

## STUDYING RESEARCH

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### Learning Outcomes

By the end of this chapter, you should be able to:

- Describe several reasons for the importance of research.
- Identify the historical and contemporary context of research.
- Explain why practitioners need to be researchers.
- Articulate the need for research skills and competencies.
- Relate research skills to student affairs practice skills.

Research is essential to student affairs. It chronicles the history of professional practice, informs contemporary work, and recommends how the field must shift to address future challenges and opportunities. Practitioners who are skilled and proficient research consumers, capable of understanding, reading, evaluating, and applying evidence-based information, are becoming indispensable to the field. The ability to support and to demonstrate how programs and practices connect to educational outcomes is no longer an advantage but an expectation in all functional areas (Schuh, Biddix, Dean, & Kinzie, 2016). Research-based evidence, collected directly or synthesized from existing studies, is progressively the basis for informing and legitimizing decisions in practice. Yet both new professionals and chief student affairs officers admit to lacking fundamental research competencies (Sriram, 2014; Sriram & Oster, 2012).

Practitioners need research skills to be effective. Research skills can be learned through graduate study and professional development, continually on the job, and

through practice to accomplish work. Practitioners need research competencies to thrive. Research demonstrates the value of work, forecasts future needs, and validates effective practices. Research skills and competencies are not mutually exclusive. While some skills are precursors to competencies, many serve as foundations for attaining basic, intermediate, and advanced proficiencies.

The purpose of this chapter is to introduce basic research terminology and to articulate the need for competence in student affairs practice. Essential skills and competencies are explained as well as considerations for applying research skills to practice. The chapter begins with an historical overview of how research came to be valued in student affairs practice. Next is context and background for understanding and studying research. This is followed by an overview of concepts and a discussion of research specific to student affairs, which serves as a transition to the contemporary landscape and transitions into recommended skills and competencies.

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## Understanding Research

Researchers have been directly studying student services and the effects of programs and interventions on students for nearly a century. Staff in the personnel department at Northwestern University, influenced by a research focus brought to the university by President Walter Dill Scott (Biddix & Schwartz, 2012), were among the first to approach college-student problems with empirical data in a systematic way. *Student Personnel Point of View* (SPPOV) lead author Esther Lloyd-Jones, who began her career as a staff member in the personnel department (Certis, 2014), emphasized research as a core component of practice in the foundational document:

Certain problems involving research are common to instruction and student personnel work. Any investigation which has for its purpose the improvement of instruction is at the same time a research which improves personnel procedures. Similarly, the results of any studies, the aim of which is to improve personnel procedures, should be disseminated throughout the instructional staff. In both cases wherever possible such projects should be carried on as cooperative ventures. (American Council on Education, 1937, p. 6)

The authors closed the report with a set of five research-focused future directions, noting that, “student personnel services will never develop as they should unless extensive and careful research is undertaken” (American Council on Education, 1937, p. 12). This statement was intended as a two-fold proposition: The field needs to identify and define its core functions and practitioners need to engage in or direct research to understand students. The report closed with four areas requiring immediate attention from the field (in other words, practitioners should be engaged in the work): student out-of-class life, faculty–student out-of-class relationships,

financial aid to students, and follow-up studies of college students. Much of contemporary research on college students shares these areas of focus (Mayhew et al., 2016).

As student affairs practitioners struggled to identify their place and role in the 1920s, a division between those who saw the field as a calling versus those who saw the need for research to inform practice emerged (Schwartz, 1997). By the 1940s, this dual focus began to merge with a rise of professionalism that extended into the 1970s (Brubacher & Rudy, 1997). By the late 1990s extending into the present, an emphasis on practitioners as scholars developed (Blimling, 2001; Komives, 1997; Sriram & Oster, 2012).

### Words Researchers Use—Practitioner–Scholar and Scholar–Practitioner

Educational researchers sometimes refer to practitioners engaged in scholarship as practitioner–scholars or scholar–practitioners. Following are some definitions to help clarify the terms.

#### **Practitioner–Scholar**

“An individual who aspires to study problems of practice in a more comprehensive and systematic way, allowing them to better understand the schools, districts, and other educational organizations within which they work. Practitioner–scholarship is *both* about your practice as an educator and your practice as a researcher” (Lochmiller & Lester, 2015, p. 3).

