

Mid-Level Student Affairs Administrators: Management Skills and Professional Development Needs

Charles J. Fey
D. Stanley Carpenter



The authors conducted a survey of mid-level administrators to ascertain the importance of particular management skills and the administrators' self-perceived need for further development of these skills. Although personnel management and leadership skills were rated the most important skills, the respondents expressed a need for further development only in the area official management, with conferences and workshops cited as the preferred professional development methods.

Introduction

In recent Years, researchers have begun to study the skills that midlevel student affairs administrators view as important as well their perceived professional development needs (Cox & Ivy, 1984; Fey, 1990; Kane, 1982). A review of the literature suggests that there is some agreement concerning

Charles J. Fey is the Dean of Students at the University of Texas, El Paso. D. Stanley Carpenter is an Associate Professor, Educational Administration, at Texas A&M University, College Station, Texas. Support for this study was generously provided by Dr. Fey's previous institution, Our Lady of the Lake University.

the skills which are important but that administrators generally feel no need for further development in most areas. As early as 1978, Scott commented that professional development for student affairs administrators was often neglected or conducted in a haphazard manner both by the institutions and by the student affairs profession as a whole. Sagaria reported in 1986 that very little research or even published opinion existed about the professional development needs of mid-level administrators; not until Young's (1990) anthology, *The Invisible Leaders: Mid-level Student Affairs Managers*, was this issue extensively addressed.

Among those who have subsequently commented on the skills of mid-level student affairs administrators was Mills (1993), who suggested that ". . . managing information is as integral to the middle manager's job as supervision and as providing programs for students, faculty, and staff Perhaps the most obvious use of information is involved in managing funds" (pp. 122-123). Hayes (personal communication, 1988), president of St. Edward's University, affirmed that fiscal management is one of the most important skills for women, indeed for all professionals who aspire to professional advancement.

Gordon, Strode & Mann (1993), using the same instrument with minor modifications as Kane (1982), LeMoine (1985), Fey (1990), and Walter, et al. (1991), found that Chief Student Affairs Administrators (CSAAS) ranked leadership, student contact, communication, personnel, and fiscal management as highest in importance of the seven skill categories of mid-level administrators. The studies of Kane, LeMoine, Fey, and Walter and associates all ranked leadership as the highest skill category; these studies, however, differed from that of Gordon and associates (1993) in the order of the other skill categories.

Only recently has research been conducted that suggests which management skills are necessary and important in mid-level positions. Although the Council for the Advancement of Standards [CAS] (1988) strongly recommended continuing professional development activities for student affairs practitioners, mid-level professionals continue to perceive little or no need for their own professional development to address relevant skill areas (Young, 1990). Both the lack of in-depth research on midlevel administrators (Benke & Disque, 1990; Carpenter, 1990; and Sagaria, 1986) and the professional development recommendations of CAS suggest that much more data should be gathered regarding the professional development needs of mid-level student affairs administrators so that effective professional development programs can be planned.

The purpose of this study was: to determine the importance of various -skills associated with mid-level college student affairs administration (as perceived by those holding such positions); to examine respondents' perceptions of the need for further development of these skills (presumably to enhance performance in their current positions as well as to further their careers); to discover the current professional development methods favored by mid-level administrators; and to learn what effect setting and demographics have on the perceived management skills of mid-level student affairs administrators.

Method

Population

The population for this study consisted of all mid-level student affairs administrators holding membership in the Texas Association of College and University Student Personnel Administrators (TACUSPA), a generalist organization to which most of the active college student affairs professionals in Texas, from a wide variety of institutional settings, belong. As defined for this study, a mid-level student affairs administrator was: (a) an individual who occupied a position that reported directly to the Chief Student Affairs Administrator (CSAA) or who occupied a position one level removed from the CSAA and (b) was responsible for the direction or control of one or more student affairs functions, or supervision of one or more professional staff members.

Of the 276 respondents (319 total members), 177 met the above criteria and the remainder were not included in the study. The respondents were allowed to apply the study's criteria to their own position to determine whether they should be included, thereby making it unnecessary for the researchers to attempt to determine eligibility by examining position titles or other post survey criteria.

Instrumentation

The survey instrument (with minor modifications for outdated language and changes in item order) was designed by Kane (1982) using Dillman's (1978) "Total Design Method." The section on "s" professional development needed" was primarily an adaptation of the "skills/competencies" questions used by Domeier (1977). Each skill-oriented question had two parts: importance of the factor, measured with a modified Likert scale (Isaac & Michael, 1985), with the following alternative answers: E (Essential), I (Important), SI (Slightly Important), and NI (Not Important); perceived need for further skill development was measured through a dichotomous yes/no scale. In addition to questions concerning the factors/ skills possessed by midlevel student affairs administrators, information concerning, employment, demographic data, and preferred methods of professional development was also collected.

