SHOULD I STAY OR SHOULD I GO?:
USING SOCIAL COGNITIVE CAREER THEORY TO EXPLAIN CAREER
DECISION-MAKING OF STUDENT AFFAIRS PROFESSIONALS

By

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ABSTRACT

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Understanding the decision-making process people use when considering career options and how those decisions manifest can inform practice for individuals, organizations, and professions. This study explored individual paths and decision-making among student affairs professionals in an attempt to identify themes in career decision-making. This study is an exploration of how individuals make the smaller decisions about their current and future roles, not a study of attrition versus persistence. A better understanding of decision-making among student affairs professionals can inform practice for individuals, organizations, and the profession. The question driving the study was, how do student affairs professionals make career decisions? Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) (Lent, 2012) provided the theoretical framework for this qualitative study. Fifteen student affairs professionals agreed to participate in recorded, semi-structured interviews. Data were analyzed and interpreted through a SCCT lens focusing on three variables related to career development: self-efficacy beliefs, outcome expectations, and personal goals. Themes that emerged include individual considerations, professional experiences, timing of discovering student affairs, value placed on graduate degrees, frustrations related to compensation and opportunities, politics, shifting priorities, and thoughts of leaving the profession. Student affairs should be more intentional about recruitment and preparation of professionals in the field and career progression, as relying on happenstance as a method of entry into the field is not sound.

To my family, with love and gratitude.

Thank you to my parents, Larry and Ellen Drangstveit, for always asking, "How are you doing with your paper?" I will never take your relentless support of my education for granted, as I continue to work to provide that support, and similar opportunities, for others. My Eleva, Wisconsin farm roots are ingrained in my identity and yes, in fact, I DO know how to milk a cow, much to my students' excitement. I'm dairy and fair royalty through and through.

Thank you to Colleen McDonough for agreeing to be my friend on the first day of school. Your sense of direction hasn't improved, and I'm grateful that you are in my life and such a wonderful co-parent to our dogs. Thank you to my writing partners over the years: Reilly, Botey, Cooper, and Sophie.

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CHAPTER ONE – INTRODUCTION

Career paths are often studied from a departure perspective in an attempt to understand why individuals leave a position, profession, or field. In order to add to what already is known, this dissertation included individuals who remain in student affairs and have already changed jobs within the field. Understanding the decision-making process people use when considering career options and how those decisions manifest can inform practice for individuals, organizations, and professions. Studying student affairs professionals is important because the field can present unpleasant surprises and staff turnover can challenge operations. Understanding how people enter and exit the field, and how they make decisions about their career, even the small decisions on a daily basis, may help identify problem areas within the field to prevent premature departure of staff thereby limiting disruption to students. This dissertation focused on understanding career decision-making of student affairs professionals using Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT).

Student affairs professionals come from a variety of backgrounds, academic disciplines, and institution types (Barr & Upcraft, 1990; Taub & McEwen, 2006). Because there are no associated high school courses or undergraduate majors that serve as typical entry points to careers in student affairs, people often enter the field after meaningful experiences or interactions inspire them to become involved. There are many routes into and through student affairs, and the pathways vary depending on functional area, institution size and type, professional development and support, and individual skills and goals. Within the literature, career decision-making does not typically focus on individual paths taken (Carpenter, 1990; Daddona et al., 2006; Sagaria & Johnsrud, 1988). Exploring individual career paths and decisions influencing career paths can provide additional insight about factors considered when making career decisions, not just end

results. A better understanding of decision-making among student affairs professionals can inform practices within the field to better prepare student affairs professionals.

The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand the career decision-making of student affairs professionals in at least their second professional position in the field. Student affairs professionals support the whole experience of students at higher education institutions in the United States and are in pivotal positions that affect student success in college. There are over 1.5 million full-time, non-instructional employees at two- and four-year colleges in the United States in 2017-2018 (Chronicle Almanac, 2019) and student affairs professionals are part of this group. Studying student affairs professionals and their career decision-making process will allow for better professional preparation and development of student affairs professionals in myriad functional areas that comprise student affairs in higher education.

Although many frameworks, theories, and models exist to describe career progression, Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) provided the framework for the current study and was selected, in part, because SCCT takes into account varied individual circumstances and decisions that determine career trajectory and outcomes. Utilizing in-depth, semi-structured, individual interviews, this study seeks to identify and describe the issues surrounding career decision-making of student affairs professionals by listening to and learning about the experiences of each participant and discerning patterns and themes within and across their stories. The data and themes that emerged from participants inform the literature on career decision-making within student affairs and higher education.

The subsequent sections of this chapter address the significance of the research problem and provide a brief overview of the theoretical framework and research approach.

Significance of Problem and Research Question

United States higher education institutions face heightened scrutiny from institutional governing boards and state and national governments regarding student retention, graduation rates, and job acquisition following graduation (Bok, 2015; Hillman et al., 2015). Some governing bodies have tied budgetary allocations to student graduation rates in an attempt to raise completion rates and degree productivity but have done little to improve educational outcomes (Hillman et al., 2015). Although academics are the primary focus for students in college, the out of class or co-curricular experiences and opportunities for student engagement are as much, if not more influential on personal development, growth, and persistence (ACPA & NASPA, 2015; Astin, 1993; Buchanan, 2012; Colby et al., 2003; Komives et al., 2003; Kuh, 1993, 1995, 2009; Nuss, 2003; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Renn & Hodges, 2007). Student affairs professionals, especially new(er) professionals, are largely responsible for these co-curricular experiences through residence halls, leadership programs, academic advising, campus activities, and other campus resources (Renn & Hodges, 2007); student affairs professionals are often those with the most student contact on campus and the most influential in student experiences, growth, and development in college (Kuh, 2009). As a result, student affairs professionals are influential in student satisfaction, student persistence, and student success (Kuh, 2009), yet leave the field at high rates (Silver & Jakeman, 2014).

Departure rates among student affairs professionals are highest among new professionals (Bender, 1980; Holmes et al., 1983; Renn & Hodges, 2007), and an estimated 50% to 60% of student affairs professionals leave the field during the first five years working in a full-time capacity (Holmes et al., 1983; Lorden, 1998; Tull, 2006). Reasons for departure within student affairs may include low wages, long hours, a lack of work-life balance, and lack of opportunity

for advancement (Barham & Winston, 2006; Belch & Strange, 1995; Bender; Blackhurst, 2000b; Boehman, 2007; Holmes et al., 1983; Lorden, 1998; Rosser & Javinar, 2003; Tull, 2006).

Departure of student affairs practitioners has been considered by some a natural part of the field and not worthy of concern (Lorden, 1998; Renn & Jessup-Anger, 2008), but much of the research on student affairs practitioner attrition focuses on the detrimental effects of leaving (Evans, 1988; Holmes et al. 1983; Lorden, 1998; Tull, 2006). When student affairs professionals change institutions or leave the field entirely, institutions lose out on the time and effort devoted to training those individuals, as well as the institutional and professional knowledge of those practitioners (Renn & Jessup-Anger, 2008; Silver & Jakeman, 2014).

As an academic discipline, student affairs largely focuses on individual development, specifically cognitive development, of students in higher education settings (e.g., Astin, 1993; Kuh 1993, 1995; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Despite studies of departure among new student affairs professionals (e.g., Lorden, 1998; Silver & Jakeman, 2014; Tull, 2006), there does not appear to be a wealth of research on cognitive processes related to career choice and decision-making for student affairs professionals. This leaves a void in understanding why decisions are made to stay or leave the field and presents an opportunity to explore the influence of higher education settings on the cognitive processes and decision-making of individuals in those settings. A better understanding of cognitive processes enables more appropriate or tailored approaches to be implemented to address those processes and decisions over the career lifecycle of student affairs practitioners.

The focus on student success (retention, degree progress, time to degree, etc.) by higher education stakeholders necessitates a better understanding of career decision-making of crucial institutional staff members influencing and shaping student experiences. If the individuals

responsible for supporting students outside of the classroom are leaving positions, or the field, it can hinder the ability for institutions to support students effectively, potentially slowing time to degree and increasing attrition rates among students. Institutions with funding tied to student success measures aim to strengthen their retention numbers in order to maintain funding levels. Studying career decision-making among student affairs professionals in at least their second professional position allows for generation of practices that better support and accommodate the varied histories, goals, and paths of student affairs professionals, improve professional expectations and experiences, refine on going professional development and support strategies, ease transitions, and complement institutional and national scrutiny of and support for college student success, potentially resulting in a positive impact on the student experience.

The research question driving the current study is: How do student affairs professionals make career decisions?

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework guiding this study was Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT), which is a relatively recent approach to addressing career behavior (Lent, 2012). The primary argument of SCCT is that individuals exercise self-direction with three personal variables in regard to their career development: *self-efficacy beliefs*, *outcome expectations*, and *personal goals* (Lent). *Self-efficacy* refers to one's beliefs about one's skills and abilities for a specific task or outcome (Bandura, 1986; Lent, 2012). *Outcome expectations* address the perceived consequences for actions, which include the anticipation of physical, social, and self-evaluative outcomes (Bandura, 1986; Lent, 2012). *Personal goals* include choice and performance goals, and progress toward these goals can affect future choices, feelings of self-efficacy, and outcome expectations (Lent, 2012). Social Cognitive Career Theory is comprised

of four models that address various considerations and outcomes of career development: interest, choice, performance, and satisfaction (Lent, 2012).

Social Cognitive Career Theory also takes into consideration the many variables at play for each individual, including personal attributes, learning and socialization experiences, and environmental factors such as resources, opportunities, and barriers (Lent). Social Cognitive Career Theory, primarily based on Bandura's (1986) Social Cognitive Theory (SCT), blends concepts and elements from earlier career theorists (e.g., Holland, 1973; Krumboltz, 1979; Lofquist & Dawis, 1969; Super, 1957) to create a framework that explains vocational interest development, occupational choice, career success, and work environment satisfaction (Lent).

I selected SCCT because it combines trait-factor models (person-environment fit, e.g., Holland) and developmental theories, recognizing that interests, abilities, and values play a role within career development. Additionally, SCCT acknowledges that individual and environmental aspects play a role in the development process through self-appraisal, cultural context, economic situation, education, individual agency, changes over time, outside influences and circumstances, skill development, and work satisfaction. Prior studies of career development and attrition in student affairs focused on institution type, position, or specific characteristics of a population segment (e.g., Amey & VanDerLinden, 2002; Blimling, 2002; Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2004). Social Cognitive Career Theory incorporates the varied experiences of individual practitioners, regardless of educational background, sex, race, sexual orientation, disability status, or other identity factors (Lent, 2012). The focus on self-efficacy and outcome expectation incorporates all aspects of an individual while recognizing the influence of present experiences on career development and decision-making, presenting a different orientation to career decision-making

than past studies. A holistic approach seems especially important in a field lacking well-defined routes for career entry, development, and advancement, such as student affairs.

Social Cognitive Career Theory does not use a stage model with set phases or suggested ages for career development (e.g., Levinson, 1986; Levinson & Levinson, 1996). Instead, SCCT provides opportunity for continuous cycling through models that reflect interactions with others, reflection of self, and acquisition of new experiences. Social Cognitive Career Theory comprises of four separate but overlapping models that address interest, choice, performance, and satisfaction (Lent, 2012). This research study relied on the collected data to identify appropriate model(s) from SCCT that align with career decision-making of student affairs professionals, rather than selecting *a priori* between the models that which would be most appropriate and proceeding deductively with the research design. This inductive approach reduced researcher bias while exploring the applicability of SCCT to higher education as I did not seek particular answers to fit within a specific model, but instead looked to identify any similarities or parallels between participant experiences and SCCT models.

Research Design

I conducted a qualitative case study of career-related decision-making among student affairs professionals. Taking a qualitative approach to this research provided in-depth descriptions about individual career decisions of student affairs professionals in at least their second professional position in the field, from a well-grounded perspective (Merriam & Tisdell, 2014; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Many professionals consider or pursue a position change in the first three to five years in their careers (Magolda & Carnaghi, 2004). Using purposeful sampling strategies (Patton, 2015), I identified 15 participants who are in at least their second, full-time student affairs position. Each professional was the unit of analysis and I used their stories to

describe their cognitive considerations related to career paths and goals (Merriam & Tisdell, 2014). Interview questions were developed based on career development literature, SCCT, and my own experiences as a student affairs professional. The questions addressed the main components of SCCT: self-efficacy beliefs, outcome expectation, and environment. The semi-structured interviews allowed participants to discuss their experiences and decisions and allowed me to clarify and ask follow-up questions. Each interview was scheduled for 60 minutes, audio recorded, and later transcribed to ensure accuracy.

Data analysis involved reading and re-reading the transcribed interviews and seeking patterns within the career decision-making of participants, such as early life, college, or professional experiences. I looked for patterns across the individual stories and I compared those patterns to the individual models of SCCT to determine if any of the models fit with the career considerations of student affairs professionals.

Summary

There is an increased scrutiny across the United States on college student success, whether evaluated by rates of admission, retention, or graduation, grade point averages, time to degree, or other local measures. These measures of success are influenced by more than just classroom performance and student-faculty interactions; student performance and persistence are also affected by individuals on campus that work outside of the classroom to support student success, development, and retention.

Social Cognitive Career Theory has been applied to a variety of professions but has yet to be used within student affairs. The outcomes of this study will inform the practice of student affairs professional development, recruitment, and education. Individuals, institutions, and professional organizations can broadly incorporate models of SCCT that appear to represent the

experiences of student affairs professionals and their career decision-making. If no models fit, we can also learn from those observations. Instead of addressing career decision-making within student affairs from a deficit position (i.e., why do people leave?), decision-making can be a proactive process that addresses the varied circumstances and decisions that comprise the cognitive decision-making process among those working in higher education, including both those who leave the field and those who remain. This study will advance the discussion regarding recruitment, training, culture, and professional development of the diverse student affairs population, and will influence the experiences of students across the country through retention of dedicated student affairs professionals.

CHAPTER TWO – REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The current study focused on career decision-making of professionals in student affairs. To provide the grounding for this study the literature outlined in this chapter addresses career development in higher education among professionals within student affairs, career decision-making research within student affairs, and Social Cognitive Career Theory.

Career Development Broadly

Theorists have researched career development and progression across functional areas, industries, position levels, and identity trait factors. Early career development research focused on individuals identifying a vocation that matched their abilities, resources, and interests in an attempt to increase the individual's satisfaction (Parsons, 1909). This approach of fitting individuals into positions remained common until changes in the late 1940s initiated a focus on understanding individual characteristics which is still foundational in current approaches (e.g., Williamson, 1939).

There are several different types of career development theories. Trait-factor theories are based on the idea that individual traits have a match with certain occupations (Jones, 1989; Parsons, 1909; Williamson, 1939). Trait-factor theories (e.g., Parson's *Vocational Theory*) have been used in the development of several career assessments but are considered too narrow for current application in career development research. Personality-based theories (e.g., Holland's *Theory of Career Choice*) state that individual personalities have occupational matches, and those characteristics are often the product of early life experiences (Holland, 1997; Holland et al., 1969; Roe, 1957, 1972). Many developmental theories (e.g., Levinson's *Model of Adult Development*) have been very clear about linear steps for "success" and appropriate career advancement regardless of individual or situational context. Developmental theories contend that

career development is a linear stage process cultivated through physical and mental growth, observations of work, identification with working adults, general environment, and general experiences and may be delineated into clear age ranges (Levinson et al., 1978; Vondracek et al., 1986). Learning theories (e.g., Krumboltz's *Learning Theory of Career Counseling*) state that individuals have the capacity to reflect on past behavior and, as a result, change future behavior and choices (Bandura, 1986; Krumboltz, 1979, 1994).

More recent theories focus less on decision-making than older theories, instead emphasizing the individual, the individual's interpersonal context, and how the person adapts and responds to the world (Bridges, 2004; Goodman et al., 2006; Merriam et al., 2007). For example, *planned happenstance* (Krumboltz & Levin, 2004) states that individuals can position themselves to take advantage of opportunities throughout their lives. *Career construction* (Savickas, 2012) argues that individuals manage life themes that guide career choices and make meaning of their experiences through reflection. *Positive psychology* (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000) avoids a deficit approach and states that individuals are drawn to their future and are motivated by their past. *Growth at the intersections of experiences, skills, and reflection* (Gross, 2004) posits that individuals reflect on their experiences and skills in advancing their careers. These more current theories acknowledge the individual and intentionality with regard to career path, as well as incorporate the setting in which individuals function. Many of the foundational career theories were based on white men in the early 20th century (e.g., Ginzberg, 1951; Vaillant, 1977) so more recent research has focused on the application of career development theories to more to culturally diverse populations such as women (i.e., Ellemers, 2014), racial and ethnic minorities (i.e., Leong, 2014), people with disabilities (i.e., Lindstrom et al., 2011), and LGBT people (i.e., Schneider & Dimito, 2010).

Research suggests "social cognitive variables aid understanding of educational and career behavior prior to, during, and after work entry" (Lent, 2012, p. 130). Rottinghaus et al. (2003) reported a strong overall relationship between self-efficacy and career interests through their meta-analysis of 53 studies including over 37,000 participants. A variety of other studies reinforce the role self-efficacy has on career interests and subsequent career-related choices no matter the other environmental factors (Lent et al., 1994; Sheu et al., 2010).

In sum, the study of career development has shifted from identifying how to tailor individuals to fit occupations to developing an understanding of individual traits and context to identify a best fit for the individual. This change in focus from occupation to individual has also removed attention from the decision-making process, instead addressing how to find a best fit for individuals without taking into account the individual's decision-making. Individual career development consists of individual characteristics and skills as well as the decisions made by those persons. The remaining sections in this chapter address student affairs professionals and the theoretical framework used in this study, Social Cognitive Career Theory, which incorporates individual characteristics in the exploration of career decision-making.

Student Affairs and Higher Education Context

The term student affairs "is used to describe the organizational structure or unit within an institution responsible for students' out-of-class life and learning" (Winston et al., 2001, p. xi). Student affairs as a profession aims to address student development holistically while supporting the academic mission of the institution (McClellan et al., 2009; Nuss, 2003; Sandeen & Barr, 2006b). Student affairs practitioners are considered educators outside of the classroom, though these roles historically were assigned to faculty (Komives et al., 2003; McClellan et al., 2009; Thelin, 2011; Winston et al., 2001). Today student affairs administrators provide oversight to all

major functions of student affairs and can include residence life, student activities, admissions, new student orientation, registration, recreational sports, health and wellness education, student health services, food services, dean of student services, student conduct, multicultural affairs, international student services, services for students with disabilities, career services, community service, leadership programs, student religious programs, commuter student services, financial aid, advising, child care services, and counseling (Creamer et al., 2001; Hamrick & Hemphill, 2009; Sandeen, 1991; Winston et al., 2001).

Professional student affairs administrators have roles as leaders, educators, and managers focused on individual and community development and maximizing resources (Creamer et al., 2001). Practitioners also need to balance multiple roles within the institution and serve the many constituencies within areas of responsibility, including students, faculty, institutional leaders, governing boards, politicians, policymakers, media, and families of students (Creamer et al., 2001). The role of student affairs divisions and offices on campus are evolving to accommodate modern changes including technology, accountability demands, reduced staff, program expansion without financial support, program elimination, reduced state appropriations for public institutions, and changing student demographics and expectations and practitioners are adjusting their practices to focus on administrative tasks instead of student interaction (Carpenter, 2001; Colby et al., 2003).

There is no one singular path into student affairs roles. Individuals can find their way into student affairs through intentional decisions or happenstance, may come from a variety of backgrounds and disciplines, have no formal academic training, possess an unrelated or related degree, or complete a professional preparation program, and can work in a wide variety of functional areas due to the broad reach of student affairs (Sandeen & Barr, 2006a; Winston &

Creamer, 1997). Oftentimes undergraduate students connect with student affairs professionals through activities or their living arrangements, and mentors within those programs introduce students to the field of student affairs (Oseguera, 2013; Taub & McEwen, 2006). Students may seek entry-level positions or graduate study to expand their career opportunities believing that the field is flexible and may allow them to continue their college experience (Bender, 2009; Roberts, 2001).

Training and educational requirements for entry-level positions can vary across positions and institutions (Carpenter, 2001). A bachelor's degree is a common minimum requirement for entry-level student affairs positions, though some entry-level positions require a master's degree (Overland & Rentz, 2004). There is currently no licensure or certification process within the field (Fried, 2002) or undergraduate degree programs (Taub & McEwen, 2006), but associations focused on student affairs practitioners working at all levels including the American College Personnel Association (ACPA) and National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA) have identified professional competencies (ACPA, 2006; ACPA & NASPA, 2015; CAS, 2015; Liddell et al., 2014; NASPA, 1998; Nuss, 1993).

