

Creating Intentional Professional Development Plans: Moving Beyond the Annual Conference

Dan Bureau, Ph.D., University of Memphis

December comes and goes. Another AFA Annual Meeting down, and you learned A LOT. You have felt regenerated through great conversations with colleagues. There is an increased sense of competence and confidence because of all of those great educational sessions you attended.

However, by the end of the year with the holidays setting in you ask the question, “what next?”

You might attend professional pathways at a regional student conference or the regional or national association conferences for another professional association, but as you become the recipient of what people teach you, you wonder, “how can I better own this responsibility to increase my professional competence and gain a sense of confidence to do this work and have a fulfilling career?” The question becomes WHAT CAN I LEARN WITH OTHERS rather than what I will receive from others or even what do I have expertise in that I can share with others. This article provides four recommendations for a more intentional approach to your ongoing professional development.

First, gain clarity on what it is you are doing for work and where this path will take you. One of the most important parts of a professional development plan is to be intentional about developing the skills you need now in this role, regardless of whether you see this as a one, two, five, or ten year job. Additionally, though, you need to create opportunities to develop transferrable skills as well as prepare for what you believe is your next step. For example, reading *Oracle: The Research Journal of the Association of Fraternity/Sorority Advisors* is a great way to expand your competence to be an evidence-based practitioner. However, it might also be an exercise in applying knowledge in the context of fraternities and sororities to other contexts. What does research on fraternity/sorority life teach you about other areas of higher education, not for profits, the business world, etc.? That is the question you need to ask to be both a consumer and user of information in creating your professional development plan.

Second, examine what frameworks will influence your intentional professional development. The field of higher education and student affairs provides numerous guiding documents to give life to what we need to know and do in this work. Within AFA, we have our own [set of professional competencies](#). A [broader set of competencies](#) are highlighted by ACPA (College Student Educators International) and NASPA (Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education). [The Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education \(CAS\)](#) also has guidelines for how work within diverse functional areas of student affairs must be conducted. If you are drawn toward organizational development, association management, not for profit management, or other fields outside of student affairs, there are documents that speak to expectations in those fields and the specific skills and knowledge needed to be successful. Learn the frameworks and determine specific skills you need in order to better do your work.

Third, determine the actions that will continue your progress toward being the most competent and confident professional possible. Once you know what it is that you should be doing, what you aspire toward, and what expectations exist externally for you to fulfill your work and career responsibilities, you should identify a professional development plan. At the University of Memphis, we have created a template for the ongoing examination of our professional competence. This template allows for a staff member to work with her/his supervisor to identify meaningful actions they will do in order to increase their competence and confidence in aspects of student affairs work. [In review of the template](#), which I developed for my own ongoing professional development, you will see one must

identify the competency, skill, why this is important, objective, and then up to three tasks to increase competency in this area. The tasks should reflect diverse approaches to developing skills. A completion date is optional. An additional resource that provides an overview of our approach to individualized professional development plans, including the rationale for creating such an approach, can [be found here](#).

Fourth, engage in ongoing examination of your competence and commit to improvement alongside others. At the University of Memphis, all division coordinated professional development activities are grounded in [the ACPA and NASPA Professional Competencies](#) document. For example, we host a series of trainings each spring break called our [“Spring Break Professional Development Challenge.”](#) Staff is invited to participate in as many workshops as they can throughout the week. We typically schedule eight to ten, with an effort to have at least one workshop for each of the ACPA and NASPA Professional Competencies. We also have professional development sessions throughout the year and [host an annual conference each May](#). All of these activities use the Professional Competencies as a framework.

However, literature indicates that individuals are inclined to approach professional development in many ways beyond just in-person educational experiences (Roberts, 2007). We found through a survey of our student affairs staff that ongoing involvement in campus committees, conversations with colleagues, and engagement in community organizations also were strong influences of one’s professional development. Therefore, as one develops their individual approach, they must also be individually accountable. As research indicates from other aspects of personal growth and development such as weight loss and fitness routines (Bishop, Irby, Isom, Blackwell, Vitolins & Skelton, 2013), engaging others as a part of your own personal accountability is recommended. For example, to focus on your competence of advising, enlist others for periodically checking in with you. It could be a colleague or a supervisor or someone from a whole different aspect of your field.

In closing, creating a professional development plan that aids in an ongoing pursuit of competence requires being intentional. One must have a clear sense of the role and function of their work, identify future professional goals, use frameworks for determining important skills in your current or future field, specify actions needed in order to increase competence, and become personally accountable while also engaging others in your pursuit. Developing such a plan can be professionally rewarding and help each of us to realize our potential as a professional.

References

- Bishop, J., Irby, M. B., Isom, S., Blackwell, C. S., Vitolins, M. Z., & Skelton, J. A. (2013). Diabetes Prevention, Weight Loss, and Social Support: Program Participants’ Perceived Influence on the Health Behaviors of Their Social Support System. *Family & community health, 36*(2).
- Roberts, D. M. (2007). Preferred methods of professional development in student affairs. *NASPA Journal, 44*(3), 561-577.