

Professional Staff Competencies in Women's Centers
Issue Brief 04
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This issue brief contextualizes and reports on a series of conversations within the Greater Cincinnati Consortium of Colleges and Universities (GCCCU)/Southwestern Ohio Council for Higher Education (SOCHE) Women's Centers Committee ("the Committee") about the competencies and training needed to work in a university women's center. Over the past five to ten years, we have observed a marked increase in required credentials and competencies in job advertisements in women's centers across the country. The changes are perhaps most evident in the increased levels of degrees required and a simultaneous desire for narrower fields of study. Additionally, it is difficult to ascertain whether or not the job descriptions in many of the advertisements were composed by individuals with knowledge of the day-to-day work of women's centers or their philosophical underpinnings.

We will provide insight into the work of women's center professional staff, which for the purpose of this issue brief we define as all full- or part-time non-student staff members. These professional staff members have a variety of titles, including, but not limited to, *administrative specialist, assistant/associate director, coordinator, director, and secretary*. As a Committee, we believe that while these staff members may carry out different duties, the work of each is central to the effectiveness of the center. As a result, we share the competencies that we believe are required either at hiring or through training and professional development after employment. This brief also outlines our deliberations about the advantages and drawbacks of requiring a terminal degree for women's center directors.

Background

While each women's center reflects the unique needs of its community and institution,^{1,2} they share common commitments, missions, and strategies for accomplishing their work.³ As a result, the Committee discussed multiple trends affecting the market for

¹ Clevenger, B. M. (1988, Summer). Women's centers on campus: A profile. *Initiatives*, 51(2/3), 3-9.

² Martin, C., Morrow, R., Robbins, C. K., Spencer, N., & Vlasnik, A. L. (2012). The role of women student programs and services: CAS standards contextual statement. In D. I. Mitstifer (Ed.), *CAS professional standards for higher education* (8th ed., pp. 510-512). Washington, DC: Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education.

³ Vlasnik, A. L. (2013, March). *Bibliography: Women's centers in U.S. higher education*. Retrieved from www.nwsa.org/content.asp?pl=17&sl=78&contentid=78

women's center professional staff over the past five years: the increasing professionalization of women's center work; more individuals with terminal degrees—specifically, PhDs—in the job market; and continued higher education budget cuts that have resulted in layoffs and hiring freezes that do not allow centers to fill positions when a staff member retires or otherwise leaves. Consequently, many center leaders are paying increased attention to their remaining positions and the staff who fill them, prioritizing the need to supplement or increase existing staff members' competencies.

The topic of competencies for women's center professionals and whether a terminal degree should be required did not originate with our Committee. In November 2011, several Committee members attended a provocative session at the Women's Centers Pre-Conference of the National Women's Studies Association that included discussion of these issues.⁴ Donna Bickford read the following list of competencies as part of her presentation, to many nods and affirmations from the women's center professionals in the audience:

What skills *are* required/necessary: diplomacy, code-switching (changing vocabulary based on audience), deep content knowledge of relevant issues, ability to operationalize feminist practices, ability to work collaboratively, to lead and participate in teams and coalitions, long-term strategy and ability to react quickly to current campus and world events, ability to manage up and down, sense of humor and compassion, successful at external fundraising. Some of us learned some of these during our doctoral studies, but [there are] plenty of other places to learn them.⁵

It was the last statement, as well as statements from other presenters and audience members, that spurred the most conversation at the conference session and throughout the rest of the day. Several months later, Committee members who attended were still talking about the many hot-button discussion points brought up by this panel, and we decided to formally explore the topic.

This brief, which is the product of facilitated discussions, is timely for many reasons. Of particular concern is that many women's center professionals will retire in the near future. Additionally, there is little in the scholarly literature that would guide administrators who may seek to reshape these positions before posting. Most recently and directly relevant to this issue brief, a study of women's center staff members noted that "a willingness to take a stand on behalf of a needed change on campus was cited

⁴ Bethman, B., Bickford, D. M., Cohee, G. E., Issadore, M. N., & Cottledge, A. D. (2011, November 10). *Academic women's centers: Careers, professionalization and structural transformation*. Session presented at the Women's Centers Committee pre-conference at the annual conference of the National Women's Studies Association, Atlanta, GA.

⁵ D. Bickford, personal communication, December 5, 2011.

as an essential part of the role of many women's center staff."⁶ Additionally, the National Survey of Campus Women's Centers reported in 2002 that, of the 122 centers in its sample, 13 were led by directors with bachelor degrees, 53 by directors with master's degrees, and 21 by directors with doctoral degrees.⁷ No national survey has been conducted since then.

