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## STRIVING TO ALIGN WITH THE CAS STANDARDS: GRADUATE PREPARATORY PROGRAMS IN HIGHER EDUCATION & STUDENT AFFAIRS

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### ABSTRACT

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Aim/Purpose	This study examined Higher Education/Student Affairs (HE/SA) programs' curriculum alignment with the CAS Standards.
Background	HE/SA programs have a limited number of credit hours (27-65) and must structure their curriculum within the confines. The CAS Standards guides HE/SA programs and recommends this curriculum include a focus on six content areas.
Methodology	A quantitative study that examined the curriculum of the HE/SA programs in the United States (n = 230) and their offering of exclusive courses aligning with the six content areas recommended by the CAS Standards.
Contribution	This study is the first to broadly examine the curriculum of the collective HE/SA programs in the United States. It can serve as a catalyst to encourage further research and scholarly discussion around the curriculum of HE/SA programs and the professional preparation of higher education administrators.
Findings	Key findings included that of the six content areas, History and Counseling were the areas least likely to be offered in HE/SA programs (48% and 41%, respectively) compared to 82% and above for the other four areas. Evidence

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	suggests that program offerings of 36-39 credit hours may be the “sweet spot” in balancing credit hours with their ability to meet CAS Standards.
Recommendations for Practitioners	There is a need for HE/SA faculty and practitioners to communicate where HE/SA programs fell short meeting the CAS Standards so that practitioners can continue in the professional development of these young practitioners. This “handoff” between faculty and practitioners will further strengthen the field of student affairs.
Recommendation for Researchers	The findings of this study illuminate the important future research question as to whether there is a difference in the academic preparedness (perceived and/or actual) of graduates who attend programs that are more closely aligned with the CAS Standards?
Impact on Society	Recognizing the importance that student affairs professionals have on student development (in-and-out of the classroom), this study challenges educators and practitioners to ensure they are adequately developing the next generation of college administrative leaders.
Future Research	Examination of the curriculum alignment in the future once the CAS Standards for Graduate Preparatory Programs are revised
Keywords	higher education programs, student affairs programs, graduate preparatory programs, professional preparation, student affairs, professional development

## INTRODUCTION

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Recognizing the effectiveness of any division of student affairs is directly related to the caliber of professionals who challenge and support the needs of the student body (Sandeem & Barr, 2014) and ultimately the institution, leaders within the profession must continue to learn, evolve, and strengthen the work they do with students as a reflection of their importance to student success, over the last fifty years institutions have shifted their expectations for these professionals to have graduate level academic scaffolding to better prepare them for these important, student-facing roles. While the scope and nomenclature of these graduate preparation programs have evolved, most are designed to instill future administrators with the necessary knowledge and skills to be effective professionals who can meet the needs of the contemporary college student (Long, 2012). These graduate preparation programs can broadly be referred to as Higher Education/Student Affairs (HE/SA) programs. This apprenticeship-style degree path is designed to provide students with the tools to analyze and effect change on both sides of the college experience. HE/SA programs should challenge future student affairs professionals to think critically, develop as scholar-practitioners, explore innovative ideas within the field, and to meaningfully apply theory-to-practice. Without this academic preparation, student affairs professionals may find themselves ill-equipped to handle the challenging and evolving landscape of their work.

As the number of HE/SA programs rapidly grew since their establishment in the 1960s, there became an apparent need to develop standards for HE/SA programs (Barr & Keating, 1985). Formed in 1979, the Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS) provided common recommendations based on the needs of the profession. Aligning with the CAS Standards helps HE/SA programs to shape their curriculum to ensure they are educating and producing practitioners equipped to handle the unique challenges of the field. These standards also provide for a baseline of knowledge for all student affairs professionals, establishing a basic understanding needed to work with colleagues across the field.

While institutions nationwide look to these standards to structure their programs, “the inherent challenge in meeting and meaningfully adhering to the CAS Standards is the limited number of courses in graduate programs, which prohibits the inclusion of classes focusing exclusively on each of these components” (Tolman & Calhoun, 2019, p. 68). In an effort to examine program’s abilities to align with the CAS Standards, this study examined HE/SA programs curriculums and their offering of exclusive courses/content recommended by CAS.

## **REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

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Our inquiry into the alignment of HE/SA programs curriculum began by reviewing the literature on CAS Standards for graduate preparatory programs in higher education. This literature provides the needed context to better understand the CAS Standards and how they are intended to inform HE/SA Programs. This literature meaningfully informed this quantitative study and reinforced the need for this inquiry.