Professional preparation programs yielding master's degrees focused on student affairs, higher education, counseling, and leadership development are a typical step for individuals wishing to advance in the field (Creamer et al., 2001; Komives et al., 2003; Taub & McEwen, 2006). Master's degree programs range from one to three years in length and typically involve coursework while students simultaneously explore hands-on learning and work opportunities through graduate assistantships, practica, internships, and related projects, and foster personal, institutional, and professional exploration and development (Collins, 2009; Kuk & Cuyjet, 2009; Liddell et al., 2014).

Professional preparation programs may inform students about student development theory, higher education administration, counseling, leadership, communication, team dynamics, assessment, managing resources, finances, program development, research, and organizational theory, depending on the focus of the program, and programs themselves may generate a cycle of reflection and self-evaluation among the students that is not present in field work (Liddell et al., 2014; Winston & Creamer, 1997). Preparation programs are recognized in the student affairs field as contributing factors to individual and institutional success (Herdlein, 2004) and shape how individuals perceive themselves as student affairs professionals (Bruss & Kopala, 1993; Renn & Jessup-Anger, 2008). Faculty may provide professional development during the degree program, assisting students in learning about professional associations, professional standards, and appropriate norms for the field (Cuyjet et al., 2009; Kuk & Cuyjet, 2009; Waple, 2006; Weidman et al., 2001; Young & Janosik, 2007). Additionally, out of class opportunities and socialization to the field of student affairs can be just as important for students as their in-class learning as they prepare for full-time student affairs roles (Renn & Jessup-Anger, 2008). Out-of-class experiences inform students about institutional politics, culture, networking, and how the performance expectations as professionals, graduate students, and undergraduate students vary (Liddell et al., 2014; Tull et al., 2009). Some of the challenges of graduate school are managing multiple roles, personal relationships, and new environments, in addition to the acquisition and mastery of content knowledge (Gansemer-Topf et al., 2006).

Research has been conducted on the transition from graduate student to full-time student affairs professional, the persistence of student affairs professionals who have related master's degrees, as well as desired outcomes from preparation program graduates (Holmes et al., 1983; Renn & Jessup-Anger, 2008). Renn and Jessup-Anger (2008) found that new professionals used

mentors and professional development opportunities to respond to frustrations with new cultures and establishing a professional identity. The gap between expectations and reality may exist for graduate students transitioning into full-time positions, despite additional exposure to the profession and expected socialization in graduate school (Amey, 1990; Bender, 2009; Lorden, 1998; Magolda & Carnaghi, 2004; Renn & Hodges, 2007; Shupp & Arminio, 2012).

Career Research in Student Affairs

Historically student affairs career development and progression have been studied in a reflective manner through surveys and interviews of student affairs professionals, identifying career paths, positions, education, and involvement in the profession (e.g., Amey & VanDerLinden, 2002; Biddix et al., 2012; Blimling, 2002). Data from these surveys identified common paths or ladders through the student affairs profession but did not address career decision-making (Blackhurst, 2000a; Evans & Kuh, 1983; Sandeen & Barr, 2006b). Some studies identified skills and abilities that may be helpful or crucial for student affairs administrators in general (Lovell & Kosten, 2000; Sandeen, 2001) while others identified reasons for departure from the profession and it was stated "the most important factor to emerge … is that there is no single, fixed formula for successful leadership in Student Affairs administration" (Sandeen, 2001, p. 4). Sandeen's research highlights the varied paths and priorities for student affairs professionals and that there is no one recipe for success within student affairs that can be applied to all individuals. The fact that there is not just one path to be a student affairs professional is important to this study as it may not be the career paths but instead the career decisions that need attention within student affairs to understand retention and advancement among student affairs professionals.

Focusing on new professionals in student affairs in a review of 21 years of student affairs attrition research, Renn and Hodges (2007) estimated that "between 50% and 60% of new professionals leave the field before their fifth year" (p. 370). While understanding the paths of those who remain in the field may guide aspiring professionals, it is necessary to better understand the decision-making process of individuals, not just the outcomes of those decisions. This section identifies the ways in which career development has been studied in student affairs as well as how new professionals and those in entry-level positions have been included in career-related research.

Research has addressed general student affairs career development in addition to focusing on specific individual characteristics and positions within the field. While some studies addressed student affairs broadly (e.g., Hamrick & Hemphill, 2009; Socolow, 1978), it is common for researchers to focus on a certain individual identity characteristic or position within student affairs in order to identify a path to that particular position that others could emulate. Studies and theories have addressed senior student affairs officers (SSAOs) (e.g., Biddix, 2013; Kuh et al., 1983; Lunsford, 1984), women in SSAO positions (e.g., Biddix et al., 2012; Evans & Kuh, 1983), African Americans as SSAOs (e.g., Biddix, 2011), women student affairs administrators (e.g., Blackhurst et al., 1998a), and mid-level managers (e.g., Fey & Carpenter, 1996; Young, 2007). These studies described the student affairs trajectory for that particular sample using unique theories or frameworks to situate that group. It is difficult to isolate one aspect of identity and the role that identity plays in career development; more current research has included the intersecting identities of individuals in career development. This variation suggests there is no one career development approach that fits across populations, position roles, or identity characteristics.

Individuals may change functional areas within student affairs throughout their careers making it more difficult to identify distinct themes in career paths. New professionals who complete master's programs may change their functional area between their assistantship and full-time professional position, depending on their interests and limited opportunity in their desired area (Liddell et al., 2014). Housing and residence life seem be consistent areas of employment between undergraduate positions, graduate assistantships, and professional positions, while individuals often transition out of and between "academic support, career services, identity-based programs, health programs, and international student services" between graduate school and their first position in the field (Liddell et al., 2014, p. 82). Whether this is due to a greater number of positions available in residence life compared to the other areas or positions are filled by individuals with other training and backgrounds is unclear (Liddell et al., 2014).

Some research suggests that those in student affairs want to find the ideal type of career, including professional development opportunities, graduate school, mentors, additional or expanded position responsibilities, involvement in external activities, and participation in associations (Twombly, 1990). Career advancement opportunities can exist through traditional career paths, expansion or development of new positions or units, or title promotion, though some individuals exit and re-enter student affairs over their career (Sagaria & Johnsrud, 1992; Twombly, 1990). People come and go within the field for various reasons and the diversity of student affairs career opportunities makes it difficult to identify one plan for success within the field. Much of the existing research focuses on reflection after departure and leaves an opening for addressing career decision-making, no matter the decision outcome.

Career Decision-Making and Student Affairs

Career decision-making in student affairs has been studied from two perspectives: why people leave and why people stay, and typically focuses on satisfaction and dissatisfaction. Job satisfaction, commitment to the profession, and attrition have been studied at all levels of student affairs (Boehman, 2007; Lorden, 1998; Rosser & Javinar, 2003) but how people make decisions has not been included in this research. Results from prior studies indicate that individuals feeling more satisfied are more likely to remain in positions as well as within the field as a whole, though some studies acknowledge that satisfied people may leave their jobs and the field and dissatisfied individuals may remain due to other factors (Lorden, 1998). Individuals whose identities are strongly connected with an institution may be inclined to remain in that space no matter the level of satisfaction (Gouldner, 1957; Rhoades et al., 2008), while others' decision-making may be less influenced by satisfaction and more dictated by external priorities such as role, location, family commitments, or professional identity (Rhoades et al., 2008). External priorities may lead to individuals identifying new positions or institutions, or possibly new career fields unrelated to student affairs, regardless of their levels of satisfaction. Attention to departure from the field can be a major concern due to the investment of time and money by programs, organizations, individuals, and institutions in acclimating new professionals (Buchanan, 2012) and supporting the success of students.

Student affairs professionals' feeling of satisfaction can be attributed to many factors (Oshagbemi, 1997) including perceived opportunity (Evans, 1988), supervision (Cilente et al., 2006; Renn & Hodges, 2007; Tull, 2006), congruence between job expectations and the reality of work demands (Amey, 1990; Lorden, 1998; Magolda & Carnaghi, 2004; Shupp & Arminio, 2012), and quality of professional and institutional work life (Rosser & Javinar, 2003), in

addition to work-life balance, transition, professional identity development, and job expertise (Oshagbemi, 1997). Peer relationships can affect professional satisfaction, commitment, and awareness of job expectations and roles, all of which can influence career decisions (Tull et al., 2009). Even when job satisfaction in student affairs is high, retention within the field has been consistently low, especially among new professionals or younger age groups (Buchanan, 2012; Lorden, 1998). The next section addresses factors that influence career decision-making of new professionals.

Factors Influencing Career Decision-Making of New Professionals

New professionals, those within the first five years of the profession, comprise an estimated 15-20% of student affairs practitioners and are treated as a separate segment of the student affairs workforce due to their significant size (Cilente et al., 2006), high rates of attrition (Lorden, 1998; Tull, 2006), low starting salaries, and specific professional development and socialization needs. Researchers have focused on student affairs new professionals' career development in myriad ways, including: preparation of new professionals through formal degree programs or on-the-job training (Amey & Reesor, 2009; Hirschy et al., 2015), the competencies and skills necessary for success (Burkard et al., 2005; Cuyjet et al., 2009; Kuk et al., 2007), the needs of new professionals (Cilente et al., 2006), socialization of new professionals (Hirschy et al., 2015; Renn & Hodges, 2007; Strayhorn, 2009; Tull, 2006), job satisfaction among new professionals (Tull, 2006), and the experiences of new professionals in their first jobs (Magolda & Carnaghi, 2004; Rosen et al., 1980). The focus of these studies addressed the experiences of individuals early in their careers but does not focus on career decision-making. However, research does exist on career decision-making of early career professionals.

Peer interactions seem to be very influential on new professionals' career decision-making. Strayhorn (2009) cites that frequent and supportive interactions with coworkers and professional peers lead to more satisfaction for new professionals and new professionals would repeat their job selection due to positive colleague interactions. In addition to satisfaction, Liddell et al. (2014) suggest that peer relationships and the frequency of peer interactions affect new professionals' commitment to the profession, which could influence decisions to remain in the field, even in a position they did not like.

In addition to peer relationships, new professionals' satisfaction and commitment may be affected by expectations and socialization, which may impact decision-making. Individuals' expectations and ideas about careers and possible paths are shaped through family discussion and examples, school, part-time employment, peers and friends, and the media. This anticipatory socialization from youth through adulthood allows individuals to apply prior knowledge and norms to new situations (Jablin, 2001; Van Maanen & Schein, 1979). Socialization to the field of student affairs may begin through undergraduate education, activities, and interactions with student affairs staff, and continue through graduate school, professional associations, and professional positions (Tierney, 1997; Winston & Creamer, 1997). New professionals typically experience orientation and training to the position and organization, which may include some form of peer interaction (Cawyer & Friedrich, 1998). New organizational members should learn about the philosophies, values, missions, decision-making processes, politics, expectations, and goals of their department, division, and institution in order to become fully participating members (Carpenter, 2001; Louis, 1980; Van Maanen, 1976; Van Maanen & Schein, 1979). Individuals who understand the environment in which they work may be better equipped to manage their own expectations and become part of the unit quickly. Understanding expectations

and successfully navigating an organization can better prepare new professionals to make decisions about their career paths based on their own goals rather than being reactive to the situation.

Individuals may behave differently based on their years of experience. New professionals are more likely to be role takers, adjusting themselves and their behaviors in an attempt to fit within an organization, while more experienced professionals are more likely to be role makers, attempting to alter the organization and role to align with their preferences (Cooper-Thomas et al., 2012; Feldman & Brett, 1983; Kramer, 1993; Zurcher, 1983). At the same time, new professionals within student affairs tend to be enthusiastic and eager about what they have learned and want to apply this knowledge in their new work environment (Roberts, 2001), but they may not understand the context of their new setting and how their ideas fit. Newcomers who fail "to understand, accept, and be accepted by the culture will not remain long on the job or, at best, fail to grow into a productive member of the organization" (Carpenter, 2001, p. 227). Cultural context and assumptions from prior positions may not hold true in a new setting or role (Louis, 1980) and may lead to cognitive dissonance for new professionals. This provides a challenge within student affairs for new organizational members or new professionals.

Institution type may influence career decision-making of new professionals. After completing a master's degree at any institution type, new professionals often return to institutions similar to those attended for their undergraduate education and tend to continue working in the same functional areas in which they held graduate assistantships and undergraduate employment (Liddell et al., 2014). The socialization that took place during undergraduate and graduate education may be enough to prepare new professionals to understand the context for their professional work and create reasonable expectations, though it may also

provide young professionals an understanding of the work environment that makes it difficult to reconcile differences in their new position, functional area, or institution.

Student affairs career development research has largely focused on outcomes of decisions without regard to the decision-making process. Given the many routes to and through student affairs, it may benefit our understanding to include decision-making. The next section will explore the theoretical framework of this study.

Theoretical Framework - Social Cognitive Career Theory

This study used Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) as a theoretical framework, which is a relatively recent approach to examining career behavior (Lent, 2012). Using Bandura's (1986) Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) as a foundation, SCCT posits that individuals exert agency over themselves and exercise self-direction in career development with three personal variables: self-efficacy beliefs, outcome expectations, and personal goals (Lent, 2012). SCCT "seeks to create a unifying framework for explaining how people (a) develop vocational interests, (b) make occupational choices, (c) achieve varying levels of career success and stability, and (d) experience satisfaction or well-being in the work environment" (Lent, 2012, p. 115) by blending concepts and elements from early career theorists (e.g., Holland, 1973, 1985; Krumboltz, 1979; Lofquist & Dawis, 1969; Super, 1957), weaving together trait-factor models (e.g., Holland, 1997) and developmental theories (e.g., Hartung, 2007).

Trait-factor models, also known as person-environment (P-E) fit, address individual traits and assume that the mix of personal attributes including interests, abilities, values, and personality, predispose one to "fit" better in certain work environments, resulting in satisfying choices for individuals and satisfactory choices for the environment (Lent, 2012). Developmental career theories focus on the tasks and challenges that accompany career development and

incorporate how work and career compliment individual context outside of the work environment and construct a career path (Lent, 2012).

In addition to trait-factor and developmental models, SCCT considers the many variables at play for each individual, including personal attributes, learning and socialization experiences, and environmental factors such as resources, opportunities, and barriers (Lent, 2012). Social Cognitive Career Theory recognizes the role that interests, abilities, and values play within career development (trait-factor) while incorporating a focus on how people reconcile challenges, tasks, and milestones within their personal career development process (developmental). However, SCCT goes beyond existing theories as it incorporates personal and environmental aspects, including self-appraisal, expectations, cultural context, economic situation, and education. Social Cognitive Career Theory also recognizes individual agency, changes over time, outside influences and circumstances, skill development, and work satisfaction to create a more holistic or comprehensive career theory (Lent, 2012).

As a foundation of SCCT, Bandura's (1986) Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) emphasizes the ways in which people, their behavior, and their environments mutually influence one another. *Self-efficacy* refers to one's beliefs about one's skills and abilities for a specific task or outcome (Bandura, 1986; Lent, 2012). Individuals can have multiple, varying self-efficacy beliefs ("I am a good writer" and "I am a good supervisor") that can change based on or be isolated to a situation or task. Individuals may feel confident about one skill, task, or ability, and simultaneously lack confidence in another area. *Outcome expectations* address the perceived consequences for actions, which include the anticipation of physical, social, and self-evaluative outcomes (Bandura, 1986; Lent, 2012). Outcome expectations are also shaped by past learning experiences, both in-person and observed. Self-efficacy and outcome expectations contribute to

individual decisions about activities in which to engage. *Personal goals* include choice goals ("I will be in student affairs") and performance goals ("I want to be in an associate director position at my institution within 10 years"), and progress toward these goals can affect future choices, feelings of self-efficacy, and outcome expectations. Social Cognitive Career Theory, building on SCT, states that career decisions and performance are affected by self-efficacy and outcome expectations (Lent, 2012). Strong self-efficacy and positive outcome expectations reinforce decisions and allow for individuals to persist despite setbacks. Lack of progress or poor outcomes can decrease self-efficacy and negatively impact future decisions; past experiences guide future paths.

Social Cognitive Career Theory was intended to enhance career development understanding for a diverse array of individuals and groups (Lent, 2012). It has been used across gender, race, disability, sexual orientation, and cross-cultural and cross-national participants. Social Cognitive Career Theory has been applied to a variety of professions but has yet to be used within student affairs. The breadth of what is covered by SCCT makes it useful to a field as diverse in so many ways as student affairs. Instead of a stage model with set phases and suggested ages (e.g., Levinson, 1986; Levinson & Levinson, 1996), SCCT provides opportunity for continuous cycling through models that reflect interactions with others, reflection of self, and acquiring of new experiences. Social Cognitive Career Theory has four separate but overlapping models that address the various considerations and outcomes of career development: interest, choice, performance, and satisfaction (Lent, 2012). Each is briefly described below.

Interest Model

The *interest model* (Figure 1) reflects influences that shape people's pursuits and career interests (Lent, 2012, p. 120). Individuals are encouraged by teachers, family, and peers to

explore activities throughout childhood and these explorations, along with self-efficacy and outcome expectations, lead to goals. Having goals leads to practice, which results in outcomes and reflection. Individuals use past experiences to assess and pursue new opportunities. The cycle repeats as new opportunities and activities arise and as new interests are explored.

Adults tend to have generally focused and stable career interests (Hansen, 1996), but interests shift, circumstances change, options are restricted, and experiences may yield new ideas, such as pursuing student affairs. Social Cognitive Career Theory assumes that "shifts in interest are largely due to changing self-efficacy beliefs and outcome expectations" (Lent, 2012, p. 121) based on individual reflection. Individual values are incorporated into SCCT's outcome expectations as a reflection of how well the occupation would fulfill or align with the individual's interests (Lent, 2012).

Figure 1

Model of How Basic Career Interests Develop Over Time (Lent, 2012)
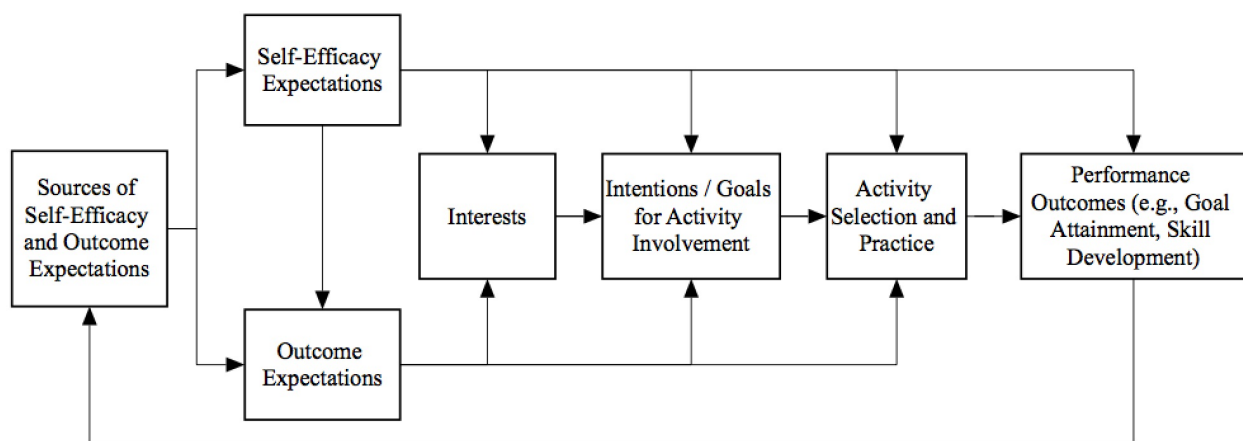
Social Cognitive Career Theory recognizes that environments and personal circumstances influence individuals' career decisions, including both permanent and conditional circumstances such as ethnicity, disability status, socioeconomic conditions, and gender (Lent, 2012). The social implications of each circumstance contribute to self-efficacy and outcome expectations,

rather than the "categorical" aspect of the factor (Lent, 2012). For example, individuals are socialized beginning at very young ages about what is appropriate for boys and girls (or another identity characteristic) to play, behave, and consider as career options. Guidance of appropriate interests and learning experiences is ongoing and not undone quickly in adulthood. Through adulthood, however, these identity characteristics, environments, and personal circumstances may impact individual career options both internally through self-efficacy and decision-making processes, as well as externally through opportunity structures in place in organizations (Lent, 2012).

Although SCCT identifies a cycle of practice, exploration, and commitment to career goals, the awareness of student affairs at a young age may not exist. There is rarely "playing college administrator" among young children, who are readily able to play doctor, teacher, parent, or other jobs easily understood or observed by children. Unlike careers with clear academic linkages and career paths, student affairs professionals come from a variety of backgrounds. Individuals may not cognitively begin considering student affairs until adulthood while experiencing college themselves, limiting the amount of exploration and clarification of interests within the field, or opportunity to practice student affairs prior to college.

