Using History to Promote Reflection: A Model for Reframing Student Affairs Practice

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**Innovations in Research and Scholarship Feature**

**Using History to Promote Reflection: A Model for Reframing Student Affairs Practice**

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Though history has long been a part of graduate preparation in higher education administration, new student affairs professionals often struggle to see its relevance to their work. We present a conceptual framework that links organizational ecology, institutional culture and climate, and student development through a historical lens. We then provide concrete recommendations regarding the framework’s use as a reflexive tool.

Mentioning the history of higher education to most people in student affairs is likely to elicit foggy recollections of the Colonial Nine, the Yale Report, or the G.I. Bill. Thinking about institutional history is apt to spur thoughts of venerable campus buildings pictured on admissions websites, presidential portraits hanging in the library, or perhaps major athletic victories. History courses in student affairs preparation programs often focus on names and dates at the expense of application. History is too seldom discussed as a tool for making sense of present trends in higher education, daily work in an institution, and the lives of students.

History can be a useful tool for reflexive practice: We propose that considering the past—of higher education and student affairs, institutions, and even students—can help make meaning of student affairs work. We make the case for history by drawing upon some of the fundamental texts in the study of higher education and student affairs, and we point out that some of the major contributions to the field suggest that the past allows for a better understanding of the present. Historical knowledge is included in the *Professional Competency Areas for Student Affairs Practitioners* (ACPA & NASPA, 2010; hereafter, referenced as *Joint Statement*). Digging deeper, we explore the historical perspectives of the most salient organizational and student development theories applied in student affairs practice today. We also provide a conceptual framework for using history as a reflexive tool and some of the implications it offers for new and seasoned student affairs professionals.

**Making the Case for History**

History texts commonly used in student affairs graduate preparation programs assert the re-
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The relationship of history to our present practice, but these connections are usually made in the preface or introduction of the book, which readers may overlook. Authors advise readers that seemingly current events and emerging trends owe much to the events and practices that preceded them (Eisenmann, 2004). These works indicate that viewing higher education through a historical lens demonstrates that recent innovations developed over time—though this work is complicated by the paucity of resources that specifically attend to the history of student affairs (Caple, 1998; Wechsler, 1989). This historical lens permits the celebration of progress, while demanding accountability for the substantial work ahead for the student affairs profession, at institutions, and in individual student affairs practices.

Clark (1972, 2008) demonstrated that the study and application of history sharpens our understanding of institutions of higher education, both individually and as a system of higher education. Best known for introducing the notion of organizational saga as a way to explain how institutions of higher education work, Clark (1972) described saga as the compelling history or legend of an institution, developed over decades and rooted in a strong sense of institutional purpose and achievements, sometimes in the face of great odds. Clark argued that saga provides a context for understanding why institutions behave as they do and serves to connect individuals (i.e., staff, students, faculty) to their institutions—often in spite of disparate roles and beliefs. Together numerous different institutional sagas have forged the broader story of U.S. higher education, despite the various institutions and institutional types where we work in our finely differentiated system of higher education (Trow, 2000).

Clark (2008) also observed that each institution has its own “developmental flow” as programs, departments, and services are created and evolve over time. Using history as a reflexive tool, not simply as a way to learn what happened when, helps promote an understanding of how the developmental flow influenced institutions and their attendant structures, practices, and rules. We believe that even previously abandoned institutional structures and approaches to doing business affect current practice. Further, we argue that the collective organizational saga of higher education, viewed through a historical lens, provides student affairs professionals the perspective to understand the broader context of higher education. Institutional histories and the history of higher education written large are critically important for making sense of our institutions and our work as student affairs professionals.