#### **Scholar–Practitioner**

“The scholar–practitioner exists in a space where research and practice inform each other and create a synergy: research informing practice, practice informing scholarship, and the many combinations. A scholar–practitioner understands the importance of practice and research informing each other and the need to ground work in theory and evidence and create measurements that demonstrate impact as well as explore phenomena” (Kupo, 2014, p. 96).

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## Studying Research

For many students, the first exposure to student affairs research is in a student development theory class. Unfortunately, faculty teaching theory or research methods courses seldom discuss how those theories were developed—such as the empirical basis of Astin’s initial (1970a, 1970b) conceptualization of involvement or the original sample informing Chickering’s (1969) theory.

Beyond graduate school, an increased need for research-competent professionals has become evident with the multifaceted concerns and issues that can affect student

success. In addition, legislative scrutiny of higher education has led to questions about how student services directly contribute to academic outcomes. This also is related to increased federal accountability for higher education. Heightened attention on learning outcomes from accrediting agencies is an example. Administrators have recognized that demonstrating the value of student affairs work is critical in this environment, giving rise to a proliferation of full-time assessment professionals.

Developing and continuing to cultivate research skills has professional benefits for work and personal benefits for career development. Research experiences, both directly and as a consumer, improve the ability to formulate and ask good questions, evidence an argument, relate concepts across situations, develop and solve problems, and communicate solutions effectively. Research skills also teach professionals to be skeptical, logical, problem solvers who can adapt approaches to practice across varied situations, settings, and audiences. As professionals gain responsibilities in program development and decision making, being knowledgeable about research and assessment pays dividends for evaluating and demonstrating the value of student services.

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## Defining Research

Definitions for research are varied, emphasizing research as a process, stressing the importance of research questions and hypotheses, or identifying specific procedures. Different academic fields also have assorted definitions of research, ranging from theory verification and hypothesis testing to theory development and open inquiry. Synthesizing these approaches, Creswell (2012) identified a broadly applicable process-based definition, stressing a comprehensive approach:

Research is a cyclical process of steps that typically begins with identifying a research problem or issue of study. It then involves reviewing the literature, specifying a purpose for the study, collecting and analyzing data, and forming an interpretation of information. This process culminates in a report, disseminated to audiences, that is evaluated and used in the educational community. (p. 627)

A definition of research suitable for student affairs practice needs to emphasize investigation in educational contexts, be flexible to include multiple ways to study a problem or issues, but be process oriented to emphasize rigor. It should also be able to be differentiated from assessment and evaluation. A general definition for research applicable to student affairs is that **research is a systematic approach to learning that involves asking and answering questions**. This definition includes five key concepts: systematic, approach, learning, asking (questions), and answering (questions). Table 1.1 displays the definition with a discussion of each concept.

**Table 1.1. Definition of Research and Five Key Concepts**

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**Research is a systematic approach to learning that involves asking and answering questions.**

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*Systematic* implies that researchers follow a process when conducting research. This does not mean that the approach is the same for every project. Researchers often adjust their approach based on variable aspects of the study such as data sources, accessibility, feasibility, and efficiency. Systematic also does not mean organized in the sense of orderly, as some researchers prefer an open or less structured approach to conducting a study. Systematic implies that researchers follow a sequence. It is essential that the sequence is documented so that others are able to follow or replicate the study.

*Approach* encompasses aspects of methodology, ethical considerations, and the use of theory. From a methodological standpoint, research has a perspective, type, design, and methods. Ethical considerations comprise the concern and respect researchers extend to data sources, inclusive of participants, places, and other data forms. Theory can be used to guide all decisions related to research, or it may inform specific aspects such as participant or data selection, integration, or discussion.

*Learning* suggests an openness to discovery. Researchers need to be receptive to new information while being skeptical of existing knowledge. A holistic focus on learning suggests that not all answers have been found, regardless of existing or related knowledge. It also suggests that while learning is a goal, the process is also a form of teaching. As educators, student affairs professionals emphasize learning as a fundamental goal. Researchers need to be mindful of this purpose by placing it central to their investigative processes and outcomes.

*Asking (questions)* is the core of research. All research begins with one or more large or big-picture questions. Sometimes, the questions remain unchanged throughout the conduct of a study. Other times, questions shift based on any number of factors. In addition, smaller, related questions are threaded throughout all aspects of research. For example, when a researcher chooses a topic, they ask questions about why the topic is important. Once this is established, questions about prior evidence arise. This is succeeded by innumerable questions about methods, findings, discussion, and implications. Good research answers questions. Better research has rationale to justify all decisions in the research process. Great research leads to more questions. Flawed research begins with an answer.

