Juniority: Cultivating the New Student Affairs Professional

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The experiences of new professionals in student affairs have become a matter of increasing concern for both scholars and practitioners. Professional conferences within the field are filled with program sessions addressing the related issues of transition from graduate school to work, appropriate methods of supervision, and factors leading to job satisfaction. Likewise, the literature contains many guidebooks, studies, and practice manuals providing specific advice on how to successfully shepherd new professionals into institutions and the larger field. Ensuring the success and satisfaction of new professionals is not only essential to maintaining vibrancy in the college student personnel workforce but also the success of the undergraduate students for whom entry level professionals are the primary points of contact.

Instead of identifying the myriad ways in which new professionals should learn, develop, and grow in order to become more seasoned practitioners (a deficit approach), this paper will identify some of the endemic realities of entering a new work organization and how these realities, in tandem with developmental needs, define the new professional experience. By framing the aptitudes and abilities of new professionals as distinct from the skills of their more experienced colleagues, it is possible to appreciate juniority as a uniquely valuable career development stage. The economic theory of comparative and absolute advantage can help pinpoint specific arenas of student affairs work in which new professionals can be more involved and empowered despite their relative inexperience. Relational demography theory, which considers how "individual demographic characteristics and the social context interact" (Riordan & Shore, 1997, p. 342), will be used to highlight some of the previously hidden challenges faced by new professionals.

Understandings of the New Professional

Any examination of the experiences of new professionals must be predicated on a clear understanding of exactly who is being discussed. This subgroup within the field has been of scholarly and practical concern for at least the last 30 years (Burns, 1982; Coleman & Johnson, 1990b)

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and has been defined in a variety of ways. Many authors have described new professionals as anyone with five years or less of full-time experience in the field (Cilente, Henning, Jackson, Kennedy, & Sloane, 2006; Coleman & Johnson, 1990a) while others add some nuance to that basic criterion, such as being in a first professional position (Renn & Hodges, 2007). This paper will use the parameters of having one to five years of experience in the field (Standing Committee for Graduate Students and New Professionals, 2004) and being younger than 35 years of age.

In his foreword to the monograph The New Professional, Saddlemire (1990) summarized the main questions that frame almost every approach to understanding new professionals:

> How can young professionals become older professionals who have not lost their enthusiasm and commitment for a career in student affairs? What are the concerns, fears, opportunities and needs of a new practitioner starting up the career ladder in higher education? (p. vii)

These questions are addressed not only within the monograph (Coleman & Johnson, 1990b) but are taken up by later scholars as well. In the introduction to their qualitative examination into first job experiences, Magolda and Carnaghi (2004a) noted that of "particular interest are new professional's *survival* strategies" (p. 8). More recently, the American College Personnel Association released a report focusing on the six most critical needs of new professionals: "receiving adequate support, understanding job expectations, fostering student learning, moving up the field of student affairs, enhancing supervision skills, and developing multicultural competencies" (Cilente et al., 2006, p. 2).

Consensus has formed around the most effective ways to help new professionals develop, including synergistic supervision, involvement in professional associations, and connection to an effective mentor (Cilente, et al., 2007; Clifford, 2009; Coleman & Johnson, 1990b). Underlying these approaches is the assumption that new professionals are underprepared for their new roles; therefore, the individual, the hiring institution, and the field of student affairs must work together to overcome these shortcomings. Evident in several studies, mid- and senior-level practitioners find graduate preparation programs inadequate or incomplete in the training and preparation of new professionals (Burkard, Cole, Ott, & Stoflet, 2005; Herdlein, 2004). Renn and Jessup-Anger (2008) noted that "new professionals must 'grow up' quickly" (p. 329), a typical approach to the new professional experience.

While individual development is assuredly needed, focusing exclusively on the inadequacies of new professionals obscures some of the systemic structures that prevent new professionals from being fully actualized and empowered in the early years of their careers. The economic principle of comparative and absolute advantage provides a way to understand some of the specific strengths that new professionals bring to a student affairs organization.

