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# Building Bridges: Using the Office Consultation Project to Connect Students to Theory and Practice

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# Building Bridges: Using the Office Consultation Project to Connect Students to Theory and Practice

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*The Office Consultation Project is an innovative capstone project that partners graduate students in student affairs preparation programs with academic and student affairs practitioners. It provides an opportunity for students to apply research and scholarship to practical settings, while giving practitioners new insight into their units, additional work support, and expanded professional networks. The project benefits graduate preparation programs by cultivating cross-divisional networking and increasing campus awareness about the student affairs profession that could generate new practicum and assistantship opportunities.*

In student affairs, dissonance exists between the espoused value of evidence-based practice and the reality of many practitioners' professional lives. The Council for the Advancement of Standards (CAS) in Higher Education (2009) calls for graduate preparation programs to provide students with a strong foundation of historical, philosophical, theoretical, and empirical knowledge that they can draw upon as professionals when they face the complexity of student affairs practice. In addition, historical and contemporary professional philosophy statements emphasize the value of intentional, empirically grounded practice (Evans & Reason, 2001).

Recent research on new practitioners illustrates that most new professionals have difficulty applying theory to practice. After graduation, many students leave theory behind in the papers that were written for their classes and in the books sitting on their office shelves (Hirt, Collins, & Plummer, 2005; Renn & Jessup-Anger, 2008). In their national study of new professionals in student affairs, Renn and Jessup-Anger (2008) found that despite the good intentions of the CAS standards and graduate preparation programs, new student affairs professionals had difficulty applying theory to practice, drawing solely from assistantships, practicum placements, and internships to guide their practice. This finding echoes concerns raised by Stage and Dannells (2000), who described

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several reasons why students have difficulty applying theory to practice, including the reality that most students only learn one theory at a time, and often in the vacuum of a classroom, which makes it difficult to understand its applicability to a real setting. The way we teach students how to apply theory to practice may contribute to the dissonance regarding its utilization and application on our campuses.

In this essay, we describe an innovative capstone project designed to address the theory to practice conundrum troubling student affairs graduate preparation programs. The project provides scaffolding for students to apply theory to practice in a more intentional way than might occur during a practicum or internship. Situated in a capstone class and undertaken by soon-to-graduate master's students, the project provides a structure for examining an issue or problem and consistent coaching as students integrate theory and research to make recommendations. Furthermore, the project equips these students with skills to discuss theory with multiple audiences (in and outside of student affairs), apply theory to practice in real-life settings, and develop a sense of agency in making theory-based recommendations. We begin by discussing the evolution of the project and describing the logistics. Next, we address the benefits of the project to students, discussing how it creates a powerful group learning experience and builds their capacity to integrate theory and practice. Finally, we discuss the benefit of the project to the campus, detailing how it aids offices and graduate preparation programs alike. Throughout the article, we offer the voices of our graduates and campus professionals to illustrate the value of the project across the university.

## History

The Office Consultation Project (OCP) is a culminating capstone project developed initially at Michigan State University and adopted at Marquette University in which soon-to-be Master's graduates serve as consultants who work with "clients" in academic and student affairs units to address a specific problem or concern facing the unit. The OCP emerged from a discussion about re-designing a course that focused on theory application. One objective of the course was for students to draw upon and apply content learned in core classes to a real setting in student affairs. While using case study analysis could help to address the objective, it did not capitalize on the diverse setting of a large research institution, nor did it provide students a "hands-on" experience. The program director and course instructor envisioned placing small groups of students in a consulting role to offices that identified a problem or issue for the students to work on.

Over the past 8 years, refinements were made to the project infrastructure and guidelines were created for prospective clients. Previous clients frequently returned with new projects, and new clients from across the university expressed interest in participating. In 2010, Marquette University adopted the assignment. Since then, instructors at both institutions have discussed teaching strategies and project improvements each semester and began surveying their students after graduation about their OCP experiences. To date, approximately 210 students have participated and 42 clients have collaborated with students on projects, such as examining the career development needs of international students, facilitating appropriate student and parental involvement in the admissions process, exploring the needs of veteran students, establishing a formal peer academic advising program, and understanding the needs of nontraditional student library usage (see Table 1 for additional topics).

