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Commentary

Reasons We Don't Need a Formal Recognition System for Student Affairs Graduate Preparation Programs That Demonstrate Compliance with the CAS Standards: *12 Myths*

Aaron W. Hughey
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During the 2010 Spring Semester, I participated in a video conference with around 25 graduate students in a master's program in student affairs at an institution in Indiana. The instructor of the course is an alumnus of our master's degree program at WKU; he subsequently went on to complete his doctorate and recently assumed an upper administration position at an institution in Texas. The "12 Myths" presented were inspired by that experience, although many of you have shared similar views with me in recent months. Most of the students were overwhelmingly in support of a formal recognition system for graduate preparation programs that demonstrate compliance with the CAS Standards — primarily as outlined in a commentary I had in the Spring 2009 issue of ACPA's *Developments*, "Certification for student affairs graduate preparation programs: An idea whose time is past due."

Contrary to the somewhat condescending and overly simplistic mantra of some; i.e., *"What problem does it solve?"* such a formal recognition system would absolutely contribute to solving several important problems — problems that are disproportionately experienced by smaller graduate preparation programs. It would also positively impact the further development of the student affairs profession by providing an additional avenue for promoting quality assurance among students, graduates, the profession, and the public at large.

I encourage everyone to forward this article on to their students and graduates, as well as their colleagues on both the academic as well as the practitioner side. These issues need to be widely discussed within the profession. It is very important that everyone has a voice in this dialog because in a very real sense, we are all in this together. This issue needs to be back on the front burner.

M*yth #1:* "Student affairs" is not a "real" profession — at least in the same sense as other professions such as counseling, social work, or even public school administration.

Wrong. Student affairs is a very clearly defined profession with a very specific set of knowledge, skills and ethical standards that must be acquired and adhered to in order to be effective at what we do. We have all the traditional characteristics of a profession; there are many resources that list and explain the basic tenets of a profession; one fairly good description can be found here: Characteristics of a Profession. The mere fact that we have the "CAS Standards" implies that there is something unique and specialized about what we do.

***Myth #2:* We don't want to become "overly professional."**

Obviously wrong. In fact, this is one of the weaker arguments that I've heard lately for not pursuing some kind of formal recognition system for graduate preparation programs that demonstrate compliance with the CAS Standards. Right. Don't want to be "too professional" — that would certainly get us into trouble.

***Myth #3:* Anybody can do student affairs work; i.e., you don't have to graduate from a 'standards-based' program in order to be successful in the profession.**

This is not only patently wrong, it's inherently dangerous. If "anybody" with "any kind of related degree" (Administrative Dynamics, General Administration, General Education, Communication, MBA, etc.) can do what we claim we do, then we really are in trouble. Furthermore, if we are not a profession, then why even develop the "CAS Standards and Guidelines for Master's Level Student Affairs Professional Preparation Programs" or the more recent "Professional Competency Areas for Student Affairs Practitioners." If anyone can do student affairs work, these kinds of initiatives seem more like exercises in futility.

A General Practitioner can do brain surgery. I'm not sure I would want my family doctor performing that kind of operation on me. I have never seen the primary role of student affairs professionals as administrators or managers. Yes, we need to be skilled in those areas, but that is not the essence of what we "do." Can you be effective as a student affairs professional with an educational background and degree in "Administration"? Sure, if the degree program is built around the CAS Standards and the Professional Competencies. If not, then you're probably not as prepared as you could be and should probably opt for a position (and career) outside student affairs.

***Myth #4:* A certification system for student affairs graduate preparation programs will not help programs access more internal institutional resources and support.**

Wrong. Absolutely wrong. I'll be happy to give you the phone numbers for my Dean and Provost — ask them what they consider to be more important: "voluntary compliance" or "certification." And I have heard from many of my colleagues at similar programs across the country who can attest to this reality. If there were a system for "certifying" programs as being

in compliance with the CAS Standards, it would give greater creditability to those programs and help them receive more support and resources at budget time. This is especially true for smaller programs that do not have the "clout" of larger, more established programs — even though the smaller programs are arguably just as good at what they do as the ones with more name recognition.

Myth #5: **CAS will be expected to assume a leadership role in any certification process; i.e., CAS will be actively involved in certifying compliance with its standards.**

Again, not true. As many of us have noted, anytime the idea of developing a formal recognition system is discussed, someone from CAS is always quick to send out a disclaimer that indicates that this is not "their" role. This is really a straw issue. CAS has done its part by developing (and updating as appropriate) the Standards; it is now up to the professional organizations to determine how they are to be integrated as a measure of quality assurance in our various departments, divisions, and graduate preparation programs. I am certainly not asking CAS to play an active role in any formal recognition system — other than to provide the standards that form the basis for the internal/external review process.

Myth #6: **Any attempt to set up a 'registry' of student affairs graduate preparation programs that have been demonstrated to be "CAS Compliant" through an internal/external validation process will inevitably start us down the 'slippery slope' toward full-blown accreditation (a la CACREP).**

Yes, and smoking pot occasionally leads to full-blown heroin addiction. This is also patently untrue and borders on the kind of fear mongering that characterizes many radio and TV shows these days. We have the capacity to shape any system we want and to limit it in any way that we want. As I have stated many times, I am absolutely not in favor of a full-blown accreditation process for student affairs programs that even remotely resembles CACREP. To suggest that we don't have the innate capacity to control what we build is insulting.

Myth #7: **Voluntary compliance works just as well as external validation when it comes to demonstrating compliance with standards.**

Sure it does. Just look at the recent history of our financial institutions. Or maybe the petroleum industry. Voluntary compliance without external validation seems to have worked exceptionally well in those areas. Why have anyone from the outside actually checking to see if you are in compliance with ethics regulations or safety standards. Just tell us you are meeting them and we'll trust you. By-the-way, I tend to see the glass as half full and usually give people the benefit of the doubt. But I can see the potential for a lot of fly-by-night programs claiming they are "CAS-compliant" and without some form of confirmation of that status, potential students and employers could find out too late that the program doesn't really do what it purports to do.