The late awareness of student affairs as a career choice does not mean that individuals cannot explore their interests and gain experience in the field, but it may take more effort to identify resources to do so compared to professions about which an individual has a longstanding awareness. College students and graduates identify activities, roles, and professionals across campus that inform their knowledge, cultivate their curiosity and practice, and stimulate or confirm career exploration decisions, including student activities, leadership involvement, campus events, academic advising, and residence life interactions (Bender, 2009; Roberts, 2001;

Sandeen & Barr, 2006a; Winston & Creamer, 1997). Student affairs professionals and those considering student affairs may not experience shifts in career path due to a change in self-efficacy or outcome expectations, but instead shift their path because they discover a new field, student affairs. The "practice" or "trying out" within student affairs could be graduate school, practica, assistantships, volunteering, or full-time professional positions (Kuk & Cuyjet, 2009), in addition to involvement and activities as an undergraduate student. These experiences redefine choice and performance outcomes with regard to career path, subsequently altering self-efficacy beliefs and outcome expectations (Lent, 2012).

Choice Model

A second model of SCCT, *choice model*, outlines career selection as "an unfolding process with multiple influences and choice points" (Lent, 2012, p. 123). Individuals make career choices but may alter those decisions due to environmental or personal changes. These change initiators could include lay-offs, new opportunities, barriers to advancement, a shift in personal values and priorities, familial expectations, geographic focus, economic realities, skillset, or education. Similar to the interest model, the choice model has a cyclical structure with individuals making a career goal, taking actions to achieve that goal, and reflecting on the successes or failures of those actions in relation to the career goal (Lent, 2012). Strong environmental support more likely leads to career goals and pursuit of those goals. However, "work-seeking decisions may be influenced less by interests than by pragmatic contextual, self-efficacy, and outcome expectation considerations" if environmental barriers or limited opportunities exist (Lent, 2012, p. 126). A key assumption of this model is that individuals will make career choices if they believe their preference will have minimal barriers and ample support (Lent, 2012). The choice model is represented in Figure 2.

Figure 2

Model of Person, Contextual, and Experiential Factors Affecting Career-Related Choice Behavior (Lent, 2012)
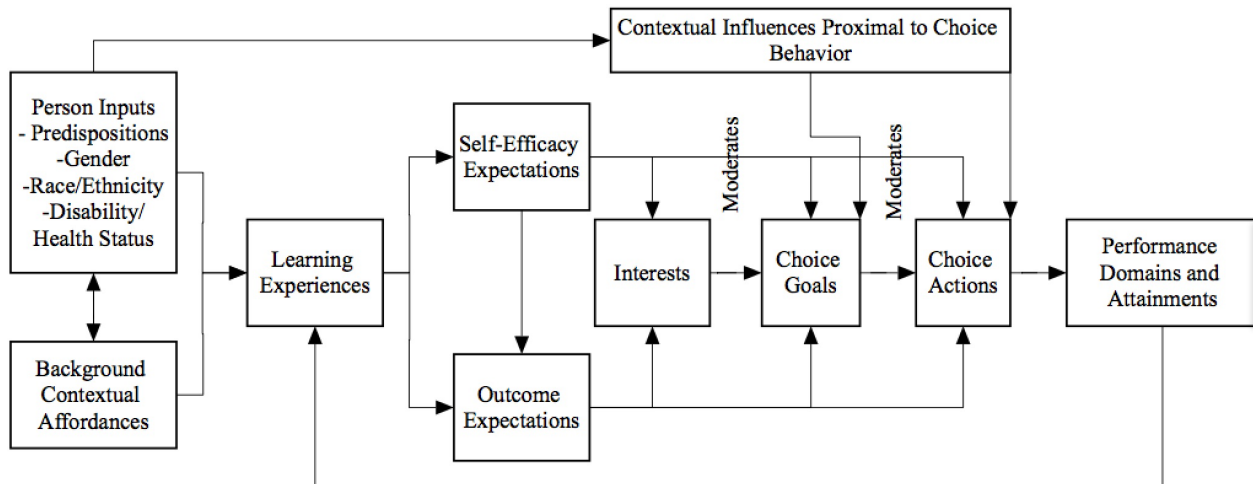
Note. Direct relations between variables are indicated with solid lines; moderator effects (where a given variable strengthens or weakens the relationships between two other variables) are shown with "Moderates" (Lent, 2012).

Many individuals opt into student affairs during or following their college years as an alternative to their original career considerations (Taub & McEwen, 2006). This change does not indicate dissatisfaction with original plans, but may be indicative of student affairs being a better fit for an individual's skills, desired geographic location, interests, work environment, and professional expectations. The choice to pursue student affairs may also be an indicator of strong support from an individual's environment – family, supervisors, mentors, and friends – coupled with an opportunity to find employment in their desired geographic location (Komives & Kuh, 1988; Taub & McEwen, 2006; Williams et al., 1990). Campus involvement may have reinforced the individual's ability to succeed in student affairs-related positions, fueling a desire to continue working within the field, and the low or minimal barriers to entry to full-time positions within

student affairs may make employment more accessible and attractive for those unsure of their post-college plans (Hunter, 1992; Richmond & Sherman, 1991; Taub & McEwen, 2006).

Performance Model

The *choice* and *performance models* of SCCT each address persistence. Lent (2012) considers persistence as choice stability (enduring with a course of action) or performance adequacy (doing well enough not to be terminated or desire to leave). Persistence is not an adequate indicator of performance, as an individual may remain in a position due to a need for employment or because it is difficult for the organization to separate the individual from the position. Additionally, individuals may leave positions for better opportunities or change career paths, neither of which is an automatic indicator of poor performance or deficient skills.

The performance model shows that self-efficacy and outcome expectations inform goals and subsequently, performance level attainment. Stronger "self-efficacy and positive outcome expectations promote more ambitious goals," which motivates individuals to achieve those goals (Lent, 2012, p. 127). This feedback loop is completed as successes and failures impact feelings of self-efficacy and expectations of outcomes for future goals. Individuals' skills, interests, and self-efficacy develop and evolve over their entire lives, so career decisions in adulthood and eventual successes all relate to formative years and environmental resources. An accurate self-appraisal (Sedlacek, 2004) is crucial within the performance model, as individuals may attempt incorrect tasks based on an inappropriate or underdeveloped skillset or set goals too low and avoid realistic challenges if they lack confidence in their abilities (Bandura, 1986; Lent, 2012). The performance model is shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3

Model of Task Performance (Lent, 2012)
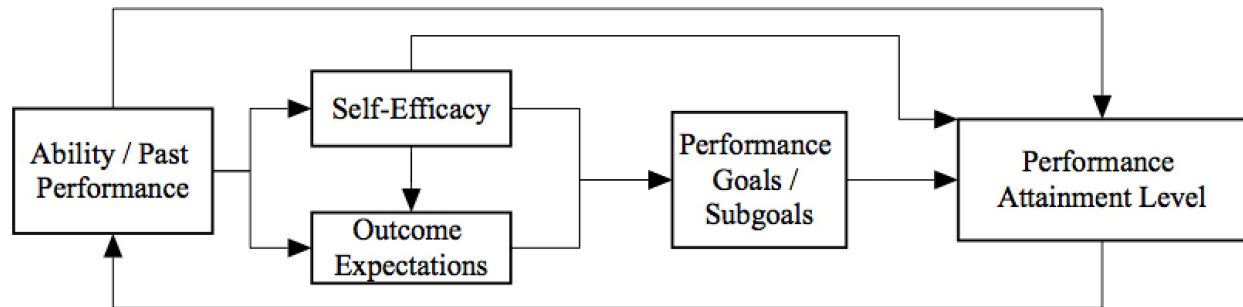
Early career professionals likely have not had long to work through goal setting, experiences, and reflection related specifically to student affairs. However, a lifetime of experience developing self-efficacy and outcome expectations ideally prepare new professionals for understanding their own skills and abilities (e.g., Burkard et al., 2005; Cuyjet et al., 2009; Kuk et al., 2007; Sedlacek, 2004). This self-appraisal assists the individual in generating realistic professional goals within student affairs and approaches to achieve those goals.

Satisfaction Model

Individual satisfaction is influenced by many variables that overlap with other SCCT models. Social Cognitive Career Theory's *satisfaction model* suggests that individual happiness is likely when one is involved in activities of value, when progress is being made toward personal goals, when possessing strong self-efficacy about goal tasks, and when resources are available to support and promote self-efficacy and goal pursuit (Lent, 2012). Personality traits, work conditions, and other environmental factors may affect work satisfaction. This model is shown in Figure 4.

Figure 4

A Social Cognitive Model of Work Satisfaction (Lent, 2012)
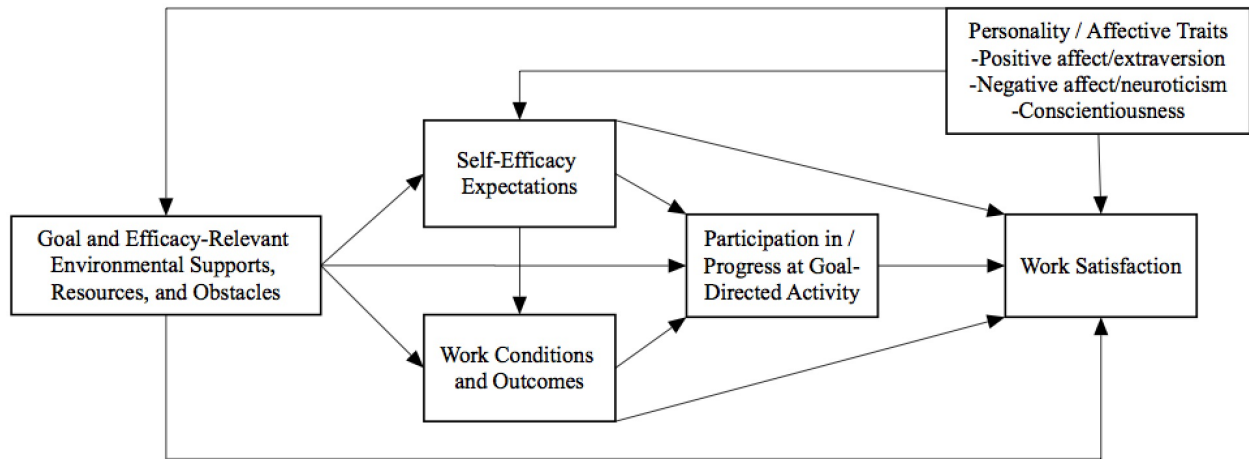
Self-reflection is a common practice within student affairs, mimicking the cyclical

structure of the models for SCCT, which may make it easier for student affairs practitioners to

understand and relate to the broader approach of SCCT. Student affairs practitioners have likely

experienced leadership or other development programs during their time as undergraduate

students, whether as stand-alone opportunities or integrated into other engagement activities such

as student groups or employment roles. Additionally, those working within student affairs

typically undergo training for their positions and may facilitate training for others, which assists

individuals in understanding common goals, creating individual goals, and developing skills to

achieve those goals, all factors in satisfaction (Amey & Reesor, 2009; Burkard et al., 2005;

Cuyjet et al., 2009; Kuk et al., 2007; Molina, 2009). Student affairs as a profession typically

builds upon individual development, recognizing the unique traits and skills individuals bring to

the table, and uses reflection and mentorship to further individual growth, advancement, and

satisfaction (Cilente et al., 2006; Hirschy et al., 2015; Renn & Hodges, 2007; Strayhorn, 2009).

The SCCT focus on self-efficacy and outcome expectations through cyclical repetition, including

experiences, beliefs of self, and messages from the environment informs future career decisions, large and small.

The reflective nature of the student affairs profession echoes the reflective nature of SCCT. Van Maanen and Schein (1979) state that membership and participation in a group make an impact on individuals, as "social research has yet to discover a work setting which leave people unmarked by their participation" (p. 210). Zurcher (1983) adds that our understanding of roles is based on interactions with others, are specific to those settings, and those interactions shape self-concepts or what this study refers to as self-efficacy. Self-efficacy provides a foundation for behavior and decision-making in new settings (Zurcher). As individuals discover student affairs, they utilize skills and habits from previous experiences to create and adjust their expectations within the field.

Social Cognitive Career Theory combines personal attributes and environmental context in career decision-making, which appears to be a holistic understanding of how people build their careers. While commonalities exist within student affairs, no two people are going to have the same experiences or paths in their careers, and SCCT takes into account the unique context for each individual. The lack of stages, ages, and sequential steps makes SCCT a good fit for the current study, as student affairs does not necessarily follow strict plans or timelines for advancement. Given that SCCT has not yet been used to study student affairs professionals' career development, the current study used the framework as a guide, and data analysis was informed but not deductively directed by the different models of the SCCT. The data informed the model selection or rejection, rather than shaping the research to match a model that may or may not be appropriate for the participants.

The outcomes of the current study will inform the practice of student affairs professional development, recruitment, and education. If one or more models of SCCT seem to represent the experiences of student affairs professionals participating in this study and their career decision-making, individuals, institutions, and professional organizations can incorporate the model(s) broadly within the field. The model(s) can be introduced through coursework and professional development to better prepare student affairs professionals for entry into the field and identifying and pursuing long-term career goals. If the models do not quite fit, or require a new, student affairs-specific model, we can also learn from those observations. Instead of addressing student affairs career decision-making from a deficit position ("why do people leave?"), it can be a proactive process that addresses the varied circumstances and decisions that comprise the cognitive decision-making process among those working in the field, including both those who leave it and those who remain. Social Cognitive Career Theory is a broad framework and is not exclusive to one segment of the population. Utilizing SCCT will advance the discussion regarding recruitment, training, culture, and professional development of the diverse student affairs population.

Summary

There are many variables at play for student affairs practitioners, including educational experiences, institutional characteristics, and personal situations. Personal characteristics may be a key factor in the choice of student affairs instead of another option, as shared values is a reason some individuals pursue the field (Hunter, 1992). Early career exploration coupled with collegiate experiences filled with support and acceptance within student affairs may lead to a broadened list of career possibilities and enhanced self-efficacy beliefs, altered outcome expectations, and personal goals that fit within the profession. Gaps exist in career development

research in student affairs and there is opportunity to better understand the decision-making process of newer professionals, inclusive of both those who leave the field and those who persist.

Social Cognitive Career Theory incorporates early-life (and entire-life) experiences in the shaping of individual interests, self-efficacy beliefs, and career goals, while balancing activities and experiences in adulthood. Although unlikely to be an early-life career exploration, introduction to the student affairs profession during or after college may still be affected by early-life exploration with regards to skills, abilities, and interests.

CHAPTER THREE – METHODS

This chapter addresses the nature of the current study, the research question being explored, context, methodology, participants, data collection, and data analysis for this study. I wanted to understand the phenomenon of career decision-making of student affairs professionals in at least their second professional student affairs position. I intended to conduct a qualitative study of a phenomenon, career decision-making, that will provide in-depth descriptions about individual career decisions of student affairs professionals and helps answer questions of "how" or "why" related to career decision-making of student affairs professionals. The research question driving the current study is: how do student affairs professionals make career decisions?

The current study used a social constructivist approach through qualitative research, recognizing that participants have created meaning from their past experiences and contexts (Broido & Manning, 2002; Corbin & Strauss, 2014; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Glesne, 2006; Guido et al., 2010; Merriam & Tisdell, 2014; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Rossman & Rallis, 2011). I used participants' descriptions to describe the cognitive considerations related to career paths and goals. The social constructivist approach parallels Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) in that it recognizes individuals make meaning of their experiences based on historical and cultural norms in their lives.

Participants

In this study the unit of analysis was individual student affairs professionals in at least their second professional position in student affairs, having worked at least two years, who are able to share their lived experience of career decision-making. Professionals often consider or pursue a position change at the three- to five-year mark in their careers, making it an optimal time to conduct a career decision study (Magolda & Carnaghi, 2004). Because I was interested in

the career decision-making of these professionals, not the specific area of their employment in the field, participants may be from any functional area within student affairs. Additionally, this is not a case study of the career decision-making of professionals at one institution, so institutional affiliation of participants, while possibly relevant to an individual's decision-making process, is not relevant to the current study for participant selection. Participants could all be from one institution. I used a random purposeful sampling strategy and snowball sampling for additional participants to solicit participants who can inform my understanding of career decision-making (Miles & Huberman, 1994). I used social networks, personal relationships, and professional associations to send emails and post invitations for the study (Miles & Huberman, 1994). I requested that individuals share the invitation with others who may fit the parameters for this study. Interested individuals were directed to complete an online participant recruitment form, which included questions about years in the field, current role in student affairs, basic demographic information, and the participants' willingness to participate in research. The form also directed individuals to submit their resume or curriculum vitae, review the informed consent information from the Michigan State University Human Research Review Board, and complete the research consent form (Riessman, 2008). I identified 15 participants, satisfying the suggested minimum of 12-15 to reach data saturation (Merriam & Tisdell, 2014; Patton, 2015), from this list of respondents. Qualitative research is typically not generalizable from one case to another as context may differ, but I worked to select individuals with diverse characteristics, providing an in-depth understanding of these participants.

Data Collection Methods

Qualitative studies can rely on multiple data sources and I utilized individual interviews and resumes. The primary data collection method was in-depth, individual interviews that

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provided information sharing not normally available through observation or other data collection methods and allowed for observing verbal and non-verbal cues (Fontana & Frey, 2000; Glesne, 2006; Janesick, 2000; Merriam & Tisdell, 2014; Patton, 2015; Riessman, 2008). Decision-making processes can take place incrementally for individuals over a long period of time, and it would be difficult to observe participants' experiences with it; but their perceptions of their decision processes can be shared in reflective conversations about past experiences.

Interviews were conducted at locations selected by participants in an attempt to make them feel comfortable in their natural environments (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). These locations included offices, coffee shops, restaurants, and outdoor spaces on campus, and I conducted individual interviews in person at times suggested by participants. I designed a semi-structured interview protocol to allow participants to share their experiences, and so that clarifying and follow-up questions could be asked as the interview moved along (Patton, 2015; Riessman, 2008). Interview questions were based on career development literature, Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT), and my own experiences as a student affairs professional, and addressed the main components of SCCT: self-efficacy beliefs, outcome expectation, and environment. Individual interviews were tailored to reflect participant responses from the online participant form and their submitted resumes to reduce redundancy. Interviews with each participant were scheduled for 60 minutes and audio recorded for later transcription and to ensure accuracy. The protocol was first piloted with two individuals and refined for the study's 15 participants to ensure question-topic fit, improve clarity, and collect additional background information (Glesne, 2006).

I took hand-written notes during each interview to capture initial reactions, body language, and to have an additional source of information to back up the recordings. I spent time

following each interview to journal my thoughts about the conversation and the study as a whole (Patton, 2015). In qualitative research the researcher is a key instrument in data collection and interpretation, so my own reflections directed my interpretation and presentation of what participants shared, including timelines, event outcomes, and participants' interpretations of experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2014; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Interviews were transcribed and both audio files and transcriptions stored in multiple secure locations. Transcribing helped to familiarize me with the data and allowed for the identification of general themes of significance or redundancy (Creswell, 2012). Participants' confidentiality has been protected through the use of aliases. Based on the interviews I created a description of participant decision-making, including what they experienced and how they experienced it.

Data Analysis

Following transcription, I analyzed the data to identify key factors in the research and relationships between individual experiences to other individual experiences to discover patterns (Merriam & Tisdell, 2014; Stake, 1995). After a preliminary review I had a sense of general themes/codes contained in the data and used inductive analysis to create categories and themes from data collection based on Social Cognitive Career Theory, education, and experiences participants shared. I applied those codes to all of the thick description from participants in order to make processing the data into findings easier (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Glesne, 2006; Riessman, 2008). I analyzed participant resumes to identify any patterns in experiences and education and compare those factors with information shared in individual interviews. I remained in contact with some participants and I used member checks by sharing themes and how their stories were being told to ensure validity of the data and eliminate misinterpretation (Janesick, 2000; Maxwell, 2012; Merriam & Tisdell, 2014; Rossman & Rallis, 2011). I also used

student affairs colleagues for peer review and debriefing to obtain external input about my interpretations and findings, and detect researcher bias (Merriam & Tisdell, 2014; Patton, 2015; Stake, 1995).

Researcher Perspective

I have worked in higher education and student affairs for almost 18 years in several areas, including residence life, STEM transfer student support programs, academic advising, career advising, and study away programs. I have recruited, been recruited, trained, been trained, and worked at multiple institutions following the completion of my master's degree. I have supervised graduate students, new professionals, and more experienced professionals, worked alongside colleagues and under supervisors, and have seen varying degrees of fit within and commitment to the field. I have observed my own master's cohort members and colleagues from each institution in different positions and institutions and some no longer in the field.

I approached this topic from a researcher's perspective, working to understand student affairs career decision-making through a theoretical lens, not just relying on my own observations or anecdotes shared by others. I have not yet considered leaving student affairs, but I have changed jobs, functional areas, institutions, and regions of the United States many times in my career. I have experienced unemployment while seeking student affairs positions. I am interested in learning more about the field I value and how career decision-making can be impacted by individual circumstances along with institutional and positional factors and wondered the extent to which my own experiences and decision-making might be reflected in the choices made by others earlier in their careers. I believe a combination of recruitment, training, and personal and institutional factors affect how student affairs professionals conceptualize their futures within the field. I aim to generate research that contributes to maximizing the potential of

individuals and institutions to support students and incorporate this information into my own practice.