The instrument in the present study contained 63 questions, based on Kane's (1982) seven category scheme: (a) leadership skills, (b) fiscal management skills, (c) personnel management skills, (d) communication skills, (e) professional development skills, (o) research and evaluation skills, and (g) student contact skills.

To verify the accuracy of the item groupings, Kane calculated reliability coefficients (Cronbach's alpha) for each; the calculated coefficients indicated that all items were appropriate to the category in which they were placed. In the present study, the researcher calculated split halves using the Spearman-Brown formula for reliability. The results, shown in Table 1, demonstrated that the groupings were reliable measures of each attribute except for personnel management, which was moderately reliable.

Table I
*Reliability Coefficients for Skill Categories
as Reported by Kane (1982) and Present Study*

Category	Kane's Skill Numbers (Present Study)	Cronbach's alpha Kane's Study	Spearman-Brown Present Study
Leadership	1 0 through 30 (20 through 39)	0.86	0.72
Fiscal Management	31 through 37 (40 through 46)	0.84	0.81
Personnel Management	38 through 45 (47 through 54)	0.84	0.64 ^a
Communication	46 through 50 (55 through 59)	0.72	0.74
Professional Development	51 through 56 (60 through 65)	0.79	0.74
Research and Evaluation	57 through 65 (66 through 74)	0.88	0.79
Student Contact	66 through 73 (75 through 82)	0.82	0.83

Note. All references from Kane are from *A Comparative study of student affairs mid-level professionals: Characteristics perceived skill attainment and need for continued development* (p. 77), 1982.

^aModerate reliability measure.

Procedure

In order to gather the best possible data and so gain a more thorough understanding of the issues involved, the instrument was sent to the entire membership of the Texas Association of College and University Student Personnel Administrators (TACUSPA) instead of to a random sample of members. Three mailings, which included the instrument and a business reply envelope, were sent to the members. Where there were large numbers of non-respondents at an institution, calls were made to solicit responses to a second mailing. As a result of these efforts, the total number of responses (276) included 86.5% of the total TACUSPA membership (319), as shown in Table 2. Subjects were self-selected using the definition of mid-level student affairs administrators indicated above.

Table 2
Summary of Survey Responses from TACUSPA Members

Type of Member	Returned	Percentage
Mid-level Student Affairs Administrators	177	64.1%
All Others	99	35.9%
Total Returned	276	100%
Total Membership	319	86.5%

^aPercentage of respondents out of total population of TACUSPA members

Results

The data collected included responses to 19 demographic items, 63 skill items grouped into 7 categories, and 10 items concerning preferred professional development methods. The mean scores of the grouped responses concerning the importance of skill categories for all respondents are reported in Table 3.

Importance of Skills

Using essentially the same instrument, Kane (1982) found that leadership skills were ranked as the most important; similar results were obtained by Fey (1990), Walter, et al. (1991), and Gordon, Strode, & Mann (1993). In the present study, however, the respondents rated the personnel management category ahead of leadership.

Table 3
Response Means by Skill Category in Ranked Order of Importance

Skill Category	Mean	SD	N
Personnel Management	3.368	0.475	163
Leadership	3.303	0.475	155
Communication	3.224	0.598	165
Student Contact	3.220	0.710	164
Fiscal Management	3.190	0.609	158
Professional Development	3.036	0.600	167
Research and Evaluation	2.613	0.769	160

Note. Scale was: Essential=4, Important=3, Slightly Important=2, Not Important=1

Skill Development

This study also investigated perceived need for further development of these skills. The ranking of skills in need of development differed from the ranked importance of those skills, as indicated in Table 4. Only fiscal management skills were perceived to need further development.

Table 4
Skill Categories Ranked 0 Order of Need for Further Skill Development

Skill Category	Grouped Mean
Fiscal Management Student	1.444
Contact	1.533
Research and Evaluation	1.552
Personnel Management	1.669
Leadership Communication	1.701
Professional Development	1.707
	1.718

Note. Scale was Further Development Needed=1, No Further Development Needed=2.