In 2011, we launched an online survey and sent the link to all 72 alumni from both institutions who participated in the OCP. Our response rate was 47%. The purpose of the survey was to explore effectiveness of the OCP in teaching students to apply theory in higher education settings. Among the questions we asked were what students learned from participating in the OCP, whether the



Table 1

**Past Office Consultation Projects**

Topic	Office/Unit
Improving Orientation for International Undergraduate Students	Office of International Students and Scholars
Advancing an International Multicultural Initiative	Associate Provost for Diversity and Inclusion/ International Education
Developing a Social Media Presence	The Graduate School
Developing a Summer Bridge Program	Academic Supportive Services
The Role of Service Learning in an Honors Education	Honors Program
Developing a Diversity Peer Education Training Program	Residence Life Office
Neighborhoodly Behavior: Strategies for Increasing Civil Student Behavior	Student Life Office
A Climate Audit Examining the Experiences of Students of Color in the College of Education	College of Education
Envisioning a Holistic Academic Support Center	Student Educational Services
Assessing International Students' Needs in Residence Halls	Residence Life Office

project helped them apply theory to practice, and if the overall experience informed their current practice in student affairs. Basic demographic information, such as gender, graduation year, and current job title were also collected. Graduates' responses were anonymous.

In 2012, we administered an online survey to all previous clients ( $n = 40$ ) at both institutions, of whom 32 responded to at least some of the questions. Our response rate was 80%. The purpose of the survey was to explore clients' experiences with the project. We asked the following questions: Did they find the OCP to be a valuable experience, did their office or unit benefit from the project, and did they have any suggestions for improving the project? Both institutions' Institutional Research Boards approved the two surveys.

We analyzed the data from both surveys independently, initially reading through responses and coding each individual response line by line. Then we discussed our interpretation of the data and developed the overarching themes from our individual coding schemes. We will discuss these as we highlight the benefits, limitations, and challenges of the project to students and professionals.

### Project Logistics

The success of the OCP depends in part on good planning from the instructor. From recruiting the appropriate type of client to assisting students in breaking down the project into manageable components, the instructor plays a vital role in helping students learn to complete a project of

such magnitude. The first step is to seek potential clients. Several months before the start of the capstone class in which the OCP is embedded, we (as instructors) identify offices to serve as clients. We cast a wide net to solicit projects by e-mailing past participants, directors of offices within the student affairs division, and directors in other campus divisions a brief project description and explanation of the components, project deliverables, time commitment, and examples of past projects and sponsoring units. This list of past projects is particularly useful as it gives prospective clients ideas for potential projects.

Once clients have been identified, we work with them to refine their topic. It is critical to identify topics that are both bounded in scope and within offices that may benefit from the knowledge and skills developed in student affairs graduate programs, such as assessment and theory application. We have turned down projects where the fit was not right. One potential client was interested in learning more about faculty engagement in a tenure and promotion workshops series. While the issue was relevant and timely to the institution and the sponsoring unit, it reached beyond the understanding, experience, and preparation of most master's level students in student affairs graduate preparation programs.

After clients and topics are settled and the semester has started, we dedicate one or two nights of class to client presentations, during which clients present their topic and answer questions that students prepare with coaching from instructors. We encourage students to ask clients about work and communication style, availability for meetings, and expectations for the final product. After the last presentation, students individually rank their preferences of the client with whom they would like to work. From these preferences, we create consultant teams of two to four students and assign them to each client.

Consultant teams are expected to set up a meeting with their client to formulate a plan for addressing the client's issue. In addition, there are two assignments embedded into the capstone course that provide foundational support to each group's work, including an *Annotated Bibliography* and *Best Practices Summary*. For the *Annotated Bibliography*, students compile and summarize relevant research related to their topic. The assignment is intended to help students understand the information already available about their topic, so that they are better informed about the issue. The *Best Practices Summary* is a catalog of relevant programs and best practices gathered from other colleges and universities. Groups work with their client and instructor to identify innovative programs relevant to the client's issue and then contact these programs to gather additional information. For the *Best Practices Summary*, groups provide an overview of each program highlighted, discuss lessons learned from that program, and detail the relevance of the program to their OCP project. Other work OCP groups might complete depends on the charge laid forth by their client; often they develop and administer surveys, conduct interviews or focus groups, or examine protocol at other institutions.

