Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice

ISSN: 1949-6591 (Print) 1949-6605 (Online) Journal homepage: http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/uarp20

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McCambly, H. N., & Haley, K. J. (2016).
Equity and the "B" Word: Budgeting and Professional Capacity in Student Affairs.
Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice, 53(2), 205–217.
ISSN: 1949-6591 (print)/1949-6605 (online)

Innovation in Practice Feature

Equity and the "B" Word: Budgeting and Professional Capacity in Student Affairs

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The dual pressures of the national college completion agenda and diminished public investment in higher education have led to a growing reliance on performance-based policies. Using a policy implementation framework, this qualitative study examines the implementation of a performance-based budgeting model at a broad-access urban research university and its implications for student affairs practice. The findings revealed a need for increased capacity within student affairs to better align resources with student success and equity objectives.

The college completion agenda, fueled by the public perception that higher education is both operationally inefficient and failing to keep pace with economic demands has become the primary driver for public higher education funding reform (Harnisch, 2013; Kelly & Schneider, 2012; Kretovics, 2011; Levine, 2011; Miao, 2012). The resulting environment has led to resurgence in policies that promote performance-based budgeting (PBB) and performance-based funding (PBF), (Hillman, Kelchen, & Goldrick-Rab, 2013; McLendon & Hearn, 2013). These performance-based models are often touted as tools to stimulate and reward practices that enhance student success and other mission-critical outcomes (College Complete America, 2011). State and institution-level shifts toward outcomes-based resource allocation have the potential to expose institutional values and to affect campus practice and student outcomes.

The implementation of a resource allocation policy is often complicated by the required metric selection, reporting, and strategic alignment required for success. Implementation can be even more challenging for units, including student services and various academic affairs functions, whose outcomes cannot be measured by the number of students enrolled in majors or student credit hours (Barr & McClellan, 2011; Wellman & Soares, 2011). The purpose of this case study was to explore the initial implementation of a resource allocation model within such a unit—enrollment management and student affairs (EMSA)—at a broad-access, urban research university (UU). The primary research questions were: As UU implements a new PBB model, what does the institution require from student affairs departments in order to fulfill the policy objective? How do these requirements compare to the existing capacities or the perceptions of the policy among student

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affairs professionals or departments? What are the strategies for implementation? What are the equity-related implications of the move to a new model?

This article reviews the performance-based resource allocation movement from the perspective of professional practice in non-instructional units that serve the critical student success mission of a public university. Outcomes-based allocation models often focus on the distribution of state appropriations to public institutions based on performance measures. These same approaches, however, are also being adopted by individual campuses for internal allocation purposes. This study focuses on one campus-based example of PBB implementation. The results highlight emergent strategies for professional development, policy influence, and organizational sensemaking in student affairs that maximize the potential of performance based models to support student success and equitable outcomes.

Theoretical Framework

Bastedo (2012) recommended refocusing organizational theorists in higher education on issues of educational work that are critical to major outcomes of concern in higher education—the need to facilitate deep learning, access, and success for a diverse student population. As policies intended to address such outcomes are implemented, units and individuals must rethink existing understandings, a process known as organizational sensemaking (Eckel & Kezar, 2003). Policy implementation theory provides a framework for critiquing and exploring the dynamics between policy and practice, including sensemaking, in the larger context of serving critical student success and diversity outcomes.

The word *policy* represents both the formal text and the iteration implemented in the field. Policy is often substantially altered, negated, or expanded during implementation (M. J. Hill & Hupe, 2002). Some theorists refer to implementation deficit, which quantifies the difference between policy impact and the original policy intent (M. J. Hill & Hupe, 2002), while others posit that successful implementation can often include the "unintended benefits that may result from implementers' action" (McLaughlin, 2006, p. 218).

The final iteration of any policy is shaped by opportunities for the professionals doing the work of the university to acquire the necessary skills and to learn about the policy, the problem, and the expectations for practice (Goggin, Bowman, Lester, & O'Toole, 1990; Honig, 2006). Implementation hinges on agents' understanding of how policy demands change or reinforce current practice (Spillane, Reiser, & Gomez, 2006). In order to minimize negative distortions that may occur as practitioners construct meaning of unfamiliar directives from within existing mental models, institutions must establish clarity within policy texts and create multimodal opportunities for implementers to learn about the policy, the problem, and the logic behind the implementation plan (H. Hill, 2006; Honig, 2006).