*Answering (questions)* is the practice of research. The process of answering questions includes all aspects of conceptualization, research design, data analysis, and effective reporting. Specifically for student affairs research, effective reporting includes recommendations for practice. Each aspect has multiple steps and requires careful consideration. Answering questions effectively and efficiently is listed as the last concept in the definition of research because it requires the most comprehensive understanding. Competent researchers need a varied and deep understanding of research to answer the larger questions framing a study as well as the variety of smaller but equal important questions that guide it.

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## Recognizing the Purposes of Student Affairs Research

Research has two primary purposes in student affairs: contributing to knowledge and improving practice. Stage and Manning (2016) differentiated research in student affairs as basic or applied (p. 5). The *Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice* (JSARP) solicits manuscripts based on a related definition: “JSARP seeks to publish practice articles that are firmly grounded in research and literature and research articles that speak to practice” (JSARP, 2017). Following is an overview of the dual purposes of student affairs research. Examples suggest how research focusing on student success might be applied to practice.

### The Dual Purposes of Student Affairs Research

Contribute to Knowledge	Improve Practice
Address gaps in knowledge	Enhance services
Expand knowledge	Promote efficiency
Replicate knowledge	Determine best practices
Add voices of individuals	Evaluate initiatives

### Research Contributes to Knowledge

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS, 2009) defined research as “systematic investigation, including research development, testing and evaluation, designed to develop or contribute to generalizable knowledge” (45 CFR 46.102). This broad description is intentional. It encompasses interdisciplinary fields from social sciences to technology and provisions for both immediately applicable as well as highly theoretical studies. In summary, the essential function of research, according to the federal definition, is to contribute to knowledge.

Following are some aspects of knowledge contribution from a student affairs perspective, each with an example based on student success. An important feature is to address gaps in what is already empirically evidenced about a topic. While socio-economic status has been identified as a risk factor for college success, multiple unknown or under-researched factors also can affect student achievement. Another general contribution of research is to expand knowledge. Researchers are continuously searching for new ways to increase what is known about factors affecting student persistence. Research also replicates knowledge. Researchers have proposed models for student success revealing contributing factors that can be used to help refine theory.

Finally, research adds voices of individuals. Much of what was known about student success initially was based on specific populations of students. Researchers working with marginalized or underrepresented students have added important perspectives to the study and practice of student academic support. This last aspect is considered by many researchers to be the most important function of student affairs research, because it shares a philosophical perspective with foundational values on individual student success (Boyle, Lowery, & Mueller, 2012).

### Research Improves Practice

Research in student affairs is focused on improving practice. As a result, the research is often referred to as applied. The primary venue to distributing research in student affairs is an academic journal. Returning to the JSARP guidelines, manuscripts for the primary section, Innovations in Research and Scholarship, are described with the following definition: “Manuscripts submitted for review in this area may include qualitative and quantitative manuscripts that clearly provide a theory–research–practice connection” (JSARP, 2017). This emphasis on a “theory–research–practice connection” means that research published should directly apply to aspects of work in the field, or include implications for how results might shift or influence practices. Pragmatically, research focused on or intended for practice means that the discussion of results includes specific recommendations that can be implemented for improvement.

Following are some aspects of improving practice, each with an example based on student success. An important feature is to enhance services by suggesting improvements. For example, research might show that a lower ratio of advisors to at-risk students can dramatically improve first-year retention. Another way research improves practice is to promote efficiency. Declining resources or shifting budget priorities may make hiring a new advisor impossible, but examination of the core responsibilities and focus of the proposed position described in research may result in revised job responsibilities for current staff. Research also helps to determine best practices by providing perspectives on how the larger field is responding to trends or handling challenges. For example, student services for returning veterans has been informed by research in the last decade focused on ways to meet the unique needs of this population (Ackerman, DiRamio, & Garza Mitchell, 2009).

Finally, research evaluates initiatives, both directly and indirectly. Direct evaluation includes case studies of new, innovative, or existing programs to determine their effectiveness. Indirect evaluation is less focused on a specific program or service, but more on concepts and grounding as the basis for initiatives. From a research perspective, this may center on a single initiative such as a unique living learning community (LLC) housing first-generation students or may be a synthesis of common LLC features designed to evaluate the effectiveness of specific features.

