



Professional Certification

A NEW RESOURCE
TO ELEVATE YOUR
DIVISION

BY JOSEPH DESANTO JONES

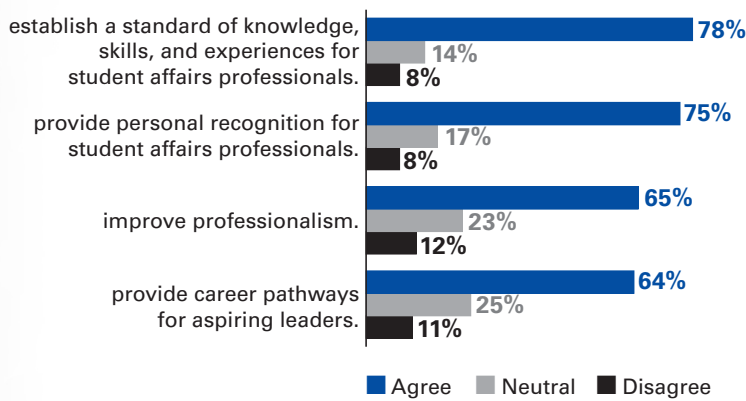
Student affairs senior leaders

know the importance of attracting and retaining knowledgeable and adept staff, which is complicated by student affairs workforce morale and retention issues exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and reflected in higher education trade publication reports and online conversations. The effective functioning of a student affairs division relies on the daunting responsibilities of crafting, developing, and sustaining a healthy robust team. What is a vice president for student affairs (VPSA) to do? Student Affairs Educator Certification was recently introduced as a new resource to help address management issues and benefit individual educators, practitioners, divisions, and the student affairs field.

IDEAL PARTICIPANTS RESPONDED CERTIFICATION WOULD:



IDEAL SUPERVISORS RESPONDED CERTIFICATION WOULD:



NASPA’s 2019 market analysis included a survey and nine focus groups of VPSAs, 12 groups of mid-level educators and new professionals, and six groups of graduate faculty. Focus groups provided additional insight into the field’s impressions of certification.

Source: 2019 presentation to the NASPA Board of Directors

The Case for Certification

Common in many fields, as well as a topic of conversation among multiple professional associations, practitioners, and graduate faculty for decades, professional certification is relatively new to student affairs and related services. The early launch of certification was met with a range of reactions from full-room attendance at conference presentations to social media misconceptions. Its early presence raised several questions. Would certification replace graduate education? No. Is certification a new requirement for professionals in the field? No, again. Then what is certification and its purpose, and where did it come from?

Several student affairs professional associations have engaged in work related to certification, ranging from actual programs such as the Registry of Collegiate Recreational Sports Professionals from NIRSA: Leaders in Collegiate Recreation to market and feasibility studies conducted by associations such as the National Association

for Campus Activities (NACA) and NASPA. Market research on the viability of professional certification in student affairs and services was conducted by NASPA in both 2013 and 2019. The 2013 study explored interest in various program designs including certification, certificates, and digital badges. Respondents favored certification and certificates. The 2019 market analysis consisted of a survey to 8,700 potential participants and supervisors that generated 2,420 responses. Response data was further analyzed by all participants, as well as ideal participants and ideal supervisors. Ideal participants were those who would be eligible for the program, would participate if their institution pays/reimburses, and work at an institution that would pay/reimburse for the program. Ideal supervisors were those who would support and encourage staff to seek certification, would participate if the institution pays/reimburses, and work at an institution that would pay/reimburse for the program.

VPSA Impressions of Certification

Positive View of Certification

- credibility and integrity
- mastery of skills
- demonstration of ongoing commitment

Hiring, Retention, Staff Development

- resource for small colleges with no graduate preparation option as well as community colleges
- retention incentives
- promotion incentives

Nimble Content Engagement

- interest in certification covering new content in the field

Update to MA/PhD Experience

- way to showcase continued learning in time since graduate degree
- means to document this new learning

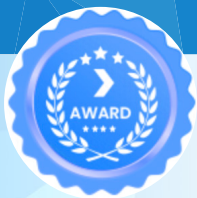
Outside of Student Affairs

- allows for credential without an MA/PhD
- offers new ways to document learning

Inform Use of Professional Development Funds

- provides structure for identifying professional development that would be too time consuming to conduct on own
- opportunity for cross-functional training

Source: 2019 presentation to the NASPA Board of Directors



Certification Gains Interest

Response data from a 2019 NASPA study generated high interest in certification from both ideal participants and ideal supervisors. In total, 76 percent of ideal supervisors and 74 percent of ideal participants believed certification should be offered to professionals.

