Student Affairs Program Search

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We’re Looking for a Few Good Students: Careers in Student Affairs

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Introduction: The Field of Student Affairs

The field of student affairs includes broadly defined any activity that supports the academic goals of the institution outside of classroom instruction. Campus jobs include but are not limited to admissions, financial aid, housing, dining, judicial affairs, student organizations (including fraternities and sororities), career placement, academic advising, and alumni affairs. This short paper introduces you to the field of college student affairs, and provides some pointers about selecting a college student affairs graduate program. The information is not meant to be exhaustive, but should be representative of the experiences you will have as you determine to pursue graduate study in student affairs.

We will provide you with links to information about graduate programs in student affairs in the body of this paper. All you will need to do is click on the links provided to obtain useful information from the Internet.

We have provided you with selected “sound-bites” of information in the accompanying power point presentation from Taub & McEwen’s (2000) descriptive study of 300 masters candidates in college student affairs. The purpose of the study was to learn what college student affairs graduate students had done to select their program of graduate study. Three items were most important, (1) physical location of the graduate program in relation to the student’s home, (2) the work experience opportunities available for the student, and (3) the academic reputation of the graduate program. Students wanted to find a school relatively close to their home with a good reputation in the field of student affairs, where they could find a graduate assistantship to help defray the cost. Interestingly, one-half of these students looked at only one graduate program before they selected their institution.

Taub & McEwen (2000) noted that students did not consider the philosophy of the programs or the learning resources available as they made comparisons between graduate programs. Program philosophy and resource availability are extremely important (Ressor, 2000). To get a sense of the program philosophy, prospective students should ask the following: Is there a student-centered learning focus, or are faculty members more research-focused? In terms of the curriculum, does the program center on courses in counseling, an emphasis on administration in higher education, student
affairs administration specifically, or on issues of college student development? What emphasis is placed on restorative justice? Is the program housed in a department of educational administration, higher education, or counseling? Then, what sort of degree do you wish to earn, a Masters of Education with an emphasis in student affairs, or a Masters of Science within student affairs? These ideas all represent legitimate questions to ask faculty and campus student affairs staff members as you consider your own choices.

In this internet age, what learning resources are available to you on the campus? What are the library facilities? Are campus internet servers adequate for the traffic? Are classes offered face-to-face, enhanced with on-line supplementary materials, or are classes offered totally on-line? Are program faculty members easily available to students? What opportunities are there for professional socialization via faculty mentoring?

What are the strengths of the program you are considering? Is it well known for producing graduates in your field of interest, say, fraternity/sorority affairs? Do faculty members have an extensive experiential background in student affairs? What is the balance between the expectations of the graduate faculty members for academic coursework and the expectations of your graduate assistant supervisor for your experiential work role as a graduate assistant? Does a half-time assistantship really mean 20 hours per week, or are expectations nearer to that of a full time job? What are the characteristics of entering students, the characteristics of graduates, and the placement record of graduates? Do faculty members help students in the job search with mentoring, advice, and recommendations?

In the Taub & McEwen (2000) study, people who looked at more than one graduate program checked on the school’s and the program’s academic reputation and curricular emphasis, looked at more than one region of the USA, sought graduate assistantships, compared costs of attending, checked for affordable housing, and wanted a program with a higher number of credit hours (a two year program compared to a one-year program) meeting the standards of the Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS). They ultimately selected programs on the basis of geographic location, financial costs and benefits, and the attractiveness of the graduate assistantships and internships available on the campus or in the area.

Finding Information about Programs in Student Affairs

There are a number of websites where you can find quick, accurate information about graduate programs in college student affairs. Among them are the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA) and the American College Personnel Association (ACPA). Entirely on-line sources are studentaffairs.com and GradSchools.com. You can access links to both graduate program faculty and campus student affairs staff members. You will be able to request graduate catalogs from the graduate school office, college student affairs program brochures from the graduate faculty contact person, and begin your preliminary search for a graduate assistantship.
Be aware that application deadlines vary from campus to campus. It is best to start your search midway in the fall semester of your senior year. Many programs make their final admissions decisions in January of the year that students start their graduate work (usually in August or September). Still other programs wait until after the Oshkosh Placement Exchange, held on the first weekend in March every year, and then complete their own on-campus interviews. Often, graduate program faculty work closely with the student affairs staff on a campus that offers graduate assistantships, and admission is not offered unless a graduate assistantship is also offered to a candidate. Based on a 1997 Council of Graduate Schools resolution, students have until April 15 to accept an offer of a graduate assistantship.

