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## Personality type and student affairs graduate students

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## Personality type and student affairs graduate students

### Abstract

The use of personality type information about student affairs graduate students is , interesting to speculate about. A graduate program could identify what populations of students it is attracting for enrollment. Such information could allow them to adjust their recruitment techniques in order to attract a more diverse student body. Understanding the personality types of students in the classroom would provide insight into the most effective instruction techniques. Personality type information could also be helpful for advisors to use in assisting students with selecting electives and practicum or internship experiences that complement their type. Graduate students could learn more about how their behavior is impacted by their personality and how they can interact more effectively with faculty members and other classmates.

PERSONALITY TYPE AND STUDENT AFFAIRS GRADUATE STUDENTS

A Research Paper

Submitted

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of the Requirements for the Degree

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## Introduction

Attending graduate school is a unique and wonderful experience for many individuals. It is a time for individuals to commit themselves to an area of interest and learn how they can be meaningful contributors to that interest area. It is often a time of searching for meaning and understanding in both their personal and professional lives. As a graduate school student myself, I experienced this sense of searching and found myself looking for direction in any way possible. I felt linked to my classmates by our common interest in student affairs, yet saw great differences among us in our personality types and specific areas of interest within student affairs. I began to wonder how it was possible that we could share interest in the same field of study. At times, I questioned my "fit" with the program and ached for reassurance that I had chosen a graduate program that suited me. I needed to find ways to confidently reflect my individual personality among the variety of personality types around me.

When we began discussing typology theory in College Student Development class, I was struck by how meaningful the information was to me and noticed a curiosity among my classmates, as well. I began to wonder about the personality types of students who chose to enter student affairs programs. The literature reflected little information on this topic, although personality types of individuals in other fields of study are prevalent. Thus, my research interest grew toward collecting information about the personality types of student affairs graduate students. It was important for me to consider how other fields of study had used information about personality types. I also wanted to address how the information would be meaningful to students and professionals within the university setting.

## Interest in Understanding Personality Type

Personality research has long been a part of scientific study. Though works can be traced back to earlier times, Sigmund Freud was the first to produce a comprehensive and detailed publication about personality theory. Freud studied personality through seeking to uncover the intrapsychic mystery that he believed resided within each person and is created by their unique life experiences. He made four basic assumptions about human nature, including determinism, conflict, the unconscious, and interpretation. This occurred in the late nineteenth century (McAdams, 1990). Since that time, many individuals have contributed to the body of work in personality theory. Carl Jung was another important contributor with his analytic approach to understanding human personality beginning in the early 1900s. Jung asserted that the “goal of human life is development of the self” (McAdams, 1990, p. 183), which he called individuation. His work identified several different psychological types into which individuals could be categorized. Jung identified the differences between two major methods in relating to the environment – extroversion and introversion. He also characterized four functions used to understand life events – thinking, feeling, sensing, and intuiting. The interaction of these attitudes and functions within an individual creates their personality type. Katherine Briggs and Isabel Briggs-Myers further specified and modified the different psychological types identified by Jung to create an instrument, the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, which measures the attitudes and behaviors characteristic of each type. Their goal had been to help individuals learn more about themselves in order to better choose jobs that suit their personality type.

Today, “the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator is the most extensively used instrument for assessing personality type” (Evans, 1998, p.249). In fact already in 1985, almost two million people were completing the instrument each year (Myers & McCaulley, 1985). This

demonstrates a definite interest of individuals in learning more about their personality type and the types of those with whom they interact. Although the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator is only one of many personality inventories, it is a valuable one to refer to based on its extensive use by a variety of individuals. It is important to note that the founding purpose behind this instrument was to aid individuals in determining their future career paths. In a study conducted by the National Research Council Committee on Techniques for Enhancement of Human Performance, 80 percent of participants reported that their behavior was impacted by taking the MBTI and 74 percent found that they related differently to others after reflecting on the information available through the MBTI (Zemke, 1992).

Information about personality type is valuable to gather and understand for oneself and for others. It aids in what Jung identified as the "goal of human life," as it helps to further develop the individual self. Myers and Briggs commented on the value of personality type in making career decisions. The widespread use of the MBTI since its creation indicates how valuable it is in understanding how personality impacts behavior and relationships with others. The worth of knowing one's own personality type impacts each individual in a unique way.