Myth #8: **A certification system would create a two-tiered hierarchy among graduate preparation programs.**

Like that doesn't already exist. The larger, more established programs may not see the need for a certification system because they have the reputation (deserved or not) to back their graduates in the job market. Smaller programs, of which there are considerably more, could benefit immensely from a certification system. And it would still be voluntary; i.e., no program would be required to go through the internal self-study or the external review. At WKU, our mental health counseling and marriage and family therapy programs are not required to be accredited by CACREP. Our graduates could still be licensed if our programs were not accredited. But it does add tremendous value to the degrees that our graduates earn. We could provide the same benefit for our student affairs graduates without having to jump through all the hoops of a CACREP-like process (See Myth #5 above).

Myth #9: **We shouldn't even be discussing this; after all, don't you remember, we had this discussion a couple of years ago and couldn't reach a consensus. So why don't we just move on?**

Because the right thing to do is always the right thing to do. I'm sure Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., was advised more than once to "tone it down" and don't be "too pushy." Good thing he didn't listen to his distracters who lacked the vision to do what needed to be done. Or Susan B. Anthony. I'm confident she was told numerous times that "women's suffrage" was a dead issue. Good thing she didn't give up. The underlying issue here is that a lot of professionals in the field (both faculty and practitioners) still see want to see some type of certification system implemented and are not going to drop the issue just because a few people consider the matter closed.

Myth #10: **We should trust the vast experience and insights of our senior student affairs leadership. After all, many of them didn't graduate from student affairs programs and they've done pretty well.**

Sure they have. When I first came to Western Kentucky University 30 years ago, the VP for Student Affairs was from the History Department and the Dean of Student Life was out of Agriculture. Different world/era; we were not really a profession then in the same way we are now. Those administrators were "good people" but they didn't have a clue about student affairs the way most of us see it now. They would not have been hired for those positions today (nor should they even be considered). Student affairs is now a much more well-defined profession that is arguably much more responsive to the needs of students. If we are to achieve our true potential, as outlined in the recent report, "Envisioning the Future of Student Affairs" then we need practitioners and faculty who are specifically educated to do so.

Anyway, the experienced leadership of Enron, AIG, Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac, Bear Sterns, Goldman Sachs, and, last but not least, BP, seems to have served the folks in the financial profession rather well.

Myth #11: **If the leaders in ACPA and NASPA don't want to pursue a certification system for our graduate preparation programs, the rank-and-file should just forget about it.**

I am so tired of hearing from my colleagues at other institutions who are afraid to speak out on this issue because the senior administrators or faculty members at their institutions might not like it. To begin with, anyone who attempts to stifle free and open debate about this (or any issue) is inherently wrong and should be ashamed of themselves. And anyone who is scared to speak out on this issue probably needs to re-examine their values and realize that they are simply being "politically correct" and prostituting themselves. Yes, we all live in the "real" world and actions have consequences. But life is short. Younger professionals often have views that are more valid than their more experienced but somewhat out-of-touch counterparts.

Myth #12: **This issue is going to go away.**

Don't count on it. There are a lot of us who are unimpressed by the PSTD some of our colleagues seem to be experiencing from their previous encounter with this issue. See a counselor if you need to, but there are a growing number of us who are determined to press forward. I am convinced that we will eventually have some type of formal recognition system for graduate preparation programs that demonstrate compliance with the CAS Standards. On some level, this is inevitable. A quick review of the historical development of any profession supports this conclusion. It may well be when the leadership has shifted and some of the more vociferous opponents of a formal recognition system are comfortably situated in assisted living accommodations, but it will happen. You can count on that.

The primary purpose of this POV piece is not to create hard feelings or generate mindless conflict. That is already being done by those who want to ignore this issue, think it has already been decided, or simply feel that they have insights into reality that have somehow escaped the rest of us; i.e., those who want to impose their own personal/professional preferences on others who don't share their views. This is certainly not my purpose here. The point is that there is a significant percentage of those in the profession who support the creation of a certification system for graduate programs that demonstrate compliance with the CAS Standards. Participation would be voluntary — those programs that don't want to participate don't have to. Unlike those who are opposed to the creation of such a system, nobody is trying to impose the preference for a system on anyone or any program. If you don't like it, don't participate in it.

I firmly believe that there is much more support for a certification system as described above than there is lack of support. The volume of supportive e-mails I have received on this topic, combined with the numerous conversations I have had at conferences and other professional meetings, contribute to this belief. Moreover, I further believe if this were brought to a vote, it

would pass overwhelmingly. But as the recent attempt to derail the merger of ACPA and NASPA shows, sometimes what the membership wants is not what it gets.

But don't tell the rest of us we can't have something that we consider vital to the future of our profession.

Thanks for taking the time to read this. Again, please forward it to your students and colleagues who may be interested.

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Characteristics of a Profession:
http://www.adprima.com/profession.htm

CAS Standards and Guidelines for Master's Level Student Affairs Professional Preparation Programs:
http://www.cas.edu/getpdf.cfm?PDF=E86DA70D-0C19-89ED-0FBA230F8F2F3F41

Professional Competency Areas for Student Affairs Practitioners:
http://www2.myacpa.org/au/governance/Joint_Task_Force_of_Professional_Competencies.php

Envisioning the Future of Student Affairs:
http://www.naspa.org/unification/TF_final_narr.pdf

This article is also available to ACPA members at the ACPA Website:
http://www.myacpa.org/pub/developments/

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