## Perspectives From the Field—Why Practitioners Need to Learn About Research

Professionals engage in practice, meaning that they apply what they have learned from their advanced educational experiences to the work responsibilities that have been assigned to them. Through practical experience and continued study, they should be committed to improving their effectiveness so they can add value to the educational experiences in which students participate. An important aspect of professional development for practitioners is that they be exposed to research, be it through reviewing literature, attending conference-based programs, or working with consultants who share their research so that practitioners can become more efficient in their work and their work becomes more potent. At a minimum, practitioners need to be able to distinguish well-conducted research projects from those that are flawed, and understand how to apply findings to their practice setting. Whether they conduct research projects or not, the ability to learn and grow as practitioners depends to a great extent on their ability to understand research and to apply findings in ways that add value to the students they serve. Professionals who do so will make valuable contributions to the growth and learning of the students they serve. Those who do not will be mired in the mediocre.

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## Differentiating Research and Assessment

Research focused on improving practice is conceptually similar to assessment. Both research for practice and assessment share a focus on program evaluation and/or improvement. Both incorporate rigorous research methods for data collection and effective practices for communicating results. Typically, the scope of the two approaches is a distinguishing factor. The extensive use of assessment in conjunction with research necessitates some clarification.

*Assessment* is the collection, analysis, and interpretation of context-specific data to inform the effectiveness of programs and services. Suskie (2009) specified that assessment is “disciplined and systematic and uses many of the methodologies of traditional research” (p. 14). Schuh et al. (2016, pp. 7–8) further differentiated research from assessment based on the following points:

- Assessments are guided by theory but research frequently is conducted to test theories.
- Research often is not time bound to the extent that assessments are time bound.



- It is common for assessments to have a public or political dimension to them.
- Assessments typically are funded out of unit or divisional budgets. . . . Research often is financed through special support such as a grant or contract.

A simplified distinction between the two concepts concerns audience and intention:

- Research is meant for an external audience and is intended to generate knowledge.
- Assessment is meant for an internal audience and is intended to inform practice.

A related concept often also used in conjunction with the two terms is evaluation. Schuh et al. (2016) defined evaluation as the use of assessment data to determine effectiveness. Suskie (2009) emphasized that assessment results are intended for guidance and not decision making, should be used to determine alignment between intended and actual outcomes, and are helpful for investigating the quality or worth of a program or project rather than for measuring student learning. Evaluation typically also requires the evaluator to make a judgment, where research and assessment are more focused on sharing findings and offering interpretation or application.

Sriram (2017) related the difference between assessment, research, and evaluation to the accountability movement. According to Sriram, assessment was intended to improve higher education, but has been reframed as “about proving, not improving” (p. 28), calling for practitioners to describe and consider their assessment work as a research activity.

First, I do not think there is a genuine difference between the terms *assessment* and *research* in practice. Second, I think there is an important difference in the implied meaning of the two terms. *Assessment*—at least in practice—concerns proving that programs that do exist should exist. *Research*, by contrast, aims to discover truth that will alter how we see the world. (Sriram, 2017, p. 29)

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## Identifying Research Competencies and Skills

Researchers have found that while research skills are among the most valued abilities in terms of importance for practitioners (Herdlein, Riefler, & Mrowka, 2013; Sandeen & Barr, 2006), they are also among the lowest rated in terms of perceived development (Sriram, 2014). Following is an overview of research-based competencies and skills for student affairs practitioners as described in foundational documents related to standards, expectations, and skills for practice.

## Perspectives From the Field—Research Skills and Competencies

One challenge with the field of student affairs (and higher education in general) is the use of acronyms. People often confuse the CAS Standards, ASK Standards, and ACPA/NASPA Competencies. The important thing to consider is the focus of the standards/competencies. The CAS Standards, developed by a consortium of 41 higher education associations, define standards of professional practice for student service programs such as residential life and housing, student activities, academic advising, etc. The 10 ACPA/NASPA Competencies center on skills and knowledge that student affairs educators should possess. The Assessment Skills and Knowledge (ASK) Standards also relate to individual competence, but focus solely on assessment-related skills and knowledge student affairs practitioners should possess. They can be used to develop a professional development plan, design a student affairs professional curriculum, or assess individual and department performance. Their applications are versatile and robust. These three sets of standards and competencies provide a framework for individual and program excellence in student affairs.

