

Focus on Student Affairs, 2018

UNDERSTANDING KEY CHALLENGES USING CUPA-HR DATA

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**College and University Professional
Association for Human Resources**



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Introduction

Higher education today embraces a holistic view of student development that creates learning opportunities both inside and outside the classroom, yet what we now take for granted was once not the norm. The field of student affairs helped put the “higher” in higher education, tracing its formal roots back to 1926 when the National Research Council requested that the American Council on Education study “personnel practices” at colleges and universities. Among these early investigations was a survey by L.B. Hopkins for the Committee on Personnel Methods “to determine what a number of institutions were then doing to assist the students to develop as individuals.”¹ This culminated in a seminal report and call to action entitled *The Student Personnel Point of View* (1937) arguing for a more deliberate institutional approach to the student’s experience as a whole, including intellectual, emotional, physical, social, vocational, moral, economic, and aesthetic aptitudes.² From this idea, the field of student affairs was born. Shaped by the post-WWII success of the GI Bill and key legal changes during the 1960s and 70s, student affairs has evolved into the contemporary, all-encompassing field we know today.³

Organizations like Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education (NASPA), the College Student Educators International (ACPA) and numerous other student affairs-focused associations represent thousands of professionals in the many areas of this field. From the early calls for creation of “student personnel services” to developing professional competencies, the field of student affairs has come a long way.

Colleges and universities do the work of educating students to build knowledge for the benefit of all. Each student is a complex individual whose personal pursuit of education is informed by unique intellectual, emotional, aesthetic, philosophical, and material goals. Student affairs connects the work of higher education to the development of students. Their work develops critical, informed citizens; encourages respect for the basic worth of individual lives; promotes diversity and inclusion; and helps students realize their own social identity and full potential.

This research brief takes a closer look at the challenges institutions face in addressing the needs of students as individuals, and particularly the people those institutions hire to sustain progress toward these ideals.

1 American Council on Education (1937). *The Student Personnel Point of View: A Report of a Conference on the Philosophy and Development of Student Personnel Work in College and University*. (Report).

2 American Council on Education (1937). Ibid.

3 Schwartz, R. & Stewart, D. (2017). *The History of Student Affairs. Student Services: A Handbook for the Profession*, 6th ed. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

“Creating a diverse workforce that reflects the diversity of the students we serve is a top priority for NASPA and the entire student affairs profession. This report confirms a mostly anecdotal observation that student affairs divisions and leadership represent one of the most diverse sectors in higher education. However, the report also makes clear that more progress is needed in order to ensure that the student affairs workforce is truly representative of the rich diversity of students who attend our colleges and universities. It is critical that we continue to increase pathways for access, pay equity and advancement for women and professionals of color in student affairs.”

Kevin Kruger, Ph.D.

President, NASPA – Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education

KEY CHALLENGES IN STUDENT AFFAIRS

Broad societal changes impacting higher education create a difficult situation in which student affairs must operate.⁴ Colleges and universities enjoy much less funding and face more oversight and accountability than in the past and have increasingly moved toward tuition-based funding. Consequently, the costs of a college education have increased faster than incomes. Over the past decade, some have questioned if the rising costs of higher education have begun to outweigh the value of a college degree, with some organizations arguing that higher education should change to a more job-oriented approach.⁵ Many college and university presidents and educators, however, maintain the holistic view of higher education’s role in the intellectual development of individuals.⁶ Underlying this debate is the clear evidence of broader societal benefits when more people are able to access a college education.⁷

The changing demographics of higher education, along with rapidly evolving views of race and diversity among young adults, bring their own challenges to student affairs. Not only is the typical student body becoming more female and more ethnically diverse, the proportions of non-traditional and part-time students are also increasing.⁸ Student affairs must adapt to the realities of a more diverse student body — one that may require more specialized attention but be less likely to utilize traditional on-campus services. Additionally, student affairs is called on to navigate a technology landscape that includes the rapid-response expectations of a social media-savvy student population.

4 Jones, S.R.; Schuh, J.H.; & Torres, V. (2017). *Shaping the Future. Student Services: A Handbook for the Profession*, 6th ed. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

5 Fisher, K. (2011, May 15). *Crisis of Confidence Threatens Colleges*. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*.

6 Ibid.

7 Trostel, P. (2015). *It's Not Just the Money: The Benefits of College Education to Individuals and to Society*. (Research Report.) Lumina Foundation.

8 Hussar, W. & Bailey, T. (2018). *Projections of Education Statistics to 2026*. (NCES 2018-019). U.S. Department of Education.

Schwartz and Stewart (2017) reflected on the history of changes in student affairs over the past century.⁹ They identified the key challenges student affairs professionals are facing today and into the future. Among these are:

- **Increasing student diversity**, which brings with it the need to find deeper ways to engage students that go beyond the superficial and cross traditional political and identity lines.
- **Higher costs and reduced funding in higher education**, which are reshaping who attends and how people attend colleges and universities. Minority and part-time students comprise a large proportion of community college students, whereas at four-year institutions, the enrollment gaps between higher-income traditional students and lower-income students may be widening.
- **Business model pressures for efficiency** in the context of lower state and federal funding, which has led to tension between the job training functions of education and the holistic view of student development that underpins the student affairs profession.

