MINDSETS: UNDERSTANDING THE WORKPLACE EXPERIENCES OF MIDLEVEL STUDENT AFFAIRS ADMINISTRATORS

By

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A DISSERTATION

Submitted to
Michigan State University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of

Higher, Adult, and Lifelong Education — Doctor of Philosophy

2024

ABSTRACT

Decades of established research have focused on the attrition, workplace trauma, and career burnout of student affairs (SA) professionals working at colleges and universities (see N. J. Evans, 1988; Herr & Strange, 1985; Perez & Bettencourt, 2024; Walterbusch, 2019). The purpose of this generic qualitative research study (Khalke, 2016) was to understand the workplace experiences of the population of midlevel SA administrators working in the United States and Canada. Specifically, this study explores how midlevel SA administrators experience different mindsets in response to their workplace context and persist in their SA careers. The mindset concepts explored in this study include *thriving* (Schreiner, 2010), *buoyancy* (Parker & Martin, 2008), and *resilience* (Winwood et al., 2013). Positive psychology literature posits thriving, buoyancy, and resilience as *mindsets.*

The following research question guided this generic qualitative study: *What are the experiences midlevel SA administrators have with thriving, buoyancy, and resilience mindsets?* Participants (n = 12) included midlevel SA administrators working in the United States or Canada, each sharing similar work-related characteristics and responsibilities while persisting through their SA careers. Participants completed an individual self-reflection activity focused on their career trajectory, followed by two in-depth interviews over a two-week period.

Findings present a distinction among the concepts of thriving, buoyancy, and resilience. Midlevel SA administrators engaged buoyancy and resilience as mindsets but experienced a thriving state or condition at work. Participants engaged a buoyancy mindset to respond to consistent changes and local challenges within their specific department. Participants were more likely to engage a resilience mindset in response to high stake workplace challenges, and significant, unexpected, complicated, and compounded workplace issues that also influenced

personal stress. Participants recalled thriving as a very specific, monumental career experience from the past that are uncommon at work. Overall, all participants indirectly expressed ways their sense of *agency* (Bai, 2006; Mitchell & Meacheam, 2011) influences their feelings of success at work, suggesting agency can affect one's workplace mindset.

Implications for practice focus on midlevel SA administrators, the supervisors of midlevel SA administrators (e.g., vice president, students; vice provost, students), senior campus leaders (e.g., president, provost), and SA professional associations in the United States and Canada. Other implications center on theory and directions for future research.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My HALE Ph.D. cohort participated in our orientation with the faculty on August 24, 2019. On that day, I remember Dr. Dongbin Kim advising us to consider writing our dissertation acknowledgements any time we needed a reminder about why we decided to become a HALE student, or to consider someone we would want to acknowledge for helping us get to this point of our educational journey. Those who know me well will likely not be surprised how literally I took Dongbin's advice. With imposter syndrome fully in play, I opened a document and typed "*you can do this*," along names to remind me about whom I thought may agree with this statement. The following text is not a copy and paste from that document. However, these words capture individuals who have been there from the beginning of this chapter through to today.

First, thank you to those that told me to consider enrolling in. a Ph.D. program full time, and encouraged me to not be afraid to go abroad. Each of you were most reassuring when I did not even think this opportunity would even be possible. I am grateful to each of you for bringing the topic up when I was avoiding it, and for believing that I could contribute to the field as a scholar. Specifically, thank you Dr. John Austin, Tony Conte, Ian Crookshank, Dr. Heather Lane, Dr. Janet Miller, and Dr. Tricia Seifert. To my closest work partners from the past, Valerie Bruce and Brittany Reifenstein—thanks for always being there. Last, thank you to Dr. Stephanie Waterman for reminding me that I *should do* the Ph.D. Each of your mentorship has meant so much to me. I will never forget how each of you cheered me along the entire way, and how you seemed to know why I should take this challenge on before realizing it myself.

At HALE orientation, I also remember Dr. Leslie Gonzales introducing herself and shaking each of our hands to welcome us as new members of the community. Dr. G's invitation for collegiality reminded me about the teams and close colleagues I worked with throughout the

years. Including those already mentioned, thanks also to Kait Asquini, Nick Asquini, Erin Biddlecombe, Scott Buttenham, Dr. Angela Coleman, Dr. Louise Cowin, Darran Fernandez, Steve Fitterer, Jen Gonzales, Lara Hof, Adam Kuhn, Woo Kim, Ann Lê, Susan Mazza, Jenn McClean, Clay Mccourt (Go Green!), Cathie Miller, Tiffany Mintah, Payge Mildebrath, Marcelle Mullings, Troy Murray, Dianne Norman, Dr. Casey Phillips, and Dave Shorey. I have had the opportunity to report to dynamic leaders prior to my MSU journey: Tash Reynolds and Steve Fitterer at Mount Royal; Kevin Beatty and Cathie Miller at McMaster, and Ian Crookshank at Toronto Metropolitan University. Thank you—each of you have influenced me tremendously.

At the end of orientation, Dr. Patricia Marin emphasized how important it is for us to communicate to our families, friends, and supporters about the sort of commitment, time, and energy our work will take throughout the Ph.D. I am grateful to have had so many of you behind me—regardless of you understanding what I research or not. Aside from those I have already mentioned, special thanks to my north stars…my closest friends, family, and adopted families—including the Sutherlands, Gravelles, and of course, my dear Family Francey. Special thanks to Emma, Darren, and Jeff for their (sometimes daily) counsel. Thank you to my mother, Shari, for being my first teacher, and my sister Ashley for being the first student in my kid classroom. Most, thank you Blair for your encouragement, understanding, patience, grace, and love.

MSU, the College of Education, and the Department of Educational Administration are each dynamic communities that foster collaboration—and ultimately nurtured my abilities to succeed despite the global, local, and campus challenges experienced in 2019–24. I am grateful for the generous funding to complete my education at MSU. Specifically, thank you to the Department of Educational Administration, the College of Education, the Council of Graduate Students, the University Innovation Alliance, and the Carnegie Corporation of New York.

I am grateful for #GST: Dr. Patricia Marin and Dra. Jesenia Rosales. I have learned so much from working with you, and I am appreciative for our continued collaboration. Thanks especially, Dr. Marin, for your mentorship and perfect ability to balance challenge and support. Thank you to Associate Dean Dr. Kristine Bowman for encouraging me to lend my practical knowledge to scholarly projects in the college. Special thanks to the HALE Faculty: your breadth and depth of knowledge is something that will continue to influence how I approach research and teaching. I have learned so much from you and so appreciate the scholarly community you have fostered. Also, kudos to each of you for keeping the ship sailing in the right direction as we all navigated the pandemic—while also managing your own personal and familial needs.

To the HALE student and alumni community: thanks to the upper-year students who took me under their wing in my first year—especially Drs. Stephanie Aguilar-Smith, Adam Grimm, Katie Lopez, Mia Murphy, Chelsea Noble, Alyssa Stefanese Yates, and Cameron Tanner. Special thanks to two HALE alumni: the late Dr. Robert J. Coffey, Jr., and fellow Canadian Dr. Leanne Perry. Bob really opened the door for me to consider HALE as a possibility and Leanne helped me through the door after Bob's passing. I have particular gratitude to my cohort—I am so glad we were selected to learn together in community. Special thanks to my OG reading group and first friends, Justin St. Charles and Erica Weeks; Naseeb Bhangal and Chastity Stokes. I loved getting to publish with you, Guanglong Pang. And most, thank you to Maryann Orawczyk. Mo, the friendship we developed throughout this journey is one of the greatest gifts—not just because you cooked a surprise Canadian Thanksgiving dinner when I needed it the most.

Thank you to each of my participants for trusting me. I do believe your experiences can influence how we think about, approach, and shape student affairs work beyond entry-level roles, and your words can influence future, supportive workplaces. I am grateful for my dissertation

committee: Marilyn J. Amey, Angela T. Hall, and Patricia Marin. From proposal to defense, I felt how you were truly invested in my work. Your scholarly and practical expertise—especially considering my study—really motivated me to shape and deliver a thoughtful project. I feel very fortunate. I know your guidance and advice will continue to shape my future scholarship.

Last, Dr. Kristen A. Renn: "thank you" will never be enough. Kris, I so appreciate you for being there from day one when I was exploring doc programs right through to the end of this challenging, fulfilling life chapter and milestone. I admired your scholarly contributions before arriving to MSU—getting to work with you throughout my assistantship was a dream, and getting to know you personally is another gift of friendship. And…we had so much fun on this journey! You have challenged and supported me as I developed as a scholar and shaped my work, and you ultimately taught me how to be a better researcher, teacher, and leader. Thank you for pushing me to be critical, to not play it safe, for guiding me as I finally established my "swim lanes," and for helping me find my voice. I aspire to be a principled, collegial, caring mentor like you—I know I am one of many who are grateful for your intentional mentorship.

From thinking about orientation day to every step leading to (and from) graduation, I am reminded by Steve Jobs's Stanford University Commencement Address in 2005, "…you can't connect the dots looking forward; you can only connect them looking backward. So, you have to trust that the dots will somehow connect in your future. You have to trust in something—your gut, destiny, life, karma, whatever. This approach has never let me down, and it has made all the difference in my life." I am so glad I took the chance to add this chapter to my life and career journey. I cannot be more appreciative for this amazing, complicated, challenging—and ultimately rewarding personal and professional experience. Here's to what is ahead…*onward*!

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ACE	American Council on Education; an organization focused on education policy
ACPA	American College Personnel Association
CACUSS	Canadian Association of College and University Student Services
CAS	The Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education
COSPA	Council of Student Personnel Associations in Higher Education
NASPA	National Association of Student Affairs Personnel Administrators
PSE	Postsecondary education; any level of education beyond secondary
SA	The student affairs profession; also known as student “services” and “personnel”

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

This dissertation focuses on the workplace mindsets and experiences of the midlevel student affairs (SA) administrator population. Specifically, I explore how workplace environments may influence SA administrators' mindsets. Although higher education researchers have focused considerably on workplace trauma, career burnout, and departure from the student affairs profession (N. J. Evans, 1988; Herr & Strange, 1985; Perez & Bettencourt, 2024; Walterbusch, 2019), my study offers insights into what individual and workplace factors influence a midlevel SA administrator to engage or experience buoyancy, resilience, and thriving at work (Peters et al., 2021). I view this research through scholarly and practitioner lenses. Before my doctoral studies in the United States, I worked for over a decade in progressive leadership roles in SA at multiple Canadian campuses. Accordingly, my lenses position me to explore how midlevel SA administrators experience mindsets in response to successes and challenges at work.

Research in higher education focusing on topics such as the SA profession, entry-level higher education professionals, and senior higher education administrators is comprehensive and established. However, considerably less research has focused on the broad population of midlevel administrators and their experiences working in higher and postsecondary education (PSE). For this research, the concept of *mindsets* is a way to comprehend how someone understands their workplace experiences. Research on mindsets has focused on the cognitive and emotional development of an individual, and has considered why and how attitudes and beliefs influence behavior (Dweck, 1986; Dweck & Yeager, 2020; Yeager & Dweck, 2012). Mindset concepts like *thriving* (Schreiner, 2010), *buoyancy* (Parker & Martin, 2008), and *resilience* (Winwood et al., 2013) are ways to view and understand workplace experiences.

Understanding how midlevel SA administrators experience different mindsets related to their workplace experiences—particularly their challenges—is a way to understand the extant problems with attrition and career burnout of SA professionals (N. J. Evans, 1988; Herr & Strange, 1985; Perez & Bettencourt, 2024; Walterbusch, 2019). More recently, some SA workplaces have been referred to as inhumane (Palmer, 2021; Yoder, 2019), with some SA professionals describing their workplace as toxic (Yoder, 2019). Therefore, understanding the midlevel SA administrator population's mindsets about their work can shed light on what this population needs in the workplace to avoid career burnout or subsequent career departure. Burnout and departure have negative personal effects on the individual and the workplace (Lubbadeh, 2020).

I conducted a generic qualitative study to understand the experiences of midlevel SA administrators with thriving, buoyancy, and resilience mindsets. Furthermore, I endeavored to understand the contexts (e.g., workplace, home life) of midlevel SA administrators that may influence this group to experience thriving, buoyancy, and resilience.

This research is particularly relevant to the midlevel SA administrator population, supervisors of SA administrators, senior campus leaders (e.g., president, provost), and SA professional associations in the United States and Canada. My study identified how and why these professionals engage buoyancy and resilience mindsets at work, and experienced thriving in their careers. I also explored what personal, interpersonal, and environmental workplace factors influence midlevel administrators' mindsets and experiences at work.

Statement of the Problem

The population of midlevel administrators working in SA experience unique challenges, and their responses to these challenges influence their ability to thrive in sustained careers.

Research focused on attrition of SA professionals has described multiple issues (e.g., role clarity, preparation, compassion fatigue) that influence career longevity and feelings of fulfillment related to their work (Perez & Bettencourt, 2024; Raimondi, 2019; Tull, 2014). Research on SA personnel has primarily been concerned with how *career burnout* leads to low job satisfaction and high attrition, and less research has focused on their persistence (Kunk-Czaplicki, 2021).[1] Although most research uses the lens of career burnout to explore SA professionals leaving the field, it is true that many professionals persist and stay in the profession (Marshall et al., 2016). Accordingly, there is an opportunity to understand if and how midlevel SA administrators experience various mindsets and behaviors to address their workplace experiences.

Although not a solution to problems influencing continuously high attrition of SA professionals, understanding the mindsets of people who stay could uncover some solutions to burnout. Exploring midlevel SA administrators' experiences with mindsets and the contextual and environmental factors (e.g., interpersonal, institutional) contributing to these mindsets can provide insight into retaining SA professionals. Midlevel administrators working in higher education settings are typically of the greatest employee groups on campus in terms of accompaniment and hold significant institutional knowledge and professional expertise (see "Chapter 2: Literature Review").

However, the most pressing problem relates to how campuses support and resource the work of SA divisions—specifically the vast group of midlevel SA administrators who direct the various SA educators who serve students attending university and college. As the literature highlights in Chapter 2, SA divisions and workers are expected to respond to and manage some of the most pressing challenges facing higher education campuses. The literature also illustrates

[1] In the context of careers, broadly, burnout refers to "a different work-related stress syndrome portrayed by dimensions; emotional exhaustion, professional inefficacy, and cynicism" (Lubbadeh, 2020, p. 7).

how and why these specialized employees on a campus continue to burn out. Thus, the attrition of this population is not a new problem; rather, the great resignation and quiet quitting are continuing to happen as they have— but in a new, different context. Insight about what campuses *can* and *should* do may improve SA work locally and broadly in the profession. With this problem in mind, university and college campuses experiencing increasingly turbulent challenges can address the recurring issue of employee attrition while adequately addressing the support and resources required for SA divisions. Overall, understanding the contemporary experiences of midlevel SA administrators can offer important insights that can influence career sustainability in student affairs.

Overview of the Study

In this section, I provide an overview of the dissertation study. First, I present a description of midlevel administrators working in SA, which includes context and ambiguity related to how this population is described. I conclude this section by highlighting my previous research relevant to this study. Second, I describe the overall dissertation study and define the mindsets bolstering this work. From here, I explain the purpose of this dissertation research and identify its relevance to the field of higher education. Next, I list the research question that addressed the problem earlier identified. I conclude this section with context about the significance and audience for this study. This context also identified daily and contemporary challenges facing (a) SA administrators and (b) universities and colleges as organizations (Pugh et al., 1968).

Describing Midlevel Student Affairs Administrators as a Population

The research population is referred to as midlevel administrators. Scholars and practitioners have identified midlevel administrators in SA, sometimes called midcareer

administrators, as a population of interest. In broad terms, literature has suggested this group includes those who work at a college or university and are between the ages of 27–55 with undefined "senior" responsibilities (Arnold, 1982; Rosser, 2000). Other research is more specific, identifying that midlevel administrators influence decisions made by senior leaders, control budgets, and direct units and personnel (Rosser & Javinar, 2003). SA professional associations (e.g., ACPA, CACUSS, and NASPA) do not provide a clear description of those in the midlevel category. In comparison, these associations clearly describe other career stages (e.g., entry-level and new professionals, senior student affairs officers). Yet, ambiguity regarding those "in the middle" reinforces the vagueness associated with defining this population.

For this study, I defined midlevel SA administrators as those: (a) with more than 10 and up to 25 years of professional experience; (b) who report directly to the most senior leadership of the division and/or the executive leadership or "top officers" of the campus and do not have a faculty role (Austin, 1985); (c) responsibility for the budget, direction, control, or supervision of one or more units; and (d) directs the work of one or more full-time professional staff. To better understand the midlevel SA administrator population and their work experiences, I conducted a study focusing on this population during Summer 2021 that led to the present dissertation study.

Initial Study: Midlevel Student Affairs (SA) Professionals – Summer 2021

I received a Summer Research Fellowship (SRF) from the College of Education at Michigan State University (MSU). It is important to highlight that this study occurred before general media and PSE blogs started to focus on new notions related to PSE career attrition, like *the great resignation* and conditions related to the 2020 pandemic (see "Chapter 2: Literature Review").

I intended to interview 10–12 participants. I was surprised to see how many midlevel SA professionals were interested in discussing their careers and workplaces—nearly 100 professionals in the United States and Canada who met the criteria completed the interest form—and I interviewed 51 participants based on availability. Semistructured interviews focused on (a) participants' personal journeys and motivation into the SA profession; (b) their career experiences from entry to midlevel;[2] (c) career experiences that have influenced their skills and behaviors related to change management and adaptability; (d) their working environment(s) from the perspective of departments/units of SA, the general SA division, and the broader campus; and (d) supervision—by the SA professional (e.g., ways they supervise) but also the supervision they experience from those senior to them.

In summary, findings from SRF 2021 showed:

1. SA professionals' dedication to the student learning experience in and out of the classroom ultimately motivated them to enter the profession. This commitment continues to ground their work despite most of them no longer being student facing.
2. Nearly all participants described feeling that senior level professionals (e.g., President, Provost; in some cases, senior SA officers) do not fully understand the conflicting demands and expectations placed on them, their departments/units, and the greater SA division. Participants cited not having adequate resources (e.g., staffing, training expertise) to address and manage the changing conditions *off* campus (e.g., free speech, political discourse, violence) that influence SA professionals' work *on* campus.

[2] If this was not applicable (e.g., the participant worked in a different career prior to their SA midlevel administrator role), questions we adapted to ask about how their broad career experiences led to their midlevel SA administrator role.

3. Most participants shared that communication barriers among intercampus divisions—including before the COVID-19 pandemic—created unnecessary challenges to their work and required an understanding of what students are experiencing on campus in terms of their learning and development.
4. Participants felt factors affecting their feelings of being valued at work were connected to salaries and benefits (e.g., health, education, pension). Participants expressed how total compensation influences what some described as helping or hindering their career progress, specifically when considering salary transparency (e.g., hiring range posted with job, detailed vs. general job description).
5. Most participants recalled significant training and mentoring opportunities on campus for professional associations as entry-level professionals but a lack of personal and professional development to assist their ability to be successful "beyond a [professional association] conference." Others described there being "not enough time" for their senior level supervisor (e.g., executive director, vice president, or provost) to offer guidance outside of occasional report meetings, and some wished there were opportunities for them to seek mentoring from leaders in the SA profession and PSE field.

My previous research (Smith, 2024) revealed new insights about the contemporary population of midlevel SA administrators who shared the same job responsibilities. My research also left me with questions about how and why these 51 midlevel SA professionals stayed in the profession despite the challenges they described. This study and these questions informed the development and design of my dissertation research, including forming the base for recruiting study participants.

Description of Dissertation Study

I conducted a generic qualitative study (Khalke, 2016) by applying the conceptual mindset frameworks of thriving (Schreiner, 2010), resilience (Winwood et al., 2013), and buoyancy (Parker & Martin, 2008) to interpret and describe the workplace experiences of midlevel SA administrators (Rossman & Rallis, 2016). A generic qualitative approach allowed me to make meaning of data collected from participants (Ritchie et al., 2014) about their career experiences with a subset of my summer 2021 sample. I comprehensively describe the research design in Chapter 3: Methodology.

Definitions: Thriving, Resilience, and Buoyancy

Thriving is a mindset in which one feels "progress and momentum, marked both by a sense of learning and a sense of vitality" (Spreitzer et al., 2005, p. 45). Thriving is the opposite of burnout, which is the cumulative effect of multiple daily instances of challenge and can cause "emotional exhaustion, professional inefficacy, and cynicism" (Lubbadeh, 2020, p. 7). Resilience can be seen as an accumulation of buoyant responses, so someone facing significant challenges can be resilient to avoid burnout. Förster and Duchek's (2017) work on resilient leaders in workplaces noted, "'resilience' derives from the Latin word *resire* and means 'to leap back'" describing that resilience is "adaptation in the face of risk or adversity" (pp. 282–283). Accordingly, buoyancy is described as bouncing back from change, or "'everyday resilience' that is typical of the ordinary course of life" (Parker & Martin, 2009, p. 8).

Thriving and resilience are established frameworks, especially in the context of the higher education field, as described later in my literature review. However, buoyancy is recognized in K–12 education research (Martin & Marsh, 2008, 2020) but has yet to be explored in higher education research. Studying buoyancy, resilience, and thriving together offers new

perspectives about when and how these mindset concepts are experienced by midlevel administrators in response to their everyday workplace challenges. See Table 1 for definitions of mindsets related to this study.

Table 1

Definitions for Selected Mindset Frameworks

Thriving	Buoyancy	Resilience	Burnout
"When people are thriving, they feel progress and momentum, marked both by a sense of learning and a sense of vitality" (Spreitzer et al., 2005, p. 537).	"Resilience research has been extended to consider more 'everyday resilience' that is typical of the ordinary course of life. This has been referred to as buoyancy" (Parker & Martin, 2009, p. 136).	"Negotiating, managing, and adapting to significant sources of stress or trauma. Assets within the individual, their life, and environment facilitate the capacity for adaptation and 'bouncing back'" (Winwood et al., 2013, p. 1208).	The cumulative effect of "emotional exhaustion, professional inefficacy, and cynicism" (Lubbadeh, 2020, p. 7).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to understand the workplace experiences of midlevel SA administrators working in the United States and Canada, and how they experience different mindsets in response to their workplace experiences. Specifically, I was curious about how this population responded to those challenges. Accordingly, I connected the mindset frameworks as elements of my conceptual framework, which guided my methodological choices. By doing so, I gained an understanding of how midlevel SA administrators respond to their everyday challenges and how these responses align with scholarship on thriving, buoyancy, and resilience. My research illuminates positive organizational conditions at universities and colleges, along with

conditions that can be improved to better support this population and potentially enhance their career success.

Research Delimitations

Delimitations are "limitations consciously set by the authors themselves" and "are concerned with the definitions that the researchers decide to set as the boundaries or limits of their work" (Theofanidis & Fountouki, 2018, p. 157). I set several delimitations for this research study, described next.

First, I decided to include only participants who were part of my initial study (n = 51) that influenced this dissertation. I made this decision because of my familiarity with their SA work and my assumption they were satisfied in their careers rather than experiencing burnout. Next, regarding participants (see Chapter 3, "Research Design"), I developed my definition of midlevel administrator. I developed this definition based on several literature sources. I made this decision to better bind this study with participants with similar characteristics rather than the differing definitions of midlevel administrator used by different professional associations (see Chapter 2: Literature Review), resulting in 32 potential participants.

Another delimitation was the decision to try to balance the participant groups to have equal representation from the United States and Canada, as well as from several varying states and provinces. I made this decision as my initial study included participants from across the United States and Canada. Yet, I observed several similarities across this population despite living in very different political and geographical locations. Therefore, I wanted to understand what similarities and differences may appear between participants living in different locations and two countries. Also, I decided to interview these participants shortly after the winter break, beginning at the end of January. I decided to do this considering my previous career experiences

and my assumption that the participant would be acclimatized back at work, which was a consideration as some participants manage 24/7 environments that remain open during the winter break.

Last, I decided to focus on the mindset concepts selected for this study—thriving, buoyancy, and resilience—rather than other bodies of literature focused on other mindsets (e.g., grit). I have anecdotally observed that thriving and resilience concepts are frequently used for SA programming and campaigns—particularly in Canada. In research, thriving and resilience are quite opposite, whereas buoyancy was included because the lack of research focused on this concept, which is more common in K–12 academic success work. Therefore, I selected clear and grounded definitions of each mindset concept for my study to eliminate any ambiguity or assumptions based on how participants may interpret these terms in advance of my research.

Research Question

My dissertation was guided by the following research question: *What are the experiences midlevel student affairs administrators have with thriving, buoyancy, and resilience mindsets?*

Significance and Audience

The working conditions for those in PSE administration are increasingly turbulent (McClure, 2022). This research is significant because of unceasing challenges related to career and compassion fatigue, and sustainability for those working in SA and higher education (Perez & Bettencourt, 2024). Recent studies have documented challenges impeding the sustainability of higher education administrators, including increasing demands by the public and government, which broadly impact the PSE sector (Cantwell & Taylor, 2020; Ortega, 2020). These demands have changed several expectations of midlevel administrators within the United States and Canadian PSE context (Elfman, 2021). Specifically, SA personnel are experiencing escalating

challenges that influence their role responsibilities and their abilities to thrive in sustained careers (Raimondi, 2019). These experiences include their day-to-day responsibilities and could also be considered more common factors that can cause the professional to be continuously responsive to unexpected demands in the workplace.

The audience for this research includes all levels of university and college staff working in SA services and administration. This research is particularly relevant to anyone considered a midlevel SA administrator population member, not limited to the definition binding the population in this study, but also the various definitions of "midlevel" within different higher education professional associations. The audience for this research also includes higher education leaders and administrators superior to midlevel SA administrators (e.g., senior SA officer, provost, vice president, provost), along with human resources staff and leaders working with SA on a campus. Last, this study is also relevant to SA and higher education professional associations in the United States and Canada, whose membership includes those working in SA. These audiences each have a stake and influence on the work SA does on campus, including the challenges that influence SA work.

Examples of Daily Occurrences Affecting Midlevel SA Administrators

For contextual purposes, I identify examples of situations that affect midlevel SA administrators' mindsets in the workplace. These daily occurrences could include responding to escalating student issues, emergencies, and crises; addressing parent or guardian concerns and their involvement; or adapting to being pulled into last-minute meetings or "shoulder tapped" to take on additional work that may be perceived as recognition or an additional burden. Higher stake issues can also require significant and sometimes unplanned responses, which ultimately affect common daily workplace conditions. These circumstances can include last-minute cuts to

budget planning for the following academic year; a shift in responsiveness to new institutional commitments, goals, and academic planning; and organizational change—like the introduction of new leadership, or general staff turnover—which impedes intentional strategic planning. Although many of these scenarios are part of daily "other duties as assigned," they also can have long-term impacts on the midlevel administrator and their abilities to conduct day-to-day responsibilities, thus affecting their working environments. These experiences can be positive and negative and can cause these higher education professionals to thrive, be buoyant, or exhibit resilience based on how they respond.

These factors can have weight on midlevel SA administrators' working responsibilities—whether immediate institutional needs or sociopolitical situations external to the institution but still have an effect on their working day (e.g., protests, free speech issues, controversial policy). Consequently, midlevel administrators working in SA are consistently required to be responsive. As a result, professionals experience positive and negative outcomes, which can include skill development in critical thinking, influence on their ability, performance under uncertainty and stress, or have influence on the midlevel SA administrators' career confidence.

Examples of Contemporary Issues Affecting Midlevel SA Administrators

In addition to the daily occurrences affecting midlevel SA administrators, contemporary issues face PSE, particularly the SA profession. These compounded issues further emphasize the importance of understanding what problems SA administrators may experience individually and within their teams. Recent, escalating issues facing American and Canadian campuses include the changing political climate (Katz, n.d.), violence on campus (Young, 2019), free speech (Baer, 2019), protests, and changing forms of student advocacy (Dahlum & Wig, 2021), similar policy and response regarding Title IX in the United States and Bill 132 in Canada (J. E. Anderson et

al., 2020; Bonnyman, 2017), and what continues to be referred to as a "mental health crisis" facing campuses in both countries (Aslanian & Roth, 2021; Carrasco, 2022). Accordingly, as everyday challenges facing SA leaders continue to escalate in gravity, understanding how they respond and continue with their work is important for both lenses of the profession and the professional—and particularly relevant to the organizations that employ them.

Organizational Significance to PSE Institutions and the SA Profession

This research is also important because the success of midlevel PSE administrators is mutually beneficial to the individual and the organization of universities and colleges. Midlevel administrators are among the largest number of administrators within most PSE institutions (Rosser, 2004). This group is also considered an essential component of the organizational structure of a campus due to the size of this population, their vast responsibilities, and their knowledge base (Harris & Jones, 2017; Tull et al., 2009). Further importance relates to their consistent characteristics. For example, midlevel administrators can influence all levels of PSE administration and leadership, have direction and influence over planning, systems, budget, and personnel; they likely hold capital through their knowledge base and engagement with their professional field (Porath et al., 2012).