The student affairs profession as a whole has utilized the past as a way of thinking about the principles that undergird it in the present. The Student Personnel Point of View (American Council on Education, 1937) outlined the roles and responsibilities of student affairs and continues to serve as a historical touchstone for the field. The recent 75th anniversary of this document provided an opportunity to examine current practices from the historical perspective of the Student Personnel Point of View, prompting reflection on how student affairs work and how the student experience has evolved over time (Worley & Wells-Dolan, 2012). The histories of students and student life on campus, the advent and expansion of administrative staff roles, and the evolution of faculty work within higher education shed considerable light on the conditions of each of these groups individually and the whole of higher education today (Thelin, 2011; Wechsler, 1989). Examining our history can yield a “professional transformation—from a workaday focus on the ‘what’ is provided to students to the broader professionalized perspective of ‘how’ we go about the work of student development in the services provided to students” (Worley & Wells-Dolan, 2012, p. 51). Reflection on the profession’s historical values connects quite clearly to the more contemporary discussions of both philosophies and competencies represented by documents like the Joint Statement (ACPA & NASPA, 2010) and Learning Reconsidered 2 (Keeling, 2006).
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Situating History as a Practice-Based Skill

The student affairs profession is overwhelmingly oriented toward practice. To the extent student affairs work requires foundational knowledge, that knowledge is inextricably linked to the operational details of the work itself. To more fully connect history to student affairs practice, we review literature on the definition of a competent student affairs professional, the philosophical basis of the profession, and an integrative model of theory-to-practice. Based on this review, we suggest that history can play a key role in reflexive practice.

The Toolkit of Student Affairs Professionals

Recent literature designed to assist in the socialization of graduate students and new professionals emphasizes the difficulty in defining a discrete knowledge base for the student affairs profession (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2010). While it is debatable that there was ever a definitive knowledge base for the profession (Love, 2012), competence in student affairs is now conceptualized as a disparate array of skills that function as a toolkit and which vary from individual to individual. A single knowledge base does not define the student affairs profession but instead the ability to process relevant information and adapt to new situations (Reason & Kimball, 2012). The most recent attempt to define good student affairs practice, the Joint Statement (ACPA & NASPA, 2010), is indicative of this trend.

The Joint Statement (ACPA & NASPA, 2010) articulated 10 competency areas that its creators thought were critical for good practice. The document noted that “student affairs professionals should be able to demonstrate their ability to meet the basic list of outcomes . . . regardless of how they entered the profession” and further stated that “if student affairs professionals desire to grow in a particular competency area, they can examine expected learning and skills in the intermediate and advanced levels” (ACPA & NASPA, 2010, p. 3). These competency areas combined both theoretical knowledge and practical skills, but overall, they were strongly weighted towards application. The document focused the ability of student affairs professionals to integrate the resources at their disposal into an adaptive framework—recalling Parker’s (1977) thoughts regarding the importance of a student affairs professional’s ability to “read” a situation and “flex” to respond.

Despite the document’s orientation toward the application of theoretical knowledge and practical skills, the Joint Statement’s “History, Philosophy, and Values” competency area articulated the importance of understanding the past as a foundation for present practice. Using the language of “connections” between current practice and past circumstances, the Joint Statement made the case that history serves as applied skill via a focus on explanation and exploration; however, the document left unclear exactly why this application is necessary save for the notion that “historical lessons” might reframe “future practice” (ACPA & NASPA, 2010).

Philosophies and Values of Student Affairs

In order for history to be useful in the reframing of practice, it must be aligned with the forms of knowledge the profession values. In their appraisal of the major philosophical statements on student affairs, Reason and Broido (2011) found that student affairs consistently emphasizes a holistic approach to students and embraces an individuated approach to practice. Student affairs practice must be guided by expert knowledge and organized into intentional strategy (Reason & Broido, 2011). In contrast to these approaches, history typically provides a macro-level analysis of society. Though history is an excellent way of capturing human stories, traditional approaches have a limited ability to capture variations from person-to-person. New approaches to history can capture the histories of groups of people [what we call “social history”], a nuanced understanding
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Shifting between these various approaches cultivates the ability to see multiple perspectives, which is crucial to the student affairs professional's ability to respond to the unique needs of each individual student. The multiple perspectives offered by history also encourage the integration of disparate forms of knowledge into a coherent narrative designed to guide practice—thereby fostering intentionality in practice. The development of multiple perspectives and the capacity to integrate knowledge into intentional strategies for practice are not easy skills to master. History is, therefore, best conceptualized as part of a holistic movement from abstract scholarly knowledge to concrete strategies for action.

