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**A Survey of Senior Student Affairs Officer Perceptions of the Role of Politics in Student  
Affairs Administration**

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*Knowledge of political issues is vital to successful practice yet there is a paucity of research on this dynamic in student affairs. The study was intended to provide information relevant to the preparation of new professionals and help practitioners negotiate the political dimensions of their work. A national survey of senior student affairs officers provided quantitative and qualitative data critical to the search for meaning in this important facet of administration. The*

*findings provided clear evidence of the pervasive role of politics in policy and decision making, the need to understand the political nature of student affairs at all levels of administration and identified major sources of political activity.*

The role of politics in student affairs administration is a little understood phenomenon in higher education yet important to successful practice and the preparation of new professionals. Research on the general topic has been limited and the last comprehensive analysis of the political dimension of student affairs was published more than 20 years ago (Moore, 1991). A survey and manuscript including important data on politics and its relationship to the senior student affairs officer was completed in 1993 but remains unpublished (Moore, Bosma & Moore, 1993).

In order to enhance understanding of this important dynamic, a national survey of senior student affairs officers (SSAOs) holding the title of vice president for student affairs (VPSAs) was conducted to provide both quantitative and qualitative data critical to the search for meaning on the widespread or ubiquitous role of politics in student affairs administration. Renn and Jessup-Anger (2008) noted in their research on the preparation needs of new professionals: “As new professionals’ understanding of cultural norms developed, many noted the pervasive role of politics in their organizations. The political nature of student affairs surprised and dismayed many new professionals” (p. 326). Providing relevant data for the preparation of graduate students in student affairs administration and insights for practitioners involved in intentional professional development provided motivation for pursuing this investigation.

A plausible definition of institutional politics might refer to activities or strategies to use power in order to influence outcomes involving personnel, budget and a host of managerial and

administrative decisions. Politics is most obvious when there is lack of consensus about various options, inconsistent goals, resource scarcity, decentralized decision making and when academic institutions operate in a collegial fashion (Pfeffer, 1992). Understanding that work in an organization with democratic characteristics necessitates acknowledgement of politics as an operational methodology, helps one to realize that political behavior in American institutions including the division of student affairs is not uncommon. Realizing the relationship between politics and shared decision making helps to mitigate perceptions, stereotypes and misunderstandings that exist within the profession.

Key factors in a political system involve power, differing preferences, conflict, influence, coalitions, negotiation and compromise. Various types of power include coercive, reward, expert, referent, and legitimate power with expert power being critically important for the student affairs professional (Moore, 2000). The relationship of politics to the operation of individual institutions may be quite different depending on the history, tradition and organizational culture and could be affected by bureaucratic, collegial, rational or political decision making or a combination of several models (Baldrige, Curtis, Ecker, & Riley, 2000). It is also important to note that various aspects of collegiate institutions may operate quite differently, some with largely bureaucratic structures such as general administration and others with more decentralized decision making such as faculty. Institutional size is also an important factor related to the role of politics as discussed by Birnbaum (1988) and Smith (1991). Thus it is important to apply knowledge about politics appropriately to the particular circumstances of each academic institution.

Having knowledge and skills related to politics in student affairs administration has not been a natural consequence of preparation for the field since opportunities to directly investigate this issue have been limited in graduate programs, the literature, and required competencies of

the field (McLendon, 2003). Despite this obscurity in student affairs, the influence of politics can be seen in virtually every part of our society. Therefore, political behavior within an educational organization should come as no surprise. Politics transcend through interdependent collegiate departments including the division of student affairs. As organizational units of student services grew and developed, administrative and management structures emerged and a political role developed (Newman & Carpenter, 1993; Sandeen & Barr, 2006). The purpose of this study was to provide data on an important dynamic in student affairs administration by raising awareness of political activity, sources and conditions for political behavior and the level of significance for graduate students, new professionals, middle managers and senior officers.

### **Literature Review**

A review of related literature revealed little information regarding senior student affairs officers' perceptions of the role of politics in student affairs administration. However, several themes related to the general role of politics in business organizations, higher education, and student affairs administration emerged. These themes included: the development and management of political organizations, political dimensions of student affairs and the results of political activity on student affairs personnel and organizations.