Preferred Methods of Skill Development

The study also sought to determine preferences for methods of improving skills. The respondents were asked to list three preferred professional development techniques from among 10 choices: reading, sabbaticals, discussions with colleagues, staff meetings, workshops, conferences, internships, mentor relationships, none of the above, or other. The respondents expressed a marked preference for interaction with peers at conferences and workshops or discussions with colleagues (Table 5). The most preferred methods were conferences (74.4%), workshops (58.0%), reading (47.2%), and discussions (44.9%).

Table 5
Preferred Methods of Professional Development

Method	% Responses
Conferences	74.4%
Workshops	58.0%
Reading	47.2%
Discussions with Colleagues	44.9%
Mentors	23.9%
Staff Meetings	14.8%
Sabbaticals	9.1%
Other	4.0%
None	0.0%

Note. Percentage of respondents who selected this method as one of three preferred choices.

Setting and Demographic Factors

The effect of setting and demographics on perceptions concerning the importance of the seven management skill categories was also explored.

Institution Type

Personnel at public and private institutions were compared using a Mann-Whitney U-test. As indicated in Table 6, only in the case of fiscal management were significant differences found using this variable. Although most administrators employed by private and public institutions held that fiscal management skills were important, fewer of those associated with private institutions (81%) did so than those associated with public institutions (94%). This finding was significant at the $p < .05$ level.

Table 6
Mann-Whitney U Test Scores for All Skill Categories by Selected Demographic and Setting Variables

Categories	Institution Type ¹	Gender ²	Ethnicity ³	Age ⁴
Leadership	2184.00	2460.00	961.50	2424.50
Fiscal Management	1892.00 ^a	2779.00	885.50	3593.50
Personnel Management	2531.00	2864.50	121-50	2727.50
Professional Development	2786.50	3189.50	1156-00	2711.50
Communication	2723.00	3002.50	1095-50	2821.00
Research and Evaluation	2466.00	3092.00	1052.00	2618.00
Student Contact	2519.50	3230.00	886.50	2117.50 ^b

¹Private vs. Public

^aSignificant at $p < .05$ level

²Male vs. Female

^bSignificant at $p < .01$ level

³White vs. Non-white 'Over

⁴Over 40 vs. 40 and under

Institution Size

There were no significant differences in perceived importance of management skills based on institution size. There were, however, small observed differences in the rankings of the skill categories, as can be seen by comparing Table 3 with Table 7. Respondents from small institutions ranked student contact skills as third in importance and communications as fourth; those from medium sized institutions ranked fiscal management skills third, followed by communications and student contact; respondents from large institutions ranked communications as the second most important skill followed by leadership.

Table 7
Skill Categories Ranked in Order of Need for Further Skill Development

Order	All Institutions	Small Institutions	Medium Institutions	Large Institutions
1.	Personnel	Personnel	Personnel	Personnel
2.	Management	Management	Management	Management
3.	Leadership Communication	Leadership Student Contact	Leadership Fiscal Management	Communication Leadership
4.	Student Contact	Communication	Communication	Student
5.	Contact Fiscal Management	Fiscal Management	Student Contact	Fiscal Management
6.	Professional Development	Professional Development	Professional Development	Professional Development
7.	Research and Evaluation	Research and Evaluation	Research and Evaluation	Research and Evaluation

Age

Mean age of respondents was 40-86 years of age (S.D.=9.25) with a range from 24 to 71; 48.8% of respondents were 40 and under, and 51.2% were over 40. Using the Mann-Whitney U-test (Table 6), age significantly affected only the student contact category ($p < .01$); those over 40 expressed a lower rating of importance for student contact than those 40 and under.

Ethnicity

A number of statistically non-significant but nonetheless interesting differences in the perceived importance of several of the skill categories were found among the three largest ethnic or racial groups in the study, white, black and Hispanic. Blacks rated leadership skills lower in importance than either of the other groups. Whites rated fiscal management skills as less important than did the other two groups. Hispanics viewed personnel management skills as less important than did whites, and blacks rated it the lowest among the three groups. Hispanics rated communication skills as less important than did either blacks or whites. White administrators gave the lowest rating to professional development skills, blacks to research and evaluation. Research and evaluation received the lowest ratings of importance among all categories, although Hispanics rated it higher than did whites; only slightly more than one-third of the respondents who identified themselves as black viewed research and evaluation as important or essential.

Gender

Female mid-level administrators rated all skill categories, except student contact skills, as more important than their male counterparts, with the greatest difference found in the area of leadership skills ($p < .05$), as is indicated in Table 6. None of the other categories was significantly affected by gender.

Conclusions

The skill categories listed as most important to midlevel student affairs administrators in TACUSPA are personnel management, leadership, and communication. These administrators apparently believe that those skills that involve interacting with and providing leadership and direction to others are more important than less person-oriented skills such as research and evaluation or fiscal management.