Focus groups also identified important questions about certification, including cost-related concerns given limited budgets and potential cuts to institutional funding. VPSAs raised questions regarding equity such as if certification could potentially contribute to barriers to entry within the field. They were also interested in the information that would be documented by a certification assessment.

Certification market analysis data was shared with the NASPA Board of Directors as well as executive leadership and boards of several other professional associations. After examination and discussion of these data, Association of College and University Housing Officers–International, ACUI–Association of College Unions International, Association of Fraternity/Sorority Advisors, Association for Student Conduct Administration, NACA, and NIRSA joined NASPA in establishing a separate, independent organization to offer Student Affairs Educator Certification: the Higher Education Consortium for Student Affairs Certification.

Certification Purpose and Components

Student Affairs Educator Certification consists of a core, or general, certification as well as six specialty area certifications in the functional areas of campus activities, campus housing and residential life, campus recreation, college unions, fraternity and sorority life, and student conduct administration. The core certification is a standalone credential as well as a required prerequisite for certification in all specialty areas.

Each certification credential can help student affairs educators and practitioners to do the following:

- ➔ **Demonstrate knowledge.** Certification is a formal means to demonstrate knowledge of the field beyond education and through ongoing student affairs work experience. Certification was created to complement the knowledge gained through graduate programs and recognize that learning continues after these valuable experiences.
- ➔ **Encourage learning.** Each certification is a credential to formally show how a professional is staying current with topics in the field in the time elapsed since completion of their last degree. Certification mandates continued learning through professional development to inform practice.

Legitimizing Expertise

Sasha Masoomi, who received her master of business administration degree in 2007 from Portland State University, has spent the majority of her career working in residence life.

“Student affairs professionals often do not give themselves enough credit for their knowledge and experience,” says Masoomi. “If you care about professional development, then certification is an option to consider.”

Masoomi describes how the assessment demonstrated her strengths and weaknesses. “I did well on the assessment, but it got me to think and help overcome my imposter syndrome. It proved I am knowledgeable and competent,” she adds. “Certification can provide evidence to staff that supervisors are committed to professional development and to staying current on workplace trends and changes.”

Certification also can aid the profession and encourage practitioners to pursue continuing education credits. “Once you have passed the assessment, every five years you demonstrate continued education to be sure you are staying current with key competencies,” says Masoomi. She notes certification should be accessible to a diverse group of professionals, with funding provided by divisions or universities. She also recommends certification is more appropriate for those with at least five years in student affairs, and she has discussed ideas for a preparation class with the consortium group.

Sasha Masoomi is assistant director of resident life at Miami University.



Instilling Confidence

Christopher Miofsky began his student affairs career in enrollment management, but he has spent most of his career in fraternity and sorority life. Miofsky admits for years he witnessed other professionals earning continuing education credits as requirements for their fields and wondered about the possibility for the student affairs profession.

“How do you ensure someone does not take a job and for the next 20 years does nothing to advance their skill level?” asks Miofsky. “As you spend a number of years in the field, there is a tendency to get complacent. But having to maintain certification keeps you from getting lazy and forces you to remain engaged, which is what we all need.”

Passing the certification assessment gave Miofsky, who earned a master of education in adult and higher education administration from the University of Missouri–St. Louis, even more confidence to pursue a doctoral degree. The topic of his dissertation: belonging in fraternity and sorority life at regional public institutions. “Certification benefits your career in a number of ways: you can be more strategic in pursuing professional development, and it can help with career planning—whether you want to earn another degree, stay on your current path, or change course.”

A bigger question is: Will certification help keep people in the field longer? The average life expectancy of a student affairs professional in the fraternity or sorority life area is three-and-one-half years, according to Miofsky. “New professionals always ask me the secret to staying in the field so long. As we move into a new era of certification and continuing education, we are hoping it will increase longevity in the field.”

Christopher Miofsky is associate director of Fraternity and Sorority Life, Office of Student Engagement at the University of Denver.