#### **Development of Political Organizations**

A body of literature developed over the past four decades on the topic of organizational development and management theory. Eventually, the role of politics and power emerged as major issues within the general context of managerial psychology and the study of organizations (Bacharach & Lawler, 1981; Bolman & Deal, 1984; Fairholm, 2009; Gilley, 2006; Hornstein, 2003; Kotter, 1985; Krackhardt, 1990; Leavitt, Pondy & Boje, 1988; Mintzberg, 2007; Pettigrew, 1973; Pfeffer, 1992; Walumbwa, 1999). Further research investigated the relationship between

higher education and political entities (macro politics) including federal and state government that play an important role in funding and accountability (Balderson, 1995; Bush, 2003; Gelber, 2001; Nicholson-Crotty & Meier, 2003; Ruppert, 1996). Additional discussion focused on the internal workings of the university (micro politics) and the important role of power and influence (Baldrige, 1971; Baldrige, et al., 2000; Gittell & Kleiman, 2000; Pfeffer & Moore, 1980; Salancik & Pfeffer, 1974; Walker, 2002).

### **Political Dimensions of Student Affairs and Results of Political Activity**

Most of the literature on politics in higher education concerned general discussions of the application of politics to organizational management. A number of sources included implications for student affairs professionals (Appleton, Briggs, & Rhatigan, 1978; Sandeen, 1991; Young, 1990) and several provided more specific information on the evolution of student affairs and the need to become more organized and intentional by development of a political culture (Hadley, 1999; Newman & Carpenter, 1993).

The most complete and definitive work found on the topic of politics in student affairs administration defined and analyzed the various dimensions of political activity and behavior including values, ethical issues, working with the president and senior administrators, role of the middle manager and challenges for women and African Americans (Moore, 1991). Based on this research, it was suggested that power is an essential tool of decision-making and is utilized through effective leaders, such as senior student affairs officers. Rowley, Lujan and Dolence (1997) indicated that politics influences power and may lead to conflict when expectations of professional roles do not interconnect with those of the general administration. In addition, negative politics and conflict of individual interests could generate consternation within a department or division of student affairs.

A recent quantitative study conducted by Boehman (2007) found that student affairs professionals believed organizational politics to have a negative correlation with employee commitment and viewed political activity as a sign of miscommunication, distrust, and a decline in the team concept. It was also reported that student affairs professionals felt that political activity reduced affective commitment to the organization. Although some research (Boehman, 2007; Renn & Jessup-Anger, 2008) indicated negative feelings toward the politicization of student affairs by practitioners, Rowley et al. (1997) and Kretovics (2011) also noted the positive contributions of politics and determined that political behavior helps to control resources and change, accomplish goals, and is integral to the process of strategic planning.

Lack of research on the role of politics in student affairs administration and differing views on the results of political activity necessitated additional investigation on a relevant topic. The current survey intended to assess and make meaning of this phenomenon since politics will likely remain a significant influence in higher education administration. It was important to gather evidence of VPSAs perceptions in order to gain a lucid picture of how political realities influence student affairs. To facilitate an understanding of these issues, the survey of politics pursued the following research questions:

- What are the general perceptions of VPSAs relative to the role of politics in student affairs administration?
- What are the nature and sources of political activity on individual campuses served by VPSAs?
- What is the importance of political knowledge for each level of student affairs administration?
- How important is knowledge of political activity for new professionals?

- What are the most effective sources of political training for new professionals?
- Can student affairs practitioners be successful without adjusting to political realities?

## **Method**

### **Participants**

The participants consisted of 125 VPSAs listed in the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA) Directory. NASPA provided a systematic sample of every ninth entry out of a population of 1125 members with the title vice president for student affairs. VPSAs were selected as the sample population since they are a group of individuals with the same characteristic as opposed to including other senior officers that may function from differing vantage points (Creswell, 2008). Systematic sampling was used and sample size determined in order to ensure the do-ability of the study (Jones, Torres & Arminio, 2006, p. 2). Contact information for three individuals was not available due to transitions in the position leaving a total of 122 potential participants. Individuals receiving the survey were asked to complete the instrument within a 15 day period. Three follow-up electronic surveys spaced at three week intervals were also distributed to obtain results from non-respondents. This resulted in a total of 47 completed instruments. A mail-out survey was fully completed by 11 individuals resulting in a total of 58 and a response rate of 47.5%.

