonable to expect that competence in every area could be effectively taught through direct instruction or that faculty should generate courses and lessons that explicitly address all of these areas, but the role of coursework in affirming that which students are learning in their assistantships, internships and practicum experiences should not be dismissed. For example, assigning students to work in groups might foster competence in the areas of Human and Organizational Resources and Leadership, even if the topic being addressed were unrelated to either of those two areas.
Faculty relationships. While assistantship supervisors were credited with supporting the professional development of graduate students, faculty members were rarely mentioned. It would seem as though the expertise and knowledge base of faculty members in preparation programs should support their roles as mentors and advisors to students, not just in curricular and coursework matters, but in professional preparation. The absence of references to faculty members as sources of support for competence raises some question about the efficacy of their role. Preparation program faculty should assess their relationships with students and consider whether purposeful, individual support of students relative to their competence is well advised. A context for this suggestion may be the size of a graduate preparation program or the faculty to student ratio.

The cohort model. The cohort model seems to be effective for competence development. When students are able to develop authentic relationships with others who are like-minded and who are experiencing similar life transitions, they are able to learn from each other and reflect upon the experiences of others. Faculty and program coordinators should consider the cohort model to facilitate the process of learning in the classroom, applying knowledge in the assistantship, and then discussing developmental learning with others.

Supervisors and employing institutions. For those who supervise new professionals, the responsibility for fostering development is significant. Since most participants in this study attributed their competence development to their experiences working in the profession, supervisors can play a large role in ensuring that they get exposure to the experiences that encourage development in each of the ten competency areas. New professionals whose roles were narrow demonstrated less competence than those whose job responsibilities varied. Perhaps one key implication for supervisors is to encourage new professionals to engage in committee
work and other cross-functional activities so that they can develop competence in areas that may not be directly addressed by their functional area or professional role.

**Individual new professionals.** While graduate faculty and supervisors have some responsibility for providing opportunities for learning and engaging, new professionals themselves are primarily responsible for their development. Recommendations for this population would be to engage in diverse experiences on campus and within professional associations, identify mentors who will invest in their professional development, and learn from colleagues who are involved in different professional experiences. Student affairs is incredibly diverse and affords new professionals many opportunities for learning when they intentionally seek those experiences.

**Professional associations.** Professional associations were cited as providing some support for competence development in some areas, but not at the level that one might expect. Membership in these associations is rather expensive. Perhaps these professional associations could accommodate the salaries of new professionals by offering discounted fees to those who are new in the field. The larger associations already make a point to identify specific competency areas being addressed by program sessions and other elective workshops and courses, but they might consider offering more targeted learning opportunities that address specific areas of competence and that are created for this population specifically.

**Recommendations for future research**

This study revealed the self-perceived levels of competence of new student affairs professionals and identified various experiences that fostered such competence. Future research might include the following:
A longitudinal study that would address the competence levels of a group of newer professionals as a baseline, and then a study of the same participants sometime later might render interesting results. A study in later years, after significant experience in the field, might yield very different levels and sources of competence.

A similar study that would include feedback from new professionals, along with their supervisors and coworkers, might also add to the richness of the current study. Comparing the self-reported competence of new student affairs professionals with reports from those who have observed their work might render useful information.

A similar qualitative study using a sample of senior student affairs officers at different types of institutions would also render useful information regarding the developmental nature of competence development and the extent to which self-concept evolves and impacts self-perception.

Further, a study that addresses perceptions of faculty of graduate preparation programs regarding the impact of curriculum and other aspects of their program on the development of competence could contribute to the literature.

A study that further delineates the skills and knowledge associated with each competency area might reveal more detailed information on the acquisition of competence. Perhaps one could extract a few of the areas that are of most interest and investigate them more intensely.
Conclusion

This qualitative study was conducted to assist in understanding the self-perceived competence of new professionals and the experiences that fostered their competence. The researcher found previous studies generally related to this topic, but none were found that offered rich, qualitative information. This study analyzed the perspectives of new professionals in their own voices.

Donald Super’s Life-Space Life-Span model provided a framework for this study. Participants were functioning at the Establishment phase. The notion of career development being influenced not only by age and education, but by self-concept, life events and other individual inputs was affirmed by this study.

This study determined that professionals attributed a variety of sources to their competence in each of the ten areas described by ACPA and NASPA (2010). The study also determined differences in the general self-assessments of newer professionals based upon their years of experience and their gender.

