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Prepare, Hire, and Retain: The Lost Link between Graduate Preparation and Retention of Professionals in Student Affairs

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PREPARE, HIRE, AND RETAIN: THE LOST LINK BETWEEN GRADUATE PREPARATION AND RETENTION OF PROFESSIONALS IN STUDENT AFFAIRS

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ABSTRACT

Coming from multiple backgrounds, new professionals in student affairs, exhibit a high rate of attrition ranging between 50% and 60% in the first five years. The challenges facing the professionals during their first job includes: forming relationships, seeking mentorship in the new work environment, and balancing work-life responsibilities. This paper builds on factual data about new professional retention rates. Establishing that intentional and realistic preparation approaches are one way to reduce attrition, the relationship between the graduate preparation programs and professionals' job satisfaction in their first position cannot be ignored.

GOALS

The goal of this paper is to generate discussion about suggested practices in graduate preparation programs and professional development approaches in response to high attrition rates of student affairs professionals. The argument is that realistic and comprehensive preparation combined with a well-developed low cost professional development plan for new hires and junior professionals would result in a lower attrition rates for student affairs professionals.

Theoretical Framework

Several scholars have raised the flag on the challenges facing new professionals in student affairs. Together with unmet needs of the new professionals, these challenges are the most credited reasons for a high attrition rate in the profession within the first five years. Both graduate preparation programs and institutions where the new professionals work can provide solutions boost a higher job satisfaction and retention rates.

Background

First-time new student affairs professionals with less than five years of experience are faced with a substantial population in the field representing 15% to 20% of the student affairs workforce (Cilente, Henning, Skinner Jackson, Kennedy, & Sloane, as cited in Renn, 2007). There is a diverse background of new professionals that represent various settings. These include

community colleges, for-profit institutions, and online institutions (Cilente et al., Hirt, as cited in Renn, 2007). Many new professionals experience some of the same common experiences. These commonalities include master's programs, relationship formation, mentor seeking and work-life balance issues (Hodges, Renn, Paul, Maker, & Munsey, Magolda & Carnighi, Richmond & Sherman, as cited in Renn, 2007). If not addressed appropriately, these experiences and issues can be related to a high attrition rate in the field. There is a prediction that between 50% and 60% of new professionals will leave the field within their first five years (e.g., Bender, Berwick, Evans, Lorden, Tull, as cited in Renn, 2007). This high attrition rate could remain true if solutions are not implemented. Failure to produce higher retention in the field could reduce lower admission rates into student affairs graduate level programs. This could also affect institutions across the country in staffing graduate level professionals.

CURRENT STATUS

Four themes cluster around major challenges faced by new professionals and address the academic and professional content and the process of the transition to the student affairs workforce. The four themes are; creating a professional identity, navigating a cultural adjustment, managing a learning orientation, and seeking sage advice (Renn & Jessup-Anger, 2008). While challenges may arise, there is quite certainly ways to adapt to these themes and adjust as new professional. There are specific advantages to being a new professional and those qualities should be cultivated for the benefit of student affairs organizations and the students such organizations serve (Coleman & Johnson, 1990). The first year as a new professional and the ability to decrease attrition can be done by encouraging a culture of juniority and enabling new professional inclusion and growing the community of practice (Fried, 2011). Encouraging new professionals to overcome challenges is done so by a transition of a more independent new professional rather than a dependent student role. Support in this transition will occur, however it is still new professionals' duty to understand their responsibility for job performance is primary and individual development is secondary (Renn & Jessup-Anger 2008).

Challenges for New Professionals

New student affairs professionals are faced with a variety of challenges in their career transition. Making the transition from graduate school to full-time work can be an overwhelming and fast pace change. One new professional respondent suggested to, "Give us way more help about job searching, so we would end up at institutions that fit us better" (Renn, 2008). A new professional is faced with understanding the organizational culture, policies, procedures and their complete job functions and expectations. According to Renn and Jessup-Anger (2008), the change in cultural norms at new institutions challenged new professionals to reconsider the nature of their work. Additional challenges about establishing a mentor can also cause further implications. According to a new professional respondent, "An ongoing challenge that I am having is the lack of professional mentoring I am receiving from my direct supervisor" (Renn, 2007). While a direct supervisor may not always be the most suitable mentor, new professionals are still challenged with finding the right mentor. Based on a new professional respondent," One challenge that I am still facing with in my position is finding a suitable mentor" (Renn, 2007). Job descriptions and expectations should be established during the job-posting and interview process. However, clarifying job expectations can shift or be misconceived from the interview to

the on-boarding process. Competence for new professionals is an issue for job training, skills, and knowledge (Renn, 2007). A new professional should not be expected to know how to perform every function and responsibility of their position. Adequate training, supervision, and mentorship should exceed the orientation phase in order for a new professional to have a positive and successful start to their career.

Needs of the New Professionals

The standard of supervised practice is addressed by the questions of relevant assistantship experiences, practicum experience, and other paid work experience while in graduate school. The data collected indicates that most employers agree that practical experience is of significant importance (Kretovics, 2002). While all this experience is necessary, are graduate students receiving too much support that they cannot be independent in their first year as a new professional? According to a study done by Renn and Jessup-Anger (2008), new professionals stated they felt they were not receiving enough adequate support, did not understand their job expectations, had trouble fostering student learning, did not see an ability for moving up in their profession, needed enhanced supervision skills, and were unable to develop multicultural competencies in their first year as a new professional. The participants' needs imply an imperative for faculty and graduate students to take a holistic approach to early career, considering graduate preparation and the transition to the first job as a seamless learning experience (p, 33).

SUGGESTIONS FOR PROGRAMS

Solutions for facing these challenges start in the graduate preparation. Programs should intentionally guide the new professional create or develop their professional identity to match the ethics of the profession and their personal aspirations and background. Another responsibility is exposing graduates to different organizational cultures where they have the task of exploring the fit between themselves and the diverse circumstances in the different institutions. Another target is the lifelong learning quest that the programs should instill in the new professionals. Through that quest, the new professional will have the ability to see prospective professional growth through self-learning.

SUGGESTIONS FOR INSTITUTIONS

Institutions should provide a sustainable support system for the new professionals in order to retain them for a win-win relationship that benefits both the campus community and the professionals in the field. The first step is building a culture of *"cool feedback"* through a system of informal mentorship. Through such feedback, the new professionals will be groomed to cultivate accountability mechanisms where an understanding of institutional values and policies explains procedures and practices. Providing recognition venues for self-initiated professional development will also serve as a retention factor for the professionals who will appreciate the growth opportunities. Reflective practice events may also serve as building stronger ties between the new professionals and their colleagues across campus. Such connection will help in creating a culture of collaborative data driven practice which will ensure excellence in performance, an essential factor of job satisfaction.

CONCLUSION

As graduate preparation master programs becomes more and more a requirement for securing a job in the student affairs profession, these graduate programs must take the responsibility of preparing the new professionals to face the challenges in the beginning of their careers. Although these challenges vary, solutions rotate around a collaborative approach between the preparation programs and the institutions where the new professionals will work in. Such solutions include: developing professional identity, cultivating an ability to adapt to different organizational cultures, creating a lifelong journey of professional development, providing mentoring opportunities, and encouraging collaborative sharing of best practices and evidence based successful initiatives.

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