Certification Domains

Foundations of the Profession	Student Learning, Development, and Success	Assessment and Evaluation	Social Justice and Inclusion
Leadership	Talent Management	Crisis and Risk Management	Financial and Facility Management

→ **Provide recognition.** Certification is a way to both incentivize and recognize individuals who demonstrate knowledge of the field and actively continue to learn. This official recognition further supports the morale and retention of certified individuals.

→ **Support advancement.** Certification is an additional tool for student affairs professionals to further signal their qualifications for new roles, professional transitions, and advancement.

Certification is not a replacement for graduate education, which holds an established history and significance in preparing individuals to engage in student affairs work. Graduate education is critical in shaping institutions, educators, and practitioners. Instead, certification is an additional resource in the toolkit available for both those who have earned graduate degrees and those who have not to show how they continue to learn through ongoing work experience.

Four Components of Certification

Eligibility. The target audience for certification is mid-level student affairs professionals and above. Eligibility requirements were informed by NASPA's market analysis and a larger practice analysis of the student affairs profession. The importance of complementing, and not competing with, graduate education was also an important factor in determining certification eligibility.

Certification eligibility consists of two pathways:

- Educators whose have earned master's-level degrees or higher must have five years of work experience in the field.
- Educators who have earned bachelor's or associate's degrees must have seven years of work experience in the field.

Exams. Each certification credential has its own exam designed to measure performance against level of knowledge and competency in eight domains that can be reasonably expected of mid-level student affairs and services professionals. Exam content within all domains is determined through a practice analysis, also known as a job task analysis. The practice analysis reoccurs approximately every five years to refresh domain content and reflect the work of the student affairs profession at the time.

After completing an exam, certification candidates receive a score report that indicates whether they passed or failed. The score report also illustrates performance across the different domain areas. The report can guide future professional development selections in areas that could benefit from further learning as well as can serve as a study tool for candidates who did not pass an exam.

Code of ethics. Educators agree to a code of ethics to apply for certification and to maintain the credential. The certification code of ethics prompts ethical behavior and details conduct for which certification can be revoked or denied. The code of ethics includes guiding principles; ethical goals for contributing to the profession, higher education institutions, and others; and ethical obligations. Guiding principles and ethical goals are aspirational; ethical obligations specify conduct that certificants are expected to follow to support the integrity of the profession.

Continuing education. Each certification is valid for five years. In addition to adhering to the code of ethics, all certificants must complete approved continuing education. Such certification maintenance is required to stay current with important trends and topics impacting student affairs work. Educators recertify by achieving a minimum of 50 approved continuing education (CE) credits per certification. Of the 50 core CEs, at least eight must be within social justice and inclusion-focused areas.

Demonstrating Knowledge

Coming from a human resources background, Priscilla Arungwa understands how certification sets one apart in a given field. “Professionals at the top of their respective fields, such as engineering and health care, obtain certification. It is a testimony of one’s expertise in the field,” she says. “Certification affirms that you possess the knowledge and requisite experience to thrive in your chosen career field.”

Driven by an innate passion for professional development, Arungwa, who holds a PhD in educational leadership from Prairie View A&M University, a member of the Texas A&M University System, says she thrives on learning new concepts and testing her knowledge. “Earning certification has boosted my confidence and established me as a committed professional in the student affairs field,” says Arungwa. Additionally, certification allowed her to set an example for others who may be considering it. “Recognition from my supervisors holds great meaning for me, and I look forward to future opportunities where I can leverage my skills and knowledge to support others in the field,” she adds.

She believes strongly if a manager is considering certification, they need to pursue it. “Pick a date and begin preparing for it,” she advises. “Even if the test is six months out, find someone to help you prepare and motivate you. Once you qualify, that is a big step.”

Priscilla Arungwa is director of students at Utah State University.



Bridging the Gap

Many student affairs professionals who hold a bachelor’s degree may not see another degree in their future or those with a master’s degree may not be considering a doctoral degree. “It is a long, cumbersome process and can be very expensive,” explains Dawn Meza Soufleris, who manages a staff of more than 200 student affairs practitioners. “There has not been anything in the middle,” she explains. “Certification is an opportunity for middle managers in the field to reignite and reengage.”

Soufleris offered scholarships to some 14 staff members who were interested in certification. Their experience generated a mixed bag of reactions. “For traditional student affairs professionals who have taken the typical pathways into the field, the exam was manageable,” explains Soufleris. “For others, such as members of the university police who did not enter the field in a traditional way, it was more difficult.”