Regardless, research focused on the general satisfaction of this population has been inconsistent. Importantly, midlevel SA personnel have a strong professional identity related to both their work and the student affairs profession (Renn & Jessup-Anger, 2008). However, midlevel SA professionals also express challenges regarding opportunities for career advancement, lacking mentorship, and feelings of minimal recognition that affect their workplace morale (Harris & Jones, 2016; Johnsrud, 1999). Specifically, attrition and detachment continue to be an experience for many within this group of professionals and are attributed to

lack of preparation and socialization available to them as they transition into this level of seniority (Ozaki & Hornack, 2020; Marshall et al., 2016; Renn & Jessup-Anger, 2008).

Conceptual Foundations and Rationale: Engaging Thriving, Buoyancy, and Resilience

I selected the specific concepts—thriving, buoyancy, resilience—because most participants from SRF 2021 provided examples aligned with these mindsets. These mindsets seemed to have some explanatory power for sustaining a midlevel career in SA. Accordingly, I wanted to understand more about how these concepts might play a role in an SA career and understand how midlevel SA administrators experienced them.

Thriving and resilience are psychological, unique to an individual, and affected by the environment(s) that the individual is immersed in (Powley et al., 2020; Schreiner, 2010). In the context of career development and workplace environments, Spreitzer et al. (2005) described a thriving mindset: "When people are thriving, they feel progress and momentum, marked both by a sense of learning and a sense of vitality" (p. 537). In the same view, resilience is parallel to thriving; the individual responds to some sort of contention. Windle (2011) described this mindset as "the process of negotiating, managing, and adapting to significant sources of stress or trauma" (p. 152). Their work asserted the ability to be resilient is attributed to "assets and resources within the individual, their life and environment facilitate the capacity for adaptation and 'bouncing back' in the face of adversity" (Windle, 2013, p. 152). Förster and Duchek (2017) complemented this idea and identified that resilience in leaders requires "a collection of [personal] characteristics" and "risk and protective factors" (p. 283), which allows one to be resilient in the face of adversity.

The concept of buoyancy offers insight into an employee's mindset when they are not necessarily progressing or adapting to stress or trauma. Buoyancy is an individual's self-

perception of their capacity for adaptability and positive adjustment (Parker & Martin, 2009). Parker and Martin's (2009) work on buoyancy identified that "resilience research has been extended to consider more 'everyday' resilience that is typical of the ordinary course of life. This 'everyday resilience' has been referred to as buoyancy" (Parker & Martin, 2009, p. 136).

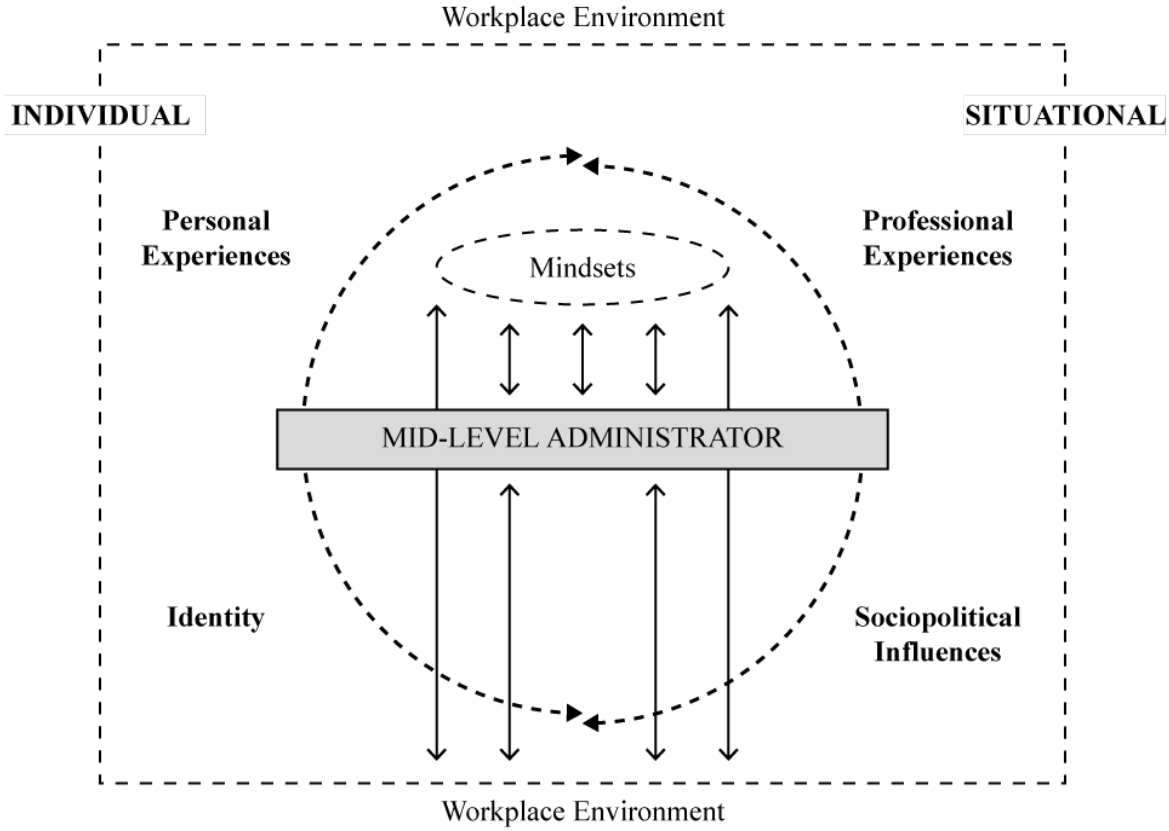
A burnout mindset can result when the other mindsets no longer prove adequate to resolve or cope with ongoing challenges. Burnout is the cumulative effect of multiple daily instances of challenge and is evidenced by "emotional exhaustion, professional inefficacy, and cynicism" (Lubbadeh, 2020, p. 7). Thriving, buoyancy, resilience—and the opposite, burnout—relate to one another and interact. A conceptual framework focused on employees engaging different mindsets rather than burning out offers insight into how midlevel SA administrators persist in their careers.

Conceptual Framework

My conceptual framework is informed by the literature on the SA profession and mindsets. Figure 1 presents a conceptual framework that represents what influences the mindsets of the midlevel SA administrator population. Why and how the midlevel administrator activates mindset(s) is subjected to personal experiences, identity characteristics, and situational factors (e.g., professional experiences, sociopolitical influences). Overall, how the SA midlevel administrator is intrapersonally affected by these factors will influence their mindset(s) and ultimately how they experience the workplace. Thus, successes and challenges in midlevel SA administrators' workplace environments (e.g., specific department and/or unit, the broader SA division, the greater campus community) can weigh on their (a) work performance and (b) feelings about their work.

Figure 1

Conditions Influencing the Mindsets of Midlevel SA Administrators



Note. At work, the ways in which individual factors (e.g., personal experiences, identity) and situational factors (e.g., professional experiences, sociopolitical influences) interact are a constant cycle. These factors interact in and outside the workplace environment and influence the mindset(s) of midlevel SA administrators.

Overall, this conceptual framework shows these influences are cyclical and ongoing. As the midlevel SA administrator's personal and professional contexts interact, mindsets can affect how they approach their work (e.g., day-to-day responsibilities, professional engagement, collegiality, responses to work demands outside office hours). Also, mindsets can be outcomes of all other variables at play, as well as factors that shape or influence the behavior of midlevel SA

administrators. Thus, one's identity will consistently shape how the SA administrator approaches their work. The midlevel administrator's workplace environments (e.g., campus, department, unit) are the foundation of what can influence their mindset. The environment has a boundary but is not extended fully enough to be closed. Ultimately, the midlevel SA administrator's mindset is porous—their response to daily challenges and sudden changes regarding the midlevel SA administrator's individual and situational context is permeable to influences from all "worlds" they are immersed in.

Research Design

As explained earlier, I applied thriving, buoyancy, and resilience to develop a conceptual framework that considers the workplace and personal factors that affect the mindsets and experiences of midlevel SA administrators (Jabareen, 2009). I frame the research with an interpretive, generic qualitative methodology (Khalke, 2016). For the dissertation, I conducted two interviews with 12 of the 51 participants who fit the criteria of a midlevel SA administrator from the Summer 2021 sample with a continued commitment to their SA career. A self-reflection activity followed by two individual interviews with each participant allowed me to identify consistencies with what challenges these professionals were experiencing, and how they experienced different mindsets in response. Data analysis consisted of a mixed coding scheme that was deductive based on the thriving, buoyancy, and thriving literature and inductive. Accordingly, I explored similarities and differences from their responses related to the mindset frameworks and participants' careers and identified relationships and patterns of association (e.g., relationship between the thriving, buoyancy, and resilience with the participant and their SA work).

As the researcher, I consider how my point of view and interpretation of the findings relate to Pezalla et al.'s (2012) work on a researcher's credibility. Specifically, their focus on the concept of the researcher as an instrument (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995) suggests the researcher's understanding of the subject matter positions them as an active respondent throughout all aspects of the research study. Considering my professional experiences and personal interests, I was able to conduct analysis using these approaches to methodology and methods (see Chapter 3) based on my own context and positionality related to this population. There is also bias due to my previous career as a member of the greater midlevel SA administrator population. To address this, I described my efforts to limit bias and establish trustworthiness in Chapter 3.

Conclusion

This chapter outlined my dissertation proposal by identifying the problem regarding the everyday factors affecting the mindsets and experiences of midlevel administrators working in SA. This research is important as the work of SA professionals and higher education administrators continues to be unpredictable and challenging, which has been well documented in research since the 1960s and continues to be of focus in current media. I described the research study and relevant definitions related to selected mindset concepts. I also described the midlevel SA administrator population and explained the significance of this proposed research from the perspective of the SA profession, the midlevel SA administrators, and PSE institutions. I outlined my research question and intended research design, which engages with the conceptual mindset frameworks of thriving (Schreiner, 2010), buoyancy (Parker & Martin, 2008), and resilience (Winwood et al., 2013). In the next chapter, I review literature related to the study.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review focuses on two relevant areas of research: (a) the student affairs (SA) profession and professionals working within an SA division and (b) literature focused on the selected mindsets informing my study—thriving, buoyancy, and resilience. In conversation, this literature provides context about how these concepts can be a way to understand how midlevel SA administrators feel about, experience, and experience their work on a college or university campus. Furthermore, this literature review grounded why midlevel SA administrators need to experience different mindsets to avoid burning out of their careers because of their navigating consistent challenges at work—historically and recently over the last 5 years.

In this literature review, I first offer a brief history of the SA profession and the different staff who work in the profession from the context of the field of higher and postsecondary education (PSE). Next, I define the population of midlevel SA administrators based on evaluation of the literature. From here, I describe consistent issues experienced by this population—ranging from those challenges that are historical and recurring to more recent and contemporary problems—which is followed by an overview of factors that influence attrition of this population. This conversation of the literature then turns to the concept of *agency* in the contexts of education and workplaces. Last, I focus on the mindsets experienced by midcareer SA administrators.

Student Affairs as a Profession

The "roots" of student affairs emerged later in the 19th century, yet the professionalization of student affairs work on higher education campuses is a "relatively new phenomenon" (Long, 2012, p. 2). After the Era of Paternalism (1636–1850), college enrollment continued to increase, eventually leading to the establishment of residential colleges in the

second half of the 19th century (Schwartz, 2017). This influx and growth of students accessing U.S. higher education was a responsive development mainly focused on postwar reorganization on campuses to concentrate on students' needs in college, leading to the Student Personnel Movement in 1914 (Schwartz & Stewart, 2017). In this movement, college students were "viewed as emotionally immature and requiring strict supervision" (Long, 2012, p. 12). As a result, colleges and universities prioritized a parental role—*in loco parentis*—for students attending PSE that was intended to cultivate the college–student relationship while students pursued their studies (Long, 2012; Snow, 1907). Eventually, administrators exclusively focusing on students' developmental needs were first hired in the 1920s, which offset this responsibility from faculty and the greater campus (Long, 2012).

This progress and growth on campuses were first under the direction and leadership of deans of men and deans of women (Schwartz, 1997). First, deans of men were hired to ensure students followed campus policies, to enforce regulations, and to investigate student issues (Long, 2012). Eventually, deans of women were the established and positioned to be "champions" for "women students" (Schwartz & Stewart, 2017). Over the next decades, SA professional values were recognized, focusing on supporting the *whole student*— their "intellect, spirit, and capacity" (Long, 2012, p. 4). These foundational values were established in 1937, discussed next.

The SA profession was recognized in the United States after publication of the *Student Personnel Point of View* report (American Council on Education [ACE], 1937) coming from the Conference on the Philosophy and Development of Student Personnel. This report considered the perspectives of 14 colleges which met to discuss the "vocational guidance" needed for students outside their formal learning experiences in the classroom to best "assist the students to develop

as individuals" (ACE, 1937, pp. 2–3). The report is gendered and focused exclusively on male students, which is especially relevant when considering historical inequities when this report was published. The report asserted that considering the report's outcomes is an obligation for PSE institutions to mandate. In doing so, PSE institutions would be able to:

> consider the student as a whole—his intellectual capacity and achievement, his emotional make up [sic], his physical condition, his social relationships, his vocational aptitudes and skills, his moral and religious values, his economic resources, his aesthetic appreciations. It puts emphasis, in brief, upon the development of the student as a person rather than upon his intellectual training alone. (ACE, 1937, pp. 4–5)

As a result, a list of 23 needs was established (see Appendix A), describing steps for PSE institutions to enact to best serve student needs. These philosophies describe efforts ranging from selection of students, their orientation to campus, and services required by the students, including medical and mental health, to institutional coordination of support for their financial, intellectual, and living needs (ACE, 1937). A follow-up report, *The Student Personnel Point of View*, emphasized the progress of the SA profession and highlighted the importance of student personnel work to allow for "faculty members teaching courses in personnel work, and by staff members performing designated functions in the personnel field" (ACE, 1949, p. 2). This second report led to (a) the formation of professionalized councils and committees regarding student-facing work; (b) a clear philosophy on how student personnel work fits within the mission of higher education; (c) defined elements, structure, and direction on how to administer and evaluate a student personnel program; and (d) the introduction of what was described as a research emphasis to inform student personnel work moving forward (ACE, 1949; NASPA, 2022; Schwartz & Stewart, 2017).

The specificity of SA roles and responsibilities has evolved over time, leading to national associations (ACPA, 2024; CACUSS, 2024; NASPA, 2024). Furthermore, student personnel work evolved into the SA profession and continues to become more sophisticated (Long, 2012). The SA profession offers nuanced services, with some of the work specifically tailored based on students' identities and their needs (Patton et al., 2016). Today, The Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS)—a consortium of over 100 PSE institutions—continues to develop evaluation and assessment to ground the work of 46 functional areas (e.g., departments, units, programmatic offerings) of SA (see Appendix B), alphabetically ranging from Aboriginal Student Services to Work-Integrated Learning (Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education, 2023).

The work requirements and administrative responsibilities executed by SA professionals have also become more ambiguous over time, often evolving based on the current state of the PSE sector. In 1975, The Council of Student Personnel Associations in Higher Education (COSPA) published three documents identifying priorities of the SA profession and for these administrators and built on the 1937 and 1949 reports: (a) *Student Development Services in Postsecondary Education*, (b) *Tomorrow's Higher Education Phase II: Student Development Model for Student Affairs*, and (c) *The Future of Student Affairs* (Schwartz & Stewart, 2017). The work of SA student-facing staff, administrators, and leadership continued to become increasingly professionalized in the mid-late 1970s—which was particularly responsive to the field of higher education when considering the research, teaching, and service requirements of faculty within the academy (Long, 2012). As a result, SA administrators were tasked with addressing student outcomes (e.g., success, retention, persistence, graduation) to best support the development of students in and outside the classroom (Pritchard & McChesney, 2018). The next section of this

literature review outlines nuances related to the different professional roles within the SA profession whose responsibilities address both (a) the support for student needs and (b) execution and decision-making regarding SA functional areas.

Student Affairs Personnel: Staff and Administrators

There are 36 common SA positions in the profession, split between leadership roles (e.g., the senior student affairs officer such as dean of students or vice president of students, followed by executive director and director), broadly defined midlevel positions (e.g., senior, associate, or assistant director of a functional area), and "frontline and student-facing" roles (e.g., full-time live-in residence hall staff; coordinator of an SA department or unit (Pritchard & McChesney, 2018, p. 5). In North America, SA associations continue to professionalize the careers of SA employees. These include organizations like ACPA—College Student Educators International ("ACPA," formerly *American College Personnel Association*; Schuh et al., 2016), the Canadian Association of College and University Student Services (CACUSS), and NASPA (formerly the *National Association of Student Personnel Administrators*), as well as a host of organizations for specific functional areas (e.g., National Orientation Directors Association or Association of College and University Housing Officers-International). Overall, the associations represent and organize tens of thousands of SA professionals working in the field through professional competencies (ACPA & NASPA, 2015). With consideration of multiple positions in the SA profession along with the broadly defined midlevel administrator population, the focus population for this dissertation research was midlevel SA administrators. This group has a significant stake in the success of SA work and sustainability of knowledge, as demonstrated by the literature discussed next.

Midlevel Student Affairs Administrators as a Population

There is no clear definition of what a midlevel SA administrator does; descriptions vary in organizational literature and across SA professional associations. There are clear descriptions regarding the experience levels of new professionals in the SA profession and those who are the frontline, student-facing professionals working in both higher education and SA (McClellen & Kiyama, 2024; Renn & Jessup-Anger, 2008; Tull & Kuk, 2023; Tull et al., 2009). This ambiguity is the same for positions related to senior executive administration roles in higher education (Lavigne & Sá, 2021). However, the literature has shown an inconsistent definition of SA professionals who are not entry-level nor considered senior leaders. This in-between population is referred to as midlevel administrators in this study. My definition is based on integrating literature about midlevel administrators working in higher education, as well as SA literature and definitions from SA professional associations in North America.

There is discourse on how to describe midlevel administrators—also known as midcareer in some literature (Ojala, 2021). Organizational literature has posited that intentional job design—such as clear job descriptions, responsibilities, and outcomes—can have a beneficial effect on the employee, their performance, and the outcomes of the organization they are part of (Bennis, 1969; Oldham, 2012). From a broad organizational perspective, midlevel administrators have been described as "middle line managers on the organizational hierarchy between those who perform basic services and those who provide vision and direction for the organization" (Mintzberg, 1989, p. 328). Therefore, this population is managing up, coordinating work across the division and, in some cases, the greater campus. Furthermore, midlevel SA administrators are directing work down to subordinate and parallel positions, while also providing direction and leadership in accomplishing goals for the university or college.

Over time, literature has posited the ambiguous responsibilities and job descriptions of midlevel administrators are not a new issue for those working in higher education, broadly, and SA specifically. Moreover, midlevel administrator roles lack clarity about their responsibilities and have generalized, broad job descriptions—all of which makes their work unclear, thus creating role conflict (J. E. Anderson et al., 2020; Juhan, 1993; Mullen et al., 2018; Rosser, 2004; Wolverton et al., 1999). I address role conflict later in this chapter (see "Attrition and Burnout"). Regarding midlevel administrators working in PSE—and in broad terms outside this sector—relevant literature suggests this group of individuals includes those who are working on a campus with undefined senior decision-making responsibilities and authority to make decisions on behalf of their specific area of the college or university (Rodriguez, 2021; Rosser, 2000, 2004). Other research has identified that midlevel administrators have a budget and responsibility for directing personnel in department(s) to achieve departmental goals (Fey & Carpenter, 1996; Rosser & Javinar, 2003).

Similarly, the national and international SA professional associations have enigmatic descriptions about workplace responsibilities of midlevel administrators. Although ACPA and NASPA offer clarity about entry-level and new professional roles and expectations as they are socialized into the SA profession, senior SA officer roles and responsibilities are mostly clear and consistent (Jordan Dungy & Ellis, 2011). At this time, CACUSS does not offer this specific clarity about scope and responsibilities differentiated by level of experience. In. all, there is ambiguity regarding those left "in the middle" for each ACPA, CACUSS, and NASPA.

Specifically, NASPA (2024) defined midlevel administrators as "practitioners with at least five years of student affairs experience, who supervise full-time staff members and are primarily responsible for several student affairs functions on campus" (para. 3). ACPA provides

more context to the association's description of the midlevel SA administrators, identifying that midlevel SA administrators "have more than five years of full-time experience in higher education and are not senior professionals" (ACPA, 2024, para. 3) and a professional level where "some may remain for the entirety of their careers" (para. 5). CACUSS (2024) integrated a similar, albeit unclear, definition of this population. In all, the three associations described the significance and importance of this population and their integral role on campus, offering nuanced professional development opportunities—such as in-person institutes ranging from 3 days to a week and different topical professional development opportunities—yet these trainings change year-to-year and lack a base foundation for training outside the midlevel management institute offered by ACPA (2023). After reviewing schedules and topics of the different trainings and institutes, I noted that topics and sessions are ad hoc year-to-year, with few consistencies.

Defining Midlevel Student Affairs Administrators

I looked for commonalities among the ACPA, CACUSS, and NASPA definitions related to those professionals described as midlevel. I considered these commonalities and related them to similar characteristics from higher education organizational literature (see Austin, 1985) along with government agencies (see U.S. Office of Personnel Management, 2018). As a result, I have developed this working definition for midlevel SA administrators that frames the work responsibilities of this population for my study. By my definition, a midlevel SA administrator working in higher education:

- has more than 10 and up to 25 years of professional experience,
- reports to the most senior leadership of the division and/or the executive leadership or "top officers" of the campus and does not have a faculty role (Austin, 1985),

- has responsibility for the budget, direction, control, or supervision of one or more units; and
- directs the work of one or more full-time professional staff.

Overall, this population is broad in age and experience, is numerous in terms of employee group, and faces ambiguous role expectations. Therefore, it is important to explore what midlevel SA administrators experience at work—especially considering their everyday *experiences*. These everyday experiences can include difficult conditions they sometimes may face on their campuses and their everyday *responsibilities*.

Conditions Faced by Midlevel Student Affairs Administrators

The literature specifically focused on midlevel SA professionals began to be published in the early 1980s, and covers issues related to attrition of these professionals, their evidenced challenges, and what influences them to leave the profession. Recent focus has concentrated on contemporary issues facing midlevel PSE administrators, broadly. Before focusing on literature about the attrition of SA professionals, it is first important to understand the context of the issues affecting midlevel SA administrators. I begin with recurring and historical issues affecting this population, followed by recent and contemporary challenges that influence midlevel SA administrators' day-to-day work activity.

Historic Challenges Experienced by SA Administrators

Over time, there is less focus on midlevel administrators in both bodies of literature focusing on higher education and SA (Mullen et al., 2018), despite midlevel administrators being the largest employee group on campus (Rosser, 2006) and generally representing up to 65% of a campus employee population on campus (Hernandez, 2010; Sagaria & Johnsrud, 1992; Rodriguez, 2021). Much of the SA literature has focused on new professionals (McClellen &

Kiyama, 2024; Renn & Jessup-Anger, 2008)—specifically, how they can be socialized into the SA field and acclimatize through the development of supervisory relationships, connections to professional associations, and competency and skill development (Tull et al., 2013; Torres et al., 2019). There also has been concentration on how SA is a low-consensus profession, including theories and research that informs theory to practice (Herdlein, 2013; Torres et al., 2019). Other literature has focused on the needs of senior administrative leaders (e.g., deans) and senior leadership (e.g., presidents) within higher education (Lavigne & Sá, 2021; Rosser, 2000; Rosser & Javinar, 2003; Tull et al., 2009).

The literature on midlevel administrators in higher education, broadly, and SA specifically, has focused on bleak aspects of their experiences in the workplace. Well-researched factors contributing to SA professionals leaving the field of higher education include career change (Rosser, 2000; Rosser & Javinar, 2003; Tull et al., 2009), negative workplace satisfaction and morale (Johnsrud, 1999; Rosser, 2000; Rosser & Javinar, 2003), and nearly four decades of research concentrated on burnout of SA professionals (N. J. Evans, 1988; Howard-Hamilton et al., 1998; Johnsrud, 1999; Rosser, 2000; Rosser & Javinar, 2003; Rosin & Korabik, 1995; Strange, 1983; Tull et al., 2009). Other work has identified how gender identity can influence how midlevel administrators experience, respond, and adapt to changing conditions and adversity—specifically in consideration of those who identify as a woman and the personal and professional complexities that this population must navigate (Renn & Hughes, 2004; Sallee, 2021). A national study focused on midlevel administrators working in any area of higher education (n = 4,000) identified this population to be the "unsung professionals in the academy" (Rosser, 2004, p. 324) due to their challenges relating to and managing morale, work–life issues, workplace demographics, and satisfaction with their work.

The gap in literature of the midlevel SA administrator population illuminates: (a) there is a lack of knowledge about what helps this employee group socialize into their roles and responsibilities from entry-level or as a student-facing SA educator; (b) there is less research about how this population is trained to manage effectively, but more research focus on their career burnout; and (c) what workplace factors (e.g., leadership, mentorship, opportunities for growth, supervision, structures) contribute to—or hinder—this population's abilities to succeed (Mullen et al., 2018; Rosser, 2004). It is evident this population encompasses a substantial professional community on a campus, depending on the size of the university or college. For SA professionals, institutional membership in international and regional associations (e.g., ACPA, CACUSS, NASPA) also establishes a sense of community within the profession on and beyond campus borders. Furthermore, some members of the midlevel SA population are advancing into senior opportunities and likely self-directing opportunities for leadership and advancement. Overall, contemporary issues facing the midlevel SA administrator population arguably complicate this population's conditions even further.

Contemporary Problems Faced by SA Administrators Since 2017

I present as contemporary problems those matters that have affected the work of SA administrators from 2017 to the present. Therefore, those with at least 5-years of experience (from the start of my Summer 2022 study) would likely have been affected by these contemporary problems at work. Accordingly, I establish a snapshot of the situations likely engaging midlevel SA administrators. This summary includes contentious issues impacting campuses that would regularly be addressed by SA professionals on a campus, especially considering the student-facing responsibilities of their teams, including:

- the COVID-19 pandemic;

- anti-diversity, equity, and inclusion legislation in the U.S. states of Alabama, Florida, Idaho, Indiana, North Carolina, North Dakota, Tennessee, Texas, Utah, and Wyoming that particularly affects students, SA professionals and their work, and campus policy (Alfonseca, 2024);
- a changing political climate sometimes leading to violence on campuses (Katz, n.d.; Young, 2019),
- an increase in public-facing campus incidents related to freedom of speech regarding the *First Amendment* in the United States and the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms* in Canada, and the duty of the university to make sure students feel protected (Baer, 2019; Ben Porath, 2017; Chemerinsky & Gilman, 2017; Friedman, 2019);
- changing forms and approaches to protests on public university campuses—globally—sometimes involving rights or coalition groups external to the campus as evidenced by peer-reviewed research (see Dahlum & Wig, 2021);
- continued focus on financial literacy and financial aid needs of students in PSE, which engages nuanced student identities and affinities (Hernandez & Lopez, 2004; McFarland et al., 2017; Ruiz & Perna, 2017);
- changes related to Title IX in the United States and Bill 132 in Canada, thus affecting the campus' due diligence and responsibilities related to sexual violence (G. Anderson, 2020; Bonnyman, 2017; Department of Education, 2022);
- adapting homogenous student support structures and programs for the increasing number of students with diverse identities and characteristics coming to campuses from North America and abroad (Quaye et al., 2020), very much relating to the "surge of international student enrolment" (Knox, 2023, n.p.); and

- continuous challenges related to holistic health, mental health, and the well-being of students engaging in PSE (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2021; Pascoe et al., 2020), with mental health even being referred to as a "crisis" facing campuses (Aslanian & Roth, 2021; Carrasco, 2022).

The last five years have also illuminated financial constraints for universities and colleges in the United States and Canada, and wavering support and varied public opinion regarding the benefits of students attending universities or college (Cantwell & Taylor, 2020; Garritzmann, 2017). The pandemic, arguably the most disruptive of any of these contemporary problems, has required SA professionals to pivot and adapt in a new way (Rothenberg, 2020).

The College and University Professional Association for Human Resources (CUPA) identified key challenges informed by data (Pritchard & McChesney, 2018). Nearly 2,000 U.S. universities and colleges informed this work and captured the three main challenges facing the SA profession: (a) "increasing student diversity," (b) "higher costs and reduced funding in higher education," and (c) "business model pressures for efficiency" (Pritchard & McChesney, 2018, p. 4). Thus, midlevel SA administrators are required to lead their departments and units through these societal challenges affecting the sector, along with their general day-to-day responsibilities and responsiveness to other anticipated challenges or changes (e.g., conflict, reorganization).