Student affairs professionals respond to these challenges as they do the work of connecting the institution to the individual students they serve. Understanding more about the student affairs workforce is a critical piece of information for institutions and could make the difference between surviving and thriving in the ever-changing world of higher education.

Who Are Student Affairs Professionals?

Along with academic affairs and business affairs, student affairs is a critically important part of every institution of higher education. There are dozens of functional areas on campus that are frequently part of student affairs, and many more that draw upon the same, or very similar, skills and competencies but may not be part of the student affairs organization on a given campus.

Although different functions are considered part of student affairs by different institutions, the 36 positions in the table below are almost always included.¹⁰ These can be broadly classified into “leadership” (top officers, heads, supervisors) or “frontline” (coordinator, standard, or counselor) positions.¹¹

9 Schwartz, R. & Stewart, D. (2017). *The History of Student Affairs. Student Services: A Handbook for the Profession*, 6th ed. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

10 For the purpose of this analysis, student affairs employees are the 25,518 incumbents of these positions from the 760 non-profit, higher education institutions that completed all three 2017-18 CUPA-HR non-faculty salary surveys.

11 Full position descriptions are available in the [Survey Participation and Information Templates](#) for the administrators, professionals, and staff surveys on the CUPA-HR website.

Table 1. Position Titles and Categories

Position	Title	Position	Title
LEADERSHIP POSITIONS			
Top Officers			
145000 ^A	Chief Student Affairs/ Student Life Officer	155010 ^A	Dean of Students (with or without faculty status)
194170 ^A	Deputy Chief, Student Affairs		
Heads			
196280 ^A	Chief Campus Student Activities Administrator	196300 ^A	Chief Campus Student Center Administrator
196310 ^A	Chief Campus Greek Life Administrator	196330 ^A	Chief Campus Career Services Administrator
196340 ^A	Chief Campus Student Counseling Center Administrator	196360 ^A	Chief Campus Student Housing Administrator
301050 ^A	Chief Student Affairs Officer, College/Division	410110 ^P	Head, Minority/Multicultural Student Affairs
410115 ^P	Head, LGBTQ Student Affairs	410130 ^P	Head, Campus Ministries/Religious Affairs
410135 ^P	Head, International Student Affairs	410140 ^P	Head, Women's Center
410150 ^P	Campus Chaplain	412120 ^P	Head, First-Year Experience
415120 ^P	Head, Campus Recreation/Intramurals		
Supervisors			
414100 ^P	Deputy Head, Student Housing	414110 ^P	Student Housing, Administrative Operations Officer
414120 ^P	Student Housing, Residence Life Officer	415110 ^P	Deputy Head, Student Activities
415140 ^P	Deputy Head, Campus Recreation/ Intramurals	415150 ^P	Deputy Head, Campus Student Union
416100 ^P	Deputy Head, Student Counseling		
FRONTLINE POSITIONS			
Counselors			
412100 ^P	Student Career Counselor	416120 ^P	Student Counselor
416110 ^P	Student Counseling Psychologist		
Standard			
412130 ^P	Student Success Professional	414130 ^P	Student Residence Hall Manager (R&B incl.)
414140 ^P	Student Residence Hall Manager (R&B not incl.)	415130 ^P	Student Activities Officer
Coordinators			
412140 ^P	Coordinator, Student Conduct	415160 ^P	Campus Recreation/Intramural Coordinator
416115 ^P	Student Health Coordinator	543000 ^S	Student Services Coordinator

^A Administrators in Higher Education Survey.

^P Professionals in Higher Education Survey.

^S Staff in Higher Education Survey.

The Challenges of Student Diversity

The demand for higher education institutions to provide tailored student support for a wide range of student needs is an emerging challenge in higher education. When the goal is to provide deep, rather than superficial, engagement with diversity, a starting point is often the following question: Does the higher education workforce that is supposed to meet the needs of a diverse population reflect the demographics of those they serve? This is a challenge for every area of campus, but the challenge is magnified in student affairs.

SEX AND RACE

According to the most recently available data from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), approximately 56% of the nearly 20 million college students in 2016 were female. About 54% of these students were White, 13% Black, 17% Hispanic, 6% Asian, and 5% were nonresident aliens.¹²

Figure 1 compares student affairs professionals by sex and race to the composition of the U.S. college student population. It's important for every campus to do this assessment using the current or aspirational demographics of their student body, but a broad view across the country is an important starting point for this review. Student affairs is a majority female field. About 71% of student affairs positions are held by women, compared to only 58% among all higher education professionals.¹³ In student affairs, 56% of top officers are female, compared to only 51% among all higher education administrators.¹⁴ White females make up around 51% of student affairs professionals, although white females only comprise around 30% of the student population.

¹² National Center for Education Statistics (2016). [Table 306.30](#). *Digest of Education Statistics*.