This study provides opportunity for practical solutions to many issues raised by participants and the literature. The greatest opportunity is to help others into and remain in student affairs by having more information about the profession codified, disseminated, and available regardless of point of entry or path into and in the profession. This information exists in smaller, less formal spaces, as well as through some options and creative tools available to individuals and professional association members who choose to generate and share this type of information. Changing how we support student affairs practitioners must start somewhere, and I will do my part to model transparency and honesty about our profession.

Limitations

The current study focused on the experiences of 15 student affairs professionals within at least their second professional position in the field. There are thousands of professionals working in higher education across the country at numerous institution types and functional areas within this same criterion, so we cannot generalize participant experiences of this study to the population as a whole.

These individuals were all located in Southern California and snowball sampling was utilized, which may have resulted in more common experiences due to geography than if the participants were from different areas of the United States or not connected to one another. The Latinx or other collectivist cultural identities of some participants may have played a role in decisions at the earlier stages of their careers, compared to a wider sample, as some individuals were living at home in multi-generational households with current caretaking responsibilities for family members. The non-Latinx participants mentioned family considerations as possible

factors for future job searches, not current and past job searches. Some participants were younger, were very early in their careers with only a few years of experience, and in just their second role, while others were in their fourth or fifth position with at least a decade of experience. There could be a difference between factors affecting decisions of someone in their second position at age 27 and one who is in their fourth position at age 30. The small sample did not allow for more discrete understanding of how factors affecting decision-making were affected by having had more positions in the field, by institution type, or by other organizational cultural influences on the structures of positions.

The findings can illuminate any potential use of SCCT with student affairs professionals and others working in higher education to help better understand career decision-making among early career professionals, and possibly identify lessons learned for application of SCCT within student affairs and with new professionals. Additionally, my own experiences as a student affairs professional may frame my interpretations of participants' experiences. I bring my own perspective and set of beliefs, which informed the research study preparation, execution, and writing (Creswell, 2012), and acknowledge that I interpreted what participants shared through my own lens.

Summary

The current study aimed to have student affairs professionals share their experiences and career-related decisions through the use of qualitative data collection, including interviews and surveys. Through inductive analysis and interpretation of the provided data, I identified significant themes and compared the experiences of participants to the models outlined in Social Cognitive Career Theory for possible application to career decision-making of student affairs professionals.

CHAPTER FOUR – FINDINGS

Chapter 4 presents findings based on interviews and surveys with 15 student affairs professionals who are in at least their second professional position in student affairs. The chapter includes the participants' insights regarding how they explored their interests and career options, answering the research question driving this study: how do student affairs professionals make career decisions? Overarching themes emerged include discovering student affairs during or following college, value placed on graduate degrees, feeling frustrated about the pay and opportunity in student affairs, navigating politics, a change in priorities for job searches, and participants considering leaving student affairs. Using Lent's Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT; 2012) as a framework, responses are organized according to the three components of SCCT: self-efficacy beliefs, outcome expectation, and personal goals.

Participants

The participants in this study were 15 individuals in at least their second professional student affairs position. Participant demographics are included in Table 1, including aliases, number of positions held in student affairs, years of experience in student affairs, race or ethnicity, gender, and age. Participants self-identified their identity characteristics through open-ended responses in the recruitment form. Study participants range in age from 24 to 35 years old. Eleven of the participants identify as women and four participants identify as men. Ten of the participants identify as White, two identify as Latino, two identify as Filipino, and one identifies as Asian. Additional descriptions of participants are included in this section.

Alisia is a 30-year-old Latina whose four years of experience have been primarily in STEM academic advising and transfer student support. Alisia, a first-generation college student originally from Southern California, began as a student at a community college, completed a

bachelor's degrees in sociology and gender studies, and has earned her master's degree in American Studies. Her graduate assistant roles were in student affairs functional areas including identity-based resource centers and an academic support space for students, all at the same institution she attended for her bachelor's and master's degrees. Alisia has aspirations of being a professor of American Studies and does not want to remain in student affairs.

Annie, aged 34, is a White woman who has worked for 10 years in residence life, career services, and student activities. Annie attended religious education through high school in Southern California and college-going was a family expectation. Annie participated in study abroad in college and a six-month international mission, attended a Christian institution for both bachelor's and master's degrees, and has worked only at private institutions. Annie is married and plans on having children and pursuing a doctorate in the near future. She looks to work at public or non-religious institutions in the future in a role that has fewer demands for evening and weekend commitments.

Antonio is a 31-year-old gay Latino and son of immigrants, who has worked in admissions, student activities, LGBTQ services, and student support services over the course of six years in student affairs. His current role is a generalist at a professional school, supporting graduate students in multiple functional areas, including advising, enrollment, student activities, international student services, and career services. Originally from Southern California, Antonio chose to attend a public university in Northern California for a bachelor's degree in communication, worked for two years in admissions, and left for New York City to pursue a master's in student affairs at a private institution, including two study abroad experiences. Antonio was very active as a student leader in college and has worked in positions serving undergraduate and graduate students. He has a partner who does not work in student affairs,

plans on getting married soon, hopes to have children, and anticipates remaining in Southern California to remain close to family.

Betsy, the youngest participant at 24 years old, identifies as an Asian woman. A first-generation college student, her family did not want her to go into debt to go to college without a highly employable and high-earning career option, and her high school did not really promote college-going, which led to Betsy exploring college options largely on her own and seeking funding opportunities to avoid student loans. Betsy originally considered teaching and was highly involved as an undergraduate student. She participated in the NASPA Undergraduate Fellows Program (NUFP) and internship, which led to pursuit of a master's degree in leadership at a different public institution. Betsy held graduate assistantships in residence life, works as a professional academic advisor at her undergraduate institution, and lives with her parents, paying for much of the household's expenses. Betsy is from Southern California and plans on remaining in the area to care for family members.

Catherine was born in California but moved to Texas at age seven. Her grandfather was a surgeon, and it was an expectation that she would go to college. Catherine was very engaged on campus during her undergraduate experience at a large public institution in the middle of the country, participating in a sorority, community service, and campus engagement activities. She continued for her master's degree at her undergraduate institution and knew that she wanted to return to California for employment. Catherine, 28, and her husband are both in student affairs, having met as hall directors at a religious-affiliated institution in the Pacific Northwest. Catherine has worked in student affairs for five years in four different positions in residence life, student life, and academic advising, finally achieving her goal of returning to Southern

California and now working at a large public institution. Catherine works as a travel agent as an additional form of income.

Colette, a 27-year-old White woman is originally from Southern California and has remained there for education and employment. Colette has a bachelor's degree in journalism and a master's degree in student affairs counseling, both from large public institutions. Her father has a Ph.D., and her mother has a master's degree. She was very involved as an undergraduate student with orientation. Colette has worked in three positions in student affairs over five years. She has worked in part-time and full-time positions in a variety of functional areas, held several internships as part of her master's program, including conduct, student activities, and the student union, and worked outside of student affairs while she was job searching for permanent student affairs opportunities. She credits her husband's high-paying job as the reason she has been able to continue working in student affairs in low-paying and part-time positions.

Holly, 29, holds a bachelor's degree and teaching credential from a public university in Northern California and was a resident advisor and orientation leader at that institution. Holly, a White woman, taught high school social studies for two years before changing jobs to a position in student services. She is in her second student affairs position and fourth year in the field and has supported undergraduate and graduate students at both private and public institutions. Holly married her husband just after college and has changed institutions and moved from the Bay Area to Southern California to support him while he pursues his Ph.D. She anticipates staying at home if they eventually have children and does not plan on pursuing a master's degree.

Isabel, a 34-year-old Filipina, is the daughter of immigrants who value the American dream and wanted their daughter to be a medical doctor. Isabel intentionally went to college away from her family and studied abroad in Asia. While her parents went to college in the

Philippines, Isabel feels like she is a first-generation American college student. Isabel was involved in the NASPA Undergraduate Fellows Program and internship, cementing her decision to pursue a student affairs master's degree, which she pursued out of state, again away from family. Isabel is in her fifth position in six years in student affairs. Isabel has worked in residence life positions in Washington and across California and finds value in her community organization work. Isabel was fired from one position and experienced brief periods of unemployment. She hopes to obtain her doctorate one day, anticipates parental caretaking, and will likely eventually move closer to home.

Jake is a 26-year-old Filipino from Los Angeles in his second professional position. Jake's family did not have specific career goals for him but did encourage college attendance as a first-generation college student. Jake was part of Filipino community college-going mentoring programs in high school and then went away to college in Southern California, serving as a residential advisor. Over the course of four years Jake has utilized his psychology bachelor's degree in student support roles through grant programs and academic advising. He lives with his parents and is responsible for some of their household expenses and care and hopes to pursue a master's degree in counseling to expand his career options in the future.

Jamie, a 28-year-old White man, was raised by his grandmother in New York. The family expectation was to go to college, and he attended the same private institution in New York for both his bachelor's and master's degrees, studied abroad, and was a resident advisor. Jamie had difficulty obtaining his first job after graduate school and lived with his sister and her family in California for several months while he searched for residence life positions in the area. Jamie has worked in student affairs for four years in three separate positions in residence life and academic advising at public institutions. He desires to remain in student affairs long enough to take

advantage of student loan forgiveness programs and has started driving for Lyft as an additional source of income. Jamie currently lives with his boyfriend and a roommate. He has considered eventually working outside of student affairs or at least changing institutions for advancement opportunities.

Leigh is in her second position in her six-year career, currently working in career services, having previously served in campus life. Leigh discovered student affairs after discussing possible transfer options with her undergraduate advisor at her private college in Southern California. She was involved in leadership programs and several of her friends also pursued student affairs as a career. Leigh obtained a master's degree in New York with assistantships in Greek life and student activities and an internship in summer conferences in Southern California. A 30-year-old married White woman, Leigh searched for full-time positions in California rather than New York following graduate school because her husband had received an offer before she did. Leigh appreciates the ability to have work-life balance in her current role, appreciates traveling with her husband, and wishes to have children in the near future. She does not plan on getting a doctorate.

Lindsay, a 29-year-old White woman, has worked in student affairs for four years and is in her second position. Lindsay is the only child of physicians, who grew up in the middle of the country. Lindsay entered student affairs after serving as a resident assistant during college at a small, private, evangelical institution in the Midwest. Lindsay applied for residence life jobs right out of college, but all positions required a master's degree. Lindsay then pursued her master's degree at a large, public institution in the Midwest, with assistantships and internships in residence life, student government, and orientation. Lindsay has attended and worked at Christian higher education institutions in residence life and now works at a private, non-religious

university in orientation, desiring to remain in Southern California and leave Christian higher education. She is considering a doctorate to help with career opportunities.

Renee is 33 years old and currently in her fifth professional position in her 11-year career. Renee was heavily involved in student leadership opportunities throughout college, the same private, evangelical university she attended for both her undergraduate and graduate programs in Southern California, an institution some of her family also attended. Renee began her coming out process during graduate school, but remained closeted, which led to her decision not to pursue jobs in Christian higher education or near her immediate family in Southern California. Renee has worked at private institutions in residence life, student activities, and orientation. Renee is a married White woman with two children and has aspirations of completing a doctorate and moving into a senior-level leadership position.

Originally from the Midwest, Robin chose a small, private, liberal arts institution in New England for college, pursuing languages, playing a sport, and studying abroad in Europe. She comes from a family that expects higher education; her father's family are all physicians. Robin is a 35-year-old single White woman and entered student affairs eleven years ago, identifying the field as an option after completing college. She worked in residence life at her alma mater before pursuing a master's degree with an assistantship in orientation at a private institution in the Midwest. She is now in her fourth position, associate dean of students, after having worked in residence life, orientation, and first year programs. She now has family in Southern California, prompting her desire to remain in the area.

Sheldon, a 27-year-old White man originally from the Midwest, credits a student life advisor with introducing him to student affairs during his time at a Midwestern public institution. His family did not provide direction or expectations for his future, and his parents finished their

college degrees while Sheldon was in high school. Sheldon began his coming out process at age 10 and is currently partnered with a woman. After working at his alma mater for one year in the LGBT center, Sheldon pursued his master's degree at a larger, public institution in the same state and had an assistantship in student conduct. Sheldon relocated to Southern California to work in conduct at a large public institution, and has moved to a nearby small, private liberal arts institution. Sheldon has been engaged with professional organizations in student affairs in his three positions and five years in the field.

Table 1

Participant Data

Alias	Number of Positions Held in Student Affairs	Years of Experience in Student Affairs	Race / Ethnicity	Gender	Age
Alisia	2	4	Latino	Woman	30
Annie	4	10	White	Woman	34
Antonio	3	6	Latino	Man	31
Betsy	2	2	Asian	Woman	24
Catherine	4	5	White	Woman	28
Colette	3	5	White	Woman	27
Holly	2	4	White	Woman	29
Isabel	5	6	Filipino	Woman	34
Jake	2	4	Filipino	Man	26
Jamie	3	4	White	Man	28
Leigh	2	6	White	Woman	30
Lindsay	2	4	White	Woman	29
Renee	5	11	White	Woman	33
Robin	4	11	White	Woman	35
Sheldon	3	5	White	Man	27

The next sections discuss participant responses related to the SCCT themes of self-efficacy beliefs, outcome expectation, and personal goals, about which the interview questions were organized.

Self-Efficacy Beliefs

Participants' self-efficacy beliefs were largely shaped from messages received from others at all stages of their lives, including from family, friends, faculty, and supervisors. These self-efficacy beliefs affected their education, hobbies, and career considerations. Self-efficacy was further influenced once participants began exploring and working in student affairs. Their experiences in the field of student affairs shaped how participants felt about themselves as individuals and student affairs practitioners, their ability to be successful in any realm, and their views on the field of student affairs. This section addresses messaging about career options, college going, student affairs, graduate school, and messages about student affairs from graduate programs. Additionally, participant perspectives about self-efficacy beliefs in regard to value within student affairs, experiences within student affairs, and influence of colleagues and supervisors are discussed. Finally, personal attributes, including motivation for student affairs and personal characteristics and growth, will be included.

Early Messaging About Career Options

Participants received messages about career options and plans early in their lives from family members, other adults, and their surrounding communities, but none received messages about careers in student affairs. Role modeling and direct observation were primary sources of messaging and career options for most participants. Some participants came from families with a history of completing advanced degrees, as Robin shared, "My dad's family is all doctors, including his older sister and my grandmother who was top of her medical school class. My

grandfather was number two." Other participants felt that they received no messages from family about career plans, like Jake who shared, "My parents didn't pressure me to go into any field … they let me do my own thing. First generation." Lindsay stated that her exposure to career options was limited as a child, as "you see very few people in different professions when you're growing up. You see what your parents do, maybe what some immediate family members or friends do, what your teachers do, and that's pretty much it." Several participants noted that they initially considered career options similar to their parents, and that teachers, counselors, and faith leaders also impacted their career considerations.

Early messages often revolved around finding reliable employment. Antonio's immigrant parents wanted him to use logic to "do more than they had accomplished" as accountants. Lindsay's parents, both in the medical field, encouraged her pursuit of the health professions. Isabel, a child of Filipino immigrants, was told from a very early age that she would go to college to be a doctor. Some families encouraged options that were perceived as a better fit for their child's skills and interests. Holly shared that while her parents were very supportive of her doing anything, her own pragmatism gave her anxiety as she wanted to be self-sufficient and employed.

Other participants shared that there was no real discussion about careers or future plans when growing up. Sheldon shared that "we didn't talk about careers a lot" but that going to college was an expectation of him. Catherine wished she would have done more exploration when she was younger but said her "own self-efficacy didn't think that I could. It was a lot of self-talk. I didn't think I was competitive enough."

Participants relied on observation of those around them to learn about career options, as well as direct messaging from family members, teachers, and community environments.

Messages focused on careers with reliable employment that paid well. These messages also touched on college going.

Messages About Attending College and Exploring Interests

The majority of participants stated that messages shared by family members focused on college being an expectation, not an option. Older siblings and prior generations set the tone for many participants. Robin said that college was an expectation, and that family conversation was never about "ARE you going to college, but WHERE are you going and what do you want to do with it?" Some families expected education beyond a bachelor's degree, and almost half of the participants have family members with advanced degrees, which led to participants expecting and exploring graduate education even before they began college. Colette's parents viewed a bachelor's degree as a starting off point because one can get a master's degree and doctorate to do "what you want." While most participants who were expected to attend college were encouraged to explore their interests and major options, Isabel noted that her father had strong views based on his Filipino culture about where she should attend college (near family) and what to study (medicine).

Not all messages about college were encouraging. Annie noted that in her small, predominantly white, upper middle-class community high school it was expected that graduates would go to college, and that there was an undercurrent of "just a community college" if students opted to attend two-year institutions. As a result, Annie only considered four-year institutions after high school. In contrast, Jake noted that his older cousins first attended community college then transferred to a four-year institution, and Jake was inspired seeing students go directly from high school to college instead of entering the workforce with their high school diplomas. In

Jake's family community college was an aspirational option, compared to how it was viewed as a less than desirable option in Annie's family.

Not all participants planned on attending college or were encouraged to do so. College going was not discussed at Betsy's high school, and her family did not want her to take on college debt unless she was going to be a doctor. While both of Sheldon's parents finished their college degrees while he was in high school, none of Sheldon's three siblings went to college, which signaled to Sheldon that college could be an option, but not necessarily right out of high school. Neither of Alisia's parents attended college and her eldest siblings were teen parents and high school dropouts. Alisia noted, "education was always important to my parents, but they didn't know how to get us there."

No matter the messaging received, all participants attended college. While some participants were already thinking ahead to graduate school, others were unsure how to manage their undergraduate experiences. College provided an opportunity for participants to get involved on campus and explore their majors and career options, regardless of how prepared they were for their college experiences. Several participants joined campus activities and student government due to the recommendation of family members and friends. Colette, for example, shared that her parents told her she was a leader which encouraged her to get involved in campus leadership opportunities. Annie, highly involved on campus, called herself a prototypical college student, sharing "I fit. I got through easily. It wasn't hard. I enjoyed my classes. I met my husband in undergrad. All of my friends were involved as student leaders in some capacity." In addition to family, college friends influenced decisions among participants. Jamie applied to study abroad with his friend group but ended up going abroad by himself. Jake applied to be a resident

assistant because his friends were applying and also was the only one who was offered the opportunity.

Students often changed their majors in college, some due to outside suggestion, and others due to a lack of interest in their original plans. Messaging from family members led to major changes. Antonio was encouraged to change from music journalism to something more pragmatic by his parents, citing an ability to find employment and have steady income. Lindsay's physician parents told her medical school would not be an option with high Bs, so she changed to English, something she enjoyed more. Betsy's family encouraged her to focus on her passion in college rather than a major with a clear path to a profession, which made Betsy feel comfortable selecting her major. Catherine changed her major "six to seven times" by her sophomore year until an advisor told her she needed to select something she enjoyed learning, finally selecting communication, a blend of all prior considered majors.

Participants received messages to use college to identify areas of interest, engage with campus leadership opportunities and activities they enjoyed, and select majors that kept their interest and could lead to employment.

Early Messages About Student Affairs and Other Careers

Most participants had received messaging about career options, but none had been aware of student affairs as a profession until they were in college. Campus job supervisors, student group and academic advisors, faculty members, and college friends were the primary sources of career guidance for participants, introducing student affairs as a career option. Participants were exposed to student affairs based on their college experiences living in residence halls or with student leadership programs and had to explain to their friends and family a shift in career plans upon deciding to pursue student affairs.

Supervisors explained student affairs opportunities, graduate preparation programs, and ways to explore student affairs to participants. Isabel and Betsy were part of the NASPA Undergraduate Fellows Program (NUFP), a student affairs career exploration program through one of the field's professional associations, which enabled them to network with individuals at their own institutions and at others across the country prior to searching for graduate school options.

Friends and family of participants, including those who attended college, had difficulty understanding how student affairs could be a career option. Many participants' family members had served as a primary source of career guidance and advice when participants were younger, able to discuss commonly understood career options, such as teacher or doctor. Those same family members were unable to provide guidance to their adult children as they had when participants were younger, as there was no frame of reference for student affairs, the training needed, or the opportunities or variety of jobs within the field. While Robin's parents both attended college, they were "completely helpless in this process, and useless as well. They didn't understand what I was trying to do, but they were okay if it made me happy. I just needed guidance, but they couldn't give it to me." Lindsay's parents were supportive of her pursuit of student affairs, but still remind her that she can do a post-baccalaureate program and pursue medicine. Generally, participants' families were supportive of participants' student affairs aspirations, despite not necessarily understanding the field.

Messages received about career opportunities changed over time, evolving from family members and friends to personal connections at their colleges. Participants discovered student affairs as a career option and relied more heavily on their supervisors and advisors at college than their prior support people for career advice and messaging. Participants were often

explaining student affairs to the individuals who previously had been their primary sources of support. Still, these early career resources also supported the participants' pursuit of student affairs, even if this new profession was not easily understood or familiar. Many participants shared that they were encouraged by their college support individuals to explore graduate programs in student affairs.