A policy implementation framework considers the communication that shapes the ability of implementers to comply with and resist a policy. This ability "pivots on power—here meaning the relative capacity of actors to exert influence on policy developments" (Malen, 2006, p. 88). Actors' powers can be measured by the capital they possess in the form of networks, information and knowledge, individual attributes, position, and reputation. An actor must have the "skill and will" to convert these assets into influence, making ability, desire, and capital equal components in policy influence (Malen, 2006, p. 88). Policy implementation theory is an effective lens to study how student affairs professionals engage as co-creators of policy outcomes that impact the capacity to serve students and how these professionals can build this capacity.

The change process hinges on the practitioners who either "have professional and personal motivation to comply or carry out policy directives—or not" (McLaughlin, 2006, p. 214). Most practitioners in higher education are already serving to the best of their understanding, and as such, change is difficult unless it "is made meaningful to them and they can connect to the change" (Kezar, 2013, p. 763). Successful change leaders must introduce processes that facilitate individual sensemaking through task forces, cross-divisional inquiry teams, public presentations of internal data, robust planning processes, responsive professional development, and inclusive dialogues that span the institution (Kezar, 2013). Transforming institutional outcomes requires translating the critical ties between the innovation, its potential outcomes, the needs of the institution or its students, and the implications for individual practice (Eckel & Kezar, 2003).

Literature Review

This literature review provides an overview of resource allocation in higher education and its connections to the student success and equity mission of the university. The literature also documents the state of current student affairs practice and perceived need among leaders in the field in terms of practitioners' capacity to engage in assessment and strategic budgeting processes.

Resource Allocation in Higher Education

Performance-based models have reemerged in the past several years with a greater emphasis on degree production and alignment of missions, measures, and incentives (McLendon & Hearn, 2013). Policymakers are looking to use funding models as levers to improve postsecondary outcomes, namely degree production (Christensen, Horn, Caldera, & Soares, 2011; Miao, 2012).

In spite of symbolic efforts to improve equity, diversity, and student outcomes, budget and accountability models rarely convert symbolic effort into a systemic feature (Bensimon, Rueda, Dowd, & Harris, 2007). Budget models have the potential to eliminate or contribute to undesirable results, including reinforcing social inequity or undermining educational quality (Hillman et al., 2013; Hillman, Tandberg, & Fryar, 2015).

Dowd (2003) provided a compelling ideological approach to the performance movement: "equity-inclusive performance accountability" (p. 114). This approach posits that if the goal of public institutions is to reduce social and economic inequality, then funding solutions must intentionally address this goal to be efficient and economical. Equity goals can be pursued with efficiency in mind, but the evidence or metrics used to monitor progress must keep the ultimate goal of equity at its center because "what gets counted, counts" (Dowd, 2013, p. 50). Institutions and systems must produce evidence of disaggregated student achievement to ensure that, on average, different racial and socioeconomic groups are achieving equitable outcomes (Dowd, 2003).

Despite evidence of persistent inequities, funding structures in higher education often amount to "upside-down spending—the least resources are spent on the students most at risk of failure, reserving funds for students who already have demonstrated capacity to succeed and advance" (Wellman & Soares, 2011, p. 9). These authors contend that greater investments in coaching, advising, and improving developmental education could yield better student retention and learning outcomes, which would mean a "right-side-up" approach to funding proven support programs, including those administered by student affairs.

Student Affairs: Assessment, Budgeting, and Professional Capacity

Within the student affairs profession, the value of budgeting as a tool for reaching student success or equity goals often gets lost in bulky administrative processes. Budgeting skills—including strategic thinking, targeted data collection, and using data to share important departmental work—are nonetheless essential for personnel at all levels within student affairs in order to align decisions with mission-critical goals (Barr & McClellan, 2011). Practitioners dedicated to diversity and student success might not see a connection between their administrative tasks, including budgeting work, and their role in "making or unmaking unequal outcomes" for students (Bensimon et al., 2007, p. 32). Given the central role and expertise of many student affairs units in supporting diverse student success, the allocation of resources to these divisions can make or break programs supporting equitable student outcomes.

