CONSIDERING THE NATURE OF THEORY-BUILDING IN THE FIELD OF CAMPUS ACTIVITIES: ADVICE FROM THE JOURNAL EDITORIAL BOARD

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AT ITS HEART, THE CENTRAL MISSION OF THE JOURNAL OF CAMPUS ACTIVITIES SCHOLARSHIP AND PRACTICE (JCAPS) has been to promote and sustain a culture of scholarship within the field of campus activities. This editorial board has used a variety of strategies for accomplishing this goal. We routinely reach out to senior scholars in the field to invite them to share insights that can benefit student affairs professionals. We work in a hands-on way to help burgeoning scholars in our field to develop a research and scholarship agenda, and to make publication an important part of their scholarly activity. In the Fall 2019 edition of JCAPS, we provided a guide for transitioning a dissertation into a scholarly publication (Rosch, Desawal, McCullar, Peck, & Russell Krebs, 2019). This article, in particular, has been favorably received since it fills an important gap not only in the field of campus activities, but within student affairs overall.

A key strategy in promoting a culture of scholarship in campus activities is engaging practitioners in intentionally applying theoretical elements in their practice more consistently. Given the work demands of this group, it can be hard to make time to even think about theory – let alone produce new scholarship to help guide others. In the first edition of this journal, Love and Goyal (2018) wrote, "…student activities professionals…are busy people who argue that they hardly have the time to slow down to use theory to guide and direct their work" (p. 33). They add, "In our conversations with professionals about how they determine their actions to bring about specific outcomes, formal theory rarely enters the conversation" (p. 34). Beyond the speed at which student activities professionals are expected to operate, and the volume of work they must manage, there are other reasons why they often find it difficult to apply existing theory. A significant reason identified by Love and Goyal (2019) is that many have limited knowledge of theory beyond the introduction provided during their graduate program of student development and organizational theories that are frequently cited within the professional literature.

In their piece, Love and Goyal (2019) advocate that practitioners embrace not only formal theories to guide their actions, but also their own personal theories that they have developed to explain, predict and proscribe their own personal approach to the development of their students. Developing your own personal theories, as Love and Goyal note, is an example of how campus activities professionals unconsciously are using constructivism to make meaning of their environments. Full-time researchers often identify a theoretical perspective (e.g., constructivism) to indicate to the reader how they approach and situate their work. Campus activities professionals make meaning of their environments (e.g., student organization behaviors, student leader training programs, etc.)

by translating and interpreting the individual behaviors to understand social interaction. This meaning-making process is known as constructivism (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2006). The application of formal theory to practice involves developing a conscious awareness of the beliefs and theories that one holds and using one's understanding of formal theory to validate or question their own construction of the observed environment.

Campus activities professionals observe student learning and development day-to-day within the campus environment. As a result, professionals frequently respond to an observed phenomenon within their environment and adjust the delivery of services to meet student needs. These adjustments often improve the student experience and promote student learning. The action of improving conditions for student learning is how student activities professionals pursue and achieve "praxis." Praxis is defined by Kemmis and Smith (2008) as "action that is oriented and informed by traditions in a field" (p. 4). An easy way to conceptualize praxis is to think of it as the fulcrum in a leaver – like the balancing point of a seesaw. Praxis is the balance point between theory and practice. Praxis is desirable for practitioners to attain– balancing the knowledge of the theory unpinning their work with how one approaches the specific work they are doing.

In this edition of JCAPS, Spencer and Smedick provide a comprehensive review of the Council for the Advancement of Standards (CAS) in Higher Education (2019) professional standards and how they serve as a framework for ensuring that student development is at the center of our work, assessed regularly, and used to make program improvement. This framework from CAS sets the conditions in which praxis can be achieved through the understanding and application of formal theory. The newly updated CAS standards provide a blueprint for successfully assessing our programs and services, and can serve as a stepping-stone from creating a culture of student learning and assessment to creating a culture of scholarship. As we mentioned above, we see our work in JCAPS as creating a culture of scholarship in the field of campus activities. To this end, we suggest that helping campus activities professionals achieve praxis – by connecting formal theories with our constructivist approach to improve student learning and engagement unique to the campus activities environment– may be the very essence of our scholarship.

It is no secret that campus activities professionals, and student affairs as a whole, have struggled to create a culture of assessment. A culture of assessment is a "set of pervasive actions and behaviors by staff across an organization (e.g., unit, division) focusing on the use of data in decision making regarding the accountability and improvement of programs and services" (Henning & Roberts, p. 263). As JCAPS works to build a culture of scholarship, we recognize that one of the challenges professionals may be facing is that they are unaware of the data they have, and how they have used constructivism to create conditions in response to issues facing students.