In conversation, it is no wonder SA midlevel administrators "believe they have the hardest jobs within their organization" (Burke, 2022, para. 2). Before the pandemic, the career development of SA professionals was a relevant topic to better understand this population's needs for personal and professional development. Current media has focused on how PSE staff and administrators, broadly, have been leaving their careers because of the pandemic (Tomac, 2021), with some calling it "the great resignation" (Schroeder, 2021). Most recently, there has

been a focus on the number of jobs available within the PSE sector. Yet, these positions continue to be undesirable due to current structural conditions within universities and colleges (McClure, 2021). When considering the tensions related to historic and contemporary issues facing this population, it is important to experience these challenges with historic attrition and burnout of SA professionals. Studying the understanding of individuals' inherent abilities to self-improve, regulate, and "achieve fulfillment" by way of mindsets can offer an alternative perspective to the widely researched "burnout" experiences of SA professionals (Brown et al., 2017). Furthermore, understanding factors in and out of work that influence mindsets at work can offer contextual perspective about midlevel SA administrators' experiences.

Attrition and Burnout of SA Professionals

Considering the historic and contemporary challenges facing midlevel administrators in higher education, attrition of PSE staff continues to be widely covered in research and the media. In fact, higher education scholarship has covered the areas of attrition and burnout of SA professionals since the 1980s (N. J. Evans, 1988; Howard-Hamilton et al., 1998; Keener, 1990; Martone, 1987; Mullen et al., 2018; Strange, 1985; Walterbusch, 2019). Books and edited volumes related to burnout and attrition of SA professionals consider how characteristics of a campus (e.g., type, demographics, location) can influence the retention of SA professionals (Guthrie et al., 2005; Murphy, 2001; Quiles, 1998).

Although these sources provide comprehensive context and analysis about why and how midlevel SA administrators and staff leave the profession, in many cases regarding organizational issues researched in the field, there is little to no focus on solutions to address these problems (Perez & Bettencourt, 2024; Walterbusch, 2019). Similarly, this research often does not consider the positives of career change, such as when employees leave the sector for

new and diverse opportunities to exercise existing skills in a new context (Tomlinson et al., 2018; Wittmer & Rudolph, 2014). Ultimately, 4 decades of research has shown how a consistent reason for attrition among SA professionals is the lack of opportunity for career advancement (Bender, 1980; N. J. Evans, 1988; Green & Davis, 2021; Johnsrud, 1999; Marshall et al., 2016; Rosser 2004, 2008; Tarver et al., 1999). More specifically, recent literature suggested career progression and advancement for higher education professionals has been limited by socially unjust and exclusive spaces within the academy (Castro et al., 2020). In all, extant challenges SA professionals are expected to address and manage threaten the sustainability of a career in SA.

"Sustainable" Careers in Student Affairs

As described earlier in this chapter, the roles and responsibilities of SA professionals have continued to become more complex over time. Contentions continue within the SA profession—albeit, along with other roles within the broader PSE sector—about the lack of recognition in the workplace and concerns with livable working salaries. When considering this problem and how SA professionals continue to burn out, the sustainability of a career in the SA profession is important to address. The edited volume, *Creating Sustainable Careers in Student Affairs,* argued, "the current structure of student affairs work is not sustainable, as it depends on the notion that employees are available to work non-stop without any outside responsibilities" (Sallee, 2020, p. iv). Sallee (2020) grounded the book in Acker's (1990) scholarship focused on ideal working norms.

This research argues the sustainability of SA work is becoming more complicated, and sustaining a career in SA must consider the personal toll employees experience while doing SA work related to their own identities (e.g., being a member of a group that state policy excludes, responding to escalating work demands while also caring for others at home). These factors

threaten the sustainability of SA careers in complex and contextual ways—particularly how and when identity and affinity groups contend structures of work-life integration (Hirschy & Staten, 2020; Leppert & Mitchell, 2022). Combined, there is a toll on emotional labor and wellbeing of SA professionals (Lynch & Klima, 2020; Perez & Bettencourt, 2024; Sallee, 2020). Overall, unaddressed recurring and nuanced issues over the past 40 years can explain the consistent pattern of burnout of SA professionals.

In summary, the literature has identified consistent factors contributing to attrition and burnout of SA professionals as job dissatisfaction, role ambiguity, poor work–life balance, and limited opportunities for advancement. One's agency in the workplace can be how workers advocate for or reject specific expectations normed, particularly considering the historic and contemporary challenges midlevel SA administrators are navigating. Agency is discussed next.

Agency in the Workplace

Integrating foundational research on social development, management, and workplaces (see Arrow, 1985; Berle & Means, 1932; Jensen & Meckling, 1976; Levinthal, 1988; Pratt & Zeckhauser, 1985) agency in workplaces is said to be a dominant aspect of organizational behaviour "in strategy and especially in corporate Governance" (Bendickson et al., 2015, p. 175). Agency theory is:

> based on the relationship between one party, the principal, who designates certain tasks and decisions to another party, the agent. The focus of agency theory stems from assumptions that the agent will behave opportunistically, particularly if their interests conflict with the principal. (Mitchell & Meacheam, 2011, p. 151)

So, agency is centered as the unit of analysis among the principals and agents (Eisenhardt, 1989). In times of conflict or disagreement among principals and agents, negotiation is required to

understand what costs are required for resolution (Mitchell & Meacheam, 2011). In education research, agency is described as "the sense of being able to enact one's freedom (as opposed to conditioned and habituated patterns of thinking, perception, and action) grounded in personal knowledge and ethics" (Bai, 2006, p. 9).

Research focused on the interaction of emotions and agency at work has documented how individuals' "fear and enjoyment, related to professional identity, work, and social relationships" will influence's how one's agency at work is employed, and that "among both employees and leaders, emotions were found to play an important role in the enactment of agency" (Hökkä et al., 2017, pp. 161–162) as one navigates their workplace. Overall, agency at work is "relational and profoundly social in nature" (K. Evans & Biasin, 2017, p. 17). This perspective is especially important to consider with (in)consistencies facing higher education institutions and the leaders within.

For principals and agents intertwined with workplace agency, the perceptions and emotions are engaging with the structures and systems at play. It is fair to suggest one's multiple identities at work—not limited to their context, characteristics, and expertise—will influence how agency is exercised or depended on. Therefore, one agent may be facing a workplace situation or in a workplace norm where their agency can be used as an asset; for another agent, their lacking agency may be a deficit or disadvantage in the circumstance. Concepts like mindsets may help explain employees' experiences and engagement in the workplace and can be a way to understand how midlevel SA administrators understand their workplace environment and navigate their agency. Next, I discuss literature related to mindsets.

Mindsets in Higher and Postsecondary Education Research

Fostering employees' mindsets in an intentionally organized environment "offers a compelling lens for understanding the cognitive and social processes through which those on the front lines successfully navigate high-risk, high-hazard work" (Vogus, 2012, p. 674). Research on mindsets, broadly, focuses on human cognitive and emotional development within an individual and "examines the power of such beliefs to influence human behavior" (Dweck & Yeager, 2020, p. 481). Considering the organizational level, mindsets are a way for employees to be "aware of their situation and desired outcomes, recognize, choose, and sometimes invent from among a variety of leadership strategies, and effectively employ a variety of potential leadership actions" (Sullivan & Page, 2020, p. 180).

The concept of mindsets is not new in research nor practice, especially when considering K–12, PSE, organizational research, and the broader sociological fields of literature. From my initial overview of the research focused on mindsets, it is important to note that each mindset is distinguished from the others, yet how they are commonly seen or used on a campus can vary. This note is important as the mindsets are nuanced, exclusively defined, and empirically evidenced. That said, when applying mindsets from theory to practice, mindset concepts become confused for one another and used interchangeably. For example, SA programming may deliver what is called "thriving programming" for students, when the programming targets resilience in practice. Mindsets are especially relevant to SA administrators based on their work responsibilities and their individual abilities to lead, influence—and sometimes mentor—various types of SA professionals.

van der Walt and Lezar (2019) distinguished thriving in the workplace, building upon Bakker et al.'s (2008) work. The population of their study (n = 283) included participants from

the public and private sectors working in the same location. This scholarship concluded thriving is psychological and can influence and lead to continued growth. However, the research asserted employees "have been found to be more inclined to have higher levels of satisfaction and career longevity, healthier relationships, and greater job satisfaction, and to learn more effectively" (van der Walt & Lezar, 2019, pp. 259–260, in reference to the work by Keyes, 2009; Rautenbach, 2015; Seligman, 2011). Thriving includes self-actualization of one's successes, which requires continuous growth rather than just continuously doing well (Spreitzer et al., 2010; van der Walt & Lezar, 2019). Distinguishing and defining how midlevel SA administrators experience mindsets is key to understanding a phenomenon—in this case, the career experiences of midlevel SA administrators.

After reviewing several different mindsets in the literature noted above, two parallel mindsets are well evidenced in the PSE and organizational literature—thriving and resilience. There is a less established middle ground between these two concepts, described in academic success literature as buoyancy. This final section of the literature review describes each selected mindset related to this study.

Thriving

Positive psychology and well-being scholarship is the root of *thriving* research and considers one's "intellectual, interpersonal and psychological engagement, learning, and growth" (Schreiner, 2024, p. 1). Those who are thriving can achieve practical outcomes and complete goal-oriented activities without setbacks (Carver, 1998; Nieto, 2009; Schreiner, 2010). From the perspective of thriving in the workplace, Spreitzer et al. (2005) referred to the influence knowledge and understanding have on a thriving employee in the workplace in their definition:

"When people are thriving, they feel progress and momentum, marked both by a sense of learning and a sense of vitality" (p. 537).

Schreiner and colleagues' (2020) work regarding thriving from the lens of student success adds context to this view by describing thriving in the following way. According to this research, a thriving individual is:

- not only succeeding academically but also experienced in the learning process,
- invested to reach important educational goals through their own efforts,
- effectively managing their time and commitments,
- connected to others in healthy ways,
- optimistic about their future, they are positive about their present choices,
- appreciative of differences in others, and
- is committed to enriching the communities in which they are part.

Schreiner's multicampus project, Thriving Quotient (2021), emphasized that thriving is an intersection of intellectual, interpersonal, and psychological engagement while participating in PSE and applies to adult learning environments. Like the notion of thriving in student success research, trends regarding thriving in the workplace posit that thriving is socially embedded. Accordingly, thriving can vary by employee groups and can have practical links to health. Furthermore, thriving can contribute to a positive workplace environment due to the positive psychological experiences and lead to an increase in motivation. In all, a thriving mindset fosters a positive personal condition for the individual and is evidenced by positive energy and contributions to the environment in which they are. Parallel to a thriving mindset is resilience.

Resilience

Research focusing on *resilience* posited this mentality to be complex to define due to interdisciplinary understanding and application of this responsive mindset (Windle, 2011). With authors from multiple fields referring to Winwood et al.'s (2013) work focused on lifespan, resilience is defined as a "process of negotiating, managing, and adapting to significant sources of stress or trauma. Assets and resources within the individual, their life and environment facilitate the capacity for adaptation and 'bouncing back' in the face of adversity" (p. 1208). Although the behaviors and reactive choices of the resilient individual being faced with a specific challenge are intrinsic, how they cope or adapt is also dependent and influenced by the specific environment they are in (Williams-Brown & Mander, 2020; Windle, 2011; Winwood et al., 2013). Therefore, if workplace demands are causing internal conflict for an employee, their workplace environment will influence how they respond.

This notion is also focused on from the lens of positive organizational scholarship. Caza and Milton (2012) described workplace resilience as a "developmental trajectory characterized by demonstrated competence in the face of, and the professional growth after, experiences of adversity in the workplace" (Caza & Milton, 2012, p. 895). Whether it be consistent issues, escalation, continued individual challenges regarding personal energy, self-defined success at work, or continuous adversity, resilient individuals "find a way" to adapt, adjust, or simply cope. The effects of resilience create capacity for adaptability and positive adjustment and allow the individual to rebound to some sort of challenge, which is not typical (Carver, 1998; Powley et al., 2020). Engaging resilience can have a positive effect on the individual and allow them to also build capability and experience success mindsets at work and lead to thriving (Caza & Milton, 2012).

For example, Caza and Milton (2012) described the role adversity plays in resilience at work, noting that adversity is an "essential precondition that causes a trajectory of positive adaptation. . . Thriving does not require adversity as a precondition" (Caza & Milton, 2012, p. 899). Work environments can cultivate workplace resilience and promote employee engagement focused on resilience strategies when staff face a significant challenge (Sutcliffe & Vogus, 2003). Caza and Milton (2012) identified these approaches as developing "protective factors" when employees experience challenges or face risks. An employee's ability to develop this type of shield will also be dependent on their "characteristics, components of their family, and components of the wider social context . . . resilience at work [considers] individual, social, and organizational factors must be considered" (Caza & Milton, 2012, pp. 900–901).

Buoyancy

The notion of *buoyancy* (Martin & Marsh, 2008, 2020) has been a focus of K–12 research (e.g., the buoyancy of teachers within their profession, academic buoyancy of students) as well as PSE student athletes. Buoyancy is individuals' self-perception of their ability to manage setbacks and challenges that are typical of the ordinary course of life (e.g., performance, competing deadlines, pressure, difficult tasks). Parker and Martin's (2009) work on buoyancy identified that "resilience research has been extended to consider more 'everyday' resilience that is typical of the ordinary course of life. This 'everyday resilience' has been referred to as buoyancy" (p. 136).

Examples of buoyancy in the workplace can relate to responding to what is not planned nor anticipated, thus requiring a response to these ebbs and flows of the everyday workplace. Research focused on buoyancy mindset behaviors suggests an individual engaging in buoyancy is doing this more commonly to respond to the fluidity of wavy, inconsistent conditions as they

adapt to their environment. From an academic success lens of learning a second language, Yun et al. (2018) described how anticipated challenges with learning a second language can cause buoyant behaviors in learners who are adapting to new learning successes and challenges. In this view, buoyancy is more "mainstream" and "ordinary" (Yun et al., 2018), and Yun et al. (2018) noted "buoyancy sustains motivation thereby providing learners with the capacity to negotiate the ups and downs of everyday language learning, sustain prolonged effort, and overcome setbacks on the path to learning success" (p. 810). These buoyant behaviors are individual and can be cultivated (e.g., by a teacher or perhaps a supervisor) and are self-monitored by self-regulation and goal setting (Martin & Marsh, 2008, 2009; Yun et al., 2018). Therefore, with this self-driven mindset, one's goal achievements could lead to thriving or cause resilience if the individual experiences repeated challenges when buoyant—thus placing buoyancy in the middle.

Therefore, an employee does not need to be buoyant if their work is predictable, allowing the employee to conduct their work as it was envisioned and planned. Less interruption allows for someone to be able to thrive in their environment. More challenges and changes requiring adaptability will cause one to be buoyant and responsive, and continuous adapting to change could lead to resilience. I posit that buoyancy engages midlevel student affairs administrators and their workplace. Buoyancy can be experienced because of experiencing through four factors that cause one to be buoyant: common "setback, challenge, adversity, and pressure" (Martin et al., 2016, p. 17). I next differentiate the selected mindsets.

Distinguishing Selected Mindsets: Thriving, Buoyancy, and Resilience

Although each mindset is an individual area of research, I distinguish buoyancy from thriving (Schreiner, 2023) and resilience (Winwood et al., 2013) research as it focuses on an individual's fluid, everyday experiences. When differentiating buoyancy from the other

frameworks, thriving is a mindset experienced when there is dedicated learning from personal growth, interpersonal, and intrapersonal development; resilience is a behavioral response resulting from significant stress or some sort of pressure. Buoyancy is resilience in daily practice—how an employee responds to the ebbs and flows of changing demands of the workplace. Buoyancy is not a process of responding to significant stress, like resilience. Rather, buoyancy is how resilience "shows up" in an employee and enables them to work toward thriving or bouncing back when necessary. All three mindsets experience in isolation or in tandem, depending on the circumstance, and can protect someone from burnout.

Chapter Summary

This literature focused on the history of the SA profession and the professionalization of careers in SA. From here, I illustrated preexisting conditions and new issues that are detrimental to the SA profession and those who are SA employees on a campus. For some, dealing with these circumstances leads to burnout and affects the attrition of SA professionals. For others, different mindsets—thriving, buoyancy, and resilience—can influence how the professional sees and does their work and help them continue in the profession. In conversation, one's agency may influence the SA administrator's overall mindset and how they navigate their workplace experiences.

This literature review frames my research methodology and design to understand the experiences of midlevel SA administrators in thriving, buoyancy, and resilience mindsets in different contexts. The literature also highlights how one may experience different mindsets in response to the experiences and conditions experienced by midlevel SA administrators at work. I posit a deeper exploration of how employees experience these mindsets offers insight into

employee and organizational successes and challenges in SA divisions. The methodology that guided this research is discussed next.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY AND METHODS

In this chapter, I overview my role and view as the researcher, the methodology that grounds this research, and the design of this study focused on midlevel administrators working in student affairs (SA) on higher education campuses. To begin, I describe my lenses viewing this study: my positionality, my research paradigm, and my role as the researcher. From here, I explain my methodological choices, describe the generic qualitative approach (Kostere & Kostere, 2022) that grounds this study, and follow with an overview of the research methods I employed. The methods overview concludes with a description of my data analysis strategy, followed by considerations related to trustworthiness and ethics. The research question guiding my study asked: What are the experiences midlevel student affairs administrators have with thriving, buoyancy, and resilience mindsets?

Positionality

My positionality addresses my personal and professional experiences, my influence on the research, and my values and assumptions, which can impact the overall study (Holmes, 2020; Merriam, 2002). I worked in various SA leadership roles for nearly 15 years at three different universities in Canada before beginning doctoral studies in the United States. Based on the definition of the midlevel SA administrator population for this study (see Chapter 2), I fit this definition for over half my career working as an SA educator and administrator.

I have been recognized for my career accomplishments; however, I also experienced hardship in my career. I feel I can identify with thriving, buoyancy, and resilience differently based on various career experiences. My professional positions offered me incredible opportunities, such as advocating for and engaging with student learning and development and forming relationships on and off campus to support student success. My last role positioned me

to give students the best news—like receiving a scholarship or an award. In contrast, my previous work required me to be managing the campus response to individuals' most challenging life experiences—whether it involve addiction, experiencing a mental health crisis, or coping with some form of violation or assault. Other career experiences required me to deliver difficult news that would influence a student's or parent's life journey.

My view is that a career in SA offers more than the experience of managing budgets, projects, and people; rather, working in the profession can present a transformative experience. It can be assumed that all careers have "ups and downs," but I argue SA is unique. Some positions in the SA profession experience the most personal and individual realities of postsecondary students. Other positions with fewer stakes are equally important and perhaps considered transactional, but still have high stakes. Looking back, I remember when I was thriving; I understand when I needed to be resilient—but more often—I remember wading through tides and adjusting to rough waters, with each experience requiring me to experience buoyancy to meet expectations related to my responsibilities.

When bridging all my previous career experiences, my research training, along with the importance of positionality as described in generic qualitative methods, I view this study from multiple perspectives. I understand PSE as a constant learning environment—whether living on campus as a professional, engaging with leaders and community stakeholders on campus, managing projects and people, responding to high-impact emergency management, or providing direction to emergency response at any hour while communicating these active issues to senior leadership of the campus. Understanding the mindsets of those midlevel SA administrators who lead departments, programs, and student-facing areas of a campus can offer new insight into this population's needs and engagement with their work. This opportunity is particularly imperative

considering midlevel SA administrators' professional and institutional expertise with the ongoing workplace challenges experienced by this group, as illustrated in the literature review.

Research Paradigm

I view this research from a social constructivism paradigm based on Vygotsky's (1978) social learning theory. This approach allowed me to identify how "psychological phenomena emerge from social interaction" (Liu et al., 2010, p. 11). Social constructivism posits that the creation of knowledge is not separate from the social environment that forms it (Detel, 2015). Creswell (2016) identified that social constructivism promotes understanding multiple meanings of perspectives from social and historical data. Last, from an ontological perspective, "constructs cannot usefully be qualified; only rich qualitative description can capture their essence" (Coe et al., 2017, p. 6). Based on my previous career experiences and positionality, I explored the phenomenon in depth and considered midlevel SA administrator participants' experiences while considering what workplace environment factors influenced this population's mindsets and experiences at work. Involving participants with similar career characteristics and employing multiple methods for data collection from participants also promoted social constructivism of knowledge. Accordingly, the social constructivist paradigm and context framed the methodology for this research study.

Role of the Researcher

I approached my study with the conceptual lens as a researcher as an instrument (Pezalla et al., 2017; Xu & Storr, 2012). This concept means my positionality and experiences can add to data interpretation—especially when considering many data sources—and positions my role as the researcher to be reflexive (Stewart, 2010). Furthermore, Pezalla et al.'s (2017) work on investigating social science research credibility related to this concept suggests I am well

positioned for analysis using these approaches to methodology and methods based on my own context and positionality related to this population. Ultimately, the concept of *researcher as an instrument* is critical to constructivism (Stewart, 2010). My positionality, research paradigm, and role as the researcher informed my methodological choices.

Methodology

Broadly, this was a qualitative research study. This research seeks "answers to questions in the real world" (Rossman & Rallis, 2017, p. 3) from the perspectives of midlevel SA administrators working in postsecondary education (PSE). The qualitative design "take[s] place in the natural world, can use multiple methods, and focuses on the context" (Rossman & Rallis, 2017, p. 36). Accordingly, this study took place in natural settings, and I endeavored to learn more about individual experiences and perceptions in the social world of midlevel professionals working in higher education (Rossman & Rallis, 2017). This qualitative study may offer insight that can influence how campus leadership and professional associations think about and approach this population and the SA profession. A generic qualitative approach bolstered this qualitative study.

A Generic Qualitative Approach to Methodology

A generic qualitative approach (Khalke, 2016; Kostere & Kostere, 2022; Percy et al., 2015) can offer insight into the phenomenon of how midlevel SA administrators experience thriving, buoyant, and resilience mindsets in response to escalating challenges in the workplace. Although other methodologies have specific and binding philosophical tenets and expectations regarding methods (Kostere & Kostere, 2022), a generic qualitative approach to research availed me the flexibility to draw from multiple theoretical frameworks and methods to understand human experiences (Percy et al., 2015). The phenomenon explored in this study relates to

contemporary workplace experiences and conditions and how and why midlevel SA administrators experience mindsets in response to ongoing and escalating challenges at work.

The obvious limitation of this methodological approach is that it lacks a clear foundation and is "less defined and established" (Khalke, 2016, p. 37) than grounded theories and other methodologies. However, some authors who use this approach have posited that a generic qualitative approach can experience multiple approaches that may influence a researcher to experience different types of research questions with atypical methods rather than those methods that bind a specific philosophy and methodology (Khalke, 2016; Kostere & Kostere, 2022). Khalke's (2016) work focused on generic qualitative approaches offers remedies to ensure generic qualitative approaches remain rigorous, which includes focus on (a) taking the researcher's epistemological and theoretical self-awareness into account, (b) evidencing "clear thinking-through and justification of research choices and linkages" in the study, and (c) clear understanding of the research frameworks being experienced with thorough peer checking or "the guidance of an experienced supervisor or mentor" to ensure what is being borrowed from is done so correctly and ethically (Khalke, 2016, pp. 48–49). This study met these methodological thresholds, which was especially true when considering my chair and dissertation committee's scholarship, along with their professional and administrative experiences.

In sum, generic qualitative studies "simply seek to discover and understand a phenomenon, a process, or the perspectives and worldview of the people involved" (Merriam, 1998, p. 11). Therefore, borrowing from multiple philosophical and methodological approaches can illuminate the phenomenon of the unique experiences of the midlevel SA administrator population and offer interpretive description of the conditions that affect them (Caelli et al., 2003). Accordingly, this generic qualitative study also engaged aspects of phenomenology. This

study was not phenomenological, but I borrowed aspects to influence the generic qualitative design, including a first interview in 2021 from my separate study that informed this research and multiple interviews in 2022 for my dissertation. This design allowed me to explore the workplace phenomenon in depth and include participants' lived experiences (Rossman & Rallis, 2016). The generic qualitative design allowed me, as the researcher, to interpret and describe lived experiences regarding a phenomenon affecting multiple participants (Moustakas, 1994) and typically involves interviews as methods (Creswell, 2015).

In all, I have a fair understanding of participants' lived experiences at work, along with their intentions, attitudes, and beliefs about their SA work and their workplaces. A generic qualitative approach allowed me to explore workplace mindsets and experiences in depth and make meaning of the data collected from our interviews and their artifacts (Ritchie et al., 2014). My research paradigm as a social constructivist offered me the opportunity to understand why and how participants are engaging different mindsets in their workplace environment.

Research Design

I recruited participants individually with the intention of having a mix of self-identified characteristics (e.g., years working in the SA profession, living in the U.S. or Canada, gender). These participants were from my original study (Smith, 2024; $n = 51$). I narrowed the 51 participants based on the new criteria of midlevel SA administrator, resulting in 32 potential participants. Twelve were initially asked to participate, with 11 participants confirming their participation. One individual did not respond to my request due to their parental leave, so I invited one more participant. Participants were invited and consented to participate, agreeing to complete a pre-interview reflection activity that allowed them to illustrate their career (see Appendix C) before participating in two individual semistructured interviews with me over a 4-

week period in winter 2022. The pre-interview reflection activity completed before the interviews focused on the participant's career journey in SA, which each participant overviewed in Interview 1, leading to formal interview questions.

Participant Selection and Sample

Each participant fit the criteria of midlevel SA administrator: had more than 10 years but up to 25 years of working experience in SA, reported to the most senior leader of the SA division or provost, and directed the work of personnel in at least one department in a functional area of SA. Using the 2021 summer research fellowship sample (n = 51), I created a purposive subset by inviting a sample of participants that met the population criteria to balance participants from both countries. To maximize diversity in the sample, I considered self-identified characteristics from the 2021 registration form that includes a mix of career experiences, years of experience, country, race/ethnicity, gender, and experience with campus types.

My sample consisted of 12 midlevel SA administrators currently working in the United States (n = 7) or in Canada (n = 5). Three participants had postsecondary degrees and work experience from both countries, giving them context and experience with SA in the United States and Canada. All participants had career experience in more than one functional area of SA, which gave them deeper perspectives on the SA profession. Although the United States and Canada are neighboring countries and generally share the same professional values under ACPA and NASPA, there are nuances about working in SA in the United States or in Canada, including but not limited to salary, transparency of job advertisements and responsibilities, and benefits (e.g., health). Based on my experience in both contexts, I believe it is fair to assume Canadian SA is broadly shaped by the United States. SA research and values. The formal CACUSS association was developed in 1974, and the CACUSS SA professional competencies (see

Fernandez et al., 2016) are developed from the established ACPA and NASPA competencies, with some Canadian contextualization (see Table 2 for participant demographics and characteristics).

Table 2

Dissertation Study Participants

Pseudonym	Self-identified characteristics	Years working in student affairs
Annie	Canadian, White, woman	15+
Eliza	American, Latina, woman	20+
Jacquie	Canadian, Latina, woman	15+
Malcolm	Canadian, White, man	20+
Marc	Canadian, South Asian, man, gay	15+
Maria	Canadian, European White, woman	20+
Peter	American, White, man	20+
Robin	American, White, man, gay	15+
Simon	Canadian, White, man	10+
Steven	American, White, man, gay	15+
Susie	Canadian, White, woman	20+
Xiomara	American, Latina, woman	20+

Participant Profiles

This section includes brief profiles describing each participant's education and career journey. This information is based on their own information inputted on the demographics and interest form, as well as from the self-reflection activity they completed prior to the interviews for the dissertation study. Each profile is named with a pseudonym selected by the participant.

Annie

Annie is Canadian with over 15 years' experience working at five different campuses in western Canada. Annie decided to consider a career in SA due to "an important mentor" she worked with as a student. Having professional experience at universities, colleges, and a polytechnic college, Annie has worked in progressive leadership roles, starting her career in a student-facing support position. Annie now directs a department focused on student transition and success. Her career changes in progressive roles have been at a new campus instead of progressing at the same institution. Annie completed her undergraduate and master's degrees in Canada and has nearly finished her Doctor of Education degree in Canada.

