The development, validity, and reliability of a psychometric instrument measuring competencies in student affairs

Rishi Sriram, Baylor University

Available at: https://works.bepress.com/rishi_sriram/23/
As student affairs evolves as a profession, scholars place increasing attention on studying the profession itself in addition to studying the students the profession serves (Herdlein, Riefler, & Mrowka, 2013; Lovell & Kosten, 2000). The call to study the profession dates as far back as 1937 in the original Student Personnel Point of View, in order to “satisfy the growing demand for current authoritative information about the student personnel field” (American Council on Education [ACE], p. 47). In the second version published in 1949, the authors emphasized improving the quality of practice through the tools and techniques of science. “Without such a stress upon critical and experimental self-study,” they note, “student personnel work will deteriorate into ritual observance which yields little assistance to growing students” (ACE, p. 12).

Scholars generally agree that student affairs supports the academic mission of the institution by providing services, programs, and environments primarily outside the classroom that promote learning and development in college students (Dalton & Crosby, 2011; Porterfield, Roper, & Whitt, 2011; Sandeen, 2011). Student affairs administrators once needed little more than counseling skills in order to be effective, but essential responsibilities now include administration, management, supervision, and scholarly practice (Cuyjet, Longwell-Grice, & Molina, 2009; Lovell & Kosten, 2000). In fact, the list of demands placed upon student affairs administrators continually grows (Fifolt, Solomon, & Owens, 2010; Porterfield, Roper, & Whitt, 2011).

To guide the complex work of student affairs, professional associations developed several documents that outline key knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed for successful practice. Examples of these pivotal documents include A Perspective on Student Affairs (NASPA, 1989), The...
Measuring Competencies

Student Learning Imperative (ACPA, 1994), Principles of Good Practice for Student Affairs (ACPA & NASPA, 1997), Learning Reconsidered (Keeling, 2004), the CAS Professional Standards for Higher Education (1979/2006), and the ASK Standards (ACPA, 2006). Recently, ACPA–College Student Educators International (ACPA) and NASPA–Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education (NASPA) commissioned two task forces to lay a foundation for “expanding the definition of student affairs work and focusing on ways that enable all who work with students to do so more effectively” (2010, p. 8). The board of directors for ACPA and NASPA endorsed a joint publication entitled, Professional Competency Areas for Student Affairs Practitioners (2010). This document identified 10 competencies that define the professional knowledge, skills, and attitudes expected of student affairs professionals regardless of their area of specialization or specific role within the profession.

The 10 competencies—subdivided into categories of basic, intermediate, and advanced—provide student affairs professionals with the ability to increase awareness of strengths and areas of needed development. The competencies include: (a) advising and helping; (b) assessment, evaluation, and research; (c) equity, diversity, and inclusion; (d) ethical professional practice; (e) history, philosophy, and values; (f) human and organizational resources; (g) law, policy, and governance; (h) leadership; (i) personal foundations; and (j) student learning and development. These competencies represent a significant step forward for the profession because they are a synthesis of decades of research and provide specific areas of focus for professionals. Studies on competencies in student affairs professionals exist, but surprisingly little research attempts to psychometrically assess the extent to which student affairs professionals meet these competencies (Herdlein et al., 2013). Experts in the profession developed the initial list of competencies using previous research, but extant research does not attempt to validate them. An appropriate next step is to measure these competencies in professionals. Only then will scholars, practitioners, and professional associations know where to focus professional developmental efforts to improve the profession. This study developed and tested a psychometric (measurement of psychological constructs) instrument designed to measure student affairs competencies.

Conceptual Framework

The Joint Task Force on Professional Competencies and Standards and the subsequent document, Professional Competency Areas for Student Affairs Practitioners (2010) guide my framework for this study. After conducting a review of related literature, members of the task force identified and broadly defined 10 competencies with the associated knowledge, skills, and attitudes that correspond with basic, intermediate, and advanced levels of mastery. Levels of mastery are cumulative (intermediate mastery assumes basic mastery as well) and do not necessarily correspond to years of experience or job title. All student affairs professionals, regardless of how they entered the profession, should demonstrate at least basic mastery (ACPA & NASPA, 2010).