The organization of the project into several smaller assignments (i.e., Annotated Bibliography, Best Practices Summary, and Executive Summary) provides milestone markers that help students to gauge their progress. The structure creates scaffolding that aids teams in acquiring the requisite knowledge and understanding of innovative practices, which helps them design evidence-based recommendations for their client. These assignments assist students in developing the skills needed to construct meaning and apply their knowledge to a new setting (Baxter Magolda, 2001). This design encourages students to reach a higher level of learning—they are not just finding information and regurgitating it; rather, they must sift through different sources, take multiple perspectives into account, and create an analytical framework and implementation structure to utilize in working towards their recommendations.



As instructors, we monitor students' progress and provide regular feedback during each step to reinforce and deepen their learning. First, we provide constructive and timely feedback on written assignments to help ensure each team is building a solid foundation of evidence. We spend considerable time critiquing each consultant team's early work. For example, did a group consider all angles in the literature? Are their interview questions too narrow or leading? Prompt constructive criticism is vital to the success of the 10-week project. Second, we establish an expectation that each team meet with their client twice throughout the semester with an agenda in hand, and follow up with minutes after each meeting. The purpose of these meetings is to ensure the team and clients are working in the desired direction of the client. The meetings also help provide professional socialization to students, so that they communicate and lead meetings professionally and effectively. After these meetings, and in lieu of class for that week, each group meets individually with us to discuss their project, address any difficulties they are encountering, and share their next steps. These team meetings have proven to be instructive and insightful, as they allow us to provide guidance specific to the team. The smaller setting of these meetings (i.e., 2–4 students with one instructor) provides an ideal forum to encourage students to play a central role in knowledge construction. Students share what they have discovered and talk through how they are trying to apply what they know about student development, organizational, and other theories to their particular setting. Meanwhile, we listen and provide suggestions to address the concerns, and through this exchange, the group and instructor agree on the next appropriate steps. This mutual construction of meaning (Baxter Magolda, 2001) develops and reinforces outcomes of our Master's programs, including critical thinking, leadership, and effective communication. We also encourage feedback and critical analysis by devoting class time for teams to discuss their progress, share challenges, and hear suggestions from their peers on other teams. During these sessions, students often wrestle out loud with the intersection of theory and practice and begin to realize that they are "in charge" of the project, as they are more knowledgeable about the literature and best practices, have cultivated a relationship with their client, and ultimately control the outcome of their final recommendations. By taking on the role of a consultant, while still having the support and guidance of faculty and peers, these students are able to reflect critically on how to integrate theory and practice in their day-to-day work as future professionals.

The project culminates in an *Executive Summary* that includes recommendations grounded in theory and research, including appropriate historical context, foundational documents, and student development, organizational, and environmental theory learned throughout their graduate programs. Students present their Executive Summary formally to their client during a presentation and question-and-answer period that is also attended by peers, program faculty, and many administrators (vice president for student affairs, directors of offices, etc.). These presentations are a valuable learning experience for students and often attract new clients for future projects.

### **Benefit of the Project to Students**

The OCP offers an effective and innovative approach to teaching students how to apply theory to practice. It provides an experiential learning opportunity that encourages them to create peer learning communities and empowers them to recognize they have the capacity for theory-based practice.

### **Experiential Learning**

Teaching theory application in the confines of a classroom is limiting (Stage & Dannels,

2000). Students read about theoretical constructs but may struggle to apply them to collegiate settings. They encounter difficulties when theories do not quite fit the context—or vice versa. Case study analysis does not provide the sense of immediacy that a “real world” issue presents. The OCP encourages students to draw from knowledge across the curriculum (theory, foundational documents, and practical skills) to determine what might prove useful to the situation. As one student explained

Our clients had varying degrees of theory knowledge, and, in an effort to justify or explain decisions, it was essential that we were able to make clear connections between theory and practice. The task wasn't just naming theories that were applied, it was to link theory to the work being done and to use it as foundation to work from and teach others how to use theory in their practice. (2011 graduate, Residence Life Coordinator)

Whereas in an assistantship or practicum a student may tacitly apply theory to practice, the OCP provides an analytical framework to do so and requires students connect explicitly what they know about how students learn, develop, and persist and apply it to a variety of academic and social settings. The assignment provides an opportunity to apply theory to practice at two different levels. First, the components of the OCP provide formal opportunities (as graded assignments) to reflect thoughtfully and demonstrate how research and literature can inform practice. Second, the required meetings with the clients—especially those when the project is nearing completion—provide a less formal but perhaps more critical opportunity for students to explain and justify how the literature and research has guided their work. Presenting recommendations backed by research in these client meetings reinforces and helps refine the theory-to-practice behavior that graduate preparation programs are aiming to instill and model for their students. Until students have a required, hands-on learning experience in which they apply their knowledge in a real setting, they may not appreciate the complexity of how theory can inform practice and policy formation.

