

AN UPDATED RESEARCH AGENDA IN NACA: A SUGGESTED ROADMAP FOR FUTURE SCHOLARSHIP ON PRACTICE?

David M. Rosch, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Adam Peck, Illinois State University

Danielle DeSawal, Indiana University-Bloomington

RESEARCH PLAYS A VITAL ROLE IN THE DISCIPLINE OF CAMPUS ACTIVITIES AND OUR SOCIETY AS A WHOLE. Research provided the foundation for the most significant achievements of humankind. Conducting valid research can lead to new discoveries, prompt the questioning of commonly held assumptions, and build a base from which scholars can further advance knowledge. Booth, Colomb, and Williams (2017) wrote, “Without trustworthy published research, we all would be locked into the opinions of the moment, prisoners of what we alone experience or dupes to whatever we’re told” (p. 10). Certainly, it would not be difficult to find recent relevant examples of the necessity for research – nor the need for the skill to interpret and make sense of research.

While researchers within the field of student affairs and campus activities may not be doing anything quite as dramatic as attempting to put a person on the moon or cure a disease, research plays a vital role in our work. Through this endeavor, we seek to understand how students develop and grow through their participation in our programs. We can further refine how effectively we can achieve desired outcomes for our institutions – and advance the competency and professionalism of those within our field. Student learning and development have become a central focus for student affairs professionals of various disciplines in the present era. Despite this focus, many challenges remain that inhibit practitioners from bringing research and practice together.

Much of the work of campus activities professionals is guided – or should be guided -by a collection of theories known as student development theories (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton and Renn, 2010). Student development theory began first as a patchwork of social scientific concepts borrowed from other disciplines (Patton, Renn, Guido-DiBrito, & Quaye, 2016). It can be argued that the lack of a central theoretical base throughout most of the profession’s history has led to, or at least exacerbated, the lack of understanding by the general public and key stakeholders regarding the purpose and impact of higher education. Kruger and Peck (2016) explain:

Anyone who has worked in the field of student affairs has likely observed how difficult it can be to explain to others the nature of our work. Even those closest to us—spouses, children, parents, and so forth—may have a basic idea of our day-to-day work without completely understanding the big picture of why our jobs exist in the first place (p. xi).

Within the field of student affairs, the work of campus activities is particularly susceptible to this lack of understanding because such work suffers from both a lack of a robust group of theories to guide our work and a critical mass of practitioners well-versed in existing theories. There is also an extant lack of scholars producing research that is relevant to the field of campus activities.

In the inaugural edition of the *Journal of Campus Activities Practice and Scholarship* (JCAPS), Love and Goyal

(2019) discussed data they collected regarding how well campus activities professionals understand and apply theory, writing, “In our conversations with professionals about how they determine their actions to bring about specific outcomes, formal theory rarely enters the conversation” (p. 34). They added, “When asked specifically about formal theories guiding their work, a few that were mentioned included Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs, minority/social identity theories, and Schlossberg’s Transition theory. These theories only cover a small portion of their work” (p. 34). Clearly, a lack of knowledge of theory impedes our ability to be effective as a profession.

What’s more, evidence suggests the field of campus activities as a whole has not enthusiastically embraced assessment, either. McCullar, Peck, DeSawal, Rosch & Russell Krebs (2020, p.6) wrote, “It is no secret that campus activities professionals...have struggled to create a culture of assessment.” While assessment is distinct from research in many ways, considering a collective lack of interest in both suggests that our field may still be too reactive to trends in student learning and changing student needs than we can anticipate and understand them. It may even leave students unaware of what they are or are supposed to be learning from their experiences (Peck and Cummings, 2016).

