



5 Things Young Professionals CAN DO if they Want to be a Vice President of Student Affairs

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Strategies for Becoming a VPSA

INTRODUCTION

A Vice President of Student Affairs (VPSA), also referred to as a Chief Student Affairs Officer (CSAO), is an individual who oversees the Division of Student Affairs at a higher education institution. A VPSA's duties and responsibilities typically include administrative duties, personnel management, direct interaction with students, strategic planning, crisis management, finance and public relations (Sponsler & Wesaw, 2014). However, these duties and responsibilities, as well as the functional areas they oversee, vary depending on the type of institution at which they work. The structure of student affairs divisions and the functional areas that are overseen by VPSAs differ from institution to institution; such functional areas, to name a small portion, range from campus activities, student conduct, counseling services, on-campus housing, and multicultural services to commuter student services, LGBTQ student services and admissions to financial aid, academic advising and athletics (Sponsler & Wesaw, 2014). With such a vast set of responsibilities and a broad array of personnel to manage, how does one possibly prepare for a becoming a VPSA? There is no one career path, but rather the combination of many years of experience in the field and an advanced degree to start. According to current VPSAs, those pursuing such a career should also network with other professionals in the field, get involved and know one's students and campus climate.

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With a large set of responsibilities and personnel – how does one prepare for the role of Vice President of Student Affairs?



1 Be a Generalist

There is no set career path that one must take in order to reach the VPSA position. As Table 1 indicates, there are many different job titles that student affairs professionals or faculty held prior to becoming VPSAs. Table 1 refers to individuals who were employed at their current institution before being promoted to VPSA, rather than individuals from a different institution, because “it is most common for a CSAO to be an internal hire” (Sponsler & Wesaw, 2011, p. 11). Each of the given job titles that a VPSA previously held, was likely to be within one of many functional areas. Research by Biddix (2011) supports that most men and women that have attained a senior-level position within student affairs at a 4-year institution, have worked in a dean of students, residential life and/or student activities office at some point in their career. However, it is highly encouraged that one gets outside of their functional area so that they may develop a wide portfolio and broad set of competencies (K. Kruger, personal communication, November 7, 2016). Invaluable experience is gained for career advancement from working or volunteering in other areas on campus (G. Smith, Cox, Hudson & M. Smith, 1990).

Table 1: Previous Job Title for Non-CSAO at Current Institution (n= 393)

Job Title	Percentage
Dean	29%
Director	23%
Associate/Assistant Dean	19%
Associate/Assistant Director	17%
Faculty	6%
Other (within higher education, mixed open field)	6%

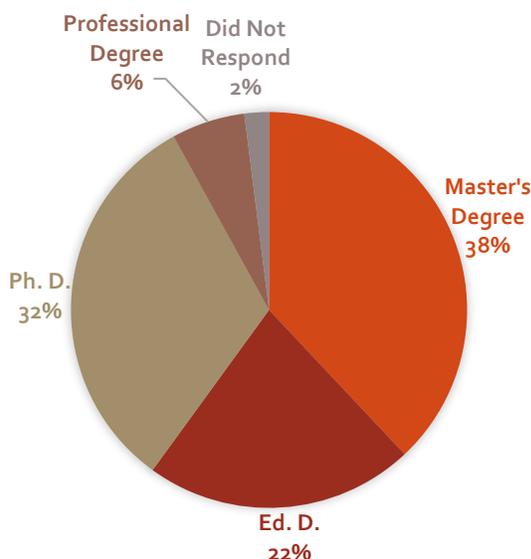
Source: Sponsler & Wesaw (2014, p.13)

"I encourage a generalist view to be well-rounded. Choose a path that offers variety and lots of opportunities." -Dr. Ainsley Carry, VPSA at USC

- Get out of your functional area.
- Try a different institutional type.
- Move to a different part of the country.

Also, do not be afraid to move to different types of institutions or different parts of the country; it will teach you to make friends and you will learn new values and cultures which will increase your adaptability skills (A. Carry, personal communication, October 10, 2016). The willingness to move can lead to opportunities for advancement as well as learning (G. Smith et al., 1990).

HIGHEST DEGREE EARNED BY VPSAS (N=868)



Source: NASPA VPSA Census Report (2014)

2 An Advanced Degree is Necessary

The VPSA position is a senior-level job and therefore an advanced degree is necessary. Having a doctoral degree “can lend viability to job candidacy, open doors to mid- and upper-level management, and lend credibility to student affairs professionals working alongside faculty” (Biddix, 2011, p. 455). In addition to career advancement, obtaining and pursuing a doctoral degree also leads to an array of transferable skills. For example, disciplinary knowledge, an informed career, teaching competency, understanding the diversity of current and prospective students and workforces, understanding mentoring processes, connecting expertise to needs of society, the ability to communicate and work in groups and understanding ethical conduct (Gilbert, Balatti, Turner & Whitehouse, 2004). More than half of VPSAs have a doctorate, and three-quarters of those doctorates are in education or higher education (Sponsler & Wesaw, 2014).