Comparative and Absolute Advantages

Bowman's (2008) analysis of how differences in age and organizational tenure demographics influence teaching in law schools offers a theoretical frame through which student affairs leaders can better determine where staff members should be positioned for maximum effect. He used the economic principle of absolute and comparative advantage to identify circumstances in which junior faculty may be more effective and efficient than their more senior colleagues. In economic terms, while two entities may be able to produce the same good or service, circumstances dictate which entity can do so more efficiently in all cases (absolute advantage) or in most cases (comparative advantage). While either junior or senior faculty member can perform almost any function called for in their positions, there are areas in which either junior or senior faculty will need to spend less time, effort, and energy to be equally effective. Simply put, "the types of performance that long-tenured employees enjoy and excel at might be different from those of young new hires" (Ng and Feldman, 2010, p. 1221).

Generational Proximity

Although not precisely on point for those working with college students, the types of activities Bowman (2008) identified as being particularly appropriate for junior faculty can serve as guideposts to those tasks that new professionals are more likely to excel or do so more easily. The generational proximity of junior faculty to law students enables them to more easily establish rapport and find common cultural experiences with their students. Bowman (2008) specifically noted that being of the same or similar generation may provide junior faculty with a better understanding of their students' learning styles and view of the social value of education. Awareness of generational issues in student affairs gained momentum with the advent of the Millennial generation of students (Coomes & DeBard, 2004; Elam, Stratton, & Gibson, 2007; Howe & Strauss, 2000) and the entry of millennials into the profession (American College Personnel Association, 2004; Freeman & Taylor, 2009; Kegolis, 2009). For instance,

managing the evolving role of parents in the academic and co-curricular lives of students may be more intuitive for practitioners who themselves had actively involved parents.

Recent Student Experience

Bowman (2008) also posited that junior faculty, having most recently practiced law themselves, would be better acquainted with the immediate professional context most law students are hoping to enter. While acknowledging the greater teaching experience that senior faculty would have, Bowman (2008) concluded that the "non-contemporary practice experience may be of less contextual usefulness than the more recent, albeit limited, practice of junior faculty members" (p. 205). Other faculty members have also felt this disconnect with their students, going so far as to conduct ethnographic studies of the undergraduate experience because they felt that they simply no longer understood the cultural context their students (Moffatt, 1989; Nathan, 2005). There is a powerful correlation on this point to student affairs work in that new professionals have been students more recently themselves and will have a more visceral understanding of the experience of current students than senior administrators who attended college decades prior.

Although student affairs professionals are not teaching undergraduate students to join the profession, new professionals are teaching them how to be successful students. Having recently been students themselves, new professionals may be more in touch with undergraduate students' reference points, mores, and attitudes than colleagues who have not so recently been an undergraduate. Strange (2004) described some of the ways the Millennial generation require a reshaping of the manner and method of student service delivery. Those new practitioners are closest in generational context to the incoming students who are in the best position to know how the hallmarks of student personnel work can be successfully reinterpreted for incoming cohorts of students, a position also proffered by Freeman and Taylor (2009).

Energy and Enthusiasm

A third area in which Bowman (2008) suggested that junior faculty members are more likely to have a relative advantage is faculty energy level and enthusiasm for teaching. While energy for higher education administration may not be comparable to the energy expected of classroom faculty, there is a parallel to the fervor that many new professionals exhibit. Lorden (1998) noted that "new professionals in particular bring

an essential energy and enthusiasm to the profession and to institutions of higher education in general" (p. 214). This energy must be directed judiciously as practitioner burnout has been the subject of considerable concern in the literature (Evans, 1988; Gentry, Katz, & McFeeters, 2009; Howard-Hamilton, Palmer, Johnson, & Kicklighter, 1998; Lorden, 1998). Magolda and Carnaghi (2004b) included several narratives in their qualitative approach to the new professional experience that cited the negotiation of long hours as a challenge. Not having the professional wherewithal to balance energy for work with personal priorities can turn the advantage of fresh enthusiasm into the disadvantage of exhaustion and frustration.

