

Equity and Student Services

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Community college student affairs and services professionals serve a plethora of students with wide-ranging unique needs. Due to their location in the higher education hierarchy there are many inequities these professionals face that are counter to their efforts to holistically and effectively support student success. This article outlines the provision of student support services in the community college context, applying a “traditional” student support framework in the community college context, and the role of professional development for staff members. The conclusion provides next steps for future research as well as ideas to improve the current state of student services in community colleges.

Student Support Services in the Community College Context

Community colleges serve a diverse population of students with various academic and personal needs and stemming from varied socioeconomic backgrounds, goals, and abilities. Community college students represent 45% of all undergraduates, 41% of first-time freshman, and more than half of Native American, Hispanic, and Black students who enroll in postsecondary studies (American Association of Community Colleges, 2016). The average age of community college students is 28, with about half of students falling into the 22–39 age range (American Association of Community Colleges, 2016). Community colleges provide a pathway to postsecondary education for many first-generation and single-parent students, 36% and 17% of community college undergraduates, respectively (American Association of Community Colleges, 2016). Many community college students enroll in college underprepared, with about 60% of community college students being referred to at least one developmental education course (Bailey, 2009). Community college students can also lack crucial knowledge necessary to navigate college successfully (Schoem & Dunlap, 2011). This unpreparedness can translate into substantial developmental education coursework, increased drop-out rates, and longer time to degree completion (Bailey & Cho, 2010). Finally, nearly two-thirds of community college students enroll part-time, often due to a need to maintain employment throughout their studies (American Association of Community Colleges, 2016).

Community college students’ needs are both similar and dissimilar from those students attending four-year institutions. All students require academic, social, and personal support; however, the degree of support needed is often higher among community college students. Community college students commonly balance a complex set of responsibilities. As a result they often need more flexibility in course offerings, student activities, and student support services to be successful. Likewise, student affairs personnel need to provide these students with more personalized academic supports, including tutoring, one-on-one support meetings with faculty and advisors, access to learning centers, and alternative means of learning. Effectively meeting the needs of community college populations often requires personalized non-academic supports such as childcare assistance, access to emergency funds, extensive mental health assistance, and disability support.

Academically and personally, student support services are essential to the success of community college students. Student support services offered by community colleges can fall into one of five categories:

- Academic guidance, including educational assessments, educational planning, and degree requirements;
- Academic supports such as tutoring;
- Personal guidance and counseling, including mental health treatment, crisis management, and mentorship;
- Career counseling and career planning, including resume building and interview skill development; and
- Supplemental services, such as child care assistance, book vouchers, and emergency funds (Purnell & Blank, 2004).

Other examples of supplemental student support services include orientation, first-year student programming, student activities, registration events, student success courses, learning communities, and special population programming (e.g., TRIO).

Student support services, especially in community colleges, are extremely vulnerable to downsizing or elimination due to budget cuts. Often community colleges find themselves understaffed in student support services, relying heavily on other staff to take on extraneous duties or multiple roles within the institution. Inequities exist in the areas of academic advising and personal counseling as community colleges experience high student-to-counselor/advisor ratios and staff members have limited time to dedicate to working with each student individually. Access to support services is a common issue, as most services are provided only during normal business hours, which does

not meet the needs of students who take evening or weekend courses or who access their coursework remotely. Supplemental services, when offered, are also at risk when state revenues and funding are decreased, requiring institutions to minimize costs on non-academic expenses.

Applying a “Traditional” Student Support Framework in the Community Colleges Context

Despite community colleges increasingly serving as a gateway educational pathway for contemporary students (Shapiro, Dundar, Wakhungu, Yuan, & Harrell, 2015), much of the literature on student development theory is modeled from and applied within the context of a “traditional” college experience characterized by a student entering a four-year institution directly from high school, living on campus, and attending college full time. However, research on student learning styles within the community college context has been conducted (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2010).

Engaging students in campus life and services can be challenging in any institutional context. However, serving a community college population creates nuances in the experiences of student affairs and student support professionals. For campus activities professionals, the only “captured audience” may be found mid-day in a cafeteria setting. A LGBTQA club advisor may need to support and engage the senior adult who has been out publicly for many years and the 19-year old questioning student. Academic advisors may be expected to counsel students at all levels of ability and preparation for any number of trajectories in a myriad of programs, often in a matter of minutes. This includes supporting students who are engaged in adult education, developmental education, lifelong learning, short- and long-term certificate and diplomas program, and/or technical and academic degree programs.