Assessment practice in student affairs is the foundation for reporting requirements created by performance-based models. According to Bresciani (2002), "an inarguable trend seems to be that as resources continue to tighten, student affairs professionals will be required to provide evidence that their programs are having an effect on student learning and development" (p. 98). Establishing a mechanism for quality student affairs assessment as a best practice that balances equity, access, learning, and efficiency outcomes is politically necessary (Keeling, Wall, Underhile, & Dungy, 2008). Student affairs professionals must be savvy in the political aspects of budget management in order to influence decisions about funding and programming that will impact the institution's capacity to meet its mission (Wellman & Soares, 2011).

Many senior student affairs officers (SSAOs) report that although recent graduates have a working knowledge of student development, ethics, and other theory, they do not have confidence in a number of other highly valued skills, including budgeting and financial management, outcomes measurement and demonstration, political skills, and policy awareness (Cuyjet, Longwell-Grice, & Molina, 2009; Herdlein, 2004; Lovell & Kosten, 2000). SSAOs want graduates to have a better sense of the way student affairs fits into the institutional educational mission and how to navigate the political milieu (Herdlein, 2004), which requires capacity building to introduce systems that link assessment, budgeting, and strategic planning (Bresciani, 2010; Keeling et al., 2008).

The literature assessing the capacity within the student affairs professions highlights a distinct gap in terms of successfully maneuvering through the political and evidence-driven budget process. Addressing such a gap is not intended to perpetuate an "arms race" between academic and student affairs, but to further the institutional capacity to maximize the use of limited resources.

Methodology

This case study explored a performance-based resource allocation policy implementation process on professionals and practice in an EMSA division at a UU. Because similar performance-based models were applied and often failed in different states and institutions, studying a case during implementation is a timely opportunity to consider questions about practice, perception, and the evolution of a policy.

EMSA supports student success and learning through programs "to enhance students' experiences and outcomes related to enrollment, retention, graduation and learning." EMSA is organized into 7 program areas with more than 30 departments or programs, including enrollment management, financial aid, career services, advising, and the multicultural and student support division.

Study Design

According to Creswell (2007), case study research is a qualitative method that "explores a bounded system (a *case*) or multiple bounded systems over time, through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple *sources of information*" (p. 73). Case study research has several features that lend to this particular topic. According to Merriam (2009), the particularistic nature of case studies "makes it an especially good design for practical problems" (p. 43). Case studies can provide thick description, offering a more complete view of an issue, which helps the reader understand the phenomenon under study and brings "about the discovery of new meaning, extend[s] the reader's experience, or confirm[s] what is known" (Merriam, 2009, p. 44). Case studies have proven "particularly useful for studying educational innovations, evaluating programs, and informing policy" (Merriam, 2009, p. 51). The approach to this case is also critical: This study aimed to reveal equity-related implications of the move to PBB.

Data Collection and Analysis

The primary data came from eight interviews with EMSA leaders and practitioners and a collection of UU documents. The interview participants were selected using purposeful sampling (Plano Clark & Creswell, 2010) to capture a broad range of viewpoints for maximal variation (Merriam, 2009) from individuals directly involved in the budgeting process. Participants included mid-level leadership (directors), upper-level leadership (associate vice presidents), and expert contributors (budget and assessment experts). With the participant's permission, data from an informal interview with a high-level leader in the division of finance and administration were also used.

Interviews were conducted using a semi-structured protocol, consisting of open-ended questions related to knowledge and experience regarding the transition from the old to new budget model, perceptions of the transition implications, and opinions related to needs and ideal policy. Participants ranged in assessment or budgeting expertise from limited to expert knowledge and in their direct engagement with policy-making conversations.

The interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed. The data were coded in a first-cycle initial coding process. The first-cycle codes were then compared to the results of an outside, second coders' findings from two of the eight interviews to identify possible areas of confusion or bias (Saldaña, 2013). The data then underwent a second-cycle coding process where superfluous data were dropped and data were recoded based on identified patterns (Saldaña, 2013).

The data collected from internal UU committee records and external communications materials published over the preceding two years documented the mission, evolution, and structure of the new budget model. This analysis was valuable due to the independence of the data from the researcher's influence and the documentation of the history of the program (Merriam, 2009). The documents were analyzed for content directly relevant to EMSA's practice and programs. These data were useful in identifying the messages that have been actively and formally communicated to the university community about the intention and structure of this new policy.

The final analysis, using both document and interview coding, compared and analyzed the perspectives using a policy implementation theory framework. This framework dictated an analysis of the differences between the policy's intended outcome, the policy's implementation, and the perceptions, messages, power relationships, institutional contexts, and cognitive schema that emerged from the data.

