

Theory to Practice

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Over the past two years, I have had the privilege to work in the Office of Student Activities as a Graduate Assistant for Programming. Throughout this time, I have seen various theories and academic knowledge bases being put to use. However, I have seen ample opportunities for use of these theories in developing programs and implementing ideas. This paper will discuss the academic knowledge bases of the College Student Personnel program at Western Illinois University (WIU) and their use in my internship site.

Concepts from the Academic Knowledge Base Used in Practice

Students

The “students” academic knowledge base consists of student characteristics, student populations, the various student development theories, and counseling. This section will highlight those that are used in the Office of Student Activities (OSA) and how they are used.

Populations. Student populations are discussed extensively as certain events and programs are created for WIU students. For instance, I frequently have discussions with the University Union Board (UUB) officers about the student populations that they have created events for, and why it is important to reach out to other student populations. We have talked about the various interests of student populations and how activities can serve as an avenue for student development and personality expression. Therefore, the students are sure to plan events that consist of different genres, interests, abilities, and cultural enrichment.

Similarly, the various functional areas within the Office of Student Activities sometimes cater to specific student populations. For instance, students involved in greek life are a population all their own. These students typically have different interests, needs, and desires that need to be catered to by the OSA. Traditionally, greek students have a higher level of academic

achievement, involvement, and often, greater liability. Because of this, certain programs are designed to fit these characteristics in greek life.

Characteristics. Another important concept in the “students” academic knowledge base is student characteristics. While this may include student populations, this section will focus on the understanding of millennial student characteristics and its use in the OSA. Coomes and DeBard (2004) identified millennial students as sheltered, special, confident, team-oriented, and achieving, among others. Knowing this, in work with student affairs, the professionals in the OSA treat the students as unique individuals, but understand how these characteristics may play into their development and actions. For example, many of the students we work with want to achieve and do great things, but they want their advisors to walk them through every step. Knowing this, I can offer students challenge to learn the steps on their own, but make sure to provide the support that they need as members of the millennial generation.

Learning styles. As discussed in Evans, Forney, Guido, and Patton (2009), Kolb discusses the various learning styles of students and the contexts in which these styles learn best. These are considered by the staff in the OSA when planning retreats and workshops for students and staff members. We are encouraged to design these sessions by using various methods of learning including handouts, powerpoint presentations, case studies, discussions, and more. This gives students and staff members the opportunity to learn from the sessions in the manner that best suits them.

Organizations

This section will discuss the academic knowledge base concept of “organizations”. This category includes group dynamics, organizational theory, administrative concepts and practices,

functional areas, and more. I believe the OSA is quite effective at using this knowledge base in its day-to-day work as illustrated below.

Group dynamics. Group dynamics is used extensively with student organizations under the Office of Student Activities. Since the professionals in the OSA advise and supervise a number of student organizations, discussions of group dynamics are inevitable and extremely important. While each organization has separate goals and mission statements, all of them work most effectively and efficiently when they develop cohesion. Therefore, as professionals, it is important for us to facilitate activities and discussions that promote teamwork and allow the group to navigate through conflicts and successes.

Functional areas. Another area that the OSA excels in is working with other functional areas. This is specifically prevalent in programming. In my work with UUB, the student leaders brainstorm ways that they can reach out to other functional areas through programming. For instance, the Homecoming committee works with Alumni relations to program and provide services for WIU alumni. Also, the students have frequently worked with the Gwendolyn Brooks Cultural Center to provide events that promote multiculturalism. These, among many more, allow the students to recognize the services provided by other functional areas and reach out to other populations served through those areas.

Advising/supervising. The difference between advising and supervising was not something I fully understood until I entered my assistantship in the OSA. Since then, I have learned that advisors should motivate, guide, and encourage students, while supervisors should exert control and give direction to students. As an advisor to the University Union Board, I usually play the role of advisor, but sometimes, must also play the role of supervisor. The UUB officers get paid a stipend to complete the duties of their officer position, and they are held to a

different standard than other volunteers because of the compensation they receive. If those duties are not fulfilled, it is my responsibility to remind students that I may have to demand the completion of these duties or take necessary disciplinary action.

