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Student Affairs: An Apologia

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Student Affairs: An Apologia

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resources **standards** *students*
certification **standards** *formal recognition*
traditional **standards** *learning **quality***
we are not just administrators

we are student affairs professionals

progressive **competencies** *we are not just counselors*
credibility **competencies** *we are not just educators*
faculty **competencies** *development **accountability***
staff **competencies** *preparation programs*
external validation

by Aaron W. Hughey, EdD

Once again, our major student affairs professional conferences are in full swing. Thousands of my colleagues are — or have been recently — meeting, presenting, sharing, discussing, reflecting, debating, and pontificating.

And once again we seem, for the most part, collectively oblivious to the eight-hundred pound gorilla sitting in our midst. The lack of responsiveness to the needs of virtually everyone associated with, and affected by, the student affairs profession is astonishing and indefensible.

To be blunt, I am embarrassed by our leadership. I'm pretty sure the feeling is mutual.

Don't get me wrong. I love student affairs. I have for the last 30+ years. What I find disturbing is the direction in which my profession seems to be drifting these days.

Where is the visionary leadership student affairs so desperately needs?

I would like to apologize to the faculty who teach in student affairs graduate preparation programs. Those who are striving to adhere to the [CAS Standards and Guidelines for Master's Level Student Affairs Professional Preparation Programs](#) and/or the [Professional Competency Areas for Student Affairs Practitioners](#) deserve some formal recognition for their efforts. The indifference from our senior leadership on this critical issue is inexcusable.

I would like to apologize to our colleagues in other professions who long ago recognized the need for standards as a way of insuring some measure of credibility and trustworthiness for their respective disciplines. Student affairs, it seems, is in a perpetual state of denial when it comes to the need to further legitimize what we have to offer.

I would like to apologize to the student affairs practitioners. Those who hire our students deserve a more focused and transparent emphasis on quality and consistency from graduate preparation programs. As most of them instinctively know from their experience or just through common sense, 'trust us' does not constitute good policy when it comes to delivering newly minted professionals. Being able to provide employers with some measure of quality assurance would be a win-win for everyone.

I would like to apologize to the general public. They deserve greater accountability from those entrusted to develop and implement degree programs designed to prepare student affairs professionals. As the student population has become more reflective of the society at large, the need for reliability in the provision of specialized knowledge and skills has never been more acute.

In the case of public institutions, I would also like to apologize profusely to the taxpayers. Those who help finance higher education for the inimitable service it provides to the citizens of this country deserve more tangible reassurance regarding how their increasingly scarce financial resources are being utilized.

Most importantly, I would like to apologize to the students we serve for our inability to provide them with some means of realistically gauging the efficacy of competing graduate preparation programs. The notion that one program is just as good as any other program is obviously foolish, but apparently acceptable to many of our leaders. Moreover, letting the market ultimately decide which programs are 'virtuous' and which are not amounts to playing a dangerous game with potentially devastating consequences for both students as well as the profession.

Where was our leadership when the president of the American Counseling Association decided, as evidenced by his [letter](#) to the chair of the Standards Revision Committee of the Council for the Accreditation of Counseling and Related Education Programs (CACREP) that counseling no longer constitutes a major component of student affairs work? I do not appreciate my profession being redefined by those who have their own agenda and do not understand the essential nature of what we do in student affairs.

During my tenure at Western Kentucky University (WKU), the proposal has been made more than once to move the master's degree program in student affairs in higher education from the Department of Counseling and Student Affairs to the Department of Educational Leadership,

Administration, and Research. I have always been categorically opposed to such a move on the grounds that counseling is an integral and indispensable part of what we do in student affairs. From my vantage point, many of our leaders have been all too eager to capitulate to those seeking to reinvent us as generic student services 'administrators' who just happen to work in higher education.

Anyone who thinks student affairs professionals should primarily be counselors is fundamentally misguided. Similarly, anyone who thinks student affairs professionals do not need to be proficient in basic counseling skills is fundamentally clueless. One of the beautiful and inspiring aspects of the student affairs profession is the idea we are, and have traditionally been, a hybrid of both disciplines; i.e., a fusion of the best of both worlds. We are what we are and any attempt to move us exclusively into one camp or the other is intrinsically ill-informed.