Reason and Kimball (2012) on Theory-to-Practice

To facilitate the integration of the multiple toolkits that student affairs professionals might utilize in their professional lives, Reason and Kimball (2012) proposed a theory-to-practice model designed to connect scholarly knowledge with reflexive practice. To do so, they suggest that student affairs professionals should

1. begin with a consideration of relevant formal theories;
2. determine how a chosen theory (or theories) must be adapted to fit a specific institutional context;
3. consider how the revised theory aligns with their own values, beliefs, assumptions, and experiences—something that Parker (1977) calls informal theory; and
4. utilize their informal theories as the basis for developmental interventions at both the individual and group level.

The Reason and Kimball (2012) model provided a structured way to think about theory-to-practice conversions rather than a description of what does occur and suggested that good student affairs practice could be cultivated via the structured review of the outcomes of this process. Though Reason and Kimball suggested that the feedback loops associated with theory-to-practice conversions are related to reflexivity (for the link between practice and informal theory) and assessment (for the link between practice and institutional context), they were less clear about the substance of each process. While Reason and Kimball indicated that student affairs professionals must engage in reflexive practice and assessment, they did not clearly indicate how best to do so. We review the myriad ways that a contextual, historical approach underpins the student affairs practice and can, therefore, serve as the basis of reflexive practice.

Finding History in Theory

In a recent literature review, Duncheon and Tierney (2013) advanced the claim that scholars' understandings of educational processes are inextricably linked to the way time is conceptualized and further suggested that the way time is understood has changed with the introduction of digital learning environments. Time is only one small element of our use of narrative storytelling to make sense of the world around us (Dewey, 1938). By viewing narratives chronologically—possible only through the imposition of a temporal lens—the sequence of events becomes an integral part of narrative structure (Coulter & Smith, 2009). Sequence, in turn, helps us to make sense of the seeming chaos and randomness of the world in which we live, but it can also obscure the many possible interpretations and reinterpretations of our experiences (Bakhtin, 1986).

Gubrium and Holstein (2009) argued that we can attend to both the complexity of human
experience and the need to create logically sequenced narratives of that experience by viewing every narrative as connected to a larger system of storytelling and meaning-making. Based on this understanding, narratives derive a great deal of their meaning only in relationship to other narratives. Such an approach is inherently historical given history's temporal emphasis and desire to use the relationships between a series of events to explain a specific circumstance or social phenomenon (Mannheim, 1952).

While the narrative approach to understanding both higher education administration and student affairs work is well established (Reason, 2001), the historical basis of theories related to student affairs sometimes goes unacknowledged. Our review of literature on organizational ecology, learning and work environments, and student development reveals that history is a foundational element of student affairs work.

Organizational Ecology

As was described in the preceding section, the Joint Statement (ACPA & NASPA, 2010) articulated an understanding of the past as a key element of competency in “History, Philosophy, and Values.” The document indicated that at the most basic level a competent student affairs professional should be able to “articulate the historical contexts of institutional types and functional areas within higher education and student affairs” (ACPA & NASPA, 2010, p. 14). This approach is fundamentally consistent with an organizational ecology perspective.

Organizational ecology suggests the role that knowledge of the population field of all institutions in a given category—for example, home improvement stores, fast casual restaurants, or post-secondary institutions—plays in understanding the behavior of a specific institution (Hannan & Freeman, 1989). An organizational ecology approach prioritizes an examination of: the mechanics and frequency of new institutions and institutional types, influences that lead to changes in the relative positions of institutions within the population field, and changes in the frequency of or factors that lead to the elimination of institutions or institutional types (Hannan & Freeman, 1989). Given the overriding focus on both comparison and change, organizational ecology is rooted both in the narrative approach generally and the historical approach specifically.

Organizational ecology is also frequently reflected in higher education scholarship (e.g. Clark, 1978; Trow, 2000) that utilizes a historical orientation and a comparative analysis of various post-secondary institutions to elucidate important changes in the higher education system as a whole. The approach finds itself, more importantly, in major texts that are commonly used in masters- and doctoral-level courses in higher education and student affairs graduate programs. For example, Griffin and Hurtado (2011) provide a chapter describing the landscape of higher education institutions by looking at Carnegie type, mission, and populations served for the newest edition of Student Services.