Women's center literature does not contain many references to competencies of women's center professionals that might inform job descriptions. However, the student affairs literature has two relevant sets of professional competencies. The first is the American College Personnel Association and National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (ACPA/NASPA) Professional Competencies and Standards.⁸ Created as broad principles for student affairs professionals in higher education,⁹ the competencies assist individuals who write job descriptions for positions within higher education administration, can be used in the assessment of colleagues, and/or can help determine whether additional professional development or education is needed. While relevant for work in higher education, the professional competencies are not specific to the needs of women's centers.

The second set of competencies is published through the Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS)¹⁰ and contains a section that specifically focuses on competencies and ethics for Women Student Programs and Services (WSPS). The CAS standards provide guidelines in 12 parts and a contextual statement for the work of women's centers. Two parts are relevant to the competencies of professional staff: human resources (part 4) and ethics (part 5). The standards state that "professional staff should demonstrate a commitment to improving women's lives

⁶ Marine, S. (2011). Reflections from "professional feminists" in higher education: Women's and gender centers at the start of the twenty-first century. In P. A. Pasque & S. Errington Nicholson (Eds.), *Empowering women in higher education and student affairs: Theory, research, narratives, and practice from feminist perspectives* (p. 19). Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing.

⁷ Davie, S. L. (2002). Results of the *National Survey of Campus Women's Centers*. In S. L. Davie (Ed.), *University and college women's centers: A journey toward equity* (pp. 493-504). Westport, CT: Greenwood Press. Not all centers responded to the questions regarding director credentials.

⁸ American College Personnel Association, & National Association of Student Personnel Administrators. (2010, July 24). *Professional competency areas for student affairs practitioners*. Washington, DC: Authors. Retrieved from www.naspa.org/programs/prodev/Professional_Competencies.pdf

⁹ The ACPA/NASPA Professional Competencies were produced by a joint committee that reviewed literature and research about competencies, standards, and expectations of student affairs professionals. The ever-evolving document emphasizes the fact that basic, intermediate, and advanced competency levels vary greatly with each institution, and that student affairs professionals who wish to utilize the competencies in their professional work should customize them depending on the needs, mission, or campus climate of varying higher education institutions.

¹⁰ Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education. (2012). Women student programs and services: CAS standards and guidelines. In D. I. Mitsifer (Ed.), *CAS professional standards for higher education* (8th ed., pp. 513-521). Washington, DC: Author.

and a respect for the diversity of women's identities and experiences" and outline a list of tasks with the directive that staff members

(a) develop and implement programs and services; (b) conduct assessment, research, and evaluation; (c) advocate for the improvement of the quality of life for women as students, faculty members, and staff members; and (d) participate in institutional policy and governance efforts to ensure that policies and practices take into account the unique experiences of women.¹¹

Although more directly relatable to women's center work than the ACPA/NASPA Professional Competencies, the WSPS section of CAS standards cannot speak for the entirety of women's center work. Because of this gap in the literature, the Committee undertook this project.

The Process

To generate the data included in this brief, the Committee engaged in multiple group discussions and a writing exercise that included those not able to attend the group meetings. The process was designed to share the internal discussions and diverse perspectives of our group of women's center professionals.

Based on our early discussions of professional staff competencies in women's centers, Amber Vlasnik was tasked by the Committee to create a worksheet that would encourage reflection prior to the group's May 2012 meeting. Committee members were asked to bring their completed worksheets to the meeting or, if they could not attend, to send the completed worksheets to Vlasnik for compilation. Responses submitted via e-mail were shared with the Committee for discussion at the May meeting. The following questions were included in the worksheet:

1. What competencies should all professional women's center staff possess?
2. Are there any competencies that a women's center director should possess that are unique from those of other staff members?
3. What are the pros and cons of requiring the director to have a terminal degree?
4. Does institution type (e.g., public/private, two-year/four-year, religious) influence competencies for staff at women's centers? In what ways?
5. Any additional thoughts or considerations you'd like to share?

At the May 2012 meeting, the Committee generated an extensive list of competencies for women's center staff. At the August 2012 retreat, the compiled data were shared

¹¹ Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education. (2012). Women student programs and services: CAS standards and guidelines. In D. I. Mitsifer (Ed.), *CAS professional standards for higher education* (8th ed., p. 516). Washington, DC: Author.

with the Committee for discussion; questions 3 and 4 were also discussed (see subsequent sections). Feedback on these five questions was also incorporated from two presentations of the rough data at the 2012 annual conference of the National Women's Studies Association.^{12,13}

Competencies for All Women's Center Professional Staff

Discussions at the May 2012 meeting and August 2012 retreat were grouped into three broad categories to describe the professional competencies of all staff of women's centers: content areas, skills, and commitments. For the content areas, Committee members felt that it was essential that staff have pre-existing knowledge in these areas or professed/demonstrated interest/willingness to learn, when needed, for their positions. The following lists are not in any ranked order.