Eliza

Eliza is from the United States, and her career spans over 20 years across many states in different regions. Eliza decided to consider a career in SA because of her "passion" for being involved on campus by working with students. Eliza's career in SA focused on student involvement, broadly, and then became more focused on fraternity and sorority life, along with student activities on campus. Eliza has been in many professional associations related to specific SA functional areas, as well as ACPA and NASPA. Eliza also has a unique perspective from working outside higher education campuses while working with a professional association full-time at a certain time in her career. Eliza earned her bachelor's, master's, and PhD at different campuses in the United States.

Jacquie

Jacquie is a first–generation Canadian with nearly 20 years' experience working professionally in SA. Jacquie decided to consider a career in SA due to being "inspired" by her residence life paraprofessional experience. Jacquie has worked within the same province in

eastern Canada and has worked at two different large university campuses. Jacquie's foundation to SA is her paraprofessional and entry-level career experience working in housing and residence life. After leaving a midlevel leadership role directing residence life, Jacquie progressed at the same institution directing student life and leadership programs, and now is the most senior student affairs officer, reporting to the vice provost. Jacquie is very involved in several professional associations dedicated to functional areas in SA, along with the broader ACPA, CACUSS, and NAPSA professional communities.

Malcolm

Malcolm is a Canadian with over 20 years' experience working in various functional areas in SA, mostly related to housing and other roles requiring 24/7 response. Malcolm decided to consider a career in SA due to a "mentor" who encouraged him to consider SA as a career. Malcolm currently works in western Canada but has worked coast to coast in Canada and the United States. Specifically, Malcolm has worked professionally on the East Coast of the United States and western Canada. Malcolm currently reports to the most senior student affairs officer and has progressed on this campus in several roles. Prior, Malcolm worked at two other campuses in each Canada and the United States and earned his undergraduate degree in Canada, and both his master's and Doctor of Education degrees in the United States.

Marc

Marc is from Canada and has 15+ years of experience working in various functional areas in SA, along with registrar services. Marc decided to consider a career in SA due to encouragement from "an important supervisor." Marc's beginnings in SA began in housing and residence life and advanced to an assistantship-like role as a live-in professional working in housing throughout his master's degree. Professionally, Marc has worked at three campuses

between the West Coast and eastern Canada. Marc earned his undergraduate, master's, and Doctor of Education degrees at three different Canadian universities. Marc's previous and current positions each report directly to the provost. Marc is highly involved in several higher education professional associations in Canada—not limited to CACUSS.

Maria

Maria is a Canadian with over 20 years' experience working professionally in SA, primarily in the same functional areas: housing, career education, peer mentoring, intentional student support, and student leadership development. Maria decided to consider a career in SA due to the positive experiences she had in leadership roles as a student. Maria has worked at universities and colleges in Canada, totaling five campuses. While much of her career has been in the same province in eastern Canada, Maria has professional experience in Canada and the United States. Maria earned her undergraduate degree in Canada, her master's in the United States, and a Doctor of Education outside North America. Maria's master's degree program was in the Midwest in the United States, where she also held an assistantship role. Maria has reported to the senior student affairs officer at the last three campuses where she has worked.

Peter

Peter is from the United States with nearly 25 years' experience working in SA. Peter decided to consider a career in SA as he enjoyed his student involvement and engagement experiences throughout his undergraduate degree. Most of Peter's career has been based in the same eastern seaborne state in the United States and spans seven different university and college campuses. Peter's career began in SA and focused on campus activities, judicial affairs, and student conduct. Peter's career has since focused on student activities and student leadership development. Peter also has experience teaching master's level SA administration graduate

students at different campuses within the same state he works and lives in. Peter's educational accomplishments include a bachelor's and master's degree completed on the East Coast of the United States, and a Doctor of Education earned from a campus in the South.

Robin

Robin is from the U.S. and has over 15 years working professionally in SA at the same East Coast college. Robin decided to consider a career in SA resulting from "feeling alive" after his student leader contributions throughout his undergraduate degree. Robin started his SA career working in a professional role during his master's degree at a different university campus focused on student activities. Now, Robin leads all of student engagement, activities, and programs on his campus, where he started as an entry-level student activities coordinator over 15 years ago and progressed in his SA career after working in six different positions. Robin earned his undergraduate and master's degrees at two different campuses on the east coast of the United States. Robin is highly experienced in various regional and national professional associations related to SA.

Simon

Simon is a Canadian with just over 10 years of professional experience working in SA. Simon decided to consider a career in SA, which resulted from his interest in developing involvement experiences for others like those he had experienced on campus. Simon's professional experience spans from the West to the East Coast of Canada at six college and university campuses. Simon's career started in residence life, and his professional experiences also include leading all of housing, residence life, student conduct and judicial affairs, and student activities at his current campus. Simon's reporting structure has changed over time, and

his role—the most senior student affairs member—dually reports to two vice presidents on his campus who focus on finance, administration, and students.

Steven

Steven is from the United States and has over 15 years of experience working in SA professionally. Steven decided to consider a career in SA because he enjoyed being involved and experienced on his campus as an undergraduate student. Steven's professional career has mostly taken place in the U.S. South; however, Steven also has other professional experiences in the Midwest and West Coast of the United States. Most of Steven's work focuses on the student conduct, judicial affairs, and student integrity functional areas of the SA profession. Recently, Steven was promoted internally to be in the most senior student conduct and student integrity role at his campus, reporting to the vice president of students and the provost. Steven completed his undergraduate and master's degrees in the Midwest and his PhD in the South.

Susie

Susie is a Canadian with over 20 years working in SA after a career teaching overseas. Susie decided to consider a career in SA for career stability after returning from a career overseas. Susie works in the same West Coast province where she attended all her schooling, from elementary school to her undergraduate degree and Bachelor of Education. Susie has worked in various functional areas within SA (e.g., student learning, writing support) and now manages all student services on her campus. Susie has worked at the same university campus where she started her SA career, has continued to be promoted into more senior roles and was recently interim dean of students.

Xiomara

Xiomara is from the United States and has education and career experiences throughout the United States in several states, coast to coast. Xiomara currently works at a campus in the South, where she has worked for over a decade, transitioning into progressively senior roles. Xiomara wanted to begin her career in SA due to "an important mentor" whom she met during her undergraduate degree and with whom she is still close. Xiomara's SA career started in student activities, as well as sorority and fraternity life, eventually working in many other SA functional areas related to student development and success. Now, Xiomara directs all community engagement on her campus. Xiomara has taught graduate school courses. Xiomara completed her undergraduate and master's degrees and PhD at different campuses on the East Coast.

Methods

A pilot study is a "small study to test research protocols, data collection instruments, sample recruitment strategies, and other research techniques in preparation for a larger study" (Hassan et al., 2006, p. 70). I completed a pilot of the research methods November–December 2022 that included five participants not related to the dissertation and with whom I am familiar. These participants work in SA roles in the United States or Canada and have completed graduate school in higher education in the United States. The pilot allowed me to refine questions and test all aspects of my methods.

Prior to the first interview, I asked participants to complete a reflection activity on their own, which was sent to me in advance of our interview. I used the result of this activity as an artifact for analysis. The activity asked participants to create an artifact to "list or illustrate your career journey/trajectory" and "identify self-selected benchmarks (e.g., highlights, challenges,

and/or milestones).” Artifacts have been described in qualitative research as a tool to help participants focus on what they are learning or the subjects being discussed (Edwards & l’Anson, 2020). See Appendix D for participant artifacts. This artifact influenced the discussion of our first interview. Participants used the artifact to explain their career in SA from its starting point to today, which is described later (see “Data Collection”).

In accordance with recommendations by Rossman and Rallis (2017), I conducted the second interview within at least two weeks of the first interview. Interviews occurred between January and March 2023. In-depth interview methods (Mears, 2017) allowed me to “understand individual perspectives, deepen understanding of events and experiences, generate rich descriptive data, gather insights into participants thinking” and “learn more about the context” (Rossman & Rallis, 2017, p. 154) of participants. Follow-up interviews allowed me to gain deeper insights while conducting member checking with participants regarding initial analysis, allowing me to “elicit elaborations and clarifications” (Rossman & Rallis, 2017, p. 159). I did this by recapping our initial conversation in the first interview and summarizing the themes I observed. The follow-up interviews allowed participants to reflect, build on, or clarify earlier responses. Considering my social constructivist research paradigm, my rapport with participants was further established due to these interviews and discussions about the artifact, particularly considering our initial interview prior to the dissertation study. Specifically, my research interactions with participants enhanced essence and understanding of participants’ SA experiences and workplaces, leading to socially constructed knowledge (Detel, 2015).

Data Collection

The initial in-depth interview (see Appendix E for protocol) started with the participant using their artifact to explain their career journey, followed by questions focusing on their

workplace experiences (e.g., an ideal workday, a challenging workday, career motivations, workplace factors that affect their work, personal factors that affect their work). Follow-up interviews (see Appendix F for protocol) focused specifically on the definitions related to thriving, buoyancy, and resilience. I provided definitions of thriving, buoyancy, and resilience to the participant during the interview, allowing them to reflect and situate themself in the specific definition. This step was important given the sometimes interchangeable understandings about specific mindsets, as highlighted in the literature review. These data combined offered me a general perspective on what participants perceived to be a challenge or positive experience at work, their specific workplaces, and their resulting mindset—as well as how they responded to what they described as a challenge.

Participants used multiple approaches to illustrate their careers. Most created a timeline using pen and paper; some used colors to distinguish specific timeframes, two created a PowerPoint slide, and one used symbols. Participants later emailed me a scanned document of their artifacts. I used Zoom to record each interview. Interviews were transcribed using MSU Media Space and followed by my editing of each transcript.

Participant and Interview Memos

I used a detailed memo strategy for each interview, which I later typed (Rossman & Rallis, 2017). Memos recorded observations about participants' reactions (e.g., long pauses, observed body language) and responses to interview questions (e.g., reactive comments, like "wow" or "nobody has asked me that before"). Individual memos associated with each participant also resulted in an individual Interview 1 summary, which was shared with the participant at the beginning of Interview 2. Participants could confirm, correct, and acknowledge this summary at the beginning of Interview 2. Memos also detailed key trends in interviews. I

reviewed memos and identified trends related to reactions and responses, while viewing and listening to each interview recording. Memos helped guide inductive coding.

Data Analysis

Data analysis consisted of a mixed coding scheme but was grounded in (a) generic deductive coding informed by the thriving, buoyancy, and resilience literature and (b) generic inductive coding (Bazeley, 2013; Saldaña, 2016). For inductive coding, emotions and values codes were defined based on Bazeley's (2013) and Saldaña's (2016) work and were then associated with examples participants shared, resulting in a descriptive code. The coding scheme considered descriptive, emotion, and values codes (Bazeley, 2013), which aligned with generic qualitative methodology, and assisted with "managing the data" and "build ideas" (Bazeley, 2013, p. 129). See Table 3 and Table 4 for coding examples and schemes.

Table 3

Dissertation Study Deductive Coding Based on Mindset Literature

Parent code: Mindset	Child codes: Characteristics based on mindset concepts, definitions, and concepts
Thriving	• describes progress towards task or goal • describes momentum (e.g., continuous progress) • describes learning from progress and/or momentum • describes vitality (e.g., strength, liveliness, excitement)
Buoyancy	Describes: • common challenge requiring participant to negotiate with self • common challenge requiring participant to negotiate with others • self-qualities that support(ed) participant navigate through common challenge(s) • contextual factors that contribute to the challenge • qualifies challenge as common (e.g., "everyday" or ordinary)
Resilience	Describes: • significant challenge requiring participant to negotiate with self • significant challenge requiring participant to negotiate with others • significant experiences leading to "stress" • significant overcoming challenge negotiating with self • significant overcoming challenge negotiating with others • significant overcoming experience leading to "stress" • self-qualities that support(ed) participant navigate through challenge • contextual factors that support(ed) participant navigate through challenge (e.g., workplace, home) and "bounce back" • qualifies challenge as substantial (e.g., "worst," major problem, "serious concern," "hardest day," "that was stressful"

Table 4

Sample Inductive Coding Based on Bazeley (2013) and Saldaña (2016)

Inductive coding	Examples	Categories	Descriptive code
Emotion codes based on thoughts, feelings, and behaviors expressed by the participant.	"What's lunch? [Sarcastically laughs] I don't know the last time I took a lunch. That would be part of my ideal work." "Everything is a fire! If they email the president or there is something on the news—it just ruins what [referencing their team] has planned for the day or even week. It's so annoying."	sacrificing time, responsive to communications (e.g., calls, emails), references to wide-scale issues causing disruption to workday, references to consistent or constant issues or challenges	Reacting and responding
	"I know I'm trusted because the president's office will call me instead of my boss." "We were growing! I was working way beyond my job description, but [other campuses] were watching us and trying to catch-up."	development of self-assurance from being encouraged, receiving new "special" tasks, being relied on, contacts from campus officials outside of supervisor, being trusted and seen as credible, reflexivity about career growth	Self-awareness and confidence
Values codes subjective to participants' experience.	"Bi-weekly coffee dates! It's important to not work in a silo. Especially at my level. There are people on my campus that don't do [SA] work that face the same [challenges]. They're my support network." "Now I'm asked by HR [human resources] to facilitate workshops on how to get work done. It's nice to have people come up to me on campus and say 'hey…you really helped me."	self-directed connections with colleagues at work, friends from out of work that 'get it' (e.g., master's cohort), strong network of peers,	Workplace relation-ships and professional engagement
	"We do so much work and my team can be on campus all hours of the day or night, but what we do is barely by-line…" "I started in [SA] because of my mentor. It's my responsibility to give back. But, it's hard to find [mentorship] now."	being included or depended on, seeking and/or providing mentorship, credibility of SA work, receiving awards or accolades from campus and/or professional association	Recognition

Accordingly, inductive coding was informed by the thriving, buoyancy, and resilience literature, allowing me to see if and what participants share aligns with the mindset literature. I organized coding based on each of the mindsets using interview data that describe participants' mindsets: (a) workplace factors affecting mindset, (b) emotional factors affecting mindset, and (c) social and work–life integration. This approach was developed considering my conceptual framework (see Figure 1). Open coding looked at the specific workplace context (e.g., challenges, frequency of challenges). I intentionally aligned my interview protocols with my analysis strategy to allow analysis to understand the experiences midlevel student affairs administrators have with thriving, buoyancy, and resilience mindsets, and understand similarities across the sample.

I used Dedoose software for data analysis and printed copies of transcripts for manual coding. I synthesized and grouped themes using Microsoft Excel software over numerous rounds through Summer and Fall 2023, debriefing each synthesis with my chair. Final groups of themes were organized by how and when participants experience buoyancy, resilience, and thriving in their workplaces, with accompanying examples via transcribed quotes.

Trustworthiness

My primary goal with my research was to be usable, credible, and applicable for others to access and apply to their own context or research (Rossman & Rallis, 2017). My dissertation committee was intentionally selected to represent scholars who understand the practical responsibilities and research about the population and the SA profession, and the external member is a legal and human resources scholar who could offer insight about the phenomenon more broadly informed by labor and industrial aspects of human resources.

Criteria: Reflexivity, Dependability, Confirmability, Triangulation, and Transferability

My methodological strategies and reflexive lenses enhance dependability and confirmability of this study, thus promoting the transferability of this research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). From an epistemic view, reflexivity allows me to acknowledge my role and context related to this research (Olmos-Vega et al., 2023). My reflexivity connects to my previous career working in SA, along with my context as a midlevel SA administrator. Reflexivity influenced the dependability of this research (Janis, 2022). I maintained trustworthiness by grounding the consistency of methodological decisions and availed for constructivism from the data. Confirmability relates to the objectivity of the data and methods (S. Ahmed, 2024). I promoted confirmability by engaging in peer debriefing (later described) before interviewing participants and conducted member checking after analysis. These criteria influence the trustworthiness of this study and promote its transferability.

My purposive sampling strategy also establishes grounds for transferability of this study within reasonable limits, particularly considering my familiarity with participants from the previous study (see Smith, 2024) and the multiple methodological strategies employed for my dissertation research (Anfara et al., 2001). This sample also provided me with "richly-textured information relevant to the phenomenon under investigation" (Vasileiou et al., 2018, p. 3), which is a quality of purposive sampling (Sandelowski, 1996). In conversation, Lincoln and Guba's (1985) work highlighted *informational redundancy*, where "no new information, codes or themes are yielded from data" (Braun & Clarke, 2019, p. 203). Although this is a generic qualitative study and not grounded theory, I drew conclusions from this sample considering the multiple methods employed in this study. Also, triangulation of this research—specifically, having used two methods for interviewing after the initial reflection and illustration activity—allowed for rich

understanding of participants' workplace experiences (Coe et al., 2017). Also, Interview 2 allowed the participant to clarify or emphasize any points. Together, these strategies enhanced the ability to consider how the study findings might apply beyond the 12 participants.

Peer Debriefing

To establish trustworthiness—particularly confirmability criteria—and credibility, I discussed this research with peers in different educational settings. I debriefed my research design and data analysis with three individuals. One is a peer doctoral student from the United States with a similar SA career trajectory. The others are Canadian senior-level SA administrators who completed doctoral studies in the United States. These peers reviewed and provided feedback on (a) the reflection activity and my interview protocols, (b) coding strategy, and (c) early findings from my first-level analysis prior to debriefing formally with my chair.

Ethical Considerations for Participants

Ethical considerations that grounded my approach to confidentiality and responsibility (Rossman & Rallis, 2016) included intentional rapport-building (Bell et al., 2016) as well as "fair dealing" with participants and what I asked them to do and discuss, and included a range of various points of view (C. Anderson, 2011, p. 143). From my own reflexivity, it was important for me to ensure I was not leading participants based on my familiarity with their work and my understanding of the methodology and conceptual framework.

Risk and Confidentiality

All participants were given the opportunity to consent at the beginning of each interview and the option to withdraw their participation at any time by contacting my chair or me. Member checks with participants were conducted after the analysis. Participants selected their own

pseudonyms to ensure anonymity. Data are secured in an encrypted database shared only with my chair.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I introduced my social constructivist paradigm and my lenses and role as a researcher. From there, I introduced my conceptual framework. Next, I framed generic qualitative methodology that informed the methodological choices related to this dissertation study in view of my conceptual framework. I described my participant strategy and sample, data collection, and analysis strategy, along with my efforts to establish trustworthiness and ethical considerations regarding this study.

CHAPTER 4: BUOYANCY FINDINGS—
OVERVIEW, AND ENGAGING A BUOYANCY MINDSET IN THE WORKPLACE

> These days, I think the nature of this work requires a consistent level of resilience. Before, I think what attracted some of us to the work is the changing day-to-day demands and experiences. In some ways, it was exciting because you didn't know what's coming at you. But the world is different now. Now I think you have to search to find some way to thrive. The nature of our work now requires daily buoyancy [pause] and comfort with a certain level of risk because you're going to make decisions and give direction where you know most times things will work out the way you anticipate them to. But…you have to be prepared to be resilient in case it doesn't go well. You can't expect to be at your best all the time. For me, buoyancy is now the constant state—because it's not easy work.
>
> —Maria, 20+ years' experience working in student affairs (SA)

As we approached the conclusion of our final interview, Maria integrated buoyancy, resilience, and thriving. She did this by considering her context, experiences, and feelings about the state of SA work today. Maria's quote illustrates a major finding of this study—buoyancy and resilience are mindsets, but thriving is a state of being. Maria's experience shows how a buoyancy and resilience mindset are not fixed; rather, these mindsets are experienced differently depending on the situation someone is facing, which also considers context, circumstance, and their home and work environments. Meanwhile, for Maria and most participants, thriving was a *state*—a conditional experience meaningful to them and now considered a reminder of what is possible in the context of working in SA.

Like the other participants, Maria's context is rich. She completed her undergraduate education in Canada, her master's degree in the United States, and her Doctor of Education from

a university outside North America. Maria's career has spanned over 20 years at seven campuses in varying progressive leadership roles in SA (e.g., student-facing educator, senior leader, instructor teaching about the SA profession). Maria was also open about the influence of "home life" at work: roles of being a partner and parent, descriptions of joyful experiences where home life affects work, and the need to navigate other challenges, illnesses, and loss while still "getting the work done." Like most participants in this study, Maria's personal factors at home are not isolated from situational factors in the workplace. Furthermore, as for most participants in this study, an inseparable combination of personal and professional factors permeates Maria's workplace experience. Study participants' personal and professional experiences and multiple identities, combined with effects of the sociopolitical climate on and off campus, to influence all aspects of their lives at work and home.

To best explain the distinction between a *workplace mindset* and *state in the workplace*, I organize my dissertation findings into three chapters: (a) how midlevel administrators engage buoyancy (Chapter 4) and resilience (Chapter 5) mindsets in the workplace and (b) how midlevel administrators experience a thriving state in the workplace (Chapter 6). This findings chapter begins with a description and overview of the major finding from this study. From here, I describe what participants deemed to be overall everyday challenges they experienced in the workplace. Then, I provide in-depth discussions of findings related to why, when, and how they engaged buoyancy and resilience mindsets as separate findings chapters.

Overview of Findings: Buoyancy, Resilience, and Thriving in the Workplace

As I described in Chapter 2, positive psychology literature posits buoyancy, resilience, and thriving as *mindsets.* I began my study interested in understanding how midlevel SA administrators experienced each mindset within their workplace settings. However, my findings

demonstrate a distinction among the three. Midlevel SA administrators *engaged* buoyancy and resilience as *mindsets* but *experienced* a thriving *state* or condition at work. Specifically, midlevel SA administrators engaged buoyancy and resilience in response to escalating challenging conditions but experienced a state of thriving under certain positive conditions. Thriving, as highlighted in the quote from Maria, was seen as a state to achieve or fall back on through engaging buoyancy and resilience in the face of everyday—and sometimes extraordinary—workplace challenges.

As explained in Chapter 3, each participant provided examples of when they personally connected with each of the buoyancy, resilience, and thriving definitions. Participants described engaging a buoyancy mindset nearly daily within their specific work environment and scope of responsibilities (e.g., a specific unit or department, the multiple departments they oversee). Buoyancy is a mindset that allows participants to do the work they are expected to do while responding to local, internal challenges, or a response to the external world around their environment. Buoyancy is like treading water—it is challenging and requires dedicated energy, but it is a maintainable mindset that gets easier with practice. The more one is in a buoyant mindset, the more they are in a flow.

Participants were more likely to engage a resilience mindset, however, in response to significant, unexpected, complicated, and, at times, compounded problems at work and home. The examples participants shared regarding resilience included situations often related to influences on their work beyond their control on or off campus and sometimes their own personal life. Nearly all responses to the buoyancy questions included multiple examples of everyday challenges at the workplace. The employee is leaving their state of flow when engaging a resilience mindset—and, at times, slogging through a swamp. The challenges to the employee's

mental and physical energy are greater, requiring a resilience mindset; these demands are met through resilience, but this level of challenge and response is not sustainable over time.

The literature positions thriving as a mindset. Contrarily, the midlevel SA administrators I interviewed consider thriving more as a state or condition remembered from a specific experience. When asked, "What makes you feel like you're doing your best at work?" nearly half the participants elaborated on an example of thriving, describing feelings of vitality. They typically paired this example with descriptions of factors related to ideal, positive working conditions that supported their state of thriving at work.

Participants described very specific and monumental career experiences that influenced thriving at work. Participants' examples related to thriving focused on a career highlight, significant recognition, or way the participant realized their personal success at work. Participants generally understood that a thriving state is possible depending on the individual and positive working conditions. Thriving became a state worth working toward; for example, Jacquie attributed her thriving state as "the north star" that continues to guide her work during challenging times that engage her resilience.

Buoyancy

When studying resilience, scholars identified buoyancy as "more 'everyday resilience' that is typical of the ordinary course of life" (Parker & Martin, 2009, p. 136). My findings demonstrate how participants consistently engage a buoyancy mindset in the workplace that allows them to mitigate emerging and unpredictable daily challenges related to their portfolio of responsibilities. It allowed participants to respond to problems arising in their immediate purview of responsibilities (e.g., staffing problems, local and global challenges affecting students), ambiguity at work (e.g., budget, employee retention; interim roles), and changing

demands related to campus priorities (e.g., enrollment, new directive about goals from campus leaders). These workplace situations are inconsistent in nature, frequent, and require the participant to engage buoyancy to "go with the flow" of an unpredictable workday or work week. Engaging buoyancy is dependent on the employee's abilities, skills, and competencies to address what is unexpected to be faced each day.

Why and When Participants Engaged a Buoyancy Mindset

Participants regularly engaged a buoyancy mindset as necessary to adapt to escalating pressures affecting their work in higher education and SA in the United States and Canada. Engaging a buoyancy mindset allowed participants to respond to the ebbs and flows of their changing workday and changing demands at work. More than half of participants described a buoyancy mindset as "necessary," with some explicitly saying a buoyancy mindset is their most consistent, regular mindset at work.

Contemporary issues affecting the work of SA and the higher education sector are connected to each participant's examples of engaging a buoyancy mindset. Contemporary issues that affect daily work include (a) lack of role clarity; (b) changing and compounded demands; (c) resource scarcity; (d) contextual political influence on higher education at the federal, provincial, and/or state level; (e) evolving student needs or demands; and (f) escalating world events that affect participants' everyday work. Other examples provided were more specific, including effects of enrollment on SA at a campus, resources (competition for resources, scarcity of budget), and ambiguity at work (positional/role, campus planning and goals). In all, buoyancy is the mindset most referred to by midlevel SA administrators that connects to specific, everyday challenges within participants' immediate scope of responsibilities (e.g., everyday tasks for them personally, local unit or department, cluster of departments within their portfolio).

As mentioned, 10 of 12 participants described how engaging a buoyancy mindset is part of their daily work experience. Robin laughed after the initial buoyancy question, quickly declaring, "my every day is exercising [buoyancy]," where Peter explained how the buoyancy definition "bleeds into my every day." Malcolm shared that buoyancy is "how I have to approach my daily work," and Simon explained how he must "do that every day, all the time because of changing priorities [with supervisor]—sometimes changing by the end of a meeting." While explaining why buoyancy is engaged, Maria reflected on her 20+ years of experience, sharing, "Oh my goodness . . . I think the nature of our work requires daily buoyancy, which seems to be a space between thriving and resilience. We [midlevel SA administrators] need to know how to do that and navigate [different challenges]." Jacquie shared:

> Buoyancy is my every day. I needed to do this today: this morning a hiring decision was going one way and [at the end of the day] the decision is now pulling [different departments] in another way. And now I have a lot of new work to do [related to planning and budget]. Buoyancy is my daily[3] at my level [of responsibility].

In response to the first set of buoyancy questions, Marc vividly described how his daily work makes him most "feel like [he is] floating on the surface of water . . . but [he is] not drowning." Steven stated that "you need that ability [to engage buoyancy] every day," while Xiomara shared, "[I am] buoyant every day . . . and I don't have a chance to stop." Participants also described engaging buoyancy as a mindset as being helpful—and in some cases necessary—to get through their daily work. Next, I explain why and how participants feel like they are engaging a buoyancy mindset.

[3] "My daily" is a slang term used to note a common, everyday circumstance experienced by the individual using the term.

Why and How Participants Constantly Adapt to Changes in Work Environment

Participants described engaging buoyancy daily to respond to constant changes to their workday. Specifically, these changes caused participants to respond to new directions, change priorities, or address unexpected challenges affecting their work. Nearly all the participants' examples were associated with their immediate local work environment and responsibilities, meaning the specific unit, department(s), or stakeholders with whom participants most regularly work and experience. A buoyancy mindset allowed participants to navigate these (un)predictable changes they were faced with at work and adapt their priorities to get their work done and address the changes they encountered.

Eight of the 12 participants described how new, unexpected directions at work from their supervisor conflict with their abilities to complete everyday responsibilities. For example, Robin explained how "there can be a new priority identified by the [campus] president that needs an immediate response or report from [him and his team] all while [team] continues to conduct their regular operations." Robin explained, responding with buoyancy, sharing, "I just pause, help my folks reprioritize, take on what they can't get to because we still need to have our planned offerings and programs—and this of course happens during the busier times [for his SA operation]." Xiomara shared a similar example of a "new, big ask" from her supervisor where she "needs to pause, figure it out, mobilize my team who I know are frustrated—but I just have to deal." Annie shared a similar example about unexpected demands from her supervisor that require adapting, stating, "This [reprioritization] happens more often that it doesn't, so everyone ends up just doing what they can to get [their work] done, go with the flow, plus these new 'other duties as assigned.'" Both Robin and Annie explained how the unexpected changes to their workday came from their supervisors and highlighted their skills in reprioritization in the

instances where they need to be buoyant to adapt. Some participants (i.e., Annie, Peter, Jacquie, Robin, Xiomara) suggested how these new priorities established by campus leadership generally upstage and eclipse the priorities and the everyday SA work.