Learning Environments

The Joint Statement (ACPA & NASPA, 2010) also emphasized the relationship between an understanding of history and the ability to understand the learning environments encountered by students. At the basic level, the Joint Statement indicated that student affairs professionals should be able to describe the “history of inclusion and exclusion of people with a variety of identities” (ACPA & NASPA, 2010, p. 14). Strange and Banning (2001) provided the most widely known synthesis of postsecondary learning environments. In their work, they suggested that the campus should be examined through the lenses of physical, human aggregate, organization, and constructed environments. Each of these elements is rooted in the history of a given campus:
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- The physical environment includes the facilities, overall campus design, and navigational aids present on campus. Each of these things represents the development of the campus over time—and thus a historical legacy (Turner, 1984).

- The human aggregate environment is comprised of the people present on a college campus. Structural diversity, a key element of the human aggregate environment, is a historical phenomenon with a significant influence on learning and development (Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pedersen, & Allen, 1998).

- The organizational environment relates to the way in which campus offices are organized and institutional policies are articulated. As we suggest in the subsequent section on work environments, the way that postsecondary institutions are organized reflects a variety of historical influences.

- The constructed environment includes the interaction of the physical, human aggregate, and organizational environments as community members make sense of higher education institutions. Such work is typically thought of through the lens of climate (Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pedersen, & Allen, 1998; Rankin & Reason, 2008) and culture (Kuh & Whitt, 1988; Tierney, 1988)—each of which is viewed as having contemporary relevance based upon past institutional sensemaking.

These environments, taken together, represent the spaces on campus where learning and development occur. Those spaces owe both their existence and contemporary form to their unique historical development.

Work Environments

Just as learning environments impact student experience, the student affairs work environments shape practice. The Joint Statement (ACPA & NASPA, 2010) acknowledged this fact when it asked advanced professionals to “identify other countries’ history and development of student affairs practice” (p. 15) and intermediate professionals to “explain how today’s practice is informed by historical context” (p. 15). The importance of context is discussed in two different ways in relevant literature: first, there are approaches that focus on culture; second, the more substantial body of work explores student affairs by functional areas. In our view, both culture and functional areas are historically determined.

Scholars have long acknowledged the importance of culture to student affairs work (Kuh & Whitt, 1988; Tierney, 1988). Not only is culture tangibly manifested via things like mission statements, orientation processes, and the decisions institutional actors make about physical spaces and organizational processes (Tierney, 1988), it also plays a key role in shaping institutional climate (Rankin & Reason, 2008). Given that culture is depicted in each of these works as a form of institutional memory, the cultural framing of the work environment requires an appreciation of the remembered past through the lens of the present. As such, culture is an intrinsically historical construct.

As with culture, the role that history plays in mediating work environments is evident in the treatment of the functional areas of student affairs. A textbook that is commonly used to train new student affairs professionals—Rentz’s Student Affairs: Practice in Higher Education (Zhang, 2011)—reviewed major functional areas such as advising, career services, multicultural affairs, residence life, and student activities. In an older edition of Student Services, Dungy (2003) described additional, more specialized areas including assessment, athletics, service learning, dining, Greek life, leadership programs, LGBT student services, and women’s centers. Recent trends might also lead to the focus on student affairs practice in areas like veterans student services and technology (DiRamio,
Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2008; Gemmill & Peterson, 2006). No student affairs division includes every possible functional area since organizations vary in the specific alignment of, and even what comprises, student affairs work. Decisions about the presence, absence, or alternate reporting of a given function are based on a variety of historical factors.

**Student Development**

Knowledge of theories related to learning and development is its own area of competency in the *Joint Statement* (ACPA & NASPA, 2010) and also an implicit part of the competency related to “History, Philosophy, and Values.” At the advanced level, for example, the *Joint Statement* (ACPA & NASPA, 2010) suggested that student affairs professionals should be able to “actively apply historical lessons to one’s future practice” and “engage staff in critically examining history for contemporary meaning” (p. 17). This emphasis makes sense given historical thinking undergirds many major developmental approaches.