In addition to the competencies, the theoretical framework outlined in this study also draws from the work of Carpenter and Stimpson (2007). These scholars synthesize literature on professionalism in student affairs and discuss and defend student affairs as a profession. They argue for the intentionality of practice as a challenge to intuition, the common use of peer review as a challenge to individual isolation, consultation as a challenge to competition, and professional accountability as a challenge to standards (Carpenter & Stimpson, 2007). The designation of a profession requires that members share goals, develop a community of support, define boundaries for regeneration, and reach consensus on preparation and career development.

The current study is predicated on the ideas that competencies do exist, they are measurable,
they are relatively stable without intervention, and yet are malleable enough to be improved with intervention. These ideas are supported, at least in part, by previous research on student affairs competencies.

**Review of Research on Student Affairs Competencies**

Research during the last four decades had two general focuses: (a) broadly identifying student affairs competency areas or (b) specifically measuring only one competency or only one administrative level (e.g., new professionals). These studies led to the identification of the 10 competencies published by ACPA and NASPA (2010) and serve as a foundation for new research to measure a broad array of student affairs competencies.

Scholars began advocating for and examining competencies in the student affairs profession in the early 1970s. This foundational scholarship encouraged a shift in both graduate education and professional practice from course-centered approaches and status-based relationships to a paradigm based on competency and collaboration (Crookston, 1972; Newton & Hellenga, 1974). In early research, practitioners considered competencies related to mature interpersonal relationships between staff of primary importance, while areas such as multicultural competence and change-agent competencies received the lowest ratings (Newton & Richardson, 1976). Subsequent research emphasized the importance of interpersonal, programmatic, and leadership competence, but disregarded the importance of multicultural competence or research skills (Ostroth, 1981).

In their synthesis of the student affairs competency research prior to 2000, Lovell and Kosten (2000) concluded that the most important competency themes were administration, management, human facilitation, student development theory, functional responsibilities, personal integrity, and cooperation. Since 2000, Herdlein and colleagues (2013) discovered a new emphasis on multicultural competence and research skills. Despite publications such as *Powerful Partnerships* (AAHE, ACPA, & NASPA, 1998), *Learning Reconsidered* (Keeling, 2004), and Cook & Lewis’s work (2007), collaboration with academic affairs remains an important competency area not found in either meta-analysis.

**Competency Research by Position Level**

One way to analyze recent literature on student affairs competencies is based on the level of student affairs administration studied: entry-level professionals, midlevel managers, or senior student affairs officers (SSAOs). A majority of the literature on student affairs competencies focuses on new professionals and their transition from graduate programs to full-time professional work (Herdlein, 2004; Kretovics, 2002; Kuk, Cobb, & Forrest, 2007; Renn & Hodges, 2007). Kretovics (2002) found that helping skills and assistantship experience were rated as highly important by administrators for potential candidates during job interviews, while research skills and counseling were relatively unimportant. Herdlein (2004) analyzed new professionals through the perspectives of SSAOs and found that they were satisfied with the preparation of entry-level professionals in areas such as student development theory and understanding human differences, but remained unsatisfied in new professionals’ legal knowledge, administrative skills, and research skills.

Substantial overlap exists between the views of SSAOs and faculty for entry-level competencies, but faculty perceive a greater gap in new professionals’ knowledge of diversity issues and commitment to social justice, while SSAOs emphasize gaps in using data and applying theory in practice (Dickerson et al., 2011). Faculty also perceive administrative skills, goal setting, and managing organizations as having a lesser level of importance when compared to the perceptions of midlevel managers and SSAOs (Burkard, Cole, Ott, & Stoflet, 2005; Kuk et al., 2007). From his
Measuring Competencies

sample of 430 professionals on 28 different competencies, Waple (2006) found adequate graduate preparation for 14 competencies and inadequate preparation for three competencies: supervision of staff, strategic planning, and budget and fiscal management.

While not as extensive as the research on new professionals and their competencies, some older research does exist on the competencies of midlevel and senior-level administrators. When SSAOs are hiring midlevel managers, SSAOs primarily look for leadership, the ability to work well with students, and communication skills. Research and evaluation is least important (Gordon, Strode, & Mann, 1993; Saunders & Cooper, 1999). Fey and Carpenter (1996) found similar results when asking midlevel managers themselves about their needed competencies. When college presidents hire SSAOs, personal and interpersonal competencies are most important, along with the ability to motivate others and resolve conflicts (Randall & Globetti, 1992). No recent research exists on midlevel and senior-level administrative competence, and none of the extant studies attempt to measure competence at these higher levels of administration.