Findings about why and how participants react to constant changes in their work environment are related to four themes that engaged a buoyancy mindset responses. Participants (a) perceived their daily SA work and priorities to be less of a priority to their supervisor and relevant campus stakeholders; (b) described the effects of responding to change that affects their daily SA work, demands, and priorities; (c) regarded their position responsibilities and work requirements to be more complicated and sophisticated, thus causing their work needs to have "grown out" of the design of structures and systems built for SA on their campus; and (d) explained how they are continuously required to do more with fewer resources available compared to earlier in their careers. Engaging buoyancy allowed participants to disregard negative feelings about not being a priority, changing expectations, ambiguous and unpredictable work expectations, and the imperative to "do more with less," all while managing multiple portfolios and staff.

Everyday SA Work Not Prioritized by SA Supervisor and Stakeholders Outside the Division

Midlevel SA administrators work in dynamic contexts where they manage *down* to the day-to-day operations of student-facing staff, *up* to their supervisors at a vice provost and vice president level, and *across* to their colleagues in different divisions whose work can be affected by SA portfolios and priorities. Those supervising midlevel SA administrators often interrupted participants' progress on day-to-day responsibilities. For example, Maria shared how she and her team can "be in a good flow to get what we need to and planned for done, while maximizing effort to just hit the mark, and then we get this sudden, last-minute big ask that needs to happen

since we are student-facing." Participants see these interruptions as indications that supervisors did not consider their daily work as priorities, and they described engaging buoyant mindsets to respond and persist through their day. In other cases, participants described the importance of getting their everyday work done and their buoyancy, allowing them to accomplish this need. However, participants expressed their SA work is not acknowledged by those senior to them, compared to other campus priorities that receive recognition. Still, buoyancy seemingly allowed participants to dismiss this issue and continue focusing on their priorities.

In some cases where student affairs divisions have an opportunity to work with other areas on campus, the new direction for the participant is positioned as a "great opportunity" for SA to be involved. These opportunities created more work for the participant while they tried to prioritize their everyday responsibilities, which in turn caused them to engage buoyancy. In some cases, participants alluded to how these invitations sometimes do not give the participant the opportunity to prepare adequately for the opportunity (e.g., organizing briefing materials that may be required for the meeting) and/or adapt their skills to quickly learn about new subject matter not directly related to their daily SA work. These situations affect how participants prioritized their work.

For example, Annie related to the definition of buoyancy and shared, "Oh, I'm always getting last minute requests. I don't know the last time I had a day where I could just phone it in," meaning, just get work done without maximizing her efforts to prioritize or carry out her expected responsibilities. Annie shared an example of engaging buoyancy in relating to how her morning was affected and required her to reprioritize meetings and responsibilities the same day we had our second interview:

> I just wrapped a workshop for my team at 10[am]. The minute this interview is done [at 11 am] I have to now be part of this [air quotes] "really important meeting" with the *province* on a new collaboration or initiative or something? That [direction] came to me while I was doing the workshop just before talking to you.

Annie seemed frustrated yet unphased about the request, and she explained how this new expectation offered her no time to prepare for a seemingly high-stakes meeting that may have potential for provincial collaboration and funding. Furthermore, Annie described how these sorts of requests involving new stakeholder meetings were regular, requiring her to change her daily priorities at work, learn about something new in preparation, and at times prepare last-minute briefing documents about her area's work for meetings such as these. Engaging buoyancy allowed Annie to complete her workshop, meet me for our second interview, prepare on the fly for the meeting with the province, and reprioritize her day as needed.

Simon engaged a buoyancy mindset related to his new direction to be part of a campus-wide student recruitment and enrollment committee. Simon described similar expectations related to engaging buoyancy, when he needed to pivot his SA work to meet his supervisor's expectations related to being the only SA stakeholder needing to do this committee work. Simon explained how his position's "day-to-day responsibility is typically representing undergraduate students' needs to succeed on campus," and he "assumed [he] would be offering insights about the on-campus experience for potential students at this committee." Consequently, Simon was required to compromise his work and adapt to help the goals of the committee advance.

Engaging buoyancy allowed Simon to adapt to these new needs and develop his knowledge base with new subject-matter content outside SA work so he could contribute effectively. Referring to this committee and consequent work, Simon shared, "There are so many

areas related to my daily work now [that are not explicitly part of SA] where I wasn't an expert. But I probably am now." I asked Simon a follow-up question about what this situation required him to do differently. Simon's response related to engaging a buoyancy mindset that allowed him to adapt to carry out new priorities and reprioritize his direct reports' needs to address the unexpected demands for new priorities directed to him. Simon said:

> I think a lot about relationship and communication management differently now. I always think "who [as in his direct reports] can wait until tomorrow?" Now, outside of the teams I lead and my colleagues, I have 18 high schools that I am expected to have partnerships with. Having to triage, I guess—yeah, that's the best word about what I do with my usual daily work expectations.

In another example, Peter described how his role started as leading several functional areas within SA; however, the functional areas he oversees have evolved and adapted to addressing enrollment pressures on campus, particularly since "enrollment is going down across the nation." Consequently, Peter took on several new responsibilities that influenced his day-to-day work. Peter also described how daily SA work is not acknowledged compared to campus enrollment, suggesting SA work lacks acknowledgment because "it's all about the numbers . . . given the times we are in," referring to recruitment and retention efforts on campus. However, Peter explained how it is also important to ensure the day-to-day responsibilities of his SA areas are acknowledged, especially when there are multiple "fires to put out" related to SA work. Peter identified how engaging buoyancy helped him to be responsive and to learn how his new content knowledge related to enrollment allows him to strategically highlight the everyday SA work creatively so other stakeholders understand how students are supported on campus. Peter's adaptability and ability to be buoyant have allowed him to respond with the answers to the

questions his leadership wants about enrollment and to find ways to highlight his SA areas' successes in the update meetings about how his areas can support enrollment. Peter explained:

> Naturally, there's a greater focus on [enrollment] and having to wade into number tracking on almost a daily basis. And I have to be ready to respond to questions about [these metrics] while also highlighting how my team is putting out fires [in multiple SA areas]. But who is supporting [students] when we get them here? Student affairs. I think this approach requires what buoyancy means. In all, [supervisor and campus leadership] cares most about enrollment but now they need to know how much [SA] is doing while I am taking care of both [enrollment and SA priorities on campus].

Robin also described engaging buoyancy for new learning outside his specific SA expertise and as a strategy for creative problem solving and justification for SA work. In his current position, Robin had also been in an interim position focused on leading mental health case management for nearly two years due to budget constraints. In Robin's view, the need for this position is not prioritized by those senior to his position, but these responsibilities are essential to supporting students. Robin's strategy has been to take on this additional interim leadership role to help build a better case for funding. Engaging buoyancy has helped Robin continue adapting: "I'm not the content expert in a lot of areas I oversee, but I need to be until we find long-term solutions. So, I am advocating as that new content expert so I can explain the need for [the role] at the tables I sit around." Robin referred to this adaptability and his other examples related to buoyancy as the ability to develop "band-aid solutions" that are necessary to meet the issues he is navigating in his position related to his SA work not prioritized by others.

In all, each participant example explains how engaging buoyancy allows midlevel SA administrators to creatively respond to how SA work is less prioritized than other areas on

campus. Engaging buoyancy allowed these participants to take on additional responsibilities related to campus-wide priorities and gave participants the ability to adapt to changes and new priorities within their work environment.

Change Affects Daily SA Work Demands and Priorities

It is reasonable to assume any employee should be expected to be adaptable to change; the literature indicates change management is an especially important skill for midlevel administrators (van der Voet, 2013). However, midlevel SA administrators described consistent issues related to change and change management that influence their daily work, requiring them to engage buoyancy. Participants explained the effects resulting from consistent changes to their workplace demands and priorities outside of direction from their supervisor. These examples are related to staffing problems, lacking communication between divisions that affect SA work, and compounded work where new departmental or divisional needs push participants' original priorities to "the corner of [their] desk," as Peter described. Some participants expressed feeling resultantly fatigued, while others alluded to strain on how they approach and view their work—as Jacquie described, "one seemingly little thing one day ends up [causing] a big impact on my week that I need to then figure out. Then I sometimes work all weekend so I can try and start the new week right." Malcolm contrasted how responding to changing demands has escalated over time, drawing comparisons to the late 2010s to today. Malcolm said:

> Back then, I used metaphors like "water off a duck's back" or "pull up the collar on your raincoat and just weather the storm," but, yeah, now I'm literally floating along every day for the most part. It's really stormy now, and I don't know where my coat is! [laughs] Either way, I keep the vast majority of the weather out, if you will.

While reflecting on his nearly 20-year experience working in SA roles in both the U.S. and Canada, Malcolm explained, “The scope, severity, and significance of what I’m dealing with [in SA] has shifted. And I think it’s required a shift in development in my professional practice over the course of time as well. It’s not easy . . . but I’m getting through.” Overall, Malcolm shared his perspective on how changing demands requiring him to adapt his work has engaged a buoyant response but explained how the changing demands require more work and suggested there is strain on how he approached and viewed his SA work as a result.

Simon shared similar sentiments about the effects of consistently responding to changing or unexpected demands at work. After sharing an example where his supervisor changed priorities “significantly” during a weekly report meeting, Simon explained, “In this line of work, I don’t know if there’s really any point where there’s a predictable day, or you really know what you're going to do on a daily basis.” Simon described how engaging a buoyancy mindset allows him to be responsive when discussing different varying challenges in his workday while managing unexpected new demands, saying, “You always have to be able to roll with the punches—or you won’t last. I think it’s fair to say your days are mostly unpredictable. The majority of my working days are challenging, but I get through.” Other participants, and specifically Simon, described how pre-semester goal setting can lead to “completely different outcomes that don’t align with planning” by the end of the semester, but a buoyant mindset still allows him to adapt and change “to get what we need done and respond to each day.” Xiomara shared similar perspectives about the effects of consistently responding to changing demands, particularly after needing to pivot her portfolio’s goals from a new campus president while advocating for her SA work rather than just changing on demand. Xiomara noted, “I’m constantly pivoting. I think buoyancy, how it’s defined, you know, is how I continue to do that—

it's how I continue to get my work done, while also advocating for myself." Participants' examples illustrated how they used buoyancy as a tool to respond to changing demands that affect their daily responsibilities. However, participants' responses confirmed that consistently responding to changing demands comes at a cost and consequently results in strain at work over time.

SA Work Has Become More Complicated, Requiring Sophisticated Solutions

Participants made references to how their own roles and the positions within their portfolios now required sophistication, particularly specialized skills, abilities, and competencies that can address the more complicated situations facing SA work. Most participants described problems about not having a clear job description or a job description that has been reviewed in recent memory and does not include reference to the need for these skills, abilities, and competencies. This problem is not necessarily attributed exclusively to midlevel SA administrators but does connect to changes in higher education and society that are clear today (see Lindholm, 2021). Additionally, several more experienced participants describe how SA work has 'grown out' of the structures and systems developed for SA on their campuses.

Nearly all participants referred to how SA work, broadly, has "changed" and alluded to several complications related to the subsequent complexities of student affairs work. For some participants, engaging buoyancy has allowed them to respond to students with complex needs related to advising work that requires participants' and other functional areas' responses. For example, Maria reflected on students working with her teams across her portfolios and how she feels that students generally have more self-awareness about their "wants and needs" compared to her observations about students' self-awareness from earlier in her career. As a result, Maria described how most students who experience with her departments have multiple touchpoints

with SA and broadly on campus, including but not limited to case management, health and wellness, academic advising, international student support, academic supports (e.g., writing, reading), and financial aid. Maria referred to those touchpoints as what students are "needing" but also mentioned how these students may also be accessing other areas of campus—such as affinity groups or engagement opportunities—that may enhance their experience outside the classroom.

Maria explained how this can be difficult as her campus "is largely a commuter school. So, [students] need all of these services at once before their 2-hour commute out at the end of the day." Engaging buoyancy has allowed Maria to navigate and respond to unique, compounded student needs that are initially presented by the student or are uncovered by the SA professional. Maria explained:

> Our campus promises a lot and we [in SA] are offering a lot. And students are coming in aware with a complex set of intersectionalities, different experiences, different motivations, and goals. Students know this [about themselves] now coming in [to higher education]. They now have different experiences with large organizations [like a campus], and different experiences with authority. There is more for them to choose from, and [at the same time] their expectations are higher. They know what they need but making it happen all at once requires my team to pivot and adapt in ways we didn't need to before.

Maria shared examples related to how her teams seem to be buoyant in their mindsets by adapting to students' requests in a reasonable way, while considering everyone's schedules. However, some students' needs are more explicitly layered and require considerable efforts from multiple SA educators to address students' requests. Maria described how engaging buoyancy

can help SA educators be nimble in their responses, supporting students' needs and expectations, particularly as more items emerge in a single appointment. Maria said:

> You have to be flexible in a new way in those situations. You have to adjust your mind and yourself to the situation of the person you're being presented with in order to meet the ultimate goal of what they are asking for—but also for what you see as being their potential need. The problems or challenges are not obvious. Then [students] may have exceptional needs…like, an academic advisor may learn there is a housing security issue when discussing courses. [SA goals] are different than they were before yet we are offering more than ever.

Maria suggested how these offerings are a great opportunity for campuses and SA, but they also come at a cost in terms of what is offered and the education and background needed by those SA professionals leading these areas. In all, Maria emphasized how engaging buoyancy allows her to respond to the complexity connected to some specific students' needs—particularly when SA is expected and required to assist the student when SA professionals may not always be the expert.

Annie recalled similar experiences where her day-to-day responsibilities have been affected by students experiencing a crisis—a situation that generally would not affect her daily responsibilities in her functional area—further emphasizing how challenging and unpredictable SA work responsibilities can be. Annie explained that these situations are "not every day but happen enough." Annie connected this example to the buoyancy definition by the effects of these situations taking a toll on work responsibilities, saying:

> Our campus psychiatrist called [the student life functional area] about a student emergency requiring everyone's attention. Sometimes, I often feel like I've had a whole day by 10:00 in the morning. Getting [student case/documentation] notes together while

> others navigate an [emergency] situation is a lot and [takes a lot of time]. And, like everyone [in Annie's area] doesn't have this experience [responding to emergencies], too. Plus, we are dealing with the expectations of my boss, plus the expectations I put on myself. I don't get what I need done and then I feel like I'm totally disappointing my [senior leaders].

In all, Annie acknowledged how needs for students of concern are not isolated to one area of campus (e.g., counseling services) but happen more often. Helping a student get what they need and the areas of support in cases where they are presenting concerning behaviors, while continuing with her day-to-day work is connected to Annie's ability to be buoyant at work.

In another view, Xiomara shared how recent political challenges facing her work in the state of Florida influenced her to engage buoyancy to respond creatively to changing expectations for higher education, broadly, and for those living in and attending classes in the state. Xiomara was clear that specific state and federal U.S. policies—over time and very much recently—complicate her SA work and triggered her to be buoyant as seemingly "unthoughtful decisions [by the state] have big impacts on students." Xiomara's senior role on campus required her to develop strategies for her student-facing areas to respond to expectations rooted in the political bills and policies she referred to, while also supporting the students who may be affected by the bills. Xiomara described how developing these strategies requires sophisticated responses to her SA work and the effects of these demands: "I have been in so many meetings that are just really emotionally draining. The summary of the bill, that in essence excludes me, requires my areas to adapt." Xiomara finished this part of the interview and reflected on the toll of these precedents and her abilities to respond and adapt to complicated scenarios that directly affect her day-to-day by way of engaging buoyancy, saying, "I can't describe the pressure of

working and living in [Florida], particularly when you think about the values [of SA] work." In reference to how this circumstance complicates the SA priorities on her campus, Xiomara said, "This is just how it is now and is going to be. I can keep shifting and adapting as I need to but know it will eventually hit a limit if I hit actual roadblocks." Although constantly adapting has caused challenges to her personally and her SA work, Xiomara's buoyancy has still allowed her to adapt her portfolios as expected to be in accordance with new expectations related to diversity, equity, and inclusion—diverge where possible—and conduct her day-to-day leadership responsibilities.

Jacquie shared how she has naturally role-modeled buoyancy responses to the "team" she has managed and described role modeling buoyancy as a way to respond to how complicated SA work has become. In reference to espoused values from the greater campus community in recruitment strategies (e.g., "an exceptional student experience"), Jacquie noted, "Unfortunately, being within this system [where promises are made to students] and navigating that system to meet these promises is one of my responsibilities." Jacquie described how certain commitments are made to students by campus recruitment and academic planning that directly affect the work of her team. Jacquie explained how these campus needs required flexibility and adaptability coming from engaging buoyancy and gave her the ability to navigate departments trying to manage layered student expectations and, at times, demands resulting from "big promises." Jacquie explained this further:

> I try to set-up a forward-thinking space. Really putting that on the table for these managers [about the issues higher education is facing] and why some promises are made. It's getting really hard for these leaders of student-facing areas. They're hearing these promises but seeing these not-so student-centered decisions by executive leaders that are

> actually tied directly to my area, and we are constantly needing to adapt and change to [address inherited problems and promises] . . . these students are coming in with different expectations.

Jacquie's ability to be buoyant allows her to respond to "promises" made by campus leaders to students, which affect her areas of responsibility. Buoyancy allows Jacquie to address these promises creatively. However, Jacquie described her continuous adaptation to ongoing challenges that included varying degrees of complexity. Jacquie questioned the sustainability of her ability to engage a buoyancy mindset in these cases and described that she is "tired."

Overall, engaging buoyancy allows SA educators to be flexible and adjust as needed, particularly given students' varied needs. A buoyancy mindset is regular and allows participants to shift, adapt, and change successfully, with participants explaining how there can be a limit to being buoyant when things become a "roadblock," leading to more stress and adversity at work. Maria concluded our conversation with her opinion about why buoyancy is necessary to respond to how complicated SA work has become and stated, "[SA] is at a very fragile point. I think those of us with strong senses of responsibility are continuously buoyant as our work gets more complicated." Referring to the great resignation, Maria said, "Those who have [not left SA profession], our sense of responsibility might continue to keep us here, but we're really starting to question what it's worth." Maria thought a lack of resources for SA is causing the consistent need to engage buoyancy; I discuss this challenge next.

Resources: The Expectation to Do More With Less and Redistributing Work

Participants described how pressures about resources (e.g., budget, personnel, knowledge and expertise) influence midlevel SA administrators to engage buoyancy, allowing them to come up with creative solutions to fill varying gaps. Relatedly, participants from both the United States

and Canada described lack of government support not only for the work they do in SA but also for higher education, which has an effect on SA resources. The lack of resources limits abilities to conduct SA work adequately. Participants associated buoyancy with how they creatively worked around the limit of resources and, at times, developed creative temporary solutions just to get by to achieve expectations.

Simon explained that SA "seems to make a lot happen with a little" on his campus and described how his multiple units are conducting their work without adequate resources. This approach has caused his areas to "not necessarily face [the need] as I would have planned with additional resources." Simon explained his SA division lacked staff with direct experience in specific functional areas. Simon described needing to find ways to "get around" the pressure on resources, which resulted in collaboration with other departments experiencing resource scarcity. Simon's buoyancy mindset allowed him to consider creative, alternative approaches to address the gaps in his area. Other approaches Simon described related to building and finding "developmental opportunities" for staff members—in essence, he added these SA deliverables lacking a direct resource as special projects to his staff's portfolio, and at times redistributed work. Simon described collaboration with other areas of campus and additional responsibilities for selected staff as once being "great opportunities for individuals or [other departments] in the past but is now necessary. [The campus] expects us to meet this need, so I have to fill the gap." Simon alluded to tension he has felt in these experiences, but explained how being buoyant when dealing with these situations has allowed him to move forward with his portfolio goals.

Robin related engaging buoyancy to how he continued to advocate for what he felt was an imperative new staff position: a licensed mental health professional to lead case management on campus. Despite the escalated and complex student issues related to mental health on campus,

Robin has not been able to secure base funding for this role in the last 2 years. Robin engaged buoyancy by acting in this role while managing his other executive director responsibilities, while managing change to structures and personnel in multiple departments and units. Robin explained that he has continued to lead case management in an interim way so he can better advocate a case for this position for the next budget cycle. Robin explained how his SA portfolios are inadequately resourced compared to other areas of his campus and the greater public college system he is part of: "The departments I oversee are resourced so poorly compared [to other campuses with similar characteristics] in and out of my state."

Furthermore, Robin explained how engaging buoyancy allowed him to balance these competing responsibilities while also building a case that described the specific need for a subject-matter expert. Referring to the unpredictability of the added responsibility of case management as a nonlicensed mental health professional, he said, "We just need to get this work done at the same time." Robin shared, "We aren't meeting the actual need with [interim role], but we are getting through each day." Robin explained how his approach is intended to "buy time" but is not a sustainable solution to the need he sees related to hiring someone specializing in mental health. Robin shared:

> I am sure I'm not the only [midlevel SA administrator] creating band-aids. This approach can't last forever. I'm creating temporary solutions, and this [interim role] is now sometimes my daily work rather than fixing [the issue]. So, I suppose buoyancy is allowing me to come up with short-term solutions and deal with the issue as best as I can.

Malcolm shared sentiments similar to Robin's and described how important areas in his SA portfolios are not resourced adequately, particularly those that protect his campus from public

relations scenarios. This resource scarcity causes "talented team members" to do more by redistributing work to address what is needed. Malcolm explained:

> Now departments go without funding, but we *need* to do the work. Or else we end up in the newspaper, or we lose a human rights tribunal [related to the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms]. I'm spending a lot of time creating solutions to predictable problems and then [unexpected problems] because we are under-staffed and under-resourced. I have had, I think, four different leaders over five years who I keep making the same case [for more resources] to. But we get it done.

Both Robin and Malcolm described feelings of being tired and pressured from doing more with less and positioned their choices with responsibility and best interests of the campus in mind and related these approaches to buoyancy. However, Robin and Malcolm also seemed satisfied with their ability to navigate these issues by being buoyant.

Jacquie also shared value that is gained from her abilities to engage buoyancy to address interdivisional competition. Jacquie reflected on her learning from what she described as "constantly needing to be buoyant." She shared an example of needing to advocate for resources more than her direct colleagues who have more "innovative portfolios" and being successful at doing so by being buoyant, saying, "I didn't realize how multidimensional I am. It's quite easy for me to go between those two spaces of reacting and responding, and to switch approaches and gears." Jacquie attributed her abilities to react, respond, and adapt approaches to her having engaged buoyancy at the workplace. Robin, Malcolm, and Jacquie's examples highlight how participants adapt and continue to do the work necessary to meet their portfolio needs regardless of the adequate expertise or resources needed. Each participant highlighted their preference to approach these scenarios with proven or best practices in mind; however, those approaches

require resources. A buoyancy mindset gave these participants the ability to develop creative solutions to fulfill the lack of resources (e.g., financial, personnel) that allowed them to meet their workplace expectations.

In a different view, Steven described engaging buoyancy with his strategy to get the additional tasks he has inherited in his portfolio done while he also "pushed back" on what he cannot do due to his lack of resources (e.g., additional staff). Steven described that while it is tiring, "pushing back" is important. Steven described buoyancy in student conduct situations where cases multiply, and he must prioritize cases accordingly due to a lack of staff in his area. Steven explained that this is a common occurrence, and buoyancy gives him the ability and confidence to navigate these situations. Steven described how he would explain to campus leaders what his area can achieve related to the immediate need and what may not immediately be accomplished due to the lack of resources. Considering his 15+ years on campus, Steven attributed the buoyancy definition to giving him the confidence to push back in these situations and said: "You need buoyancy every day because everyone [on campus] needs more and asks for more. My path is to [get work done] with a boundary. [Senior leaders on campus] expectations are not realistic." Buoyancy allowed Steven to accomplish his tasks while thinking critically about what could be mitigated given the available resources, which may also influence him and those he supervises to shift from one conduct case to another quickly.

Personal and Situational Factors Related to Engaging a Buoyancy Mindset in the Workplace

Participants explained several personal factors that allowed them to engage buoyancy in the workplace; however, there were no specific situational factors at work that foster a buoyancy mindset. Multiple personal factors within the individual allow them to engage buoyancy

depending on the severity of the issue they swam through. Five of the 12 participants described consistently engaging a buoyancy mindset at work and shared expressions of dissatisfaction with their work because of constant change and attention requiring buoyancy. Eight of the 12 participants perceived these constant challenges and needs as the state of SA work generally, with one participant saying, "this is how it is," referring to the need for finding creative solutions. In all, engaging a buoyancy mindset allowed these midlevel SA administrators to navigate local dynamics. The more complex and layered the issues at the local environment level, the more the participant is treading these uncharted waters looking for a creative solution to their workplace challenges.

Personal factors greatly connected to participants' abilities to engage buoyancy are most rooted in their personal commitment to the SA profession—they described students and the nature of their work as motivating. For those most experienced in terms of years of service, their socialization into the SA profession, paired with their abilities to contrast differences with how the state of SA was and how it is now, emphasizes their—in some cases, taxing—commitment to getting through the tough times by way of engaging buoyancy. Nearly all participants concluded they most frequently engaged a buoyancy mindset. However, several participants referred to consistent effects and cautions resulting from spending so much time finding solutions to problems: "setting boundaries" or "saying no" (i.e., Annie, Jacquie, Malcolm, Peter, Simon), "stop responding when the workday is done" (i.e., Peter, Steven), and "finding time to breathe" (i.e., Jacquie, Xiomara).

Like buoyancy, participants also engaged a resilience mindset. Participants engage resilience when facing escalating and complex challenges at work involving stakeholders outside

an SA division. In the next chapter, I present findings related to how midlevel SA administrators engage resilience.

CHAPTER 5: RESILIENCE FINDINGS—
ENGAGING A RESILIENCE MINDSET IN THE WORKPLACE

> I go back to [personal reflection] questions: "Why am I here? What are my values? What is worth it? How would I feel walking away from it?" . . . Every time I need to get through something, I reflect on what I can do, my history of resilience [laughs], and that helps me by just getting through [the challenge].
>
> —Annie, 15+ years' experience working in Student Affairs

Using an unscripted follow-up question, I asked Annie to expand on what helped her navigate the stressful situation she was experiencing at work that influenced her to engage resilience. The situation involved Annie—the next-tier leader of the department under her director—being in the middle of a conflict between her senior leader and the less senior personnel. Annie described how she respected her senior leader, but also found herself disagreeing with the leader's decisions. Consequently, Annie managed multiple layers of conflict "over an extended period of time," with nobody to discuss the conflicts with except the senior leader, noting, "I kept this to myself." This experience was taxing enough that it caused Annie to consider leaving this new leadership role. From here, Annie negotiated by self-reflecting; she questioned her position in the situation, as explained in the epigraph. Eventually, Annie discussed the challenges with the senior leader and found a compromise that resulted in a more positive workplace dynamic. Engaging a resilience mindset helped Annie adapt and respond to navigating the conflict.

When participants engaged a buoyancy mindset to adapt to continuous change and respond to emerging needs at work, they engaged a resilience mindset in significantly stressful and challenging workplace situations related to irregular, compounded workplace stressors. Resilience is "negotiating, managing, and adapting to significant sources of stress or trauma.

Assets within the individual, their life, and environment facilitate the capacity for adaptation and 'bouncing back'" (Winwood et al., 2013, p. 1208). This chapter of my study's findings explains how a resilience mindset in the workplace resulted from participants' need to respond to and manage significant challenges and stresses at work, above and beyond engaging in everyday buoyancy.

Resilience is required to navigate compounded and layered workplace challenges that cause pressure (Winwood et al., 2013). These pressures affect the employee's overall responsibilities and goals, thus causing them to substantially renegotiate their own work and their personnel's overall priorities. In some cases, reprioritization has been a need for the greater campus community, and changing priorities and workflows with little flexibility has caused strain at work for the individual and the environment in which they are working. All participants generally understood resilience as a mindset that allowed them to be responsive when experiencing significant workplace challenges. Midlevel SA administrators' abilities to engage resilience are based on their skills and competencies to address or resolve major problems at work, and their abilities depend on how long or often they engage a resilience mindset.

Midlevel SA administrators engaged resilience mindsets by being responsive in the following ways: (a) accommodating their work, objectives, and goals due to significant pressures they are experiencing to "make it work and get the job done" which causes stress and (b) negotiating with personal feelings resulting from the effects of bringing their "whole selves" to their offices, causing friction with how they are approaching their work.

Participants described urgency related to resilience, specifically, their need to adapt, find a solution, or make a change at work or at home with the intention to "get [them] out" of a resilience mindset to "recover." Although no questions specifically related to burnout, some

participants described engaging resilience as a possible precursor to burnout, such as Simon saying he was "at least not burning out" while testing his resilience at work while dealing with compounded issues. Maria also drew a parallel, contrasting her abilities to exercise a resilience mindset to a colleague who "burned out" and no longer working in higher education. All participants referred to emotional costs associated with constantly processing how to deal with uncertainty, constantly adapting and pivoting, and responding to changing and escalating needs that affect their work. Having to maintain a resilient mindset consistently is harmful to the midlevel SA administrator and can strain their work objectives and areas they are leading (e.g., department, unit, division).

