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The Ubiquitous Middle: Conceptualizing Mid-Level Experience in Student Affairs

Benjamin Z. Huelskamp

Until very recently, research and writing on mid-level student affairs practitioners focused narrowly on job satisfaction (Scott, 1978; Sagaria, 1986; Bogenschutz and Sagaria, 1988). This article, a scholarly personal narrative, discusses the career track and experiences of mid-level practitioners. The author proposes and discusses suggestions with regard to support for mid-level practitioners and ways of developing our thinking about these positions and professionals.

“Dean Huelskamp,” the student said standing in the doorway to my office, “I need you to sign something, please.” Who was this “Dean Huelskamp?” I was “Ben” an entry-level student affairs practitioner who reveled in close interactions with students. Six months earlier I was a residence director at a small Catholic college (approximately 3,000 total students) in New York, and before that I was a community director at a large, public flagship institution. Even further back, I was a grad in housing and a resident assistant as an undergraduate. I am one of those people who fits in residence life and housing. I developed a knack for running buildings and working with students in residential environments. I was strong in most areas and still learning in every area. In short, “Dean Huelskamp” might as well have been my father. Nevertheless, I was an assistant dean at a very small, Catholic college (fewer than 1,000 total students). Hearing “dean” with my name caused me to start thinking about what it meant (and continues to mean) to be a mid-level practitioner and administrator. Particularly, I realized that rather than being a definable stage of professional development, mid-level is a period when a student affairs professional moves beyond entry-level roles and continues to develop the competencies and relationships we will need to assume senior and executive roles in the field.

Classifying Student Affairs Professionals

What makes someone entry-level, mid-level, or senior-level? Years of experience and position level are good, though not perfect, measures. Indeed, there is hardly one measure. Reviewing over 2,500 institutions, Tull and Freeman (2008) struggled to isolate five common titles for the chief student affairs officer (CSAO)\(^1\), let alone a group of titles and positions in one level of experience. A recent email

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from NASPA invited attendees to a mid-level conference and defined “mid-level” in terms of five years of post-masters professional experience or post-masters professionals serving as directors. Fey and Carpenter (1996) chose to classify mid-level professionals based on the following criteria: 1) has a master-level degree or higher; 2) holds the most senior position in a functional area; 3) reports directly to the senior student affairs officer (SSAO); and 4) supervises at least one full-time professional. Based on this criteria, my position, credentials, and background can be classified as mid-level. I am a post-masters practitioner with almost five years in the field beyond the degree and hold the position of assistant dean and director. I report to a dean of students who is our SSAO. I supervise full-time professionals as well as graduate-level professionals. That said, I think organizations and professionals have to be careful not to confuse levels of experience with levels of management. For example, at many large universities where housing and residence life is an auxiliary, directors, who are often also assistant/associate vice presidents, are senior-level professionals.

**Scholarly Background (or Lack Thereof) on Mid-Level Professionals**

Although the definition of mid-level might be elusive, the transition from entry-level to mid-level is more concrete. Socialization as a mid-level practitioner and socialization in the institutional culture where the practitioner is employed are essential to entry-level professionals’ tenure in the position and success in mid-level roles (Hornak, Ozaki, and Lunceford, 2016). Inherent in that socialization is supervision (Tull, 2006; Boehman, 2007; Marshall, Gardner, Hughes, and Lowery, 2016). Working with a supervisor who made the switch from entry-level to mid-level is imperative. That said, one thing that struck me early on in my current position was the feeling of being disconnected. I admit some of that disconnection was part of starting a new job at a new institution, but some was also being at a different level and place in my career. More than in the past, I find myself walking a fine line between our senior leaders, who are older than me, and our entry-level professionals, who are younger[2]. Quite literally, mid-level professionals are between the social and professional circles of entry-level professionals and senior leaders.

Walking this fine line led Scott (1978) to conclude that mid-level practitioners are a form of “loyalists” who express institutional loyalty as a means of navigating their positions. Indeed, Scott identified a significant tension in that mid-level professionals are neither faculty (who define the institution) or the senior staff (who lead the institution). Young (2007) found that mid-level professionals may have significant capacity to drive collaboration and bring about change in the organization. I lived both of these experiences. It is difficult to drive collaboration when you work with “loyalists,” but my institution is also going through a period of intentional and measured change driven by several people who are new and
mid-level. If nothing else, I am more realistic about institutional change than I was straight out of grad school and am in a position where I can successfully navigate the institution and make positive strides towards change.

**Supporting Mid-Level Professionals**

The definition of who is a mid-level professional is fluid and so too is the attempt to draft statements about how to support new and advancing mid-level professionals. Each year there is a new batch of best practices on supervision at every level and for every professional, but we are quick to forget that each person is unique and deserves individualized supervision. With that in mind, I propose three simple suggestions for mid-level professionals.