### ***EVOLUTION OF STUDENT AFFAIRS***

The need to provide student services beyond classroom instruction in American higher education dates back as far as the 17<sup>th</sup> century and was primarily focused on student conduct and discipline (Rudolph, 1990). As faculty focused more on intellectual training, students turned to literary societies, sports, and other extracurricular areas as way to develop more holistically (Long, 2012). This need for additional student oversight, combined with the expansion of access to higher education resulting from the Morrill Acts of 1862 and 1890, led to the creation of more formal positions such as Deans of Men and Women (Schwartz, 2010; Solomon, 1985). By the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the student personnel movement, rooted in psychology and focused more on vocational and professional development, began to emerge (Biddix & Schwartz, 2012; Schwartz, 2010). The late 1940s and 1950s saw another boom in enrollment following the Serviceman’s Readjustment Act of 1944 (Theelin, 2011). During this same time, most deans of women had formal graduate training, with 90% of them possessing either a master’s or doctoral degree. Conversely, most deans of men favored a more practical approach to professional preparation, through apprenticeships (Hevel, 2016; Schwartz, 1997, 2010). By the 1960s, these two approaches merged, with student affairs embracing both theory and practice, leading to its recognition as a formal profession (Alleman & Finnegan, 2009; Hevel, 2016; Schwartz, 1997). Through its many iterations, the profession of student affairs has continued to evolve and grow, while remaining committed to the development and recruitment of qualified practitioners who understand not only the complex landscape of colleges and universities, but also the evolving developmental needs of contemporary college students.

### ***CAS STANDARDS***

Despite the fact that programs differ in enrollment, emphasis, credit hours, and capstone requirements (Barratt, n.d.; NASPA, n.d.), the academic content and professional knowledge provided by graduate preparation programs are critical to the development and competency of practitioners (Creamer, Janosik, Winston, & Kuk, 2001; Kuk & Cuyjet, 2009). As such, there is a need for some degree of standardization regarding the content covered in these programs. Fifteen years ago, Herdlein (2004) asserted it was “unclear whether graduate programs in student affairs have been satisfactory in preparing student affairs administrators in the rapidly changing environment of higher education.” (p. 51). This claim is just as relevant today, as program standardization and potential certification has been and continues to be an ongoing debate among those within student affairs graduate preparation (Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education [CAS], 2015; Ebberts & Kruempel, 1992; Hirt, 2006; Hughley, 2009; Young & Janosik, 2007).

This debate is fueled by program faculty members’ desire to equip aspiring student affairs professionals with an understanding of the basic knowledge and skills needed to be successful in student affairs practice, which led to the initial call for the development of standards for graduate students in professional preparation programs (McEwen & Talbot, 1998). The most widely used standards for

HE/SA programs are found within the CAS guidelines for Higher Education (Creamer & Winston, 2002; Ebbers & Kruempel, 1992; Meaborn & Owens, 1984; Young & Janosik, 2007). These standards for graduate preparatory programs in higher education have gone through various iterations, with the first being published in 1986 (Ebbers & Kruempel, 1992) and leading up to the most current version published in 2015 (CAS, 2015).

The Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS) was originally designed to foster and enhance student learning, development, and success at institutions of higher education through the development and promulgation of professional standards of practice. Today, CAS is made up of over 40 higher education professional associations representing over 115,000 professionals, many with international constituencies (CAS, 2019b). While CAS does not offer or endorse individual certifications, it relies on the concept of compliance, which “implies that an institution or program meets or exceeds the fundamental essential criteria established for a functional area program, service, or master’s level professional preparation program” (CAS, 2019a). It is important to note however, that there is no enforcement nor repercussions for failure to comply with the recommendations set forth by CAS.

The CAS Standards for professional preparation at the master’s level are the “recognized authorities in the field about fundamental qualities of pre-service education deemed absolutely necessary to ensure minimum levels of competence for persons entering the field of student affairs” (Creamer & Shelton, 1988, p. 408). In addition, the CAS Standards have been endorsed by the faculty leadership of both the American College Personnel Association (ACPA), and National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA), the primary organizations for the student affairs profession (ACPA & NASPA, 2014). However, there is great variance in CAS Standards compliance, which impacts how graduate students are socialized to the work of student affairs and its values (Young & Janosik, 2007). As student needs have evolved, so have the expectations of student affairs practitioners. In recent years, added focus has been placed on the development of professional competencies, prompting some to recommend expanding the curriculum and increasing credit hour requirements in an effort to improve program outcomes (ACPA & NASPA, 2014; Cooper, Mitchell, Eckerle, & Martin, 2016; Herdlein, 2004; Herdlein, Kline, Boquard, & Haddad, 2010; Merlin, Pagano, George, Zanone, & Newman, 2017). This suggestion is difficult to entertain in a time where students are encouraged to complete their coursework and enter the workforce as quickly as possible. To this end, Tolman and Calhoun (2019) previously asserted that:

Graduate preparatory programs in higher education (and the CAS Standards themselves) face the daunting challenge of requiring the necessary courses needed to build a strong foundation while balancing the number of credit hours required in the program. The desire of students to complete their graduate work in shorter time has pushed many programs to become 36 credits instead of the traditional 48. Program Coordinators are faced with the difficult task of what to put in and what to leave out. (p. 77)

How curriculum is set up and the content areas addressed within each program is left up to the discretion of the faculty, but the guidelines do stipulate there should be competency requirements that are regularly reviewed to ensure they are adequately preparing these graduate students for their imminent careers in student affairs (CAS, 2012). The primary value of the CAS student affairs professional preparation standard is to “assist in ensuring that an academic program is offering what the profession, through representative consensus, has deemed necessary to graduate prepared student affairs and student services professionals” (CAS, 2013, p. 2).

