

The Mid-manager in Student Affairs: What Are CSAOs Looking For?

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The authors present findings for research undertaken to determine what competencies top-level student affairs administrators seek when hiring for mid-level positions.

INTRODUCTION

Mid-managers in student affairs are receiving increased attention in the literature and in professional development programs. Much of this attention focuses on personal and professional growth in individual positions and on strategies for moving on to become chief student affairs officers. Little research, however, has been conducted on either the career paths or competencies expected of mid-level managers (Benke & Disque, 1990).

A mid-manager is one who occupies a position that reports directly to the chief student affairs officer (CSAO), or to a person who reports directly to the CSAO, and is responsible for the direction, control, or supervision of one or more student affairs functions, or of one or more professional staff members (Kane, 1983). Many professionals with experience are ready to assume the limited number of such positions and are therefore concerned about having the "right" skills to be competitive when applying for them.

Kane (1983) asked mid-level managers what skills they perceived to be important to their success and professional advancement. Respondents felt that leadership and personnel management skills are "very important"; that fiscal management, communication, professional development, and student contact skills are "important"; and that research and evaluation skills are "not very important." Additionally, they cited a great need to develop further 38 of the 64 specific skills included in the instrument.

Benke and Disque (1990) asked chief student affairs officers to identify skills essential for competent performance at the director level and then to identify skills critical for outstanding performance. A low return rate of approximately 40% makes the results of this survey suggestive but not definitive. The skills identified as essential for both competent and outstanding performance in student service units focused on management and supervision.

Competent

- establish priorities
- promote effective teamwork
- evaluate staff performance
- write clear, concise memoranda and reports
- display leadership skills
- select, train, and supervise staff
- make effective decisions
- establish rapport with administrative staff
- formulate and manage a budget
- conduct performance appraisals

Outstanding

- gain commitment from top decision-makers
- maintain student confidentiality
- make effective decisions
- make realistic conclusions and recommendations
- exhibit tolerance for conflict
- know principles of management
- know principles of decision-making
- communicate effectively on a one-to-one basis
- engage in systematic planning within the department or unit
- recognize and use the expertise of others

Many professionals have developed the skills they perceived they lacked in order to be better prepared and competitive for mid-level positions. Kane (1983) reported that the top five professional development activities her respondents engaged in were conferences, reading, student involvement, discussions with colleagues, and workshops. Student affairs professional associations have also recently offered workshops and summer institutes on mid-level management skill development and concerns.

But little research has attempted to identify characteristics and competencies CSAOs look for when hiring for mid-level positions. Such information could clarify whether mid-managers' perceptions of needed skills match the expectations of CSAOs. This research was undertaken to determine what competencies top-level student affairs administrators seek when hiring for mid-level positions.

METHOD

With the author's permission, we developed a survey instrument based on Kane's (1983) research conducted with mid-managers. Following a pilot study with 20 campus practitioners, we revised the instrument for clarity, length, and;

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appearance. The revised survey contained 5 demographic questions, 45 skills-competencies, and 9 personal characteristics perceived to be possessed by student affairs professionals serving in generalist roles. The instrument was distributed to 250 CSAOs at 4-year institutions randomly selected by the publisher of the *Higher Education Directory*. Respondents indicated the relative importance of each skill when hiring a mid-manager for a generalist position, using a Likert-type scale with five ratings ranging from 1=*Essential* to 3=*Desirable* to 5=*Not Essential*. The CSAOs then ranked the skills in order of importance. The specific skills were grouped within the following categories: leadership, fiscal management, personnel management, communication, professional development, research and evaluation, and student contact. Respondents also ranked the categories themselves, as well as 9 personal characteristics in order of importance. Space for comments was provided at the end of the instrument. Finally, a self-selected group of 14 CSAO respondents participated in comprehensive interviews on the topic.

Findings are based on the return of 160 questionnaires (64%). Mean scores were used to rank items, and chi-square statistical analyses were performed at the .05 level of significance.