The results of this study may be useful to faculty in graduate preparation programs for curriculum development and for strategies to improve the quality of preparation of entering professionals. The results will also be of use to student affairs professional associations as they consider developing and refining their professional development opportunities. Finally, the study will be of use to the supervisors and employers of newer professionals as they work to enhance their competence for success in the field.
REFERENCES


Miller, T.E., Tyree, T.M., Riegler, K.K., & Herreid, C.M. (2010) Results of the use of a model that predicts individual student attrition to intervene with those who are most at risk. College and University, 85(3).


APPENDIX A

ACPA/NASPA Professional Competencies (Abbreviated)

I. Advising and Helping

Description: The Advising and Helping competency area addresses the knowledge, skills, and attitudes related to providing counseling and advising support, direction, feedback, critique, referral, and guidance to individuals and groups.

A. Basic: One should be able to

- establish rapport with students, groups, colleagues, and others;
- facilitate individual decision making and goal setting; and
- know and use referral sources (e.g., other offices, outside agencies, knowledge sources), and exhibit referral skills in seeking expert assistance.

B. Intermediate: One should be able to

- identify patterns of behavior that signal mental health concerns;
- manage conflict; and
- appropriately mentor students and staff.

C. Advanced: One should be able to

- exercise institutional crisis intervention skills, and coordinate crisis intervention and response processes;
• collaborate with other campus departments and organizations as well as surrounding community agencies and other institutions of higher education to address mental health concerns in a comprehensive, collaborative way;

• provide effective posttraumatic response to campus events and situations, collaborating with other appropriate campus departments.

II. Assessment, Evaluation, and Research

Description: The Assessment, Evaluation, and Research competency area (AER) focuses on the ability to use, design, conduct, and critique qualitative and quantitative AER analysis; to manage organizations using AER processes and the results obtained from them; and to shape the political and ethical climate surrounding AER processes and uses on campus.

A. Basic: One should be able to

• effectively articulate, interpret, and use results of assessment, evaluation, and research reports and studies, including professional literature;

• explain to students and colleagues the relationship of AER processes to learning outcomes and goals; and

• align program and learning outcomes with organization goals values.

B. Intermediate: One should be able

• design ongoing and periodic data collection efforts such that they are sustainable, rigorous, as unobtrusive as possible, and technologically current;

• effectively manage, align, and guide implementation of results of assessment, evaluation, and research reports and studies; and

• construct basic surveys and other instruments with consultation.

C. Advanced: One should be able to
• effectively lead the conceptualization and design of ongoing, systematic, high-quality, data-based strategies at the institutional, divisional, and/or unit-wide level to evaluate and assess learning, programs, services, and personnel; and

• effectively use assessment and evaluation results in determining the institution’s, the division’s, or the unit’s accomplishment of its missions and goals, reallocation of resources, and advocacy for more resources.

• Lead the strategic use and prioritization of budgetary and personnel resources to support high-quality program evaluation, assessment efforts, research, and planning;

III. Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion

Description: The Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) competency area includes the knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed to create learning environments that are enriched with diverse views and people. It is also designed to create an institutional to free them of any misconceptions and prejudices.

A. Basic: One should be able to

• interact with diverse individuals and implement programs, services, and activities that reflect an understanding and appreciation of cultural and human difference;

• design culturally relevant and inclusive programs, services, policies, and practices; and

• demonstrate fair treatment to all individuals and change aspects of the environment that do not promote fair treatment.

B. Intermediate: One should be able to

• engage in hiring and promotion practices that are fair, inclusive, proactive, and nondiscriminatory;
• develop effective multicultural training that expands the cultural knowledge of one’s staff; and

• apply advocacy skills to assist in the development of a more multiculturally sensitive institution and profession.

C. Advanced: One should be able to

• ensure that elements of EDI are demonstrated throughout institutional mission, goals, and programs;

• create ongoing strategic plans for the continued development of diversity initiatives and inclusive practices throughout the institution and ensure that competence in these areas is fully integrated into departmental practices throughout the campus; and

• provide leadership in fostering an institutional culture that supports the free and open exchange of ideas and beliefs, and where issues of power and privileged are identified and addresses.