Lewin (1936) defined the interactionist approach as the relationship between a person and the environment and indicated that its focus is on the resultant behavior. Developmental approaches to human–environment interactions add a temporal element by suggesting that the way that a person interacts with an environment will change—and typically grow more complex—over time (Evans et al., 2010). Consequently, student affairs professionals are using a form of historical reasoning when conceptualizing the lived experiences of an individual student by examining the way they progress in the affective domains [as in psychosocial development], process ethical decisions in increasingly sophisticated ways [as in moral development], use meaning-making processes to hone their sense of self and social relationships [as in identity development], or define knowledge differently over time [as in cognitive development].

A student’s life history and the history of the environments that they encounter are an explicit part of ecological development theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). As reframed by Renn and Arnold (2003), ecological development theory is uniquely useful for understanding postsecondary learning environments because it can take into account the impact of both higher education and nonhigher education contexts on an individual student. By viewing a student’s experience systemically, ecological development theory also asks higher education professionals to take a wide view of social history. To accomplish this task, ecological development theory requires student affairs professionals to understand an “individual’s own developmental life course” as situated within “the historical period through which the person lives” (Bronfenbrenner, 1995, p. 641). Ecological development theory also demonstrates the importance of a broader view of social history in addition to a focus on an individual’s life history.

**A Conceptual Model of History as a Reflexive Tool**

From the preceding sections, it is clear that history should be conceptualized as a useful skill in practice and further that history is an integral part of many theories that student affairs professionals utilize. Even following this discussion, it remains unclear how exactly one would use history in their daily work. We suggest that history’s value to student affairs professionals stems from its ability to serve as a (re)framing device. History allows student affairs professionals to see the present differently through the lens of the past. Studying history allows student affairs professionals to learn things about themselves, the places they work, and the way the world is structured that could be missed if focused only on the contemporary world. When investigating topics relevant to today through the lens of the past, badly needed cultural distance is created. That space, in turn, allows questions about why things are the way they are and whether things might be done differently.
Using history as a tool for (re)framing contemporary practice requires that student affairs professionals proceed in a relatively structured manner to ensure the cognitive frameworks that guide practice are examined and expanded. By calling attention to formal theory, institutional context, and informal theory, Reason and Kimball (2012) suggested the incorporation of an analysis of trends and patterns [formal theory], a careful consideration of local issues [institutional context], and a sensitivity to individual meaning-making and experience [informal theory] into theory-to-practice conversions. We believe that history becomes a valuable reflexive tool through the study of overall patterns via an examination of social history, local context via institutional history, and individual variations via a student’s life histories. Student affairs work takes place in a specific socio-historical context, and by acknowledging that context, a more useful cognitive framework for thinking about and reflecting upon student affairs practice is created.

We position our model as a response to and expansion of Reason and Kimball (2012). Given their similar approaches, the overarching conceptual model that we propose for the use of history as a reflexive tool aligns well with Reason and Kimball’s (2012) theory-to-practice model. Figure 1 indicates how these two models overlap:

*Figure 1. A conceptual model of history as a reflexive tool.*

At the level of social history, we suggest that it is important to consider the broad social trends, movements, and processes that impact the experience of students on college and university campuses. This suggestion is consistent with social history’s long-running interest in ordinary people and everyday life. At the level of institutional history, we suggest that a nuanced understanding of how a college or university developed over time is integral both to a full understanding of the broader history of higher education and to understanding the contemporary reality encountered at that specific institution. Finally, we believe that, to the extent that a student’s life experiences constitute the raw materials from which learning and development are made, consideration of a student’s life history can produce a more nuanced approach to developmental interventions.