In 2009, the National Association for Campus Activities (NACA) produced the “Competency Guide for College Student Leaders” (Brill et al., 2009). The publication was intended as “...a learning map for student leaders as they grow and develop through participation in student organizations, community service, campus employment, grassroots activities, leadership positions, followership positions, mentoring relationships with campus activities advisors, etc.” (p. 1). Peck and Cummings called this document “An important first step in unifying learning outcomes in campus activities programs” (p. 151). Clearly, our ability as a profession to demonstrate collective impact can be significantly enhanced by a shared agenda for creating and measuring our effects on student learning. Compelling questions remain unanswered, such as, how does participation in campus activities benefit students and what competencies are necessary for campus activities professionals to prompt and guide this growth? How do we systematically create a sense of belonging for students and staff within institutions, and how can practitioners advance equity and inclusion for our diverse student body? Additionally, how do we advance the professionalization of our work? The field of campus activities can benefit from an increased focus on scholarship. Promoting a culture of scholarship is among the main foci of and reason for the existence of JCAPS (McCullar et. al, 2020). But it is also essential that we target this scholarship on topics that can advance our profession’s work, benefit the students we serve, and prepare future campus activities professionals.

That is why the editorial board would like to highlight the recent good work of the NACA Research and Scholarship Group in the creation of the NACA Research Agenda. This document represents the dedication, effort, and progressive thinking of a broad and diverse group of professionals. This Agenda is similar to an initial document created by the NACA Research and Scholarship Group in 2014. While this is not the first time NACA has produced a research agenda, this is the first research agenda since the inception of JCAPS. We believe that these two initiatives overlap considerably and can work in concert to accomplish our shared goals for advancing scholarship in campus activities. As individuals consider conducting scholarship for potential publication in JCAPS, we hope they will consider the concepts and topics introduced in the updated Research Agenda.

NACA RESEARCH AGENDA

The updated version of the NACA Research Agenda incorporates the same three focus areas as the initial 2014 version, with several edits and additions of specific topics and questions within those areas. The three central areas of focus remain: 1) Assessing the impact of involvement on students who participate in campus activities sponsored initiatives; 2) Student learning and development related to the work of campus activities units; and 3) Issues regarding the professionalization of campus activities work. Each of these areas also includes particular sub-topics, and within each sub-topic includes specific exemplar research questions that scholars in campus activities can help address. We describe each of the three areas below and illustrate concrete examples of how emerging scholars in campus activities contexts can potentially respond.

Impact on Involvement in Campus Activities Initiatives

The effects on students who participate in initiatives sponsored by campus activities units are of central concern for postsecondary institutions and broadly within NACA. Without being able to make informed statements about how students might be affected due to the work done in these units, justifying their budgets, or even their existence, becomes a challenge at best. This first section of the NACA Research Agenda includes four sub-topics that campus activities scholars are invited to address in their work; we will address each in turn.

Assessing inclusivity and justice-oriented campus culture. Campus activities professionals have a primary responsibility in contemporary postsecondary education to create and support these cultural attributes on their campus and assess their success in doing so. Empirical and anecdotal evidence has long existed suggesting that historical and traditional campus programs, if not rigorously examined with regards to aspects of diversity, equity, and inclusion, may unintentionally sustain a continued marginalization of minoritized students and the inequitable power structures that create such marginalization – along with an environment of white and male supremacy that underlies both. The field of campus activities specifically and student affairs needs more scholarship that addresses the degree to which our work unintentionally contributes to these pernicious issues and examines avenues to create stronger senses of inclusivity and justice in the campus culture.

Building student sense of belonging. Creating a campus culture that promotes inclusivity and social justice directly supports efforts to help individual students feel that they belong within their postsecondary institution. Such work might be considered necessary but not sufficient in creating a widespread sense within students that they belong as part of their campus community and feel welcomed at social and educational programs sponsored by a campus activities unit. Examining the extent to which students feel this sense of belonging and how campus activities contribute to such feelings are key goals within NACA and its updated research agenda. Within the new research agenda, it is noteworthy that attention is paid to the degree to which campus activities work supports students in making decisions that contribute to their holistic health and well-being. NACA considers fundamental to helping students feel that they belong within their institution's community.

Contributing to student academic success. “Campus believes we just plan parties” is a common complaint among campus activities professionals. In response, scholars should focus on assessing student academic outcomes as deeply as those that are more social. Fifty years of research in higher education has shown that involvement on campus is correlated with positive academic outcomes, and scholarship over the past twenty (such as that which resulted in a list of “high impact educational practices” (see Kuh, 2007, among others) has begun to unlock the mechanisms that exist in postsecondary education that result in those outcomes. Less is currently known about the specific roles that campus activities work plays in contributing, or the nature of this relationship.