### **An Authentic Group Learning Experience**

To varying degrees, all student affairs professionals work on projects with others. The OCP teaches students project and group management skills, such as time management, division of labor, group norm development, and conflict mediation (Barkley et al., 2004). The relatively large scope of the project makes it an ideal assignment for small teams of students. These teams often become powerful peer learning communities as students teach, learn from, guide, and support one another through the various components of the project (Astin, 1993; Barkley, Cross, & Major, 2004; Stein & Hurd, 2000). As one student related

I learned how difficult it is to coordinate committee work, and what has to be done to keep a group on task. I learned how to manage my expectations of others, especially those whose work styles differ drastically from my own. I learned that assessment and gathering data is not always the answer. And, I learned that sometimes there are going to be things I really just don't like or don't want to do, but will have to do anyway because they are part of my job. (2010 Graduate, Assistant Director of Career Center)

The team management experience students gain through the OCP prepares them for work as professionals. By virtue of the nature of the project, there is no right answer. Thus, a tremendous amount of peer teaching and supporting occurs as student colleagues explain concepts, grapple with materials, and refine their understanding of the client's vision and the scope of the project. Successful teams meet weekly throughout the semester. Teams quickly ascertain members' strengths and weaknesses as they analyze and synthesize literature, interview professionals about existing programs, develop original instruments or protocols to collect data (e.g., survey, focus group ques-





tions, interview guidelines), and sift through materials to write an executive summary and develop a professional presentation.

While the OCP may seem like another group project, the stakes and expectations are higher. As they progress through the semester, teams realize how they must draw upon many courses. Furthermore, having a client external to the class and their academic department provides a different type of motivation and external accountability that does not exist with a typical class project. Clients review the executive summary, attend the final presentation with colleagues from their unit and sometimes from other areas of the university, and engage in immediate feedback and questions after the presentation. One student remarked, “It was eye-opening to have the department professionals challenge you on your findings” (2010 Graduate, LGBTQ Center Coordinator). The final presentation provides a public forum for students to demonstrate how theory has informed their process and influenced the development of proposed recommendations.

### **Building Capacity for Theory-Based Practice**

The OCP cultivates two realizations among students that make it a meaningful and effective assignment: first, that they have the ability to construct knowledge, and second, that they possess the expertise to make recommendations about policies and programs. Students discover they have the knowledge and skills needed to address complex situations as they immerse themselves in the relevant research and best practices, gain insight into their client’s issue, and contemplate how theory might inform their recommendations. Discovering how the various elements fit with each other can be a daunting task. For many of our students, this project was the first time they were asked explicitly to embrace the position of an expert and apply classroom knowledge to a real-life setting, a process that validated them as knowers (Baxter Magolda, 2004). One student recounted her experience:

OCP provided essential real world experience that has been transformative for my practice. It gave me the skills and confidence to trust myself as a knowledgeable practitioner who can consult on various topics and use my education and critical thinking skills to provide valuable input. (2011 Graduate, Residence Life Coordinator)

As students immerse themselves in their topic, many move from what Baxter Magolda (2001) calls “knowledge acquisition” to “knowledge construction;” they learn how to “construct new knowledge to extend existing knowledge” (p. 205). Furthermore, they construct this knowledge in context, as clients often pose very real restrictions (such as budgetary constraints, staffing shortages, or alignment to the leadership philosophy of the division), and students need to make recommendations that are mindful of these boundaries. Accordingly, a great deal of struggling occurs as students find ways to integrate and reconcile ideas, research, and best practices. At the conclusion of the project, both the students and clients are rather surprised at the outcomes, because they have mutually constructed meaning of the problem and potential solutions (Baxter Magolda, 2004), with clients bringing expertise of their unit and students bringing expertise on theory, literature, best practices, and assessment.