Content Areas

- Women, gender, and equity issues
- Feminism
- Cultural competency
- Histories of oppression
- Intersectionality
- Women's issues in higher education
- Landscape of higher education
- Needs of diverse groups on campus (faculty, staff, nontraditional students, etc.)
- Campus and community resources
- Institutional politics and practices related to women/gender
- Program development and evaluation
- Understanding of campus climate and politics
- Student development
- Human/social/professional development needs of constituents
- How women's centers fit with and/or challenge institutional mission
- Violence against women/gender-based violence
- LGBTQ content knowledge

Skills

- Ability to exercise and model good judgment, especially in crisis situations
- Technological proficiency (software, social media)

¹² Vlasnik, A. L., & Cottledge, A. (2012a, November 9). *Reclaiming our staff: Structures, competencies, and feminist practices*. Session presented at the annual conference of the National Women's Studies Association, Oakland, CA.

¹³ Vlasnik, A. L., & Cottledge, A. (2012b, November 8). *Reclaiming our staff: Structures, competencies, and feminist practices*. Session presented at the Women's Centers Committee pre-conference at the annual conference of the National Women's Studies Association, Oakland, CA.

- Written and oral communication skills
- Diplomacy and the awareness/ability to navigate complex campus and community situations
- Conflict management and the ability to negotiate conflict
- Ability to work with diverse groups (identity, constituency, etc.)
- Budget management/effective management of limited resources
- Ability to work as an activist and/or advocate
- Ethical behavior
- Ability to collaborate with individuals, departments, student organizations, community groups, and others
- Ability to translate theory to practice

Commitments

- Demonstrated commitment to and experiences with women's issues/social justice
- Lifelong learning
- Mentoring and leadership development
- Passion for work of women's centers
- Commitment to the balance of work and life by modeling/attempting to model it
- Advocacy and activism—willing to take risks, speak on difficult topics

Competencies for Women's Center Directors

The Committee compiled a list of competencies that a women's center director should possess in addition to the preceding lists. As the leader of the unit, the director must also demonstrate the following skills and knowledge areas:

- Be a strong visible activist and a vocal advocate for women/gender issues
- Budget/resource management
- Supervisory skills
- Assessment and evaluation
- Strategic planning/vision
- Vision, mission, goals planning
- More detailed knowledge of national, state, local, and institutional policies
- Relationships with colleagues in field
- Professional memberships, conference presentations, and publishing as appropriate
- Commitment/ability to establish partnerships with campus and community stakeholders
- Use CAS standards to proscribe/practice ethical behavior
- Manage multiple roles (administrator, advocate, revolutionary, instigator)

- Formal training (broadly defined, could be a formal degree or formal experience/training)
- Experience in higher education setting (preferred) or highly transferable skills from another environment
- Experience in a campus-based women's center (preferred)
- Greater breadth and depth of knowledge of women's issues
- Understand the need for political sensitivity and demonstrate the ability to navigate politically
- Willingness to do what they ask of others (e.g., civic engagement, challenge power)
- Grant writing and fundraising
- Marketing
- Presentation and public speaking skills
- Research and scholarship

Fields of Study

The Committee also discussed fields of study that should be preferred or required for the range of positions in women's centers. We represent a wide variety of disciplinary homes, but there was consensus that, when possible, a degree in women's/gender studies is preferred. We acknowledge that not all campuses currently offer women's/gender studies degrees. Yet, we feel that women's centers help to create a market for these degrees, which in turn helps to validate women's/gender studies as a discipline and ensure that staff members are grounded in feminist theories. The CAS standards, while listing additional areas of potential study, concur with the Committee's discussion. They note,

Staff members should have coursework in women's studies or demonstrated experience in advocacy on women's issues. Specific coursework may include organization development, counseling theory and practice, group dynamics, leadership development, human development, and research and evaluation.¹⁴

However, the Committee also acknowledged that there are multiple ways to learn this material in addition to a degree, including relevant experience. As a result, we discussed a growing trend to write position descriptions with multiple combinations of degree requirements and number of years of experience in a related field. For example, a position could require a master's degree and three to five years of relevant experience or a bachelor's degree and five to seven years of relevant experience.