IV. Ethical Professional Practice

Description: The Ethical Professional Practice competency area pertains to the knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed to understand and apply ethical standards to one’s work. While ethics is an integral component of all the competency areas, this competency area focuses specifically on the integration of ethics into all aspects of self and professional practice.

A. Basic: One should be able to

• articulate one’s personal code of ethics for student affairs practice, which reflects the ethical statements of professional student affairs associations and their foundational ethical principles;

• identify ethical issues in the course of one’s job; and
• demonstrate an understanding of the role of beliefs and values in personal integrity and professional ethical practices;

B. Intermediate: One should be able to

• identify and seek to resolve areas of incongruence between personal, institutional, and professional ethical standards;
• address and resolve lapses in ethical behavior among colleagues and students; and
• articulate and implement a personal protocol for ethical decision making.

C. Advanced: One should be able to

• engage in effective consultation and provide advice regarding ethical issues with colleagues and students;
• ensure those working in the unit or division adhere to identical ethical guidelines and appropriately resolve disparities; and
• actively support the ethical development of other professionals as well as developing and supporting an ethical organizational culture within the workplace.

V. History, Philosophy, and Values

Description: The History, Philosophy, and Values competency area involves knowledge, skill, and attitudes that connect the history, philosophy, and values of the profession to one’s current professional practice. This competency area embodies the foundations of the profession from which current and future research and practice will grow. The commitment to demonstrating this competency area ensures that our present and future practices are informed by an understanding of our history, philosophy, and values.

A. Basic: One should be able to
• describe the foundational philosophies, disciplines, and values on which the profession is built;
• articulate the historical contexts of institutional types and functional areas within higher education and student affairs; and
• model the principles of the profession and communicate the expectation of the same from colleagues and supervisees.

B. Intermediate: One should be able to
• participate in opportunities to identify and incorporate emerging values of the profession into one’s professional practice;
• actively engage in service to the academy and to student affairs professional associations; and
• teach the principles of the profession to staff.

C. Advanced: One should be able to
• partner with faculty for teaching and research regarding the profession;
• model, encourage, and promote community by reinforcing the long-standing values of the profession; and
• contribute to the research and scholarship of the profession.

VI. Human and Organizational Resources

Description: The Human and Organizational Resources competency area includes knowledge, skills, and attitudes used in the selection, supervision, motivation, and formal evaluation of staff; conflict resolution; management of the politics of organizational discourse. And the effective application of strategies and techniques associated with financial resources, facilities
management, fundraising, technology use, crisis management, risk management, and sustainable resources.

A. Basic: One should be able to

- demonstrate familiarity in basic tenets of supervision and possible application of these supervision techniques;

- design a professional development plan in one’s current professional position that assesses one’s strengths and weaknesses in one’s current position, and establishes action items for fostering an appropriate level of growth; and

- describe the basic premises that underline conflict in organizational and student life and the constructs utilized for facilitating conflict resolution in these settings.

B. Intermediate: One should be able to

- assist and/or direct individuals to develop professional development plans that are appropriate for individual growth while also serving the current and future needs of the unit where one is employed;

- communicate with others using effective verbal and nonverbal speaking strategies appropriate to the situation in one-on-one as well as small and large groups settings; and

- develop appropriate alliances with others as a means to efficiently and effectively complete work assignments; recognize how the formation of alliances can either enhance or detract from one’s professional credibility or the use of teams.

C. Advanced: One should be able to

- effectively intervene with employees in regard to morale, behavioral expectations, and conflict and performance issues;
• evaluate the effectiveness of current staffing patterns and supporting job descriptions in regard to a unit’s ability to effectively meet institutional, divisional, and unit mission and goals; and
• anticipate how future needs of students, the unit, or the division may affect staffing levels or structures and make proactive adjustments to meet those needs.

VII. Law, Policy and Governance

Description: The Law, Policy, and Governance competency area includes the knowledge, skills, and attitudes relating to policy development processes used in various contexts, the application of legal constructs, and the understanding of governance structures and their effect on one’s professional practice.

A. Basic: One should be able to
• describe the evolving legal theories that define the student institution relationship and how they affect professional practice;
• explain the concepts of risk management and liability reduction strategies; and
• describe the federal and state/province role in higher education.

B. Intermediate: One should be able to
• incorporate best practices of the profession when managing institutional and personal tort liability;
• identify emerging trends in the law and understand how they affect current case precedent; and
• use data appropriately to guide the analysis and creation of policy.