Competency Research by Specific Areas

Scholars also examined student affairs competencies by focusing on specific competency areas, but such research is scant. Pope and Reynolds (1997) present the argument for the importance of multicultural competence, especially as campuses become increasingly diverse. Castellanos, Gloria, Mayorga, and Salas (2007) empirically tested Pope and Reynolds’ model with student affairs professionals, demonstrating that three multicultural domain subscales—awareness, knowledge, and skills—were internally consistent measurements. Other specific competency areas identified in research include helping competence (Reynolds, 2011) and global competence (Bresciani, 2008).

A Need for a Psychometrically Sound Instrument for Competencies

Despite more than 40 years of research on student affairs competencies, there remains an important and surprisingly large gap in the literature related to the broad measure of competence for all levels of the student affairs profession. Much of the previous research used the Delphi method—a robust method for identifying competencies through multiple rounds of surveys administered to the same sample. The purpose of the Delphi method is identification, and these studies do not attempt to measure the actual competency levels of the professionals examined. Waple (2006), Castellanos et al. (2007), and Kuk et al.’s (2007) research attempts to measure competency levels, but these studies are limited by either focusing on one administrative level of the profession or one competency. No scholar attempts to measure a broad spectrum of competency areas like those later listed by ACPA and NASPA (2010) for the profession as a whole. Scholars make a call for such measurement (Burkard et al., 2005; Herdlein, 2004; Herdlein et al., 2013), and the purpose of this study is to fill this gap in the literature.

Purpose and Significance

My purpose in this study was to develop a way to measure the competencies of student affairs professionals for professional awareness and development in a manner that meets standards of educational and psychological measurement (AERA, APA, & NCME, 1999). This study presents the development of the National Survey of Student Affairs Professionals (NSSAP). The NSSAP examines competencies on a national level with relatively large samples in order to make inferences to the larger student affairs population in the United States. Specifically, the following research questions guided this study:
Measuring Competencies

1. Is there validity in a psychometric instrument designed to measure student affairs professionals' competencies?
2. Is there reliability in the instrument, leading to a level of measurement accuracy that is above an acceptable threshold in social science research?
3. How do student affairs professionals rate their competence in the different competency areas?

Methods

This study explains the development of the NSSAP and analyzes its ability to measure the competencies of student affairs professionals. Porter’s (2011) concerns regarding issues of validity in higher education quantitative research and Kane’s (1992, 2001) argument-based approach to validity led to the consideration of several factors in the development of this instrument. These factors included the overall approach to measuring competence, the instrument development model employed, the structure of the instrument, and content validity. I conducted construct validity and reliability analyses in order to analyze the NSSAP’s ability to measure competencies.

Overall Approach to Measuring Competence

Several methods to measure professional competencies exist, such as an outside researcher observing professionals in practice, a supervisor commenting on the level of progress of staff members, an exam-based instrument that tests knowledge, or a survey instrument relying on self-reports. All methods pose advantages and limitations, but the NSSAP utilizes self-reports based upon the premise that no other individual or test can measure professionals in all competencies better than the professionals themselves. Because research on survey instruments used in higher education indicates that people do a poor job recollecting and accurately reporting behaviors (Porter, 2011), the items of the NSSAP mostly focus on perceived knowledge, perceived skills, and attitudes rather than specific behaviors and actions that are difficult to report accurately.

Instrument Development Model

The NSSAP was developed within the guidance of the classical measurement model, which purports that scale items are comparable indicators and indirect measurements of an underlying latent variable (Deville’s, 2012). For the NSSAP, each competency and subscale corresponds to a unique latent variable (e.g., advising and helping). When developing an instrument, it is important to consider the cognitive processes required for participants to respond accurately. Tourangeau, Rips, and Rasinski (2000) provide the cognitive model used in developing the NSSAP: the Comprehension-Retrieval-Judgment-Response model. This model reasons that responders must understand the questions and link them to relevant concepts (comprehension), retrieve specific and generic memories (retrieval), draw inferences based on accessibility (judgment), and map the judgment onto the response category (response).