While fiscal management skills were ranked relatively low in importance, these were the only skills viewed as needing further development although only by a very small margin (.051). The subjects of this study, therefore, are similar to their colleagues from other regions of the country as reported by Cox and Ivy (1982), Fey (1990), and Walter, et al. (1991) in their perception that little or no professional development was perceived to be needed in any skill area.

The preferred methods of professional development expressed by the TACUSPA mid-level student affairs administrators are interpersonal and interactive, mostly involving the major activities of professional associations such as conferences, workshops, discussions and mentoring. This preference may be the result of the counseling, person-centered foundation of the student affairs profession. This result is also consistent with the findings and conclusions reported above concerning personal interaction.

Several variables affect the importance placed on the management skill categories. More administrators in public than in private institutions held that fiscal management skills were important; this may reflect the greater control exerted by state governments over public institutions of higher education. Perceptions of the importance of student contact skills were more correlated with age than were other skills. The average mid-level administrator holding TACUSPA membership is a 41 years old female who holds a master's degree and has been in the profession for over seven years. Perhaps because of the length of time since their formal training and the probability that lower level employees are most often the first point of contact for students, mid-level practitioners consider student contact skills less important. Ethnicity showed no significant differences. Gender significantly affected importance of leadership skills; Hayes (1988) has asserted that since females have come late to administrative roles in higher education, they have had to place a greater emphasis on such skills. No other significant differences were noted.

Implications

These findings have several implications for the profession, administrators, employing institutions, and graduate programs. Graduate education programs at the master's and doctoral level should require courses that foster the skills examined in this study, particularly that of fiscal management. Keim (1991) notes that faculty in graduate programs predict numerous changes in curriculum, including adding "emphases on administration, management . . ." (p. 240); even here, however, there is still no specific consideration of fiscal management. A review of the literature shows that

practitioners (Kane, 1982; Fey, 1990; Walter, et al., 1991; and, Domier, 1977), CSAAs (Lunsford, 1984; Gordon, et al., 1993), and CEOs of higher education (Hayes, 1988; Kinnick & Bollheimer, 1984) have differing opinions about the importance of such skills. The personal contact-oriented skill areas viewed as most important by mid-level student affairs administrators (personnel management, leadership, communication, and student contact) may be the most personally rewarding to them, but if CEOs hold fiscal management skills to be important, then student affairs professionals, both midlevel administrators and CSAAs alike, will probably enhance the perception of their effectiveness and competence as managers by placing a strong emphasis on mastering such skills.

Another skill area that was viewed as less important than others by respondents was research and evaluation. If the student affairs profession is to remain credible and progress from an emerging profession to a fully established one, then research and evaluation among both practitioners and faculty must be given a higher priority.

Hanson (1990) writes

The research agenda for student affairs will be dictated by the purposes behind the assessment of students.... The first purpose is accountability ... The second purpose ... is to understand the process of student learning and development with a goal of improving our educational practice.... The third purpose ... is the use of data to help students better understand themselves (self-assessment). (pp. 277-278)

If practitioners leave the responsibility for research to faculty members, continuing the perception that research and evaluation are not important, the vision and direction of the profession will be determined by the scholars alone.

Further efforts must be made by the professional associations to provide continuing developmental opportunities for their members. The associations may be in the best position to provide the education of those who are continuing in the field but are not actively pursuing advanced degrees. In the present study, 73% of respondents are not currently engaged in advanced, formal study; they therefore need activities designed to keep them informed about the field, and associational activities, like conferences, workshops, and journals, may be the most effective methods of accomplishing this. State organizations, such as TACUSPA, may be the professional associations of choice for many active professionals, and they

should be at the forefront of continuing professional development for practitioners. The National Association of Student Personnel Administrators

(NASPA) Mid-Management Institute is a good example of an effective skill enhancement strategy by a professional association.

The professional development activities most preferred by the mid-level respondents of this study are conferences, workshops, reading, and discussions; these are the same as the principal activities sponsored by professional associations (conferences and workshops). Such avenues for professional development should be further explored and expanded, particularly in local and regional settings, so that practitioners win have as many opportunities for improvement of skills as possible.