Messages about Graduate School for Student Affairs

Prior to considering student affairs for a career, participants had mixed plans following college. Some participants planned to enter the workforce, while others were considering graduate school in their original subject areas. Annie shared, "My sister went straight to grad school and she's two years older so it's just what you do, just like college." Messaging about graduate school for student affairs largely focused on the need for a master's degree to obtain entry-level and mid-level positions, and possibly requiring a doctorate to move up to higher levels. Messages about graduate degrees for student affairs positions generally came from job postings or talking with student affairs professionals.

Not all participants opted to enter graduate programs immediately following college. Some participants pursued full-time positions in student affairs, either as a way to test out the profession, or a way to gain more experience before beginning graduate school. Robin worked in student affairs at her undergraduate institution following graduation and learned more about the profession. Robin noted that a master's degree in something seemed to be a requirement for "pretty much anything in student affairs" and started exploring graduate programs, ultimately beginning her master's program after working in student affairs for two years. Similarly, Lindsay did not want to pursue graduate school immediately following college but had a difficult time obtaining a student affairs position without a master's degree. Lindsay shared, "I thought it must

be a fun job if lots of people are going to get their master's so they can do it." Colette searched

for academic advising positions after graduating from college and learned that they all required

master's degrees, so she researched programs and worked for two years in an unrelated field, as

she could not find a student affairs position that would hire her with just a bachelor's degree.

Supervisors and friends in student affairs provided support for some participants during their

college years and beyond, including sorority sisters, orientation directors, and mentors. This

support included explaining program options, selecting schools, and reviewing application

materials.

Participants shared that they had repeatedly heard that a master's degree was necessary to

work in student affairs. However, Jake and Holly have not pursued graduate degrees in any field.

Jake has not yet had success with graduate school admissions but plans to eventually pursue a

master's degree. He said it is challenging working with others who have graduate degrees, as he

holds them in higher esteem than himself. In contrast, Holly has no desire to obtain a master's

degree at this point in her career, encouraged by the fact that she has always found jobs in the

field that were a relatively good fit with adequate pay. Holly sees her work experience as just as

valuable as a graduate degree and is currently helping put her husband through a Ph.D. program,

noting that she plans on being a stay at home mom once they begin having children and feels a

master's degree is unnecessary. Holly is the lone participant not considering or pursuing a

master's degree, while several participants already identified plans to pursue a doctorate.

While the general perception among participants is that a master's degree is required to

work within student affairs, many participants shared that they believe a doctoral degree is

necessary for career advancement. Several participants have already contemplated applying for

doctoral programs, but are considering cost, timing, balancing other commitments, and being a

student again. Renee plans to start a doctoral program soon, as her institution will pay for it and she believes it will be valued for future jobs. Annie shared that it is not if, but when she will pursue a doctorate, and has been told by faculty in an Ed.D. program that it will not be what she expects, but that she can be successful in a program that is very rigid and less supportive than her master's program. Isabel has talked to women in higher positions without a terminal degree and believes she can be successful without the doctorate, but still wants to get one. Lindsay has considered another degree to make herself more marketable or eligible for positions and is considering an Ed.D. or an MBA. Alisia wants to pursue a Ph.D. in her field and become faculty. She misses research but notes that "part of me thinks I can do it, but then I have that voice inside of me asking why I would put myself through that." Leigh noted that she did not anticipate obtaining a doctorate and shared "I think I'd enjoy the learning, but I enjoy my free time. I know it's not too late, but I wonder if it's too late." Most participants feel they can be successful in a doctoral program, if they choose to pursue a doctorate. None of the men expressed an interest in pursuing a doctorate, but were able to clearly articulate some short-term and long-term career goals.

Participants received messages to obtain a master's degree in order to work in student affairs, and that a doctorate would be helpful for career advancement. Individuals have perceptions about what a doctoral program would be like, especially in comparison to their master's program, in addition to balancing other commitments not present earlier in their careers.

Messages in Student Affairs

Participants received messages about student affairs throughout their undergraduate and graduate experiences, as well as in their professional positions in the field. These messages have

been about the field as a whole, opportunities within the field, and their own performance as professionals.

Messages Received in Graduate Programs

Participants received various messages during their time in graduate school, including how to think like an administrator and the realities of the field. Graduate programs expanded participants' understanding of student affairs as a whole and provided a shift from thinking like a student to thinking from an administrative perspective, as noted by Lindsay. Leigh shared that her program faculty explained that student affairs did not pay well, but "you get rewarded in other ways." Leigh is quick to explain the low pay whenever students inquire about the field, in addition to discussing what she appreciates about student affairs work, something that she wished others had done for her earlier in her career. Renee's graduate supervisor shared that it was easy for student affairs professionals to get pigeonholed in their roles within student affairs, which led to Renee exploring additional responsibilities outside of residence life to broaden her experiences and resume. Participants shared that graduate programs and classmates were sources of support in classes, but also became a source of stress during job search time; for example, Annie's cohort was competitive about the number of interviews at national placement conferences, though faculty assured students that they would eventually find jobs. Sheldon noted that his graduate program faculty hinted that professionals should remain at their institutions for long periods of time, which has not been his experience or observations elsewhere, and led Sheldon to question his desire to change institutions when job searching.

Feeling of Value Within Student Affairs

Messages received as student affairs professionals affirmed career choices for some participants, while others questioned their vocation. Several participants voiced concern that

student affairs practitioners are overworked and underpaid, with no expectation given from supervisors to change that circumstance. Participants noted that non-traditional hours, expectations, and low pay were some of the things they did not like about student affairs. Annie stated, "Student affairs practitioners have a savior-victim mentality in many ways. We will work 80 hours. We must be martyrs." Renee described student affairs job descriptions as unrealistic and is disappointed when she cannot meet all of the expectations, even with an understanding that those expectations are unrealistic. While some participants noted that they value health and wellness, many shared that the field of student affairs does not appear to support good health and wellness in its employees by encouraging long hours, extended training periods, and not taking care of oneself. Robin works to role model good self-care among her staffs, noting the irony of a group of people trying to help others who do not help themselves. Isabel encourages those around her to give themselves grace when tasks do not get completed and summarized the messages she has received about student affairs this way:

> Do your time at entry level. It's going to be harder as a woman to get to the top. You need a terminal degree. You're never going to find balance. Are you sure you want to be a mother in the field? If you have a family, you're off the hook and can go home at 5 while all the single people are able to stay at work longer.

Sheldon enjoys that student affairs is an engaged profession, focused on social issues, and has a kinship among professionals, but added, "higher ed as a whole is a clusterfuck" in that the espoused values of the field are not necessarily the enacted values of the professionals in the field. Isabel noted that student affairs tends to be reactive instead of proactive, saying, "Sometimes in higher ed we land the plane before we build the plane. We don't take time to pause and reflect." She argued that student affairs professionals "need to be supportive of one another as professionals, and I don't think we are good at that." Jamie shared that he feels limited in the field about how and to whom he can vent about his frustrations, saying, "the public image

student affairs professionals need to upkeep all the time is exhausting" and that complaining about your job in student affairs is not allowed. Most participants struggled with the messaging that student affairs professionals must work long hours with little opportunity for advancement or increased pay, which led to questioning how long they could remain in their roles as effective student affairs practitioners. Overall, all participants identified aspects of the field that led to dissatisfaction and consideration of other job opportunities, including low pay and long hours, a feeling of misalignment with espoused and enacted values within the field, and a hypersensitivity to honest discussion about concerns and worth.

Student affairs professionals work with students in a variety of settings, which provide different levels of opportunity for feedback that can shape a sense of value for some practitioners. For example, Jamie noted the lack of instant gratification of knowing a student has been helped is a source of frustration. However, feedback, whether instantaneous, delayed until end of semester evaluations, or contact from a student long after an interaction, has provided affirmation to some participants, and women noted this affirmation more frequently than men. It is unclear if the women received more affirmation than men, if it mattered more to women than men, or if the women just mentioned it more. For example, Catherine appreciated that reviews showed that others valued her; Annie received feedback from colleagues and mentors and believes she is smart, has good ideas, and is confident in her abilities; Lindsay commented that peer affirmation has been helpful in keeping her engaged; and Renee felt affirmed by other people sharing positive feedback and advocating for her. This sense of worth and value did encourage some participants to continue in their current positions, but many indicated that they were considering their next roles within the field, believing that a new position, team, or institution would provide a different and better environment.

Varied Experiences and Career Advancement

Many participants discussed the value of working in different functional areas of student affairs and at different institutions. For example, Annie, Catherine, and Lindsay shared that their diverse working environments, including residence life, career services, academic advising, and student activities, have taught them about student issues, family dynamics, and functional areas of campus, and have enabled balancing administrative and interpersonal responsibilities. Sheldon has become more confident in his ability to work closely with university leadership through roles in LGBTQA services and student conduct. However, many participants shared that the messaging they received did not recommend they should vary professional opportunities, and some participants recognize the limitations of their experiences and ability to contend for new positions, including Leigh, who has worked as a generalist and within career services, who felt that it is easy to get pigeonholed into certain functional areas or institution types. Several participants noted that student affairs does not seem to facilitate experiences outside of one's functional area, value transferrable skills, or do a good job of preparing professionals for the next step, which makes obtaining interviews or changing functional areas very difficult. Jamie shared, "I don't know if I believe in myself sometimes" about the ability to identify his own transferrable skills for new positions. Thinking about career progression, several participants identified community colleges as an ideal destination due to higher wages and more structured roles than four-year institutions, but very few have been able to obtain interviews for those coveted positions due to limited or no experience in that setting. The same challenges were identified for those who have worked in only public or private institutions.

Participants identified the messages they received about career advancement in student affairs, with many noting that it would be difficult to advance in the field given personal

preferences and limited positions at higher levels. Renee has been told that it is important to be administratively strong in order to advance, able to manage budgets and staff, but that the number of positions decreases the higher you move up, the number of applicants increases, and there is less support from colleagues due to the limited number of individuals and roles. As a result, Renee has worked to expand her own experiences and skillsets to make herself as competitive as possible when she does find a position that is a step up while remaining in her desired geographic area. Jamie is discouraged that the climb to high level positions is long and burnout is common, noting that he would need to work at his current institution for 20-30 years and earn a Ph.D. before he could move into a dean or VPSA position. Jamie observed that friends in other fields can change jobs and obtain pay increases much more quickly than in student affairs, sentiments shared by Leigh and Catherine who noted that friends who left the field are now making significantly more money than when they were in student affairs. Several participants observed that moving up in title does not always have an associated increase in pay, and that titles in student affairs are deceiving and may not reflect responsibilities. For example, Renee has been told by supervisors that she will have to sacrifice pay for a better title when changing jobs.

As mentioned earlier, many participants commented that the pay in student affairs is disappointing. Several noted a lack of transparency about earning potential at their institutions and that those in student affairs are underpaid for the amount of work and energy put into their roles. Antonio recognized that those working in education are not there for the money and that it is understood that student affairs does not pay well, but counters that it is challenging to "do my best work when I know I'm worth a lot more than what I'm getting paid. I'll be paying student loans for the rest of my life." Antonio adds, "there's a discrepancy with saying that we value

education but pay our educators very little. It comes down to how education is valued in our society." Despite the feelings of being undervalued and underpaid, none of the participants have left student affairs.

Colleagues and Supervisors

Several participants commented that colleagues were a source of frustrating messaging about the level of commitment needed to remain in a role and about being a good colleague. Lindsay illustrated this point, noting that student affairs professionals "think that they're better equipped and more self-aware than they actually are," when in actuality they are not prepared to handle their own issues, let alone help students or be good colleagues. Sheldon commented that "it's funny how non student affairs [student affairs] people can be" when dealing with change or unpopular opinions. Some participants noted that colleagues are able to remain in their positions despite doing the bare minimum of work or mediocre work, which does not encourage participants to work harder or do more than what is necessary. Jamie shared that he likes the people within student affairs but struggles with individuals whose only identity is that of student affairs professional and who are unable to consider experiences beyond their own. Sheldon added, "I got out of my student affairs program knowing how to learn, how to not make mistakes. I think a lot of people are graduating with the mentality that what they're doing is right" no matter the institutional context, history, or students. Despite Isabel's "very very toxic" colleagues in her first professional role, she knew she could be successful in student affairs but just needed to be in a different setting. Overall, participants felt colleagues were a source of frustration for their lack of commitment and an inability to customize approaches based on institutional context.

Supervisors play an impactful role for student affairs professionals and their feelings of self-efficacy, and most participants identified how supervisors had a negative impact. Catherine shared that her supervisors held the team together during challenging times, which kept Catherine in the field. However, Catherine noted that organizational changes and restructuring of her department by upper administration made her question if student affairs was the right environment for her, as she perceived that changes were being implemented without taking into account the current student affairs staff. Sheldon felt demotivated after overhearing his boss state that Sheldon was never going to be hired for a promotion, which led to an accelerated job search for Sheldon and departure from that role. Robin was disappointed that her efforts were not recognized after she took on her former supervisor's responsibilities in addition to her own job for a period of time. A mismatch between employee and supervisor can create low feelings of self-efficacy, as noted by Isabel who shared, "I wore [the supervisor's] perceptions of me like it was my favorite jacket." Other participants noted that uniform approaches to all employees by supervisors, in the spirit of equity, led to frustration and feelings of not being valued or developed professionally. Messaging was not the only way participants shaped their self-efficacy beliefs, but it did influence their attitudes and behaviors at work.

Participants received messages about student affairs pay and effort expectations, self-care, and opportunity for advancement throughout their time in graduate programs as well as through their employment. Participants shared that changing functional areas or institution type was challenging, that they were not necessarily given much encouragement to prepare to do so through increased opportunities, and that new positions may have better titles but do not always include better pay. Learning how to work with difficult colleagues and supervisors led to some job searches and made some participants question their ability to be successful in student affairs.

Personal Attributes and Fit

Self-efficacy can be influenced through experiences, which can be shaped by personal attributes. The reasons an individual opts to enter the profession can be affected by or directly correspond to these attributes, which, in turn, shape how an individual experiences student affairs, feels a sense of fit, and considers their self-efficacy as a student affairs practitioner.

Motivation for Student Affairs

Many participants identified an interest in helping others as a reason they feel they are a good fit for working in student affairs. A focus on student development, social justice, and playing a role in the college experience was a strong motivator for several participants. For example, Colette shared, "I like that student affairs is about students. They're not getting a full education if all they do is go to class. I want them to have the full advantage and that's where student affairs comes in." Robin shared that she values helping students figure out who they are and who they want to be. Similarly, Catherine noted that activities and initiatives at the college level can be mirrored in the real world, and that she values strong relationships with students, helping them "be successful inside and outside of the classroom."

In addition to directly helping others, some participants identified an interest in affecting policy and developing themselves. Lindsay is confident that her ability to think about things on multiple levels and explain things in a way that others can understand is valuable in student affairs and enhances her ability to do her job. However, she shared that it is also hard to have patience when she does not have the authority to make decisions. Holly aims to "go to the root of systemic issues" when helping students. Catherine recognized growth through her career and a willingness to challenge the process and improve things, and strives to be in a position that will allow her to implement her own ideas and policy changes.

Personal Characteristics and Growth

Participants identified certain personal characteristics that they believed made them successful in student affairs, and also recognized their own growth and development in the field. Self-efficacy was impacted by their experiences, which has shifted participants' commitment to the profession writ large and their specific functional areas.

Some participants identified how their experiences in the profession led to changes in ways of approaching their work and their self-efficacy. They shared that it was easy to take on too much in their roles, and that it has been a journey not only to advocate for oneself, but also not to rely on mentors as much as their own instincts with workplace decisions and career considerations. Annie noted that she is a hard worker and has learned from her professional positions that student affairs is a marathon, not a sprint. Annie believes colleagues who tell her she could do half of what she normally does and still be doing more than others, which is why Annie added that she will "set the bar low" in future new positions so that others do not expect too much from her. Renee is "100% affirmed" that student affairs is the correct field for her based on her experiences and added that she learned that "you can't stay in the field if you don't advocate for yourself." Alisia shared that she is still developing her professionalism skills and has identified that "maybe I shouldn't always speak first, maybe I shouldn't say everything. There's a potential to hurt people in our jobs and I don't want to cause hurt." Robin identified her own resiliency as a factor in her success in adapting to new institution types and geographic areas. Robin noted that her experiences have made her realize that student affairs is her passion and she is good at it, but also felt confident that she could be successful in anything. Not all participants identified growth in confidence and self-efficacy based on experiences within student affairs. Alisia is less confident about her abilities in student affairs, sharing, "I've

surprisingly been okay at it. People keep hiring me and I don't know why. I think I doubt my abilities."

Participants recognized the impact of others in their work and how they have reflected on their own growth and development as student affairs practitioners, whether it is comfort in job tasks, ability to reconcile past student experiences with professional expectations, or plan for the future. Sheldon shared that he has learned to be more accepting of the ambiguities of higher education than when he was a new professional, as well as better understanding the impact of the government and policy on his job. Betsy said she cringes when professionals say, "this is the way we've always done it," but has caught herself thinking "this is how we did it when I was a student." Betsy added that she has to remind herself that things might need to change, and that she has not grown as much as she thought she had or would, perhaps due to working professionally at her undergraduate institution, where she recalls how things were when she was a student. Alisia still centers her student perspective, despite working as an administrator, and works to reconcile her job responsibilities with her personal instinct. Lindsay noted that the student experience has shifted dramatically in the last 100 years, "so why wouldn't it shift in 10 years? Just because something has been effective in our lifetime doesn't mean it will be effective for the duration of our lifetime. It excites me when people want to think about how to do things differently."

Personal identities and institutional context fit were mentioned by both Robin and Sheldon as being significant to their experiences. Participants shared that differences in institutional environment, student body demographics, and personal experiences led to reflection about how to be their authentic selves while working with individuals and in spaces that were unfamiliar. Sheldon noted that his self-efficacy was affected when working with students who

have high socioeconomic privilege, as he grew up "broke" and had different considerations during his college experience. In contrast, Annie recognized that her understanding of her own privilege has grown over time, and she focuses on listening to the voices of the marginalized students on campus to keep her own biases in check. Lindsay has learned "how to infuse kindness and compassion into my work in very unique ways" and worked to address how privilege perpetuates injustice at an institution whose evangelical religious affiliation prevents open advocacy for diverse students and issues of social justice. Isabel recognized how her own identities influenced her experiences, and how the importance of each identity shifted depending on her institutional context, changing from her Filipina identity to focusing on being a woman, especially a woman of color.

Beyond institutional context, finding the right functional area and role was something many participants identified as important to them and their feelings of self-efficacy. Sheldon shared that conduct was a good fit for him because he gets to "talk with students and tell them how to improve their lives, and not in a passive way." Renee began in student affairs focused on housing but realized that her interests were much broader as she began to explore social justice issues in her residence life, student activities, and orientation roles in preparation for a senior leadership role overseeing myriad functional areas within student affairs. Lindsay appreciates the secure employment that higher education provides, including a paycheck, insurance, and tuition benefits, and has enjoyed her transition into orientation programs feeling this is a good fit for her for now. Finding the right fit may take time. Betsy added, "I know I'm in the right field, but I don't think I'm in the right place," after she realized she was not a good fit for housing, and later found a position in academic advising that she loved. Jamie is bored in his current role as an

academic advisor where he says "the same thing to students all day, every day" but did not identify another functional area or role that would remove the feeling of boredom.

Participants spoke about their motivations for pursuing student affairs positions, including helping others and influencing policy. Individuals felt that their personal characteristics made them successful in the field of student affairs, including adapting to new work environments, institutional settings, and colleagues. Participants shared that they have grown as professionals, understanding a larger political and legal context, how to advocate for themselves, and how to assess potential employment settings. The next section discusses outcome expectation.

Outcome Expectation

Social Cognitive Career Theory (Lent, 2012) states that past experiences dictate future decisions, and that individuals expect certain outcomes based on experiences, reflection, and feedback. Participants in this study have experienced higher education as students and as practitioners. Many participants have completed professional preparation graduate programs, and all have received feedback from coursework, practica, or supervisors. Participants had various paths of entry into student affairs during and following college and opportunities to reflect on their own experience and choices, which impacted their career decisions and paths to and within student affairs.

Initial Interest and Experiences in Student Affairs

None of the participants were aware of student affairs as a profession prior to attending college, possibly due to the lack of a corresponding undergraduate major, unlike options that lead to other professions such as being a teacher or a doctor. Most participants were involved in leadership programs during college, including serving as resident advisors (RAs) and orientation

leaders (OLs), and connected with student affairs professionals on campus who introduced them to the profession while they were still students. Participants who were not involved in these traditional student affairs gateway opportunities explored student affairs following college through employment in higher education settings. Some of these employment pursuits were due to a lack of career plans in an individual's original area of study, such as employment or graduate school, while others used higher education employment directly following college as an intentional exploration of student affairs opportunities open to individuals with bachelor's degrees.