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## CAS

In 2015, the Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS) released its most recent set of Standards for Master's Level Student Affairs Professional Preparation Programs (CAS, 2015). These standards help frame a larger discussion on the related skills and competencies needed across a career in student affairs. Two areas directly relate to the need for research skills development.

### Subpart 5b.2: Student Characteristics and Effects of College on Students

This component of the curriculum must include studies of student characteristics, how such attributes influence student educational and developmental needs, and effects of the college experience and institutional characteristics on student learning and development.

Graduates must be able to demonstrate knowledge of how student learning and learning opportunities are influenced by student characteristics and by collegiate environments so that graduates can design and evaluate learning experiences for students. This area should include studies of the following: effects of college on students, campus climate, satisfaction with the college experience, student involvement in college, student culture, campus environment, and factors that correlate with student persistence and attrition. (p. 11)

The authors identified specific areas that need focus to ensure that the unique needs of all students and subpopulations are accounted for in student services and programs. This includes accounting for student characteristics such as sexual identity, academic ability and preparation, national origin, and developmental status, as well as student populations such as residential, part-time and full-time, student athletes, student group members, international students, and veterans.

Subpart 5b.5 lists expectations of graduate preparation content:

#### Subpart 5b.5: Assessment, Evaluation, and Research

This component of the curriculum must include the study of assessment, evaluation, and research. Studies must include both qualitative and quantitative research methodologies, measuring learning processes and outcomes, assessing environments and organizations, measuring program and environment effectiveness, and critiques of published studies.

Graduates must be able to critique a sound study or evaluation and be able to design, conduct, and report on a sound research study, assessment study, or program evaluation, grounded in the appropriate literature. Graduates must be aware of research ethics and legal implications of research, including the necessity of adhering to a human subjects review. (p. 13)

The authors also identified specific methodologies that need cultivation, as well as the abilities practitioners need, including measuring learning processes and outcomes, assessing environments and organizations, measuring program and environment effectiveness, and critiques of published studies. They also add the need to be aware of the ethics and legal implications of research. CAS professional program expectations serve as a guide for faculty in graduate programs for what content should be included for professional preparation. Further, they suggest what content-based skills professionals need to be successful in their work.

A closer look at these standards, as well as others in the complete document, highlight research-based skills that extend beyond research design and data collection. These include the ability to read, evaluate, and use published research; know and incorporate literature from the field in decision making; and understand the need for research ethics.

### **ACPA/NASPA Joint Statement**

American College Personnel Association–College Student Educators International (ACPA) and the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA) have emphasized the importance of developing and maintaining research as an essential competency area for student affairs practice. In 2015, the two organizations co-published a joint statement identifying 10 core competency areas for student

affairs educators. Assessment, Evaluation, and Research (AER) was among these fundamental concepts. Following is the description of the competency:

The Assessment, Evaluation, and Research competency area focuses on the ability to design, conduct, critique, and use various AER methodologies and the results obtained from them, to utilize AER processes and their results to inform practice, and to shape the political and ethical climate surrounding AER processes and uses in higher education. (ACPA & NASPA, 2015, p. 12)

Examining the individual parts of the description reveals several areas of emphasis. The ability to design, conduct, critique, and use research comprises the major phases of conducting a study. These four skills can be learned through formal coursework or a self-directed approach. The second part of the description is more challenging—to take those skills and use them to inform practice and to shape the political and ethical climate surrounding their use in higher education. These aspirations require more explanation. Upcraft and Schuh (1996) and, more recently, Schuh et al. (2016) emphasized that it is nearly impossible to separate assessment, and by extension, research, from the political environment in which studies are conducted and used. Research both shapes and is shaped by contemporary context. Recognizing how these aspects affect the conduct and use of research can offer influence and advantage to practitioners who can recognize how to advocate for resources and decisions informed by evidence.

Adjacent to the basic description of the AER competency is a depiction of professional growth.

Professional growth in this competency area is broadly marked by shifts from understanding to application, and then from smaller scale applications focused on singular programs or studies to larger scale applications that cut across departments or divisions. Many advanced level outcomes involve the leadership of AER efforts. (ACPA & NASPA, 2015, p. 12)

The authors noted that professional development in any competency is not static, but must be ongoing to maintain and advance learning within any area. They divided each competency into three levels—foundational (requisite), intermediate, and advanced, stressing that each should not be considered as a capability level or treated as a checklist of items to be completed. Instead, they should be viewed as goals for progressive development that can be mapped. This perspective lends further emphasis to the importance of continued professional development.