¹³ Bichsel, J.; Li, J.; Pritchard, A.; & McChesney, J. (2018). *Professionals in Higher Education Annual Report: Key Findings, Trends, and Comprehensive Tables for the 2017-18 Academic Year*. (Research Report). CUPA-HR.

¹⁴ Bichsel, J., Pritchard, A., Li, J., & McChesney, J. (2018). *Administrators in Higher Education Annual Report: Key Findings, Trends, and Comprehensive Tables for the 2017-18 Academic Year*. (Research Report). CUPA-HR.

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Representation of Sex and Ethnicity for Student Affairs Employees Relative to Students

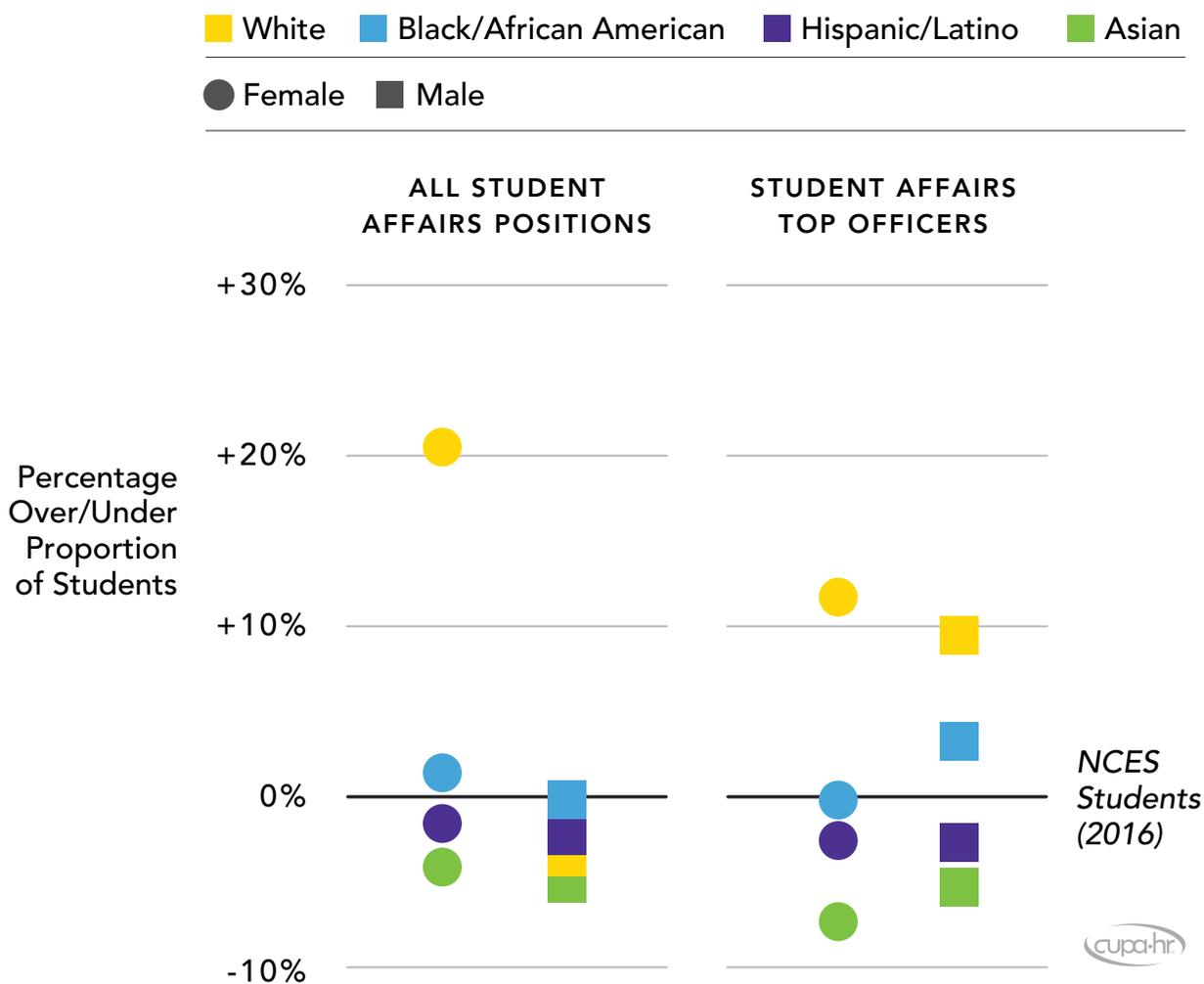


Figure 1

One way to examine diversity within student affairs is to compare the demographic makeup of student affairs employees to the demographics of the student population. Both Hispanics and Asians are underrepresented in student affairs. Hispanics make up 17% of students, but only 8% of student affairs professionals. Similarly, only 3% of student affairs professionals are Asian, compared to 6% of students. White males are slightly underrepresented among all student affairs professionals, accounting for 20% of student affairs positions compared to 24% of students. In leadership positions, however, some of these patterns differ. For top officers, White males (33%) and Black males (8%) are overrepresented compared to the student populations (24% and 5%, respectively).