Supporting student engagement. Beyond the direct contributions to students as a result of their being involved in campus activities initiatives, scholars should also examine potential indirect contributions. For example, how does their involvement in campus activities lead students to become more deeply engaged in other ways on campus? What is the nature of the relationship between involvement in campus activities and students' sense of agency in directing their overall postsecondary experience? Scholarship that builds knowledge in these areas will arm campus activities professionals with talking points that support how their work contributes to the larger goals possessed by high-level campus administrators.

Student Learning and Development

The first area listed in the NACA Research Agenda focuses on how campus activities contribute to broad campus goals. The second helps focus scholars within a smaller scope: how involvement contributes to the growth that occurs within individual students. Like the first area, assessing student development can be divided into several sub-topics.

Cultural competence. Campus activities professionals should feel they contribute to students gaining skills in appreciating, understanding, and practicing connecting with other students from backgrounds that are different from their own. However, research and scholarship examining how campus activities can and do contribute

to these outcomes remain sparse. Moreover, when campus activities professionals create initiatives specifically focused on diversity, equity, and inclusion, how do students engage with these initiatives, and does such engagement look different across student social identities? The NACA Research Agenda also includes a specific suggestion to focus on student spiritual, faith-based, and meditative growth in the context of their campus activities involvement.

Broad skill-building. Employers have long called for postsecondary educators to help students build skills relevant for leadership, problem-solving, working in groups, and managing themselves and others (Mackes, 2017). For these reasons, scholars who study and write about the work that occurs in campus activities office should be encouraged to explore the myriad ways that such work contributes the student skill-building. More explicit knowledge would contribute to better positioning campus activities units on campus and communicating to involved students how to more effectively describe the effects of their efforts when applying for employment.

Employability. Speaking about students applying for jobs, the NACA Research Agenda explicitly encourages research and assessment efforts focused on campus activities' impact on student post-graduation success. In addition, many campus activities units employ students as team members – to what extent does such employment contribute to future professional attainment? NACA as an organization has recently deepened its investment in student professional attainment through the creation of NACA NEXT; what is the relationship between this investment and students' future professional success?

Event planning. Regardless of specific innovations within the field of postsecondary campus activities, a core foundation within its work will remain creating, organizing, advertising, conducting, and assessing the impact of discrete events within the campus community. To what extent do these events contribute to student development – for those who participate and those who help plan and carry them out? How has the logistics and context of event planning shifted over time, especially in the light of current events and international crises like the Covid-19 pandemic?

Lifelong learning. As the pace of change in society increases, the need for people to continually augment their development and growth increases apace. Scholars focused on campus activities are encouraged to investigate the relationship between being involved in the work of campus activities and the development of a mindset dedicated to lifelong learning. For example, to what extent do students –through their employment, volunteer involvement, or participation in programs – go on to pursue post-graduate for education or informal learning, especially in comparison to peers who are not involved?

The Professionalization of Campus Activities Work

While the previous two sections of the NACA Research Agenda focus on students and their experiences and outcomes, the third and final section of the Agenda centers the professionals who manage the work of campus activities units. Student affairs post-graduate preparatory programs have been in existence for several generations (Pierre, & Henning, 2019), yet the specific work of campus activities done by full-time employees has received only marginal attention within these programs in the degree to which they focus on this work. Outside of NACA, opportunities for professional development in campus activities are not centralized or systemic. Further scholarship is clearly warranted. Like the two areas described above, this section of the Agenda is also divided into specific sub-areas.

Diversity, equity, and inclusion-related skill-building. Given both global and campus-based trends, campus activities professionals possess the clear need to be skillful in areas related to inclusion and social justice issues – in their work with students and as employees within complex modern organizations. The NACA Research Agenda encourages scholars to examine how campus activities professionals gain these skills, what they use them to accomplish, and how their students and the broader campus community are affected by their work in this area.