She notes, “Even for many middle managers in their 30s, 40s, or 50s, taking an exam can be an intimidating task—especially with no practice exams to prepare. Even the director of our student union, who has a doctoral degree, was concerned.” At some point, Soufleris would like to see another certification option that would focus on more basic student life concepts for those relatively new to the field or who have entered the field in nontraditional ways. She believes for those who have a toe in the water about getting another degree, certification could push them forward—which is a big win for the profession.

“Overall, I love the concept and specialty areas of certification,” says Soufleris. “I absolutely would have taken it if offered years ago. It adds to your credibility, your CV, and is great for posting on LinkedIn.” Soufleris notes certification is critical to demonstrate the theoretical, research, data, and substance behind what student affairs does.

Dawn Meza Soufleris is vice president for student development and campus life at Montclair State University.

Highlighting Competencies

As a collective, the student affairs profession has struggled to find a streamlined and accessible way to ensure that its workforce has a specific and established set of standards. “The Student Affairs Educator Certification goes a long way to solve this dilemma,” notes Ian Wolf.

The certification does not and is not intended to replace an academic degree (whether it be at the master’s or doctoral level), and it certainly cannot replace hands-on practical experience. “Yet, the certification does offer student affairs professionals a straightforward, clear, and industry-vetted way of highlighting their learning, competencies, and knowledge,” says Wolf.

Ian Wolf is assistant dean for student engagement at Passaic County Community College.

The Benefits of Certification

Student Affairs Educator Certification was piloted in fall 2022 with the first core and specialty area credentials granted beginning in early 2023. To date, more than 230 mid-level educators and above have earned one or more certifications. Program evaluation data support market analysis findings about certification.

Certification recipients report the credentials as a means to demonstrate knowledge, competency, and learning, particularly mid-level professionals. Recipients report the credentials provide acknowledgment and legitimacy of professional development and aspire for certification to be a platform for generating further respect from peers and employers. Additional benefits include support for advancement, a competitive edge in applying for positions and supporting transitions, and a focus for continued learning and improvement.

Use Certification to Support Your Division

Professional certification is a new tool to support staff recruitment, professional development, and recognition of excellence of divisions of student affairs.

Recruitment. VPSAs, other senior leaders, and functional area directors seek to recruit and hire staff who exhibit a foundational understanding of student affairs, understand

the day-to-day “real world” tasks, and continue to learn. Certification is a means to demonstrate those qualities.


- Work with an institution’s and division’s human resources areas to build understanding of Student Affairs Educator Certification and to list the core and specialty area credentials as preferred in applicable position announcements. The credentials and corresponding acronyms include:
 - CSAEd: Certified Student Affairs Educator
 - CSAEd-CA: Campus Activities Specialty
 - CSAEd-HRL: Housing and Residential Life Specialty
 - CSAEd-CR: Campus Recreation Specialty
 - CSAEd-CU: College Unions Specialty
 - CSAEd-FSL: Fraternity and Sorority Life Specialty
 - CSAEd-SC: Student Conduct Administration Specialty
- Incentivize staff recruitment by informing applicants of funding assistance to earn certification.

Professional Development. Certification offers opportunities to retain staff by supporting professional development requirements for continuing education.

- Certification score reports can be used by supervisors and staff to inform professional development planning, including use of funds toward meaningful professional development. These reports indicate areas of strength as well as for improvement within the certification domains.
- Staff attending professional development events offered through multiple associations, such as conferences and webinars, can earn related continuing education credit.
- If an institution or division offers in-house professional development opportunities, consider applying for continuing education credit for the programs through the Higher Education Consortium for Student Affairs Certification.

Recognition. Use certification as a recognition and celebration tool.

- Highlight staff who earn certification at recognition events and through websites, newsletters, social media, and annual reports.
- Share data on staff who have earned professional certification with other senior institutional leaders and divisions to further raise awareness and demonstrate the credibility for student affairs work.

Student Affairs Educator Certification offers new benefits for the field as a tangible resource for VPSAs in leading staff recruitment, development, and retention efforts. As the student affairs field continues to evolve, certification has tremendous potential for promoting the professionalism of practitioners and the field. For more information about certification, visit studentaffairscertification.org or email info@studentaffairscertification.org. 

Joseph DeSanto Jones is executive director of the Higher Education Consortium for Student Affairs Certification.