Understanding and embracing the notion that student affairs professionals can be experts on students and their needs and experiences is another important outcome of the OCP. The assignment empowers students to realize that they have the potential to be an “educational connoisseur and critic” of student affairs (Magolda, 2005)—that is, someone who understands how students learn and develop in collegiate contexts and can translate and apply this expertise to various settings in higher education. This discovery sometimes surprised students, as two students reflected



Many professional staff members that I had worked with throughout the project looked to us, as graduate students, to help solve the problem. They were open to our suggestions and looked at us as having the current knowledge base to better understand these problems. (2011 Graduate, Resident Director)

OCP not only showed me the importance of understanding theories myself, but also being able to explain theories to colleagues who may not be familiar with them. I think it has made me more of an advocate in working to improve how services and programs are structured. (2010 Graduate, Hall Director)

Being situated in a space where fulltime professionals looked to them to best understand an issue and make recommendations provided a new vantage point for some students. The realizations that they, as graduate students, were experts and could contribute to the conversation about student learning validated these students as educators (Baxter Magolda, 2001).

### **Benefit to the Clients**

Clients play a critical role in the OCP as they provide the projects and also work with students through the various stages of the project. Although the OCP provides numerous academic and professional benefits to graduate students, it yields advantages to the professionals who sponsor projects. We surveyed past clients about the value and impact of participating in the OCP. They reported gaining additional insights about their unit, appreciating the additional support student teams provided to their units, and developing new networks. Because they were adequately prepared about the time commitment and logistics of the project, very few clients were dissatisfied with their experiences. However, a few critiqued students' final reports, commenting that the recommendations provided by students were too narrow, or did not quite fit the context. These criticisms reflect the reality that students remain in a learning process throughout the project.

### **New Perspectives**

Several clients shared that participating in the project provided new insights into their units and how they tried to address their challenges. For some clients, simply having new people examining perennial challenges was beneficial. As one client explained, "It was helpful to have fresh eyes on the subject asking the basic questions that forced us to redefine the ways we were looking at our project" (Client 1). The background research (i.e., literature review and best practices summary) that student teams complete provided depth and breadth of information that some clients used as a "jumping off point for further conversation" (Client 12). In addition to providing information about their topic, the process of discussing the challenge with their student consultant teams encouraged clients to be more reflective about their respective units:

Working with the students required me to really think through our project and present a clear vision to the students—from historical/institutional knowledge and background, to a concise picture of what data we needed to progress to the next level in our process. In some ways, I feel I learned as much as the students with regard to our operations and various approaches to problem solving. (Client 11)

Another client made a similar observation, explaining that the "collaborative process was what made the difference" (Client 6). For this client, the process of working with the student team—responding to questions, discussing students' findings, and redefining the project's focus—helped the client rethink the problem and potential solutions. The OCP compelled clients to think critically about their challenges and how their units were addressing them.



## Additional Resources

With the ever-increasing demands on time, budget cuts, and staff reductions, many colleges and universities have to accomplish more with fewer resources. OCP clients have used their projects to explore ways to address resource constraints. As one professional explained, “These are real problems, and I’ve found there is so little time to concentrate on them” (Client 6). This client, like many of the professionals who sponsor an OCP project, used the OCP team to complete the initial research on a potential new program. Another client, an academic advising unit, was interested in creating a peer-led academic advising program for the college. With a high volume of students, a small full-time staff, and a hiring moratorium in place, the advising office wanted to reach more students and maximize their current resources without hiring additional full-time staff. They had heard about peer advising, but had no idea of where to start looking for model programs or what kinds of structures existed. They were also concerned about FERPA issues and the cost of running such a program. Their OCP team researched current peer advising programs at comparable institutions; reviewed existing literature on peer advising; and gathered information about FERPA concerns, compensation options, and program organization. The group recommended a peer advising model and provided suggestions regarding technology, training and supervision, remuneration, and the evaluation of peer advisors. The semester after the project had been completed, the client reported that she had presented the research and program plan to her dean, and it was fully supported. Many clients appreciated this kind of additional short-term assistance on projects. “We were able to have a project done for us without having to add something to another staff member’s plate in our department” (Client 19). The OCP can provide clients with short-term assistance in the project design and development stages of new programs that can be useful to clients with small staffs and limited budgets, while affording graduate students a hands-on opportunity to apply theory to a setting within their institution.

## Networking

Participating in the OCP helped clients expand their professional networks on campus. Working and consulting with their clients over the course of the semester fostered new connections between the client and the student teams. One client observed, “I think it’s excellent for the students to work with administrators that they have not worked with before” (Client 15). Some of these connections extended into subsequent semesters, as clients sponsored students for practicum assignments. Clients also gained access and “working exposure” (Client 10) to a pool of new professionals that could be useful when looking for potential candidates for job vacancies or practicum positions. While the OCP helps to connect graduate students to professionals outside of their academic unit or graduate assistant assignment, the project also connects professionals to rising new talent on campus.