Structure of the Instrument

The NSSAP consists of 122 items representing 13 scales. Items used a Likert-type six-point scale that ranged from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Ten of these scales mirrored the 10 competencies published by ACPA and NASPA (2010). One additional scale measured a competency related to collaboration with academic affairs. Although not part of the original 10 competencies, collaboration with academic affairs was a competency found repeatedly in the review of the literature on student affairs practice (Cook & Lewis, 2007; Keeling, 2004; AAHE, ACPA, NASPA,
Measuring Competencies

Two other scales attempted to measure perceptions of institutional culture, with one scale focusing on how much the institutional culture promotes research engagement and another scale addressing how much the institutional culture promotes student and academic affairs collaborations. The inclusion of these scales allows for future studies to examine the interplay between institutional culture and individual competence. Future research can determine the influence that a culture promoting research engagement has upon the research competency. Table 1 provides an overview of the instrument.

Content Validity

For content validity, item development began by a close examination of the literature. I designed items to represent knowledge, skills, and attitudes of each competency, as identified by ACPA and NASPA (2010). I administered a draft of the NSSAP to a focus group of eight student affairs professionals. Using convenience sampling, the focus group consisted of student affairs professionals who worked on a single campus, but members were selected to represent graduate programs and previous workplaces from across the United States and Canada. The focus group had two African American professionals, one Latina professional, and five European American professionals. Five members were female and three were male. One had a Ph.D. in higher education, one had a Ph.D. in another field, and six had masters degrees in higher education or student affairs. Participants had graduate degrees from institutions in California, Canada, Illinois, Kansas, Michigan, Missouri, Nebraska, Ohio, and Texas. Specializations included multicultural affairs, campus recreation, student activities, orientation, leadership development, residence life, student and academic affairs collaborations, and student affairs assessment.

I administered the survey to members of the focus group and asked them to discuss any items they found confusing, curious, or otherwise imperfect. Two senior student affairs administrators from two other institutions reviewed the items and provided feedback. The feedback affirmed the content of the items and focused primarily on item clarity and word choice. I revised the items based on feedback from both the focus group and the two external reviewers.

Participants

I administered the NSSAP to a sample of 2,049 student affairs professionals from nine different institutions. I chose these institutions because they (a) represented different regions of the United States, (b) were research institutions, (c) were a mix of public and private institutions, and (d) had graduate programs in higher education or student affairs. I targeted research institutions with graduate programs in higher education or student affairs based on the premise that those institutions would most likely seek to hire entry-level professionals with masters degrees in a related field and that those institutions would offer a culture that promoted competency development. Other studies selected such institutions for similar reasons (Herdlein, 2004). I received 564 initial responses, leading to a response rate of 27.5%. The actual sample size varies from 278 to 378 responses with usable data depending upon the subscale analyzed.

I included demographic items at the end of the instrument, resulting in some participants responding to scale items but not providing demographic information. My known sample included 204 females (69.2%), 90 males (30.5%), and 1 participant who selected other gender identity. The following ethnic and/or racial groups were represented: European American (N = 229, 77.6%), African American (N = 33, 11.2%), Latino/a (N = 14, 4.7%), multiracial (N = 7, 2.4%), Asian (N = 6, 2%), other (N = 5, 1.7%), and Native American (N = 1). Highest level of education for participants was as follows: high school (5, 1.7%), associates (3, 1%), bachelors (50, 17%), masters (183,
Table 1