These data highlight important considerations for college and university leaders who expect student affairs professionals to address the challenges of an increasingly diverse student body. Projections from NCES for the next decade predict a 15% increase in the Hispanic student population, a 7% increase in the Black student population, and a corresponding 8% decrease in the proportion of White college students between 2016 and 2026.¹⁵ Though Black students are proportionately represented among student affairs professionals today, Hispanics are underrepresented among student affairs professionals (8%) despite comprising 17% of the student population and having projected growth to 20% by 2026. Based on these data, colleges and universities will need to more actively pursue student affairs professionals and leaders who can better represent and relate to a growing Hispanic population of students.

PAY EQUITY

Student affairs is exemplary for pay equity compared to the rest of higher education. CUPA-HR's 2018 *Professionals in Higher Education Annual Report* found that student affairs was one of only a few areas with equitable pay overall for both women and minorities.¹⁶ Analysis for this report finds similar results, with minor differences for certain combinations of sex and race (Figure 2). Additionally, student affairs leadership positions are also stronger (in comparison to the rest of higher education) in pay equity across sex and ethnicity combinations. This is particularly true for female leaders, given that overall women administrators in higher education are paid only \$0.82 for every dollar paid to men.¹⁷

Although these ratios are generally promising, there is still room for improvement on pay equity within student affairs. Asians are the most highly compensated frontline employees but fall short of pay equity in leadership roles. It is also important to note that Hispanic females have the lowest pay ratios of any sex-ethnicity combination (\$0.92 for frontline, \$0.94 for leadership), and that White females in leadership positions have the overall lowest pay ratio at \$0.91. When taken into consideration along with the representation data presented above, clearly pay equity should also be considered to ensure that the growth of Hispanic representation in student affairs and of women in leadership is advanced.

¹⁵ National Center for Education Statistics (2016). [Table 306.30](#). *Digest of Education Statistics*.

¹⁶ Bichsel, Li, Pritchard, & McChesney (2018).

¹⁷ Bichsel, Pritchard, Li, & McChesney (2018).

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Pay Ratio of Student Affairs Employees by Sex and Ethnicity Compared to White Males