Within that quote, the phrasing *deemed necessary to graduate prepared student affairs and student service professionals* may be problematic, in that it sets up a number of questions related to the preparedness and quality of graduates of these preparation programs. What if all the necessary components are not included within an academic program? If so, does it mean there are unprepared graduates entering the

field of student affairs? If programs are graduating students that have not adequately met the standards, what is the purpose of having standards at all? In addition, the CAS Standards (2012) state that “demonstration of minimum knowledge and skill in each area is required of all program graduates” (p. 353). How is minimal knowledge and skill determined by each program? These were the questions the researchers sought to find out through this study. With approximately 15% - 20% of the student affairs field being new professionals coming directly from graduate preparation programs (Cilente, Henning, Skinner Jackson, Kennedy, & Sloane, 2006; Renn & Hodges, 2007), it is important to examine the content that is covered as it relates to the CAS Standards. This served as the inspiration for this study.

## METHODOLOGY

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This quantitative study sought to empirically study the alignment of HE/SA programs curriculum with the alignment of the CAS Standards. To describe the dataset and make meaning of the findings, both descriptive (measures of central tendency) and inferential statistics (ANOVA) were conducted.

### *DESIGN*

The design for this quantitative study was content analysis, which provided a structured mechanism to quantify unstructured and/or qualitative data (Rose, Spinks, & Canhoto, 2014). Content analysis allowed us to examine the curriculum websites of the HE/SA programs and quantify the data into categorical data. The benefit of this methodology and its selection for this study was it allowed for the examination of all the identified HE/SA program in the US and did not rely upon response rate (which would have likely yielded a significantly smaller dataset).

### *RESEARCH QUESTIONS*

The following research questions guided this research:

1. Of the six core areas outlined by the CAS Standards, what percentage of HE/SA programs offer exclusive course in each of these areas?
2. Do the credit hours of HE/SA programs impact their alignment with offering the six core areas outlined by the CAS Standards?

### *STUDY SITE*

In an effort to compile the most comprehensive list of graduate preparatory programs in higher education/student affairs (HE/SA), the graduate program directories were cross-listed and compared from the Association for the Study of Higher Education (ASHE), Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education (NASPA), and the American College Personnel Association (ACPA). After removing duplicate entries and academic programs no longer being offered, a total of 230 HE/SA programs were identified (Table 1).

**Table 1. Graduate programs in higher education/student affairs identified through program listings maintained by ASHE, NASPA, and ACPA.**

Number of Credit Hours	27-35	36-39	40-48	50-65	Total HE/SA Programs
Number of Programs (n)	53	115	50	12	230

### *DATA COLLECTION*

Our study sought to examine how closely these 230 HE/SA programs align with the curriculum proposed by the CAS Standards. Within the revised *Master's Level Student Affairs Professional Preparation Programs: CAS Standards and Guidelines* (2015), Part 5 outlines the recommended curriculum for all

HE/SA programs. Situated within three broad categories, there are six areas of study explicitly recommended: History, Student Development, Counseling & Advising, Organization & Administration, Assessment/Evaluation & Research, and Practicum/Supervised Practice. For Practicum/Supervised Practice, CAS (2015) recommends students have two experiences that total 300 hours (which could be combined within a single course or broken down into two separate courses). For the purposes of this study, the HE/SA program was considered to have met this area of study if they offered at least one dedicated course.

Of these six areas of study, the websites of the 230 HE/SA programs were reviewed in April 2019 to determine if courses were being offered exclusively to cover these topical areas of study. We intentionally looked at program websites as opposed to official university catalogs, as from our experience these program and course descriptions are often more accurate and use language that a layperson would understand. Furthermore, searching in this manner provided insight into the information prospective students would also find in a similar search of these respective programs. This included a review of the program of study, course catalog, course and program descriptions, and marketing materials. Recognizing the ambiguity in course nomenclature between programs, to ensure inter-rater-reliability between the research team, the first 30 programs were reviewed jointly to establish a baseline standard for inclusion/exclusion of course titles. After that point, when uncertainty arose from a program/course, the research team reviewed it together and agreed upon the inclusion/exclusion. After the curriculum offering of the 230 HE/SA programs were compiled, descriptive and inferential statistics were performed to analyze the dataset to describe the dataset and draw conclusions related to course offerings by program credit hours.