Table 1 indicates the percentage of participants by ethnicity, age, gender, institutional type, student affairs and VPSA experience and years teaching in a graduate preparation program. Demographic information included an equal number of female and male participants, over 25% persons of color, more than 66% had less than 11 years.

More than half the respondents had experience teaching in a student affairs master's program.

Institutional types included private liberal arts and comprehensives, private and public research universities, public comprehensives and community colleges.

Table 1

*Percent of Participants by Ethnicity, Age, Gender, Institutional Type, Experience, Years as VPSA, and Years of Graduate Preparation Program Teaching*

		%			%
Ethnicity:	African American	20.3	Student Affairs Experience:	1-10	1.7
	Caucasian	74.6		11-20	20.7
	Latino/a	5.1		21-25	19.0
		26-30		20.7	
				31+	37.9
Age:	35-40	8.9	Years as VPSA:	1-5	25.4
	46-55	46.4		6-10	40.7
	56-59	17.9		11-15	22.0
	60+	26.8		16-25	10.2
				26	1.7
Gender:	Female	50.0	Teaching in Grad Program	N/A	48.2
	Male	50.0		1-5	30.4
Institution:	Private Liberal Arts	19.0		6-10	10.7
	Private Research	15.5		11-20	10.7
	Public Comp.	34.5		21+	0.0
	Public Research	24.1			
	Community College	5.2			
Private Comp.	1.7				

## Procedure

The authors of the study had both unsettled questions and a compelling interest in the general topic of politics in student affairs administration thus motivating an investigation of VPSAs opinions. Past experience had led to the belief that it is important to gain understanding from those directly experiencing the phenomenon under consideration. This constructivist view, linked with hermeneutic phenomenology or the science of interpretation, formed the theoretical perspective of the study (Jones et al., 2006, p. 18; van Manen, 1997). In a mixed-method approach, both quantitative and qualitative methodologies were used to investigate the relationship between politics and the administrative environment of student affairs.



A self-designed instrument using SurveyMonkey.com was selected as the primary means of contacting potential respondents and included a series of 5-point Likert scale surveys totaling 42 statements. One anecdotal question was included to provide rich, thick description, and capture the perceptions of student affairs leaders on a topic listed in *Professional Practice: Leadership and Management/Administration, Political Landscape*, (American College Personnel Association [ACPA], 2007).

Summary data in the form of percentages and frequencies were provided by SurveyMonkey.com while additional data was analyzed through the use of the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) providing descriptive and inferential statistics including the Pearson Correlation Coefficient. Anecdotal responses were analyzed by multiple authors using the constant comparison method and permission to survey human subjects was approved by the local Institutional Review Board.

In order to reduce limitations of the current research, a number of initiatives were pursued to minimize potential response bias. A pilot test was administered to five VPSAs prior to the electronic survey and suggestions were included in the final document to insure content validity (Creswell, 2008). A six-step procedure was used including an introductory email announcing the research study, sending four electronic surveys at three week intervals, and forwarding a mail-out version to all VPSAs identified as non-respondents. Other steps in survey implementation included ensuring that the problem was of significant interest to the population, constructing a brief instrument capable of being completed in less than 10 minutes and providing an incentive.

Wave analysis involved a check for response bias by monitoring the returns and comparing four interval groups to see if the responses changed (Creswell, 2008). The four on-

line Likert scale surveys demonstrated remarkable consistency and when compared to the mail-out version, the Pearson Correlation (.712) was significant at the .01 level. In addition, demographic statistics between electronic and mail-out surveys were almost identical.

## Results

### General Perceptions of VPSAs

The survey included a series of statements regarding the general perceptions of vice presidents' relative to politics in student affairs/higher education. The results identified in Table 2 indicate strong and consistent opinions that politics plays a major role in the administration/management of colleges and universities in the United States. Most of the statements reflected a response rate of over 90% either *agreeing* or *strongly agreeing* that politics is a major issue and pervasive phenomenon in the academy.

Identifying decision makers and the informal power structure reflected uniform agreement, and knowledge of political power and behavior were also nearly unanimous. Over 96% of the respondents agreed that not employing politics is to participate in student affairs without a full range of resources especially in times of uncertainty and downsizing.