C. Advanced: One should be able to
develop institutional policies and practices that are consistent with federal and state/province law;

- develop policies in one’s department and institution; and influence policy making at the local, state/province, and federal levels of government when appropriate; and
- participate effectively in the governance system of one’s institution when appropriate.

VIII. Leadership

Description: The leadership competency area addresses the knowledge, skills, and attitudes required of a leader, whether it be a positional leader or a member of the staff, in both an individual capacity and within a process of how individuals work together effectively to envision, plan, effect change in organizations and respond to internal and external constituencies and issues.

A. Basic: One should be able to

- identify one’s strengths and weaknesses as a leader and seek opportunities to develop one’s leadership skills;
- understand campus cultures (e.g., academic cultures, student cultures) and collaborative relationships, applying that understanding to one’s work; and
- think critically and creatively, and imagine possibilities for solutions that do not currently exist or are not apparent.

B. Intermediate: One should be able to

- advocate for change within the division that would remove barriers to student and staff success;
- facilitate consensus processes where wide support is needed; and
serve as a mentor for students, new professionals, or those new to the organizational unit.

C. Advanced: One should be able to

- lead, motivate, influence, inspire, and enable others to contribute toward the effectiveness and success of the organization;
- develop and promote a shared vision that drives unit, divisional, and institutional short and long term planning and the ongoing organizing of work; and
- implement divisional strategies that account for ongoing changes in the cultural landscape, political landscape, global perspectives, and sustainability issues.

IX. Personal Foundations

Description: The Personal Foundation competency area involves the knowledge, skill, and attitudes to maintain emotional, physical, social, environmental, relational, spiritual, and intellectual wellness; be self-directed and self-reflective; maintain excellence and integrity in work; be comfortable with ambiguity; be aware of one’s own areas of strength and growth; have a passion for work; and remain curious.

A. Basic: One should be able to

- describe the importance of one’s professional and personal life to self, and recognize the intersection of each
- articulate an understanding that wellness is a broad concept comprised of emotional, physical, social, environmental, relational, spiritual, and intellectual elements; and
- articulate meaningful goals for one’s work.

B. Intermediate: One should be able to

- identify sources of dissonance and fulfillment in one’s life and take appropriate steps in response;
recognize the effect between one’s professional and personal life, and develop plans to manage any related concerns; and

- explain the process for executing responsibilities dutifully and thoughtfully.

C. Advanced: One should be able to

- seek environments and collaborations that provide adequate challenges such that personal development is promoted, and provide sufficient support such that development is possible;
- mediate incongruences between one’s professional life and one’s personal life; and
- transfer thoughtful reflection into positive future action.

X. Student Learning and Development

Description: The Student Learning and Development competency area addresses the concepts and principles of student development and learning theory. This includes the ability to apply theory to improve and inform student affairs practice, as well as understanding teaching and training theory and practice.

A. Basic: One should be able to

- articulate theories and models that describe the development of college students and the conditions and practices that facilitate holistic development;
- identify and define types of theories (e.g., learning, psychological and identity development, cognitive-structural, typological, and environmental);
- identify and construct learning outcomes for both daily practices as well as teaching and training activities;

B. Intermediate: One should be able to
• design programs and services to promote student learning and development that are based on current research on student learning and development theories;
• utilize theory-to-practice models to inform individual or unit practice; and
• create and assess learning outcomes to evaluate progress toward fulfilling the mission of the department, the division, and the institution.

C. Advanced: One should be able to

• utilize theory to inform divisional and institutional policy and practice;
• evaluate and assess the effectiveness of learning and teaching opportunities at the division level, communicate its effectiveness to the larger campus community, and explain opportunities for collaboration and integrated learning opportunities; and
• build and support inclusive and welcoming campus communities that promote deep learning and foster student success.
APPENDIX B

Member Check Form

Dear ____________________________.

Thank you for an insightful interview on your competence as a student affairs professional. Attached please find a draft copy of the verbatim transcripts of the interview. Please review the transcription for accuracy and completeness of responses. Feel free to contact me at 813-781-5720 or by email (jaschnei@usf.edu) should you have any questions. If I do not hear from you by ____________, 2014, I will assume that you agree with the attached draft of the transcription.

Thank you again for your willingness to participate.