## ASK Standards

In 2006, the ACPA Commission for Assessment for Student Development published the ASK Standards, a set of proficiencies intended to communicate areas and degrees of content expertise practitioners need to engage in assessment. The 13 standards include abilities in design, writing learning outcomes, collecting and managing data, analyzing data, benchmarking, program review and evaluation, ethics, effective reporting, the politics of assessment, and assessment education. The authors framed the necessity for learning research-based skills in the need for measurement and reporting competencies for learning outcomes assessment. They noted that many of the constructs such as leadership, citizenship, and appreciation for diversity that represent the hallmarks of work with students present challenging issues for measurement.

In student affairs, the articulation and assessment of student learning has been especially challenging given the complex psychosocial and cognitive constructs that are the hallmarks of our work with students. . . . The ASK standards seek to articulate the areas of content knowledge, skill and dispositions that student affairs professionals need in order to perform as practitioner-scholars to assess the degree to which students are mastering the learning and development outcomes we intend as professionals. (ACPA, 2006, p. 3)

Each of the 13 standards includes several proficiency areas, written as “ability to” action statements. For example, under content Standard 8: Benchmarking, the authors list “Ability to use benchmarking data for strategic planning purposes” (p. 8). Many of the areas relate specifically to data skills learned in a research methods or assessment course or furthered through either formal (courses, conference presentations) or personal (self-guided courses, books) professional development. Most of the abilities listed are “doing” skills that complement and extend research foundations. Consistent with this, the authors noted, “Proficiency standards complement content standards. Proficiency standards articulate the degree of expertise of the practitioner in a given area of content” (p. 4).

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## Relating Competencies and Skills to Practice

Developing research skills also improves practice skills applicable in other areas of student affairs practice. Following is a listing and discussion of six skills engaged while learning about research that are relatable to professional practice. The skills can be divided into two groups. The first group relates to critical thinking: communication,

reasoning, and skepticism. The second group relates to determination: autonomy, perseverance, and resourcefulness.



## Communication

Communication includes both verbal and written interactions. It includes summarizing and synthesizing research as well as being able to articulate findings for specific audiences. Under the heading of “writing, editing, and more writing” Creswell (2012) noted:

Researchers cannot escape the ever-present aspect of writing as a key facet of research . . . writing is more than recording ideas on paper or in a computer file. It is also organizing ideas, preparing interview questions, jotting down notes during an observation, and writing for permission to use someone else’s questions or articles. Writing exists in all phases of the creative process of planning and in conducting research. (p. 25)

Practitioners engage communication skills continuously. Whether writing reports or developing policy, answering email, or simply delivering information during a meeting, communication skills are pervasive and essential to good practice. Communicating about research results requires being able to deliver a report that is clear, which includes close attention to editing as well as consideration of the logic or arrangement of the content. It also requires being succinct but knowing the essential details to include. Finally, it means being accurate which involves careful reading and knowledge about the content. All of these are valuable skills for learning to communicate to audiences across and beyond campus.

## Logic

Logic is the ability to recognize and work through a problem in a purposeful way. While different types of research designs and methods can influence the application

of logic, studying the research process to understand how it was initiated, how it developed and progressed, and how it was finalized reveals the researcher's reasoning. Creswell (2012) described this skill as being good at solving puzzles, drawing a parallel between a researcher's ability to see the final picture of a complete project and using a process to complete it.

Practitioners encounter problems every day. One of the attractions of this profession for many is that every day is different. Some issues can be resolved easily and others require a more thoughtful and long-term approach. Often, the time it takes to work through a problem is influenced by prior experience with a similar situation, the expertise of others, and any number of conditions beyond control that need to be accounted for to address an issue.

## **Skepticism**

Skepticism is driven by curiosity, which is a fundamental research ability. Synonyms for skepticism—disbelief, suspicion, and uncertainly—are also accurate characteristics of this skill. Skepticism helps with identifying research problems, which leads to researchable topics. Researchers need to be willing to disbelieve, or to suspend, what is known to consider ways to investigate or reevaluate and issue using a different approach.