Table 2

*VPSAs Perceptions of Politics in Student Affairs/Higher Education by Mean, SD and Percent of Agreement*

Survey Statements	Mean	SD	Percent Agree/ Strongly Agree
Colleges and universities are political organizations	4.58	.565	96.5
Politics in higher education are inevitable	4.54	.537	98.2
Political behavior influences or determines policy and direction	4.42	.565	96.5
Constituencies attempt to enhance their ability to influence policy/events	4.33	.539	98.2
Not employing politics is to engage student affairs without full range of resources	4.61	.572	96.4
Conflict/politics intensifies when establishing priorities, goals, allocating resources	4.54	.537	98.2
Individual needs/expectations must be related to organizational objectives	4.21	.750	84.2
Power is the ability to influence change	4.19	.639	87.7
Power comes from having expertise, coalitions, credibility and positive history	4.46	.757	92.9
During economic uncertainty/downsizing, political skills can save resources	4.42	.731	89.5
Student affairs administrators must play a role in shaping the political process	4.47	.630	93.0
Identifying decision makers and informal power structure is critical	4.60	.469	100.0

*Note:* Participants responded on a Likert scale: 5 (strongly agree); 4 (agree); 3 (neutral); 2 (disagree); 1 (strongly disagree).

## Political Activity

VPSAs were also asked to respond to a series of statements concerning political activity; over 91% agreed that the political environment was active on their respective campuses. Table 3 indicates less unanimity on a range of issues including the sources of political behavior involving budgetary, staff and student, and interpersonal issues. Budgetary issues and resource allocation had the highest mean as almost 72% agreed about the political nature of these activities. The statement concerning stress had the greatest difference in responses as participants reported varying degrees of stress related to political activity. There was broad agreement that political activity intensifies with the level of responsibility from entry level to middle management to senior level officer.

Table 3

*Rating of the Affects of Political Activity, Environment, Involvement, Stress, and Focus of Political Activity on Their Own Campus by VPSAs*

Survey Statements	Mean	SD	Percent Agree/ Strongly Agree
It is important to initiate political activity that affects resource allocation	3.86	.854	73.7
It is important to initiate political activity that affects institutional direction	3.89	.838	70.2
The political environment is active on my campus	4.32	.631	91.3
I am personally involved in campus politics	4.14	.718	87.7
I experience stress related to political activity	3.77	1.02	68.5
Political activity is centered around budgetary issues	3.86	.895	71.9
Political activity is centered on staff and student issues	3.63	.837	57.9
Political activity on campus is centered on interpersonal issues	3.51	.848	54.4
Political activity in student affairs intensifies with level of responsibility	4.14	.854	80.7

*Note:* Participants responded on a Likert scale: 5 (strongly agree); 4 (agree); 3 (neutral); 2 (disagree); 1 (strongly disagree).

## Sources of Political Activity/Time Commitment

In a series of specific statements considering the sources of political activity and how they affect the VPSA, the survey included five categories rated between 5 – very stressful and 1 – always positive. A review of Table 4 indicates that 57.4% of the respondents found interactions with the president, academic and business vice presidents to be *very stressful* or *stressful*.

Political activity emanating from the faculty was found to be *stressful* by 63% of the respondents with students and parents having a much lower percentage rating. In terms of work time committed to managing the political environment, 20% noted that politics consumes between 50% and 71% of their time while 3.5% reported spending over 71% in dealing with politically based issues. The majority of VPSAs (65.4%) reported spending between 11% and 50% of their time managing politics on their campuses.

Table 4

*Reporting of VPSA Sources of Political Activity and Affect, and Time Spent Managing the Political Environment*

<b>Reporting of Sources of Political Activity and Affect by Percent of VPSAs</b>					
Category	Very Stressful 5	Stressful 4	Neutral 3	Not Stressful 2	Always Positive 1
President	24.1	33.3	13.0	22.2	7.4
Academic V.P	24.1	33.3	16.7	18.5	7.4
Business V.P	24.1	33.3	22.2	14.8	5.6
Faculty	13.0	50.0	27.8	9.3	0.0
Students	3.7	31.5	38.9	22.2	3.7
Parents	1.9	34.0	35.8	28.3	0.0

  

<b>Percent of Time Spent Managing the Political Environment Reported by Percent of VPSAs</b>	
Percent of Time	Percent of VPASs
1-10	10.9
11-20	34.5
21-50	30.9
51-70	20.0
More than 71	3.6