### ***DATA ANALYSIS***

In consistency with the descriptive methodology of this study, the analysis of the data sought to describe the percentage of HE/SA programs offering exclusive classes in the six content areas recommended by CAS. This resulted in the calculation of the means of each of the six content areas. Furthermore, programs were classified into three groups: Below 36 ( $n = 53$ ), 36-39 ( $n = 115$ ), and 40+ ( $n = 62$ ). This classification into these three groups was based on the anecdotal perception that traditional, two-year HE/SA programs are 36-39 credits (typically three courses each semester with some programs having more credits for practicum/internship hours). One-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted to determine if graduate programs course offerings were different for programs with varying numbers of credit hour requirements. There were no outliers and the data were normally distributed for each group, as assessed by boxplot and Shapiro-Wilk test ( $p < .05$ ), respectively. The following section presents the results of ANOVA for each of the three variables examined: 1) History of Higher Education, 2) Counseling Skills, and 3) Offering all six recommended courses by CAS.

### ***RELIABILITY AND VALIDITY***

When conducting quantitative content analysis, it is imperative to establish reliability and doing (Rife et al., 2005). To ensure inter-rater reliability, the members of the research team (two of whom have served as program directors in HE/SA programs) reviewed and agreed upon the course nomenclature that would qualify for each of the six respective content areas. This reliability was tested by jointly reviewing the first 30 HE/SA programs curriculum and jointly deciding if their curriculum aligned with some or all of the six content areas. This process showed a saturation and consistency in reliability between the research team in their coding and identification of HE/SA curriculum. To further triangulate the data for reliability and validity, three HE/SA faculty members were contacted to affirm the research team's assessment of their curriculum alignment with CAS (and their interpretation of course nomenclature).

It was imperative to ensure qualitative validity in this study, as that was the mechanism that yielded the data for the quantitative content analysis. Our approach to developing an agreed upon criteria/nomenclature for the course inclusion in the six content areas adheres to Maxwell's (1992) criteria

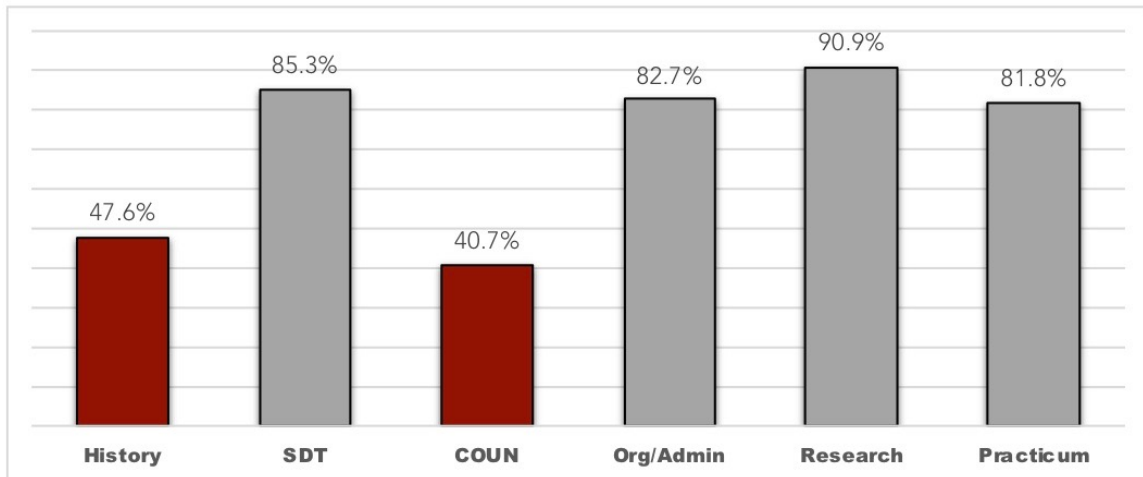
for establishing validity: *descriptive validity, interpretive validity, theoretical validity, evaluative validity, and generalizability.*

