JCAPS

BUILDING A CULTURE OF SCHOLARSHIP IN CAMPUS ACTIVITIES UNITS

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A culture of scholarship might seem like an unattainable goal for busy campus activities units immersed in student life, exciting programming, organizational advising, and campus administration. In this short introduction to Volume 5, Issue 3, the JCAPS Advisory Board describes its ideas for how to think about what "scholarship" is and how to efficiently engage with the scholarship of campus activities in ways that build up, rather than enact a tax on, the energy level of campus activities professionals.

Consider 9:30am on a Monday morning in the middle of the academic year. After a weekend of coordinating well-attended programs on Friday and Saturday nights, with all the detailed planning and logistical oversight that come with them. Add a Sunday afternoon student organization meeting with its requisite planning and advising responsibilities. Include an Associate Dean who oversees several student affairs units, who has never served in the campus activities unit, who seems ambivalent to support its staff in pulling away from these responsibilities, even in part, to consistently engage in "scholarship" as part of their professional responsibilities. Does this sound like a typical campus activities unit at many colleges and universities associated with the National Association of Campus Activities? At 9:30am on a Monday morning, "scholarship," may be far from a fundamental focus in that unit. According to Kane, "practitioners' limitless availability frequently force a comparison between priorities of scholarship and the tyranny of the urgent" (2019, p. 30).

These seemingly built-in organizational barriers to creating a culture of scholarship in campus activities units can often be paired with self-created personal barriers, as well. The term "scholar," when used in higher education, often has a connotation with some degree of expertise that can only be attained through special training or preparation – through completing long and grueling coursework, attaining a credential most people do not possess, or a combination of both. Those who possess the privilege of being popularly considered "scholars" are, in this sense, specialists. They are literally "special" in their expertise, not like the "regular" folk who are engaged in the work – the daily grind – within their roles and responsibilities on campus. The Advisory Board of the *Journal of Campus Activities Practice and Scholarship,* however, believes this connotation to not only be wrong, but harmful to the continued health and growth of our field. Our goal in this short article is to address both types of barriers and provide insight on how to build a culture of scholarship in units despite them. The need for an "expanded view of scholarship" (Kane, 2019, p. 30) has been an on-going concern of the JCAPS Advisory Boad as well as the leadership of NACA.

The word "scholar" is derived from Old English (i.e., before the written word was widespread). The word *scholere* can be translated literally as "someone who learns." In this way, "scholars" are not those who have arrived at the destination of learning (e.g., someone with an acronym like "Ph.D." after their name). Rather, they are constant

learners. The significance of this difference cannot be understated. We do not engage in professional development to *become* scholars; we engage in professional development because we are scholars. The distinction holds important practical significance for campus activities work, as well: those units engaged in actively learning about their work and the world around them will almost always over time outperform those units where there is no innovation and creativity.

It is not coincidence that the earliest documents that describe the work of student affairs (e.g., the Student Personnel Point of View, 1937) embed "learning" as a core principle in the professional work of supporting student development. More recently, the Student Learning Imperative, first drafted in 1996 (American College Personnel Association), directly ties holistic learning in students to the advancement of a culture of scholarship in student affairs administration, including within campus activities offices. The most recent draft, from 2004, begins, "higher education is in the *throes* (emphasis added) of major transformation" (p. 1) and calls for student affairs fields to respond in co-curricular settings. Such throes have not lessened in size nor significance after the Covid-19 pandemic, and require our field to be innovative, creative, open, and inclusive, which all require individual and collective learning.

Still, we recognize it is not so easy to simply change one's outlook on engaging in scholarship to build a culture where a critical mass of staff in any given campus activities unit engage as scholars in their work. Structural issues most likely exist that should be recognized. The Advisory Board believes their existence does not necessarily represent barriers to advancing a culture of scholarship, but at the least, might serve as de-motivators to such advancement.

The first barrier is related to those supervisors and administrators who oversee campus activities units, and believe that staff who are "learning" are not also "doing" – and therefore are not fulfilling the roles and responsibilities in which they were hired. These administrators might look with a cynical eye towards those staff who propose the freedom to spend two hours each week out of their office and engaged purely in "learning activities." The second barrier can often be found within employee evaluation programs that emphasize concrete and measurable outputs, such as the number of students who attend programs, or the number of dollars spent on student development, or the number of staff who are supervised. Rarely do evaluation programs like these also provide explicit space to report on and celebrate new knowledge or skills gained, and how these gains might relate to those outputs. A final barrier might be a little more subtle and resides in campus activities staff themselves – the staff who believe that "professional development" means "attending conferences." To be clear, field-wide meetings like NACA Live, the ACPA national convention, or NASPA regional conferences are often filled with opportunities for staff to engage as scholars in their field. These events are excellent avenues for growth. And, they are also expensive, time-consuming, and intermittent. After all, attending a three-day conference in another place involves spending hundreds or thousands of dollars, one or more days dedicated solely to travel, and take place over only 0.8% of the year.