In practice, skepticism is related to questioning. Practitioners use skepticism to investigate issues and to make decisions related to program revision or development. Being skeptical means thinking beyond how things have always been done to develop innovative solutions to issues or problems. Practitioners also use skepticism reactively. For example, student conduct officers use this skill when gathering facts about an issue. While skepticism can be a valuable way of thinking, too much skepticism is unproductive for both research and practice applications.

## **Autonomy**

Autonomy is the ability to work self-sufficiently. Individuals who conduct research in student affairs rarely are full-time researchers. Research time typically competes with other work responsibilities, whether for faculty with teaching, advising, and service or for practitioners with primary and voluntary tasks. Collaborating with others can help to offset time and expertise limitations; however, research typically still needs an independent component. Further, being a research consumer also requires autonomy and independence as reading and evaluating research, especially as a novice or infrequent consumer, involves a time commitment and focus.

Autonomy is a valuable skill for student affairs work. The need to include multiple points of view and to account for various perspectives can lead to a lot

of meetings, particular as decision-making responsibilities increase. As a result, non-meeting time needs to be efficient. Even with delegation, individuals typically need to set aside time to complete their responsibilities.

### **Perseverance**

Perseverance related to research involves the determination to finish a study, as a consumer or producer. Time on task is vital for most research, as studies are time-intensive both in planning and execution. Producing or consuming research can be a solitary activity that requires intrinsic motivation. Creswell (2012) regarded a similar skill as lengthening one's attention span. One example he provided was the ability to read a journal article, which requires patience and focus.

Perseverance as a professional skill is helpful when dealing with the vague nature of student affairs work. It is also beneficial when working within the bureaucracy of higher education.

### **Resourcefulness**

Resourcefulness is a multifaceted research skill. Pragmatically, being resourceful when conducting research means knowing how and when to use available resources to complete work. For example, identifying and obtaining literature to evidence a topic can be time consuming. Access to an academic library or subscriptions to relevant journals can make the process more efficient, but it is not always possible to acquire the resources needed in a timely way. Resourcefulness also means doing more with less. When gathering data through interaction with others, such as with surveys or interviews, being resourceful can mean identifying optimal ways to gain participation in research, such as sending surveys to more targeted samples at particular times or identifying key individuals that can help facilitate participation in interviews.

Resourcefulness is also a useful skill for practitioners. It can involve establishing and using a local network to aid with campus issues or developing a larger professional network for advice with bigger concerns. Resource-sharing partnerships across and beyond campus are invaluable for practitioners, who are often tasked with doing more work with less time, money, or facilities.

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## **Building Your Research Skillset**

Learning about research can be overwhelming. One of the most beneficial ways to begin building a research skillset is by talking with others. Ask supervisors and



colleagues how they use research, question faculty about their projects, and attend professional development sessions at conferences. When learning independently, choose topics that directly relate to an area of interest or that can contribute to practice to stay engaged. Asking questions about the material while reading can also be valuable. Questions do not have to be confined to new terms and concepts. They might focus on the need for research on the topic, the literature researchers used to frame the problem, methods used to arrive at the findings, or results. When reading landmark, or highly referenced, studies, consider what made them so important. For example, Astin's (1984) "Student Involvement: A Developmental Theory for Higher Education" is among the most highly cited studies in student affairs research. What makes the work significant to the field?

Thinking about applications is also helpful when studying research, such as considering how the findings might be adapted to a specific institutional context. If a study is theory-based, reflect on how (or if) the model or its key tenets might be used in practice. Researchers often describe this as operationalizing theory. A benefit of considering applications while reading is that uses for research do not have to be specific to the topic. For example, results from a national study about academic engagement may highlight student–faculty interactions as critical to fostering learning outcomes. Considering that interactions between faculty and students do not have to be in a classroom might lead to ways those relationships might be facilitated in student affairs.

A final point to keep in mind when learning about research is that mastery will not be accomplished in a single class or even during graduate study. Education on any topic is never complete. For practitioners, formal study in research is inversely related to when they need it. The necessity to interpret research and evidence-based results often increases with decision-making responsibilities. As noted in the review of competencies and skills, professional organizations view learning about research as an ongoing aspect of professional development. Sriram (2017) emphasized this point, stating, "If those of us who work in higher education want to improve college students' learning, we must become better learners ourselves" (p. 30).

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