Limitations

The nature of the case study approach offers the opportunity to identify insights from real-life situations providing a rich account of a complex problem (Merriam, 2009). Case studies, however, are not generalizable or representative but instead provide insights that may be useful in similar contexts (Merriam, 2009). To balance the risk of detrimental researcher bias in the selection and analysis of interview data, several stakeholders were consulted on the research design and a secondary coder was engaged to review the data for themes.

Findings

This study exposed the complex relationship between the intention of a new budgeting policy and its implementation as experienced by student affairs practitioners. EMSA modeled some intentional change strategies to build capacity through structured sensemaking tasks. These efforts advanced practitioner knowledge and capacity while revealing considerable skill gaps. Equally instructive, the study also revealed threats to the potential for this model to achieve its goals of both improved efficiency and student outcomes due to misalignment between the policy's intent and its execution.

Capacity Building Through Sensemaking

The analysis revealed an emphasis on sensemaking strategies used by EMSA's leadership to build capacity and to protect the student-centered efforts of the unit. Participants were aware that the introduction of a new budget model was an outgrowth of changing times in higher education. The budget expert stated that "PBB … will not create new money, but it will help us make better decisions." Multiple leaders acknowledged that the policy environment nationally, locally, and institutionally demands efficiency and evidence of student success. This environment, as noted by one high-level leader, provides points of political leverage for student affairs practitioners who can use data to show effectiveness.

Identifying a Gap in Capacity. Participants provided differing perspectives on the skills that they and their staff needed to be successful under this new model. One of the most knowledgeable mid-level participants outlined the skills necessary to be a successful EMSA leader. In addition to such skills as "be able to explain funding sources and structure, understand the restrictions relevant to funding sources … have familiarity with tools for creating a new budget …" the participant added "understanding how [the budget] is built behind the scenes will help you navigate it," including the way one's work fits into the larger goals, activities, and politics of the university. This mid-level participant explained that the process of budgeting and advocating for resources is part of strategic planning and serving students. As such, budgeting changes should not be about teaching "directors how to use a tool but to get people in touch with strategy and budgeting as an important aspect of success."

Another mid-level leader stated, "for a student affairs administrator, knowing the budget and how it works is invaluable and I don't know if that's something that is stressed in a lot of higher ed programs …" This mid-level leader explained that staff needs to go through a shift in professional mindset to think strategically about documentation, justification, and obtaining the resources needed to serve diverse students. These participants agreed that the skillsets and opportunities to engage in this sort of work had not existed prior to the previous two years of sensemaking and professional development.

On the assessment front, one high-level participant reflected that there had already been a desire among practitioners to assess their programs, and the new assessment expert provided "the structure and leadership to do it very well." Participants acknowledged that they needed to map program goals to those of EMSA and finally to those of the university. Practitioners' skill levels, however, varied widely as most of the departments never before introduced concepts of strategic assessment or budgeting. The budget expert admitted that EMSA practitioners have a long way to go, stating "we do not take it as seriously as we should …" The assessment expert agreed but insisted the unit was never going "to go from not doing assessment planning to 'now tie it to your budget and do all these things.'… [T]here was a progression that we wanted to transition them to."

Participants indicated that the ability to prioritize and utilize tools to make strategic decisions is not only important to their future work but is also something that had been missing from the EMSA unit. One high-level EMSA leader made comments representative of nearly all of the participants and reflected:

> [w]e've had decisions based on emotional pleas and whoever could yell the loudest … people made requests for investments saying—here is what I am going to accomplish with that, I don't think we circled back … and said—did you accomplish what you said you were going to?

This idea was echoed by mid-level leaders, one of whom reflected that, "[n]obody ever asked us in the past to demonstrate [how we] produced anything of value," and another who said "everyone should know their plan…. In the past…they have been asking for money one at a time, one program at a time, which is crazy." Another mid-level leader explained, "rather than being thoughtful, we just used to freeze positions if the budget was too tight." Comments along these lines painted a consistent picture of gaps in strategic capacity related to budgeting and assessment.

Leading a Sensemaking Process. EMSA's leadership recognized that professional development related to the new budget process had to go beyond simplistic modes of communication (e.g., e-mails, isolated meetings) and invest in a culture shift through hands-on, collaborative work to tackle questions of priority and strategy related to student needs. EMSA's systematic steps over two years to change the division's culture is most publicly evident in the addition of two experts, one on budget and finance, and another on outcomes assessment. Although these positions already exist at some colleges, at this open-access institution that historically underfunds its student affairs unit, the staffing change was a strong symbolic shift. These expert staff took the lead to develop professional capacity and help the division act strategically in both budgeting and assessment.