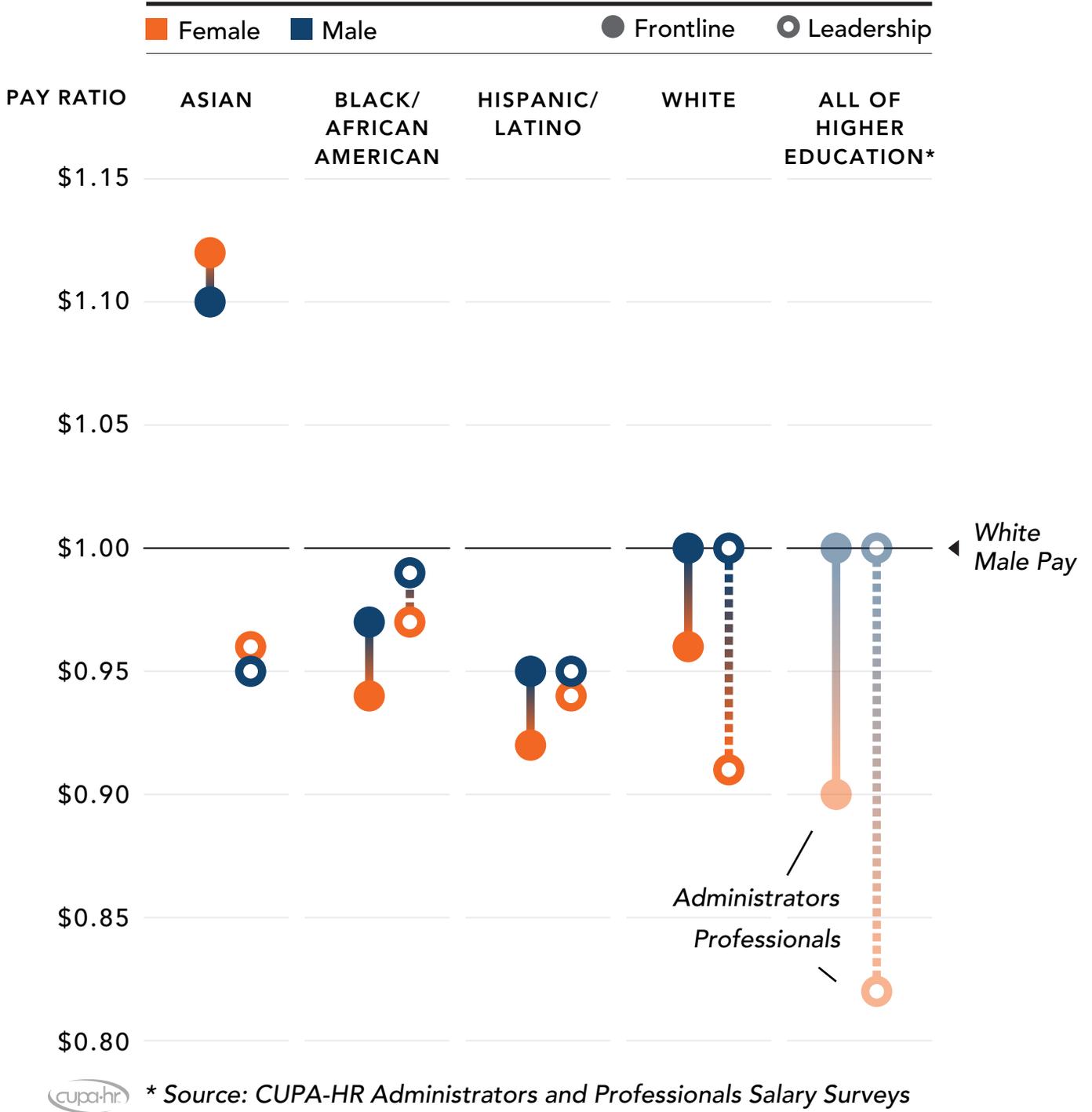


Figure 2

AGE

A strength of student affairs is the relative youth of student affairs professionals compared to many other areas in higher education. CUPA-HR's analysis of age and years in position among higher education professional positions found that the median starting age for student affairs professionals was 32 years old, the lowest of any professional group. By comparison, the median starting age for academic affairs and fiscal affairs positions were 37 and 41, respectively.¹⁸ This suggests a strong pipeline of individuals beginning their higher education career in student affairs.

Likewise, the median age for top officers in student affairs is 51 compared to the overall median age of 54 for all higher education administrators,¹⁹ suggesting that the pipeline and advancement opportunities for student affairs leadership are also strong. However, because student affairs professionals are younger, student affairs may require more deliberate development of future leadership and succession planning than other areas. The relative youth of student affairs as a field can be viewed as both an asset and a challenge for the future and should be an important consideration in institutional workforce planning.

The Challenges of Cost and Efficiency

The trend of decreasing public funding, both directly through state budget cuts and indirectly through reduced student financial aid assistance, has led to a greater dependence on tuition to cover operating expenses at most institutions. The majority of public and private institutions have had to create and implement new models for allocating and managing very tight budgets. In response, institutions have had to assess services and resources provided across the campus, including those dedicated to student services. However, counter-pressures from government oversight (e.g., Title IX enforcement) and consumerism among prospective students have emerged to justify the continuation, if not expansion, of many student services in the name of recruiting and retaining students.

Given these tensions, can staffing data for student affairs professionals give us insights into how institutions have been handling these competing pressures and provide a sense of direction for the future?

¹⁸ Bichsel, Li, Pritchard, & McChesney (2018).

¹⁹ Bichsel, Pritchard, Li, & McChesney (2018).

STAFFING IN STUDENT AFFAIRS POSITIONS

Because much of the work in student affairs is focused on direct student services, it is no surprise that 71% of all student affairs employees fall into frontline categories of coordinator, standard, or counselor positions.²⁰ Higher education institutions employ a median of 14 frontline student affairs positions and eight leadership positions (which include top officers, heads, or supervisors). However, the number of student affairs employees at an institution varies greatly based on its classification and student population. Figure 3 shows the median number of students and student affairs employees by institutional classification.

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Student Affairs Employees by Institution Classification