## Benefit to Graduate Preparation Programs

The OCP provides multiple benefits to student affairs graduate preparation programs. First, it helps to cultivate relationships with administrative units within and outside of the student affairs division. When clients are outside of a traditional student affairs unit (for example in academic affairs, finance and operations, or development), the project encourages students to learn about these areas. One student addressed how the project forced her out of the student affairs sphere:

The practice of student affairs is not only the work we do with students, but also how effectively we can work and collaborate with fellow university employees, student affairs practitioners, or otherwise. OCP taught me the importance of communication and relationships throughout

an institution. The OCP has encouraged me to seek out departments on campus and create relationships with individuals within a variety of offices in an effort to more effectively meet the goals and mission of the institution and of my own practice. (2011 Graduate, Residence Life Coordinator)

Administrative areas outside of student affairs also learn more about student affairs professional preparation, advancing their understanding of the role of the student affairs and deepening their relationships to graduate preparation programs. The work of the student affairs profession should not be confined to the student affairs divisions or preparation programs on our campuses. We cultivate experts on students—how they develop and think and how we can structure and influence their learning and living environments—but too often we limit our influence. Innovative models of student affairs administration favor boundary blurring and collaboration across the institution (Manning et al., 2006). Because clients often bring their entire staffs to the final presentations or ask students to provide encore presentations during a staff meeting, the OCP raises the level of attention paid to our graduate preparation programs. This attention can lead to new assistantships, practicum sites, and other opportunities for students. In addition, it might bring new prospective students to graduate preparation programs.

The OCP also benefits graduate preparation programs by strengthening the quality of our graduates and making them more marketable. Several students mentioned citing their OCP experience during job interviews when asked to describe their approach to challenging issues. One student shared, “the office consultation project serves as a great example of working in a team in order to come up with a solution [to] issues within student affairs” (2010 Graduate, Human Resource Coordinator).

In addition, our graduates also discussed how they continue to use the OCP analytical structure to address problems they face in their professional positions. One student noted

Professionally, I have [applied] the method of approaching the problem from the Office Consultation Project to a real job-related issue. By using a combination of research from the field, feedback from students, and theory, I was able to provide recommendations for improvements within my office. (2011 Graduate, Associate Director)

The OCP project helps graduate preparation programs expand their reach and influence across campus by working with new partners that could generate new practicum or assistantship opportunities.

## **Challenges and Limitations**

Although the OCP offers an authentic, collaborative learning experience for students, the project has challenges and limitations that affect students, clients, and the graduate preparation programs adopting it into their courses.

### **Students**

Two areas prove to be perennially challenging for students: the length of the project and students’ ability to “own” their recommendations. Excluding initial client presentations and final presentations, the project spans 10 weeks. The short time frame requires students to work regularly and intensely. Accordingly, we implemented project scaffolding by breaking the project down into smaller assignments with due dates early in the semester. These assignments address the pacing challenge to some extent, but some groups still have difficulty finding their momentum and routine and must rush to complete the project.



The second challenge encountered by students is recognizing their capacity to offer meaningful recommendations. Through the literature review and best practices overview, meetings with the client, and other components (e.g., survey, focus groups, interviews), student teams develop a fairly comprehensive understanding of challenges and possible recommendations. Cognitively, however, some students struggle with the notion they can offer meaningful solutions that their clients might adopt. As instructors, we remind them to include “their voices” in the assignments, but students frequently are more comfortable citing the expertise of other experts, even though they have completed considerable work and have developed a solid knowledge base to make informed and well-supported recommendations.

## Clients

There have been few challenges related to clients. The most common client-related challenge has been unrealistic project expectations. For some new clients, the scope of the project is too broad or has too many outcomes for students to achieve. These issues are addressed during the student-client meetings and especially during the one-on-one coaching sessions between the student team and the instructor. Requiring the students to meet with their clients at least twice during the course of the project helps to address this issue. Sometimes, however, clients remain unsatisfied with the results. We remind clients and students that the final executive summaries are often good “springboards” for future work and that the teams’ recommendations likely will generate more questions to consider.