Respondents were also asked to indicate how frequently they initiate political activities intended to affect institutional direction and resource allocation. As listed in Table 5, almost 62% reported they *frequently* initiate political activities intended to steer the direction of major campus initiatives. Less than 2% indicated never employing this strategy in their managerial style. An additional statement regarding sources of political activity was offered to survey subjects. Budget issues (90.7%), activities related to the president’s council (79.9%) and interpersonal relations (57.4%) were reported to be considerable sources of political activity with

staff and students a more occasional factor. When asked to rate the importance of having political knowledge and skills for each level of management, more than 94% of the respondents indicated that political knowledge and skills were either *essential* or *very important* for both VPSAs and SSAOs. For mid-level management, political knowledge and skills were at least *important* (100%) for each practitioner while over 64% rated these at least *important* for new practitioners. Another 35.8% indicated that political awareness was at least *helpful* for entry-level staff.

Table 5

*Reporting of Initiating Strategic Political Activities, Sources of Political Activity, and Importance of Political Knowledge and Skills by Student Affairs Administrative Level by VPSAs*

*Frequency of VPSA Initiating Strategic Political Activities Intended to Influence Institutional Direction and Resource Allocation*

Frequently	61.8%
Occasionally	36.4%
Never	1.8%

*VPSAs Rating the Sources of Political Activity on Home Campus*

	Always 5	Frequently 4	Occasionally 3	Seldom 2	Never 1
Interpersonal Relations	14.8	42.6	33.3	9.3	0.0
Budget Issues	40.7	50.0	11.1	0.0	0.0
President's Council	25.9	54.0	16.7	1.9	0.0
Staff	3.7	27.8	55.6	11.1	0.0
Students	1.9	29.6	57.0	11.1	0.0

*Rating the Importance of Political Knowledge and Skill for Each Level of Student Affairs Administration*

	Essential 5	Very Important 4	Important 3	Helpful 2	Not Important 1
VPSA	83.6	14.5	1.8	0.0	0.0
SSAO	47.0	47.0	5.9	0.0	0.0
Mid-Level Management	14.5	47.3	38.2	0.0	0.0
Entry Level Professional	5.7	13.2	45.3	35.8	0.0

## Politics and New Professionals

In a series of statements focused on entry-level staff at individual campuses, more than 65% of the VPSAs agreed that political activity affects new professionals and over 85% considered politics an important topic for graduate preparation programs. Table 6 also indicates

that 89.2% of respondents found a strong relationship between career satisfaction and knowledge of the institutions political landscape. Building alliances (94.6%), awareness of different types of political power (87.3%), and determining who has power at an institution (70.9%) were determined to be important activities for new professionals. Learning about institutional politics through the case study method (80%) was seen as an effective method for preparing entry level staff. Other methods including guided practice and trial and error were considered the only viable method of informing new staff by 41.9% of the respondents.

Table 6

*Exposure, Importance, Understanding, Experience and Graduate Preparation Program Preparations, for Political Activities on Campus as Reported by VPSAs*

Survey Statements	Mean	SD	Percent Agree/ Strongly Agree
Entry level staff experience political activity on your campus	3.56	.788	65.4
Politics is an important topic for graduate preparation programs	4.20	.678	85.4
Master's & doctoral programs need to include coursework on politics	4.26	.732	87.0
New professionals should be informed about politics through case studies	3.96	.838	80.0
New professionals should be aware of types of power	4.05	.678	87.3
Politics can only be learned through guided practice & trial and error	3.09	1.010	41.9
New professionals distance themselves from politics due to persistent attitudes	3.24	.981	50.9
New professionals think that power is combative, coercive & destructive	0.33	.904	54.5
New professionals should be able to determine who has power	3.75	.844	70.9
New professionals must understand the affect of self-serving political interests	4.15	.650	89.1
Career satisfaction is enhanced by knowledge of the political landscape	4.13	.695	89.1
Given time devoted to politics, graduate programs are haphazard in preparation	3.34	.966	41.8
<u>Building alliances is an important political activity</u>	<u>4.31</u>	<u>.573</u>	<u>94.6</u>

*Note:*  
Participants responded on a Likert scale: 5 (strongly agree); 4 (agree); 3 (neutral); 2 (disagree); 1 (strongly disagree).