Although the performance-based system was still in development, these two leaders began to proactively build capacity in the unit for the still-vague policy change through the introduction of a collaborative, year-long Zero Based Budgeting (ZBB) process. EMSA leadership selected this model to take staff through the process of building a budget from "zero" based on prioritized activities and the unit's mission. This model has been used in the public sector for decades; however, ZBB's application in this voluntary student affairs context appeared to be an effective process around which to organize sensemaking and professional development activities related to data analysis, presenting assessment data, strategic planning, communicating program value, and engaging in difficult dialogues tying funding to organizational priorities.

One mid-level leader articulated the view shared by many participants that even though the future policy was unclear, the leadership had been leading them "into the modern age." Another added that leadership had "called us to re-imagine and re-envision student affairs" and "wants

EMSA to have a seat at the table to discuss its impact to transform practice and meeting university goals." This process facilitated transparent strategic internal budget allocation in a limited budget environment and helped prepare practitioners for the types of responsibilities they might expect under the coming university-wide implementation of PBB. Interviews also revealed that although understanding of the impact of budget on practice was still tenuous, the sensemaking activities had begun to build cognitive connections between the new policy environment and the student-centered values at the heart of these practitioners' work, thus creating motivation to be a part of the change.

Making Sense of Budgeting in Practice. The sensemaking process helped align EMSA's resources to its goals, create the capacity to link assessment data to budgeting, and build a knowledge base for strategic advocacy outside of the unit. Although the unit was certainly making progress, at the time of this study, there was limited awareness among some mid-level leaders about the connection between the ZBB exercises and the larger institution-wide change to a new budget model. Many participants discussed the idea of a resource allocation system as a "prioritization," "accountability," and "communication" tool that can be used to legitimize the value of EMSA's work and to show that "[we] make an impact on learning and progress to degrees. We need to protect, educate, and make our case to a broader audience." A mid-level leader cited assessment and strategic budgeting work as key to the ability of EMSA's leadership to be the "voice in the room to help us get our fair share." This leader echoes Malen's (2006) claims that evidence of effectiveness in serving students and the ability to link that evidence to funding is the type of knowledge capital that can be used to access the resources necessary to fulfilling a department's educational mission.

EMSA's strategic shift helped practitioners transition to a new model for professional practice through an intentional, interim budgeting process (Spillane et al., 2006). This process also prepared preemptive justifications for student affairs in direct relation to the institution's open-access mission. In the words of one mid-level leader, this model could "empower" practitioners to take more "authority over their work."

Misalignment Between Intent and Mandate

A PBB policy relies on practitioners across the institution to collect and report data and to identify opportunities to maximize efficiency and outcomes. As such, the new policy at UU is dependent on ground-level implementers to reach its full potential. Given recent emphasis at this institution and in critiques issued by state policymakers on the need to strategically improve the success of the increasingly diverse student body, UU is particularly dependent on the leaders responsible for enrollment diversity, diverse student support, student success, debt management, and post-graduate career readiness. The data, however, reveal that the stated intention of the policy to improve student outcomes and the mandates and implementation process that followed are not in alignment.

Confusion in the Policy Environment. Interviews and institutional documents reveal significant confusion about the goal of the PBB model, implications for EMSA, and the shape it will take over the course of implementation. This confusion, which can be an obstacle to carrying out policy in a way that serves the mission of the institution, is evidenced by the difference between interview data and written policy documents, as well as conflicting messages within the documents about the structure of the new policy (H. Hill, 2006; Spillane et al., 2006). This inconsistency centered around two points: the purpose of connecting performance to resources (e.g., for improved student outcomes, increased revenue generation, or some other strategic purpose) and how the proposed structure of the model will shape EMSA's practice.

In a campus-wide communication, UU described the former, incremental model as having been based "on individual negotiation, with rewards not clearly related to the units' performance," whereas the new model is meant to reward "colleges or units" for the generation of resources and for fulfilling the institution's academic mission and strategic priorities, including investment in student outcomes. In reference to EMSA, the initial budget policy task force explicitly linked the lagging enrollment, retention, and completion outcomes at UU to the poor investment in student services compared to peer institutions. Due to the centrality of student outcomes to the strategic goals of the institution, the task force recommended that UU leverage the new policy to address the funding deficiency. This recommendation is in line with the greater investment in student services and supplemental programing for better student retention and learning outcomes advocated by Wellman and Soares (2011).