RESULTS

The survey respondents represented public and private institutions almost equally (47% and 53%, respectively). Fifty-four percent were from institutions of under 5,000 students, 19% from institutions of 5,000-10,000, and 27% from institutions of over 10,000. Seventy-two percent of the respondents were male and 28% female.

Chi-square analysis of institution type with institution size and with respondent gender revealed that institutions under 5,000 were predominantly private ($p < .01$) and that female CSAOs were more likely to be at private institutions ($p < .05$). This suggests that the association between gender and institution can be attributed to institution type.

Of the 14 CSAOs interviewed, seven were from small institutions (under 5,000), four from institutions of 5,000-20,000 students, and three from large institutions (over 20,000). Two of the 14 were female (15%).

Almost all of the respondents rated 34 of the 45 skills identified in the questionnaire as essential. While mean scores established the rankings for functional categories, individual competencies (see Appendix), and personal characteristics, the respondents' comments at the end of the instrument pointed out the "great difficulty" of ranking the items because "all are of equal importance." Their comments are substantiated by the small range of mean ranks for most categories.

Respondents ranked the functional categories as follows:

Sample Rank	Mean
1. Leadership	1.80
2. Student Contact	2.64
3. Communication	2.78
4. Personnel Management	3.79

6. Professional Development	5.48
7. Research and Evaluation	6.62

The interviewed CSAOs ranked the categories much the same. Those from small institutions ranked student contact as most important. In most cases, they reported having 24-hour contact with students. A CSAO at a larger institution stated that mid-managers generally do not have the same level of contact as entry-level staff. AU respondents recognized leadership and ability to communicate as extremely important.

At the other end of the continuum, research and evaluation were least important to those interviewed, irrespective of institution size. With tight budgets limiting staffing patterns and, in some cases, the availability of an institutional research office, this area of competency was not perceived as a high priority. Fiscal management competencies also rated low.

A discussion of findings for each of the functional categories follows. The Appendix contains mean ranks for the individual items in these categories.

Leadership

Respondents rated all ten leadership competencies as essential, although half indicated that the ability to "Provide in-service training" was desirable but not essential. "Accepts responsibility or delegates as appropriate" received the highest ranking, half a point above "Knows how to make decisions." Mean ranks on the ten items ranged from 2.44 to 5.69.

Student Contact

The ability to "Develop mutual understanding and trust with students" ranked first of the five items in this category. Means ranged from 1.4 to 3.62 and all items rated essential. Only 74% of those at public institutions, however, rated "Holistic approaches to student programs" essential, compared with 89% at private institutions ($p < .05$).

Communication

Again, all six items rated essential, with means ranging from 2.24 to 5.28. The top-ranked skill was the ability to "Maintain confidentiality." The ability to "Understand nonverbal communication" ranked much below the other items.

Personnel Management

Half the respondents rated "Developing behavioral job description" as desirable but not essential. The other four items in this category were seen as essential, led by "Dealing effectively with interpersonal problems." Means ranged from 2.04 to 4.17.

Fiscal Management

"Analyzing and interpreting program needs" and "Developing an appropriate budget" were the two highest ranked items of the seven in this category. Only one item received ratings of desirable or not essential: "Writing grant funding proposals." In fact, 42% of those at private institutions rated it not essential, compared with 23% of those at public institutions ($p < .05$). A broader range of means in this category (2.48 to 6.6) indicates a greater differentiation in the importance of items.

Professional Development

This category, along with Research and Evaluation, contained the most variation. Only three of the seven items received essential ratings from all respondents: "Establishing balance between personal needs and professional expectations" (ranked first), "Defining and prioritizing development tasks" (ranked second), and "Maintaining a scholarly background" (ranked fifth). Some respondents rated "Involvement in professional organizations" and "Networking" desirable but not essential. AU rated "Identifying patterns of mobility and promotion" as desirable and "Writing articles for publication" as either desirable or not essential. Means ranged from 1.97 to 6.01, indicating again a greater differentiation among items.