#### Importance of Self-Awareness

Earle Clifford, a past president of the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators, has commented, "There is not one administrative style. You achieve that style which is successful for you only by beginning with yourself and continuing to be yourself" (Appleton, 1978, p. 5). His comment relates specifically to administrative style, but the value of it can be taken in realms outside of administration. As individuals seek to be the best professional, student, or person that they can be, they must remember that their search must always be a reflection of their uniqueness.

Self-understanding can lead to greater insight into the choices and decisions individuals make about their lives. When an individual is knowledgeable of their personal cognitive style, they are better able to select environments that are compatible with that style and can more successfully find ways to implement their style in any setting (Christiano & Robinson, 1982). Cognitive style is much like personality traits because it involves “the way individuals take note of their surroundings, how they seek meaning, and how they become informed” (Christiano & Robinson, 1982, p. 520). Personality influences how individuals approach and respond to their surroundings.

In particular, personality type can influence how individuals interact with others. Knowledge about personality helps to explain how individuals respond to one another and how differences are perceived. “Mutual understanding of individual differences regarding personality type, learning style, and leadership approach for advisors, student leaders, and group members should bring about a sensitivity to individual and group interactions” (Petty, 1985, p.102). Understanding oneself and others can lead to viewing differences with appreciation, not as sources of conflict. Having self-awareness is meaningful in developing self and in establishing relationships with others.

Another value to learning more about individual personality type is taking that information and applying it to becoming a more well-rounded individual who can function better within their current environment. Type development as identified by the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator is seen as an ongoing process of gaining competence in each of the functions, not just those preferred functions (Evans, Forney, & Guido-DiBrito, 1998). This can be an especially important skill to acquire in graduate school and ultimately apply to your experiences in the workplace. Psychologist Nevitt Sanford’s ideas about development also support this idea. He



identified two aspects to the process of development – (1) differentiation and integration where individuals learn about their personality characteristics and how that influences their identity and (2) a mix of challenge and support provided within the environment (Evans, Forney, & Guido-DiBrito, 1998). It is necessary for individuals to experience some challenge from their environments in order to develop and move away from what is safe, but the amount of challenge that one can tolerate is dependent on the amount of support provided. Challenge can be seen in working within an environment that includes a variety of personality types, but support can come from an environment that has taken the time to learn more about personality types. Sometimes it is necessary that individuals be challenged to develop other aspects of their personalities in order to better connect with their environments. This is a critical and ongoing part of development.

#### Populations Utilizing Information about Personality Type

More and more individuals are finding value in understanding personality type, even beyond self-awareness. Places of work, education, and social interaction are all realizing the importance of learning more about what each individual brings to their experience and how that affects their interactions with those around them. Greater understanding can aid in providing better support, understanding, and acceptance of individuality. The following paragraphs demonstrate how personality type research has been put into practice.

In 1993, a study was conducted at the United States Coast Guard Academy. The personality preferences of the cadets were found to significantly relate to their academic success and military performance (O'Connor, 1993). The author of the study recommended that the personality preferences of the cadets be identified shortly after their arrival. Then the information gained could be used by academic advisors and student counselors to help students adapt to the culture of the Academy. Special attention could be given to students who would

otherwise be experiencing the greatest challenges to adjust. Information about personality type was utilized by the Academy to provide support to Coast Guard cadets.

Another research study examined the personality traits of graduate counseling students versus education administration students (Ledyard, 1994). The purpose of the study was to identify if there were any distinguishing personality characteristics in counselor candidates. The research did support that idea and several other studies were cited that examined the personality characteristics of counselors. Specifically, this study found "effective counselor candidates to be characterized as confident, friendly, accepting, outgoing, efficient, and assertive" (Ledyard, 1994, p.29). All of these traits appeared much more prevalent in counseling students versus education administration students. In addition, counseling students identified being called "a person of real feeling" as a greater compliment than being called "a consistently reasonable person", which was not present in education administration students (Ledyard, 1994). This is interesting information to consider in relationship to student affairs graduate students who have the option of accepting positions within the field of student affairs that have a counseling and/or administrative focus.