**LIMITATIONS**

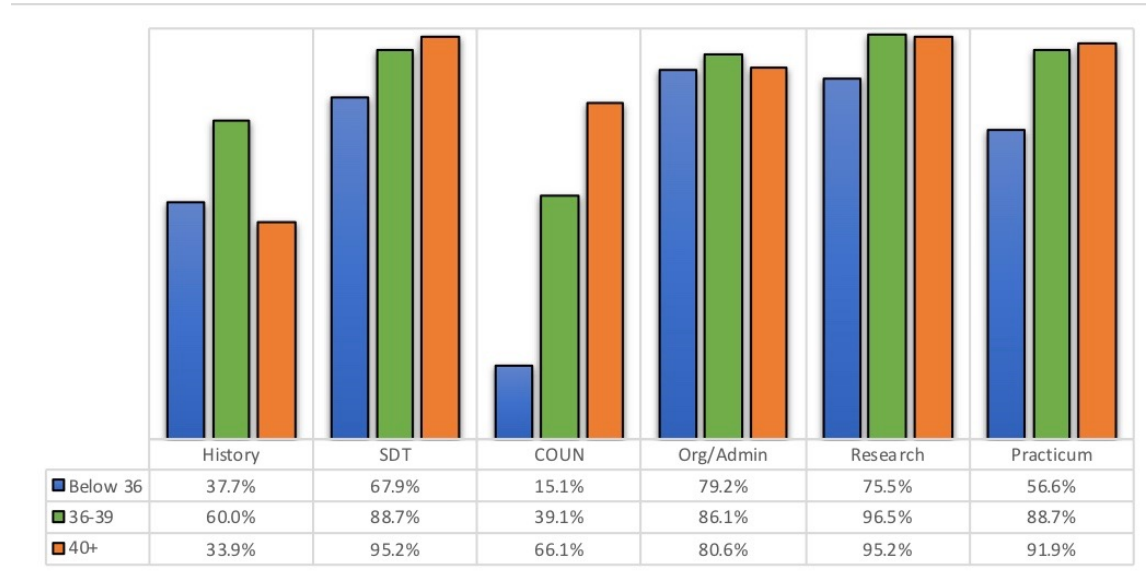
As this is one of the few studies that has examined CAS recommended content areas graduate preparation programs, there are limitations to the conclusions that can be drawn to this study. To be clear, this descriptive study should be viewed as an initial inquiry, with plans already in place for further investigation. The first limitation to the methodology of the study was the reliance upon accurate data being publicly listed for each graduate preparation program. The researchers relied only on what information was available on the websites. This typically was limited to course names and in some cases descriptions. While all of the program information collected for this study was publicly accessible and found using the same means a potential graduate student would (nothing password protected or requiring special permission), there were instances in which some program websites were found to be outdated or broken links, so it is possible that some of the CAS recommended content areas were being met, it was just clearly shown how. The second limitation is that the study was limited solely to programs found by comparing graduate preparation lists posted by ACPA, NASPA, and ASHE. While this list generated a healthy sample size, the researchers are aware that it is not all inclusive, and there are most certainly graduate preparation programs unintentionally left out of this study. The third limitation is that the data collected (accurate listings of graduate preparation programs by professional organizations, as well as the information about each respective program) were reliant upon accurate and timely information being provided by official university/departmental websites.

**FINDINGS**

Examination of the 230 HE/SA programs revealed that four of the core courses were offered by over 80% of the programs nationally (Student Development 85.3%, Org & Admin 82.7%, Research 90.9%, and Practicum 81.8%) while only 47.6% offered History and 40.7% Counseling/Advising (Figure 1). The offerings of courses in these six content areas were further broken down by program credit hours (Below 36 credits, 36-39 credits, and 40+ credit) (Figure 2). Examination of average number of the six content areas by program type (Below 36 credits, 36-39 credits, and 40+ credit) yielded 3.3/6, 4.6/6, and 4.6/6, respectively. These findings guided further exploration into the program offering of both the History and Counseling/Advising core courses.



**Figure 1. Percentages of the 230 higher education/student affairs programs offering exclusive courses in the six core classes suggested by CAS.**



**Figure 2. Broken down by category type (below 36, 36-39, and 40+), percentages of the 230 HE/SA programs offering exclusive courses in the six core content areas suggested by CAS.**

**ANOVA - History.** Program Credit hours were significantly associated with differences in the number of graduate programs offering a History of Higher Education course ( $F=7.262, p < .001$ ) as shown in Table 2. Follow-up tests were conducted to evaluate pairwise differences among the means for program credit hours. The Bonferroni post hoc analysis revealed statistically significant differences between ‘Below 36 and 36-39’ ( $M = -.22264$ ) and ‘36-39 and 40+’ ( $M = .26129$ ).

**Table 2. Descriptive Statistics and ANOVA results for the CAS History Course Recommendation and Bonferroni Multiple Comparisons by Credit Hours**

HISTORY	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig
Between Groups	3.451	2	1.726	7.262	.001*
Within Groups	53.940	227	.238		
Total	57.391	229			

	Mean Difference	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
				Lower	Upper
Below 36 vs. 36-39	-.22264	.08093	.019*	-.4178	-.0275
Below 36 vs. 40+	.03865	.09119	1.000	-.1813	.2586
36-39 vs. 40+	.26129	.07680	.002*	.0761	.4465

**ANOVA - Counseling Skills.** Program Credit hours were significantly associated with differences in the number of graduate programs offering a Counseling Skills course ( $F=17.736, p < .000$ ) as shown in Table 3. Follow-up tests were conducted to evaluate pairwise differences among the means for program credit hours. The Bonferroni post hoc analysis revealed statistically significant differences between ‘Below 36 and 36-39’ ( $M = -.24036$ ), ‘Below 36 and 40+’ ( $M = -.51035$ ), and ‘36-39 and 40+’ ( $M = -.26999$ ).