GROUNDING OUR CULTURE OF SCHOLARSHIP

As we begin to build a focused culture of campus activities scholarship, the editorial board wanted to offer some considerations for how professionals could translate their practice into scholarship. First, we recognize that campus activities scholarship is about studying students in their campus environments. Second, we recognize that campus activities professionals' interactions with students are inherent to the discovery process. Third, the intentional creation of a program or service for students is based on the interaction between the professionals and the students. These three characteristics lead us to suggest that a constructivist grounded theory methodology would be an ideal starting point to build a culture of scholarship.

Grounded theory methodology focuses on aligning the theory development to the phenomenon that is being questioned (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, 1998) through a focus on those individuals that experience the environment (Charmaz, 2000, as cited in Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2006). Its systematic techniques and procedures of analysis enable the researcher to develop a substantive theory that meets the criteria for doing 'good' science: significance, theory-observation compatibility, generalizability, reproducibility, precision, rigor, and verification" (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 31). It is also anchored by the researcher's identity, philosophy and perspective (Jones, Torres & Arminio, 2014). Jones, Torres & Arminio (2014) write, "[r]ecognizing the relationship between researcher and the researched is an essential criterion for judging qualitative research" (p. 29). Taking into con-

sideration the three characteristics described above, a constructivist grounded theory "arises from the interactive process and its temporal, cultural and structural contexts" (Charmaz, 2000, pp. 510, 523-524 as cited in Jones, Torres, and Arminio, 2006). What does this mean for the campus activities professional? Those personal/informal theories that have been created within your work environments may not be that informal at all. This connection makes grounded theory ideal for student activities professionals who are seeking ways to translate their informal theory of practice with others. Within this structure, researchers can use the knowledge gained through listening to those with interest and/or understanding of a given phenomenon to construct grounded theories that can be empirically tested and validated in ways that lead to a more robust understanding.

The following represents a framework for which practitioners can employ a grounded theory methodology to translate their own practice (e.g., intentional development of student programs and services) into scholarship. Let us presume that you, reader of this article and campus activities professional yourself, have used data (qualitative and quantitative) to create the innovative programs and services that have received national awards and have been selected by peers for presentation at annual conferences. What we invite you to do at this stage is not just to share the structure of the program and highlight student success stories. In addition, we invite you to write about how you created the program/service, specifically through identifying the data (e.g., student voices, surveys, student newspaper articles, etc.) that you used to articulate to colleagues the observed phenomenon, along with what knowledge (formal and informal) informed the design of the program/service.

Dissemination of these ideas through JCAPS allows others to refine and test these assumptions to build a theoretical understanding of how the entire discipline of campus activities can become based as heavily on theory as on best practices. To pursue a model in which campus activities professionals feel comfortable using a constructivist grounded theory methodology, there are four necessary conditions that we must meet. First, we need to learn to improve our knowledge of formal theory within the fields of campus activities and student affairs. Second, we need to learn to translate assessment into scholarship. Third, we must improve our comfort with and rigorous application of qualitative methodologies. Lastly, we must find ways to share what we learn as a profession so we can test and validate our grounded theories.

IMPROVING KNOWLEDGE OF FORMAL THEORY

As noted earlier, professionals often do not acknowledge the use of formal theories in their day-to-day practice. Bensimon (2007) identified that the tension that exists between theory and practice is linked to the "invisibility of practitioners in the discourse on student success" (p. 44). She further notes that the invisibility the practitioner sees in current scholarship results in the creation of implicit theory that is based on assumptions gained from observed behaviors. Such implicit theory is similar to what Love and Goyal (2019) refer to as personal theories. How does this become enacted in a campus activities context? It emerges when a supervisor tells their graduate assistant that "we don't use theory;" and when a conference attendee who says about a program session, "that is a nice program that the presenters have developed, but my campus isn't very similar, so it wasn't useful." The supervisor likely does employ formal theory, but maybe cannot articulate it, just as much as the theory that underlies the success of the program described at the conference also can be applied at non-similar campuses.

Reason and Kimball (2015) note that "understanding formal theories provides a common language and shared understanding of student development goals among professionals" (p. 368). They offered a model of theory-to-practice translation that focuses on sequential design and includes two feedback loops. First, we consider formal theory, which can be described as a shared common language that is introduced within an institutional context. In practice, we may find ourselves using common language to describe how we interact with students. For example, we may see multiple campus activities offices around the country publicize that offer a "holistic" student experience. The common use of this word, "holistic," broadly references literature that indicates professionals consider how students process knowledge, the influence of their identities and how they relate to others. Applying formal theory within our own unique institutional contexts leads to developing informal theories that many professionals use daily to inform their practice. Essentially, it is how we anticipate the behaviors and needs of our students and then respond day-to-day within our institution through the implementation of programs

and services. Done well, we utilize a double-feedback loop. The first feedback loop is how one's practice informs our application of informal theory; as what works for use changes, we adjust our informal theory. The second loop is how our practice informs our institutional context, evaluating how the programs and services we offer are meeting institutional goals. This second feedback loop becomes critical as we consider the growth of scholarship within campus activities.