How to prepare for admission to a Masters Program

There is no prerequisite undergraduate major for college student affairs. Students who earn a masters degree in student affairs come from all manner of undergraduate programs. Dr. Eberly’s undergraduate major is Chemistry and Mr. Sweeney’s major is communications. The unifying theme for most of us is what we did outside of class. We were all involved in student government, college activities, and worked on-campus. We all had an undergraduate GPA at or near 3.00, and we were involved in student leadership programs. The most important issue is not the specific undergraduate major, but that you do well academically in your major, have a record of leadership, and an interest in a career in college student affairs.

You can begin now to create a student resume of scholarship and individual accomplishments that will help you to get into graduate school. Maintain your grades and get involved in undergraduate leadership opportunities. Consider becoming a residence hall resident assistant, an admissions tour guide, an officer in campus clubs and organizations, volunteer for service learning activities, and/or get an on-campus job. The record of leadership that you develop with a high GPA will get you on the fast track, and more importantly, enable you to develop a network of campus faculty, staff, and administrators who can write very positive recommendations about your academic and leadership potential to graduate school admissions committees. The mentoring that you gain from these people will help you become a much stronger, knowledgeable candidate. These people will know a great deal about graduate programs in student affairs, and they will know you well enough to be very specific about responding to your questions and concerns. Finally, they will be able to help you create an outstanding resume, and they will know many of the people who teach in student affairs graduate programs across the country.

Getting The Search Underway

After you have surfed through the national websites listed above, follow up by going through campus websites that interest you and request print materials. Plan a road trip to one or several of the campuses and programs that interest you. Seeing the campus, visiting with student affairs program faculty members, and talking with some of the student affairs professionals who might be your supervisors as a graduate assistant is one
of the most helpful, valuable steps you can take in selecting the program best for you and your interests.

Put your best impression forward. Make appointments ahead of time, and be on time! Dress in a professional manner, bring copies of your resume’ with you, and plan on taking a tour of the campus both with and without guides. Bring your questions with you and do not hesitate to ask them. What you learn and observe about a campus on your own can be as valuable as anything that tour guides can tell you.

What are the degree and program requirements? Is it an M.A., M.S. Ed, or an M.S.? Is the program housed in a masters only (comprehensive) institution, or is there a doctoral degree offered in the same department? What is the attention paid to masters degree candidates compared to doctoral candidates? How many credit hours of work must be completed? What is the curriculum? Is there more than one curricular emphasis, such as student development or college counseling? Must you write a masters thesis, take a comprehensive examination over all your coursework, develop a professional portfolio, or complete a required number of credit hours to finish the degree? What are major papers and assignments like? Is there much opportunity to do work on-line? What about working on research with your professors? Do they share similar interests to yours? Finally, what placement assistance is provided when you are close to graduation and looking for your first professional position?

Of course, while you are interviewing faculty members and campus staff, they will be interviewing you. Plan on being asked a number of questions, such as your interests in being a graduate student in student affairs, your thoughts about multiculturalism and diversity, your undergraduate leadership experiences, your mentors who first got you interested in student affairs, and your self-assessment of your strengths and areas where you need further development with regard to academic, work initiative, and interpersonal skills in speaking and writing.

Interview both graduate program faculty members and with the professional staff members who have graduate assistantships available. As a consequence of the competition across campuses to hire exceptional graduate assistants in many student affairs service areas such as housing and student life, many potential graduate students hold the erroneous perception that the job is more important than the graduate program. Remember that your goal is to earn an academic degree, and that the graduate assistantship is a means of financial support. Now is the time to ask about the balance of graduate work and the amount of time that supervisors expect you to invest in your graduate assistantship. What are their expectations for performance as a university staff member? Remember, as a graduate assistant, you are no longer a student but a staff employee of the university. What are the work duties? Are they of a routine nature that would allow you to study at the same time? Or, are they varied in nature, and directly applicable to what you expect to do in a future professional role? What does the graduate assistantship pay compared to the costs for the degree? What are the on-campus or off-campus living accommodations? Is there space for your spouse or partner? Does the
campus accept non-related couples living together? Will they let you have a pet in on-campus facilities?

**Clues to a Good Fit**

The on-campus visit will enable you to secure the best clues to a good fit between you and your graduate school of choice. What were the face-to-face interviews with faculty members and staff like for you? Did you feel welcomed and encouraged? During your visits with students on the campus, did they seem friendly and proud of their campus and department environments? Were the interviews for a graduate assistantship encouraging? Did you feel well about how everything seemed to go? Hopefully, your responses will be in the affirmative, and you will be looking forward to your graduate school experience.

**References:**


**About the Speakers:**

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