In order to further investigate the issue of political preparation for new professionals, VPSAs were asked to rate various sources of training from 5 - very helpful to 1 – counterproductive (see Table 7). The results indicated that respondents viewed mentors (100%) and trial and error (79.3%) as the most helpful sources of political training. Professional conference sessions (50%), graduate programs (48.2%) and readings (46.3%) were considered less productive.

Table 7

*Effectiveness of Sources of Political Training for New Student Affairs Professionals in Percents by VPSAs*

	Very Helpful Helpful 5	Helpful 4	Somewhat Helpful 3	Not Helpful 2	Counter- productive 1	Total 5 + 4 Scores
Graduate Program	13.0	35.2	31.5	18.5	1.8	48.2
Mentors	70.4	29.6	0.0	0.0	0.0	100.0
Conference Sessions	11.1	38.9	33.3	16.7	0.0	50.0
Readings	11.1	35.2	42.6	11.1	0.0	46.3
Trial & Error	47.2	0.1	18.9	1.8	0.0	79.3

**Anecdotal Responses**

An open-ended question (see Figure 1) was included in the survey to gather qualitative data on this topic. When asked if student affairs practitioners could be successful without adjusting to political realities, respondents provided a number of provocative insights. Some VPSAs suggested that although practitioners could be successful without relating to politics, the level of success would be considerably diminished. Others felt more strongly, suggesting that political understanding was essential and it would be highly unlikely that success could be possible without political acumen. Respondents also noted the misconception that politics is a negative phenomenon rather than a normal part of human interaction and pointed out the need to use political behavior to advocate for students and necessary resources. Finally, one VPSA suggested that “being credible” and “gaining respect” were important ways to mitigate the need for political behavior and help to break down the walls that sometimes divide various divisions in higher education.

- Understanding politics is essential for success
- Yes, but they would be more successful if [new staff] adjusted to the campus political realities
- It would be highly unlikely that it would be possible [to be successful]
- Every workplace, every relationship is political. The mistake is in thinking politics are negative, they are not
- The world, and our campuses, are political places and we need to be able to accept new realities
- Understanding various perspectives are critical to being able to advocate for the best interests of students
- You must be able to understand the political climate at all times
- You need political understanding to advocate for resources
- Understanding how to navigate the political climate is an essential skill
- Becoming part of the power structure requires political savvy

- Access to resources is highly influenced by one's ability to manage and be part of the political system
- Credibility and respect helps to eliminate the political power struggle and even out the 'us/them' mentality
- Practitioners will not be successful if they do not consider political realities
- Practitioners must be aware of the politics and "politics" associated with higher education
- Pick and choose your battles wisely ...Learn to be adaptive, flexible and a student of institutional dysfunction
- One can be successful but not nearly so without becoming part of the power structure requiring political savvy

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*Figure 1.* Open-ended question posed to VPSAs: Can student affairs practitioners be successful without adjusting to political realities?

## **Discussion**

### **Perceptions Regarding Role of Politics**

The initial research question was related to the relative importance of the role of politics in student affairs administration. Almost total unanimity in response to this statement confirmed the idea that colleges and universities are political organizations and that policy and institutional direction are heavily influenced by political behavior. Having the ability to identify decision makers and the informal power structure, understanding the sources of power and using it to influence change, were also seen as being of considerable importance. This timely information begs the question as to why the issue of politics has received little discussion in the literature of student affairs and even less emphasis in the preparation of new professionals entering the field. The answer could lie in the very history and tradition of student affairs which places emphasis on open, interpersonal relationships which may appear to be in conflict with perceptions of political activity and some forms of political behavior. According to the data presented, resolving this conflicting dilemma between perceptions and the reality of the pervasive influence of politics is an important consideration for the future of student affairs.

### **Sources and Nature of Political Activity**

In order to enhance our knowledge and understanding of political activity it was important to question the sources and nature of political activity. Identified sources of politics in student affairs include issues related to financial resources and supervision of personnel;



interactions with faculty, students and parents; and interpersonal relationships with the president, academic vice president and business officer. For the VPSAs participating in the survey, budgetary issues generated the greatest degree of political activity and working with various vice presidents including the chief academic and financial officers caused a considerable amount of stress to over 57% of the respondents. Interactions with faculty were reported to cause the greatest degree of stress, an important finding similar to the American Council on Education survey reported by the Council of Independent Colleges that chief academic officers indicate they have the greatest emotional challenge in relations with the faculty (Hartley & Godin, 2010, p. 30).