Hayes (1988) stated that women, and all administrators, must pay attention to and become more expert in "hard" administrative areas, such as fiscal management, if they want to advance to upper management. It is unsettling that the respondents in this study ranked fiscal management as only fifth in importance among the seven areas. The professional associations and CSAAs must begin to emphasize the importance of fiscal management skills for mid-level administrators and assist in development of these skills. In graduate programs, attention should be directed to fiscal management and accounting skills, which were rated as most important by Chief Student Affairs Administrators in Lunsford's (1984) study; interestingly, fiscal management was one of the skills 'most often selected by presidents as issues in which the (CSAA) lacked the skill or expertise' (Kinnick & Bollheimer, 1984, p. 6). Mastery of these skills should be viewed as a top priority.

Mid-level student affairs administrators are a critical resource in higher education. To become even more effective and valuable to their institutions and to their executives, they need to better understand what CSAAs and CEOs feel are important skills and pursue professional development on a continuous basis. By increasing their effectiveness in their current positions, they will be more marketable for promotion into higher mid-level or executive-level positions.

References

Benke, M., & Disque, C.S. (1990) Moving in, out or nowhere? The mobility of mid-managers. In R.B. Young (Ed.), *The invisible leaders: Student affairs mid-managers* (pp. 14-39). Washington, DC: NASPA.

Carpenter, D.S. (1990). Professional development and career issues for mid-managers. In R.B. Young (Ed.), *The invisible leaders: Mid-level student affairs managers* (pp. 88-108). Washington, DC: NASPA.

- Council for the Advancement of Standards (CAS). (1988). *CAS standards and guidelines for student services/ development programs*. Iowa City, IA: American College Testing Service.
- Cox, D.W., & Ivy, W.A. (1984). Staff development needs of student affairs professionals. *NASPA journal*, 22, 26-33.
- Dillman, D.A. (1978). *Mail and telephone surveys*. Washington, DC: Wiley.
- Domeier, P.E. (1977). A study to examine the training of student affairs administrators for specified competency tasks (Doctoral dissertation, Michigan State University, 1977). *Dissertation Abstracts International*, 38, 2580A.
- Fey, C.f. (1990, March). *Results of a mid-level managers survey on professional development needs*. Workshop presented at the annual meeting of the American College Personnel Association, St. Louis, Mo.
- Gordon, S.E., Strode, C.B., & Mann, B.A. (1993). The mid-manager in student affairs: What are CSAOs looking for? *NASPA journal*, 30, 290-297.
- Hanson, G.R. (1990). Improving practice through research, evaluation, and outcomes assessment. In Margaret J. Barr, M. Lee Upcraft and Associates (Eds.), *New futures for student affairs*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Isaac, S., & Michael, W. (1985). *Handbook in research and evaluation* (2nd ed.). San Diego: Edits.
- Kane, N.E. (1982). A comparative study of student affairs mid-level professionals: Characteristics, perceived skill attainment and need for continued development (Doctoral Dissertation, Florida State University, 1982). *Dissertation Abstracts International*, 43, 2092.
- Kane, M.C. (1991). Student personnel preparation programs: A longitudinal study. *NASPA journal*, 28, 231-242.
- Kinnick, B.C., & Bollheimer, R.L. (1984). College presidents' perceptions of student affairs issues and development needs of chief student affairs officers. *NASPA journal*, 22, 2-9.
- LeMoine, J.A. (1985). Professional development for mid-level student affairs professionals at the small college (North Central Region). (Doctoral dissertation, Indiana University, 1985). *Dissertation Abstracts International*, 46, 2878.
- Lunsford, L.W. (1984). Chief student affairs officer: The ladder to the top. *NASPA journal*, 22, 48-56.
- Miller, T.K. (1975). Staff development activities in student affairs programs. *Journal of College Student Personnel*, 16, 258-264.
- Mills, D.D. (1993). The role of the middle manager. In M. J. Barr and Associates (Eds.), *The handbook of student affairs administration* (pp. 121- 134). Washington, DC: NASPA.
- Sagaria, M.D. (1986, February). *Head counting, hill climbing, and beyond: The status and future directions for research on mid-level administrators careers*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of Association for the Study of Higher Education, San Antonio, TX. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 268 891)

Scott, R.A. (1978). *Lords, squires, and yeomen: Collegiate middle managers and their organizations* (AAHE-ERIC Higher Education Research Report No. 7). Washington, DC: AAHE. (Educational Document Reproduction Service No. ED 165 641).

Walter, T., Fey, C., Cortese, P., & Borg, T. (1991, March). *Leaders of the student affairs profession: A perspective on mid-level managers*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of ACPA, Atlanta, GA.

Young, R.B. (Ed.). (1990). *The invisible leaders: Student affairs mid-managers*. Washington, DC: NASPA.

