Practical Aspects to Pursuing a Career in Student Affairs

By Ed Kovacs and Brian M. Quinlan

So, you can't believe your advisor actually gets paid for his/her awesome job? Thinking that a career in student affairs might be right for you? It might just be, and we are here to help get you started on your career path.

The career paths of many student affairs professionals have included active involvement in extracurricular activities, development of a connection with a student affairs administrator who acted as a role model and guide, exploration of specific functional areas of interest, enrollment in graduate school, pursuit of an assistantship, interviews at a national conference for job openings, getting hired, and living happily ever after. That's a pretty typical path.

For your authors, it was no different:

Ed Kovacs graduated from Millersville University (PA) in May of 1998 with a bachelor's degree in speech communications. He began as a mathematics major, but quickly switched after being demoralized by Calculus II. During his time at student affairs field and to research graduate preparation programs. He was accepted into the college student personnel program at Bowling Green State University (OH). For his graduate assistantship, Kovacs assumed the role of house director for Sigma Kappa sorority. While there, he also worked with the fraternity and sorority community on their annual dance marathon, community service initiatives, and leadership development programs. He further diversified his experi-

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ences by completing a practicum in the Office of Development, advising Greek Week at the University of Findlay (OH), and spending the summer between his first and second years of graduate school at DePaul University (IL) working with their new student orientation program. He graduated from Bowling Green State University in May 2000 and became assistant director of fraternities and sororities and student media at Quinnipiac University (CT). Since then, he has been promoted to associate director and is responsible for advising campus programming (among many other things).

Brian Quinlan graduated from Quinnipiac University (CT) in May of 2000. He entered as an undeclared major, quickly switching to mass communications and, after a few changes, graduated with a bachelor’s degree in marketing. He was a four-year lacrosse player and was involved in campus activities. Quinlan was also an orientation leader, student affairs office worker, and Senior Week committee member.

After working in life insurance between his junior and senior years, he realized he was not interested in spending his days in front of a computer. This became the impetus for his decision to work with college students, specifically in the area of student development. Upon graduation, he spent the summer as the first-ever graduate intern for new student orientation at Quinnipiac University. He then enrolled at Springfield College (MA) as the graduate associate of student activities and later became the graduate assistant for the drug and alcohol program. He completed his master’s degree and was hired full-time in May of 2002. Currently, he advises all components of the programming board, pre-orientation group, and various other student organizations.

As you can see, we ultimately chose careers in student affairs because we had positive undergraduate experiences and gained solid educational and theoretical foundations in graduate school. This background provided us with the tools to become effective administrators, counselors, and ultimately, supporters of college students. Our jobs can be stressful, time-consuming, and challenging, but in the extremely worthwhile and fun.

**Graduate Preparation Programs**

Any of our colleagues find success in student affairs without a graduate degree. Some jobs require a bachelor’s degree, with a master’s degree preferred. We recommend graduate studies for several reasons:

1. The educational foundation is valuable. You will learn about the historical, theoretical, and ethical understandings that guide the practice of student affairs.
2. Career advancement.
3. Professional development.
4. Personal growth.

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student affairs, keep up-to-date with new innovations and research, and learn from adept and talented faculty.

Second, we recommend pursuing a graduate assistance. In our minds, it is imperative you gain practical, hands-on experience. Your assistantship will allow you to craft an advising and administrative style that will support your development as a professional. Additionally, and we will address this later, many graduate assistantships will pay for the cost of your academic program, offer you a small stipend, provide you an office, and/or pay for your living expenses.

Finally, graduate school allows you to continue your professional growth and development. We encourage you to attend graduate school at an institution different from where you earned your undergraduate degree to enhance the diversity of your educational experience. And we encourage you to seek a school that, while providing you with a solid educational experience, will emphasize the importance of practical application.

There are numerous programs located all over the country. Through the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA) Web site (www.naspa.org/gradprep/index.cfm) or the American College Personnel Administrators (ACPA) Web site (www.acpa.nche.edu/c12/directory.htm), you will be able to research various graduate preparation programs. Additionally, each association offers other electronic resources for those considering a career in student affairs. This information can be obtained from each of their Web sites.

The number of available graduate programs may certainly overwhelm you. But, before getting started, there are numerous factors and questions you should consider. And although there may be hundreds of questions, start with these:

- What type of institution should you attend for graduate school? Does national reputation matter? Are the faculty nationally known? Public vs.

private? Large vs. small? Near your family and friends? Rural, urban, or suburban community? Many classmates or do you prefer a smaller cohort?

- Which entrance exam do you have to take for acceptance? Are you ready for the GRE?

- Are you interested in a graduate program emphasizing student development theory, one administrative in nature, counseling-based, etc.?

- Are graduate assistantships available and what compensation package is offered?

Graduate school is a wonderful opportunity to learn, develop and grow as a practitioner.

- Will you need additional financial support and assistance? What scholarships and/or financial aid are available?

- Upon graduation, do you prefer a program wherein you must pass a comprehensive exam, complete a portfolio, or write a thesis?

- Ultimately, what are your career goals and aspirations? How can you get there? How successful have recent program graduates been and have they found jobs?