### **Political Knowledge and Skills Needed for Various Levels**

In order to provide data on the knowledge and skills needed by various levels of student affairs administration, VPSAs were asked to rate requirements for themselves, senior student affairs officers, middle managers, and entry level professionals. Results indicate an increasing need for skill and expertise as one moves through the different stages of student affairs administration. The important conclusion derived from the data was that political knowledge and skills were considered essential, very important or important for all three administrative stages above entry level. It was reported by 100% of the VPSAs that political awareness for new professionals was at the very least helpful. Given the fact that a national survey on politics does not exist in the literature of student affairs, awareness of VPSA's perceptions of this phenomenon has been augmented by the current study.

### **Knowledge of Political Activity for New Professionals**

The fourth research question asked how important knowledge of political activity was for new professionals. There was general agreement by most of the respondents that new

professionals experience some forms of political activity; should be aware of different types of power, a key element in understanding political behavior; and that building alliances is an important political activity. A vast majority of VPSAs agreed that politics was an important topic for both master's and doctoral programs and curricula should include coursework on political issues through the use of case studies. There was also broad agreement on the relationship between politics and ethical behavior as the data emphasized the need for understanding the ramifications of political interests being self-serving.

One of the most interesting and important findings was the connection between understanding an institutions political landscape and career satisfaction. This finding supported data included in the Renn & Jessup-Anger (2008) study concerning the relevance of graduate preparation curricula when a respondent noted a lack of skills in “navigating institutional politics – ‘the sheer amount of politics surprised me’” (p. 325). The long standing concern in student affairs regarding attrition of new professionals should give credence to additional research on this important topic.

### **Sources of Political Training for New Professionals**

There was broad agreement that mentors were the most effective source of training. This position taken by the VPSAs is certainly reasonable as those having experienced political activity would be in a unique position to share valuable insights including anecdotal information and even personal case studies. This would, in turn, require the new professional to be fortunate enough to have an effective mentor/mentee relationship with an established practitioner, a situation that does not always exist in student affairs practice (Renn & Hodges, 2007).

The survey also indicated that graduate preparation programs were helpful or somewhat helpful as a source of political training with conference sessions and individual readings

receiving similar ratings. The fact that nearly 80% of the respondents indicated trial and error as the most effective source of political training should provide cause for concern. Although it is obvious that many facets in the administration of student affairs function through a process of strategizing, adjustment and readjustment, it would seem more appropriate to approach politics in a more purposeful manner where applied research was a central characteristic.

### **Need for Practitioners to Adjust to Political Realities**

The final research question asked if practitioners could be successful without adjusting to political realities or in other words, without knowledge and political skills in higher education. The anecdotal information provided clear evidence that this sample of VPSAs had strong feelings about the need for political knowledge and training. Once again, this begs the question that arose as one of the major dilemmas resulting from the research on politics in student affairs: why has this topic been of such little and invisible consequence in the scholarship of student affairs administration?

### **Summary of Findings**

The national survey of VPSAs provided evidence that colleges and universities are political organizations and are influenced by political behavior. Both the available literature and survey results indicate that the role of politics in policy and decision making is pervasive, affecting many aspects of the academy including the division of student affairs. Identifying decision makers, formal and informal power structures, sources of power, and using power to influence decisions was seen by VPSA's as being of vital importance to successful practice. Major sources of political activity were found to be financial and budgetary issues, personnel supervision, interpersonal relationships, and interactions with faculty, students and parents.

Stressful interactions of the VPSAs involved working with the chief executive officer and the chief academic and business officers, with faculty considered to be the most unsettling.

Second, the survey considered the various levels of student affairs administration and the need for political knowledge and skills to function effectively. Findings indicate that greater skills are required for each level as a practitioner moves from new professionals to middle management to senior student affairs officer but all levels are affected by political activity. For entry level professionals, it was reported that some forms of political activity are a reality and necessitate an understanding of the different types of power and knowing how to build alliances.