Undergraduate student involvement in leadership programs and campus activities was quite common among participants and provided students an opportunity to connect with staff and other students on campus, and to learn about the process of student affairs. Several participants were highly involved in leadership programs, orientation, residence life, and student activities in their undergraduate careers. For example, Annie participated in the "traditional undergraduate student affairs co-curricular things" including living on campus, studying abroad, and serving as both an orientation leader and a resident assistant and said that student affairs was an easy career choice. Antonio called himself the "poster child student leader, RA, orientation leader, newspaper editor, club leader, tour guide, everything."

Campus engagement led to participants exploring student affairs as a career as the following examples show. Lindsay shared, "I loved being an RA. The fact that I could continue doing that for a career, even though it wasn't the highest paid job, was still very attractive." Sheldon went from withdrawn to gregarious due to involvement, which led to his pursuit of student affairs. Colette worked as an orientation leader and fell in love with the job, which led to a career change into student affairs. Holly noted that her undergraduate engagement in

orientation provided her a comprehensive understanding of student affairs and called it a pipeline into student affairs.

Formal student affairs exposure through the NASPA Undergraduate Fellows Program (NUFP), which connects students to student affairs professionals on their campus and across the country, provides leadership development, and includes potential internships in student affairs, helped Betsy and Isabel decide on student affairs as a career path. Betsy noted, "I had kind of done a student affairs track, but thought it wasn't for me. I then did NUFP and that's what led me to what I wanted to be." Isabel used NUFP and subsequent internship opportunities to explore supervision, programming, study abroad students, a research team, and a non-profit before committing to a career in student affairs.

Robin and Alisia both worked in student affairs positions following college, intending to eventually pursue graduate degrees and careers in their chosen undergraduate major fields. Both Robin and Alisia held student affairs assistantships while in graduate school; Alisia continued studying her undergraduate subject area while Robin committed to a master's degree in student affairs. Both remained in student affairs positions following graduate school. Robin shared, "I realized student affairs was a thing. I wasn't an RA or the head of any student groups. That was not on my radar as [an undergraduate] student." Alisia had a steep learning curve in her early student affairs roles and had difficulty understanding that student affairs was its own academic field, however she enjoyed the job and did not see herself leaving it. Other participants who lived in on-campus housing during their undergraduate pursuits had asked their resident director if the role was a volunteer position. Participants were surprised to learn it was a paid, professional position, and some eventually began their own professional roles in residence life.

Participants learned about student affairs during or following college, largely due to relationships and experiences on their undergraduate campus. Most participants were involved in leadership programs, residence life, or orientation, which introduced student affairs as a professional option and ultimately changed career paths for most participants. Formal and informal mentoring guided several students into graduate programs and full-time positions.

Graduate Programs and Assistantships

Most participants completed master's degrees, and a majority of those graduate programs were related to student affairs, higher education, or leadership. Graduate school classes and associated assistantships provided opportunity to learn about student affairs functional areas and gain practical experience in the field. Most participants agreed that student affairs graduate programs provided a foundation of knowledge for the field but could do more to address resiliency, supervision, and the challenges faced as student affairs practitioners. Several participants noted that counseling programs would have been more beneficial to them than student affairs programs, as more career opportunities are available with a counseling degree.

Many participants noted that while graduate school coursework was intended to prepare them to be student affairs professionals, it was hands-on experiences that were most valuable. Renee said that her assistantship experience was "way more important" to her professional development than courses, a sentiment shared by many participants. Leigh shared that her courses informed her understanding of institutions beyond her own experiences, but it was her assistantships that shaped her professional focus. Similarly, Lindsay shared that her program did not "have a class to teach you how to relate to people in a way that you can get things done in a complicated, convoluted network of people, but really, that's what the class should be on."

Assistantships provided opportunities for participants to explore functional areas, which influenced career paths. Colette used her time in graduate school to explore multiple departments through employment and internships, which helped her feel more confident moving into her full-time role as an advisor. Antonio noted that his internship in student activities led to a search for full-time student activities positions. Sheldon used his graduate assistantship to clarify his career goals and noted that "a two year program isn't the be all end all preparation for student affairs" and that he realized how little he knew once he was in a professional position at a new institution. Graduate school taught Isabel to be intentional in her work environment and to understand her circle of influence.

Most participants obtained master's degrees and shared that practical, hands-on experiences provided the most opportunity for growth and development, regardless of program focus. Assistantships allowed participants to explore new functional areas and gain a better understanding of full-time student affairs opportunities and structures.

Politics

Politics and learning how to navigate institutions influenced the job task and career decisions and workplace expectations of some participants. Many participants identified politics as a skill they have learned to develop in their professional roles, and that it poses a challenge for accomplishing their personal or professional goals. Navigating political systems has also been a source of frustration, as implementation of change or new systems is delayed.

Alisia stated, "one of the hardest things I struggle with in academia, even as a student, is how political everything is." Colette has learned how to navigate "political games" which has made her job easier, but added that it was challenging as a new professional because "politics go into every decision and you have to have proof about what works, and have someone in upper

management take your side to fight for you because you can't fight for yourself." Annie shared that she has stopped "playing the game" in recent months on her current campus, which is religiously affiliated, where "this is the way it's always been done" creates unwritten rules about behavior and who can lead efforts for change. Annie has not observed additional difficulty in performing her current job with her new approach, but has started to search for new job opportunities at institutions without religious affiliation. Lindsay noted that unwritten rules can force employees to "be sneaky about your work. You have to frame it in a way that the university will hear it." Colette had a different perspective on politics than most participants, as she shared that a mentor told her to keep her head down and mouth shut. This seems to be more of a survival tactic, but Colette feels this has been really good advice for her personal career advancement and having professional relationships on campus. However, this does not position her to be a change agent on campus in the way that other participants desired.

In addition to understanding the broader campus political climate, participants recognized their own positional power or lack thereof. Lindsay reflected, "Even if I had good ideas or I was willing to work really hard, in an entry level position I lacked the power and budgetary control to make said ideas a reality." Lindsay forecasted that American higher education is going to hit a crisis point, and solving that will depend on "who is willing to listen to you, how much clout you have, what your relationships with different people are like, and whether you can get people on board with your ideas." Positional power also facilitates job opportunities, Lindsay noted: "positions are dependent on who you have relationships with and whether or not they like you and whether or not you are needed at a certain point in time and what you're able to do in certain environments."

An additional component to politics is the ability to understand departmental and institutional context. Lindsay recognizes the change from a focus on individual roles to a value on hierarchy in her new institution, noting that longevity and performance of expected roles to receive favor is what is important. She shared that changing institutions requires building connections all over again, as you have to learn a new environment and meet the individuals in the roles with which you work. Forming new relationships can be more difficult later in one's career, and that "you can't go in and perform the exact same job functions, even if you have direct experience."

Participants noted that understanding and navigating politics is an on-going challenge. Some participants noted that their early roles in student affairs lacked positional power to be effective beyond their own roles. Understanding personal skills and the value of professional networks, especially after changing roles or institutions, was significant for some participants and influenced their outcome expectations.

Supervision

Participants identified challenging situations with supervisors that impacted their outcome expectations in student affairs. Several participants identified supervisors who led them to question their choice of student affairs due to a lack of supervision, unclear or unrealistic expectations, micromanagement, or a dramatic shift in styles from prior supervisors. For example, Robin had a supervisor who was reluctant to hand over responsibilities and Robin now trusts her instincts about individuals and offices and is cautious when applying to new positions. Robin is more aware of questions to ask and things to look for to signify the type of work environment she could be entering. Betsy shared that her job search approach has evolved from caring about the position to the people and environment in which the position is housed.

Catherine now looks for signs of organizational communication when exploring potential work environments to learn more about the supervisory style and department culture.

Several participants changed positions due to supervision or learned how to best manage their relationship with their supervisor. Isabel noted that a supervisor who did not support her led to considering leaving student affairs entirely, not just that position. Annie took a position at another institution that was a demotion just to get away from her director while Jamie changed to a new department within six months to avoid a "completely incompetent" boss. In trying to work with challenging supervisors, the concept of "managing up" was mentioned by several participants who learned that they needed to be intentional in their interactions with supervisors. Catherine and Annie both learned how to share information with their supervisors in order to do their jobs effectively.

Supervisors who cared about fostering career growth and development were appreciated by many participants. Sheldon felt selfish noting that his favorite past supervisors cared about his professional development and career growth, believing that those supervisors had so many other competing responsibilities that the fact that supervisors were taking time to focus on him was somehow something he did not deserve. Leigh shared,

> I've been lucky to have good supervisors. I hear stories about not being supported, or ideas aren't heard. For the most part I haven't been told no. My boss always said that I came in very green, but she did a lot to ask me about what I wanted to be doing, my plans, being available. I asked a ton of questions in the beginning because I didn't want to be wrong. I've worked with really supportive coworkers, which is really nice.

Supervisors affected participants' outcome expectation through micromanagement, a lack of supervision, or unclear expectations, and several changed positions due to supervision. Participants identified good supervisors as those who fostered growth, focused on development,

and had reasonable expectations in ways that were tailored for each individual employee, in support of their job descriptions and departmental objectives.

Professional outcome expectations were influenced by college experiences, initial and on-going experiences in student affairs, graduate programs and assistantships, politics, and supervision. The next section discusses personal goals.

Personal Goals

Individual career plans can change dramatically over the course of one's childhood and early adulthood, and college is an opportunity to accelerate those changes and explore areas previously unknown. Childhood career aspirations of participants focused on choice goals, such as marine biologist, president, paleontologist, acting, fighter pilot, chef, doctor, astronaut, and teacher. These career goals were based on professions seen in books, movies, family, or media. None of the participants identified student affairs as their childhood career goal, which is not surprising. Student affairs is a field that is commonly unknown prior to college and several participants identified a shift in their goals based on their college experiences related to student affairs. Several participants identified the rapid change in career plans from long-held goals to student affairs in a matter of a few years through research, coursework, exposure to new professions and opportunities, internships, and campus involvement. This section discusses participant career goals after college, student affairs job searches, leaving student affairs, and side hustles.

Career Goals in Student Affairs

College provided an opportunity for participants to explore career interests, with all participants eventually entering student affairs. Initial professional goals in student affairs focused on obtaining employment in desired functional areas, often in areas familiar to the

participants. Subsequent job searches focused more on specific achievement goals in new positions and at new institutions, rather than "just" being employed in student affairs. Considerations and goals for student affairs job searches are discussed in this section.

Goals for Initial Student Affairs Job Searches

Early student affairs job searches focused on geography and functional area. Several participants had specific desired or required locations for employment post-graduation and focused their searches on those regions, encompassing multiple functional areas. Some locations were selected based on family or professional relationships, but most were chosen based on romantic partners' employment or education location. As an exception, Renee initially searched for positions at institutions far away from family as she was working through her coming out process, which limited options as her professional connections were Christian schools in California, near her family. Many other participants explored residence life which provided housing and an opportunity to live in areas with a high cost of living.

Participants rarely thought beyond position titles and what they wanted to do for initial positions within student affairs, continuing to focus on choice goals of functional areas, rather than performance goals related to achievement within their chosen field. For example, Annie shared, "I wasn't thinking about earning power, sustainability, or the things I'm thinking about now, 10 years in the field. I was thinking about what do I want to do." Annie shared that she accepted her first offer and "didn't see why I shouldn't take it. I didn't have the capacity then to know if it was a good fit for me, or if I really wanted to live there on campus. No one was helping me sort through that in the way that I try to do with students I mentor now." Similarly, Catherine shared that she first looked for any job she could get, but over time has gotten pickier

as she has learned what she needs, and is now considering different functional areas, moving up in positions, and her pension.

Most participants conducted job searches to secure their first student affairs positions, but not all. Robin remained in contact with individuals from her undergraduate institution and was encouraged to apply to an opening at a different institution after one had changed schools. She was hired in January while she completed her master's degree and her job was held until she graduated, eliminating the search process. Betsy was already working full-time in graduate school and continued in her position once she graduated. A few participants were offered positions by individuals they knew. These approaches were far different than most participants who shared that there was a feeling of competition and pressure among their graduate school classmates regarding the search process, including national conferences, on-campus interviews, and offers, as they were all completing their degrees at the same time and often seeking out the same opportunities.

Initial student affairs job searches and goals focused on functional area and geographic location. Some participants were tethered to certain areas based on personal relationships, while many did not have such factors to consider in their decision-making process, other than personal preferences for functional area, type of work, or geographic location.

Goals for Subsequent Student Affairs Job Searches

Changes in relationship status, lessons learned from first positions, and clarification of personal aspirations led to changes in job search factors and career goals for subsequent positions in student affairs. Most participants identified that southern California (where the study took place) was a desired work location and that job searches and career decisions were geared toward moving to or remaining in the area.

Family and relationships were strong considerations for many participants beyond the first job search. Renee focused later searches on her community, now that she had come out, and getting different experiences than residence life. A new partner, and now children, keep her focus on local institutions that would not uproot her family and also have the potential to pay for college tuition later. Several participants shared that their romantic relationships strongly influenced, dictated, or initiated their later job searches due to breakups or committed relationships. For example, Sheldon noted that this changed his approach to job searching, sharing, "I could have left LA, but WE couldn't have left LA," intimating that his partner was committed to their job and that career decisions needed to be made jointly and likely within their current geographic area.

Work environments and experiences have led to changing career goals and jobs along the way for those in this study. For example, once Jamie was in his desired geographic area, he used informational interviews to broaden his campus network in an attempt to find any position, regardless of functional area without having to change institutions. This was in contrast to most participants who used their first professional position to narrow their focus or identify new areas of interest. However, most participants identified that their initial work experiences informed future position goals. Leigh, having worked as a generalist at a professional school, focused on finding a position at a nearby state institution to provide a new experience at a different institution type and focus on one functional area. Catherine explored public institutions due to higher salaries than the private school she had been at, while Robin sought out small private institutions near family instead of the larger Midwestern institution at which she had been employed.

Most participants had additional criteria and goals for their second and subsequent job searches that were not considered in the first search. Being located in southern California was a factor for many participants, along with proximity to family or partners.

Current Job Goals and Considerations

Initial job searches focused on functional area, geography, and just obtaining employment. Many participants now aim to remain at their current institution in order to maintain stability in their lives, though some noted that a lack of advancement opportunity at their current institutions would force them to eventually look elsewhere. For example, Annie prefers to stay in her present position at her current institution and negotiate her role and responsibilities to expand her skillset, accrue more time in her role, maximize her campus relationships, pursue a doctorate, and make herself more competitive for a future position rather than make a lateral move to a new institution right now. Annie would also like to be at a non-faith-based institution as her "values no longer line up with conservative Christian. It's made me who I am but I'm ready to go."

Finances are a stronger factor than in earlier searches for most participants. Several indicated they would remain in their current roles to maintain a steady income, take advantage of institutional benefits, or to satisfy loan forgiveness requirements, regardless of personal satisfaction with their roles or institutions. Jamie, who is planning to benefit from loan forgiveness, shared, "The amount of discretionary funds I have at the end of the pay periods is not very much. I'm aware that more money doesn't necessarily mean more happiness or make problems go away, but more money is more money and more money would be nice." Several participants shared a desire to own a home but cited the high home prices in southern California make that prospect almost impossible. A few participants live with their parents in order to save

money, while also providing some caregiving to their elders. Renee, who is now out and has a partner and children, focuses on stability for her family rather than career aspirations, noting,

> Getting a promotion isn't as important to me now. I think I can stick it out for a lot longer in this role without the accolades and financial piece. I have enough enjoyment outside of work that I enjoy going to work, but it's not the only thing giving me purpose. I don't feel like I need to keep moving up as quickly because I have other things going on.

Renee anticipates remaining in her current role for 5-7 years in order to take advantage of tuition benefits to pursue her doctorate, eventually becoming a dean. She does not want to uproot her family until her doctorate is complete.

Participants in at least their second professional student affairs position value remaining at their current institutions in a way not addressed in their first job searches. The reasons for remaining in current locations include maximizing existing personal and professional relationships, minimizing change for themselves and any family members, taking advantage of student loan forgiveness programs, and pursuing additional degrees.

Future Job Search Goals and Considerations

Job search strategies and factors have evolved for most participants. For example, Sheldon shared that he was seeking perfection in his early job searches, but realized it was not likely to happen and followed the advice received from faculty that he now shares with graduate students: "Right job, right location, right boss, right coworkers, right job responsibilities – pick one." Many participants have adjusted search considerations from known functional areas or institution types to include a broader range of choices, balancing work considerations with personal goals, including family, partners, and remuneration. For example, Annie would like her next role to be part of a team where she can focus on one task, allowing her to move up and make more money, noting that when she started in student affairs she was "all for the students" and now is more pragmatic. Several participants identified an increased scrutiny on supervision

and department dynamics for potential employment opportunities, something not mentioned for initial job searches.

Personal goals within SCCT are broken into performance goals that focus on career achievement with specific titles and timelines, and choice goals that are more general about working in a particular field or functional area. Several participants were able to identify performance goals for their student affairs careers, perhaps due to a combination of experience, a better understanding of what roles entail, and an idea of what roles and tasks they do not want to perform. Most participants clearly articulated a goal of moving up into new roles in student affairs, such as assistant director, director, or dean of students. Sheldon, in contrast, is reluctant to be in any position where "people hate you," noting that he does not want to be a vice president, president, or dean of students. Lindsay was the most ambitious about her career goals, stating, "I feel like some people are humble and say they'd really love to be an associate director or a director, but I would love to be a vice president and making decisions all day long." However, she was also the only participant to identify a goal outside of student affairs, as she would prefer to be a vice president in enrollment services or other non-student affairs area.

Many participants identified children and aging family members as a current or anticipated future consideration for their careers. Several female participants shared a desire to be mothers. Many talked with current women in higher education about how they negotiate their professional roles and motherhood but expressed concern about how to manage careers and be good mothers. As an example, Isabel identified family and her partner as the largest factors to consider in the future and needs to figure out what she is going to give up in order to begin a degree program.

Participants identified expanding search criteria in order to find a position that allows for balancing priorities outside of work, including family, location, and stress. Goals changed from the first search, and continue to change for many participants, shifting from wanting any job to having specific job titles and career progression in mind, even if those goals are long-term, not just for the next position. Several participants expressed a desire to become parents and are considering how to balance professional and personal aspirations.

Leaving Student Affairs

Just because participants remain in student affairs does not mean that they have not considered leaving the field or that they have enjoyed all of their time in student affairs roles. In fact, most participants readily shared what they do not like about the field or their roles within it. Many participants questioned the long-term viability of working in the field due to a changing legal landscape within higher education in the U.S., challenging work environments, and a perceived sense of being undervalued and underpaid, and were able to easily identify former student affairs colleagues who left the field for those reasons.

An increased focus on legal issues and heightened mental health needs within higher education has changed the environment for student affairs professionals. As an example, Isabel noted that the increase in mental health issues and violence in the world is impacting younger student affairs students, resulting in a lack of resiliency and grit and having to address those issues with her new staff members. Isabel shared that this has led to reflecting on her own path in the field or whether her involvement in a non-profit could be a professional avenue, not just a volunteer opportunity, as it allows her to address topics in a different way than her student affairs role permits. Robin shared that she and some colleagues are now worried about being sued for doing their jobs. Robin noted, "So many things are happening across the country. It makes me

wonder if this is just where we are in our profession now. Everyone is hypercritical of everything that we do. Can you win? I have friends who are engineers and they're not worrying about any of these kinds of concerns that we have going on in higher ed right now."

Participants identified supervisors and work schedules as a source of frustration. Leigh and Catherine had colleagues leave the field because of their supervisors. Many participants identified that while they were more easily able to work evenings and weekends when they were new professionals due to fewer commitments in their personal lives, they are now seeking career options with more standard work hours to allow for better work-life balance. Several participants mentioned negative experiences with supervisors early in their careers but credited continuing in the profession to supportive colleagues and partners who encouraged persistence in the field and exploration of different functional roles or institutions.

Almost all participants felt underpaid or undervalued in student affairs, and their examples took many forms. Colette noted that one institution used part-time employees to fill positions which led to individuals not staying for long. Betsy shared that many graduate school classmates have begun leaving student affairs after two years due to lack of opportunity within the field and the ability to transfer their skills in other areas. Despite working in the field for several years, Catherine is just about to receive her first raise, unlike friends doing leadership in business making three times what she does with benefits and stock options. Catherine shared, "Not that it's about the money, but we gotta live," and added, "I think that we are often asked to do more with less," in terms of salary, resources, and support, something most participants shared. Several participants noted perceived lack of advancement opportunity within student affairs leads to individuals leaving institutions for better roles in other departments, other institutions, or other sectors, which can cause problems and a loss of institutional knowledge.