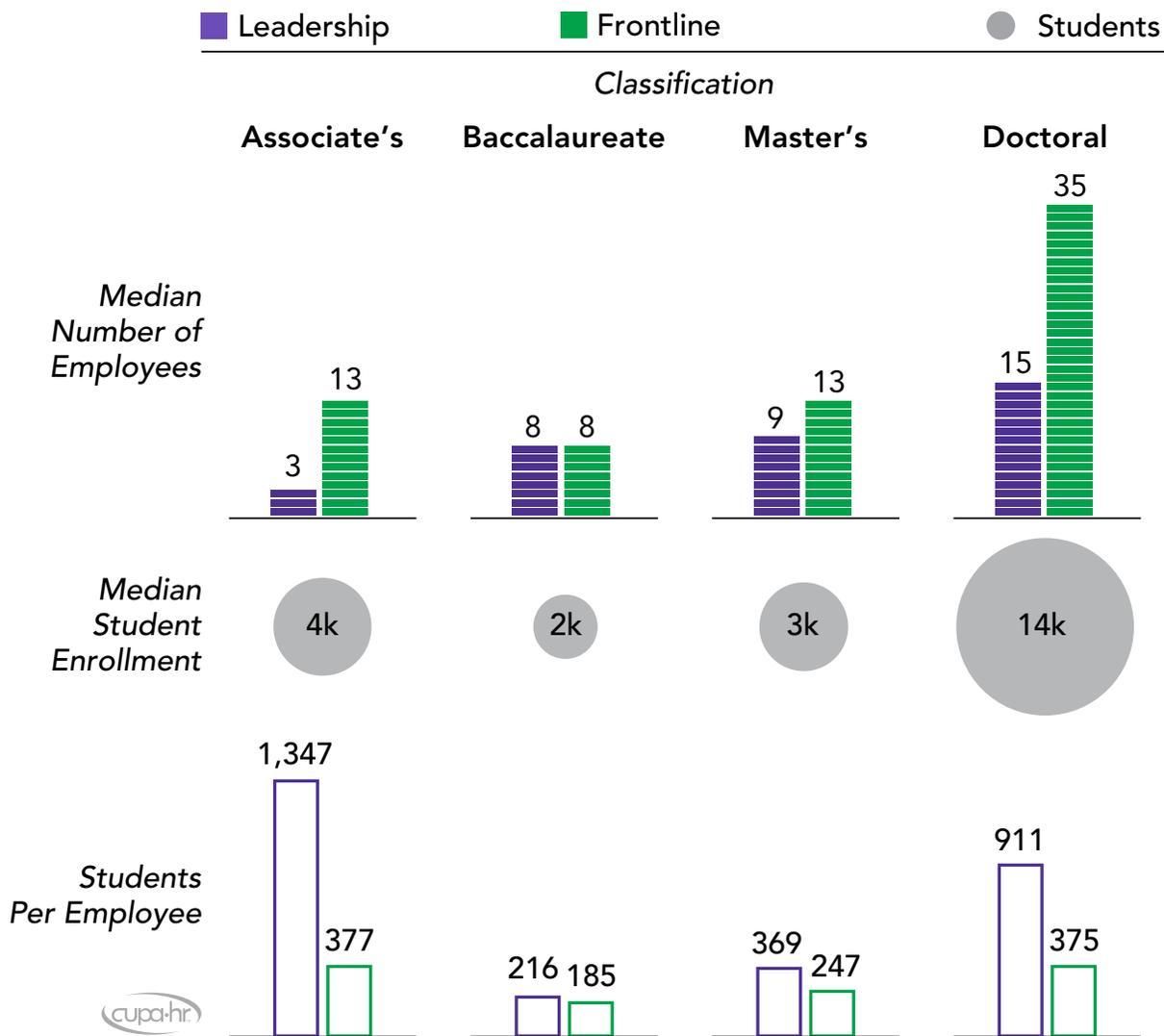


Figure 3

20 Positions included in these groups are listed in Table 1 of this brief.

From these statistics, it may appear that doctoral institutions simply employ more student affairs professionals because they are larger institutions. The number of student affairs employees, however, only tells half the story. When you also consider the number of students these institutions serve per frontline employee, important differences emerge. Students at doctoral institutions have a median ratio of students to frontline student affairs employees of 375:1, meaning that for every 375 students, doctoral institutions reported one frontline student affairs employee. At master's institutions this ratio is only 247 students per frontline student affairs employee, and for baccalaureate institutions it is only 185 students per employee. Figure 3 also shows the median number of leadership positions for each classification. Together with the student ratios, a pattern is clear: as institutions increase in size, they employ more leadership positions and fewer frontline positions per student.

Associate's institutions, however, are an exception to both patterns. Associate's institutions have a ratio of 377 students per frontline student affairs employee, nearly identical to doctoral institutions despite their much smaller median enrollment size. Associate's institutions also employ the fewest leadership positions of any institutional type, despite having the second-largest median number of students. It is clear from these data that associate's institutions structure student affairs very differently from other types of institutions, possibly related to the differences between residential and commuter student populations.

For most institutions, the student ratios suggest that many larger institutions may be unable to scale up the number of frontline positions as they serve more students. Even though the median number of students at doctoral institutions is about 8 times larger than at baccalaureate institutions, doctoral institutions only employ twice as many frontline employees and leadership positions.

Taken together, we see a much clearer picture of how the tensions between necessary student services and efficiency are being addressed. These data suggest a greater need for a variety of student affairs positions as an institution increases in size, though counter-pressure is created by a challenging financial climate.

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Close-Up: Counselors

Counselors comprise the most unique group of positions in student affairs. Counselors include the positions of student career counselor, student counselor, and student counseling psychologist. They make up 14% of all positions in student affairs and 20% of frontline positions. Recent national interest in student mental health is undoubtedly contributing to the increase in the number of counselors employed in higher ed.²¹ Compared to the overall 7% growth rate for student affairs positions in higher ed,²² the number of student counselors has increased 10%, and the number of student counseling psychologists has increased 8% from 2016-17 to 2017-18. In contrast, the number of student career counselor positions has only increased 2%.

Like student affairs in general, most counselors are women (77%) and are White (75%). Also similar to other student affairs positions, Blacks (12%) and Hispanics (6%) are underrepresented in counselor positions when compared to the overall student body.

COUNSELING POSITIONS BY CLASSIFICATION

Figure 4 shows the distribution of these three counseling positions across institutional classification. Most notably, associate's institutions employ a much smaller proportion of student counseling psychologists, whereas doctoral institutions employ the largest proportion.