Overview of the National Survey of Student Affairs Professionals

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Latent Variable / Competency</th>
<th>Original # of Items in NSSAP</th>
<th>Sample Item 1</th>
<th>Sample Item 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Advising &amp; Helping</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>I can identify all patterns of behavior in students that signal mental health concerns.</td>
<td>I have the skills necessary to resolve conflicts that arise between students.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assessment, Evaluation, &amp; Research*</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Remaining current with research pertaining to higher education or student affairs is important to me.</td>
<td>I feel like I have very good research skills.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collaboration With Academic Affairs**</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>I know how to build relationships with faculty members on my campus.</td>
<td>In my job, I have modified an existing program in order to increase faculty involvement.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equity, Diversity, &amp; Inclusion</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>I know where my campus fails to be inclusive.</td>
<td>Advocating for diversity is important in the student affairs profession.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethical Professional Practice</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>I can articulate my personal ethical framework or code of ethics.</td>
<td>I can identify all ethical issues that arise in my job.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>History, Philosophy, &amp; Values</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>I can articulate the foundational philosophies on which student affairs is built.</td>
<td>I can articulate current principles or competencies that guide student affairs practice.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Human &amp; Organizational Resources</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>I am confident in my ability to supervise staff in a way that brings out their best.</td>
<td>I know how to handle a complex budget.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Law, Policy, &amp; Governance</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>I can articulate the policies and procedures to follow when a difficult legal issue arises in my work.</td>
<td>I am confident in my ability to develop institutional policies or practices that comply with laws pertaining to higher education.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>When problems arise, I can imagine creative, unexplored possibilities for solutions.</td>
<td>I know how to motivate others toward a vision.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Foundations</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Reflection is a vital part of my development.</td>
<td>I always quickly resolve incongruences between my personal life and professional life.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Learning &amp; Development</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>I can explain student development theory to different audiences.</td>
<td>I can think of a recent example of when I applied student development theory in my work.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institutional Culture: Collaboration**</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>My institution has successful programs that involve academic/student affairs collaborations.</td>
<td>It is easy to get senior administrative support for academic and student affairs collaboration.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institutional Culture: Research**</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Discussion about research pertaining to higher education or student affairs occurs in meetings with my supervisor.</td>
<td>Remaining current with research pertaining to higher education or student affairs is an expectation of my job.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Includes items from another survey on research engagement (Sriram & Oster, 2012)
** Indicates a latent construct that is not part of the 10 competencies outlined by ACPA and NASPA
Measuring Competencies

62.2%), and terminal degree (53, 18%). Current level of position was as follows: graduate student (24, 8.2%), entry-level professional (65, 22.1%), midlevel manager (127, 43.2%), director (53, 18%), dean or SSAO (16, 5.4%), or other (9, 3.1%). The mean age was 39.17 years ($SD = 12.46$), the mean years working in higher education was 12.89 ($SD = 10.11$), and 146 participants had a graduate degree in higher education or student affairs.

Construct Validity

To determine construct validity for these 13 initial scales, I conducted a principal components analysis using SPSS. I used pairwise deletion and orthogonal rotation. I concluded appropriate model fit by analyzing the Kaiser-Meyer-Olin measure of sampling adequacy (KMO = .845), Bartlett’s Test ($p < .001$), and communalities (majority were above .6).

Limitations

Before reporting and interpreting results, some limitations to this study should be highlighted. Survey fatigue was an issue for responses, which is to be expected for a 122-item instrument. Participant responses were higher for the scales located earlier in the survey and lower for the scales located at the end of the survey. Another limitation is the use of self-reports. The NSSAP measures perceived knowledge, perceived skills, and attitudes. Self-reporting allows the student affairs professional to honestly evaluate his or her own level of competence, but response bias can influence self-reporting. To address possible bias, all responses were anonymous, I offered no rewards or punishments for responses of any type, and I offered no incentives in an attempt to boost response rates. In terms of generalizability, all of the student affairs professionals in this sample worked in research institutions. I selected this sample in order to increase the likelihood of participants who possess masters degrees in a related field (Herdlein, 2004). Hirt (2006) noted that student affairs professionals at different campuses are not the same, and scholars and practitioners should use caution when generalizing these findings to other professionals. Future research can determine if competencies vary depending upon institutional type.

Results

I conducted principal components analysis with varimax rotation to determine the underlying structures of items in the NSSAP. The analysis produced an initial 28-factor solution. Evaluations based on eigenvalues, scree plot analysis, total variance explained, model fit, and reliability of the construct indicated a 15-factor solution as most appropriate. All of the original 10 competencies espoused by ACPA and NASPA (2010) had construct validity except for personal foundations. The assessment, evaluation, and research competency items split into three unique factors. Similarly, the equity, diversity, and inclusion competency items split into two factors. The collaboration with academic affairs competency and the two scales analyzing institutional culture demonstrated construct validity, resulting in a total of 15 factors retained (see Table 2). The 122-item instrument reduced to 95 items that measure 13 unique competencies, as well as two latent constructs related to institutional culture. In assessing reliability, all 15 subscales exceeded the standard threshold of a Cronbach’s alpha of .70 (DeVellis, 2012).