Another potential limitation is if clients work at institutions that do not have graduate programs in student affairs, higher education, or related fields. One option to address this limitation is to encourage those professionals to cultivate connections with student affairs graduate programs at nearby institutions by reaching out to student affairs faculty. Conversely, we encourage faculty to look for potential clients beyond their institutions, which will provide institutional and project variety. If faculty are reluctant to dedicate a large portion of a course to a project such as the OCP, they might consider connecting two (or more) practicum students to a large-scale project. Two students working together could accomplish similar objectives over the course of a semester.

## Graduate Preparation Programs

The most obvious challenges to incorporating the OCP into a graduate preparation program are finding appropriate clients and the dedicating sufficient time to help students be successful on the OCP. Establishing a client base of units that have suitable challenges takes time. An obvious ally is the student affairs division on one’s campus, but we encourage potential adopters to look broadly and approach units outside of traditional student affairs areas. Academic advising offices, study abroad, the library, and any office that has significant interactions with students or wants to increase engagement with students are good places to begin. Be mindful that some units may not understand what students earning a graduate degree in student affairs are capable of achieving and be prepared to explain students’ knowledge base and skills when recruiting potential clients.

Finally, the OCP requires a substantial time commitment from the instructor prior to and throughout the semester. Beyond recruiting clients and organizing their presentation schedules, the instructor provides feedback constantly throughout the semester. For example, students will often go through four to five different drafts of a survey or interview instrument—and due to the short timeframe to administer the survey or focus group—the instructor cannot wait a week to provide feedback. The coaching metaphor is very appropriate when describing the instructor-student interaction expectation. In the beginning, the instructor leads the one-on-one meetings by asking

questions and encouraging students to consider alternate viewpoints. By the end, however, the instructor plays more of an observer role—watching the group’s work, providing corrective feedback when necessary, and encouraging students to move past barriers.

## **Changes**

Since the OCP’s inception, both authors have made refinements in the project to address enduring challenges, namely by providing more structure, additional guidance to students in developing administrative capacities, and a tighter project focus on students. We found that it was essential to create smaller assignments (annotated bibliography and best practices summary) in order to help students with the pacing of the project and to provide accountability throughout the semester. We also ask students to relate each aspect of these smaller assignments (article or program example) to their OCP project. For some students, the assignments, coupled with our insistence that they draw from their previous work as they write their executive summary, provide a helpful framework to address project work that endures beyond graduation. Several alumni commented that when charged with new initiatives in their work, they adopted an approach similar to their OCP, beginning their work with fact finding and investigating practices at other institutions before implementing new programs.

Another change we initiated was to use the OCP to help student develop administrative capacity. Initially we found that students were not always communicating appropriately with clients by sending clear, error-free, and timely e-mails. Now we openly discuss appropriate communication with clients and provide suggestions and expectations for communication. We encourage groups to appoint a person to be solely responsible for communicating with the client so as not to send mixed messages. We also insist that agendas and meeting notes are sent to clients and us. We sometimes discuss these in our group meetings with students, commenting on their summaries and noting when vital information is missing.

Another administrative capacity we help to cultivate is effective group work. During our individual meetings with groups, we encourage them to discuss intragroup frustrations. During the first coaching session, each group member rates their satisfaction with the group’s work and then shares their rating with the other members. When there are discrepancies in ratings, we encourage students to talk about their frustrations and develop solutions for working together more effectively, emphasizing the reality that student affairs educators constantly work with others.

A final refinement we have made to the OCP project is to only accept projects with a student dimension. For example, one project examined the community’s perceptions of international students. While the topic related to students, the majority of the work involved interviewing key constituents (e.g., mayor, city manager, store owners, school principals) in the local community. Cultivating town-gown relationships are important, but the topic did not relate to much of their curriculum. Students are more comfortable taking on the role of consultant when projects have a student dimension, because they see clear connections to their previous course work.

## **Conclusion**

The OCP offers an innovative, collaborative, and hands-on learning opportunity that empowers students to apply their knowledge and skills as emerging student affairs practitioners in a variety of higher education settings. Although more longitudinal research is needed to assess definitively the long-term effect of the project on new professionals’ practice, the evidence presented here suggests that the project builds capacity for evidence-based practice and working in groups.



Furthermore, the project benefits the campus community by providing a cost-effective approach for campus units to enhance their services and network with new talent. It also can extend the influence of graduate preparation programs beyond the division of student affairs while also helping them gain exposure from the campus community. As graduate preparation programs continue to address the theory to practice divide that plagues the student affairs profession, the OCP represents tremendous potential in demonstrating how as a profession, student affairs can have an integrated and integral role throughout the campus community.

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