In all, participants explained how their personal needs, identities, and outside work commitments can conflict with escalating, changing demands at work, triggering resilience as a coping response. Participants alluded to the strain midlevel SA administrators experience from engaging resilience. This strain resulted from constantly needing to adapt their workdays to escalating work-related pressures in response to these challenging situations that require a resilience mindset. To explain how participants engage resilience at work, I organize related findings into two themes affecting participants: (a) accommodating their work, objectives, and goals resulting from escalating pressures to "make it work" and get the job done; and (b) feeling the effects of bringing their "whole selves" to work—where their human needs and their positional needs interact.

Accommodating and Adapting to Workplace Pressures to "Make It Work"

All participants described examples where they engaged resilience to accommodate and adjust their work in response to significant or compounded priorities, objectives, personal needs, major obstacles, and workplace challenges. Participants described how self-reflection in the

moment or ongoing reflexive self-talk throughout a longer event (e.g., managing a workplace emergency and dealing with the aftermath) was a tool for the participant to assess and respond to the stress, which led to engaging resilience.

Self-Reflection: A Tool to Adapt to Stress From Emergency Situations and Significant Issues Affecting Campus

Participants described emergency situations and significant campus issues as unusually stressful, triggering a resilience mindset. They said these were times when they paused, reflected, and recognized the pressures they were experiencing at work. Navigating this stress was necessary to meet their work expectations. Generally, these types of occurrences are out of anyone's control but still require participants to negotiate, manage, adapt, and accommodate their and, at times, their personnel's daily work responsibilities to respond to the situation effectively and still conduct daily work activities. This context is particularly relevant as emergencies affecting a campus can require multiple student-facing SA areas to respond. These experiences added to participants' need to engage a resilience mindset, particularly given the unpredictability, duration, and effect of emergencies. In short, participants were able to engage a resilience mindset throughout emergencies or significant issues, all while self-reflecting about navigating their personal stresses in the moment or soon after the incident.

Eliza described the tolls of an emergency on her campus that had a lasting impact: a car accident that resulted in multiple student deaths. "This was a worse-case situation" that caused Eliza to engage a resilience mindset. Her leadership role on campus required her to manage campus needs related to this emergency, which involved multiple stakeholders on and off campus. Eliza explained how the incident "has such a significant impact on all of campus," as each of the students who died was highly involved through their fraternity, on-campus student

groups, and leadership councils. When this event occurred, Eliza managed a department overseeing student groups, so she managed parts of the aftermath affecting campus, while ensuring day-to-day responsibilities were in order as best as possible.

At the same time, Eliza was leading a team of SA professionals affected by the emergency and worked with campus leaders as needed in terms of response. She was also one of the points of contact for the families of the students who died. Eliza shared, "I remember pausing a lot and thinking about 'how is my team doing?' and 'how is this colleague who knew [students] doing?' while also helping them coordinate on campus." Eliza described assisting with coordination of campus supports for university community members affected by this situation. Eliza explained how engaging a resilience mindset was a way to "reflect, pause, and think about how to process and deal with the stress piling on throughout the aftermath" while "getting [her] work done." A colleague asked Eliza how she was taking care of herself while supporting multiple stakeholders over this extended period. Eliza explained her reflection and reprioritization that resulted in this situation where she described "consistently" engaging resilience to ensure she took care of herself. Eliza said:

> I think that's one of the big things that is an issue with [SA]: We don't always think about how events like that impact us. And that [situation] made me think a lot about [self-talk] "okay, in order for me to be resilient, in order for me to [get through] this, like I've got to find ways to take care of me too." That [self-care] is something that I started to practice and try to be a role model [for the personnel she supervises].

Eliza was forthcoming in explaining how SA work requires the ability to respond to complex situations that can push someone to engage a resilience mindset; however, she suggested repercussions for well-being to engaging resilience over too long of a period. This point helped

Eliza be comfortable with her new approach to taking time for self-care and pausing because of this emergency situation and conversation with a colleague.

Susie described challenges she experienced because of the COVID-19 global pandemic when she needed to be resilient to accommodate her work. Susie engaged resilience after she accepted an interim Dean of Students role prior to the pandemic, while also maintaining her executive director responsibilities. However, the pandemic added new pressures to this job opportunity. Stress continued to increase as work complexities continued to escalate. Susie also had to respond to familial needs, which included "coordinating with family members out of the country at the time of the pandemic to try and get them back home." Susie described engaging resilience to get her through these pressures, noting, "I immediately recognized this is a marathon with no end."

However, Susie's personal abilities to reflect on this, be adaptable, and persist through work challenges allowed her to manage and adapt to the tolls of the pandemic at work and at home. Susie also explained how the toll was exceptionally difficult as she had to rely entirely on her leadership abilities independently, particularly as her supervisor, the dean, was not present during this time due to the planned leave, leaving Susie with fewer options for personal and professional support at work. After the dean of students returned, Susie explained how she realized she was in a consistent mindset of resilience, even "pushing it throughout the pandemic." Yet, her individual asset of self-reflection helped her realize the toll of the pandemic from managing everything at work and at home. This self-awareness ultimately led her to acknowledge the stress from the pandemic, eventually influencing her to take a personal leave. Susie concluded by sharing that "too much resilience comes at a cost."

Similarly, Simon and Xiomara described the importance of being aware of the

importance of self-care when dealing with emergency situations and significant issues—a lesson learned from engaging what Xiomara described as "just enough or too much resilience to get through" these aspects of SA work. In the same view, Simon reflected on how emergencies and significant issues "seem to be more common year to year." Simon also drew a comparison about him "constantly" engaging resilience earlier in his career, whereas now he works to "pause and reflect on what [he] can do and control in the moment and what [he] can do later on" as pressures escalate at work. Xiomara shared a similar description about pausing and reflecting on the same situation involving two different actors: a campus president she had worked with for many years and, later, a new president. Certain decisions she made in the past related to high-level situations with the original president received no push-back; however, Xiomara described feeling micromanaged—and at times excluded—by the new president, explaining, "I was feeling shut out." These experiences were described as "so stressful" by Xiomara, especially as they coupled with her managing this during the pandemic, which added escalated pressures to her work.

Emergency situations and significant campus issues add multiple layers of complexity to everyday SA work. Additionally, although midlevel SA administrators describe these occurrences as being more frequent than in previous timeframes, each requires significant management from midlevel SA administrators. Emergencies and issues management do not exclude the need to direct and execute everyday operations to ensure departments are available on a regular day, particularly to serve students who require support and advising from SA departments. Engaging a resilience mindset throughout emergency situations and significant campus issues seems necessary for midlevel SA administrators. However, participants' self-awareness can be seen as an additional tool that seems a necessary asset to avoid burnout.

Inheriting Conflict: Accommodating and Adapting by Way of Reorganization

Participants shared examples of engaging resilience in response to unexpected workplace cases that required reorganization of departments and units under participants' SA responsibilities. Some participants took new positions and inherited historic conflict in their new areas discovered after their time of hire (e.g., underlying conflict situations in one of the departments they were overseeing). Still, they had to be resilient to carry out their workplace expectations. These cases were generally layered and compounded with other workplace challenges and required department-wide or divisional reorganization led by the participant. A resilience mindset allowed these specific participants to navigate these challenges.

Initially, Robin inherited conflict in a new division of SA he was hired to lead and described what he called a "constant state of being in additional interim roles." He needed to hire multiple personnel, and other areas needed new structures, which required dismantling other problematic structures. Thus, Robin was hired with the unknown expectation to lead an organizational change in this new division. This combination of challenges caused Robin to engage a resilience mindset as he led various portfolios as interim within multiple departments, while also leading his division. In Robin's words, he was "at times seen as a de facto director, sometimes a dean, sometimes a Title IX coordinator, and sometimes the sole conduct officer," thus uncovering various conflicts in multiple areas needing attention across his portfolio of responsibilities.

Robin explained how his workday experiences in the new division were parallel to his previous position on the same campus. Robin described how his new area of responsibilities in a more difficult workplace environment caused him to be resilient: "I inherited a division that I don't want to say in shambles—but was being held together by a thread." Robin described how

engaging resilience and adapting to this historic interdepartmental conflict allowed him to accommodate his new division's needs by "working hard—at times all night and all weekend—in order to dismantle problem[atic structures in the SA division]," while also building new structures at the same time. Robin described this experience as requiring resilience, particularly when these problems coincide with other workplace challenges requiring him to engage resilience. Robin said:

> It was overwhelming. I would be [on campus] at all hours of the night trying to build something that worked while remedying issues and putting out fires. There were new things we were being asked to do on top of this, but we didn't have any structures in place. It was just so much.

A resilience mindset allowed Robin to creatively respond to these problems needing a remedy, while building effective structures for his new division. Robin noted that in this situation, resilience was "necessary to address the multiple workplace challenges that existed and then uncovered" and "kept [him] going."

Peter also described the challenging effects of needing to restructure a new area of campus while also conducting his day-to-day senior responsibilities. This addition to his everyday work influenced him to engage resilience to accommodate the challenges of the restructure and meet daily expectations. Peter shared:

> [The reorganization] honestly felt like I had gone back to square one with a promotion. I couldn't believe I left [previous department] that, again, I was thriving in. I was back to square one. The stress that put me under to make it work for multiple departments [places hands up with stop motion] . . . it's a place I never want to go back to again. I worked around the clock. And I didn't have the resources I needed—I had only some of the

pieces I needed and a big game board, but still nowhere to move. But somehow, we made it work.

Robin and Peter described stresses that relate to engaging a resilience mindset, and they described how they had less control or influence related to the nested conflicts related to each of the reorganizations they were addressing. However, resilience allowed both Robin and Peter to cope with managing these layers of conflict while also directing their departments and managing everyday work.

Engaging Resilience to Accommodate Competing Needs in Personal and Work Lives

Participants described times when they engaged resilience to cope with competing needs in their personal and work lives. These layered situations caused participants to accommodate their personal or workplace needs in some regard and contributed to their examples about engaging a resilience mindset at work. Some participants described examples where their personal needs and work lives integrate, clash, and at times influence them to feel frustrated about their work. Participants describe how engaging a resilience mindset was necessary to persist through and address the workplace–personal clash they were experiencing.

Jacquie, for instance, described managing personal conflict related to public disclosure of salaries when she learned she was the lowest paid senior leader in her area. As the only woman of color in her peer group, Jacquie described this situation as particularly challenging. She negotiated this problem with senior leaders over multiple years. Jacquie described this situation, which "tested" her resilience: "Pay equity! Certainly, that issue required me being resilient in terms of negotiating and adapting. Recovering from that issue took a long time but is really huge for me." Jacquie explained how her pay equity grievance was unresolved for "years" and became less of a focus as new people took on leadership roles on her campus, requiring her to reiterate

the issue numerous times. Jacquie shared, “There were many years that I knew I was being paid tens of thousands of dollars less than my colleagues at the time, causing significant stress in and outside work. So, I named the problem.” Furthermore, Jacquie explained how engaging resilience provided her the “capacity to bounce back” each time human resources and her leaders told her they could not amend their process related to total compensation.

In reflecting on this layered time engaging resilience, Jacquie shared how engaging this mindset offered her understanding of the clash of her personal and work lives:

> What gave me the capacity and an adaptation to bounce back after the *years* of back and forth was being very, very clear with myself about my “why”—why I do my work. Why do I do this? I care about SA [work]. I care about students. I learned I was the lowest paid when I started, and then people were hired after me and still paid more than me. But I still showed up and I did my job. Some days were harder than others. Certainly, the care and love that I have for students and [SA] work was the motivating factor of me staying.

In essence, Jacquie described how a resilience mindset allowed her to respond to the compounded challenges related to her personal feelings about the seemingly repressive structures on her campus, while remaining dedicated to her job.

Annie shared an example of how she engaged a resilience mindset due to a personal workplace conflict. Annie shared, “I was really struggling with my boss—who I respect the heck out of . . . but we see things very differently. [After being promoted and part of the leadership team] I learned that I didn't agree with a lot of her decisions.” Annie explained there was a period of 6 months where this “personal struggle” continuously influenced her to accommodate her work by following directions she did not agree with and described having “this pit in [her] stomach over at least 6 months” every time there was a one-on-one and team meeting involving

this supervisor who seemed to "not be into other ways" of doing things. Annie reflected on persisting in her role by engaging resilience and shared, "I could easily have [left for a new role] because I didn't like this [situation]. It was going to be really easy to just kind of throw in the towel."

Like Jacquie, Annie described how she reflected on her personal values while being resilient to move through the conflict. Annie described this reflection:

> I go back to [personal reflection] questions: "Why am I here? What are my values? What is worth it? How would I feel walking away from it versus doubling down and getting through what sticks to me a bit?" Every time I need to get through something, I reflect on what I can do, my history of resilience, and that helps me by just getting through [the challenge].

Annie explained how she eventually discussed her challenges with this supervisor, who was open to feedback, and the conversation resulted in the supervisor providing more context to the department about decisions that may be controversial. Annie's example illustrated how she acknowledged what sorts of challenges are trying for her at work personally and professionally, but being resilient and persisting through the situation after leaving her role allowed her to eventually navigate the challenges effectively.

In a different example, Marc described a situation involving his "team's reputation" that called on him to engage a resilience mindset. Marc described how his team was being accused of contributing to a layered campuswide problem, with some peers even blaming his team's actions for causing the overall issue. Marc described how this situation caused him to engage resilience until there was a resolution. Marc explained:

> The nature of the work of my team was being publicly questioned and [his direct reports'] job classification was also being publicly questioned. That was the moment when I was negotiating, managing, and adapting to significant sources of stress and maybe even trauma.

Marc described how he navigated this conflict in a way that was principled—particularly as his senior leaders noticed the overall discrepancy. Marc described resilience through his example of persisting through these challenges and navigating his and his team's reputation. Marc described his need to prove his team's abilities to other stakeholders by sharing consistent results about their work. Remaining resilient seemed necessary "to support the work of the team. Because individuals from outside the team were the ones who were throwing daggers at them to poke holes into their work." These efforts required him and those he supervises to reprioritize and accommodate daily work, while also navigating staff members affected by the workplace criticism to appropriate coaching or resources. Eventually, the work was applauded after achieving successful benchmarks after the challenging start. Marc described the effects of his resilience during this time: "It was hard. The bouncing back [from resilience] part connects with me because the team itself also carried a certain degree of resilience. We got through." Marc alluded to how the criticism had a wide-ranging effect and cost "more energy than it needed to" for his team, particularly himself. For Marc, engaging resilience was a factor that kept him focused and motivated to mitigate the presenting issues at hand, while also persisting through the everyday work he and his multi-unit team were expected to do on campus.

Peter described an isolated, personal conflict working on a campus he had been at for some time. Peter described this conflict as causing him to be resilient as he adapted his everyday responsibilities and took on more due to feeling "held back" at work. Peter explained he was not

professionally advancing on his campus over multiple years and noted how he felt more recognition from professional associations than his workplace. Peter shared, "I remember feeling the pushback from leaders that I wasn't allowed to escape that [department]—I was not choosing to be in a silo, but I was getting siloed. But I kept showing up to do my job" even though "no matter what [he] did," he was not getting the internal jobs he was applying for, nor recognition he felt like he deserved and needed to advance. Peter explained how "it especially took a lot out of" him after finishing his doctorate and still not advancing, and he felt he was accommodating the institution. He said:

> I was a scholar and even though I was involved in my national [professional] organizations at the leadership level and was encouraged to apply for [external roles], the [senior leaders] I worked directly with would only see my work in a certain way. I even tried to make lateral moves, but they wanted to keep me in that [functional area] because I was successful [in that functional area]. I almost left the [higher education] field, but I chose not to do that. I chose to keep trying, and I eventually bounced back and grew different branches on the tree, and then eventually dipped into a new functional area. That got me to [his current position].

Peter's resilience mindset helped him recover from feelings of discouragement at work, as shown by how he adapted to personal and professional challenges with work rather than leaving for a different career path. Peter cautioned about his approach and explained the cost as "taking on too much to justify" his candidacy for the eventual promotion.

Overall, participants shared their reflections about engaging resilience to respond to and accommodate work and workplace pressures, and to accommodate conflict, which also included

their personal context. Maria summarized costs related to consistently being resilient to meet expectations best and said:

> Your resilience is constantly tested [in SA]. You deal with challenging student experiences. And then you focus on getting things done. And sometimes that means sacrificing other people's expectations. To be resilient and get through [the situation], you sometimes have to be okay with people not liking you, with people not liking your decisions, not compromising at times.

Maria's quote illustrates professional skills and personal qualities she felt were needed to be resilient while focusing on addressing issues in her immediate purview. Findings about how "work" and "self" interact in workplace settings and how this can engage resilience are discussed next.

Effects of Bringing "Whole Self" to Work

Participants described feeling the effects of bringing their "whole selves" to work and explained engaging resilience when their personal needs clash with work. Some participants described "whole selves," or similar terms, as being important, whereas others described these terms as rhetoric associated with human resources divisions on campus. For this section, "whole selves" relates to how midlevel SA administrators' human needs and their workplace, and positional needs interact. Participants described these dynamics by focusing on situations when it was difficult to compartmentalize the issue they had worked through. Participants attribute these difficulties to whether the situation(s) affects personal circumstances the participant was experiencing at their work or whether they are unable to "leave work at work," ultimately causing conflict to the participant professionally, interpersonally, or intrapersonally. Participants

described engaging resilience to confront and navigate these unique circumstances, with many describing their commitment to work and the SA profession.

Robin described conflict when his personal needs at work conflicted with his everyday work. A turning point added to Robin's need to engage resilience: he managed reorganization and the introduction of an important student fee while also navigating a cancer diagnosis he received soon after beginning his new role. It is important to highlight that Robin is now cancer-free, but he shared more specific details about the difficulties balancing his commitment to personal health and family posed to his personal commitment to his work and SA career. Robin said: "I have a sense of responsibility. For myself. For my family. For my work and the institution."

Robin shared how his resilience was engaged after learning he "had cancer and was trying to deal with [his] sense of commitment to the college and [his SA work]." Consequently, Robin described needing to be strategic with his leave times and sick days as he and his family navigated the unknowns related to his health and described how his resilience allowed him to understand that he "want[s] to be in this work. And I don't want to leave my team behind, but I have to focus on my health and my family." Robin, however, was triggered by a recent situation during our interview—over a year after being cancer-free—that provoked him to think about the time when he was navigating his health challenges at work. He continued:

> So . . . [laughs] I threw my back out Sunday at my kid's birthday party, and my partner was like, "take a sick day" and I'm like, "no, but I'm going to work from home" because I *have* this stress on myself. [Long pause]. I feel that I need to bank sick days in case I get really sick again. I maxed them out before. Now I have them stored up to go [points to his

computer]. I can work through this [back] pain right now. I guess, for me, you have to keep working for both livelihood and because of this crazy sense of responsibility.

Robin attributed his ability to be resilient to being what ultimately helped him get through this clash of perceived personal and professional obligations. Robin explained how resilience helped him finally be "okay with leaving his work" to focus on his health, so he could eventually come back to work after his recovery. The combination of what could be considered a common injury like back pain with a personal and traumatic experience such as cancer provoked a reminder about Robin's resilience at work. Robin also described times when his resilience helped him step back from responsibilities once he approached "the limit." Overall, engaging resilience seemed to be an effective tool for Robin to pause and assess the compounded personal and workplace challenges he was navigating while helping him establish certain limits, particularly related to his sense of responsibility and commitment to his campus and SA work.

Malcolm drew upon his ability to engage resilience as a response to burning out earlier in his career. Malcolm said a high profile and complicated incident on a campus he worked at required difficult decision making. This timeframe was particularly difficult as Malcolm was personally coping with the end of a personal relationship that eventually led to divorce. Overall, these situations had significant effects on his home and workplace. Malcolm drew a parallel between that burnout experience and his new ability to engage resilience to prevent burning out. Malcolm described:

> I learned over time what those signals are within myself, where I go, "okay," like "something's off, you're not feeling right." And I've learned to understand what those feelings were and that those were signals to me that I needed to deal with this in a different, healthy way or find some new strategies to employ.

Malcolm described multiple self-care strategies he employed if he noticed resilience consistently being engaged, and described that self-reflection led to a limit of resilience like Robin's did. Malcolm discussed role modeling these strategies with his direct reports, including communicating any difficulties affecting his portfolios to his supervisors to "prevent what happened before" when referencing his burnout experience.

Other participants described navigating the clash of personal and work lives, particularly related to navigating significant change. Simon described the personal toll of moving to an opposite coast of Canada to begin a new position weeks before the COVID-19 Pandemic. Several situations in a confined time period influenced Simon to be resilient: changing demands and adapting to a new workplace environment; growth in a senior leadership role; the pandemic (including the resulting personal tolls and added work responsibilities); family challenges while they adapted to a new province; and his lacking collegial relationships at work and friendships outside work resulting from being so new. Simon described the effects of navigating these challenges and said:

> I didn't get into this line of work to be doing a lot of the things that we had to do during the pandemic. Managing everything coming at me in my new job, plus my family's needs definitely took a toll on me [pause] and took a toll on my mental health as it did for a lot of people. [My family was not] expecting to be completely cut off [from a supported transition], and not able to meet new people. I had to work so much. Yeah, I was resilient, but there was a period there where I know I wasn't bringing my 'a-game' to the job. But I have absolutely bounced back from that and now I absolutely am [bringing my 'a game']. My family is now connected [to others] and I've made connections [at and outside of work]. I didn't realize how resilient I was then.

Simon's example also included multiple points of self-reflection that allowed him to assess how he was navigating the "test" of resilience in his work and eventually described how accessing counseling through his benefits prevented him from "burning out."

Susie did not change work locations; however, she was in the interim dean of students role while maintaining her executive director responsibilities. Susie described the toll of navigating work and the pandemic, along with the effects of the pandemic on her personal life: her partner was having difficulty making their way back from a different continent, while also supporting the "young adults" living in her home. At one point, Susie described leading the student–focused response to the pandemic while everyone living in her house—including Susie—had COVID. Susie described her resilience as "keeping me moving and getting things done" through this time.

Unrelated to the pandemic, Annie described navigating personal challenges while adapting to a new job. Annie attributed her actions to engaging resilience consistently over a 6-month period. Annie identified the personal issues she navigated while beginning her promotion: "I left my partner, moved houses, started a new job, moved cities, and took on so much." However, engaging resilience to cope with these personal challenges while adapting to her new work environment had positive effects. Annie explained the positive experience:

> Now, I think about that time and how I excelled. I wasn't hiding from what was terrible at home while at work. It came down to reminders about [self-talk] "you've been through harder stuff than this" or whatever. "You can get through this." The best you can do is your best.

Annie explained it was not an easy path but was worth it in the end; her overall skills at work and her personal perspectives gained while being resilient have been helpful, including the earlier mentioned example related to how she navigated personal conflict with her supervisor.

Other participants described how they engaged resilience to cope with navigating difficult colleagues and personal workplace dynamics, situations that emphasized the need to navigate personal stress that sometimes can only be internalized at work. Eliza described engaging resilience as necessary to get her "through and get over not being hired" for a permanent, internal senior position, alluding to the personal conflict with rejection. Steven described engaging resilience with a colleague whom he perceived to be homophobic based on implicit comments made by the colleague. Jacquie shared an example related to multiple divisions outside SA that focused on challenging work relationships. Jacquie described a perceived lack of respect and prioritization for the work her SA team accomplished, despite each area having worked towards the same goal on campus. Jacquie connected by her resilience to try and "work with those folks. I definitely had to negotiate and manage myself and my team so we can just do our best work and get through." Jacquie felt that resilience has given her the "tools and courage to be able to say, 'this is what I'm not doing' and I now know how to do that from learning how to navigate the system."

Participants described examples of engaging resilience due to an interaction of personal and workplace challenges, which all included points of reflection that focused on and assessed the escalating issue(s) they navigated. All examples resulted in participants reflecting on the costs and gains that resulted from the experience(s) where they engaged resilience and persisted in achieving their workplace needs.

Personal Factors That Engage and Manage Resilience at Work

The ability to engage a resilience mindset requires self-awareness and, to a point, helps avoid burning out. This awareness allowed all participants to explain some sort of limit that provokes them to engage resilience, including taking time away, some leaving a role deemed too challenging, some taking formal leaves, and some accessing health and wellbeing benefits through their options from human resources. Maria best described what being resilient necessitates and said: “Resilience requires somebody who can accept their flaws, their mistakes, who can tolerate risk to a certain extent to be resilient, have to trust yourself in your instincts and experience.” Maria further explained: “When you’re faced with a significant source of personal stress or trauma. You can weed out very quickly what matters at that moment, especially at work, and decide what doesn’t matter.”

Most participants explained how their strengths of character also add to their abilities to be resilient: Maria and Susie described the importance of knowing what you are and are not feeling confident about and experiencing critical thinking; Simon, Peter, and Malcolm described personal persistence with “the end goal in mind;” Annie described personally “letting go of ego,” while Jacquie described how spirituality helps her release negative energy resulting from workplace challenges and conflict.

Participants who were more senior in years of experience identified more options related to character strengths than those with less experience. Last, many participants described awareness of privilege as affecting personal factors that influence engagement. Those who referred to privilege recognized their privilege and acknowledged how they imagined resilience as more challenging for marginalized professionals. One participant of color explained how a significant workplace challenge was more difficult than it needed to be by the campus’s decision

making, with the participant suggesting their race was not considered as a factor of exclusion compared to their white colleagues receiving significantly higher pay.

Situation Factors Affecting Workplace Resilience

Participants explained the importance of workplace benefits to support their abilities to be resilient, specifically related to counseling, sick days, and other health benefits. Three American participants referred to these benefits as limited (e.g., counting sick days, counting appointments). For example, Xiomara shared:

> I went through the hardest period of [her] life . . . multiple deaths of those close to me. I took my personal time, maxed it out, and needed more. Eventually I had to take unpaid leave for a short time after coming back too soon.

Although not asked explicitly about counseling, eight participants referred to accessing counseling support or extended health care resulting from job-related stress; four specifically commented on their personal life intersecting with their work-related stress.

Other situation factors relate directly to the workplace environment. Most referred to how trust in leadership and collegiality causes them to recover from active resilience; others referred to how lacking trust caused them to need to be resilient. For example, Jacquie shared how the adjustment of pay situation "took some time for [her] to get back to fully trusting [her] colleagues and knowing they have [her] back." Affinity groups at work are described as being effective in supporting resilience—specifically peer support at work and intentional inclusion efforts, as well as comparison of issues of employees that consider identity groups (e.g., pay equity) and ethnic identity groups.

Summary of Why Midlevel SA Administrators Engage Resilience in the Workplace

Participants described engaging resilience in the workplace as a way to respond to and manage significant, layered, and complex challenges affecting their work. The challenges needing the participant's response required them to reorganize their departments' short- and/or long-term priorities. Engaging resilience allowed midlevel SA administrators to navigate and manage these unpredictable situations until there was some resolution. Years of experience, skills, and competencies influence the self-awareness exhibited by the midlevel SA administrator engaging resilience.

These participants engaged resilience mindsets by responding in the following ways: (a) "getting the work done" by adjusting their day-to-day and short- and long-term goals, and (b) counting on their "whole self"—abilities, skills, identities—at work, despite the personal lives sometimes being in conflict along with the stressful work the midlevel SA administrator is navigating. Participants saw engaging resilience as a step down a path that could lead to burnout if conditions did not improve, with some comparisons to "the great resignation" in these discussions about burning out. Although no questions focused on burning out, few participants referred to colleagues who left their positions or the SA profession as "burning out." Turning away from burning out, in the next chapter, I discuss findings on midlevel SA professionals and thriving.

CHAPTER 6: THRIVING FINDINGS—

THRIVING AS WORKPLACE EXPERIENCE

> I'm fortunate enough to say there's been a couple times where I thrived in my career. I was able to restructure our student activities area and [campuses of similar types] looked to *us* on how to lead here—in and out of the state. That led to me being able to actualize a referendum [student] fee and realign [the fee] so it was supporting direct departments and getting us [meaning, student affairs division] what we actually needed to function. Those experiences just opened the floodgates to where I am now career-wise, and reminded me [about] how we experience and involve our students in the [campus's] community, and the types of activities and learning we need to be engaging them in. I remember the buy-in from students, and even from faculty who wanted to join. We were expanding programs and functional areas. We were adding staff left and right, both full time and part time. We were growing in all senses. I thrived then.
>
> —Robin, 15+ years' experience working in Student Affairs

Robin and I discussed thriving in the workplace. Overall, Robin was enthusiastic when explaining how these monumental experiences have been meaningful to his career and ultimately influenced him to thrive. When asked about experiences of thriving, Robin immediately responded with the previous quote, showing how his leadership in restructuring sparked several other career milestones that led to his current leadership position. Robin associated these experiences with thriving at work, bolstered by his values about student affairs [SA] work: the importance of engaging students, collaborating with multiple stakeholders on a campus, and growth in various forms.