These barriers are important, and can only be systemically eliminated across our field brick by brick, individual by individual, campus unit by campus unit. To support such work, we provide some ideas to think about and practice "scholarship" in campus activities units in manageable, concrete, and consistent ways.

Similar to what Kane asked in 2019, what would a commitment to scholarship look like in campus activities practice? First, to counter the connotation of "scholar" as a specialist, who has done a deep dive into knowledge in ways that separate them from most regular folks in campus activities, we believe the process of scholarship can represent dipping a toe into the swimming pool of knowledge just as much as a swan dive from 10 meters up. In other words, testing new arenas for learning is scholarship as well as writing a book. For example, spending 10-15 minutes a day reading an article during breakfast, listening to a podcast while walking, or writing reflections on a blog post all are examples of someone who learns. These become the building blocks of greater insight. The point is, all of these activities expand one's thinking, particularly when dialogue ensues. Such scholarship prompts connections between new information and previous experiences, leading to creativity, innovation, and the type of productive disruption that improves our work.

Generally, "scholarship" implies depth – learning a lot about something. But emerging research suggests that generalists outperform specialists across a variety of employment sectors (Epstein, 2019). Considering the ethos of general learning that undergirds most of higher education, it is better to know a bit about a lot than to know a lot about a bit. Moreover, because the identity of "scholar" is typically associated with faculty on many campuses and because student affairs professionals often do not see themselves as connected to academic disciplines at their own university, those in student affairs may be hesitant to consider ourselves as campus activities scholars. This is unfortunate. We see no need to stick to the same topics in learning each day and week. Scholarship can be picking a topic that you find interesting in the moment (even if it is not directly related to campus activities work). There will almost inevitably be connections you find that you can make to your own life and work. Consider not only professionally related publications such as JCAPS but also national publications like NYTimes, rigorous blog posts and podcasts, and also local outlets. Importantly, we suggest spending time reflecting on connections between this media and your campus activities work. Then, writing or talking about these connections with colleagues clarifies the meaning you make of them and how the new insights they prompt can improve your work. The process of involving colleagues seeks to create a culture within the campus activities unit, going beyond your own individual practice.

Another means to create a culture of scholarship would be to include onboarding experiences that demonstrate that scholarship is embraced and encouraged for entering professionals and professionals new to campus. For example, creating and sharing reading/listening lists and potential learning experiences available on campus and in the region can introduce new staff to a culture of scholarship (Kane, 2019). Review such lists to consider what voices may be missing or what Kane called "create the context that is missing" (p. 31). Onboarding and responding to scholarship of practice suggestions is an area in which many practitioner supervisors and supervisees have individual autonomy over what could be implemented immediately.

A final point that we wish to make in building a culture of scholarship harkens back to our early point referencing those campus activities professionals that conflate and limit "professional development" (and therefore their learning) to attending conferences or watching a screen by attending a webinar. Both can be excellent avenues for learning, but both also come with an embedded drawback; they presume an externally-driven responsibility to provide resources. They are the equivalent of a multiple-choice exam item where all the possible options have already been chosen by those in authority. Contrast this with some of the ideas just provided in previous paragraphs. In this context, deciding which article across all issues of JCAPS to read or which book to buy or rent are more like fill-in-the-blank items, where possibilities are practically endless. Ideas like these also have the added benefit of making your learning active; rather than sitting and listening, engagement requires active effort and options for when to optimally engage.

In summary, our goal is not necessarily to transform campus activities units into bastions of philosophic thinking about our collective work. Rather, we simply invite readers to think of simple, time-efficient but consistent, means by which they can continually bolster what they know and think about their work in campus activities. These include a thirty-minute podcast listened to over the course of a few days and then discussed with a colleague. They include a short editorial from the local newspaper, read while waiting for a meeting to start, and then printed to share with friends at work. It includes a written reflection in Campus Activities Programming Magazine about new initiatives. And of course, it includes that article from the *Journal of Campus Activities Practice and Scholarship* that you have been meaning to consume and then reflect on. Regardless of your specific path, however, our goal is simply for you to keep walking that path, scholar.

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