Our model also differs from the work of Reason and Kimball (2012) in important ways. Whereas Reason and Kimball were interested in the question of how theory might influence practice, we do not believe that history directly influences student affairs practice. We regard student affairs practice as historically situated, and consequently, we believe that history functions as a useful reflexive tool. History can serve as a mechanism for the reflexivity called for by the feedback loops described in the broader discussion of the Reason and Kimball model provided in an earlier section. History does not have feedback loops of its own: the past does not self-correct, but people can use it to help shape the future in positive ways.
Our model for reflexive practice is based on Schön’s (1983) distinction between reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action. Reflection-in-action refers to the sort of formative assessments of self, others, and environment that will be useful during the performance of a specific task. Reflection-in-action takes place in the moment; is immediately useful; and tends to represent a more superficial form of reflection than reflection-on-action, which occurs retrospectively. Reflection-on-action takes place following the performance of a specific task and is designed to help produce new knowledge that will be useful the next time a similar situation is encountered. We model the way that student affairs professionals might use their understanding of history to recalibrate their student affairs practice via reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action in Figure 2.

Figure 2. A process model for the use of history as a reflexive tool.

As can be seen in the process model, we suggest that all student affairs professionals bring a unique cognitive map to their work that they use to interpret the situations they encounter. Those interpretive frames are utilized to address specific situations. Each of these situations represents a novel interpretive context since student affairs professionals will vary in their level of knowledge of the individuals, environment, and process in the specific situation. The student affairs professional will likely need to reconcile their interpretive frame with the interpretive context to which they would like to apply it.

We suggest that social history, institutional history, and the life histories of students can function as useful (re)framing devices. The attempt to do so in the moment of application represents reflection-in-action. Once that application is done, a student affairs professional can assess the relative success or failure of a given intervention to gain new knowledge. Reflecting on the experience after the fact is a form of reflection-on-action and is designed to produce a new, synthesized understanding of student experience and/or the specific event encountered. Social history, institutional history, and the life histories of students can function as useful (re)framing devices. The new understanding produced from reflection-on-action can fundamentally alter the student affairs professional’s interpretive frame—providing a new starting point for future encounters.

Implications for The Use of History

The model we describe above has several important implications for student affairs professionals. As was the case with Reason and Kimball’s (2012) model of theory-to-practice conversions, it is intended as a way of structuring thinking about the role that history plays in our practices rather than a normative model of what should or does happen. We present recommendations related
to the way that individual student affairs professionals can use the model in the course of daily practice, as a tool for reflective practice, as the basis for new understanding of the staff and faculty orientation process, and as the foundation for a history-focused scholarship of student affairs.

Using the Model to (Re)Frame Interactions Between Students and Professionals

The model we describe can be used to structure reflection-in-action during the daily work of student affairs professionals. This activity is closely akin to mindfulness and can function as a way of ensuring that every interaction with a student is treated as unique. Student affairs professionals often do their best work by routinizing common responses and drawing upon previously learned repertoires for action, but doing so by rote promotes implicit theory (Bensimon, 2007)—a form of stereotype that ought to be avoided. As existing repertoires for action are used, they must be interrogated to ensure that they represent a deliberate, strategic choice. Asking the sorts of questions raised by our model—What societal trends are relevant to the contemporary conditions of this institution and the situation at hand? What is the unique history of this institution, and how must it inform my practice? What do I know about the past experiences of this student?—can assist student affairs professionals in assessing whether the default or current strategy being employed is really the right one.

Using the Model to Reflect on Practice

Reflection is frequently used as a process to integrate and make meaning of learning as part of student affairs graduate preparation programs, but the practice may be squeezed out by the press of daily obligations and interruptions once on the job. We suggest revisiting or developing this habit of mind in the workplace and incorporating relevant social history, institutional history, and life histories of students. Just as the model we describe can be used to engage in reflection-in-action, it can also be used as a tool for guiding reflection-on-action. Using the model to guide reflection-on-action requires that the student affairs professionals spend time periodically auditing what they know—formal theory in Reason and Kimball (2012)—and what they believe—informal theory in Reason and Kimball (2012). Not only does this process lead to better information that can be potentially used in reflection-in-action, it also requires that student affairs professionals attend to the differences between the knowledge they possess and the assumptions they find useful. Auditing what is unassailable truth rather than simply pragmatic understanding assists in remaining open to potentially divergent information.