Antonio said, "I get why people burn out and leave. Some days I wake up and say, 'I'm not paid enough to do this!' It's hard for me. I don't feel like I'm being compensated well enough, whether it be title or monetarily, for the work that I do." Antonio has considered options outside of student affairs, like some participants, stating, "I could get a job doing something I hate and make twice as much money as I do now, but I can't get up every morning and hate my job." Holly cited that the turnover can bring new ideas, but also includes the loss of momentum and support mechanisms on campus. Renee noted a lack of earning potential among the limited opportunities for better titles, adding that a supervisor once offered a better title with no associated pay raise. Leigh appreciates being in career services instead of other areas in which she believes burnout is more common, adding that many of her friends have transitioned to more 9-5 positions and areas in academic advising and study abroad after working in student activities. Leigh observed that "the further you go up, the more is expected of you, and the more you have to handle with little resources and little time."

Some participants have not considered other career options in part, due to fear. Sheldon stated, "It's a fear of the unknown. I've looked at human resources jobs, but I don't want to do that. I've looked at conflict resolution in a corporate setting, but I don't want to do that." Sheldon has also thought about being a life coach, knowing someone who pays $300 an hour for a life coach. Renee shared a fear of change but stated she has found fulfillment within her family and her community, not needing to find as much fulfillment from work as she may have earlier in her career. Other participants have contemplated changing fields but feel a sense of loyalty to student affairs. However, many are drawn to the earning potential outside of student affairs. Lindsay considered educational technology or business but was depressed by the idea of change, believing there would be a huge disconnect from her values and those of business. Annie shared,

"I was almost a little bit judgy of my cohort mates who have left [student affairs]. I think about a third of us are still in the field. I never gave myself the opportunity to think maybe something else could be a good fit [for me] too." She gave the example of one friend left student affairs for nursing and now has improved earning potential and a much different, and more flexible, work schedule. Robin is unsure what she would do if she left higher education and recognizes that she has transferrable skills that could be applied in higher education consulting or working in a search firm, but notes that it is "not really who I am."

Robin's comments about her commitment to student affairs capture the ideas from many participants: despite an especially rough year for herself and her colleagues, there was no other position posted that made it worth leaving her current job. She noted that there would need to be an external pull such as position or partner, not an internal push of seemingly manageable or tolerable disappointment and frustration, to instigate a change. As a result, Robin said she was unsure of her next step, and that it might be time to leave student affairs but chose to remain in her position for another year. Robin's observation is that others who left their jobs are still unemployed months later, a situation she does not want for herself. This sentiment about changing jobs or leaving student affairs was mentioned by many participants. Antonio shared a similar thought, adding, "I know that the things I'm good at, the skills I'm good at, are all jobs that more or less pay the same as student affairs. There hasn't been anything that's leapt out that I think I'd enjoy as much or pay what I think I'm worth."

Many participants made conscious decisions to be educated in and work in student affairs, and some of those individuals noted that they would like to obtain a doctorate in order to secure higher level positions within the field. However, not all participants have or want student affairs-specific degrees. Jake is interested in pursuing a master's degree in counseling or social

work to further his career in student affairs, giving him the option to potentially work at a community college because salaries are higher there than at four-year institutions. Holly was the one participant who does not have career goals in general, let alone within student affairs, noting that if she and her husband have children, she will stop working. Holly was not surprised that people leave student affairs, as she sees many recent college graduates who are unsure of future plans pursue student affairs and eventually figure out what they like, which is not student affairs. Alisia was an exception to the group of participants who discuss remaining student affairs practitioners. Alisia entered student affairs through happenstance and wants to pursue a Ph.D. and become faculty in American Studies, the focus for both her bachelor's and master's degrees.

Several participants shared that they have jobs in addition to their full-time student affairs positions, including food delivery, ride-share driving, and vacation planning. The participants have no plans to leave student affairs for these additional jobs, or "side hustles" as participants described them, and these additional sources of income also affect their self-efficacy. Sheldon and Jamie are both contemplating entrepreneurial efforts in addition to their current side hustles doing food delivery, including real estate and a coffee cart. Catherine works as a travel agent providing extra money while allowing her to continue working in higher education. Catherine added that she is using many of her student affairs skills in that role, including advising, assessing, and planning. She noted, "It wasn't that I was greedy, wanting to find another job, but it is about my feeling of self-worth. I know I'm good at this. It's a little extra money and I still do what I love. Higher education pays my bills. This vacation planning provides a little commission which allow me to save or vacation. This is contributing to why I'm happy." Both Sheldon and Jamie appreciate that they can put in as much effort into these entrepreneurial ventures as they want and be paid accordingly. Jamie noted, "I like that the more

you do, the more you get paid. Whereas I could do the absolute minimum or go above and beyond [in student affairs] and it's the same pay scale – I get paid the same check every two weeks."

Participants largely felt that leaving student affairs was not their current plan, despite easily identifying areas of improvement within the field. Increased mental health issues and violence, challenging work environments, and feeling undervalued and underpaid were all reasons participants would consider leaving student affairs, but fear of the unknown, not having explored other career possibilities, or finding satisfaction outside of work keeps these participants in their current roles or in student affairs writ large. Some felt a sense of loyalty to the field and have judged individuals who left for other opportunities. As participants consider their future goals, several identified obtaining a doctorate to move into senior-level roles, which might indicate a commitment to remaining in student affairs.

Chapter 4 described participant responses to interview questions about early career plans, messages received about the viability of those options or other career choices, opportunities to engage in career exploration, and professional experiences in student affairs positions. These responses were grouped into categories based on Light's Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT; 2012) and described feelings of self-efficacy, outcome expectation, and personal goals. The three categories addressed on-going reflection by participants on the messages they received, the knowledge they gained from their experiences, their plans for careers in student affairs, and the decision-making process throughout their careers. Participants addressed how confident they are in their ability to obtain and succeed in student affairs positions, how they planned and will plan their student affairs career paths, and what has influenced their decision-making process over

time. The next chapter addresses how participant feedback relates to the SCCT models, as well

as opportunities for future research.

CHAPTER FIVE – DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND CONCLUSION

Understanding the decision-making process used when considering career options and how those decisions manifest can inform practice for individuals, organizations, and professions. This study explored individual paths and decision-making among student affairs professionals in an attempt to identify themes in career decision-making. A better understanding of decision-making among student affairs professionals can inform practice for individuals, organizations, and the profession.

This chapter provides an interpretation of the findings discussed in Chapter 4, relates them to the theoretical framework, Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT; Lent, 2012) and extant literature, and identifies implications for theory, research, and practice. Fifteen interviews were conducted with student affairs professionals in at least their second full-time position in higher education. The intent of the current study was to learn more about career decision-making among student affairs professionals who have already changed positions, allowing for reflection on career decision-making in student affairs. In this chapter data are explored relative to their significance and answers the following research question: How do student affairs professionals make career decisions? Data were analyzed and interpreted through a SCCT lens focusing on three variables related to career development: self-efficacy beliefs, outcome expectations, and personal goals.

Discussion

Themes that emerged include timing of discovering student affairs, value placed on graduate degrees, frustrations related to compensation and opportunities, politics, shifting priorities, and thoughts of leaving the profession. Student affairs as a profession should be more intentional about recruitment and preparation of new(er) professionals and career progression.

Leaving entry to the field to happenstance can be risky, as it creates a workforce of individuals who need employment and are available, rather than individuals who are passionate about and interested in student affairs. Supervisors and colleagues play a large role in student affairs administrators' experiences and career considerations, and most participants shifted their focus from finding satisfaction from their jobs to balancing or prioritizing life outside of work.

Findings About Individual Choices

The current study explored factors in decision-making related to pursuing and continuing within the student affairs profession. Participants discussed issues that relate to individual choices and the context of the field itself. Individual considerations revolved around job search criteria, sources of support, and understanding career options. Themes about individual characteristics, constraints, or decisions include educational and professional experiences, search criteria, support, and lack of awareness of or limited career options within student affairs. Issues within the profession include a feeling of being underpaid and overworked, challenges with supervision, and higher education not embracing transferrable skills. Numerous points from the current study align with findings from prior studies about student affairs career decision-making, and others warrant additional exploration.

Exposure to student affairs departments and programs generally led to positive mentoring and learning experiences in college or immediately following college. These experiences resulted in changes in all three areas of Lent's Social Cognitive Career Theory (2012): increased *self-efficacy* about student affairs, and a change in *personal goals* and *outcome expectations* to include student affairs. Several participants shared that they did not know how to explore new functional areas, did not feel competitive applying for positions in new functional areas, or had

not considered a change of institution type. Many participants felt frustrated by their seemingly limited available options.

The current study attempted to understand student affairs professionals' paths and possible mechanisms to support career development and awareness of work in the field as a whole, focusing specifically on career decision-making of participants at all points of their careers. This group of participants had diverse gender identities, sexual identities, marital/relationship statuses, ethnicities, ages, years of experience in student affairs, functional areas, institution types attended and employed, and position titles. Most participants increased their self-efficacy, or confidence in their professional abilities, despite negative interactions with supervisors or challenging environments, though some had decreased self-efficacy from these experiences. Personal self-efficacy influenced future personal goals, such as next job or career aspirations, rather than prompting individuals to take action about their current positions, such as leaving. Participants did not necessarily opt to leave student affairs as a result of their self-efficacy, as they felt they were still competent student affairs professionals, but they did identify that they would seek out specific environments in future job searches to support their confidence. Individuals adjusted their outcome expectations as they continued in their careers, relying less on their jobs as the primary source of happiness or satisfaction and focusing time and effort on life outside of work and achievements in their personal lives.

Participants' career and individual position outcome expectations were shaped by experiences with supervisors, colleagues, and observations of their work areas and institutional politics. This aligns with extant literature that states that individuals in student affairs may make career decisions based on perceived opportunity (e.g., Evans, 1988), supervision (e.g., Cilente et al., 2006), and quality of professional and institutional work life (e.g., Rosser & Javinar, 2003),

and that peer relationships can affect professional satisfaction (e.g., Tull et al., 2009). Socialization from family, graduate programs, and jobs affected participants' outcome expectation and personal goals throughout their careers, which goes beyond the existing research focused on professionals in student affairs (e.g., Hirschy et al., 2015).

The current study uniquely contributes to existing literature in that it focused on student affairs practitioners without regard to their functional area, career preparation, position level, or identity characteristics. Participants shared that their college and post-college involvement made them aware of student affairs as a profession, that graduate school was strongly encouraged in order to secure a full-time student affairs position, and that their families and work environments influence their career plans, which aligns with previous research on the subject that had narrower participant identity focus (e.g., Bender, 2009; Creamer et al., 2001; Komives et al., 2003; Overland & Rentz, 2004; Roberts, 2001). Participants discussed early career goals, experiences that influenced their career paths both in college and in professional positions, and factors affecting current and future career considerations. This study is different from prior work as it does not eliminate participants due to any identity characteristic other than individuals being in their second professional student affairs position, yet themes from identity-specific research were identified in this study.

Participants in this study stated that they focused on perceived supervisory styles, work environment, and colleagues when considering their second and subsequent roles. The individuals adjusted their outcome expectations, specifically what they believed were reasonable outcomes for their experiences, over the course of their careers based on experiences with supervisors and peers. Position goals, such as job titles and functional areas, were also informed by participants' self-efficacy - how confident they were in their own skills and abilities.

Individuals were focused on obtaining professional positions within student affairs for their first jobs. These goals for future roles shifted from choice goals, such as being in student affairs, to performance goals where participants identified specific titles, paths, and timelines for their careers. Participants continued to adjust their goals based on past experiences, feedback from others, their feelings of self-efficacy and ability to achieve, and outcome expectation. Each participant changed their goals in different ways, remaining in or leaving their institution, functional area, or role, and was able to clarify their personal factors for current and future career plans in student affairs. For many participants this clarity included paths for advancement, but for some it provided an opportunity to no longer consider some higher-level roles, as the demands of those positions did not align with desired tasks or scrutiny or support personal goals for life outside of work.

While the prior sections outlined individual considerations affecting career decision-making, there are issues within the profession of student affairs that influence career decision-making, as well. For participants in this study, these included feelings of being underpaid and overworked, a lack of decision-making power, supervisory challenges, and a limited ability to apply transferable skills within student affairs.

Almost all participants expressed frustration about compensation, stating that it was low compared to the amount of work expected of them, both in their first professional positions as well as subsequent positions. For many, finding a higher paying job was a goal for their next job search, as well as working fewer or no evenings and weekends. Several participants noted that they wanted to start having children and entry-level student affairs roles were not necessarily conducive to having a family both for time commitments expected and lower salary. In addition

to higher pay and more consistent hours, participants wanted positions with more decision-making power and autonomy.

Many participants stated that supervisory relationships were a source of frustration. Supervisors were noted to be micromanagers, completely absent, or provide unclear expectations. Some individuals in this study had left positions due to poor supervision, and others had at least begun searching for new opportunities because of their supervisors.

Student affairs as a field aims to have students develop transferrable skills outside of the classroom through various activities, as leadership, communication, teamwork, and organizational skills can be applied beyond the collegiate setting (e.g., Astin, 1993; Kuh, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). However, participants shared that student affairs administrators, including their current and former supervisors, tend to only hire individuals with experience within the current functional area without considering applicants who have worked in other areas of student affairs, no matter how transferable one's skills may be. This was disheartening for some participants who wanted to explore different functional areas in their careers. Several participants stated they felt pigeonholed in current functional areas and were having difficulty changing into new functional realms, despite having similar experiences and appropriate skills gained in student affairs. In addition to wishing employers and supervisors to be more open to individuals with transferrable skills and experiences, participants wanted to have the skills to better translate their experiences into new work settings in order to be more competitive applicants. Participants in this study often began their professional careers in familiar functional areas from college and graduate school and some remained in those same areas because they did not know other options or could not obtain positions in new areas, which is a finding that aligns with extant literature (Liddell et al., 2014).

Turnover in student support positions can negatively impact a student's college experience through disruptions in services (Tull et al., 2009). In addition to the loss of institutional memory and personal relationships when a student affairs practitioner departs, there is equal challenge when a new student affairs professional arrives and is not prepared to address local priorities and customs while maximizing student support. Improving the preparation of student affairs practitioners to include how to address national and local trends and issues, in addition to the traditional student affairs context, while also incorporating personal career development topics may result in better integration into roles and improved performance by student affairs practitioners and minimize the disruption to student services.

Implications for Theory

As discussed briefly in Chapter 1, and more thoroughly in Chapter 2, Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) focuses on how individuals exercise self-direction with three personal variables in regard to their career development: self-efficacy beliefs, outcome expectations, and personal goals (Lent, 2012). Social Cognitive Career Theory is especially interesting as it does not apply to particular demographic groups or segments of the population; it can be applied across all individuals, no matter, and inclusive of, their characteristics, including personal attributes, learning and socialization experiences, and environmental factors (Lent, 2012). Previous studies of career decision-making in student affairs focused on specific experiences or defined identity factors, including position levels (e.g., Biddix, 2013; Young, 2007), identity groups (e.g., Biddix, 2011; Biddix et al., 2012; Blackhurst et al., 1998a), or those who have left the field (e.g., Sagaria & Johnsrud, 1992; Sandeen, 2001). Aside from holding two professional roles in student affairs, the current study did not focus on other identity or experience traits of participants.

The current study focused on understanding the factors influencing career decision-making of student affairs professionals who have held at least two professional positions in the field and used Lent's Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT; 2012) as the theoretical framework. Initially this framework appeared to be useful because career decision-making was the focus of the current study. Participants' decision-making factors included the reflection cycles included in SCCT, which mimic the student affairs and general job search processes. Individuals had experiences within roles, departments, and institutions, reflected on how they perceived they performed, listened to feedback from others, all while considering their personal situations such as family or partners and experiences in student affairs with colleagues, supervisors, and students align with existing student affairs literature (i.e., Rhoades et al., 2008; Strayhorn, 2009; Tierney, 1997; Winston & Creamer, 1997). The SCCT framework was used to develop the interview questions for this study.

Having reviewed the data, SCCT is generally helpful to describe student affairs career decision-making, at least through the second professional search. Social Cognitive Career Theory can be applied to a diverse population and allows for personal contexts and experiences to inform how each participant reflects on the messaging they receive and their experiences. Participants generally shifted from being concerned about working in a particular functional area or geographic location for initial jobs, dependent on personal priorities, to considering other individuals in later job searches, such as romantic partners or other family members. Non-white participants identified wanting to remain near or continue living with family members more frequently. The reflective and cyclical format of the SCCT models mimics many of the student affairs development theories, though the specific SCCT models do not necessarily need to be differentiated from one another within a student affairs context.

Within this study, participants had varying levels of support for pursuing their goals. Some had specific goals and aspirations told to them, while others were left to their own curiosity and interests. The SCCT Interest model aligned with this study's findings: individuals learned about opportunities, tried activities, and adjusted their self-efficacy and outcome expectations based on those experiences. As for the SCCT Choice model, most participants' choices followed the SCCT expectations: individuals responded to barriers for advancement, geographic preferences, and familial obligations to make their choices for their futures. Participants may not have closely followed the SCCT Performance model early in their careers, as many individuals self-identified as over-achievers or rule-followers. However, many participants in their second, third, or later position are now enduring with a course of action or doing enough not to be fired, rather than necessarily excelling in their positions. This is in full alignment with the Performance model, as remaining in a role does not necessarily reflect high achievement. The SCCT Satisfaction model did not have clear application with this study's data, as many participants indicated that as they progressed in their careers, they valued work satisfaction less than they did earlier in their careers. Instead, these individuals relied on accomplishments outside of work to feel satisfied, no matter the alignment their jobs had with personal goals, skill development, or other satisfaction indicators that were more significant earlier in their careers. These participants' experiences fall both within and outside of the SCCT models.

No matter the *choice*, *interest*, *task performance*, or *satisfaction* models of the SCCT, the process by which the participants considered their self-efficacy, outcome expectation, or personal goals was similar: they received messages from their environment, they had experiences, they received feedback and reflected, and decided what was next for their careers.

These choices and goals were largely shaped by their self-efficacy, and individuals started to put their lives outside of work ahead of career aspirations the longer they were in the profession.

Areas of Future Research

Continuing to apply this theoretical framework across varied populations will only serve to clarify its applicability while also identifying approaches within student affairs in particular that may support career-related decision-making amongst professionals. A recently published meta-analysis about SCCT described subsequent studies that incorporated SCCT and the ways that self-efficacy and outcome expectation varied by population group (Lent & Brown, 2019). These observations could be used to inform student affairs practice and support career exploration among students and staff. Originally published in 1994 and revised in 2012, Lent's Social Cognitive Career Theory could likely benefit from a more contemporary participant group beyond those in this study or past studies. More focused applications of this theory have been conducted with first-generation college students and other minoritized populations (Lent & Brown, 2019), but the diverse nature of student affairs professionals may require a revision to SCCT's research population to identify more contemporary approaches to social cognitive career theory for student affairs administrators to best understand its utility within the profession. Changing social and political climates, technology, and modalities of interaction and instruction may also influence how individuals consider career decisions compared to when SCCT was most recently revised, potentially affecting its use.

However, it is not possible to simply relate the findings of this study to major policy or funding decisions because of its small, qualitative nature and the lack of a major or significant theme related to student affairs operations being affected by staff turnover. The limited nature of this qualitative study does not provide findings significant enough to warrant new or modified

theory, but it does support the existing literature about career decision-making (e.g., Biddix, 2013; Cilente et al., 2006; Liddell et al., 2014; Rosser & Javinar, 2003; Tull et al., 2009; Young, 2007). However, research projects like these are helpful because they can identify trends, talking points, and areas for improvement within the field even when the sample sizes are smaller.

Opportunity exists to explore additional difference among participants, including longevity and number of positions held within the field, position type and level within a student affairs hierarchy, and personal circumstances. There were differences amongst this participant group in terms of support during youth for college-going or specific career aspirations, socioeconomic status, and involvement levels in college. Individuals in their second position are likely closer to entry-level positions than senior- or midlevel-positions, compared to those in their third or fourth roles, which are likely midlevel positions or higher. This may also explain differences in how career decisions were made and the institutional and field factors that were considered, due to exposure to or familiarity with specific issues. It is entirely likely that these participants will adjust their self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and personal goals with additional experiences, feedback, and time. Following up with these individuals at a later date could demonstrate how those further along in their student affairs career make career decisions.

This research confirmed some anecdotal evidence about unclear pathways to and through the field and affirmed the literature's findings that, indeed, some people stay in the field and some people leave, which is common in all fields. The nature of entry to and progression through student affairs is largely through happenstance. As student affairs professionals and those supporting them, we want to address if we can learn to be more intentional with regard to career exploration, development, and progression. If intentionality can be infused into these processes, the profession, and ultimately students, will benefit.

Implications for Practice

Entering, remaining in, or leaving the field may be influenced by a number of factors, according to the literature and also the participants of this study. The present study supported extant literature and philosophies regarding student affairs career decision-making but did not generate new findings that should inform revolutionary field-wide theory. There was consistent recognition by participants that information about career progression was scattered, had varying availability, accuracy, and reliability, and was bestowed informally usually if one was lucky enough to have a supervisor or higher education point of contact to serve as a professional concierge.