In an area closely related to student affairs, data have been gathered regarding the personality traits of student leaders within the university setting. Student affairs professionals benefit from knowing information about the personal characteristics of student leaders because they are better able to create more optimal leadership development training (Petty, 1985). The information can aid in closing the gap of misunderstanding between advisors and student leaders. It encourages a sense of individuality because it challenges student affairs professionals to consider the individual qualities and needs of each student.

### Significance of Personality Type with Graduate School Students

Just as it is important to consider the individual qualities and needs of undergraduate student leaders, it is important to consider the individual qualities and needs of graduate students. Several areas of graduate education have taken this into consideration, as demonstrated by the previously mentioned study of counseling and education administration students. "The process of graduate education is complex, variable, and unstructured" (Enright & Gitomer, 1989, p.3). Graduate education is a unique entity separate from undergraduate education. Students in graduate programs have each selected a particular area of interest to study and often rely heavily on the interactions with their fellow classmates and faculty in order to complete their degrees. Meaningful experiences are gained in a variety of different ways.

Graduate-level education is unique in that it often involves training students to be researchers, teachers, and practitioners all within one setting. The variety of different paths that students may take allows for graduate students to have a variety of different skills and qualities (Enright & Gitomer, 1989). Students within one classroom might be working to achieve very different goals upon completing their degree. Graduate programs need to consider how they can help the variety of students who enroll to meet their individual goals. Understanding the unique personalities among their students is an important factor to consider.

The experience that a student has in graduate school is influenced by their personality. For example, personality style can impact how an individual copes with occupational stress (Berwick, 1992). Differences in personality style can create challenges for students to overcome, and ultimately raise their stress levels. In turn, occupational stress can negatively affect the performance, productivity, job satisfaction, and health of professionals (Berwick, 1992). When considering the impact of these factors on the educational experience of a student, the results

could mean lower grades, lessened motivation, decreased satisfaction with the program, poor health, and/or withdrawal from the program. It is important that graduate programs make strides to prevent these effects from occurring. Knowledge for faculty about serving the variety of personality styles within the classroom, as well as increased self-awareness for students of the impact of personality style on their experiences would benefit the overall graduate school experience.

### Significance to Academic and Student Affairs Professionals

Understanding personality types can be beneficial to student affairs professionals in the university setting. In a study of first year students entering the University of North Carolina, the personality types of students who chose to persist varied from those who dropped out. This information had implications for the acceptance of students into certain academic programs and for advisement of students. Learning about students' personality types provided advisors with greater insight into helping students find areas where they would be successful and want to remain (Uhl, 1981). Personality inventories, like the MBTI, have been found to be valuable in predicting attrition when considered within a particular major (Uhl, 1981). If student affairs professionals have the information to foresee issues of attrition, they can work to provide extra support or guidance to those students who are more likely to withdraw.

It is not only important that university professionals understand the impact of their students' personality types, but also their own personality types. Effective communication is essential for high-quality relationships between academic and student affairs professionals. Individual personality types are indicators of communication skills. If these professionals are able to understand the differences among themselves, they can be better communicators, which can have a positive impact on the matriculation of students in their colleges (Anderson, 2000).

Students will be drawn to attend institutions that have benefited from the effective communication among their academic and student affairs professionals.

### Significance to Faculty

Knowledge about personality types is not only valuable to student affairs professionals, but also to faculty members. An understanding of type theory can be very helpful in the classroom environment. "Experienced teachers report that type theory has given them a powerful tool in understanding why they can reach some students more easily than others. Many teachers report increased respect for colleagues and students whose minds work differently from their own" (McCaulley, 1974, p.9). Type theory identifies similarities and differences among students and teachers. Understanding those similarities and differences provides teachers with insight into how to reach the variety of students that they work with and creates a sense of appreciation, versus frustration, with the differences within their classroom.

Type theory has identified that learners learn best through instruction that is most comparable to their personality attitudes and functions (Haygood & Iran-Nejad, 1994). If faculty members know the personality characteristics of their students, they can structure their instruction techniques to suit those preferences. This can result in increased satisfaction for the students, as well as for the faculty members who are able to see their students respond successfully to their classroom instruction.