The CAS Standards, and more recently the Professional Competencies, were both developed in order 1) to provide a clear definition of what it means to be a student affairs professional, 2) to identify what minimal knowledge and skills individuals should possess in order to legitimately call themselves student affairs professionals, and 3) to offer a reasonable and realistic process for insuring the profession will continue to be provided with competent practitioners.

Many of my colleagues have spent countless hours hammering out both the basic guidelines and the underlying principles articulated by the CAS Standards and the Professional Competencies. For a relatively small but highly influential group of self-appointed leaders to decide, based on their own questionable preferences and biases, that graduate preparation programs making a voluntary yet conscientious decision to adopt and follow these guidelines are not worthy of being formally recognized for their efforts is the height of arrogance and condescension.

The master's degree program at WKU prepares student affairs professionals – not licensed counselors or educational administrators. We are very clear about the orientation of our curriculum and I feel we do as good a job as any program out there at preparing students for the challenges they will inevitably face as practitioners. The essence of who we are is captured succinctly and definitively by the CAS Standards and the Professional Competencies.

There seems to be general agreement that the CAS Standards and the Professional Competencies do represent valid and reasonable guidelines when it comes to educating the next generation of student affairs professionals. Although there will always be differences with respect to the perceived value of some of the specific features of those guidelines, it is difficult to argue they don't embody a coherent strategy for preparing student affairs professionals. At least this is the sense I get from most of my colleagues who are familiar with both documents.

So what is so inherently unsettling about formally recognizing programs demonstrating compliance with those guidelines?

I have addressed these issues in an array of publications and through presentations at a variety of conferences and meetings. But just to reiterate, here are a few observations several of us within the profession consider to be cold, hard truth:

1. Student affairs is a clearly defined profession with an unambiguous set of knowledge, skills and ethical standards that must be acquired, and adhered to, in order for its members to be

credible and effective. We possess all the customary characteristics of a profession; the fact we developed the CAS Standards and the Professional Competencies implies there is something unique and distinctive about what we do. There are those who seem to think we are somehow 'different' from other professions; i.e., the rules generally accepted for almost all disciplines apparently are not as applicable to student affairs. Notably, the exact reasons we constitute the exception to the rule remain rather murky and ill-defined. The sooner we begin to see ourselves as a true profession in the same sense as any other profession the better off we will all be.

2. Student affairs is not in any imminent danger of becoming 'too professional.' This is one of the more ridiculous arguments often put forward by those opposed to heightened accountability on the part of our graduate preparation programs. It takes highly focused training to learn how to effectively do student affairs work. If anyone can do student affairs work with any kind of 'related' degree – as some claim with a straight face – then we really are in trouble. Besides, if anyone can do our jobs, the CAS Standards and the Professional Competencies constitute nothing more than exercises in self-gratification designed to appease those who want to feel good about themselves. Can you be effective as a student affairs professional with a P-12 background and a degree in administration? Sure, if the program you matriculated through was built around the guiding principles we espouse as a profession. Please explain to me how being more professional is something we want to avoid.

3. There are a lot of student affairs professionals (both faculty and practitioners) who want to see some type of formal recognition system for graduate preparation programs demonstrating compliance with the CAS Standards and/or the Professional Competencies. This issue has not been decided; furthermore, the right thing to do is always the right thing to do. Best practice is never decided by taking a vote. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., was no doubt advised more than once to 'tone it down' and stop being so 'pushy.' Similarly, Susan B. Anthony was probably told numerous times 'women's suffrage' was a dead issue. Good thing they didn't listen to their distracters. Much like the DREAM Act, there are dedicated and passionate student affairs professionals who will not rest until we take quality assurance seriously.

4. There are those within the student affairs profession who are afraid to speak out on this issue for fear of retaliation from their senior colleagues. This is not 'conspiracy theory' thinking – this is reality. Several of my junior colleagues have communicated this to me directly. Anyone who attempts to stifle free and open debate about this (or any issue) is innately wrong and should be ashamed of their actions. At the same time, anyone who is scared to speak out on this (or any issue) probably needs to re-examine their values and realize they are simply prostituting themselves in order to pacify those who are abusing their influence. New professionals are often more in touch with reality than their more experienced counterparts.

5. The Council for the Advancement of Standards (CAS) does not have to play any role in a formal recognition system for graduate programs seeking to demonstrate compliance with their Standards. CAS has done its part by developing (and updating as appropriate) the Standards; it is now up to the professional associations to determine how they are to be integrated as an accountability measure in our various departments, divisions, and graduate preparation programs. CAS would not be expected to play an active role in any conceivable recognition system and nobody I know of is asking them to do so. This is another non-issue.