This early proposal did not provide clear guidance on how to hold the unit accountable. Later documents that defined the structure of the new model gave little attention to investing in student success. These plans, instead, focused on revenue-based metrics for accountability, with EMSA receiving funds on the basis of headcount rather than outcomes or strategic needs. Study participants indicated that additional investment in EMSA was not expected.

Effect of Confusion on Practitioners. Lack of policy clarity presented a challenge given the need for practitioners to understand purpose in order to carry out change effectively (Spillane et al., 2006). In contrast to perceptions among EMSA leadership, the budget expert explained that the university had not actually determined if "EMSA would have a performance measurement built into PBB as much as they would probably be capped or have some sort of ratio that relates to the revenue generators." Without a performance measurement, the power available to student affairs practitioners, regardless of their contribution to the institutional mission, is limited. As a so-called "revenue supporter," EMSA enters into a client/service provider relationship with academic units. This manner of labeling may influence the final impact of the model on decision making and the work of EMSA.

While most participants mentioned retention or graduation rates as possible metrics for their division, only two spoke to the political difficulty of using these as metrics given the attribution of retention to academic units. Without awareness of the ramifications of such resource allocation mechanisms, practitioners cannot proactively influence either policymaking or the details of implementation to better support the student-driven mission of both EMSA and the institution as a whole. Although many practitioners were able to identify the importance of their work to the institutional mission in terms of student success, they did not make the connection between their work and the larger political climate as a potential point of leverage in the process.

One high-level leader stated that practitioners need "clarity in terms of the next iteration … as it relates to EMSA" and how assessment practice may or may not translate into performance metrics. Both mid- and high-level leaders assumed that the unit would have their own performance metrics in this new model and expressed their interest in helping to define those metrics. One mid-level interviewee stated, "as a savvy administrator I want to get ahead of the performance measures. I don't want to be told [what they will be]." Another high-level leader stated, "I think we will be asked to provide [the measures]." Participants hoped to contribute to identifying metrics and to using the new process to communicate with other units about EMSA's work.

The budget expert concluded that if UU decides to create incentive metrics for EMSA, which was speculative at best, then graduation or retention rates might be used, although given the larger context of schools "owning" students by major, the link between EMSA performance and those metrics would be difficult to establish. From an implementation perspective, failure to establish meaningful metrics could be a wasted opportunity to create a better institutional foundation for evidence-based practices (Reesor et al., 2009) that encourage institutional change relative to the equity and student success mission of EMSA's body of work.

Equity: A Missing Factor. Both policy documents and EMSA leaders acknowledged that in higher education, values must sometimes take precedent over numbers or efficiency. This assertion does not surface in the implementation process in a way that empowers or holds accountable the value-oriented activity in a manner similar to revenue-generating activity, even if by different standards. Although all practitioners recognized the mission of their unit as central to equity, diversity, and student success, they did not draw a connection between this mission and the critical dependence of their practice on budget policy or the data they might utilize under the new policy. Among those interviewed, there was no discussion of the need to use disaggregated data to advocate for equity-minded investment under a performance-based system taking a largely revenue-oriented path. Despite the relative success in organizational sensemaking described in the previous section, the transformational nature of this group capacity building is limited by its lack of connection to how EMSA's use of data can impact decisions that affect the institution's most underserved students. There was no sense that the lack of attention to diversity or equity in the model in favor of revenue-generating metrics could adversely affect student support services.

This model creates a new political environment. The budget expert acknowledged that the PBB process "in general, airs the dirty laundry," which suggests that by identifying revenues and costs for a wide audience of decision makers, revenue supporters like EMSA become vulnerable to criticisms by revenue generators who now see where their funds are going and are under pressure to decrease costs. One mid-level leader speculated that some of the academic leaders will be "wondering why they are getting all the students in and graduating them and then giving some of our money over there to those people who just have fun all the time?" The budget expert stated that academic leaders will have to understand how enrollment and retention impact their bottom line and trust that if they invest in EMSA then they will see long-term returns.