Facilitation. Facilitation is an important concept used by all areas within the OSA in working with students. As new professionals, we are encouraged to facilitate activities and discussions that aide in problem-solving. Most professionals and graduate assistants in the OSA have facilitated these activities. Also, within the last year, I have been able to help students facilitate workshops and activities at retreats and at regional conferences. This helps them develop their public speaking skills and interpersonal skills to prepare them for their future career.

Professional Associations. Nearly every individual who works under the Office of Student Activities is a member of a professional association. Ann, the Director of the OSA, sees great importance in staying current in our functional areas and continuing to educate ourselves through participation in these associations. Whether it means attending conferences or just reading publications, or participating in webinars, each of us stays relevant in our areas. In some of these functional areas, like Greek Life and Programming, students are also encouraged to be a part of these associations so that they can learn more to aide them in their volunteer roles, but also to provide them skills and knowledge for their future career.

Special Topics

The final major topic I will use to analyze the functions of the OSA are “special topics”. These include legal and ethical issues, technology, research, and student affairs philosophy. Each of these secondary concepts are very different but very important to function in higher education.

Legal issues. Legal issues is not a major topic that is discussed regularly in the OSA, but it is especially prevalent in programming, the area in which I work. When students want to book artists, we are required to contract with the artists. This means having a contract signed by both WIU and the agency representing the artist. On our side of the contract, we must get approval from the Organization Finance Officer, Director of Student Activities, Vice President for Student Services, Accounts Payable, and Legal Services. This long line of approvals is necessary so that the university does not enter a vague or risky business relationship with an artist. This could put many professionals and the university at legal risk. Over the past two years, my supervisor has been very intentional about teaching me all of the details in reading and writing contracts so that I can be knowledgeable in the future and make sound legal decisions for my future employer.

Technology. With a drastic rise in technology over the past few years, it is inevitable that the OSA uses technology in many capacities. Nearly each functional area has a facebook or twitter account to keep students informed and connected. Many professionals also engage in webinars and conference calls to increase their professional development opportunities. We also use technology to conduct research, market events, and communicate. Mainly, we use email to communicate with one another, but we also take full advantage of the share drive on the computers. The share drive allows us to share documents and stay informed of the things going on in each area. Technology has greatly increased the capacity in which we are able to do our jobs and contributes to a more effective and efficient Office of Student Activities.

Concepts from the Academic Knowledge Base that Could be Used in Practice

While the Office of Student Activities at WIU is very effective at utilizing many of the academic knowledge bases identified previously, there is still plenty of room for improvement,

especially in the area of student development theory. The following portion of this paper will identify ways that the OSA can expand upon the academic knowledge bases.

Students

While the OSA is moderately effective at utilizing the “students” academic knowledge base, student development theory is seldom used in designing programs and working with students.

Identity development. In the OSA, we are privileged to work with students of various backgrounds and identities. Many of these are student leaders, while others are simply students that want to grow and learn from our events. However, instead of using identity development theories to develop programs and events, we rely solely on student interests and what we think might be best based on our experiences. I feel that the OSA can use the identity development theories in working with individual students and in developing programs and events. For instance, in working with an African American student this year, he was struggling with his identity and trying to figure out how to navigate his presence on a primarily white programming board. After having discussions with many professionals in the OSA, I was guided to have discussions with him, but to make many assumptions and go from there. In scenarios such as this, I would prefer to use my knowledge of identity development and use that as a tool for navigating these discussions rather than just make assumptions.

Similarly, I feel that we can use our knowledge of identity development and the potential stages or areas of development many students might be in, and create purposeful events for students. Some events currently accomplish this, but it is by no means intentional.

Chickering’s vectors. Similar to using models of identity development to create events and work with individual students, I believe Chickering’s vectors of student development (as

cited in Evans et al., 2009) could provide a great guide for many of the processes completed through the OSA. Specifically, the vector “moving through autonomy towards interdependence” would be useful in working with many individual students. As members of the millennial generation, many students rely heavily on authority and guidance from superiors and are unable to make many decisions on their own. Chickering urges professionals to work with students to feel comfortable on their own, voicing their own opinions, and solve problems on their own. Instead of giving students the answers and providing them the steps to complete a task, we should encourage them to try things on their own and become interdependent.