Sincerely,

Jennifer Schneider
APPENDIX C

Outside Reviewer Form

1. Susan Freeman, PhD, have served as an independent reviewer for "Self-perceived competence of new student affairs professionals" by Jennifer Schneider. In this role, I reviewed the interview transcripts, generated themes based on the data, and discussed these themes with the Principal Investigator.

Signed: Susan Freeman  Date: 1-3-2014
APPENDIX D

Interview Script

Thank you again for agreeing to talk to me about your competence as a new student affairs professional.

The purpose of this study is to determine the degree to which new student affairs professionals feel competent for the work and to identify the educational experiences that foster such competence in them. The study should also reveal discrepancies in the perceived levels and sources of competence between professionals who have completed one or three years of full-time employment in student affairs.

Our interview should take about an hour of your time. With your permission, the interview will be recorded and transcribed. To maintain confidentiality, your comments will not be identified by name. I and/or a professional transcriber will be transcribing the readings; however, an ascribed letter, such as participant A, B, C and so forth will be used to identify each transcript. You may turn off the digital recorder at any time during the interview.

I will conduct a “member check” following this interview. In the member check, I will send to you the text of the transcript of your interview. You will have an opportunity to correct or elaborate on any point in the transcript. That will assure accuracy and the intent behind your comments and observations.

If you have no further questions, let’s get started.
APPENDIX E

Script of Email to Faculty from Participating Programs

Dear ______________________,

I am contacting you to enlist your help in recruiting participants for a research project I am conducting for my doctoral dissertation in higher education administration at the University of South Florida. My dissertation committee is being chaired by Dr. Thomas E. Miller, Associate Professor and Vice President of Student Affairs at USF, along with Drs. Robert Sullins, Donald Dellow, and William Young (IRB #Pro00016507).

I am requesting that you help me recruit graduates from your master’s level student affairs professional preparation program who graduated in the spring semesters of 2010 and 2012. These alumni will be invited to participate in a qualitative study that has been designed to determine the degree to which new student affairs professionals feel competent for student affairs work and to identify the experiences that foster such competence in them. The study should also reveal variances in the levels and sources of competence between professionals who have completed one year of full-time employment in student affairs and those who have been in the field longer.

If you would be willing to contact your alumni to solicit their participation on my behalf, please reply to this email. If you would like to discuss the project further, feel free to call me at 813-781-5720 or contact me at jaschnei@usf.edu.

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Thank you for your thoughtful consideration of my request. I look forward to learning about the experiences of those who have been shaped by your program.

Respectfully,

Jennifer Schneider
APPENDIX F

Script for Email for Recruitment of Participants

Dear ____________________,

I am contacting you to enlist your help in a research project I am conducting for my doctoral dissertation in higher education administration at the University of South Florida under the supervision of Dr. Thomas Miller, Associate Professor and Vice President of Student Affairs (IRB #Pro00016507). I invite you to participate in a study that has been designed to determine the degree to which new student affairs professionals feel competent for the work and to identify the experiences that foster such competence in them. The study should also reveal variances in the levels and sources of competence between professionals who have completed one year of full-time employment in student affairs and those who have been in the field longer.

Participation in this study is voluntary. It will involve a one hour interview that will take place in a mutually agreed upon location or via Skype. Prior to the interview, you will be asked to review the ten competency areas outlined by ACPA/NASPA and to rate your competency in each. This process should take you no longer than 30 minutes and it will facilitate our discussion during the interview. You may decline to answer any of the interview questions if you so wish. Further, you may decide to withdraw from this study at any time without any negative consequences by advising the researcher. With your permission, the interview will be audio recorded to facilitate collection of information, and later transcribed for analysis. Shortly after the interview has been completed, I will send you a copy of the transcript to give you an
opportunity to confirm the accuracy of our conversation and to add or clarify any points that you wish. All information you provide is considered completely confidential. Your name will not appear in any thesis or report resulting from this study; however, with your permission, anonymous quotations may be used. Only researchers associated with this project will have access to the data. If you permit, your identifying information will be kept for future longitudinal projects. All audio recordings will be destroyed within two years of publication of the dissertation. There are no known or anticipated risks to you as a participant in this study.

If you have any questions, or would like additional information to assist you in reaching a decision about participation, please contact me at 813-781-5720 or by email at jaschnei@usf.edu.

I look forward to speaking with you and thank you in advance for your assistance.