Professionals have the opportunity through JCAPS to begin processes that lead to the creation of formal theory related to campus activities practice. We suggest that professionals begin with re-familiarizing themselves with core student development theory, and looking for the theories that have guided the design of the programs and services they offer. Since no one theory explains all student behavior, professionals should recognize that they are likely using aspects of multiple theories. Using a mapping exercise to connect programs, intended learning outcomes, and associated formal theories is an ideal place to get started. This exercise can be useful to help identify the terms and concepts that are common throughout the programs/services offered at your specific institution.

As we approach our work, we should recognize that social justice is a central value embedded in the work of campus activities specifically and student affairs as a whole. Campus activities professionals have often been on the front lines with students to identify systems of oppression that continue to lead to inequitable and unjust conditions within higher education. As we build our culture of scholarship, we should ensure that we are using a critical lens to employ the theories and literature that build a common language across the context of campus activities. Approaching our work in this way can not only benefit the students on our own campuses, but challenge and inform the perspective of other professionals within our field. Critical theory can provide a framework for approaching this work. According to Jones, Torres and Arminio (2014), critical theory constitutes "… a lens by which to promote critique and analysis for the purpose of increased understanding, improved praxis and ultimately liberation" (p. 18). Critical theory examines how constructs like race, class, ability, gender, religion or sexuality inform an individual's perspective and provide a basis for evaluating social constructs.

TRANSLATING ASSESSMENT INTO SCHOLARSHIP

Assessment and research share many similarities. Both employ various methods to understand issues of practical importance better. The biggest difference between the two rests in their goals. Erwin (1991) defined assessment as "the systematic basis for making inferences about the learning and development of students" (p. 15). Upcraft & Schuh (2002) characterized two central differences between assessment and research. First, "assessment guides good practice, whereas research guides theory and tests concepts," and second, "assessment typically has implications for a single institution, whereas research typically has broader implications for higher education" (p. 17). Both of these differences must be acknowledged as we consider elevating assessment as a form of scholarship in student activities. A significant limitation of assessment efforts is that it is often not broadly shared even on one's own campus. Another is that such efforts often become more of an exercise in institutional compliance than a sincere attempt to improve outcomes for students.

Drawing upon the concept of grounded theory, assessment-based inquiry can provide a basis for testing the local findings on a particular campus to see if it may hold true for other campuses as well. Here, the emphasis on "closing the loop" in assessment (i.e., where data analysis leads to practical changes and new questions) takes on increased relevance. The best assessment recognizes, as Banta and Blaich (2011) observed, that "…the most important outcome of assessment is not gathering high-quality data, generating reports, or stimulating conversations among colleagues. That outcome is instead demonstrably improving student learning by assessing it and using the findings to revise programs accordingly" (p. 26). One way to do that is for student activities scholar-practitioners to find significant issues to study on their campuses, rigorously assess them, make improvements, and measure the change produced. We suggest a final step of thoroughly documenting the process in JCAPS while suggesting ways it can be applied at other institutions. This kind of scholarship is desperately needed in contemporary higher education – where our current approach to improvement often involves considerable trial and error. JCAPS would welcome this sort of research that promotes best practices related to common issues in the field.

Qualitative research provides the opportunity to progress to the "heart" of an event and to learn the story or "essence" of an experience. Being able to tell the story behind the numbers that quantitative data provides will help explain why something is happening, working, or not working. Researchers have created many different approaches, or designs, to qualitative research, and there are a few that we feel are particularly relevant in campus activities and other areas of student affairs. As was previously mentioned, there is a growing acceptance of qualitative methodologies as a means of collecting reliable data (Patton, 2002). Additionally, these methods are often more intuitive to student activities and student affairs practitioners who have the opportunity to develop and refine a skill set for listening to students to understand and meet their needs. While there is a wide variety of qualitative methods, we will focus on interviews, focus groups, case study, action research, critical theory and generic qualitative inquiry.

Interviews

It stands to reason that a simple way to determine what people think is simply to ask them. By using open-ended questions that encourage participants to share their perceptions and beliefs, the researcher can achieve a robust understanding of how individuals experience the issue being studied. An important consideration in conducting interviews is whether the researcher will use pre-determined questions or allow the conversation to progress naturally. There are advantages to each. By preparing questions in advance, the researcher can thoroughly investigate the topic of interest. However, a more emergent style may discover considerations that the researcher might otherwise miss.