Using the Model as the Basis for Faculty and Staff Orientation

Our model demonstrates that institutional memory matters. It is sometimes easy to forget that fact given the hectic pace of student affairs work. New professionals sometimes seem to move on so quickly that they are barely trained before they are gone. Mid-level and senior-level student affairs professionals can sometimes seem as though they will remain at an institution forever. Neither observation is completely true: as Clark’s (1972) writing on the organizational saga demonstrated, institutions change rapidly—though that change can be hard to detect from within. We have a vested interest in introducing new members of the institutional community to the way that we use our remembrance of the past to frame our narratives about the present and the future. Though institutions sometimes proactively share information related to campus customs and culture—and indeed this information is critical—a historical understanding asks us to share more. Those who orient new professionals often require them to undertake this work on their own—meeting with senior colleagues or those in their extended network. Our model suggests that instead the onus for
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this work should be on the institution and that time must be reserved during transition. Doing so intentionally requires that an institution proactively identify the stewards of institutional history from whom new participants will learn.

Connecting new student affairs members to important historical information can be facilitated by explicitly attending to history during the orientation process. An institution can demonstrate the role that history plays in creating institutional memory, how the organization has internalized and learned from its history, and how history informs current practice. Using a reflexive model also ensures that the information received through the historical orientation process will be viewed critically rather than passively accepted. This conception of history requires that we manage the departure process intentionally as well. When a seasoned professional leaves an organization, both their skills and their knowledge can be lost. Much of that knowledge is a hard-won understanding of institutional history. Capturing all of that knowledge will never be possible, but it might be possible to pass some of it on through mentoring and the creation of transition manuals that go beyond the description of process to provide more of the departing professional’s understanding of the organizational saga.

The Need for New Forms of Historical Works

We have noted that connections between history and practice in existing historical texts are often overlooked. One implication of our model is that historical literature that makes these connections explicit would be more useful to graduate students and new professionals. U.S. higher education has often foreshadowed nascent national social movements; as a result, a social justice history of higher education stands to be both informative and to complement the core values of the field. The field as a whole would benefit from a comprehensive history of student affairs similar in scope and detail to Thelin (2011). A thorough scholarly treatment of student affairs history is warranted so we may know the historical saga of our profession. Any history of student affairs must also emphasize the experiences of individual students, which could provide a rich way to understand the postsecondary experience over time.

Using the Model to Inform Student Affairs Scholarship

Due to its grounding in the day-to-day work of student affairs professionals, this model can serve as a useful tool for determining what historical knowledge would be beneficial to student affairs professionals. For novice historical researchers, it can serve as the basis for organizing thinking about the sort of historical events—that is, information about the intersection of broader social narratives, institutional histories, and student experiences—to which the profession has responded. For more experienced historical researchers, our model suggests the importance of making connections to the critical issues that student affairs professionals confront on a daily basis.

Conclusion

We have advanced the argument that history matters to student affairs professionals in ways and to a degree that we often fail to conceptualize. From an analysis of the Joint Statement (ACPA & NASPA, 2010), history is viewed as a key part of professional competence—in part because it enables student affairs professionals to better understand the origins of the profession and in part because it has direct applicability as well. We also suggest that history can be a useful tool in making theory-to-practice conversions and demonstrate that part of the reason why it can perform this role is because history is implicated in many of our theories. History is implicated in the study of
organizational ecology, learning environments, work environments, and even student development. We would thus argue that thinking historically reaps rich benefits for student affairs professionals.

Some student affairs professionals find historical thinking uncomfortable and would struggle to use the history in theory-to-practice conversions. We provide an overview of how history aligns with Reason and Kimball’s (2012) theory-to-practice model before proposing a model that demonstrates how history can be used to assist in reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action (Schön, 1983). We conclude with a series of concrete recommendations for how the model can be used to: reframe student-professional interactions, guide reflection on practice, rethink the orientation process, and inform scholarship.

Our goal was to reframe literature on theory-to-practice conversions to focus on the importance of professional reflexivity and the need to honor the lived experiences of the students with whom we work. Our model also serves as a way to ground the study of history in student affairs practice so that those who are not historically-inclined might come to see its relevance to their work. We do not intend our work to capture the present approach to history in student affairs practice but instead to provide a mechanism for ensuring it truly is regarded as a core competency for student affairs professionals.

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