The sensemaking tasks, although effective in some regards, lacked equity-oriented discussion connecting the equity and student success mission of these units with the larger policy context. The service to diverse students and the dependence of these academic departments on EMSA's services to diverse students went unrecognized in both interviews and policy documents. These findings resonate with the ongoing struggle to bring equity to the center of policy, particularly funding policy, in higher education and foreground a potential role for the student affairs practitioner in effecting change through equity-oriented engagement with strategic planning and budgeting processes.

Implications and Conclusion

The practice in higher education of allocating limited resources to maximize efficiency and desired outcomes is still in transition, but it seems that the traditional mode of distributing funds is no longer tenable. In an uncertain environment, EMSA's sensemaking activities are an attempt to gather capital to advocate for students and access necessary resources, regardless of the final iteration of the policy. Although the data show an inequality of skill in these areas, the practitioners' narratives provide evidence that the division is successfully building a culture that can prioritize, expand the use of data, and act strategically to better position EMSA for an environment where justification for investment in the unit could be essential. The core value of these actions is not in the potential benefit to EMSA in its own silo but rather in the opportunity to institutionally improve student outcomes and to provide better data to academic units that rely indirectly on EMSA's services. This change strategy reflects the practice cited among policy implementation theorists as critical to providing agents with the opportunity to construct meaning based on their own experiences and work (Hill, 2006; Honig, 2006; Spillane et al., 2006).

One implication for practice in the field is to identify ways to equip student affairs practitioners and leaders with the capacity to create a policy implementation surplus rather than a "deficit" (M. J. Hill & Hupe, 2002) (i.e., the capacity to better align policy implementation with the intended goal by leveraging policy capital and expertise in key areas of student success, assessment, and engagement). EMSA's organizational change strategy—systematically transitioning through hands-on group sensemaking—is a practical model for other student affairs leaders to consider. Leaders used this collaborative budgeting process and related professional development opportunities as a cognitive engagement exercise to build "skill and will" among EMSA staff (Malen, 2006). This process, which required significant prioritization and data collection, also built a bank of evidence that could be leveraged to justify the unit's work in a resource-scarce environment.

By creating a community of practice around a set of robust tasks and tools, this unit helped practitioners see their role in assessment and budgeting deliberations as part of the critical work in student affairs. This study revealed an institution-wide change process with the stated intention to improve student success but one without awareness of the connections between funding levels and equitable service and support. This inattention to issues of equity did not lead to a deeper shift to understand policy in terms of equitable student outcomes (Bensimon et al., 2007). The recommendation to make this connection in order to bridge the policy intent with its flawed structure may seem obvious. Persistent findings, however, in the extant literature show that students of Color and low-income students receive inequitable services and thus achieve inequitable outcomes, suggesting that the current investment strategies are ineffective. Without the application of disaggregated data to guide institutional investment, leaders in higher education cannot intentionally use performance based funding for student benefit.

The allocation of resources based on metrics centered on enrollment, departmental graduation rates, or revenue generation without equitable measures assigned to non-instructional units may have direct effects on critical student services (Reesor et al., 2009). In such cases, contributing to the policymaking process to mitigate potential negative impacts of such a policy may be up to the unit or the practitioner as implementers.

While most student affairs practitioners and leaders see their work as student-centered, accountability and funding mechanisms rarely provide the deep and transformative support necessary to produce equitable and student-centered outcomes, particularly among the most underfunded institutions—community colleges and open-access colleges and universities. Using evidence to understand the impact of institutional supports or processes on student outcomes is critical to transforming a stratified system. An infusion of equity-minded approaches to performance-based management advocated by Dowd (2003) could enhance practitioners' will and ability to influence policy. Such an approach would require practitioner engagement with disaggregated data on student outcomes across campus and in EMSA's programs.

The need to adopt a strategic mindset and to apply assessment skills to the budgeting process has become non-negotiable in the student affairs profession and should be reflected in professional development programs and in graduate education curricula to help practitioners translate the implicit and explicit meaning of a budgeting policy and respond strategically. The next step for student affairs practitioners may be to explore other grounds on which to build capital to influence policy. The sources of policy capital identified by Malen (2006)—networks (relationships), information and knowledge, individual attributes, position, and reputation—could be a useful place to start this discussion. Although student affairs as a profession often draws individuals naturally inclined to be collaborators and counselors, the profession must also train its practitioners to operate in a political environment. The combination of skill and will to identify and enact policy surplus as an active participant is a professional trait of value to student affairs units working to advance equity on campus and one that can be developed through intentional communities of practice that empower practitioners with the skills needed to advocate for student needs.

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