An analysis of the participants’ mean response scores and standard deviations of each competency unveiled areas of strength and weakness. For the 13 competency areas (excluding the two scales regarding institutional culture), Table 3 shows the top four competencies for student affairs professionals, the middle four competencies, and the competencies with the lowest relative means.
Table 2  
**Factors and Results From Principal Components Analysis**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor</th>
<th># of Items</th>
<th>Eigenvalue</th>
<th>% of Variance</th>
<th>Cumulative %</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Cronbach's alpha</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Research Skills</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>9.34</td>
<td>7.66</td>
<td>7.66</td>
<td>4.29</td>
<td>0.29</td>
<td>0.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Learning &amp; Development</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6.45</td>
<td>5.29</td>
<td>12.95</td>
<td>4.50</td>
<td>0.32</td>
<td>0.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Human &amp; Organizational Resources</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6.01</td>
<td>4.92</td>
<td>17.87</td>
<td>4.77</td>
<td>0.38</td>
<td>0.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>History, Philosophy, &amp; Values</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>5.26</td>
<td>4.31</td>
<td>22.18</td>
<td>4.45</td>
<td>0.48</td>
<td>0.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Law, Policy, &amp; Governance</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4.50</td>
<td>3.69</td>
<td>25.87</td>
<td>4.34</td>
<td>0.47</td>
<td>0.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Values</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4.15</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>29.27</td>
<td>4.36</td>
<td>0.18</td>
<td>0.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institutional Culture: Research</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4.13</td>
<td>3.39</td>
<td>32.66</td>
<td>3.38</td>
<td>0.28</td>
<td>0.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Behaviors</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3.82</td>
<td>3.13</td>
<td>35.79</td>
<td>2.65</td>
<td>0.58</td>
<td>0.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collaboration With Academic Affairs</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3.80</td>
<td>3.11</td>
<td>38.9</td>
<td>4.11</td>
<td>0.41</td>
<td>0.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethical Professional Practice</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3.65</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>41.9</td>
<td>5.16</td>
<td>0.23</td>
<td>0.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equity, Diversity, &amp; Inclusion Skills</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3.39</td>
<td>2.78</td>
<td>44.68</td>
<td>4.79</td>
<td>0.26</td>
<td>0.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equity, Diversity, &amp; Inclusion Attitudes</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3.28</td>
<td>2.69</td>
<td>47.37</td>
<td>5.48</td>
<td>0.14</td>
<td>0.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institutional Culture: Collaboration</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2.66</td>
<td>2.18</td>
<td>49.55</td>
<td>4.32</td>
<td>0.62</td>
<td>0.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advising &amp; Helping</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2.63</td>
<td>2.16</td>
<td>51.71</td>
<td>4.83</td>
<td>0.64</td>
<td>0.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2.24</td>
<td>1.84</td>
<td>53.55</td>
<td>5.00</td>
<td>0.19</td>
<td>0.80</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Measuring Competencies

Scholars have studied competencies in student affairs professionals for more than four decades. With ACPA and NASPA’s (2010) publication of 10 specific competencies for the profession, it is perhaps now more important than ever to examine and measure the competencies of professionals. The purpose of this study was to develop a psychometrically sound instrument to measure the competencies of student affairs professionals. Results demonstrate that the NSSAP has content validity, construct validity, and reliability.