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Proportions of Student Affairs Counseling Positions

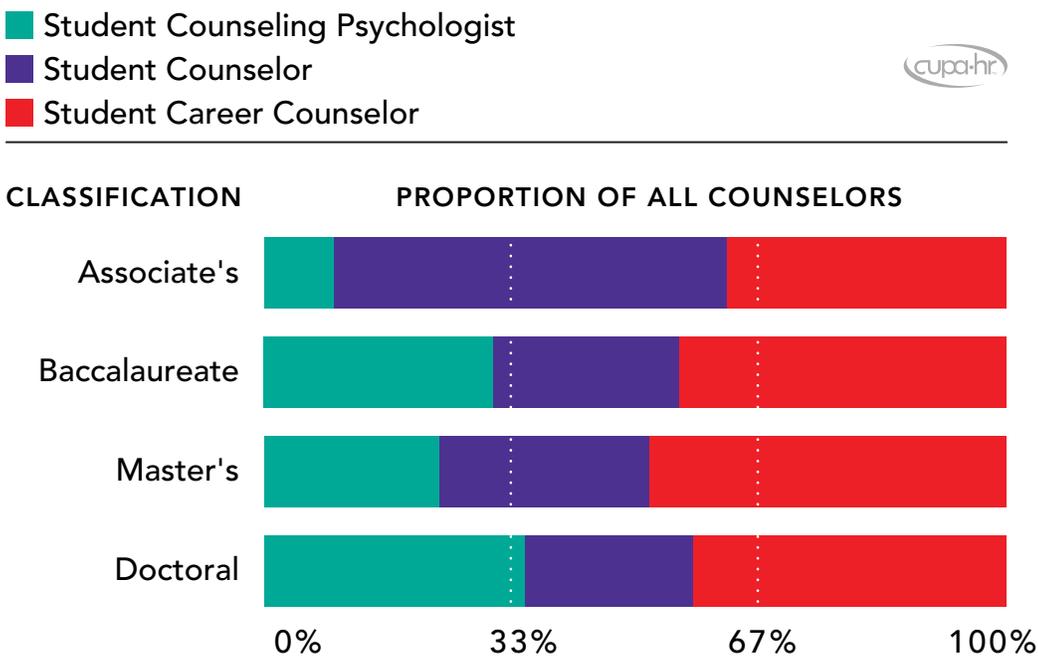


Figure 4

²¹ Henriques, G. (2014, Feb 15). *The College Student Mental Health Crisis*. *Psychology Today*.

²² Bichsel, Li, Pritchard, & McChesney (2018).

The data in Figure 4 suggests that classification impacts how institutions structure their mental health and counseling services workforce. This difference may be related to cost; extending this analysis to consider total operating expenses finds that the number of counseling psychologists an institution employs is more strongly related to total operating expenses than the number of student counselors or student career counselors.²³ Student counseling psychologists (requiring a M.A. or Ph.D. and 4-5 years of experience) earn a median salary of \$65,000 compared to the median salary for student counselors (requiring an M.A. and 4-5 years of experience) of \$52,289. Student career counselors (requiring a B.A. and 2-3 years of experience) earn the least at \$49,251. Taken together, these data suggest that both institution type and resources are important drivers of how an institution responds to student mental health needs.

SALARY GROWTH AND THE LABOR MARKET

The increase in median salary from 2016-17 to 2017-18 for student counselors (0.5%) and student counseling psychologists (1.8%) lags far behind the median increase for student career counselors (3.2%). Combined with the higher-than-average increases in the total number of positions, these figures suggest that the growth in the two mental health counseling positions may be driven by hiring more entry-level positions to meet demand, resulting in a suppression of the overall median salary increase rate. In other words, incumbents in these positions typically received salary increases of higher than 0.5% and 1.8%, but the increase in entry-level positions actually lowered the overall median salary for these positions. In contrast, student career counselors, with lower-than-average position growth (2%), have a median rate of salary growth (3.2%) more consistent with what is expected from wage growth related to annual raises. Because these data do not show both an increased hiring rate and dramatically increasing median salaries, it appears that (for now) there are enough qualified mental health counselors that wage inflation is not yet occurring nationally for these positions.

However, regional salary data shown in Figure 5 suggests that the labor market for student counseling psychologists may be tighter in certain parts of the country — particularly the Northeast and West, where median salaries are much higher for this position.

²³ A positive correlation statistic measures the extent to which two variables change together in the same direction, on a scale of 0 to 1. The correlation between total operating expenses and the number of counseling psychologists (.54) is stronger than for student counselors (.35) or student career counselors (.40).