Careers and Functional Areas in Student Affairs

So, you may be an orientation leader, member of the program board, or a resident assistant. Maybe you work in the health center, career services, or other offices on campus. If you have done any of these things, then you have most likely been exposed to an area of student affairs. This means you have seen the working, practical side of our profession.

As an undergraduate student, you are probably involved in many different areas of student life. While taking advantage of these opportunities, ask questions. There are numerous opportunities on your campus to become involved with career services, student activities, counseling, and residence life. Another popular way to get connected is to become an office assistant. Some students start as an office assistant to earn extra spending money, but oftentimes walk away from the experience with a career interest. More often than not, you will make a connection with a professional staff member and be privy to the professional and personal sides of student affairs.

There are many areas that allow you to focus on learning about being a student affairs administrator. Typical functional areas include: academic advising, admissions, athletics, career services, community service/service learning, counseling, financial aid, health services, judicial affairs, multicultural affairs, new student orientation, religious/spiritual life, residential life, and student activities. Depending upon each institution, these areas may differ as to whether they fall under the division of student affairs.
Additionally, while working at smaller institutions, you will most likely encounter combinations of functional areas. Residential life and judicial affairs, or student activities and community service, are two such examples. More often than not, working at larger institutions will allow you to focus your energies on one specific area, while smaller institutions will provide administrators more breadth and variety of experiences.

Compensation Packages

Compensation packages differ from school to school and even department to department. Many packages will provide tuition remission and/or financial compensation. Residential life positions may also include housing, a meal plan, and utilities. Other assistantships will offer you office space and a computer. Most graduate assistantships will not offer you health insurance. You may be fortunate enough to be included on your family plan, but then again, you may not. This is an area you will need to investigate further.

Depending upon your individual situation, compensation packages may be a factor in choosing a graduate program. Ultimately, you must match personally and professionally with the academic program, institution, local community, and also the department for which you would be working.

After you have completed graduate school and begin exploring professional employment, other elements to consider are annual salary, overall benefit package (health insurance, retirement, annual evaluation and raises, etc.), and tuition remission.

Concluding Comments

Just as with any other professional, there are positive and negative aspects to student affairs. We would be happy to share our experiences with you. In the negative column is the fact that the entry-level salary is average for those who have a master’s degree. On some occasions, the hours are long and inconsistent with work on weekends and holidays. During some weeks, you are in the office from 9 am to 5 pm, while in others, you are there from 9 am to 10 pm or even later.

The positive column, however, is the opportunity to work these kinds of hours to become closer and more involved with the student body. And most importantly, you will be finding incredible experiences while teaching and guiding and witnessing their leadership development. And although you will most likely never be called “The Don,” you will have chosen a career that allows you to make a difference in the lives of college students. On that, you cannot put a price tag.

Our best advice is to go through the process of self-assessment, self-exploration, and self-discovery. You already know you are not going to be rich and that you will probably be working long hours. But what else should you know?

First, as a graduate student or a new professional, you are going to make mistakes. Even as a vice president for student affairs, mistakes are part of everyday life. But how you deal with them is what determines your success as an educator and administrator. We encourage you to take calculated risks, learn from mistakes, and take responsibility for decisions gone wrong. Learning from lapses in judgment and being accountable will enhance your positive growth and maturation as a professional.

Never forget that you are a role model for students. It is imperative that you embrace this responsibility and understand its importance to your success and effectiveness as a practitioner. While your undergraduate days behind you, begin to craft your professional identity and distance yourself from the past while becoming a mentor and role model.

Additionally, begin developing limits and defining a life beyond campus. This will be one of your most difficult challenges. It is easy for work to consume you, but you can avoid this trap by setting limits and creating a life outside of work early in your career. Saying "NO" is hard. We encourage you to challenge yourself to do it in a fashion that does not cause you to shrivel responsibilities to your students, but allows you to maintain a healthy distance from matters of the office when you need it.

In the meantime, continue to meet with staff members and learn which skills they acquired prior to entering the field. Learn about their career paths and seek their advice. Other competencies we encourage you to develop include presentation skills, setting long- and short-term professional and personal goals, and an advising style that ultimately supports student growth and development.

It is with great excitement that we welcome you into the world of student affairs. Further, we look forward to seeing you at a conference, reading an article you’ve written, or seeking opportunities to discuss the field of student affairs with you as fellow professionals. Should you have any questions or need further advice, we will be more than happy to offer our time and support. Good luck as you develop and pursue your own career path in student affairs.

About the Authors

Ed Kovacs is associate director of Student Center and Student Leadership Development at Quinnipiac University (CT). He previously served as assistant director of Student Center and Student Leadership Development at the school. He served on the staff for NACAC workshops in 2001 and 2002 and was marketplace coordinator for NACAC Northeast in 2003 and 2004. He currently serves on the American College Personnel Administrators’ Commission for Student Involvement and the Phi Sigma Kappa Leadership Curriculum Committee. He holds a bachelor’s degree in music communications from Millersville University (PA) and a master’s degree in college student personnel from Bowling Green State University (OH).

Brian M. Quinlan is assistant director of Student Activities and Campus Programs at Springfield College (MA). He and Kovacs presented the educational session on which this article is based at the NACAC Northeast Regional Conference in 2003 and at the NACAC National Convention in 2004. He holds a bachelor’s degree in marketing from Quinnipiac University and a master’s degree in education from Springfield College.

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