**Table 3. Descriptive Statistics and ANOVA results for the CAS Counseling Skills Course Recommendation and Bonferroni Multiple Comparisons by Credit Hours**

<b>COUNSELING</b>	<b>Sum of Squares</b>	<b>df</b>	<b>Mean Square</b>	<b>F</b>	<b>Sig</b>
Between Groups	7.512	2	3.756	17.736	<.001*
Within Groups	48.071	227	.212		
Total	55.583	229			

	<b>Mean Difference</b>	<b>Std. Error</b>	<b>Sig.</b>	<b>95% Confidence Interval</b>	
				<b>Lower</b>	<b>Upper</b>
Below 36 vs. 36-39	-.24036	.07640	.006*	-.4246	-.0561
Below 36 vs. 40+	-.51035	.08609	<.001*	-.7180	-.3027
36-39 vs. 40+	-.26999	.07251	.001*	-.4449	-.0951

**ANOVA - Meeting all Six Content Areas.** Program Credit hours were significantly associated with differences in the number of graduate programs offering all six courses recommended by CAS ( $F=30.567$ ,  $p < .000$ ) as shown in Table 3. Follow-up tests were conducted to evaluate pairwise differences among the means for program credit hours. The Bonferroni post hoc analysis revealed statistically significant differences between 'Below 36 and 36-39' ( $M = -1.27055$ ) and 'Below 36 and 40+' ( $M = .19625$ ).

**Table 3. Descriptive Statistics and ANOVA results for the Six Recommended Courses and Bonferroni Multiple Comparisons by Credit Hours**

<b>ALL SIX</b>	<b>Sum of Squares</b>	<b>df</b>	<b>Mean Square</b>	<b>F</b>	<b>Sig</b>
Between Groups	67.276	2	33.638	30.567	<.001*
Within Groups	249.806	227	1.100		
Total	317.083	229			

	<b>Mean Difference</b>	<b>Std. Error</b>	<b>Sig.</b>	<b>95% Confidence Interval</b>	
				<b>Lower</b>	<b>Upper</b>
Below 36 vs. 36-39	-1.27055	.17416	<.001*	-1.6906	-.8505
Below 36 vs. 40+	-1.30828*	.19625	<.001*	-1.7816	-.8350
36-39 vs. 40+	-.03773	.16528	1.000	-.4364	.3609

### ***SUMMARY OF ANOVA FINDINGS***

The findings from each of the ANOVA's for the 'History Course', 'Counseling Course', and 'All Six Courses' showed interesting results that were statistically significant (Figure 3). The history course was offered significantly more often in programs with 36-39 credit hours. Conversely, offerings of the counseling course were directly related to the number of credit hours (i.e. the more credit hours, the more likely a program was to offer it). Perhaps most interesting is the finding that while programs with less than 36 credits offered less of the six content areas (3.3 out of 6), the offering of program types 36 and above were the same (4.6 out of 6).