Sincerely,

Jennifer Schneider
APPENDIX G

Script for Email to Participants

Dear ______,

Thank you for agreeing to participate in my dissertation, *Self-Perceived Competence of New Student Affairs Professionals*. Our interview is scheduled for [Date, Start Time to End Time, Location]. I look forward to learning more about your experience in higher education thus far.

Before we meet, I would like for you to review the attached document. It is a condensed version of ACPA/NASPA’s *Professional Competency Areas for Student Affairs Practitioners* (2010). It should help you understand the various levels of competence associated with each area.

Please review all ten and their respective definitions. Within each one are three levels of competence: basic, intermediate and advanced. Look carefully at the attributes and experiences that comprise each level and carefully and honestly determine at which level you function at this point in your career.

Use the attached document to note the level of competence you could confidently demonstrate in each of the ten areas. If you have a marked hard copy of the attachment with you on (day), it will facilitate our conversation.

If you have any questions, please feel free to respond to this email ([jaschnei@usf.edu](mailto:jaschnei@usf.edu)) or contact me by phone at (813)781-5720.
Thank you again for your willingness to participate. I look forward to learning from you!

With gratitude,

Jennifer Schneider
APPENDIX H

Informed Consent to Participate in Research

Information to Consider Before Taking Part in this Research Study

IRB Study # Pro00016507

You are being asked to take part in a research study. Research studies include only people who choose to take part. This document is called an informed consent form. Please read this information carefully and take your time making your decision. Ask the researcher or study staff to discuss this consent form with you, please ask him/her to explain any words or information you do not clearly understand. We encourage you to talk with your family and friends before you decide to take part in this research study.

Please tell the study doctor or study staff if you are taking part in another research study.

We are asking you to take part in a research study called Self-Perceived Competence of New Student Affairs Professionals. The person who is in charge of this research study is Jennifer Schneider. This person is called the Principal Investigator. However, other research staff may be involved and can act on behalf of the person in charge. Jennifer is being guided in this research by Tom Miller. The research will be conducted at the University of South Florida.

The purpose of this study is to determine the degree to which new student affairs professionals feel competent for the work and to identify the experiences that foster such competence in them. The study should also reveal discrepancies in the levels and sources of competence between student affairs professionals who have been in the field for one year and
those who have practiced for three years. This study is being conducted by a doctoral student in Higher Education Administration at the University of South Florida.

Should you take part in this study?

Before you decide:

- Read this form and find out what the study is about.
- You may have questions this form does not answer. You do not have to guess at things you don’t understand. If you have questions ask the person in charge of the study or study staff as you go along. Ask them to explain things in a way you can understand.
- Take your time to think about it.

This form tells you about this research study. This form explains:

- Why this study is being done.
- What will happen during this study and what you will need to do.
- Whether there is any chance of benefits from being in this study.
- The risks involved in this study.
- How the information collected about you during this study will be used and with whom it may be shared.

Taking part in this research study is up to you. If you choose to be in the study, then you should sign this informed consent form. If you do not want to take part in this study, you should not sign this form.

Why is this research being done?

The purpose of this study is to determine the degree to which new student affairs professionals feel competent for the work and to identify the experiences that foster such competence in them. The study should also reveal discrepancies in the levels and sources of competence between student affairs professionals who have been in the field for one year and
those who have practiced for three years. This information will be collected through individual interviews with new student affairs professionals.

Why are you being asked to take part?

We are asking you to take part in this study because we want to learn how competent you feel as a new professional and to what sources you attribute your competence.

What will happen during this study?

You will be asked to spend about an hour participating in an interview for this study.

If you work within 100 miles of the researcher’s institution of employment, she will meet you in a mutually convenient place for the interview. If you work farther from that, she will schedule an interview using Skype.

You will need to participate in only one visit for approximately one hour. Prior to that visit, you will be asked to rank your competence in the ten areas outlined by NASPA and ACPA (attached). The researcher hopes to complete your interview before the end of the academic year (June 2014).

The interview will be recorded and kept for no more than five years. Your identifying information (name, graduate institution, etc.) will not be included in the research report.

Total Number of Participants

About 30 individuals will participate in the study at various sites.

Alternatives
You do not have to participate in this research study.

Benefits

The potential benefits of participating in this research study include your contribution to the body of knowledge associated with the development of competence in student affairs work, which may be rewarding.