For example, imagine we were conducting interviews with individuals who regularly ride the institution's shuttle bus. We might ask detailed questions about the shuttle bus like, "What do you like most about the shuttle bus" or "tell me about your interactions with the bus driver." Or, we could ask more broad questions and let the topics that students choose to discuss help us inform the question about what aspects of the shuttle bus they care about most.

Focus Groups

According to Edmunds (1999), focus groups are used as a "means of testing concepts, new products and messages" (p. 2). Since it is a qualitative methodology, the results are not generalizable to other populations or groups, per se. Typically, a focus group is made up of a group of eight to 10 people for a discussion of a relevant topic in which the group has a vested interest. The number of participants does not necessarily impact the validity of the findings. As a matter of practicality, groups large than ten may be too large to facilitate easily. As we discussed previously, the job of a qualitative researcher is not to predict if other groups will see the phenomenon in the same way as the focus group. So unlike quantitative research, which relies upon a random sample to ensure that bias is minimized, this group is selected specifically because it has an opinion about what will be discussed.

Case Study

Case studies work well in higher education because of the nature of the "bound system" which defines it. Punch (2014) describes,

> The case may be an individual, or a role, or a small group, or an organization, or a community or a nation. It could also be a decision, or a policy, or a process, or an incident, or an event of some sort, and there are other possibilities as well. (p.121)

Case study could also include a set time frame that is observed. These all lend well to events we host or student groups with whom we work. The case study will give a snapshot of that particular place in time.

Action Research

Action research comes more naturally in our field, as it is, in essence, researching the activities that we are doing. Action research "aims to design inquiry and build knowledge for the use in the service of action to solve a practical problem. Therefore, within action research, the inquiry starts from a specific or applied problem or question" (p.136). The practicality of the research is the strength of it in student activities. Using action research

in association with the implementation of our events will provide us the opportunity to study the outcomes of our events. We can design specific research outcomes based on the outcomes of our events. These outcomes can then be used to measure audience reactions or the learning outcomes for our student leaders.

Generic Qualitative Inquiry
While somewhat more controversial to some researchers, a generic qualitative inquiry provides an opportunity to do hold to the principles of qualitative research without subscribing to a strict methodology (Kahlke, 2014). Using a generic qualitative approach, you can use the aspect of multiple designs or not adhere to the strict parameters of a particular design. For example, grounded theory has a strict set of guidelines and parameters a researcher would normally follow, but with a generic qualitative inquiry, this will allow you to use the methodological approach of qualitative research without holding to the foundation of the research methodology. Generic qualitative inquiry is a great design when you are trying to figure out why something is happening and need to gather more information to inform your research questions or your actions. Not having the bound systems provides the flexibility to collect the data you need while also being able to utilize a variety of "lenses" through which to study the data.

SHARING WHAT WE LEARN

The field of campus activities possesses several natural gateways for building a stronger culture of research and scholarship. For accreditation, year-end review, measuring program outcomes, assessing student satisfaction, and conducting employee performance evaluation, we collect data. Some of this data collected are notorious for either never being used outside of stating you have collected it or only used once in a report. We have the opportunity to be intentional in the data we are collecting and how we are using it to inform the field more broadly. Creating research questions and being intentional about what we are asking of our participants or our students can make a difference. If you are trying to figure out why students are engaged or not engaged in your activities, another campus is probably experiencing a similar quandary. In campus activities, there are countless opportunities to conduct qualitative research that includes the staff who are putting the programs on and the students (the audience) they are impacting – and then broadly describing the results of such research.

Including Program Staff and Student Workers
Qualitative research provides a great opportunity to investigate what your student leaders or staff members are gaining from participating in the organization. Do you have outcomes for the student leaders, and are you meeting them? Have you wondered why some members join and stay while other members leave? Is your organization attractive to some population of students and not others? Qualitative research could get to the root of the issues you are having by talking with those who participate or those who do not participate.

Including Students Participants
Numerous campus activities professionals would like to know how the programs they coordinate create impact within their target audiences and meet their needs. Attaining such knowledge involves more than simply finding out what speaker they want to hear or what band they want to see. More in-depth efforts involve, for example, finding out if they feel a better sense of belonging to the college or university by attending your events. More systemically investigating the needs of your student audience and the impact of your programs on them – and then sharing your results through outlets like JCAPS, may not help you develop new and better programs, but also advance the field of scholarship in campus activities.

CONCLUSION

It is important for us not only to be intentional about the data we are collecting, but also to disseminate the data we do collect. Intentionality in programming has become very important in harsh economic times, where justification of our resources has never been so critical. We need to show that our programs make an impact on our students – both those involved and those who are participating in our events. Through conducting research,

we can do this on a field-wide scale. Engaging in a more intentional process of theory-building through your campus activities work, and then sharing your information with the field through a publication such as JCAPS, will strengthen our programs, assist others, and establish a foundation for the importance of student activities to student affairs and higher education.

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