This third findings chapter concentrates on thriving, which is typically positioned in research as a mindset connected to one's well-being (Schreiner, 2023). Rather than a mindset, participants in my study described thriving at work as a state or condition grounded in positive recollections of career experiences. Findings about the state of thriving are in conversation with the previous chapters focused on buoyancy and resilience mindsets. As illustrated in Chapters 4 and 5, the findings show how midlevel SA administrators *engaged* buoyancy and resilience mindsets in response to escalating challenging conditions. I begin this chapter with a definition of thriving, followed by findings related to how participants *experience* thriving in their workplace.

Thriving

Research on thriving is grounded in well-being and psychology scholarship and considers one's "intellectual, interpersonal, and psychological engagement, learning, and growth" (Schreiner, 2023, p. 1). I asked participants about thriving in the context of "feelings of progress, momentum, marked by both a sense of learning and a sense of vitality" (Spreitzer et al., 2005, p. 537). Participants described thriving as a state or experience where they had the ability to feel flourishing from something related to their work, along with affirmation about their abilities to succeed and feel accomplished at work. The midlevel SA administrators I interviewed associated thriving with their most important career achievements, experiences, successes, and accolades that captured their career progress and momentum and paired with their personal career fulfillment. Some participants shared examples that did not necessarily occur recently, nor within their status as midlevel SA administrators.

Participants shared thriving experiences related to when they were in a space of *feeling*, *seeing*, and *doing* at work: (a) feeling affirmed, credible, and validated; (b) seeing thriving in

effect when they recognize achievement and satisfaction with their direct reports and other stakeholders; and (c) having the capacity and resources to build and innovate SA work. Most examples related to specific accomplishments (e.g., year-long projects that are sustainable a decade later, leading the development of what was something new or innovative and is now deemed a proven practice), experiences of feeling career advancement and momentum, and seeing the effects of their work on the people they supervise or work with, or the students their work connects to—comparatively few examples related to significant recognition or awards.

Participants understood thriving to be a less frequently common state compared to resilience and buoyancy mindsets. However, participants saw thriving as an ideal experience to strive for at work. For some, the thriving example was shared with pride; others reflected on their thriving experience, almost like an experience they hope to have again. This nuance is relevant given the contemporary issues affecting higher education and the precarity of the higher education sector in both the United States and Canada. I next outline specific findings related to feeling thriving through work experiences.

Feeling: Affirmation, Credibility, and Validation About Work Efforts

Based on my findings, I developed three definitions related to employees' feelings of affirmation, credibility, and validation in the workplace. I position affirmation as focusing on being supported and encouraged about or at work. I position credibility as when someone earns trust at work from colleagues and leaders. Validation relates to self-awareness and self-confidence relating to being successful at work. Participants shared their personal triumphs where they were confident in their descriptions, explaining when, why, and how they felt they were thriving.

Feelings of Affirmation and Thriving

Employees experienced affirmation in the workplace when they felt supported and encouraged about their work. The midlevel SA administrators described receiving affirmations that made them feel like they were thriving, using examples from various experiences, including public accolades, meaningful feedback and gratitude, exposure and reach, and recognition from senior leadership. For some participants, more personal moments of affirmative feedback and gratitude added to their thriving experience at work.

Eliza shared feedback from her first midlevel role, which was student-facing. She described how students recognized her by saying, "Hey, you've made a difference in my life, 'you've done this, you've done that.' Having that validation definitely helped me understand that I was thriving and doing well." Maria shared similar experiences with nuanced perspectives given her seniority, describing, "I feel like I am thriving when I'm getting positive feedback. It doesn't happen as much when you're [midlevel]. When I'm physically seeing and hearing that the work I've done has an impact adds to me feeling like I'm thriving at work."

For others, experiences with thriving at work and feelings of affirmation were situated in more publicly affirming ways. Robin, who has worked at the same private 2-year college throughout his career, described the outcomes of a major overhaul of the SA department he led before his current position. He shared:

> It was the most exciting time of my career, and we were just getting a lot of attention nationally and regionally for some of the work that we were doing, which was exciting because in the 2-year [college] world, you're not often seen as cutting edge for being innovative.

Robin later explained how this affirmation and momentum led him to apply for the more senior position on his campus (referred to in the previous chapter), for which he was hired. Jacquie explained, "I think of thriving as when I feel affirmation the most." Jacquie further described the effects of thriving in the workplace while reflecting on her successes, saying, "For me, [thriving is] probably those moments of realizing I'm living out the career that I've prepared a lot for, and I know this when [senior leadership] is most happy."

Like Jacquie, others described how affirmation from senior leaders—or getting opportunities representing their campus by way of public reach and exposure—added to their experiences with thriving. For some, this affirmation also led to feeling professionally credible, further bolstering their experience with thriving. For example, Susie described her reach outside of her division from being part of an interdivisional, campuswide professional development event and said:

> I was asked to do a staff service initiative with someone from HR [human resources] and delivered this training to over 200 employees across [campus]. I have heard directly that my facilitation, lessons, and initiatives from this promoted change in a positive way at [campus]. I felt such momentum.

Xiomara shared a parallel experience with leadership with the now-retired president of campus with whom she had worked for many years. Xiomara described how she experiences a state of thriving from affirmation and credibility and said:

> [Campus leaders] would amplify me without me asking them to people who understood what I really wanted to get done and wanted to do it with me. They were ready to play and knew that we were going to push some envelopes and push some boundaries and that was okay because I was trusted—especially by the president.

Participants explained feelings of affirmation in clear ways, showing how they experienced a state of thriving *from* their work rather than at work. Susie and Xiomara's experience shows how affirmation can also pair with feelings of credibility related to their thriving.

Feelings of Credibility and Thriving

Employees experienced feelings of credibility in the workplace when they felt trusted and believed (e.g., their direction; their advice) at work, and their feelings validated their thriving at work. These feelings included examples related to institutional knowledge, high-impact decision making, building something new resulting in recognition, and credibility resulting from promotions at work or taking on additional special projects and responsibilities. Xiomara described "vitality" as an aspect of the thriving definition that she related most to and shared how her familiarity of systems, functions, and employees on campus led to her being called upon to be of support to various colleagues and leaders across campus. Xiomara boasted that "people all over campus are sent to me by people all over campus." Xiomara explained how being "counted on by others, including the president," led to thriving at work.

Several participants described being asked to sit on different campuswide committees or work on special projects. For example, Eliza shared how being depended on helped her feel like she was thriving: "There were some committees where the administrators came to me and said, 'hey, we need you for this committee' or 'we need your brain for this committee.' Those moments help me think, 'okay, I'm thriving.'" Simon described the credibility he felt with his expertise in SA on a campus that has less of a student-services focus and after some time, he said, "[I don't have to] defend decisions that have been made by myself or my team to people that don't necessarily really understand the [SA] world that we're living and working in." Last, Simon described the validation he felt and how this relates to his thriving, related to the

credibility he feels from his supervisor (i.e., dean of students), the dean's supervisor (i.e., vice president, finance), and the president and their office. Simon shared:

> There's really been a lot of moments lately where [senior leadership] realize how much knowledge [I have] about students and [SA] work. That is a good reminder and makes me feel good. Since [senior leaders realized this knowledge about students] I've been asked to be acting dean of students instead of others [when the dean is away] and it makes me feel like, "Oh, I'm competent, I know what I'm doing because they know what I'm doing."

Participants' examples showed they experienced thriving when they felt trusted and credible by senior colleagues at work.

Participants who felt credible at work described how this quality influenced their thriving, further connected to building something new and being recognized. For example, Xiomara contrasted a former campus president and campus executives' trust in her work, supporting her in spearheading the development of an identity-focused employee group for the campus faculty and staff. Xiomara shared, "[President] was willing to take the risk [on her project]; they were willing to defend me, they were willing to fend for me, willing to support my vision, and my goals, and my dreams at work." Xiomara's efforts outside of her day-to-day responsibilities earned even more credibility. Xiomara explained how she received the highest award on her campus for an administrator after this project's launch, and a year later, the group that administered this initiative received the team awards. Xiomara explained, "I set the path. That felt good." This thriving experience at work started with Xiomara's credibility and qualities, which are shown by the product of her work. It is important to note, Xiomara

contrasted this example to the new president on campus, who she feels distant from and seemingly shut out from the new president's decision making.

Simon—the most junior of the midlevel SA administrator participants—described how he felt credible for the recognition he received for building something new. Simon shared how he felt about building a program "from scratch" and noted "it was slow. Then there were immediate results [from students] and then a lot of publicity that ensured we knew we [built the program] from scratch right." Simon's recognition for building something new that earned recognition added to his credibility on campus and influenced his ability to thrive at work. Simon also shared how this specific experience led him to apply for his current, more senior position on the opposite coast of Canada.

Marc shared how his thriving experience related to him feeling credible and connected this experience to the successful introduction of a new campuswide policy and accompanied processes, systems, and procedures led by him and a large, multiunit team:

> I felt life from that and that work, which wasn't easy to get . . . let alone approvals and satisfaction from leadership. We are in year two of [new policy/processes] right now, and it's been going quite well.

Building something new and feelings of credibility resulting from this adds to midlevel SA administrators' feelings of thriving at work. Credibility leads to testing participants' abilities to build something that begins with the trust earned and results in their experience of thriving.

For other participants, career advancement and promotions influenced them to feel credible, which related to their thriving experience. For example, Eliza shared, "I think the fact that I was promoted a couple of times [internally]—this was another experience that helped me understand, okay, I'm thriving and doing well." Robin described how he was encouraged to

consider his career growth within the same institution and said:

> I was encouraged to apply for the [most senior SA role on campus]. I decided not to for my own personal needs and seeing [the previous incumbents] burnout. But I know [senior leaders] wanted me in that position, so that feels good.

Annie described how a promotion and a new campus led her to feel credible and connected to her thriving experience. Annie reflected on this journey and how it connected to how she felt like she was thriving in the workplace. Annie said:

> I definitely felt underqualified. I came into [inheriting an] incredibly dysfunctional team . . . I [inherited] multiple grievances. The team was like, "I don't know who this person is and what this person is doing here." It started off quite rocky, and then [over a period of 6 months] I could see people listening to me, and [felt like they were] respecting me, and helping me move my decisions along. Even though these were really hard decisions, and even though it was one of the hardest things I've done in my career—you know, even having to let a few folks go . . . it was great for [development].

Annie later described the same example and attributed this credibility to adding a positive reputation to her workplace identity. She said: "My reputation [was established as a result] . . . actually like I know what I'm doing, and they do too. It was a hard [6 months], but I felt really alive during that time because I could see progress."

Annie later described the lasting effects of this experience on her campus and what led to how she felt a lasting contribution to this new career opportunity. She explained how her decisions allowed her and the new team "to see the real-world impact that [her] decisions had on team morale, our students and what they were able to access in terms of services." In all, feelings of credibility added to the thriving experiences shared by participants.

Feelings of Validation and Thriving

Validation in the workplace is related to employees' feelings of self-awareness and self-confidence about their work. Participants described feelings of validation connected to their thriving at work. They also recalled accomplishments from their previous roles, such as when they developed something that lasted since their departure from that position. Participants described feelings of professional growth and leadership development.

Participants shared feelings when they felt validated about their work and related this recognition to their thriving experience. Malcolm described his leadership in the development of a departmental vision and values workshop in a previous leadership role at another campus that "still exists today" many years later. He described his contributions as a "cornerstone" of his previous department. Malcolm said, "I look at where [department performance] was versus when I left. I look back on it and go, 'I made a really positive difference there.' It still lasts and I was for sure at my best then." Malcolm's thriving stems from his feelings of validation not only from the workshop that continues to be used but also from the continued success of the department where he no longer works, which was "built from [Malcolm's] initial work."

Maria described the development of policy on a campus that has influenced policies at other campuses with similar characteristics and described this policy as a "precedent." Maria noted how her work that has influenced other campuses contributes to her thriving at work: "Other institutions have shared, borrowed, and then built off [of her work]. As selfish as it sounds, I feel like I'm thriving." Susie described occurrences of her being asked to take on special projects and how these opportunities validated her and helped her progress on campus. Susie explained the effect on her and said: "You're digging in and trying to solve [campus problem] as the person external [to the local environment]. I know my work [on the special

project] is making things better for everybody. I love that." Susie's validation was from taking on special projects that led to immediate change or growth and connected to her experiences of thriving at work.

Participants' recognition of their professional growth and leadership development influenced feelings of validation at work and connected to their examples of when they felt thriving. Peter reflected on his transition from one position to a new area of SA, sharing:

> I had a learning curve. When I didn't know the answer, I would ask questions or research about it. I knew it was okay to say, "Oh, I don't know the answer to that right now." I didn't have that pressure to feel like I have to know everything right away, and now everyone knows and sees my growth in this area.

Annie described similar growth by moving toward and through thriving based on personal growth she experienced at work. Annie described validation from new knowledge and understanding and said: "I didn't know anything about this [subject matter] three months ago and now I'm able to eloquently discuss it in the room or lead a discussion about it." Annie later described her feelings about being an expert that validated her expertise and helped her feel thriving. She said:

> I think, particularly, being a younger [midlevel SA administrator], and a woman, I'm questioned a lot. I get to say, "Well, actually I do know this thing" . . . [pause] it seems gross to say, but kind of winning that conversation a little bit and being seen as the expert in the room among those more senior than me gives me a lot of [enthusiasm for] showing or proving my credibility. This can give me a lot of life at work.

Annie's trajectory of growth at work and feelings of validation from her knowledge contribute to her thriving in the workplace. Unique examples of when participants felt validated included

when Steven shared how “the provost even calls me now” and how Peter’s doctorate and eventual acknowledgment for his expertise had influenced him to feel validated at work despite his challenges moving into a different SA functional area. Last, many participants shared the gratitude they receive from students at work—albeit their positions not directly facing students—and validated their feelings at work.

Seeing: Achievement and Satisfaction of Direct Reports, Team, and Students

Participants described seeing thriving in action at work by how they experienced a thriving state related to: (a) their individual direct reports, (b) the greater teams they are a part of, and (c) the students who experienced with their portfolios. Participants described seeing their work in effect (e.g., in a planning process that led to successfully achieving a monumental work goal). Robin described earning respect from senior leaders for his work with student leaders on a student activity fee referendum that took multiple years. Robin described seeing thriving in effect as “a feeling of accomplishment,” and explained:

> The team felt [obstacles] are not there, it’s that we’re either working around obstacles, we’re overcoming obstacles. That’s when I feel that sense that we’re thriving. We see what we are doing. We’re meeting these challenges head-on and we're overcoming them.

Jacquie described the importance of students’ influence on her team’s work, noting, “My team’s work is all powered by a really passionate group of student leaders.” Seeing the student leaders and the professionals she supervises as “happy and doing amazing work” resulted in her thriving. Jacquie described this effect: “Their energy is palpable.” Steven shared how seeing students grow and develop influences his thriving, sharing a specific experience about a student he supervised and later recognized:

> There is a student who I formally supervised and called me a mentor. And I nominated

> them to be the speaker at graduation. We met years ago because of student government drama. I asked if I could nominate him, we had a really good conversation, and he sent me his resume and I'm writing up his nomination right now. And that makes me feel good that I can recognize students who are doing great things and accomplishing things. We forget about that sometimes [as midlevel]. It's less now but basically, anytime I get to interact with students, I feel like I'm thriving—it brings life to my job.

Jacquie's and Steven's examples also included passing reflection about how students ultimately influenced their entrance into SA as a profession; however, their contact with students had been less frequent and peripheral given their seniority.

Annie described how she was able to see thriving in effect by recognizing the influence of her leadership on her team. Annie shared, "I think just seeing that impact of our work, like seeing how my decisions lead to us making a positive impact on other people." Marc described seeing thriving in effect with his team using a comparative example contrasting organizational and structural change within his area resulting from his decisions. Marc explained how his area was enacting his decisions related to this restructure, but the results were effective due to his team. He shared:

> I did a bit of a restructuring in my office eight months ago. My approach to restructuring is thinking about groups or units of people that help to enable other individuals or other groups or units to do their best work. It's having those enablers around across multiple units. These roles have new capacities that already existed that we have leveraged in a new way. It's been successful workwise, people seem happier, and leadership is happy.

Last, Xiomara—who started the faculty and staff identity-based association—passed those responsibilities to a smaller group of people to lead this association. Both received awards over

separate years for their efforts. Xiomara described the effects of seeing this group, saying:

> Being a leader motivates me and gives me life. That really goes to the whole leadership piece. Being a leader and leading a team and wanting to be good in a team . . . and then being good in a team, and always having "the good team"—that means a lot to me. I put a lot into it.

Seeing teams and students succeed adds to participants' thriving experience at work. Aside from seeing these efforts in their development, action, and, in some cases, seeing recognition contributes to how midlevel SA administrators see thriving in effect. Participants also described how their building and innovation at work—or doing—also contributed to their thriving experiences in the workplace.

Doing: Having Capacity and Resources to Build and Innovate to Address Workplace Needs

Participants described experiencing thriving when they had resources and dedicated time to build something new and innovative at work. Nearly all participants described experiences where their direct actions—or doing—led them to experience thriving. Participants shared vivid examples of times when they could create and build something that contributed to their thriving at work. For context related to "doing," I found participants felt they were thriving at work when they: (a) had capacity and resources related to time, energy, financial means, and personnel accessible to the midlevel SA administrator; and (b) could build and innovate something relates to a special project or an initiative that is needed to solve and issue requiring capacity and resources.

Robin described the contrast of the effects of getting to build versus not building, which contrasted the excitement about new initiatives with status quo work and his need to respond to everyday challenges. Robin shared, "I feel like I'm thriving when I'm creating something. When

I'm developing something, and I feel like I'm taking something to that next level. I'm not thriving when things are stagnant and we're just here doing the day-to day." Robin explained how this thriving experience happened after he successfully positioned a referendum that resulted in new collaborations with student groups. From here, Robin led the development of a new, innovative SA area on his campus. Robin explained how this aspect of the reorganization gained attention from the 2-year college sector and said:

> [The introduction of a new area] was exciting to have that, and to see that level of growth where we were at first feeling like we were catching up. And then we became the folks that others in the 2-year world were trying to keep up with. I will always and forever look back on that time as probably my favorite time in my career just because of the people I was working with, that ability to build and to grow.

Simon shared similar effects from when he developed a campus-wide program named a campus priority by the campus executive. Explaining that "it's probably the most hours [he] ever worked in [his] life," Simon described how the overall experience—including the challenges developing the campus-wide program presented—led to long-term effects that he attributes to his thriving at work. Simon described: "It was very easy to be motivated and be invigorated by the work that I was doing because [building project] was happening fast." Eliza described how she built something new that had reached outside of her SA division on campus. She described growth from this new area and how seeing it develop adds to her experience of thriving at work: "When you see it hit metrics or you see it do the things that it's supposed to, and the learning outcomes are achieved—all of those times considered, I thought 'okay, I'm thriving.'"

Other participants described personal feelings about when they recognized their accomplishments related to their workplace contributions and how this recognition was an

opportunity to see thriving in effect. Jacquie led the redevelopment of the orientation portfolio within her areas of responsibility, which required innovative thinking that involved stakeholders and experts outside the higher education sector. Jacquie described the value of out-of-ordinary thinking and the experience of seeing the success of her redevelopment: "[specific innovation] has changed so much about what we do and how we do it on campus—logistics for open houses, or even [the innovation] being a hook for student recruitment." Jacquie was able to see something new developed under her leadership and her approach replicated, which has gained notoriety and connected to Jacquie's thriving. Peter also described seeing innovation that connected his SA work to enrollment services on his campus, explaining:

> I had to do something I'd never done before. I had to learn this whole new thing about strategic enrollment and lead [campus] in this new direction . . . it was exciting for me to be able to do that and to have the trust [from campus leaders] and I'm very fortunate to have been allowed to try this while not being expected to be the expert on [strategic enrollment].

Peter has been able to share his expertise at national conferences and how this entire experience influenced his thriving experience at work. Peter shared, "Now I've been able to bring what my institution does in that area and bring it to a bigger level." Like Jacquie, Peter has seen the results of his successes at work, and these experiences relate to his thriving.

Xiomara described the effects of seeing specific and innovative campus-wide projects affect her feelings at work, sharing how these experiences "reenergize" her. Xiomara described the effects of seeing these new campus-wide projects connecting to her thriving experience at work, saying, "[They give me a] sense of life and vitality. I literally felt like I was living again at work—living and breathing and enjoying the work experience. Enjoying work in a way that I

hadn't enjoyed before." Eliza described "seeing the change" stemming from her new approaches to advising and working with students at the beginning through to the end of the year where she "felt it" when seeing this growth and development in both her practice and the students from her work. Susie described these actions leading to "feeling it"—meaning thriving—when describing her observable accomplishments at work. Last, Malcolm summarized how observing him and his team led to his thriving experiences at work, explaining how creating and building is where he feels he is thriving at work:

> Innovation! In a number of my roles, I've had the opportunity and ability to innovate in a really significant way at the institutions that I was at. That feeling of me helping the institution move forward. Helping to provide either new services or services in a new way, you know, or where I had to learn a new concept or apply a new theory or learn a new practice or whatever it may be that helps.

Based on participants' examples, building something new—or doing—that contributes to bettering the midlevel SA administrators' overall work has a lasting effect on their career experience and their experiences related to thriving in the context of their work. Specific personal and situational factors foster conditions for these thriving experiences, which I describe next.

How Personal Factors and Recognition Affect Workplace Thriving

Participants described personal factors that attributed to their experiences of thriving and the effects of seeing thriving in effect. Robin described a sense of responsibility as being "who I am." Robin explained, "If I commit to something . . . look, it goes back to the sense of thriving. Right? Like, now I'm thinking about when I feel my best, like I'm contributing." Robin emphasized how this responsibility has been evident and "noted by supervisors" since his

experience as a student leader. He explained how this responsibility and commitment is also influenced by the values of the SA profession. Jacquie, Maria, and Xiomara described similar senses of responsibility, specifically relating to the SA profession.

Other participants described feeling confident about their work and autonomy in the workplace. Specifically, personal conditions and self-awareness set up the possibility to thrive, resulting in descriptions of confidence at work. In the same view, thriving experiences added to participants' overall confidence about their work, with some participants clearly identifying what they have or need to feel like they can thrive. Annie described "growing into" confidence, whereas Susie described confidence leading to autonomy at work, saying:

> I think having autonomy is really important. Then [this leads to] confidence! Having autonomy, then confidence. Then I'm able to do something. I can't imagine [working] where someone doesn't trust that I can get something done. I hear about this all the time.

Last, participants explained how relationships lead to their feelings of thriving at work. For some, mentor relationships are important, with Malcolm explaining how mentors affirm his abilities. Malcolm shared that his mentor "sits objectively and external" to his everyday working day and helps him to "continue to grow and identify what's going well and what isn't. And at times they say, 'you seem alive, there's a sparkle.'" Peter shared how peer relationships at work are affirming and telling about what works well and what does not. Peter explained how sharing good and challenging experiences with close colleagues is key to "keep focus" on workplace priorities.

Situation Factors Affecting Workplace Thriving

Participants described situational factors influencing how they may or may not feel like they are thriving at work. Resource scarcity, particularly in recent years, was shared by several

participants, and how lack of resources is prohibiting their feelings related to thriving or experiences of thriving at work. Robin shared how resources can help him build and grow his portfolios and said: “Getting the resources and kind of like being able to develop a vision, sell that vision, and then getting the resources to build that vision. That excites me.” Robin described recent financial constraints affecting this work related to hiring a credentialed mental health counselor and leader for the wellness portfolio. Robin described this absent resource as the “obstacle that is holding [my work] back.”

Participants also described workplace conditions as influencing their ability to experience thriving at work. Steven described supportive spaces as a work environment where “being given the space to learn and grow allows [him] to thrive at work.” Eliza explained the importance of recognition from supervisors. Annie and Maria described the importance of positive teamwork, with Annie sharing the importance of “having colleagues support me means a lot and helps me do my work better. Both good and tough feedback” and Maria describing the importance of “mutual respect” with colleagues. Maria also shared, “In a meeting, people often defer to me. And I feel valued because they then listen and follow through on what you have to say or the direction you give, while I also encourage others to do the same.” Steven shared most examples of situational factors that affect thriving in the workplace, summarizing the value of these factors, saying, “There was a combined period where in my career I will look back at and this is where I was like in this thriving space.”

Summary of Thriving as an Experience in the Workplace

In this chapter, I summarized how midlevel SA administrators experience thriving as a state—not a mindset. Thriving is dependent on various positive workplace conditions that foster a generative space where thriving is possible. Findings show three avenues by which midlevel

SA administrator participants experienced a state of thriving at work: abilities to (a) *feel* thriving in the context of work; (b) *see* thriving in effect related to their colleagues, direct reports, and students; and (c) "*do* the work" that they are confident about from receiving some sort of affirmation. This findings chapter is distinct from the previous findings chapters, which focused on how buoyancy and resilience are mindsets experienced in response to challenges in the workplace.

CHAPTER 7: DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Working in higher education environments continues to be increasingly tempestuous, particularly since the COVID-19 pandemic (McClure, 2022; Schmiedehaus, 2023). Accordingly, midlevel student affairs (SA) administrators navigate myriad workplace challenges. The challenges SA administrators manage include increasing demands for crisis management, attrition of their staff, decreasing financial resources, and coping with various global issues that affect campus climates (Morales, 2022).

Over several decades, research has documented extant work-related challenges that influence burnout of SA administrators within different contexts (N. J. Evans, 1988; Herr & Strange, 1985; Howard-Hamilton et al., 1998; Johnsrud, 1999; Rosser, 2000; Rosser & Javinar, 2003; Rosin & Korabik, 1995; Tull et al., 2009). These challenges include many of the aforementioned demands. Yet there are distinctions related to the complexity of the SA profession in this current era from what was experienced in previous years. For example, since the 2000s, the ways SA supports, educates about, responds to, and at times intervenes with mental health issues on campuses have become more complicated, with some describing this subject as a "mental health crisis" facing campuses (Aslanian & Roth, 2021; Carrasco, 2022). Mental health crises may affect multiple SA functional areas of a campus, including but not limited to case management, clinical health, counseling, and housing and residential life. Beyond the mental health example, the growing intensity of challenges midlevel SA administrators are now expected to address overall suppresses positive work environments and threatens their abilities to have sustainable careers.

I approached this study intending to explore the experiences of midlevel SA administrators with each mindset in their workplaces, as mindsets can affect how someone

experiences and navigates their work. The mindset research I applied in this study includes buoyancy (Parker & Martin, 2008), resilience (Winwood et al., 2013), and thriving (Schreiner, 2010). The purpose of this study was to understand the workplace experiences of midlevel SA administrators working in the United States and Canada and how they experience different mindsets in response to their workplace experiences. Accordingly, my dissertation was guided by the following research question: *What are the experiences midlevel student affairs administrators have with thriving, buoyancy, and resilience mindsets?*

I conducted a generic qualitative study (Khalke, 2016) by building a conceptual framework that represents why and how selected midlevel SA administrators (n = 12) experience different mindsets. I developed the conceptual framework by integrating research on the selected mindsets with results from my earlier study focused on a larger sample of midlevel SA administrators (n = 51; see Smith, 2024). This earlier research identified (a) individual factors affecting midlevel SA administrators at work (e.g., personal experiences, identity characteristics) and (b) situational factors affecting the work of midlevel SA administrators (e.g., professional experiences, sociopolitical influences). I hypothesized how an SA midlevel administrator responds to everyday challenges at work by engaging different mindsets. Thus, successes and challenges in midlevel SA administrators' workplace environments (e.g., specific department or unit, the broader SA division, and the greater campus community) can influence their performance and feelings about their work.

For the present study, I conducted two individual interviews with each of the 12 participants from the original sample (n = 51) after the 12 participants completed an illustration or timeline of their career to date. I coded all data using a mixed coding scheme, grounded by generic deductive coding informed by the literature on mindsets, and generic inductive coding

(Bazeley, 2013; Coe et al., 2017; Saldaña, 2016). These methodological decisions align with generic qualitative research design.

Discussion of Findings

Midlevel student affairs administrators have various experiences with thriving, buoyancy, and resilience mindsets. Their workplace and home contexts influence when and how this group engages or experiences these mindsets. Furthermore, mindsets are not experienced in isolation; some mindsets will permeate and evolve depending on the situation the participant is in, their context, understanding, and abilities. One's sense of agency in their workplace context can ultimately influence their overall mindsets as they interact, or are engaged or experienced in isolation.