Risks or Discomfort

This research is considered to be minimal risk. That means that the risks associated with this study are the same as what you face every day. There are no known additional risks to those who take part in this study. If transcripts or recordings were to be lost or disclosed, your identity could be at risk. These records will be kept in a locked box and in password-secure files in order to prevent such disclosure.

Compensation

You will receive no payment or other compensation for taking part in this study.

Privacy and Confidentiality

We will keep your study records private and confidential. Certain people may need to see your study records. By law, anyone who looks at your records must keep them completely confidential. The only people who will be allowed to see these records are:

- The research team, including the Principal Investigator, study coordinator, research nurses, and all other research staff.
• Certain government and university people who need to know more about the study. For example, individuals who provide oversight on this study may need to look at your records. This is done to make sure that we are doing the study in the right way. They also need to make sure that we are protecting your rights and your safety.

• Any agency of the federal, state, or local government that regulates this research. This includes the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), Florida Department of Health, and the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) and the Office for Human Research Protection (OHRP).

• The USF Institutional Review Board (IRB) and its related staff who have oversight responsibilities for this study, staff in the USF Office of Research and Innovation, USF Division of Research Integrity and Compliance, and other USF offices who oversee this research.

We may publish what we learn from this study. If we do, we will not include your name. We will not publish anything that would let people know who you are.

Voluntary Participation / Withdrawal

You should only take part in this study if you want to volunteer. You should not feel that there is any pressure to take part in the study. You are free to participate in this research or withdraw at any time. There will be no penalty or loss of benefits you are entitled to receive if you stop taking part in this study. A decision to participate or not to participate will not affect your job status.

New information about the study
During the course of this study, we may find more information that could be important to you. This includes information that, once learned, might cause you to change your mind about being in the study. We will notify you as soon as possible if such information becomes available.

Will I be compensated for research related injuries?

If you believe you have been harmed because of something that is done during the study, you should call Jennifer Schneider at 813-781-5720 immediately. The University of South Florida will not pay for the cost of any care or treatment that might be necessary because you get hurt or sick while taking part in this study. The cost of such care or treatment will be your responsibility. In addition, the University of South Florida will not pay for any wages you may lose if harmed by this study. The University of South Florida is considered a state agency and therefore cannot usually be sued. However, if it can be shown that the researcher, or other USF employee, is negligent in doing his or her job in a way that harms you during the study, you may be able to sue. The money that you might recover from the State of Florida is limited in amount.

You can also call the USF Self Insurance Programs (SIP) at 1-813-974-8008 if you think:

- Someone from the study did something wrong that caused you harm, or did not do something they should have done.
- Ask the SIP to look into what happened.

You can get the answers to your questions, concerns, or complaints.

If you have any questions, concerns or complaints about this study, call Jennifer Schneider at 83-781-5720.
If you have questions about your rights, general questions, complaints, or issues as a person taking part in this study, call the USF IRB at (813) 974-5638.

Consent to Take Part in Research and Authorization for the Collection, Use and Disclosure of Health Information

It is up to you to decide whether you want to take part in this study. If you want to take part, please read the statements below and sign the form if the statements are true. I freely give my consent to take part in this study and authorize that my health information as agreed above, be collected/disclosed in this study. I understand that by signing this form I am agreeing to take part in research. I have received a copy of this form to take with me.

______________________________________________
Signature of Person Taking Part in Study          Date

______________________________________________
Printed Name of Person Taking Part in Study

Statement of Person Obtaining Informed Consent and Research Authorization

I have carefully explained to the person taking part in the study what he or she can expect from their participation. I hereby certify that when this person signs this form, to the best of my knowledge, he/she understands:

• What the study is about;
• What procedures/interventions/investigational drugs or devices will be used;
• What the potential benefits might be; and
• What the known risks might be.

I can confirm that this research subject speaks the language that was used to explain this research and is receiving an informed consent form in the appropriate language. Additionally, this subject reads well enough to understand this document or, if not, this person is able to hear and understand when the form is read to him or her. This subject does not have a medical/psychological problem that would compromise comprehension and therefore makes it hard to understand what is being explained and can, therefore, give legally effective informed consent. This subject is not under any type of anesthesia or analgesic that may cloud their judgment or make it hard to understand what is being explained and, therefore, can be considered competent to give informed consent.

___________________________________________  ____________
Signature of Person Obtaining Informed Consent    Date

___________________________________________
Printed Name of Person Obtaining Informed Consent