Which Advanced Degree is best for you?

• Ed.D.

- The purpose of the Ed.D. is for field-based educators to improve skills and build upon existing knowledge base from experience within the field (Deering, 1998).
- Designed for practioners to learn how to apply research to their given field (Deering, 1998)
- More practical-based.

• Ph.D.

- The purpose of the Ph.D. is “to develop scholars skilled in research and teaching” (Deering, 1998, p. 243).
- Awarded after completing a dissertation based on one’s own original studies (Deering, 1998).
- More research-based.



3 Build Strong Relationships & Networks

When it comes to building relationships and networking, individuals must be active in seeking opportunities to do so. According to Dulworth (2006), “effective investments in your networks can make you smarter, more knowledgeable, and better grounded, as well as a more agile learner and collaborator” (p. 37). Building and maintaining relationships with peers and experts in the field can also lead to increased job satisfaction and higher performance (Wolff & Moser, 2009). Higher performance is a result of increased exposure to new ideas and expertise from leading professionals in the field (Dulworth, 2006). Individuals who actively establish and maintain networks with peers, colleagues, and experienced professionals will “produce tangible personal, career, and organizational benefits, including the sharing of information, the opportunity to learn from peers, and the ability to promote best practices in their field or profession” (Dulworth, 2006, p. 39). When networking with accomplished student affairs professionals it can serve many purposes; for example, it can be informational in which you receive career insight and advice, or if it goes well it can potentially lead to mentorship or a future career opportunity. Lastly, remember that the field of higher education and student affairs is small, so do not burn bridges (F. Lamas, personal communication, October 31, 2016).

HOW CAN YOU DO THIS?



- Join a professional association
 - NASPA
 - ACPA
- Attend a conference (regional or annual)
- Conduct information interviews
- Join Twitter and Facebook groups
- Use LinkedIn

4 Get Involved & Volunteer

It is highly encouraged that young professionals join at least one professional association. Professional associations within student affairs serve to “advance understanding, recognition, and knowledge in the field; to develop and promulgate standards for professional practice; to serve the public interest; and to provide professionals with a peer group that promotes sense of identity” (Chernow, Cooper & Winston, 2003, p. 44). They also help individuals to develop their professional identity and come together with other professionals within the field (Chernow et al., 2003). Within professional associations there are opportunities to obtain leadership roles as well as volunteer. Through such leadership roles and volunteering, one will build a broader network as well as develop a new set of skills.

Professional associations offer a variety of programs and services such as newsletters, journals, workshops, conferences, committees, and online communities.

For young professionals, there are also placement services available to aid in finding entry-level jobs (Chernow, et al., 2003). These programs and services are important because they allow young professionals to keep their knowledge of the profession up-to-date, the chance to establish themselves and to interact and connect with experienced and upper-level professionals.

Why you should join a professional association:

1. “To enhance administrative and professional skills;
2. To gain new perspectives;
3. To develop leadership skills;
4. To develop colleague relationships;
5. To grow professionally; and
6. To influence the future direction of the profession.”

(Chernow, Cooper & Winston, 2003, p. 45)

MOST PRESSING ISSUES FACING CAMPUSES*

- Mental Health Concerns
- Alcohol & Illicit Drug Abuse
- Changing Student Demographics
- Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion
- Campus Safety
- Completion/Graduation Rate
- Persistence
- Assessment/Accountability
- Diminishing Resources
- Compliance & Regulatory Requirements
- Strategic Planning

*In no particular order

Source: Sponsler & Wesaw (2014, p. 17)

5 Use Data-Driven Practices and Assessment

Assessment is a key part of higher education and student affairs because it helps to evaluate whether the services, practices, programming, policies, etc. that are in place are effective or not (Bresciani, 2011). The student affairs profession is student-centered and therefore making sure that students are learning is a key component of the work being done. It is crucial that VPSAs are familiar with assessment because they oversee the student affairs divisions and are responsible for making sure that they function effectively. Assessment helps to clarify the desired outcomes as well as identify strengths, weaknesses and areas in need of improvement (Bresciani, 2011). With diminishing resources and changing student demographics, assessment is more important than ever. VPSAs need to make sure that resources are being allocated appropriately and that their personnel and departments are properly supporting all of their students as best they can. As student affairs professionals, and especially VPSAs, it is vital that they understand the issues on campus the students are facing as well as the campus climate. Awareness of such issues will help in evaluating effectiveness and decision-making moving forward.

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