Student Affairs:
Discovering Your Career Path While Still a Student

By Laura Bestler-Wilcox
Discovering the Perfect Job

There are many questions to ask when planning a career path in student affairs. By answering some of these questions, you will begin to discover what will comprise the perfect job for you:

- **Which Skills Do You Want to Use?**
  - Are you able to speak in front of people?
  - Do you like to be creative?
  - Do you like to help people?
  - Do you want to inspire others?
  - Do you enjoy multitasking?
  - What do you bring to the table?

Everything you do in and out of class will help you in higher education and beyond. Keep track of the skills you are developing or enhancing while being involved on campus.

- **What Unique Knowledge Do You Have?**
  - What is your major?
  - What sort of skills are you developing through your courses?
  - What organizations are you involved with outside of class?
  - How have you been able to utilize your skills through your involvement?

- **Who Do You Want to Work With?**
  - Do you want to work with traditional aged students (18-24)?
  - Do you like to work with non-traditional students?
  - Do you want to work at a two-year or four-year institution?
  - Would you prefer working with professional students?
  - How do you interact with a diverse population of people?

- **What Kind of Work Environment Do You Prefer?**
  - Do you want a low-stress work place?
  - Or do you prefer high energy and high stress?
  - Do you want to work in a team atmosphere, be autonomous or have a little of both?
  - Do you want to work in a public or private institution?
  - Do you prefer to be on a campus that is liberal, conservative or a little of both?
  - Or do you prefer to consistently work with students or have only slight contact with them?
  - Do you like to be able to wear jeans to work or would you rather wear a suit every day?

- **Where Do You Want Your Next Job to Be?**
  - Location is important. If you are from the West Coast, you may not want to have an experience in the Midwest or East.
  - Or maybe you really want to experience something outside of your "normal" culture.

A good friend I know through NACA attended undergraduate school in Florida, decided to attend graduate school in Minnesota and now works on the East Coast. Knowing your comfort level for where your job will be will help you become a stronger young professional.

- **How Much Money Do You Want to Make?**
  - I wish I could say that in the field of higher education you will begin with a salary of $100,000 a year, but that's just not the case. What I can tell you is that wealth is a relative word. I am continually enriched every day through the students with whom I interact while doing my job. How many people can say they get to participate in the growth of students during the time they are in college?
team environment. Do you take great notes or speak in front of people? You actually are developing your communications skills. Are you in charge of your organization’s budget? Then you have financial skills.

**Identifying Your Path**

Identify what areas interest you in student affairs. Student affairs and campus activities can offer you many arenas for development: programming, student organizations, residence life, judicial affairs, academic success centers, women’s centers, international services, recreation services, Greek communities, career placement, multicultural centers, LGBTQ+ student services, public safety, academic advising, and financial aid. Once you have identified an area that interests you, talk with some of the professionals within that department. Another way to gain an understanding is to become a member of the orientation committee, your guide group, or student conduct committee, or interview to be a resident advisor.

**Mentoring Your Inspiration**

Find mentors who can help you develop your inspiration for working in student affairs. Mentors can be people from your campus or those you meet while volunteering through NACA. These mentors can also serve as a future reference for your graduate program or first professional position.

Professional associations offer formal mentorship opportunities, such as NASPA’s (National Association for Student Personnel Administrators) Minority Undergraduate Fellowship Program (www.naspa.org/resources/mufp/index.cfm) or ACPA’s (American College Personnel Association) the Next Generation Program (www.myacpa.org/cat/car/ng.cfm). NACA also matches mentors with students serving as National Convention graduate interns, as well as those students selected to participate in the Leadership Fellows Program. The 2005 National Convention graduate interns are yet to be selected, but will be announced in the 2005 National Convention Program, while recently selected Leadership Fellows Program participants will be announced in the October 2004 issue of Campus Activities Programming.

**Finding a Graduate Program and Assistantship**

Choosing a graduate program is not easy. Any given student affairs professional will most likely believe that the graduate program through which they earned their master’s degree is the best school to attend. Don’t let that confuse you—just ask your advisers about their experiences and then use this information to find the school that best meets your needs.

Program components might include counseling, research, practical skills, student development theory and leadership. Graduate preparation program databases are available online through ACPA at www.acpa.nche.edu/c12/directory.htm and NASPA at www.naspa.org/gradprep/search.cfm. Both databases include information on the state where the program is located, the application process, program cost, and whether or not graduate assistantships are part of the program. With regard to cost, some institutions may waive tuition, while others may require half of the in-state tuition to be paid.

Graduate assistantships are generally required for all graduate programs in student affairs and you will want to have practical and educational experiences while you are participating in a graduate program. Some institutions will offer a limited number of assistantships, while others may offer a large number of opportunities. Whatever the case, recognize the value of the position you’re seeking. Take the application and interview process seriously.

(EDITOR’S NOTE: Students interested in pursuing assistantships and internships may do so at the 2005 NACA National Convention. The Career Services Center at the Convention provides an opportunity for students to contact organizations to advertise internships and graduate assistantships, as well as a convenient setting in which students can share information. See the forms on Pages 61-64. Also, complete information on the Career Services Center is available in the 2005 Convention Brochure, which has been sent to all member schools.)

**Knowing You Are Right for Student Affairs**

How do you know you are right for student affairs? I wish I could say there is a right answer to this question, but there isn’t. However, it’s important to believe that you can help students achieve their goals, that you can help make a difference in someone’s life.

Recently, I attended a student rally on our campus. I was in the background watching one of my student leaders speak, feeling a good deal of pride in what she was doing as an individual to help make a difference in the world. One of my other students, who happened to be a graduating senior, looked at me and said, “What’s up?” I just smiled and said how proud I was of the event and what the students were accomplishing at the rally. He smiled and said, “You teach us how to do this, Laura.” That brought tears to my eyes. I can honestly say that is when I knew I was doing the right thing with my life.

Recognize that years from now, when you may be recalling how you got involved in student affairs, you may wonder what impact you are making with students. You may think about why you chose to live your life the way you did. You may wonder if one day a student will smile, look at you and say, “You helped me...” Or, you may know how much impact you’ve had due to the successes your students experience after graduation. And trust me—that knowledge is more special than anything you can possibly imagine.

**About the Author**

Laura Bestler-Wilcox is assistant director for the Iowa State Memorial Union at Iowa State University. Previously, she was director of Student Life at William Penn College (Ia). In NACA, she currently serves on the Board of Directors. She has served as the National Cooperative Buying Coordinator, in addition to having served in that capacity for the former Upper Midwest Region. She also served as the upper Midwest regional coordinator. In addition, she was a project manager for the Commission for Association Volunteer Development. She holds a bachelor’s degree in broad area art from the University of Wisconsin-River Falls and a master’s degree in educational leadership from Grand Valley State University (Ml). She is currently completing a course work for a PhD in educational leadership policy studies at Iowa State University.