Student organization advising. Advising student organizations has become increasingly complex as the inter-

face between postsecondary students and their institutions becomes increasingly complex in general. NACA supports efforts in emerging scholarship related to best practices in contemporary advising techniques and how these techniques result in shifts in student learning and organizational outcomes, as well as the specific roles that advisors play. In addition, the field needs more depth of knowledge of the human and technical skills required to serve as an effective advisor, as well as how advising student organizations can support continued professional development and attainment.

Graduate student preparation. Surprisingly little has been written about the specific roles of student affairs graduate student preparatory programs in serving as developmental and training grounds for emerging student activities professionals – even as many programs possess formal relationships with campus activities offices in offering financial aid assistantships. What should be the roles these academic programs play in preparing professionals at the Master’s Degree level or in helping support more experienced professionals through a terminal degree? What formal and informal lessons do current graduate students learn about campus activities work and how formal classroom experiences should be balanced with practical experiences within the campus activities office? Scholars are also encouraged to help build a field-wide consensus on the optimal curriculum for success in campus activities administration.

Pathways to professional development. Numerous opportunities exist for growing and developing in the field of campus activities outside of formal educational degree programs, including professional association membership, meeting participation, non-formal education both in person and online, publications like books, scholarly journals, podcasts, and magazines, and countless other resources. Scholars in the field are encouraged to explore and suggest some order to how campus activities professionals approach their lifelong development. Are there common professional trajectories that would be helpful to know about? Do trends or best practices exist in using research and scholarship to continue to build knowledge and skills? How can we stem the continual tide of rising star administrators who begin their career in campus activities and end it in other units or professions altogether?

Taken as a whole, the NACA Research Agenda represents a broad-based yet concrete blueprint to help guide research and assessment on the most pressing issues in the work of campus activities. For anyone interested in scholarship, presumably, a topic mentioned above should be of interest for further investigations. The remainder of this article will focus on how professionals employed in campus activities offices can use the Agenda as a resource and guide in their own work.

INCORPORATING THE RESEARCH AGENDA INTO OUR DAY-TO-DAY WORK

Student activities professionals might be intimidated to think about integrating the NACA research agenda into their daily work. Using the three central focus areas of the Agenda, we will discuss how the Agenda can be employed. Recognizing the impact of our design and delivery of programs and services on campus communities is the first step in gathering the data needed to address the pressing items outlined in the research agenda.

The beginning of an academic year or academic term is the perfect time to revisit and identify the holistic goals of your unit. Using this time to map student learning, campus community building, and programs to the research agenda can help a unit gather the data needed to improve practice. Often these goals may align with or are driven by an institution’s strategic plan.

Connecting your work to the profession can happen when you think about how specific programs/services may map to the items listed on the NACA research agenda. This doesn’t mean you need to conduct an environmental scan of your entire office, instead think about a couple of the programs/services you consider critical to the advancement of your office goals. The final sections will explore how professionals can apply the Agenda to the design, context, and delivery of their work. An example of mapping a single program to one of the focal areas is provided in the impact of student involvement. The last two sections provide key questions to consider in the design, context, and delivery aspects of your programs/services.

Impact of Student Involvement

Higher education scholars have been researching the impact of student involvement for decades. Thomas, Barr, Hottell, Adkins, & Dick (2021) found that during the early years of a student's collegiate experience, factors including student involvement and participation contribute to reducing an institution's dropout rate. While researchers have regularly examined the benefits of student involvement, the benefits are rarely linked directly to the programs and services offered through student activities. This is often because student activities units are not tracking, gathering, or disseminating data intentionally that connects practice to research. In thinking about the impact of student involvement, the first consideration is how that involvement will influence the campus environment.

Design. Student activities unit design work in this area focuses on the programs and services delivered throughout the campus. Think of this as the list of events, programs, trainings offered by the unit. These would include campus-wide events, individual student training, and student organization support. In thinking about the design of these activities and events, consideration should be given to what aspect of the campus environment the event/program influences.

Context. The context is WHO these events/programs are designed to target. The scope of work in student activities involves working with the entire campus community. However, not all programs are designed to serve all students on campus. Intentionally thinking about and being realistic about the student populations that programming events target will provide a more explicit focus on who is being served and how that influences that campus environment.

Delivery. Program delivery should focus on taking the context and recognizing HOW that target population will receive the knowledge. Is the dissemination through a single lecture, an academic course, a multi-day retreat?