As a result of the coincidental nature of the ways in which study participants gained information they wanted, perhaps one of the most meaningful findings is the need to "formalize the informal" information that participants identified. These informal topics are integrated in daily work but are often omitted from professional preparation programs. The aim would be to codify and make clear some of the work-culture aspects of student affairs, share the typical milestones, issues, and information needed for different position levels or functional areas, and disseminate "talking points" to student affairs professionals and higher education and student affairs preparation program faculty and staff.

Associations can maximize functional area and position-level communities within their organizations to serve as information dissemination points as well as sources of support for professionals. Institutions or departments can formalize information sharing about roles or functional areas through workshops or other professional development events where current staff on campus can share their current tasks, issues, and paths to their roles. Individuals need to capitalize on their own networks as sources of career information and support, whether they are

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graduate school classmates, former colleagues, individuals at their current institution, or people they met at conferences or other professional development activities. The more people an individual has available, the more information they will have about nuances between institution types, structures, functional areas, and roles, which will assist them in identifying and pursuing new opportunities.

The inconsistent nature of information availability and dissemination to potential student affairs professionals is worthy of additional focus. Further, the individuals pursuing careers or at least positions in student affairs are primarily those who have been involved in student leadership roles. It is worth exploring how else students learn about student affairs as an option if they are not yet in student leadership roles on campus, as well as understanding how students graduate from institutions with no awareness of potential careers at those institutions in non-faculty roles. No matter the level of involvement, individuals find their way into student affairs positions, but all those who *could* be working in student affairs are not necessarily aware it is an option. There is not necessarily a need for *more* individuals to work in student affairs, but if the routes into the field are better understood or identified, more could be better informed to consider the field in their post-graduate plans. In addition to formalizing the informal information and better understanding awareness of and paths into student affairs, there is work to be done to support student affairs practitioners that affects campus operations and student experiences.

Changes in student affairs staffing, preparation, and support given the direct student contact nature of the roles may influence the experiences of students, the services provided, and the efficacy of those services. If funding is tied to student success measures, it is important to address student affairs staffing as these professionals play a vital role in the student experience. It is possible that student affairs professionals leaving their roles or leaving the institution may

result in diminished, or at least interrupted, student services (Cilente et al., 2006; Renn & Jessup-Anger, 2008). Staffing changes in student affairs may impede on-going campus initiatives or student support programs. Understanding why student affairs professionals change jobs and leave their roles may allow for adjustment in training, preparation, and recruitment of student affairs professionals, which may minimize the disruption to influence student success. This training and preparation could also improve the transition for new student affairs staff members, to ensure they are able to more quickly adapt to new roles and provide the necessary student support.

Some issues raised by participants are about individual choice and preference, such as geographic location or functional area, while other issues are long-known challenges within the field of student affairs, namely low wages, long hours, politics, lack of decision-making ability, and perceived lack of opportunity within the field. The section that follows addresses possible implications for practice, both those that have associated costs and those with no cost, that may affect career decisions.

Individual Opportunities

Individuals interested in careers in student affairs, as well as supervisors and others working with student affairs professionals, can be proactive in introducing and exploring student affairs realities and topics not typically included in preparation program curriculum, such as wages, work-life balance, functional area overviews, and navigating politics.

Once student affairs practitioners are in professional roles, supervisors are crucial players in how employees consider their career options. It is helpful if supervisors develop good working relationships especially with early career professionals because there are small and more significant changes about the work environment that can mitigate or minimize negative feelings

about supervisors or workplaces. Supervisors need to understand what it means to be a supervisor of an early career professional, and how to adjust their supervisory style for employees at all levels of experience and engagement. Participants shared that rigid supervisors, believing they were being equitable across their staff when treating everyone equally, often created tension and feelings of inequity by failing to foster growth and development and exploration beyond job description requirements. It is important to make assessments of individual employees and customize opportunities and supervision to foster growth and development along an individual's career.

Supervisors can encourage exploration of other offices and functional areas through informational interviews, shadowing, collaboration, campus partnerships, committee involvement, additional or stretch projects, and an opportunity to apply and develop skills. It is especially imperative that interested early career professionals have opportunity to explore myriad functional areas to better understand not only the opportunities within student affairs, but also to have some exposure in other functional areas in order to articulate their direct experiences as well as how their transferrable skills best prepare them for future roles, potentially in new areas. This exposure to other areas for the individual staff member can strengthen relationships on campus and create new opportunities for partnerships, which benefit individual departments, the institution as a whole, and most importantly, students. Many participants stated that they felt siloed in their job searches, limited to areas of direct experience, and wished they had explored additional functional areas earlier in their careers.

If individuals have difficulty connecting with their supervisor or seek additional guidance that the supervisor or work unit is unwilling or unable to provide, they should attempt to identify other individuals with whom they can interact, whether they are in the same department,

functional area, campus, or another institution entirely. This is heavily dependent on the self-efficacy of the individual, as reaching out to strangers may be difficult, but a necessary skill to develop one's network. Criteria for identifying other individuals with whom to connect may vary, but could include career paths, past and current functional areas, personal characteristics, prior relationships through graduate school or professional positions, or shared interest identified from attending the same professional development workshops or activities. These interactions could be one-time engagements such as informational interviews, or on-going relationships, and may also provide crucial insight about how different institutions or departments operate, are structured, and how they are responding to issues. Individuals can be as creative as needed to create a support network or sounding board for current issues and future considerations.

Organizational Opportunities

Graduate preparation programs and professional associations are well-situated to inform aspiring and practicing student affairs professionals about best practices within the field, including how to explain the field to newcomers and formalizing the informal knowledge shared among colleagues.

Promotion of student affairs as a career path by practitioners, institutions, graduate preparation programs, and professional organizations should be comprehensive in the opportunities as well as realities of the field. The American College Personnel Association (ACPA) and the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA), as well as any functional area-specific associations such as the Association of College and University Housing Officers-International (ACUHO-I), the National Academic Advising Association (NACADA), and the National Association for College Admissions Counseling (NACAC) have education and outreach staff who can prepare recruitment materials for undergraduate and

graduate students of all disciplines, as well as informational materials for professionals at all levels. This more intentional outreach to and recruitment of potential student affairs practitioners may attract additional individuals to the field and refine expectations of those who consider the field. Institutions, graduate programs, and individual staff members can use and tailor these materials for their students, depending on the additional resources available locally. These associations can also utilize existing structures, beyond these education and outreach staff members, to engage members within functional area or position level groups. Pertinent topics and issues evolve as individuals change roles, and it could be a natural pairing for these identity-based communities to talk about the realities within their functional areas or position levels. This provides the experienced individuals and opportunity to share their expertise and also allows individuals newer to those spaces to learn about how things might go within their own roles, contextualized to their own spaces.

Updated approaches need to be considered for the preparation, training, roles, and expectations of student affairs professionals because of the shifting nature of higher education and student populations. If goals are in place for student performance measures, with some institutional, state, and or federal funding potentially tied to accomplishing those goals, the role of student affairs professionals must change to support those desired outcomes. Student affairs professionals influence student support services and student success initiatives through their content knowledge and expertise, longevity in a role, tenure on campus, professional networks, and career experiences as a whole. Preparation and training of student affairs professionals could incorporate these external and internal success measures and outcomes to ensure that professionals are adept at understanding expectations and aligning work with those measures, all while balancing traditional student affairs responsibilities, no matter their functional area or

institution. This is supported by Renn and Jessup-Anger (2008) and Golde (1998), who state that graduate programs socialize individuals about their field and also help develop a sense of future career paths and the skills needed to advance in those positions. Socialization needs to include topics about higher education, both within and surrounding student affairs to provide practitioners a comprehensive understanding of the field and the setting in which they work.

Graduate programs in student affairs serve as introduction to the field for many student affairs practitioners. These programs have an existing curriculum often inclusive of student development theory and student services that could be expanded to include some of what participants identified as missing from their preparation programs, including navigating politics, understanding how to address external performance requirements, exposure to various functional areas, discussion about wages and hours within student affairs, and how to manage different supervisory styles. This more comprehensive approach would enable new professionals to understand the context in which they work and be proactive in their adjustment to new roles and institutions.

These same topics could be addressed through mentorship programs, special presentations, practicum experiences, articles and class discussions, and inviting campus administrators and alumni to discuss their career paths and experiences. These activities can be focused on graduate students, if the campus has graduate programs, or expanded to include professionals and undergraduate students. If these opportunities were open to the campus student affairs community, or even hosted by a student affairs unit, it could also serve as on-going professional development for current staff, showcasing the realities of other functional areas and roles, providing helpful insight for future career considerations. Graduate preparation programs could also promote personal professional development plans so that students can identify their

own interests and areas of growth and strategies to address those areas. This personal professional development plan could be formalized as part of the preparation program or a complimentary individual program that each student could incorporate into their graduate program experience. Students could reassess their plan regularly throughout the program, creating an annual review for practitioners, even after beginning professional positions. Classmates can serve as sounding boards during graduate programs, and potentially continue in that role immediately following their programs. These professionals would then role model the practice for their students and supervisees.

Student affairs units have maintained or reduced operating budgets over the last decade and it is unlikely that institutional budgets will dramatically increase, allowing for large raises for student affairs professionals (Hillman et al., 2015). In lieu of significant salary increases, other accommodations could be considered to mitigate the feeling of being overworked and underpaid as a student affairs professional. These include accommodating late night and weekend commitments through flexible start times to the workday, optional projects in areas of interest, providing opportunities for decision-making among early career staff, and campus- or department-based professional development opportunities. Graduate preparation programs and professional associations are positioned to inform incoming and practicing professionals about alternative ways to manage the various roles, schedules, and needs of student affairs practitioners, and how to investigate and negotiate supplemental opportunities of interest.

Student affairs as a profession largely promotes the idea of transferrable skills amongst student leaders and program participants, but many appear reluctant to embrace the idea that professionals have the ability to apply skills gained in prior positions in new roles or functional areas. More needs to be done to help graduate students and professionals of all levels and

functional areas learn how to translate experiences and skills across work settings if it was not possible to vary experiences through undergraduate involvement, graduate assistantships, and professional positions. At the same time, biases in selection needs to change; in a field professes that skills are valued and actually transferrable across areas, hiring practices suggest that it is still a challenge to apply acquired skills in new areas and to be seen as credible when doing so.

Collectively, student affairs practitioners, scholars, and educators must cultivate a body of work that explores how to maximize individual and collective contributions within student affairs through identifying and developing practitioners, researching best practices, and promoting application of student affairs values within the profession.

First Search

Participants in this study primarily entered student affairs after participating in undergraduate leadership roles while majoring in areas intended to prepare them for non-student affairs careers. Happenstance led these students to engage with those around them, primarily advisors or student employment supervisors, to learn more about student affairs as a profession. Participants in this study largely focused on functional areas and desired geographic regions for their initial professional job search, and rarely considered other people, whether family or romantic partners, as part of the decision-making process for their first positions. The functional areas in which participants worked were typically those the individuals had worked in previously as undergraduate students or graduate assistants, such as residence life or academic advising (Liddell et al., 2014).

Participants learned the environments and job expectations in each new position and institution, while bringing prior knowledge and experiences to those roles. Similar to Roberts' (2001) findings in which new professionals tend to be enthusiastic and eager to apply what they

have learned in their new environments, participants of this study were largely very committed to their first roles, working long hours, doing additional tasks in their jobs, and attempting to apply practices from prior institutions in their new jobs. Participants in this study, as new professionals, tended to want to incorporate knowledge and practices acquired during graduate school and try to change their institutional or departmental practices. More experienced professionals attempted to find roles that were a good fit for their personal values, as the more experienced individuals were burned out and focused on putting their energy into their lives outside of work. Cooper-Thomas et al. (2012), Feldman and Brett (1983), Kramer (1993), and Zurcher (1983) articulated the new professional "role taker" role where individuals adapt to the environment and experienced professional "role maker" role in which people attempt to create their environment, both of which are the opposite of the experiences of the participants of this study.

Second search

Later job searches included additional criteria beyond familiar functional area or desired location. Participants noted that new romantic partners and aging parents factored into current and future searches in a way that had not been considered previously (Lorden, 1998; Rhoades et al., 2008). Sheldon's "right job, right location, right boss, right coworkers, right job responsibilities" morphed into "right life outside of work, right paycheck" for many participants.

Participants have modified job search criteria or delayed searches to remain in current positions and are now more pragmatic in their expectations of student affairs than earlier in their careers, choosing to remain in the field. The choice to remain in their current roles allows individuals to be comfortable in their job tasks or institutional settings, minimizing the effort needed to fulfill their job responsibilities while providing individuals more opportunity to focus on life outside of work. Additionally, individuals considered long-term career trajectory,

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including pension, path for advancement, and earning power when exploring job changes. The current study's participants shared that changing functional areas was also part of later job searches, especially intentionally seeking out positions and areas that had more typical 40-hour work weeks. Participants considered advancement in terms of not only identifying positions with more prestigious titles, but also exploring ways to develop skills, create or oversee projects, gain more support for involvement in professional organizations, have the ability to expand current roles and tasks, and be respected for their work. However, several participants shared concern about the long-term viability of remaining in the field due to the changing legal landscape, unpleasant work environments, and low salaries. Despite much dissatisfaction within student affairs, none of the participants in the current study left the field or have plans to leave.

This study's participants noted that the people who served as sounding boards for youthful career exploration tended to be the same individuals who participants consult now for career considerations as student affairs professionals, often family members. Participants also identified individuals from college or early jobs who remain as mentors and advise them about career options. Romantic partners became a primary source of feedback about current jobs and potential job changes over the course of some participants' careers, as more serious relationships developed.

The participants in this study initiated job searches based on bad supervision, feeling overworked and underappreciated, a desire for more consistent work hours or tasks, and changing life circumstances. Some participants wanted to remain in their roles and were very good in those positions, but the environment was not healthy or sustainable. Leaving positions is not inherently a bad thing. Student affairs professionals typically change roles many times in their careers, and work in each position to develop skills and abilities that will enable them to

move into new roles (Bender, 2009; Blimling, 2002; Liddell et al., 2014). Transition is a natural part of higher education employment, but as a field we should be encouraging people leaving roles when they are prepared to do so, not because they feel like they have to. It is not desirable for individuals who are good at their jobs leaving prematurely due to poor supervision or other workplace factors. On-going professional development for student affairs practitioners at all levels, especially those supervising others, can potentially mitigate job departure due to perceived bad work environments. Opportunities to develop skills and prepare for future positions should be explored, especially if role changes are not immediately available. A profession-wide effort to promote the development of student affairs practitioners not only through the national organizations but also through regional, state, institutional, departmental, and individual contexts assists both those current individual employees as well as the future work environments who inherit those individuals and their skills, no matter where and how those skills were cultivated. On-going professional development for student affairs administrators at all position levels allows for individuals and institutions to remain current in trends, issues, and serving students.

Student affairs supervisors and colleagues should see it as their responsibility to help equip others with information and skills to make career transitions as seamless as possible while also providing work environments that challenge and support both professionals and students. A more comprehensive and consistent approach to training and professional development of student affairs practitioners will potentially lessen the impact of transition within roles. As a student affairs practitioner and a researcher, I can incorporate these approaches in my own work. Findings from this dissertation can be shared locally, with the students with whom I work, the individuals within my team, and campus partners. Additionally, findings can be shared through

social media, including Twitter, Instagram, and informal professional groups on Facebook. If resources exist, these recommendations could also be related to published professional association professional competencies and shared through presentations and/or publications with NASPA, ACPA, and other appropriate organizations of which I hold membership.

Conclusion

Many student affairs practitioners are dissatisfied with aspects of student affairs, but not all leave their roles or the field as a whole. While attrition is normal in any profession, those leaving student affairs seem to voice concerns that there are many surprises or working conditions that seem unfair within the field. In an effort to minimize attrition for what seem to be controllable and manageable reasons, increased transparency about job prospects, working conditions in entry level roles, politics, and low wages should be discussed freely and often with new professionals and graduate students. Preparing individuals for the realities of working in student affairs may go a long way to retaining student affairs professionals and re-directing those who already know that the current student affairs environment is not for them. Graduate students and professionals with a more realistic understanding of the rigors and demands of their roles, as well as the hours and compensation, may be less frustrated about those factors, which may mean a more productive employee and engaged point of contact for students.

An important takeaway from the literature, anecdotal reports, and the participants of this study is that student affairs is a vibrant and viable career option for people and that even a minor amount of coordination across student affairs professionals and professional organizations could result in a slightly more formalized approach to recruitment, a clearer path into the field, and informed expectations for potential new professionals. Instead of relying on happenstance for individuals to enter student affairs, we can be intentional about cultivating the next generation of

student affairs professionals and guiding career decision-making of potential and current student affairs practitioners. Developing individuals who are interested in the field should be the focus, not just trusting that those who find their way into student affairs programs and jobs have a desire to remain in the field. Ideally, student affairs would be a destination rather than a holding area or stop-over point in one's early career. To make that happen, student affairs needs to be more intentional overall and foster reflection and exploration to assist individuals in setting goals, building their self-efficacy, and forming the outcome expectations for their careers.

APPENDICES

Appendix A – Interview Protocol

1. Tell me about what you wanted to be when you grew up.
   a. How did you explore/practice that/those role(s)?
   b. What messages did you receive from 1) Family 2) Teachers 3) Friends about your interests / careers?
   c. Did you believe you could achieve that? What would success look like?
   d. Was college in your original plans growing up?
2. Tell me about your undergraduate experiences.
   a. What was your major(s)?
      i. Did you ever change or consider changing your major? Why?
      ii. How did family influence / express their desires & wishes for your major selection?
      iii. How did you practice that major (jobs, internships, volunteering)?
   b. What campus involvement did you have as an undergraduate student? Jobs?
   c. What were your career plans in college?
   d. How did graduate school become part of your plans?
3. Talk to me about how you decided to become a student affairs professional.
   a. When did you first consider student affairs as a career option?
   b. What activities/experiences helped you explore student affairs as a career option?
   c. What personal characteristics contributed to your pursuit of student affairs?
   d. What role did other people (friends, family, colleagues, supervisors, professors, advisors, etc.) play in your pursuit of student affairs? External supports (institution, geography, family, etc.)?
   e. How did your master's program and related experiences impact your career decisions?
   f. Did you have any experiences that affirmed your choice to be in student affairs?
4. Looking back on your career, was there a particularly distinct juncture where a career decision might have been especially easy or hard? Why?
5. Talk me through your decision-making process for your latest position.
6. Have you changed roles/jobs as a student affairs professional?
   a. What led to that change?
   b. What factors played a role in your decision making?
7. What do you like about student affairs? Dislike?
   a. Are any of those things significant enough to impact your career decisions?
8. What future career plans do you have?
   a. What factors are shaping / will shape your decision?
   b. How do these factors compare to those for your past career decisions?
   c. How confident are you in your ability to do that (their plans)?
9. Have you given any consideration to what would you have done if you hadn't done student affairs?
   a. Why did you not pursue that? Would you change your career path?
   b. Given your current career goals, would you change anything of your past experiences?

Appendix B – Research Participant Information and Consent Form

Human Research Protection Program
Michigan State University

Dear Participant:

You are being asked to participate in a research study regarding career decision-making of student affairs professionals. Your participation in this study will contribute to a body of research intended to improve career decision-making. Your participation will consist of one, 60-minute interview, and completing one background information sheet. There is a possibility you will be contacted again for follow-up information or to answer clarification questions. Data will be collected by Megan Drangstveit, under the supervision of Dr. Marilyn Amey. Your responses will be kept anonymous through the use of pseudonyms and all potentially identifying information will be de-identified. You must be at least 18 years old to participate in this research.

Participation in this research project is completely voluntary. You have the right to say no. You may change your mind at any time and withdraw. You may choose not to answer specific questions or to stop participating at any time. Whether you choose to participate or not will have no effect on your grade or evaluation. There are no foreseeable risks to participating in this study. The interviews will be recorded. You can request that the recorder be turned off at any time, or not used at all. Recordings of interviews, notes taken during interview sessions, and information forms with participant data will be kept in a secure location to protect participant privacy for three years following the study. You will receive $20 Amazon gift card for your time and participation.

Should you have questions regarding the study, please contact the researcher, Megan Drangstveit, at mdrangst@msu.edu, or at 715-797-2171, or her faculty advisor, Dr. Marilyn Amey, in the Department of Educational Administration at amey@msu.edu. If you have questions or concerns about your role and rights as a research participant, would like to obtain information or offer input, or would like to register a complaint about this study, you may contact, anonymously if you wish, the Michigan State University's Human Research Protection Program at 517-355-2180, Fax 517-432-4503, or e-mail irb@msu.edu or regular mail at Olds Hall, 408 West Circle Dr Rm 207, East Lansing, MI 48824.

You indicate your voluntary agreement to participate by completing and returning this survey.

_____   _____
Signature of Participant   Date

_____
Name of Participant (please print)

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