**Honor Their Past**

Whether a new mid-level professional came up through their institution or is new to campus, they bring knowledge and experience. Perhaps the most important thing my new supervisor did was to acknowledge me as an expert within our department. Although I am still learning, my background in residence life and housing was valuable among the other professionals at our institution. My supervisor’s acknowledgement of that skill undoubtedly stroked my ego, but it also boosted my confidence and helped me get past the initial imposter feelings I had in this role. It is important to remember that mid-level professionals still have a fair amount of contact with students, particularly at smaller institutions (Reynolds, 2013). Therefore, the experience is not simply a building block towards new skills, but skills that can be used from day one.

**Support a Mid-Level Professional in Their Present**

Depending on the institution and the department, a mid-level position can be lonely at times. As a graduate student, I was one of 12 residence life grads plus 10 additional young professionals. At my first job, I was one of 20 community directors; at my second job I was one of four hall directors. Now, I am the director and the other assistant deans are at very different places in their lives. As an introvert, I do not get lonely easily, but negotiating my relationships with people only a few years younger than me, and not undergraduates, was tricky at first. Indeed, each of these strategies is grounded in connection. We would be remiss not to speak about mid-level professionals with regards to relationships. For better or worse, student affairs is a relationship-based field. In exploring the reasons why people enter student affairs, Taub and McEwen (2006) noted that 88% of the participants in their study (n=300) stated that their first understanding of student affairs came via their relationships with student affairs practitioners. Perhaps it says something about who I am, but I occasionally look through job
postings to get a sense of what different institutions require for specific positions. Then I ask myself: Am I doing those things now? If the answer is “no,” I gauge how valuable the experience is and if other institutions want it from their professionals. Then I try to find a way to have that experience. Before I try to move to the next step—professionally, educationally, personally—I want to make the most of the work I am doing now and the experiences I have now.

Help a Mid-Level Professional Look Towards the Future

A few years ago, I saw the mid-level position as the point in one’s career when they naturally began their doctorate or transitioned to other fields. I viewed it as the dreaded five-year mark when so many trained student affairs practitioners leave the field. As a mid-level professional, none of that seems “natural.” Indeed, members of my graduate cohort began doctorates while others left the field for closely-related fields, but it is hardly one-or-the-other. Many of us—and here I think of people beyond my specific program—are content living the lives we have and doing the work that we feel right doing. After three years of bouncing around, I made a verbal commitment to my current institution for the next five years. Pursuing a doctorate sounds good (other than the cost), but I also look for graduate certificates and complementary master-level degrees that could support the work I see myself doing. Even as I default to the narrative that one “must” have a doctorate to advance, there is a debate about what ensures success beyond the mid-level. Many professionals focus on earning a doctorate because some, if not many, institutions require the doctorate to move into senior-level positions. Biddix (2013) called this the “doctorate or bust” narrative and found legitimacy in it, but also questioned where experience enters into the equation. Indeed, Daddona, Cooper, and Dunn (2006) noted that the “doctorate leads to promotion and greater salary” narrative was far from certain for recent doctoral graduates in their study.

Personally, I feel ready for that next educational step, but like nearly 75% of the participants in Marshall et al.’s (2016) study, I have fewer than 10 years experience in the field and am not quite sure how long I will stay in student affairs. Therefore, I am less-than-convinced that pursuing a doctorate in higher education is in my best interest. To that end and with finances in mind, I started the Master of Business Administration (MBA) program at my current institution. Soon, however, I found myself wondering if I was working towards a degree just because it was another degree, which is a terrible reason to study. Eventually, I stepped back from the degree and began to look at other options. For all of my talk of the value of informal education, which is the bulk of our field, I never considered informal opportunities to learn and grow as a mid-level professional. Those informal opportunities take many forms from board service to service in local and national professional organizations.
As I read back over this brief essay, I come back to the fact that the identity “mid-level professional” is fluid and based on so many factors. Recently, as I browsed through job postings, I came across two positions at institutions just slightly larger than my own, but otherwise very similar (private, four-year, faith-based, and largely residential). The responsibilities described in both positions—residence life, student conduct, working on campus projects and committees—were nearly identical to my position. What caught my attention was that one position was written for a professional one or two years out of graduate school and titled “coordinator of …” whereas the other position was the institution’s dean of students. That example is illustrative of the problem in arriving at a coherent definition of entry, mid, or senior-level in many student affairs position. Therefore, we appeal to a combination of position, years in the field, educational credentials, and self-definition. However we define, label, and discuss it, the mid-level experience of a student affairs professional is a period of immense growth and change where some professionals will leave the field, some will stay for the majority of their careers, and others will grow and advance in the field.

[1] The terms “chief student affairs officer” (CSAO) and “senior student affairs officer” (SSAO) are broadly used terms, often used interchangeably, to denote the most senior student affairs administrator. Rarely do these individuals hold CSAO or SSAO as titles and may be known by a variety of titles including, but not limited to, Dean of Students, Vice Provost for Student Affairs, or Vice President for Student Affairs.

[2] It would be absurd to think age does not enter into the experience of mid-level professionals. Unfortunately, the current research does not sufficiently address the intersection of age and mid-level professional status except to state that age-based privilege is most experienced roughly from age 35 to age 55.
References