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Median Student Counseling Salaries by Region

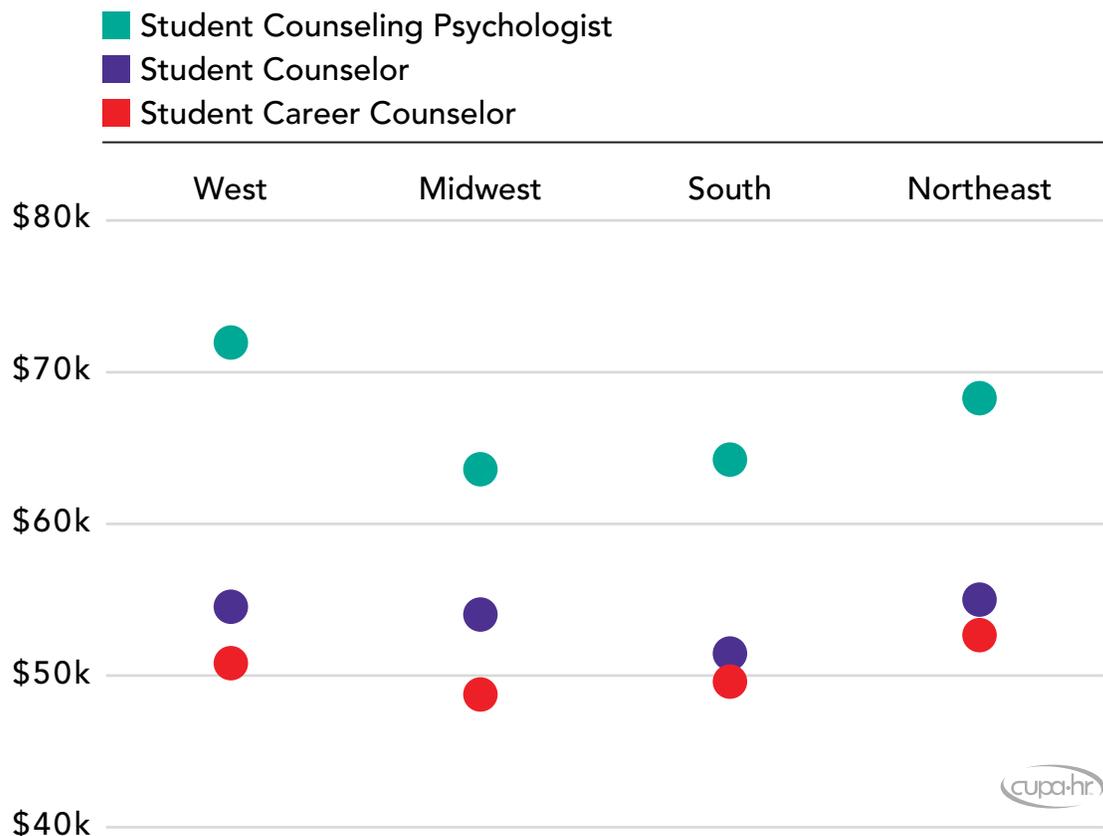


Figure 5

Student career counselor and student counselor positions pay comparable salaries regardless of region. Compared to the similar median salaries in the South or Midwest, student counseling psychologists earn over \$7,000 more per year in the West and around \$4,000 more in the Northeast. These data indicate that the labor market may be the most competitive in these regions when seeking counselors with the highest qualifications.

SUMMARY

Counselor positions reflect many of the broader challenges facing student affairs, and as such provide one example of how these challenges are being navigated. Demographically, institutions will see increasing pressure to hire counselors who more clearly reflect a diverse and rapidly-changing student body. Current events and emerging needs, such as the heightened demand for mental health counselors, play out some of the same tensions found in all of student affairs — the pressure to expand available services while trying not to overextend the bottom line.

Conclusion and Key Points

Student affairs has long held a central role in higher education's broader mission to develop students as individuals. Today's public debates about the purpose of higher education, the changing demographics of college students, and tensions around funding and efficiency all present unique challenges to the field of student affairs. Data from CUPA-HR surveys can help answer many of the key questions facing institutions when developing their student affairs workforce. Key take-aways from this brief include:

- The student affairs workforce is 71% female, and 56% of top officers are women — higher than administrative positions overall at colleges and universities.
- Compared to U.S. college students, racial and ethnic minorities are underrepresented in student affairs, particularly for Hispanics who currently comprise 8% of the student affairs workforce compared to 17% of students. The proportion of Hispanic students is projected to rise to 20% by 2026.
- Student affairs is exemplary in pay equity for women and minorities compared to the rest of higher education, and particularly for women in leadership roles. Nevertheless, the most room for pay equity improvement is among White and Asian women leaders and Hispanic women regardless of position type.
- Institutions employ a median of eight leadership positions and 14 frontline employees in student affairs, though these figures vary by size and classification. In general, the number of leaders is higher and the ratio of students to frontline employees is higher as size and classification increase. Associate's institutions, perhaps because of more non-residential students, have the fewest leadership roles and serve the highest number of students per student affairs employee.
- Institutions have increased the number of new mental health counselor positions faster than the average for other positions in student affairs for 2017-18, indicating the critical importance of this work on campus.
- For student counseling psychologists (usually requiring a counseling Ph.D. and 4-5 years of experience), salaries are much higher in the Northeast and West regions, whereas student counselors with lower credentials earn similar salaries nationwide. This suggests a tighter labor market for the most highly-qualified counseling professionals in these regions.

As higher education adapts to the challenges of serving college students with changing expectations, diverse demographics, less available financial aid, and a landscape where higher ed institutions are increasingly tuition-dependent, having a plan for developing a diverse student affairs workforce with the right professional competencies is a key element in creating a thriving college or university that is ready for the future.