Third, politics was viewed as an important topic for graduate preparation at both the master's and doctoral levels since understanding political activity appears to have a direct relationship with career satisfaction. Despite this support for political training at the graduate level, respondents identified mentors and trial and error as the most effective sources of knowledge and understanding.

Fourth, respondents were emphatic in commenting on the importance of political acumen. Although there was sentiment that a practitioner could have some degree of success as a student affairs administrator without political knowledge and skills, there was overwhelming agreement that understanding politics and employing political skills were essential components of successful practice.

### **Implications for Student Affairs Practice and Scholarship**

Given the reported emphasis on politics as an integral part of the successful administrator, it would seem that the topic should receive greater attention in the literature of student affairs. Lack of interest may be attributed to the general perception that politics is negative and leads to self serving behavior that place personal agendas ahead of the general good

(Moore, 2000, pp. 178-183). Understanding that politics is a pervasive operational strategy in organizations which intensifies with the level of shared decision making, may help to modify these perceptions. Stated simply, the more collegial the academic institution, division or department, the greater the intensity of political activity. Accepting this apparent reality is a step in accepting political behavior as a natural consequence of work in the academy.

The importance of mentorship to political training of new professionals necessitates a concerted effort on the part of the student affairs community to view the mentor/mentee relationship as critical to retention and overall development: “The lack of suitable mentors for up-and-coming professionals, particularly women, can be seen as a dangerously limiting condition for the profession as well as the individuals” (Schmidt & Wolfe, 2009, p. 380). While trial and error is seen as the most common delivery system for political knowledge and skills, it would not appear to be the most appropriate method for the student affairs profession. Preparation programs working in concert with professional associations and seasoned practitioners should be able to make substantial inroads into learning about political realities, thus avoiding the personal and professional missteps common in trial and error.

A review of the literature on politics in student affairs administration indicates that additional research needs to be pursued to enhance our understanding of this important issue that permeates work in higher education. Peer reviewed journals might dedicate special topic issues to politics in student affairs administration. Professional associations can play a major role in bringing this topic to the forefront through encouraging research and placing politics as a major agenda in conferencing and task forces used to define priorities and competencies in the field. Recent documents on professional competencies provided only limited mention of the “political landscape” and “role of alliances in completing goals” (ACPA, 2007, pp. 12-13; ACPA/National

Association of Student Personnel Administrators, 2010, pp. 14-17). The role of politics needs to be further delineated to relate to its perceived importance as a crucial factor in student affairs administration.

Awards and various forms of recognition for exceptional mentorship on political issues would serve as a way to reward role models and informal teachers. Graduate preparation programs should include politics as an important issue in the development and training of future professionals arming them with knowledge and skill sets deemed essential to successful practice.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

Survey research includes a number of limitations that are applicable to the study of VPSAs perception of politics in student affairs administration. Sample size was affected by the magnitude of the population under potential review in order to have a manageable study of an important topic. Since the sample only included those holding the title of vice president for student affairs, other senior officials responsible for an entire student affairs division and senior officers serving as associate vice president's were not included in the study. It would be particularly useful to also survey middle managers and entry level practitioners. Information needs to be analyzed according to institutional type, size and organizational model to assess the level of politics at various institutions and to ascertain if differences are negligible or of consequence and important to our understanding. Looking at differences in gender and how that characteristic might affect stress, career satisfaction, behavior, mobility and decision making would add significant data to an important topic.

Comparing the level of political behavior and decision making between various divisions and levels of collegiate organizations would also provide important data as well as relationships with different constituencies. The idea that faculty groups effect the greatest degree of stress for

both the VPSAs surveyed in this research and the Academic Vice President's in the ACE/CIC study (Hartley & Godin, 2010), is an intriguing finding and data would contribute to our overall understanding of how different groups pursue the need for participation in policy, personnel and the budgetary process.

### **Conclusion**

It was the intention of this study to understand colleges and universities as political organizations through the eyes of senior level officers. The idea that politics was pervasive and important to successful practice was based on what little was available in the literature, professional experience and anecdotal information. The results of the survey provided clear evidence that understanding the nature of political activity in a collegiate setting is of certain importance to practitioners who strive to create, facilitate and sustain optimal learning environments for our diverse student body experiencing exceedingly complex organizations in higher education. It is our hope that this study will provide an incentive for additional investigation into this salient topic.

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