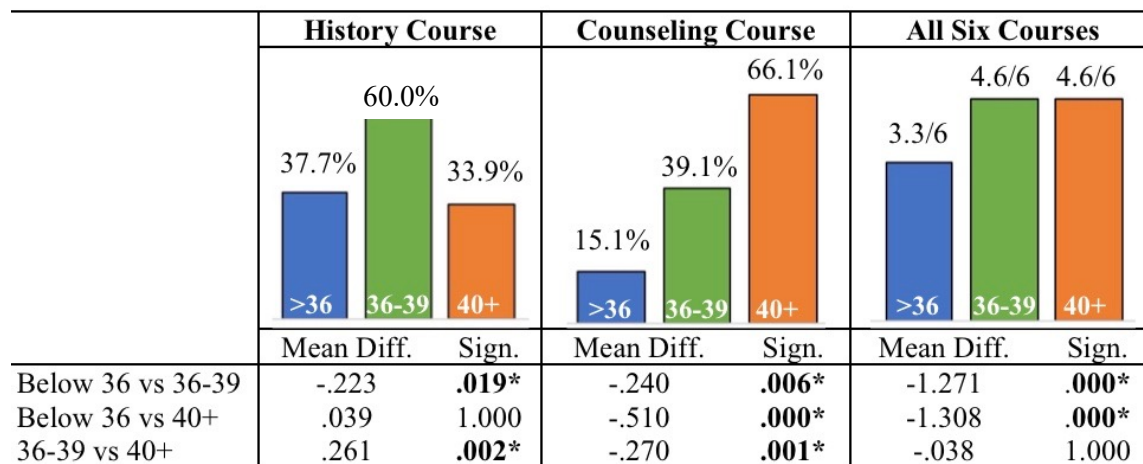


Figure 3. Summary of ANOVA

## **DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH & PRACTICE**

The findings of this investigation bring to light some insight into the current state of the CAS Standards and how 230 HE/SA programs align with the curriculum. With the upcoming revision to the CAS Standards for HE/SA programs slated for Spring 2020, this study is timely and has implications for both research and practice. Since the CAS Standards are looked to as the authoritative source to guide HE/SA programs (Creamer & Shelton, 1988; Creamer & Winston, 2002; Young & Jansik, 2007), these findings may provide insight to programs about their current alignment with the CAS Standards and potential curriculum changes that may be needed for the future. The results showed that 80% of the programs studied included four of the six suggested course content areas (Student Development Theory, Organization/Administration, Research Methods, and Practicum). Two content areas, History and Counseling, were found in less than half of the programs studied (47% and 40%, respectively). While this seems low, it may mean that this content, particularly History, is infused within other courses as a background knowledge of any area is often needed to introduce a topic. It is harder to make the assumption that counseling is being included in other courses, as those skills are unique and may not be as easily incorporated into other content areas. One area that the researchers believed may have been lower was the Practicum area, but nearly 82% of programs appear to have that covered.

In an effort to further develop student affairs professionals, HE/SA programs have continued to evolve and many have expanded their curriculum and credit hours subsequently (Cooper et al., 2016; Herdlein et al., 2010; Merlin et al., 2017). Acknowledging this growth and differences in credit hours between programs, the researchers found some interesting information when they broke down the fulfillment of the CAS required content areas based upon total credit hours required for program completion. Those programs that took 36 credit hours or less to complete had the lowest number of content areas (about half of them), while those over 36 hours over two thirds of the content areas were accounted for in their curricula. This situation raises some interesting questions regarding credit

hour requirements and a program's ability to cover all the suggested content areas. While programs with fewer credit hour requirements are appealing for students in terms of both time-to-completion and cost, these findings suggest students may be shortchanged in terms of content. To that end, we must remind ourselves of the important roles HE/SA programs have in preparing students as they will directly influence the experience of students and shape the effectiveness of their division of student affairs (Sandeem & Barr, 2014). Conversely, programs with more credit hour requirements have more time to cover these areas. The programs with the highest number of credit hour requirements (over 40 credit hours) tend to be those with a focus on counselling (likely due to professional requirements associated with APA and other licensing/accrediting bodies), so it is understandable that those programs would be able to cover all the content areas within their course requirements.

Digging further into the relationship between credit hour requirements and the coverage of the suggested content areas, the researchers found the biggest differences amongst programs. Those programs with less than 36 credit hours were statistically significantly lower in terms of including the six content areas suggested by CAS. In fact, the data reveal that those programs typically only cover between three and four of the suggested six areas (3.3), with counseling nearly non-existent. When compared to the larger programs (both 36-39 credit hours and 40+ credit hours) averaged more than four of the suggested six areas. Consistent with the previous research of Tolman and Calhoun (2019), the findings from this study suggest that programs with fewer than 36 credit hours arguably feel the greatest strain in aligning their curriculum with the CAS Standards due to the limited number of courses they offer.

### ***IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTITIONERS***

Newton's (1846) third law of motion, "*for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction*", is at the heart of HE/SA programs curriculum. While faculty (and the profession) would genuinely love to extend the number of courses offered to be able to more thoroughly prepare future administrators in the six recommended content areas by CAS (and beyond), this is simply not a luxury for many programs who are confined not only by a finite number of credit hours (i.e. below 36, 36-39, 40+) but also may have these credit hours siphoned away by additional curricular requirements from areas outside of traditional HE/SA coursework.

Not surprisingly, programs with less than 36 credit hours face the most difficulty in being able to offer the six recommended content areas. However, these results indicate there is not a difference between the HE/SA programs of 36-39 and 40+ credit hours in their alignment with the CAS Standards. This finding suggests that HE/SA programs with 36-39 credit hours are the "sweet spot" in finding the balance between offering the most efficient time-to-completion balanced with their ability to align with the CAS Standards. HE/SA programs with credit hours above/below 36-39 may want to evaluate the efficacy of their curriculum in light of these findings.