The value of understanding personality types in clinical supervision has been supported with research. Literature on clinical supervision states that counselor educators need to be knowledgeable of the personal characteristics of the students that they supervise and how these might impact the training and supervision of the students (Bernard & Goodyear, 1998).

Supervision can be tailored to better suit the needs of the individual students when the supervisor

has knowledge of the student's personality type. Researchers have also found that the most pertinent factor to interpersonal effectiveness in counseling is the personality of the counselor education student (Pope & Kline, 1999). Student affairs professionals are often required to step into a counseling role when working with students. Knowing that the personality of a future student affairs professional could be so critical to their effectiveness suggests that greater emphasis needs to be placed on this area.

### Promotion of Individuality

Several times previously, this paper comments that understanding personality characteristics promotes individuality. It is important to understand that the goal of gaining knowledge about the personality characteristics of student affairs graduate students is not to synchronize the personalities of all of the students within a student affairs program, but instead to support the individuality among them. Eight past presidents of the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA) collaborated to write a book identifying their various rites, roles, and styles among them as college deans. In a summary of their work, they concluded "to mimic would be an error; to use these materials to reflect on one's own style is our objective" (Appleton, 1978, p.155). Then, they go on to stress the value of the uniqueness that each person brings to the job. This is a valuable point to remember when studying the personality traits of student affairs graduate students. Each student brings a unique style and perspective to the classroom.

Personality type is not an absolute factor in identifying effectiveness. A study examining the relationship between personality types and effective leadership styles found that effective leadership is not dependent on personality type (Flores, 1987). In addition, the findings of a study examining the correlation between the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator and leadership

effectiveness in student affairs found that the two are not significantly related (Wittstruck, 1986).

The value in understanding type theory is in greater self-awareness, insight for student affairs professionals and faculty, and promotion of the individuality among people.

### Summary

A review of the student affairs literature revealed little information about the personality types of student affairs graduate students. The goal of this paper is to reveal the value of collecting information about the personality types of student affairs graduate students. For centuries, humans have sought out information about personality types. The use of personality inventories continues to be prevalent today. Individuals benefit from being aware of their own personality types. Numerous populations have examined information about personality type and found it to provide support and direction. Graduate students are a unique population who truly benefit from learning more about themselves and their interactions with others.

The value of understanding the personality types of student affairs graduate students could also be felt by student affairs professionals and faculty members. The information provides insight into the instruction, advising, and matriculation of students. Personality type information is also meaningful in the promotion of individuality among students. Learning about the differences among students reflects a sense of appreciation and enables professionals to provide individualized support. Overall, there is value in understanding the personality types of student affairs graduate students and attention should be given to further researching this topic.

### Recommendations for Research

The lack of information in the literature identifies this topic as an area that needs further attention. It would be valuable to look at the populations of student affairs graduate students at several different institutions. A researcher would want to consider whether the focus of the

programs are more counseling-based or administrative-based. They might also consider the area of interest that the graduate students are considering, i.e. academic advising, financial aid, residence life... Other future research might look at how information about student affairs graduate students compares to information about student affairs professionals. In addition, a researcher could contact individuals who enrolled in a student affairs program and then withdrew before finishing their degree. It would be interesting to see if differences in personality were a factor in their withdrawal.

The scarcity of information related to this topic contributes to the older publication dates of many of the cited resources, which adds to the argument that this topic needs to be further researched. Numerous other populations have benefited from studying personality type. It is logical that the student affairs field join in that body of understanding.

The use of personality type information about student affairs graduate students is interesting to speculate about. A graduate program could identify what populations of students it is attracting for enrollment. Such information could allow them to adjust their recruitment techniques in order to attract a more diverse student body. Understanding the personality types of students in the classroom would provide insight into the most effective instruction techniques. Personality type information could also be helpful for advisors to use in assisting students with selecting electives and practicum or internship experiences that complement their type. Graduate students could learn more about how their behavior is impacted by their personality and how they can interact more effectively with faculty members and other classmates.



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