¹⁴ Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education. (2012). Women student programs and services: CAS standards and guidelines. In D. I. Mitsifer (Ed.), *CAS professional standards for higher education* (8th ed., p. 516). Washington, DC: Author.

For directorships with a terminal degree requirement, the Committee came to a somewhat different conclusion related to area of study/discipline. While we are fully supportive of women's/gender studies programs and support their inclusion as a discipline in which a women's center director *might* earn a terminal degree, we are concerned that qualified candidates from other disciplines—particularly those who earned their terminal degrees at a time when there were fewer institutions with women's/gender studies graduate programs—would be ineligible or overlooked. Consequently, the Committee suggested a broader list of disciplines or areas of study for directorships requiring terminal degrees with evidence of scholarship or teaching in women's/gender issues.

Should a Terminal Degree Be a Requirement?

The Committee discussed the seemingly increasing requirement that a women's center director have a terminal degree. We do not attempt to prescribe which course of action is right for a particular campus; rather, we seek to provide context and voice concerns from our perspective as professionals who do the day-to-day work of women's centers and care deeply about building equity and opportunity for all in higher education.

We specifically chose to discuss the pros and cons of a *terminal degree*, rather than a PhD, as a way to acknowledge the diversity of disciplines and training grounds from which women's center staff originate. In addition, we discussed in great detail the various factors that would affect the decision of requiring a terminal degree on our various campuses, such as, but not limited to, institution type, reporting line of the center, parity of the director's credentials with peers in comparable units, tenure versus non-tenure line positions, requirements for teaching at the institution, and constituencies served by the center. Decision makers at individual campuses are advised to carefully consider and weigh the importance of these factors when determining the necessity and/or possibilities of women's center directors with terminal degrees.

At the August 2012 retreat, the Committee outlined a number of advantages for a director with a terminal degree. These "pros" can be characterized by two themes: the potential impact of the director on the campus, and the effect of the director within the women's center.

For the first theme—the potential impact of the director on the campus—the Committee agreed that a terminal degree provides a very particular and at times tangible credibility in higher education and professional settings. For example, having a terminal degree can increase respect from senior administrators, who often possess terminal degrees themselves. The increased credibility associated with a terminal degree can also enhance access to particular institutional conversations and increase the leverage of directors to be an advocate for all women on campus and therefore fulfill the mission of their centers. While disconcerting, the Committee also discussed that, in the face of

persistent institutional sexism, racism, ableism, and homophobia, among other forms of oppression, women's center directors with terminal degrees are often afforded more respect and credibility than directors who do not possess these degrees. Directors with terminal degrees can also use their degrees and the privileges they grant to work within the system to open doors for others; this speaks to the roles of women's center professionals, outlined earlier in the brief, to transform our institutions.

A terminal degree may also confer membership in an academic department or program, which extends formal faculty status and often academic freedom to directors. If a director has a tenure-line position, then additional employment protection and academic freedom is granted to the individual. In either case, directors with terminal degrees help to increase the numbers of administrators who are scholars,¹⁵ thus narrowing the divide between administrators and faculty, a rift that can be significant on some campuses. Additionally, it allows women's center directors to be a particular kind of role model and/or mentor to students who are seeking graduate degrees, as they can share their pathways to earning terminal degrees.

For the second theme—the effect of the director within the women's center—the Committee discussed how women's center directors with terminal degrees bring increased knowledge levels to their centers. A terminal degree implies that deeper knowledge in their field/discipline and more theoretical underpinnings, which along with a high level of research skills and scholarship can enhance the work of the center, as well as raise the visibility of the women's center on the campus, in the region, and nationally.

The Committee also explored a number of “cons,” or concerns, about directors with a terminal degree. It is important to note that only a few of these concerns are about the actual individuals with terminal degrees in the director position; most are about what a directorship with a terminal degree means institutionally and for the field of women's center work.

One theme was about turnover of the directorship, with several Committee members expressing concern that a director with a terminal degree may be more likely to leave her/his position because of the lure of a tenure-track position, another teaching position, or a position that values scholarship more highly. The Committee acknowledges that while we work in a higher education environment, different institutions, divisions, and supervisors can vary in their support for directors who engage in teaching and scholarship, roles that often (though not exclusively) require a terminal degree. Directors interested in these aspects of a career in higher education who do not receive

¹⁵ Bickford, D. M., & Whisnant, A. M. (2010, October 14). Building a corps of administrator-scholars. *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 57(18), D28-D29. Retrieved from <http://chronicle.com/article/Building-a-Corps-of/124902/>

support for their teaching and scholarly efforts may seek alternative roles within the institution or higher education.