Another vector that would be particularly useful in the OSA is the vector, “developing purpose”. While millennial students are insistent on “achieving”, they do not always have desired outcomes and purpose for why they hold leadership positions. As advisors, we should have discussions about what students want to get out of their leadership roles and how they can balance these positions with school, family, friends, and other aspects of their lives.

Counseling. Finally, while all of the professionals in the OSA seem very eager to help students and provide assistance at any moment, some of them do not practice counseling skills in these situations. I believe strongly in empathetic listening and think it is very effective in allowing individuals to navigate through their own problems. However, the professionals in the OSA are very busy and do not usually take the time to use counseling skills in the advising relationship.

Organizations

While there is plenty of room for improvement in the “students” category of the academic knowledge bases, the OSA is pretty effective at using the “organizations” academic knowledge

bases. The following academic knowledge base could be utilized to improve tasks and programs in the OSA.

Organizational theory. It is my belief that many upper administrators and full-time professional staff understand the political climate of WIU, but as a graduate assistant, it is very hard to detect the organizational landscape. At times, this is okay because it allows us to concentrate on our education rather than get wrapped up in the drama, but I feel it is important to understand the political climate so I can learn to navigate it in my future career.

Also, the physical space an organization operates within is an important aspect of organizational theory. It plays a role in how individuals interact, their perceptions of others and their jobs, and their productiveness. I believe that the OSA is an area that is extremely conducive to communication and productivity, however, I feel one area could be improved. Many of the students we work with have offices located in the Student Organization Center (SOC). Currently, the SOC is located in the basement of the union and the OSA is located on the second floor. Because of this distance, students do not make a regular effort to stop by the OSA and many students do not communicate regularly with their advisors. I feel that if the OSA and SOC were on the same floor in closer proximity, it would be more conducive to efficient, effective communication and job completion.

Special Topics

Finally, the OSA could make improvements by utilizing the academic knowledge bases listed under the umbrella category of “special topics”.

Research methods. Research methods are seldom used in the OSA, but are extremely important. Without research, we cannot justify our jobs or provide for students. Last year, I began a research effort to evaluate the programs provided by UUB and compile data that helps us

understand what students are looking for from UUB. While I thought this was very important, I was not fully supported in my endeavor, and it slowly dissolved. By gathering data and opinions from students who utilize our services and students who do not utilize our services, we would have the data necessary to make knowledge-based decisions and provide the services that students are looking for. Many times, we fail in our endeavors and do not understand why. Rather than conducting assessment to try to figure out, we make our own assumptions and move on. It would be my recommendation to the OSA to conduct surveys and assessment to student leaders, students who are involved in greek life, students who attend OSA programs and events, and students who do not have any interaction with the OSA. While this may take time and effort, I believe it will prove to be extremely beneficial in developing future initiatives in the Office of Student Activities.

Student affairs philosophy/foundations. I believe understanding and utilizing student affairs philosophies and foundations is equally as important as research methods. Having knowledge of this area allows professionals to see where we have been, what has worked in the past, and where improvements can be made. It helps us see the progression that student affairs has undergone and learn from the successes and failures of the profession. To be specific, the OSA could benefit from learning about how student organizations began, with the conception of secret societies. Students began these organizations to gather and discuss politics and academics and continue learning outside of the classroom. This idea should be prevalent in our student organizations today, and for many, it is not. As student affairs professionals, we should contribute to the great goal of student learning through student organizations and extracurricular activities. At times, this does not happen and we could learn from the organizations that existed in the history of higher education.

Conclusion

The academic knowledge bases developed through the CSP program serve as great guides for the knowledge we should possess and utilizes as student affairs professionals. As higher education continues to grow and develop, we should stay current in these areas and continue to develop ourselves as professionals and contribute to our functional areas. The Office of Student Activities at WIU is very good at what they do, but they have plenty of room for improvement and these academic knowledge bases serve as reminders for how the office can continue to provide the best services to students.

References

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