Research and Evaluation

Of the five items in this category, "Assessing student needs" and "Understanding the importance of assessing program effectiveness" were considered essential (ranked first and second, respectively). The third and fourth ranked items, "Identifying and understanding various evaluation strategies" and "Designing and modifying assessment instruments," varied from essential to desirable. One-fourth of the respondents rated "Understanding statistical techniques" as essential, while another one-fourth ranked it not essential, and half deemed it desirable. The means ranged from 1.62 to 4.30.

PERSONAL CHARACTERISTICS

The CSAOs also ranked nine personal characteristics in order of importance. "Personal integrity" and "Interest in students" were clearly most important in terms of what CSAOs expect of midlevel managers. The other seven showed little differentiation, with means ranging from 5.09 to 6.44. The rankings for personal characteristics, as well as differences between public and private institutions appear in Table 1.

OTHER INTERVIEW RESULTS

Besides ranking functional categories, interviewees discussed staff selection methods, patterns of mobility, and factors used in hiring when experience and education are similar for mid-management positions. (It is important to note that at small institutions, those described as mid-managers may direct a one- person office and have no supervisory responsibilities.)

The staff selection process was generally the same for all institutions and included advertising nationally; interviewing at conferences; designating a selection committee of faculty, staff, and students; and complying with personnel and affirmative action procedures. CSAOs at small institutions stressed that they look for persons who can not only meet the needs of the particular positions but also handle divisionwide responsibilities. Mid-level staff at these institutions cannot afford to specialize and must be team players. At one mid-size institution, the CSAO looks at the possibility of reorganization and better ways to meet division needs every time a vacancy occurs.

CSAOs at small institutions felt it was difficult to move up within the institutions because of their size. One person believed the perception that it is sometimes difficult to move from a small to a large institution is erroneous

Table 1
Ranking of Personal Characteristics

Sample Rank	Mean Rank	Personal Characteristics	Type of Institution	
			Priv	Pub
1	1.88	Personal Integrity	1	1
2	2.69	Interest in Students	2	2
3	5.09	Enthusiasm	4	3
4	5.29	Adaptability	5	4
5	5.30	Self-confidence	3	6
6	5.73	Sincerity	7	5
7	5.99	Compassion	6	8
8	6.39	Sense of Humor	8	9
9	6.44	Loyalty	9	7

since the same skills are required and a generalist who has done many things may be more helpful in meeting total needs. CSAOs at mid-size institutions felt mobility was difficult due to longevity in positions, small budgets, and fewer staff positions. CSAOs at large institutions agreed and pointed out the high cost of replacing personnel in mid-management.

The factors used by CSAOs when selecting applicants with similar education and experience did not differ across institution size or type. Some of the factors were personal characteristics: enthusiasm, positive attitude, honesty, being a team player, creativity and ability to dream, passion, sense of humor, flexibility, ability to "hit the ground running." Others involved professional considerations such as personal references known to the CSAO and progressively higher levels of responsibility in previous positions. Still others reflected the needs of individual divisions: ability to add diversity to the staff, ability to balance the staff (by race, by gender, by skills), and instinctive reactions from the CSAO and staff with whom the person would work.

The respondents also noted personal characteristics as factors in their decisions *not* to hire: too much or too little self-confidence, arrogance, discomfort in social situations, low energy, selfishness and lack of consideration, cynicism, lack of humor, and intolerance. Professional considerations also prompted decisions not to hire: lack of student focus, lack of preparation for the interview, personal appearance, poor references, and unexplained gaps in experience.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Perhaps the most striking thing about the results of this study is the consistency of responses across all survey and interview respondents. There was virtually uniform agreement among CSAOs that leadership, ability to work well with students, and communication skills are the most important competencies. Research and evaluation, on the other hand, were considered least important. These findings are consistent with the perceptions of mid-managers themselves (Kane, 1983) and similar to the management and supervision skills noted earlier for competent or outstanding performance (Benke & Disque, 1990). It appears that both the people moving up and the

people doing the hiring agree about the competencies required for mid-management positions.