Example

Influences on the Campus Environment <i>(Insert specific campus program/service description)</i>	Design <i>(Insert the type of program delivery)</i>	Context <i>(Insert types of student populations)</i>	Delivery <i>(Insert options for sharing knowledge)</i>
Example: CultureFest – 4-hour event held during Welcome Week	<i>What aspect of campus culture is the event trying to influence?</i>	<i>Describe who the event is designed to engage?</i>	<i>How are the students gaining new knowledge?</i>
Campus Culture: influences student culture, reinforces campus traditions, and assists with connectivity	Includes large-scale and small-scale activities in an outside environment.		
Academic Success: role of campus involvement in progression through the college experience	Events include academic-based organizations and social-based organizations		
Student Engagement: contribution to a culture of student engagement	Provides a space for students to find groups and students who connect through shared identities.	Designed to attract the incoming students to the campus and share the opportunities to find peers to connect socially and academically.	
Equity and Diversity: contributes and promotes inclusive and just campus culture	Communicates the importance of all the student populations on campus by showcasing them at the start of the academic year.		Interaction is grounded in students who identify with a specific population sharing about how to engage with that population on campus.

Student Learning and Development

The influence of student involvement on campus indicates a link to improved retention rates, satisfaction with the collegiate environment, and decreased dropout rates. Documenting what students have learned in these spaces has been more challenging. Student activities have actively created learning outcomes; however, documenting those outcomes to specific programming has not happened. Once the campus activities office has identified the programs being offered, the next step is to look at what students will learn and how that learning will be documented.

Design. Once we have the program's structure identified, the next step is to look at the specific content. Connecting programming to student learning and development recognizes the importance of student involvement as part of a student's academic journey. In thinking about design-specific programming, professionals should consider what aspect of learning and development is the focus. Professionals want to start by thinking broadly about how the program contributes to developing leadership, employability skills (e.g., NACE Competencies), multicultural competence, etc. In this area, you want to be able to clearly articulate the broad focus of learning. Think about this as the general description of a course on campus. The question to answer is *What is the focus of learning for the students?*

Context. An overlap is likely to exist between the student impact of student involvement and learning outcomes. In this specific area, the focus is on WHAT is being learned and the desired developmental outcome that can be MEASURED. Each program should have specific learning outcomes identified. In this section, programs should identify if the focus is on specific knowledge gain, identity development, group skills, etc. Essentially at this point, you are looking at what specific developmental tasks and competencies are trying to be achieved. It would also be critical to note connections with other programs. For example, a student leadership retreat may have outcomes that connect to the training program for student organization officers. This is where you become more specific and list the learning outcomes associated with the learning focus. The question to answer is *What are the learning outcomes?*

Delivery. Key to the delivery is the assessment of the learning and development that is the program's content. How the program is delivered does not tell us what has been learned. Building into the programming, evaluation of the outcomes is where student activities can begin to document individual programs' specific impact. The delivery of student learning and development is focused on what type of evaluation is being collected. Delivery could include an online questionnaire, program activity during the event where data is gathered on learning, a reflection paper, etc. This is where you gather the documentation about if you are meeting those learning outcomes and staying focused on the learning goals. In this section, you will describe and answer the question: *How can we measure what the students can do upon completion of the program/service?*

Professionalization of Campus Activities

In this area of the research agenda, the focus shifts to how the work of professionals in campus activities yields individual and collective competency development. Broadly speaking, advising is one of the most common activities that takes place on a college campus. As we have discussed in this article, broadly speaking, student involvement has been identified as a significant contributor to student retention and decreased dropout rate, and documenting the student learning in these out-of-classroom spaces provides connections to post-graduation employability. Thus, it becomes only natural that the contributions of the professionals who provide these learning environments and content need to also understand how to articulate their professional contributions to the collegiate environment.

Design. Student activities units should consider how they are intentionally focusing on the professional development of their staff. The busy nature of student activities often doesn't permit time to focus on the development of the staff when the focus is consistently on the development of the students. As units create their annual programming plan, attention should also be given to how to provide professional development opportunities to staff.