Engagement with Theory

Although not all new professionals will join the field with a master's degree in student affairs, a significant number enter with this credential (Cilente et al., 2006). These recent graduates will have had coursework and academic experiences requiring a foundational understanding of student development theories. New professionals will also be in direct engagement with emerging theories and their applications to student populations that were not developed when senior colleagues were earning their credentials.

Such an observation is not to suggest that seasoned professionals are not simplistic with the theoretical developments that undergird student affairs practice. In a meta-analysis of 30 years of research, Lovell and Kosten (2000) found that student development theory was the most frequently cited theoretical knowledge base for successful practitioners. Many researchers (Burkard et al., 2005; Cilente et al., 2006; Herdlein, 2004; Waple, 2006) documented the deep understanding of multiple student development theories expected of new professionals leaving graduate preparation programs. This distinction acknowledges that newer professionals who recently completed a master's degree program in the field have just exited a career stage where being familiar with such innovations was their primary professional responsibility. Conversely, their more senior colleagues have other professional duties beyond staying up to date on theory. The same explicit engagement with student development theory has not been evident in explorations of competencies and expectations of mid-level professionals although such knowledge may have been presumed (Fey & Carpenter, 1996; Gordon, 1993; Saunders & Cooper, 1999).

Evans, Forney, Guido, Renn, and Patton (2010) recently traced the

proliferation of student development theories over time in the concluding chapter of their comprehensive book, *Student Development in College: Theory, Research, and Practice*. One implication of the fast-paced evolution of the field's understanding of student development is that practitioners need to remain actively and intentionally engaged with the theoretical literature in order to build systems that best support student development. However, that engagement does not appear to be widespread. Cilente et al. (2006) found that new professionals were frustrated by their supervisor's disinterest in grounding practice and policy in theory. Student development theory, particularly emerging theories, may be an area in which new professionals hold a comparative advantage.

Use of Technology

Changes in technology and students' use of social media may also be an area of comparative advantage for new professionals. Junco and Chickering (2010) addressed some of the practical implications of social media on college campuses, noting that professional development may be advisable to overcome generational differences in technology skills. More pointedly, the researchers of *Online Social Networking on Campus: Understanding What Matters in Student Culture*, a recent book about the impact of Facebook on college campuses, identified their need to become "transgenerational ethnographers" in order to "interpret the meaning that students make of this new cultural space" (Alemán & Wartman, 2009, p. ix). New professionals who have had Facebook and other social media as a part of their own educational experience may have an easier time understanding the role that such technology plays in the lives of current students.

Examining new professionals' strengths in light of absolute and comparative advantages may reveal ways in which new professionals are able to contribute more to their students and workplaces than is currently expected. In their graduate programs, new professionals are prepared to lead, stay abreast of research developments, and contribute back to learning in the field, though most are not encouraged to do so as professionals (Harned & Murphy, 1998). One possible contribution to this discrepancy between preparation and expectation may be the overt social barriers that exist within organizations and workplaces. Often considered simply 'office politics,' there are complex social forces that can unintentionally alienate or marginalize new professionals based on their relative newness (Rollag, 2004, 2007). Relational demography offers some insight in to how these pressures manifest.

Demographic Implications

According to relational demography theory, individuals "compare their own demographic characteristics with those of others in their social units" (Riordan & Shore, 1997, p. 342). These comparisons are used to determine their own level of similarity or dissimilarity, thereby establishing an in-group/out-group dichotomy based on the most salient demographic variables (Matos, 2009). A variety of demographic variables, both situational and personal, have been studied previously, including race, gender, and level of education attained (Tsui, Egan, & O'Reilly III, 1992; Tsui & O'Reilly III, 1989). Age and organizational tenure, length of employment, are two such variables that have particular relevance for new professionals in student affairs. Previous scholars have considered these attributes in tandem largely because "increases in organizational tenure are also accompanied by increases in chronological age" (Ng & Feldman, 2010, p. 1221).