Some differences do exist, however, that mid-managers should note. Private institutions may place less emphasis on grant writing skills and certain aspects of professional development than do public institutions, while placing more on holistic approaches to student contact. Small schools may also need generalists who thrive on close and frequent contact with students.

The differences are small and many respondents to the survey noted that trying to rank individual competencies was frustrating because none were unimportant. That being the case, other factors evidently enter into hiring decisions. In fact, the personal characteristics section of the survey was added (despite its absence in other studies) because respondents to the pilot study felt such characteristics were important determinants in hiring decisions. The structured interviews in this study corroborated that point, and the survey results were quite consistent, with no deviation across groups on the first two personal characteristics and little on the others.

All the findings indicate that persons wishing to move into mid-level positions might adhere to three basic principles:

1. *Competence*: Develop all the competencies in the top three categories and at least the top three or four skills in the other categories in order to be competitive.
2. *Awareness*: If everything else is equal, hiring decisions will come down to "fit," or the ability to relate in a real way on both formal and informal levels, and to filling the needs of the division doing the hiring. Be sensitive to levels of fit during the hiring process.
3. *Preparation*: If the hiring decision is often a subjective choice, as this study implies, be ready for the interview-in appearance, in energy, in vision, and in knowledge of the institution. Remember that past efforts and relationships have a strong impact on future ventures.

References

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APPENDIX

*Rankings of Individual Competencies
(in order of importance)*

Leadership	Mean
1. Accepts responsibility or delegates as appropriate	2.44
2. Knows how to make decisions	3.15
3. Demonstrates a high level of professional behavior	3.55
4. Provides in-service training	4.04
5. Develops and maintains a cooperative work environment	4.53
6. Works effectively with top-level managers	5.19

7. Prepares for the unexpected	5.37
8. Knows current institutional practices	5.38
9. Provides positive motivation	5.44
10. Establishes educationally sound goals	5.69

Student Contact **Mean**

1. Develops a foundation of mutual understanding and trust with students	1.40
2. Identifies, recruits, and services all types of, students	2.91
3. Provides opportunities for student involvement in policy-making	3.41
4. Offers holistic approaches to student programs	3.54
5. Develops leadership programs for students	3.62

Communication **Mean**

1. Maintains confidentiality	2.24
2. Listens actively	3.13
3. Possesses strong oral communication skills	3.24
4. Writes effective correspondence and reports	3.38
5. Works to improve internal and external communication	3.54
6. Understands nonverbal communication	5.28

Personnel Management **Mean**

1. Deals effectively with interpersonal problems	2.04
2. Provides effective staff evaluation and feedback	2.33
3. Allows for due process	2.82
4. Staffs equitably according to department needs	3.56
5. Develops behavioral job descriptions	4.17

Fiscal Management **Mean**

1. Analyzes and interprets program needs and requests	2.48
2. Develops an appropriate budget	3.10
3. Identifies and uses available financial support	3.30
4. Uses cost-effective procedures	3.61
5. Anticipates future needs	3.73
6. Analyzes and interprets financial reports	4.91
7. Writes grant funding proposals	6.60

Professional Development **Mean**

1. Establishes a balance between personal needs and professional expectations	1.97
2. Defines and prioritizes personal/professional development tasks	2.36
3. Actively involved in professional organizations	3.69
4. Builds professional networks	3.90
5. Maintains a scholarly academic background	4.66
6. Identifies patterns of mobility and promotion	5.32
7. Writes articles for publication	6.01

Research and Evaluation **Mean**

1. Assesses student needs	1.62
2. Understands importance of assessing program effectiveness	1.76
3. Identifies and understands various evaluation strategies	3.14
4. Designs and modifies assessment instruments	4.10
5. Understands appropriate statistical techniques	4.30