6. Voluntary compliance does not work 'just as well or even better' than external validation when it comes to demonstrating compliance with the CAS Standards and/or the Professional

Competencies. Look at virtually any other industry – they all rely on some form of tertiary oversight to substantiate claims of adherence to established guidelines. For a program to claim it is ‘CAS-compliant’ without an independent confirmation of such status is a recipe for disaster. Potential students and employers need to know empirically a graduate preparation program does what it purports to do.

7. A recognition system for graduate preparation programs demonstrating compliance with the CAS Standards and/or the Professional Competencies will not lead to full-blown accreditation. This is the ‘slippery-slope’ argument those opposed to quality assurance often use as a scare tactic. We have the capacity to shape any system we want and to limit it in any way we want. To suggest we would not be able to exercise the self-control needed to effectively regulate what we build is insulting. It would be relatively easy and painless to keep a formal recognition system from evolving into our own version of CACREP.

8. A voluntary system for recognizing graduate preparation programs adhering to the CAS Standards and/or the Professional Competencies will not create a two-tiered ‘hierarchy’ among degree programs. The larger, more established programs may not see the need for a recognition system because they already 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 such a recognition system. In some instances, the more well-known programs might feel threatened by a formal recognition system since their counterparts would have a way to substantiate they are just as good at what they do.

9. Recognizing graduate preparation programs demonstrating adherence to the CAS Standards and/or the Professional Competencies would give those programs greater access to institutional support. Deans and provosts recognize and value accreditation and certification; they do not understand or give much credence to ‘voluntary compliance.’ If we had a simple system for verifying a program is in compliance with established guidelines, it would give much more credibility to the program and help faculty associated with it secure additional internal support and resources at budget time. This is especially true for smaller programs that do not have the institutional ‘clout’ of larger, more established programs — even though many of those programs are arguably just as good at what they do as the ones with superior name recognition.

The bottom line is there are a lot of student affairs professionals who support the creation of a formal recognition system for graduate preparation programs demonstrating compliance with the CAS Standards and/or the Professionals Competencies. Again, involvement would be strictly voluntary; programs not wanting to participate wouldn’t have to. And unlike those opposed to the creation of such a system, nobody is trying to impose their biases on anyone or any program.

If you don’t like it or agree with it, don’t participate in it.

Finally, I acknowledge and understand there are opposing viewpoints on this divisive yet pivotal issue. I have gone to great lengths using a variety of avenues to lay out what I and many others consider to be a compelling argument for the creation of a formal recognition system for student affairs graduate preparation programs demonstrating compliance with the CAS Standards and/or the Professional Competencies. To date, the only responses I have received have been terse ‘we don’t agree with you’ statements which never seem to be followed by any

genuine critical thinking and the occasional post suggesting I am somehow 'demonizing' those who disagree with me.

No one ever bothers to focus on the issue at hand and respond point-by-point.

As I indicated to my colleagues on ACPA's Commission for Professional Preparation, I am sincerely sorry if I have offended anyone with my approach to this issue. What I will not apologize for is my commitment to, and passion for, an idea whose time is long overdue in student affairs. I believe in vigorous debate and I know I can be sarcastic; that's just my style. My students are fine with it and their perception is all I'm really concerned about at this point in my career. In my experience, the ability to see beyond the way something is being presented and instead focus on the substance of what is being communicated is a sign of maturity.

As always, I encourage everyone who reads this commentary to forward it to their students and alumni, as well as their colleagues on both the academic as well as the practitioner side. This issue needs to be widely discussed within the profession. It is very important everyone has a voice in this dialog because in a very real sense, we are all in this together.



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p.s. For additional clarification of our position on this issue, including how a formal recognition system could be effectively and efficiently implemented, please reference the following article I co-authored with Dr. Monica Burke which appeared in the August 2010 issue of **Industry and Higher Education**: [External confirmation of adherence to standards: as applicable to academic programmes as to business and industry.](#)

<http://www.studentaffairsnews.com/student-affairs-an-apologia>

Embedded links:

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_Compencies.php

Letter:

<http://www.counseling.org/docs/cacrep/click-here.pdf>

External confirmation of adherence to standards: as applicable to academic programmes as to business and industry:

http://digitalcommons.wku.edu/csa_fac_pub/36/