A second concern from some Committee members was that the attainment of a terminal degree does not necessarily mean that a person has the supervisory and administrative skills needed for a directorship (see the competencies listed earlier). Because women's center directorships require a complex set of skills, it may limit the hiring prospects or the pool of candidates for positions if the supervisory/administrative skills and highest credential in the applicant's field are required. Committee members were concerned that individuals with terminal degrees may not always be able to translate the theory learned and taught in their disciplines into meaningful practice in university women's centers.

A third concern is that requiring a terminal degree may privilege education over experience, a current hot-button issue in the field of women's center work for many reasons,¹⁶ including the many privileges involved in obtaining a terminal degree. The Committee concurred that earning a terminal degree in any field is not only a measure of academic ability but also of other factors, including economic means (to pay for school and/or the opportunity cost of not working, if school is the primary commitment); flexibility of a current job if studying while working; time (to attend classes, study, complete research, attend rehearsals, work in a lab, etc., depending on discipline); family and friends both willing *and* able to be supportive of the commitment to school; and the good fortune to live near a suitable program/institution or the ability to relocate to one, among other factors.

The Committee felt that many academic, professional, financial, and personal factors had to align for individuals to earn terminal degrees. This is significant to us for many reasons. First, if institutions require a terminal degree, then potentially excellent women's center candidates who did not have the opportunity to earn this academic distinction for any of the reasons described would be barred from applying. We are concerned with the institutionalization of this form of privilege—the economic ability *and* the various forms of support needed to study for a terminal degree—into the directorship. The Committee also acknowledged that since White women earn the majority of terminal degrees, particularly doctorates, in the United States,¹⁷ it is critical that centers write compelling job descriptions and actively recruit diverse candidates, particularly women of color, to apply for directorships with terminal degree

¹⁶ Bethman, B., Bickford, D. M., Cohee, G. E., Issadore, M. N., & Cottledge, A. D. (2011, November 10). *Academic women's centers: Careers, professionalization and structural transformation*. Session presented at the Women's Centers Committee pre-conference at the annual conference of the National Women's Studies Association, Atlanta, GA.

¹⁷ U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. (2012). Degrees conferred by sex and race. In *The condition of education 2012* (NCES 2012-045). Retrieved from <http://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=72>

requirements. Simultaneously, centers must continue to advocate for increased access and opportunities for diverse individuals to pursue graduate and professional education.

Second, the Committee discussed that a terminal degree requirement may also limit career advancement opportunities *within* centers because associate/assistant directors and other staff may not be able to advance despite their relevant experience. It is concerning that highly qualified women's center staff members will potentially not be retained over time within our centers, as they will lack advancement pathways and opportunities. Their potential departure to other university or community leadership positions is a loss to women's centers and to our field. Their lack of opportunity is also significant to us because many of our centers have missions that include supporting women in their career growth and opening opportunities for members of our campus communities; in this light, it seems problematic to limit eligibility for advancement within our women's centers solely on the basis of whether someone has earned a terminal degree.

Competencies and Institution Type

The final area discussed by the Committee was whether there were unique competencies for women's center staff members depending on institution type. Overall, while there may be differences among staff member job descriptions at various institution types, the Committee felt that the desired competencies were largely the same. Several Committee members also commented that named centers may require directors to cultivate relationships with donors and families to continue a legacy, a responsibility that requires a particular set of skills and finesse, and that additional skills may be needed if parental involvement is high at the institution.

Implications

The primary audience for this issue brief is those who write women's center job descriptions, whether they work in centers currently, have worked in centers in the past, or have never worked in a campus-based women's center. For those who do not work in women's centers, this brief supplements the expertise of staff members in your own campus women's center (when present), who will have invaluable feedback and experience to inform the creation/adaptation of a position description. As a group of professionals familiar with the day-to-day as well as the strategic work of centers, we believe that our women's center colleagues across the country may benefit from discussions with their staffs and other colleagues about the content of this brief. We also hope that the list of content areas may assist individual women's centers and institutions that are considering professional staff development. Scholars, those interested in working in women's centers, and all others who read the brief will benefit from an enhanced understanding of the work we undertake in contemporary university women's centers.

The Authors

Amber L. Vlasnik is the Director of the Women's Center at Wright State University in Dayton, Ohio.

Melissa D. DeButz is a graduate student in the Student Affairs in Higher Education Program at Wright State University in Dayton, Ohio. She served as a graduate intern in the Wright State University Women's Center.

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