Those could include time away from the office to attend a NACA conference, staff retreats, etc. The key question to consider is *What are the spaces in which you expect professionals to learn?* These would include thinking about campus-based professional development, regional involvement, and professional association engagement.

Context. Student activities offices consist of professionals with varying levels of education and experience. Most office organizational structures are hierarchical, resulting in different experiences and skills required for each position classification. The context of professional development should consider WHO the programs are targeting. Additionally, consideration regarding all staff training around social issues and emerging research trends can benefit all staff. Consider *Who is the focus of the professional development?* This would require you to think about how professional development and competency development are linked to experience. Additionally, the context around job description requirements should be examined to think about how you are preparing staff to take on increased levels of responsibility to advance in the profession.

Delivery. Student activities professionals should document the professional competencies they have gained through their work and intentional professional development involvement. This can be done by using annual reviews to document past performance and identify opportunities for intentional competency development. Use time in staff meetings to share knowledge gained from conference attendance and how that information can be helpful to the work on the unit. *How are you considering evaluating the professional growth of campus activities professionals? What documentation can be provided to help communicate to the profession that campus activities professionals have specific competencies?* Think about how to provide written documentation that can be provided in a professional's electronic portfolio, or how electronic badges can be displayed on social media accounts like LinkedIn.

CONCLUSION

As many have observed, in an era of declining resources, campus activities professionals will need to do more than just increase our effectiveness – we need to demonstrate that effectiveness through data. Increasing our effectiveness will require understanding the theories that can help us improve student learning, meet institutional goals, and target improvements in ourselves and our teams. This improvement should include an intentional focus on improving our ability to interpret and conduct research. In creating the NACA Research Agenda, the association puts forward an inspiring and ambitious goal for telling the story of our collective impact as campus activities professionals. The editorial board welcomes submissions on these compelling and relevant topics.

REFERENCES

- Booth, W. C., Colomb, G. G., Williams, J. M., Bizup, J., & Fitzgerald, W. T. (2017). *The craft of research*. The University of Chicago Press.
- Brill, K., Croft, L., Ogle, J., Russell Holtz, S., Smedick, B., Hicks, M., & Coats, J. (2009, March). *Competency guide for college student leaders—Newest project by the NACA education advisory group*. Retrieved from http://www.sbctc.edu/resources/documents/colleges-staff/commissions-councils/cusp/naca_college_student_leader_competency_guide.pdf
- Pierre, D. & Henning, G. (2019). “Master’s Level Student Affairs Professional Preparation Programs.” In Wells, J.B. & Henry-Darwish, N. (Ed.), *CAS Professional Standards for Higher Education* (10th Ed) (pp. 342-343). Washington, DC: Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education.
- Kruger, K., & Peck, A. (2017). “Disruption, Change, and Telling the Story of Student Affairs: An Introduction.” In Peck, A. (Ed.), *Engagement and Employability: Integrating Career Learning through Co-Curricular Experiences in Postsecondary Education* (xi-xxxix). Washington, DC: NASPA-Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education.
- Love, P., & Goyal, N. (2019). Enhancing the use of theory in student activities professionals’ practice. *Journal of Campus Activities Practice and Scholarship*, 1(1), 33-38
- Mackes, M. (2017). “Employer Preferred Skills and Attributes.” In Peck, A. (Ed.), *Engagement and Employability: Integrating Career Learning through Co-Curricular Experiences in Postsecondary Education* (pp. 149-188). Washington, DC: NASPA-Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education.
- McCullar, Peck, DeSawal, Rosch & Russell Krebs (2020). Considering the nature of theory building in the field of campus activities: Advice from the Editorial Board. *Journal of Campus Activities Practice and Scholarship*, 2(1), 5-11
- Patton, L. D., Renn, K. A., Guido-DiBrito, F., & Quaye, S. J. (2016). *Student development in college: theory, research, and practice*. Jossey-Bass & Pfeiffer.
- Peck, A., & Cummings, T. (2017). “Developing Employability Skills through Campus Activities.” In Peck, A. (Ed.), *Engagement and Employability: Integrating Career Learning through Co-Curricular Experiences in Postsecondary Education* (pp. 149-188). Washington, DC: NASPA-Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education.