Absent from the college student personnel literature, there are instances of using a relational demography framework to understand the faculty experience in higher education. For example, McCain, O'Reilly, and Pfeffer (1983) studied the effects of a large cohort of faculty entering an academic department in conjunction with the time gap between entering cohorts. Researchers found that "cohorts are consequential for understanding the political process in organizations and for understanding patterns of conflict and integration that develop" (McCain et al., 1983, p. 638). This finding has particular relevance for a spectrum of student affairs departments, ranging from one new hire every few years to many new professionals at one time.

Although not specifically related to higher education, Zenger and Lawrence's (1989) study of technical, work-related communication across age and organizational tenure suggested that the similarities created through age or organizational entry cohort membership have important ramifications. The common experiences of a cohort influence members to communicate with each other more readily and frequently than with other colleagues. These communication patterns persist because "[p]enetrating established communication networks is difficult for new employees. Such activity disrupts current networks" (Zenger & Lawrence, 1989, p. 358).

New professionals within a student affairs organization likely share not only age and organizational tenure but other situational demographics as well. A group of new professionals starting to work at the same institution may have moved from other areas at the same time and would be negotiating

a new professional and personal community simultaneously. For those new professionals who have just finished a master's degree program in the field, it is likely that they are beginning their first full-time professional position in higher education. These shared experiences can reinforce the cohort experience of new professionals and create a greater social distance from their more veteran colleagues.

Limitations

Research on new professionals has focused largely on graduate preparation program curricula, the expectations of mid- and senior-level practitioners, and factors relating to job satisfaction, turnover, and attrition from the field. As a result, this theoretical and literary integration can provide only a suggestion for an approach to practice. Practitioners, particularly supervisors of new professionals, may want to consider the utility and applicability of cultivating juniority in their unique institutional contexts. Researchers interested in the experiences of new student affairs professionals will hopefully be able to offer a more empirical approach to the absolute and comparative advantages of new professionals and how those advantages may differ across institutional types, age ranges, and academic backgrounds.

Implications for Practice

New professionals are not merely underdeveloped practitioners in need of additional training to become fully effective. Relational demography suggests that there are social and organizational dynamics that can prevent new professionals from being fully empowered in and integrated into their new positions. Student affairs organizations large and small should actively work to recognize and overcome these barriers because new professionals can offer valuable advantages in the service of undergraduate students.

Inter-cohort conflicts and challenges in communication can be remediated by the intentional creation of cross-cohort work groups which may provide increased social contact (Zenger & Lawrence, 1989). Such groups, whether event planning committees, cross-functional coordinating bodies, or assessment teams, can have significant value beyond their immediate administrative goals. Simply recognizing the often covert disruption to relational dynamics that new group members bring to a student affairs organization may help ameliorate the challenge of navigating institutional politics that many new professionals feel (Cilente et al., 2006).

An additional benefit of fully including new professionals in

organizational working groups would be the opportunity to capitalize on their comparative advantage to seasoned professionals. The areas of advantage identified in this paper include generational proximity to college students, recency of the college experience, and the use of demographic realities to maximum benefit. Energy and enthusiasm for some of the most taxing elements of their work is another way in which new professionals can be used to serve students while at the same time respecting the new professionals' work/life balance. A systemic impact that new professionals can have on the practice of student affairs is their commitment to and knowledge of the latest advances in student development theory. Increased reflection on sound theory in combination with good practice can benefit students and institutions alike.

A career in college student personnel is not simply the inexorable progression from new professional to senior leader along a single continuum of professional development. 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. Encouraging a culture of juniority and enabling new professional inclusion may be an important next step in stemming the attrition of professionals from the field and growing the community of practice.

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