### Discussion

One of the most critical discoveries from this study is that the competencies espoused by ACPA and NASPA (2010) can be measured in a valid and reliable manner. Most competencies appropriately integrate knowledge, skills, and attitudes, but this study shows that two of the com-

### Implications for Theory

Table 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Competency</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Strongest Competencies</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equity, Diversity, &amp; Inclusion Attitudes</td>
<td>5.48</td>
<td>0.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethical Professional Practice</td>
<td>5.16</td>
<td>0.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership</td>
<td>5.00</td>
<td>0.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advising &amp; Helping</td>
<td>4.83</td>
<td>0.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Middle Competencies</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equity, Diversity, &amp; Inclusion Skills</td>
<td>4.79</td>
<td>0.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Human &amp; Organizational Resources</td>
<td>4.77</td>
<td>0.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Learning &amp; Development</td>
<td>4.50</td>
<td>0.32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>History, Philosophy, &amp; Values</td>
<td>4.45</td>
<td>0.48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Weakest Competencies</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Values</td>
<td>4.36</td>
<td>0.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Law, Policy, &amp; Governance</td>
<td>4.34</td>
<td>0.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Skills</td>
<td>4.29</td>
<td>0.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collaboration With Academic Affairs</td>
<td>4.11</td>
<td>0.41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Behaviors</td>
<td>2.65</td>
<td>0.58</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
petencies should be further divided based on these subcategories. As suggested by other scholars (Sriram & Oster, 2012), a research competency is more validly categorized as three competencies: research skills, research behaviors, and research values. Results, also, indicate that attitudes pertaining to equity, diversity, and inclusion are a separate construct from skills related to equity, diversity, and inclusion, a finding that aligns with previous research (Castellanos et al., 2007; Pope & Reynolds, 1997). Collaboration with academic affairs, added as an additional competency based on the review of the literature, also demonstrated construct validity. The Joint Task Force states that the initial listing of competencies is an evolving document (ACPA, 2010). Future editions should consider: (a) dividing assessment, evaluation, and research into the three competencies of research behaviors, skills, and values; (b) dividing equity, diversity, and inclusion into two competencies reflecting skills and attitudes separately; and (c) adding collaboration with academic affairs as a competency.

Personal foundations was the only original competency that did not show construct validity. This competency is defined as the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to “maintain emotional, physical, social, environmental, relational, spiritual, and intellectual wellness; be self-directed and self-reflective. . . .” (ACPA & NASPA, 2010, p. 24). Perhaps this competency attempts to capture too many latent constructs that may or may not be related. Items attempting to capture these variables did not correlate enough to demonstrate they measured the same construct. In light of this finding, scholar-practitioners should reexamine the personal foundations competency. Personal foundations may comprise multiple competencies, or should be thought of more as a thread rather than a competency. ACPA & NASPA (2010) identify technology, sustainability, and globalism as threads woven throughout the competency areas, and personal foundations could be conceptualized as an additional thread.

Many scholars study institutional culture in higher education on a broad level, but less research exists about institutional culture and its influence on specific outcomes pertaining to student affairs (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt, 2005; Kuk, Banning, & Amey, 2010). In the current study, two scales validly and reliably measured how well the culture of an institution encourages practitioners to use research and how well the culture promotes student and academic affairs collaborations. Although current scholarship addresses the importance of engaging research as a student affairs professional and the need for student and academic affairs to collaborate on programs and services, scholars had not previously developed a way to measure the degree to which institutions promote these constructs. These scales can help future research examine the influence of institutional culture on two key issues for student affairs practice.

Implications for Current Practice

At its core, the conversation surrounding competency is driven by the desire of student affairs professionals to become better scholar-practitioners for the sake of improving the student experience. An interest in competencies stems from an interest in understanding excellence in the profession (Carpenter & Stimpson, 2007). In order to improve competencies in professionals, scholars and practitioners must have a valid and reliable way to measure them. This study yields an instrument that helps accomplish that goal. On the aggregate level, this instrument can assess the strengths and weaknesses of entire divisions of student affairs, leading to the initiation of professional development opportunities that capitalize on strengths or that improve areas of weakness. This instrument can also measure competencies on the individual level if the purpose is only for self-reflection and the results are kept private, only shared in aggregate, or shared in an environment where professionals feel safe to be vulnerable. If professionals know their individual results will be shared, conclusions could be invalid because of response bias. On a national level, professional associations can use this instrument to determine the strengths and weaknesses of their
measuring competencies

members, thereby allowing them to plan conferences and developmental opportunities accordingly. Graduate preparatory programs can administer this instrument outside of graded courses in order to assess graduate curriculum and the resulting progress of students before, during, and after graduate school.