Given the realities of working with community college populations and the limited literature on student development in this context, there are notable opportunities for future research. Developing theoretical frameworks that reflect the community college context is essential for student affairs professionals in engaging, and thus retaining, their students. These frameworks could support the development of assessment efforts that shift institutional mindsets from delivering services to developing students. To advance equity, these frameworks must consider increasingly diverse student populations with complex lives and needs. As a part of this, equity should be at the center of assessment efforts to determine gaps in student involvement or participation in support services.



The Role of Professional Development for Student Services Staff

Student services professionals are often the first point of contact for students. These employees provide support, information, and resources pertinent to student success.

Because personnel in student affairs are usually the first to interact with students and often reconnect with students several times throughout their careers, it is imperative that these staff members have the knowledge, skills, and competencies necessary to meet the challenges presented. (Diaz, 2013, p.3)

Systems are constantly evolving to better serve student needs; due to the vast and diverse population of students at community colleges, student affairs professionals need to constantly stay abreast of the changes happening within the field (Person, Ellis, Plum, & Boudreau, 2005). Student services staff work with insufficient time and budgets to meet the needs of students. The scarcity of resources forces student services staff to engage in creative strategies to support various student groups effectively and efficiently. "Over the past several years, public colleges and universities have cut faculty positions, eliminated course offerings, closed campuses, and reduced student services. . ." (Mitchell, Leachman, & Masterson, para. 14, 2016). In order to enhance education, Chickering and Gamson (1991) argue "an organizational culture that values, nourishes, and provides support for efforts to become more effective professionals. . . emphasizes quality performance from administrators, faculty, support staff and students" (p. 57).

Enhancing delivery of services, improving knowledge attainment, and ensuring student success are benefits of professional development for the institution, employee, and students (Diaz, 2013). The complexity of the roles of student services staff members warrants the identification of training and experiences needed to prepare them and sustain their skills adequately. In addition, community college student affairs professionals frequently access professional development via local and state organizations or conferences, as distance, understaffing, and expense often hinder community college personnel from attending larger national conferences or training. Recently, however, national organizations, including the the American College Personnel Association (ACPA), National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA), and the National Council on Student Development (NCSD) have made some strides in improving offerings for community college student affairs professionals whether virtually or in person.

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The [ACPA Commission for Two-Year Colleges](#) seeks to provide professional development opportunities "through sponsored programs at ACPA's annual convention, commission-sponsored workshops, and co-sponsored programs with other national student development in two-year college focused organizations" (American College Personnel Association, n.d.). This ACPA commission also publishes a newsletter with a wealth of information on current student affairs issues.

NASPA manages a Community College Division that "examines issues relevant to community college institutions and professionals and hosts a variety of professional development opportunities" (National Association of Student Personnel Administrators, 2017). The Community College Division spearheads three different initiatives for student affairs professionals in community colleges:

- [NASPA Community Colleges Online Series](#). This series includes four free online learning opportunities each year. Its goal is to provide relevant professional development for student affairs practitioners. There is also an archive with past session presentations.
- [NASPA Community Colleges Symposium Series](#). This series occurs at various community college campuses across the country. It provides high-quality professional development opportunities for new and mid-level community college student affairs professionals, focusing on the role of the community college in society, student development theory, and adult learning theory.
- [NASPA Community Colleges Institute](#). This institute is a one-and-a-half-day pre-conference workshop facilitating deep discussion regarding a variety of critical issues affecting community colleges.

As an affiliate council of the American Association of Community Colleges, the NCSD "supports the understanding of and respect for all community college students and professionals through advocacy and education" (National Council on Student Development, 2015). The NCSD is the only organization solely dedicated to community college student development professionals. The NCSD hosts the [Walter G. Bumphus Leadership Institute](#), which provides networking opportunities, facilitates discussions on leadership and student development, and develops and refines critical leadership skills. Professionals will also find webinars, training, and a full list of associated organizations on their website.

Conclusion

Community colleges are dealing with numerous variables and challenges whilst trying to ensure the success of their students. Adequate resources, including access to and support for professional development, are needed to improve the quality of services offered by community colleges. Tailored professional development that directly addresses the specific needs and problems facing community colleges is vitally important. Student affairs professionals need frameworks that are based in the community college context. The unique structure and issues community colleges possess create distinct situations that must be addressed delicately and directly. Frameworks with four-year institutions at the center do not fit the community college context (Kelsay & Zamani-Gallaher, 2014).

Employees and institutions benefit from targeted research capturing the complex issues situated in the community college context. Specific research regarding student engagement and the experiences of student affairs professionals in the community college context can provide valuable resources that will support both students and staff members. Potential areas for research and practice could include developing partnerships between faculty and student affairs professionals, engaging students via student employment, studying the experiences of satellite campus staff and students, designing and assessing learning outcomes in student affairs, and assessing the value of student affairs in retention efforts.



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