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Student affairs professionals are often referred to as scholar-practitioners—administrators who use research, theory, and scholarship to develop college students and improve college environments. As demands upon professionals increase, however, it is all too easy for the "practitioner" part to completely overtake the "scholar." It is understandable that few student affairs professionals have the time to conduct research projects on their campuses. Those who are able to do so while handling all their other job requirements are role models in the field. But has the busyness of the student affairs profession come to the point where professionals no longer even have time to engage research by reading it and staying current in the literature? In his book, *The Contrarian's Guide to Leadership*, former University of Southern California (USC) president Steven Sample (2002) has a chapter called "You Are What You Read." In this chapter, Sample shares the importance of daily reading for overall development. If we find ourselves too busy to read research, perhaps it is time to pause, re-establish our priorities, and reclaim the "scholar" in scholar-practitioner.

Why Reading Research Is Important

Beeler and Hunter (1991) argued two decades ago that campus administrators, graduate preparation programs, and professional associations are all guilty of student affairs professionals' unsatisfactory level of engagement with research. A decade later, the *Journal for College Student Development* published an issue entirely devoted to the topic, with NASPA doing likewise with its journal in 2002. These represent concerted efforts to establish continuous engagement in research as a priority for the student affairs profession.

Expertise in the research of the field gives student affairs professionals more credibility in the academic communities of their institutions (Carpenter, 2001; Young, 2001). More importantly, however, reading and understanding research related to colleges and college students increases the ability to make decisions that produce desired outcomes (Blimling, 2001; Carpenter, 2001; Schroeder & Pike, 2001; White 2002). As Carpenter and Stimpson (2007) note, "Instinct, personality, and even successful experience are no substitute for appropriate professional education, reflection, and continual learning and professional development" (p. 279-280). Student affairs professionals owe it to themselves (increased expertise) and to their students (better outcomes) to engage research on a consistent basis. Plus, as Kidder (2010) stated so well, there is also a "joy of working at the nexus of research work and professional work." Engaging research has become a commonly espoused value, but is it a common practice?

Why It Doesn't Happen

Student affairs professionals know that staying current in the literature is important, but enacting this goal is not easy (Carpenter, 2001). There are most likely multiple causes for not regularly reading scholarship pertaining to the field. I would like to highlight four obstacles that I have seen, personally experienced, and read about (Schroeder & Pike, 2001). These obstacles are: (1) inadequate preparation, (2) tyranny of the urgent, (3) lack of clear purpose, and (4) cultural discouragement.

Concerning the first obstacle, inadequate preparation, professionals may not feel that they have the skills to

understand the methodologies and results of research studies. Perhaps their graduate research courses were too long ago or they do not come from a graduate program in higher education and student affairs. This feeling of incompetence could lead to disengagement: *Why should I read stuff I don't understand?* Also, overwhelming jobs can easily lead us to succumb to the tyranny of the urgent, where student affairs professionals never feel ahead of their work enough to just sit down and read: *How can I spend time reading when I have 50 e-mails to answer?* There can also be a lack of clear purpose for why this is important: *Why do I need to engage research in the first place?* The fourth and final obstacle is cultural discouragement. The culture of a workplace can actually have disincentives for becoming a scholar-practitioner (Schroeder & Pike, 2001). In other words, *if regularly reading scholarship is so important, why is no one around me doing it?*

What To Do About It

For each of these obstacles, I would like to offer a solution. Acting on these suggestions could be one of the most important steps for your own professional development. My four solutions involve: (1) a commitment to lifelong learning, (2) practicing the First Fifteen, (3) engaging research topically, and (4) beginning a reading group.

Inadequate Preparation? Make a Commitment to Lifelong Learning.

Whether one has forgotten their research courses or never took them, engaging research is ultimately about a commitment to lifelong learning. A desire to learn and develop yourself is really the heart of the matter. A commitment to learning can begin by simply reading the introduction and discussion sections of articles, trusting that the editors of the journal ensured that the methodology met or exceeded research standards. However, a commitment to learning should also include taking steps, even small steps, to learn the different types of methodologies on a conceptual basis. You can begin by reading an overview of the methodology on Wikipedia or something similar, focusing on what the methodology accomplishes in layman's terms while casting aside formulas and jargon. With a little dedication, you will be surprised how much progress you can make in understanding research approaches.

Tyranny of the Urgent? Practice the First Fifteen.

If the current trend continues, the profession of student affairs will only become more demanding in the future, not less. This trend makes it all the more important to force yourself to think and reflect in ways that will develop your expertise as a scholar-practitioner. As Lis Dean (2010) stated, "Refreshing or renewing my knowledge through reading is one of the most tangible and easiest ways that I can connect scholarship to my practice at any point in time." But such practice takes discipline and the formation of good habits.

Charles Eliot, the renowned president who helped transform Harvard into a preeminent American research university and who edited *The Harvard Classics*, once famously said that "the faithful and considerate reading of these books . . . will give any man the essentials of a liberal education, even if he devote to them but fifteen minutes a day" ("Eliot Names Books"). There is something about 15 minutes that is short enough to actually implement and powerful enough to change us. Sample (2002) carved out 20 minutes a day while serving as president of USC. In a world of e-mail and smartphones, I find it vital to not only spend 15 minutes a day, but also to make it the first 15 minutes of my workday. Before I turn on my computer and check my e-mail, I set my timer and read. Although it started off as a struggle, it has now become a reflective, refreshing way to begin each day; and I am amazed at how much I read over time with such a short commitment.

Lack of Clear Purpose? Engage Research Topically.

The primary purpose of engaging research regularly as a student affairs professional is to develop your own

expertise so that you can develop better student outcomes. To best accomplish these goals, you might consider engaging research topically, as opposed to passively. Engaging research passively means that you read whatever comes your way, such as from journal subscriptions that are included in your professional association memberships. Although there is much to gain from such exploration, this approach may not help you in areas that are most relevant to your work. Therefore, I suggest a more active approach: engaging research topically. Begin by reading the research that feels most relevant and exciting to you. If you work in residence life, for example, use Google Scholar (www.scholar.google.com) to search for articles about residence life in general or specific subtopics within residence life. Among those, begin reading the one article that appeals to you most. As you read, pay attention to the citations in the article and the references at the end. Use those references to help you decide what to read next. Perhaps we sometimes do not feel that research has much relevance to practice because we do not actively find research that most relates to our particular practice. By engaging research topically, you will likely sense an immediate benefit from the 15 minutes you spend reading each day.

Cultural Discouragement? Begin a Reading Group.

The community surrounding us, and subsequent cultural expectations, affects our behavior more than we may realize. If the student affairs professionals surrounding you are not committed to regularly reading research and discussing its relevance to practice, you may feel discouraged from engaging it yourself. But you can reverse those cultural norms by initiating a reading group. An easy way to start is to assign certain professionals the job of reading and reviewing research at staff meetings (Jackson, Moneta, & Nelson, 2009). I have most benefited, however, from separate groups that meet once a month for the sole purpose of discussing the research they are reading or conducting. If you have a higher education or student affairs graduate program, you can also consider inviting a faculty member to participate (White, 2002). Having a meeting on your calendar and an expectation that everyone will come with something to share creates a certain measure of healthy accountability. It will also create a community of professionals who are jointly dedicated to reclaiming the "scholar" in scholar-practitioner.

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