Descriptively, the mean scores for the competencies highlight strengths and weaknesses for professionals at research institutions. Regarding competency strengths, equity, diversity, and inclusion attitudes was the highest competency; but equity, diversity, and inclusion skills was much lower. Ethics in practice, leadership, and helping competencies were also areas of strength, and campus administrators can ensure that they take full advantage of these strengths. Student affairs professionals are well suited to be the kind of ethical leaders that higher education institutions need in a complex, resource-sensitive environment.

Research values, research skills, and research behaviors were all in the bottom five competency scores. This finding is alarming, but it also aligns with previous research related to the research competency (Herdlein, 2004; Kretovics, 2002; Ostroth, 1981; Sriram & Oster, 2012). In an age of accountability, research is becoming increasingly important for student affairs professionals (Hoffman & Bresciani, 2010); but their values, skills, and behaviors remain at unacceptable levels. Collaboration skills also had one of the lowest mean scores. As institutions attempt to achieve goals with fewer resources, collaboration between student and academic affairs becomes increasingly important (Kezar & Lester, 2009). These areas of weakness can be improved with focused attention from graduate preparatory programs and professional associations.

Analysis of the specific sample may explain some of the results regarding competency strengths and weaknesses. With 30% of the sample representing new professionals and graduate students, and almost 75% of the sample at midlevel position level or below, it makes some sense that the weakest competencies included law, policy, and governance and collaboration with academic affairs. Furthermore, given the education level of participants, with only 20% of the sample having a terminal degree, the weak competency levels in the research related areas might not be surprising, depending upon what is expected from masters degrees in terms of development of the research competence.

A key question regarding competencies is how they fit into the conversation about certification in student affairs (Stoller, 2012). Scholars advocate the need for certification (Burkard et al., 2005; Carpenter, 2001; Carpenter & Stimpson, 2007), but there is also controversy on the issue (Grasgreen, 2012). ACPA recently appointed a team to create and implement a student affairs register and a specialized skill certification (ACPA, 2012). This team will face the difficult question of what competencies are needed for certification and how such competency is demonstrated. The instrument validated in this study would lose validity in the context of certification because the reward of getting certified would cause bias in the self-reports. This instrument could be utilized for the purpose of examining how those individuals who get certification compare to those without certification on an anonymous, aggregate level.

Implications for Future Research

An important implication of this study is how scholars can utilize this instrument for ongoing research on student affairs professionals and their competencies. Future research can and should use methods such as structural equation modeling with new samples in order to improve the instrument, shorten it, and develop and test theories and models to better understand competencies in the profession. Such studies can also test whether this instrument is a valid measurement for student affairs professionals at all types of institutions.
Measuring Competencies

Future research can address what measurements correspond to the conceptual levels of basic, intermediate, and advanced mastery. One particularly interesting question for future research is whether there are differences in competency areas between divisions of student affairs on individual campuses. If so, researchers can explore whether those differences stem solely from the type of people hired, or if there are divisions of student affairs that offer highly effective ways to develop their professionals. Beyond the scope of this instrument, future studies can use multiple research methodologies to answer important questions that remain in the profession. These questions pertain to how to improve competence in an area and the effects of education and experience upon competence.

Conclusion

The previous research on student affairs professionals and their competencies served a critical purpose for the profession. Presently, surveys identifying important competencies or collecting general opinions about the competency levels of other professionals is insufficient to advance the profession. This study builds upon previous research by measuring student affairs competencies in a valid and reliable manner. Results from this study generally affirm the competencies espoused by ACPA and NASPA (2010), while also suggesting ways in which these competencies can be further refined. Collaboration with academic affairs should be added to the list of competencies based upon this study and previous research. The assessment, evaluation, and research competency should be three competencies: research values, research skills, and research behaviors. While most competencies correctly incorporate knowledge, skills, and attitudes into a single construct; the equity, diversity, and inclusion competency should be split into two competencies—one specifically targeting attitudes and one comprising skills. The personal foundations competency should be reexamined and potentially reconceptualized as an overarching thread that extends throughout all the competencies. This study represents a step toward accurate measurement of competencies; but measurement is a means, not an end. Scholars and scholar-practitioners should use the measurement of competencies in order to improve the profession for the benefit of college students.

References


Measuring Competencies