As HE/SA programs struggle to offer courses dedicated exclusively to History and Counselling, these programs should consider how to supplement this material in other ways within their programs (i.e. embedded in other courses). As programs recognize shortcomings of their curriculum offering with the ideal professional preparation of student affairs administrators, it is critical for HE/SA faculty to communicate these continued needs for professional development with the profession of student affairs (i.e. Vice presidents of student affairs and professional associations), particularly since both ACPA and NASPA support the CAS Standards as a means to measure program quality ("Statement on Student Affairs Preparation Program Quality," n.d.). However, practitioners should not rely upon HE/SA faculty to convey this information - they should actively seek it out. Beyond talking with HE/SA faculty to understand the academic preparation of new professionals, practitioners should ascertain from each of the new hires to their departments what their professional development needs are and address them strategically and systematically. Furthermore, professional associations must also recognize these needs and actively take steps to address them through conference attendance, webinars, online resources, trainings, etc.

Results of this study could be helpful for faculty teaching within graduate preparation programs, as it may provide them with some insight how their program may compare with others regarding adherence to the CAS guidelines. These findings may serve as an impetus for faculty to review their program curricula and make any updates or changes to ensure their students are graduating with the recommended tools and experiences necessary to be successful practitioners. It also could create some serious conversations regarding the ability to cover all the recommended content areas within a finite number of credit hours, as has been suggested by several scholars (Cooper et al., 2016; Herdlein, 2004; Herdlein et al., 2010). With such a variance in credit hours, faculty may want to strive to find the balance between time to completion and adequate coverage of content. Not surprisingly, those programs with higher credit hours seemed to cover areas (particularly counseling) that those with fewer did not. Typically, these programs are often part of additional accrediting bodies such as the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP), which require additional hours (Merlin, 2016). Even if the results of this study do not lead to any extensive curriculum changes, perhaps program faculty will be more mindful to be clearer about showing how their programs and individual courses are meeting the recommendations provided by CAS. With that in mind, perhaps CAS could come up with a means for programs to demonstrate how each area is being met.

The findings of this study should provide some additional questions for current and future practitioners to consider regarding HE/SA programs. Prospective students may want to decide how important it is for their future HE/SA program to be (more) aligned with the CAS recommendations. It may behoove them to review for themselves how closely the curriculum of each program they are considering aligns with the CAS Standards and the six core areas. In addition, those practitioners serving on hiring committees could elect to factor in the program content and/or CAS alignment of potential candidates in hopes of determining how prepared that individual may be for work in student affairs.

However, it is important to note that without any standardization, it may be difficult for potential students and hiring committees to even know if/how a program is meeting the CAS recommended areas. These individuals may struggle to know the various synonyms for the same course (i.e. org theory vs. admin). Finally, the question that still remains is what happens when a program does not meet a CAS recommendation? Are their students less prepared than those who attend programs that do meet those expectations? It would seem that these findings may rekindle the conversation around possible certification of HE/SA programs.

### ***CONSIDERATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH***

This descriptive study should pave the way for further inquiry into the ways in which programs are aligning with CAS recommendations, particularly with new updates to the standards set to be released in the near future. While this study is clearly descriptive in nature, it should serve as a catalyst that will enable future empirical studies to springboard off of it. Considerations for future research should include:

- Perceptions of HE/SA faculty vs. student affairs senior leaders (i.e. Vice Presidents of Student Affairs) perceptions of the CAS Standards and HE/SA programs abilities to align with them
- Do foci/concentrations (i.e. Counseling Based, Community Colleges, HBCUs, Social Justice, etc.) of HE/SA programs affect their alignment with the CAS Standards?
- Is there a difference in the academic preparedness (perceived and/or actual) of graduates who attend programs that are more closely aligned with the CAS Standards?
- When the next revision of CAS Standards are released (tentatively in Spring 2020), how closely are program's curriculum aligned with these updated standards?

## CONCLUSION

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The field of student affairs is ever-changing, and those entering the field must be adequately prepared to not only face the realities of today, but the challenges of tomorrow. As such, those who train and prepare the future members of the profession have the privilege and responsibility to develop capable and competent practitioners. Cuyjet, Longwell-Grice, and Molina (2009) remind us that “[b]ecause student affairs professionals practice in a variety of institutions and perform increasingly complex functions, the field may need to accept that there is not a single way to prepare professionals, nor a definitive set of professional education standards” (p. 105). However, those within the field would be remiss if they did not give additional consideration and attention to established standards, like CAS, that have taken rigorous steps to identify those areas that are critical to the development of those within the profession. While there may not be one way to prepare student affairs practitioners, there certainly are specific skills and content that all professionals should have, which have been well established by the CAS Standards. The findings of this study show promise in that HE/SA programs nationwide are in alignment with the majority of the six content areas recommended by CAS. However, there is a significant shortcoming in the number of HE/SA programs not offering exclusive courses in the areas of history and counseling skills. Now that this challenge has been identified and with CAS slated to revise the graduate preparatory programs standards in Spring 2020, it provides an opportunity for faculty and practitioners to collaborate on addressing the professional preparation in these areas, focus future efforts on curriculum alignment with CAS recommendations, and to continue the conversation about curriculum needs that will inform future CAS revisions.

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