I found all participants engaged a buoyancy mindset most regularly—some daily—as a way to mitigate unpredictable daily challenges at work. However, a resilience mindset was often engaged to respond to significant and layered sources of stress affecting a combination of participants' work and personal lives. Though literature posited thriving as a mindset (see Schreiner, 2010), participants interpreted thriving as a state or experience dependent on positive conditions at work rather than a mindset engaged in the workplace. Participants said they were once thriving in relation to a monumental experience from some point in their career rather than a mindset they engaged in the workplace. Participants identified and shared how one's mindset is experienced differently depending on (a) the dynamic of the work environment; (b) positive and/or negative workplace factors (e.g., conditions, recognition, resources, role clarity, structures, supervision, systems); and (c) the interaction of participants' context at work and home with their competencies, skills, and professional experience related to the SA profession. I next discuss findings related to contemporary workplace experiences and conditions that

influence participants' different mindsets.

Contemporary Workplace Experiences and Conditions

Open coding identified workplace experiences. U.S. and Canadian participants offered similar descriptions of their workplace experiences and conditions. In short, workplace conditions are challenging and unpredictable and require midlevel SA administrators leading departments and units to be malleable to change. Midlevel SA administrators encountered four common challenges. First, participants described responding consistently to escalating demands and changing expectations from their supervisors or campus leadership. This challenge interrupts the work necessary to achieve their annual planning and individual and departmental goals.

Next, participants described coping with fewer resources (e.g., budget, personnel, expertise) while trying to maximize efficiency. One participant described this compounded challenge as "needing to do a lot more but with less," which requires creative solutions to meet expectations with few resources. Third, participants described confusion about roles and responsibilities (e.g., outdated job descriptions, interim roles) for their own positions. This challenge comes with varying repercussions, including but not limited to job evaluations and total compensation. Also, this challenge caused some participants to feel like they were conducting work entirely outside their original job description. Last, participants described feelings that federal, state, and/or provincial government support for higher education is lacking. Participants assumed more government financial support for higher education could address these common challenges.

Almost all U.S. participants reflected on how the 2016 and 2020 federal elections continued to affect their work in nuanced ways (e.g., increases in campus protests). Participants described contemporary challenges at work to include: (a) unpredictable working days, (b)

lacking or outdated organizational structures or challenging effects of reorganization, (c) retaining employees and backfilling with interim roles, and (d) lack of understanding of SA work by senior executives and campus leaders.

How Midlevel SA Administrators Engage and Experience Mindsets

Findings show midlevel SA administrators engage buoyancy and resilience in different ways depending on their circumstances; however, they experienced thriving in a specific way.

Engaging a Buoyancy Mindset at Work

Many participants engaged a buoyancy mindset "every day" to navigate the constant changes, challenges, and complexities they manage in their midlevel SA administrator roles. This everyday mindset is particularly relevant considering how participants' examples align with the literature about the challenges of the SA profession over time. Engaging buoyancy is also relevant based on varying problems documented in research and media about the challenging state of the field of higher education (Mitchell, 2024), such as considerable budget cuts on U.S. and Canadian campuses (Moody, 2023). These challenges do not consider other needs of SA professionals, considering the "compassion fatigue" (Perez & Bettencourt, 2024) accumulated as they support the various needs of current students attending university and college. Engaging a buoyancy mindset can help SA professionals and administrators who lead SA departments through challenging waters.

Thus, a buoyancy mindset seems a necessary attribute for midlevel SA administrators to get through consistent waves of challenges at work—for some participants, getting through daily. Being able to engage a buoyancy mindset based on different experiences is important given the broad responsibilities midlevel SA administrators have directing people, establishing projects and ensuring projects are complete, visioning, and managing up, down, and around. As Peter

described, he was "always having to triage" his work but was adept at shifting priorities because it was his current "usual daily work expectation." A buoyancy mindset allowed participants to be responsive, adaptable, and able to reprioritize to address changing demands at work. Jacquie's daily work required her to "go between those two spaces of reacting and responding" to the consistent changes she and SA departments experience on her campus. Furthermore, buoyancy allowed Jacquie to "switch and approach gears," and as a result, it gave her what she described as her "multidimensional" abilities as a SA leader that come from regularly engaging buoyancy. As Marc shared, his daily work is a reminder that he "feel[s] like [he is] floating on the surface of water . . . but [he's] not drowning," which related to Robin's experience of engaging a buoyancy mindset to respond to "a new priority identified by the president that needs an immediate response or report" while his team "continues to conduct their regular operations."

A buoyancy mindset requires adaptability and allows employees to comfortably pivot and adapt as needed, reprioritize, and adjust cyclical planning as required or expected. Ultimately, participants' abilities to be buoyant depend on their conditions—like how mineral-enriched water makes it easier to float, a more enriched work environment (e.g., positive work environment, established structures) allows a midlevel admin to flow or float. Participants with more SA work experience explained this state of SA work as "how it is," as described by Maria. Despite participants being from multiple states throughout the United States and others from several provinces across Canada, all participants acknowledged SA work was significantly more challenging than ever before. In short, buoyancy is a mindset that allows employees to adapt to constantly changing expectations and demands.

Engaging a Resilience Mindset at Work

Participants engaged a resilience mindset as a response to workplace stresses that often include an immersion in work and home life stresses and pressures. A resilience mindset at work requires self-reflection to assess the situation and recognize what is not "every day," unlike buoyancy, which is engaged daily. Participants engaged a resilience mindset at work generally in three situations: (a) an emergency scenario—particularly the aftermath—that affects a SA division or entire campus, (b) significant issues affecting a campus and SA work (e.g., wide-scale reorganization), and (c) times when personal and work life integrate and there is a resulting tension from the integration. A resilience mindset requires effort, allowing a midlevel SA administrator to critically assess a situation broadly (e.g., actors involved, the environment, inter/intrapersonal needs, effects on portfolios) and push them to the next stage of the situation. Although buoyancy allows participants to flow with common or everyday inconsistencies at work, resilience is an individual test to persist through the tides of a significantly stressful situation.

A resilience mindset requires self-awareness intrapersonally, but also regarding workplace skills, abilities, and limits. As Eliza explained, engaging resilience at work requires her to "pause, and think about how to process and deal with the stress piling on" and make decisions accordingly—to respond to the situation, her team's, and her own needs—in a "constant" cycle. Ultimately, these are less common, but significant experiences at work that require a resilience mindset are rooted in stress. Being self-encouraging also helps midlevel SA administrators have a resilience mindset to navigate the challenging situation or respond to the stress affecting the participant, such as Annie noting her resilience "came down to reminders about [self-talk] "you've been through harder stuff than this . . . you can get through this."

Participants' examples of engaging resilience at work showed how this mindset is an approach to keep midlevel SA administrators focused, persistent, and appropriately motivated within a limit to meet the objectives of their SA work while also taking care of themselves.

Midlevel SA administrators also engaged resilience when identities interacted with the workplace and triggered intrapersonal conflict in some way. For Susie, a resilience mindset helped her continue leading a campus student-facing strategy during a global pandemic while coordinating getting multiple family members home to Canada from more than two countries. For Jacquie, a resilience mindset helped her advocate for a pay equity issue affecting her that was combined with gender and racial identity discrepancies.

Ultimately, a resilience mindset had a substantial effect on how participants thought about and responded to their most challenging work experiences. As Annie questioned when discussing the resilience mindset that helped her persist through a significant obstacle at work: "Why am I here? What are my values? What is worth it? How would I feel walking away from [the problem] versus doubling down and getting through what sticks to me a bit?" Although not all participants led to existential questions that influenced them to reconsider their work, most explained how resilience had a limit—in fact, nearly half referred to resilience as a precursor to burnout, and as Susie explained, "too much resilience comes at a cost." A resilience mindset allowed participants to cope with challenges and persevere; for some, resilience allowed them to persist in their SA careers. On the contrary, participants shared examples related to thriving related to their "feelings of progress, momentum, marked by both a sense of learning and a sense of vitality" (Spreitzer et al., 2005, p. 537)—thriving is discussed next.

Experiences of Thriving at Work

As described, a buoyancy mindset allowed participants to float and flow through ongoing obstacles and challenges at work, whereas a resilience mindset pushed participants safely through waves and, at times, rough waters when there was conflict. By contrast, participants viewed thriving with clarity—a clear, distinct experience representing their personal milestone, benchmark, or significant accolade that most suggested to be an ideal state at work. Experiences of thriving at work are conditional and infrequent—particularly considering contemporary challenges facing higher education, broadly, and specifically SA.

Thriving experiences are conditional depending on positive workplace conditions and factors and are a personal highlight as selected by the participant. Participants described how affirmation received at work added to their confidence about their SA work and allowed them to thrive, rather than merely "thriving" in the workplace environment. Participants described a cycle related to thriving: thriving experiences add to their workplace confidence and allow them to remember that thriving at work is possible. Ultimately, participants explained how they experienced thriving when they (a) could see their accomplishments and how others perceived these accomplishments, (b) felt affirmation for their work that added to their credibility, and (c) applied their expertise to build or grow something that had a positive effect on the broader SA work on their campus.

Participants explained the effect that recognition had on their experiences with thriving—not necessarily from only those in senior leadership positions compared to them, but also from peer colleagues and especially from students. Participants associate recognition with job promotions at work and being elected to represent professional associations. Being tasked with a special project or task also added to participants' experiences with thriving at work. For example,

Eliza explained the effect of her knowing senior leaders said, "'We need [Eliza's] brain for this committee.' Those moments help me think, 'Okay, I'm thriving. I'm doing well.'" Midlevel SA administrators thrive when they have the full experience of feeling trust to vision, lead, and manage a significant workplace goal or objective. After adding a new SA department because of a student referendum supported being accepted under his leadership, Robin described seeing this long-term project as his thriving experience, noting how thriving is "overcoming obstacles. That's when I feel that sense that [he and his team are] thriving. We're meeting these challenges head-on and we're overcoming them."

Participants responded to questions about thriving broadly in relation to the concept's definition. Most participants suggested how thriving is an ideal state for their work, with many also being nostalgic about how their work used to feel similarly to the thriving experiences that were shared—or, as Maria described, "Now I think you have to search to find some way to thrive" at work. Midlevel SA administrators' thriving experiences most connect to experiences where they can evidence their abilities related to SA competencies, their ability to lead, and when they feel affirmed for their work and accomplishments. This affirmation also adds to participants' confidence. As Robin described, he was proud of his thriving experience as it was "a feeling of accomplishment," while Jacquie recalled her thriving experience as "the north star" that had continued to guide her work. Thriving experiences are monumental; while less frequent, they are a key reminder about why participants continue to persist through their careers. Next, I offer implications for practice, theory, and research based on my research, data, analysis, and findings.

Implications for Practice

Findings about buoyancy and resilience mindsets, taken together with the state of thriving

described by participants, suggest several implications for practice. With the goal of creating more humane workplaces and sustainable careers that allow for one to be buoyant, sometimes require resilience, but ultimately aim for more thriving, I offer implications for practice for the following groups, broadly: (a) midlevel SA administrators, (b) senior leaders—not necessarily from SA professional backgrounds—who supervise midlevel SA administrators (e.g., associate vice president, vice president, provost), and (c) the SA profession, including the related professional organizations (e.g., ACPA, CACUSS, NASPA). I offer implications related to each group and center each conclusion on what can improve and positively affect the mindset and state of work for the midlevel SA administrator.

Prior to presenting these implications, it is important to highlight that midlevel SA administrators have personal and professional accountability for some elements related to the implications. Their mindsets and state of being at work are also dependent on their feelings, decisions, and actions related to the environment they are working in. However, paired with this accountability is a responsibility from a campus about what campus leaders can influence. Those who midlevel SA administrators report to may have an effect on positive working conditions and environments, particularly as these supervisors represent the campus as an employer. Last, there are important considerations for the SA profession and professional organizations that represent, influence, and socialize SA professional values, competencies, and standards related to SA work.

Implications for Midlevel SA Administrators

Given buoyancy is a mindset to engaged daily in midlevel SA work and resilience is essential for high-stress times, having strategies to engage these two mindsets is a valuable resource for SA professionals. The following implications can help midlevel SA administrators respond to everyday challenges in the workplace. Each implication relates to what midlevel SA

administrators have direct influence and control over related to their workplace dynamics.

Engaging Self-Reflection for Performance Planning and Personal Goal Setting

There is typically a cycle of structured performance planning and goal setting that occurs in higher education settings in accordance with human resources (HR) standards (T. Ahmed et al., 2020). Accordingly, this study highlights the importance of self-reflection and reflexivity as a tool to help midlevel SA administrators reflect on their positive and negative workplace experiences.

For example, participants engaging in the self-reflection activity and subsequent interviews with me showed me how self-reflection was a key ability participants used to assess their workplace experience. Eliza shared how self-reflection allowed her to manage the aftermath of the car accident involving students that affected her work. Eliza described how self-talk, pausing, and reflecting on her own personal needs and her work-related responsibilities (e.g., team needs, accomplishing daily tasks) allowed her to be resilient and assess her resilience to continue managing the layered challenges and aftermath. Susie shared how reflecting on her needs while navigating the pandemic at home and work helped her accomplish everything she needed to do. Jacquie recalled reflecting on her "north star" related to her SA career, which helped her navigate long-term conflict related to pay equity.

Self-reflection allowed participants to consider issues causing them to engage resilience and what behaviors signal their engaging resilience. Furthermore, participants' self-reflection allowed them to assess their workplace dynamic and experiences and differentiate between common issues that are personally less stressful but cause them to engage buoyancy at work. Participants described the value of self-reflecting about the daily workplace challenges that influenced them to experience buoyancy. Participants also described active self-reflection when

they were experiencing stress at work, with many engaging in self-talk to continue their resilience mindset through significant incidents affecting their work.

Self-reflection can help someone understand their strengths, skills, abilities, and competence to navigate certain dynamics. Self-reflection can also help someone understand challenges or gaps that may be hindering their ability to persist through challenges with an understanding of engaging a buoyancy or resilience mindset and planning for successes that may lead to thriving at work. Self-reflection can also contribute to a personal understanding of what is contributing to one's overall mindset in any given situation at work.

Participants described self-reflection only in significantly challenging or stressful workplace experiences, yet it was a beneficial part of their strategy to persist through the event. Therefore, self-reflection activities at intentional points in the year can also help a midlevel SA administrator to consider what sorts of workplace situations or dynamics influence different mindsets or experiences rather than when things are only going badly. Important time frames to consider intentional self-reflection can include summer months leading to a new academic year for initial goal setting, midpoints, and the end of each semester. This reflection activity can shape performance planning and personal goals for the beginning of each semester. Participants who recalled self-reflection while engaging resilience shared similar themes in what they were reflecting on while persisting through the challenging event. I have developed questions related to what participants were drawing on with their examples recalling self-reflection:

1. How do I feel about my work at this specific moment of the year? What is/are influencing these feelings?
2. What are positive workplace situations that I consider to be meaningful, and how frequent are they occurring?

3. What are workplace situations that I consider to be challenging? How frequently are these challenging situations occurring? Do I consider these challenges to be reasonable?
4. What are my strengths and skills that have helped me navigate through challenges at work?
5. What are skills or behaviors I feel I need to develop or resources I need (e.g., support from someone) to navigate challenges at work?

Regardless of the campus's HR standards, midlevel SA administrators should embed personal reflection into their performance planning and review process. They can do this multiple times a year (e.g., at the end of each term) to ensure they capture their holistic experience at work. Participants' experiences with self-reflection highlight the value of this practice for one to situate themselves within their context. Personal reflection is an effective first step to gauge one's mindset in a specific dynamic and can inform the individual about what they need to address or influence for a more positive working dynamic. Last, an understanding of one's mindset at work can help establish realistic goals for performance planning, along with communicating about successes and challenges at work with their supervisor in a realistic way.

Professional Development: Strategic Planning and Project Management

Professional development opportunities within the SA profession are commonly connected to an association's annual conference or convention. In conversation, most participants explained how SA work has changed significantly based on their earlier career experiences and socialization into the profession. Some alluded to how SA work has grown out of the structures and systems the profession is based on, not to mention mandates outlined by both versions of the Student Personnel Point of View (Ace, 1937, 1949). Midlevel SA

administrators with access to paid professional development can develop skills to help them achieve their goals and navigate unexpected challenges. This professional development can allow midlevel SA administrators to develop sound plans that build in flexibility for when things do not go as planned. Development in this area can foster workplace conditions for thriving when plans and projects are accomplished and prepare to respond to unanticipated challenges. When a workplace challenge may affect plans and projects, engaging a buoyancy or resilience mindset can help the administrator critically assess and adjust their strategic planning as necessary.

Participants indirectly referred to skills in adapting their formal strategic plan outcomes because of consistent changes to their everyday work. Participants' level of experience, skill development, and understanding of the state of SA work helped them mitigate challenges related to their strategic planning. Their level of experience with strategic planning and project management resulted in some participants describing thriving related to career success. As highlighted in the literature review, effective strategic planning for universities and colleges requires malleability (Fathi & Wilson, 2009), and a formal project management lens allows leaders to adapt planned goals and mitigate various risks preventing them from achieving goals due to uncertainty (Priemus et al., 2013). Developmental opportunities focusing on these specific areas can help various SA professionals adapt to challenges and can result in improved confidence that may positively affect their mindset when they use skills in planning and project management.

Strategic planning and project management skills can also allow SA administrators to normalize the potential need to engage a resilience mindset when things do not go as planned. Realistic planning and the ability to adjust as needed can foster conditions to thrive because of

the accomplished goals, and connecting a buoyancy mindset can allow the administrator to understand how to pivot and adjust phased goal setting. Professional development focused on strategic planning and project management to provide the skills necessary for assessing the needs and risks associated with change management and adaptability. These skills are necessary for any leader working in higher education settings. As a result, midlevel SA administrators can improve their mindsets with confidence by learning new skills to help them navigate significant challenges at work. If these types of learning and development opportunities are not offered through an SA association conference, multiple organizations offer these professional development opportunities, along with some campus continuing development seminars or even free online resources.

Team Development

Most participants connected challenging scenarios causing them to experience different mindsets to unpredictable working conditions and their campus leadership not understanding the unpredictability of SA work. In nearly all conversations related to the thriving definition, there was no consideration of how their own challenges and differing mindsets may affect their personnel, who most participants called "team." Yet nearly all thriving experiences did connect to the participant and their team. Participants described how their leadership and decision-making positively affected their team, particularly when they led a team initiative that has sustained over time or has had a wide effect on their campus. These participants described how this positive effect on their team has been part of their workplace thriving.

SA administrators should consider the development of their teams and how personnel can learn to understand strategies about when and how to experience a buoyancy or resilience mindset. This approach can normalize the turbulence those working in higher education may

experience. Normalizing the challenging state of SA work and problems facing higher education can be a healthy strategy to experience different mindsets to prevent burnout. Team development can also consider the personal strengths of team members. A personal strengths approach to team development can help team members identify their own potential approach to thriving, which aligns with the personally monumental examples participants shared.

Storytelling and Advocating for SA Work to Help (Re)Establish Priorities

All participants explained how their daily workplace experiences and conditions were increasingly challenging. Most participants explained that those supervising them do not understand or value how challenging SA work is, with some describing supervisors who cannot grasp how complex SA work has become. For some participants, this lack of understanding was because their supervisor did not have an SA background (e.g., vice president, finance). Others suggested their supervisors were too far in proximity or detached from understanding the effects and challenges of SA work. Some participants explained how a combination of the pandemic and challenging state of higher education has influenced an even more fast-paced work environment. Relatedly, several participants suggested being unaware of long-term planning for areas outside their SA division or even campus, which was reiterated when they discussed surprising campus changes.

In a different view, many participants' thriving experiences at work connected to their career achievements or significant career-related contributions. Thriving was especially clear when participants highlighted the benefits of individual and team progress and received various forms of recognition. People can only address or manage what they know, including issues needing attention or work being recognized in positive ways. Strategies for effective storytelling and reporting can influence SA administrators' mindsets and experiences by showcasing their

successes and explaining their challenges to create a dialogue for finding effective solutions rather than having the negative weigh on the individual. Therefore, midlevel SA administrators should consider how they tell their and their departments' workplace stories and consider how they can effectively present their work. Showcasing work can be done in several methods: report meetings, email updates, term reports, town halls, and newsletters. Prioritizing messaging is key, so understanding how the midlevel SA administrators' leaders prefer to receive this messaging is important for this approach to be effective. Storytelling can help midlevel SA administrators advocate for adequate needs and inform those they report to about successes, conflicts, and their work status. This approach can help SA administrators (a) gain perspective from their leaders about overall goals, (b) understand how to (re)prioritize their own work, as needed, and (c) communicate boundaries as needed due to unforeseen issues. This approach can help improve one's mindset at work, particularly for participants who shared how much they did in a day but did not feel they had ever accomplished their intended term goals due to unexpected changes and last-minute requests.

Accessing Reasonable Support from Supervisor and Human Resources

Although research and media highlight the challenges the field of higher education experiences, it is important to remember that SA is just one part of a campus community. Although most participants described urgency, change, and unplanned requests, shifting their priorities and conflicting with their work environment, it is important to communicate what can or cannot be accomplished without specific support. The everyday challenges participants shared affected them personally, and the literature reinforces the challenges facing higher education today.

Participants mostly did not communicate reaching out to others for support when they were struggling at work. However, the few participants mentioned communicating workplace challenges to their supervisors, resulting in short-term leaves after expending resilience, with these. Participants further describing the personal benefit of support and time away. Each also described coming back to work with different perspectives. It is imperative for midlevel SA administrators to consider who is there to help them as they continue to lead their teams to accomplish tasks and goals. Midlevel SA administrators should consider communicating reasonable personal and professional needs to their supervisors so they can assess and understand boundaries or ask for assistance in responding to urgency, change, and unexpected demands at work. This strategy can get issues out into the open, potentially decrease workplace stresses, necessitating the administrator to engage resilience, normalizing what is now every day and requiring buoyancy. This strategy can also potentially uncover what has helped the administrator thrive at work in the past and may inspire support to find ways to thrive at work despite the everyday challenges the administrator is navigating.

Most higher education institutions offer benefits plans with important resources related to physical health and mental well-being (e.g., counseling support). As indicated in some participants' stories, these resources are essential to professional success. Some employees are privileged to receive additional benefits that include but are not limited to paid short-term or extended leave times, physical therapies (e.g., massage), and alternative health offerings (e.g., nutritionist, naturopathy). Understanding these resources as needed is an important resource for any employee to consider for credentialed support to intervene in certain mindsets and experiences, particularly when in a constantly challenging work environment. Overall, accessing resources and support from the leadership and HR can ultimately improve or shift one's mindset

and ease stress.

Implications for Those Supervising Midlevel Administrators and Senior Campus Leaders

Midlevel SA administrator participants described their perceptions of how their immediate supervisor seemed unaware of the complexity of SA work and, in some cases, how their supervisor made their SA work more difficult. Midlevel SA administrator participants also described how supervisors and senior campus leaders continue to increase expectations of SA divisions and commitments to incoming and current students which most often are under resourced. Many midlevel SA administrators alluded to their supervisors and senior campus leaders losing touch with what SA work is intended to do for a campus and offer students, with what is actually required of various SA functional areas—with nearly all participants describing how their senior leaders influence and often change priorities without consideration of day-to-day needs. The following implications are directed at the most senior SA leader who supervises midlevel SA administrators and senior. campus leaders who can influence workplace environments and advocate to senior leaders on campus on behalf of those they supervise.

Communication: Priorities, Personnel, and Progress

Most participants described reacting to changes and last-minute requests from leadership, and more than half of participants described feeling unaware or uninformed about greater goals outside their own priorities and the campus academic plan. These communication challenges often triggered participants to engage a buoyancy mindset to flow with new priorities while also accomplishing their own necessary work objectives. At times, this communication conflict involved stakeholders outside the greater SA portfolio (e.g., reactive request to work with another division on a priority). On the contrary, some participants' thriving experiences related to a new, unplanned special project or task. There is an opportunity for senior leaders on campus

to highlight priorities, set expectations, and identify the status quo of the division or campus.

Several participant examples related to engaging resilience related to organizational conflict and problems with communication (e.g., lack of understanding from campus leaders and stakeholders about SA work, conflict with supervisor). Building healthy communication strategies and expectations can build investment within the greater SA portfolio and may change how the employee experiences their work and their mindset at work. Senior leaders can create opportunities for midlevel SA administrators to highlight successes and challenges at divisional leadership meetings, along with having an opportunity for an open dialogue about departmental successes and challenges outside status reports in one-on-one meetings. Communicating about and identifying emerging SA leaders who may want to work on a reasonable but important new project can also be a creative solution to improving workplace dynamics. Last, the senior leader should reflect on their information-sharing opportunities with their direct reports and their own senior leaders—especially to share and normalize the challenges departments are experiencing. Effective stakeholder communication can establish priorities and set reasonable expectations.

Assessment and Divisional Review

All participants highlighted how their current structures (e.g., department, unit) and resources (e.g., staff, budget) were beyond maximum capacity; they were in a constant mindset of buoyancy to react and respond to frequent unexpected issues. In several cases, foreseeable workplace challenges became more stressful as they became more common, and these problems cause participants to engage resilience to prevent themselves from burning out. Despite work needing to get done, it is important to assess and understand the status of departments. This approach can illuminate successes and challenges related to staff and projects, status on priorities, emerging priorities, use of resources, efficiency and effectiveness, and specific HR

issues (e.g., job description reviews, total compensation). According to the experiences participants shared, considering a divisional assessment and review is particularly relevant, given how many of the structures and systems developed for SA divisions do not adequately meet campus and student needs.

Conducting a deep assessment and review (e.g., systems, organization, employee interviews) can benefit the entire division and help inform decisions about resource allocation, proven practices, and remedy significant issues. This opportunity also can shed light on staff retention. A divisional review can illuminate conditions or opportunities for employees to thrive and identify consistent sources of significant stresses in the workplace that cause employees to be resilient. A review can also ground a common understanding of the everyday situations or problems that affect buoyancy in the workplace. Overall, employees' multiple mindsets can improve by giving midlevel SA administrators the opportunity to communicate their understandings of their work environments. Being open about assessment and review can signal a desire to improve working conditions in the division and can provide a venue to understand what factors can improve in specific areas or the greater division, which may influence employee mindset.

Overall, as the literature highlights, midlevel administrators on campus are typically up to 65% of staff accompaniment, and this employee group has the most knowledge about their profession, campus systems, and structures (Hernandez, 2010; Sagaria & Johnsrud, 1992; Rodriguez, 2021). The literature also highlights continuous challenges The sustainability of this group is important for institutional knowledge. Last, results from a review may also lead to setting clear expectations about what can or cannot be achieved.

Implications for the SA Profession

SA associations (e.g., ACPA, CACUSS, NASPA) provide their constituents with relevant history, research, competencies, and professional development that support the mission and foundations of the SA profession. It is important for these associations to consider offerings, particularly as the SA profession continues to evolve and respond to contemporary issues affecting university and college campuses. I offer implications for SA professional associations to consider for midlevel SA administrators.

Unique Professional Development Offerings for Today's Midlevel Administrator

Participants described situations that required them to be consistently adaptable to last-minute requests at work, which required them to engage a buoyancy mindset. These situations most often required participants to adjust their days and reprioritize. Many participants described last-minute learning as they prepared for meetings with unfamiliar stakeholders (e.g., state or provincial representatives) or meetings that are now more frequent with stakeholders outside their division. Several of these participants described this new learning altered their daily work and was sometimes a nuisance. However, others saw these experiences as ultimately beneficial for their development. Midlevel SA professionals should consider unique professional development offerings outside common opportunities or what may be traditionally offered in graduate preparation programs.

To address the continuous contemporary challenges affecting everyday work, each SA professional association offers communities of practice and professional development geared to either specific subjects (e.g., law and policy institute) or years of experience working in SA professionally (e.g., new professional institute, midlevel management institute). Subject offerings are typically broad, or they vary for the multiday institutes. The challenges that are affecting

midlevel SA administrators in this study are consistent among participants or very niche and individual to their campus context, yet have similar themes.

Examples of broad, unique developmental offerings that could benefit these specific participants include complex legal issues affecting higher education today, difficult decision-making as a leader, formal project management, resource sharing, strategic planning, and town–gown relationships. Development opportunities to address healthier mindsets to avoid burnout can include broadly understanding workplace mindsets on a continuum for participants to consider ideal conditions to support their thriving. Skills can be developed related to buoyancy (e.g., being adaptable, creative problem solving), and resilience building (e.g., what is appropriate workplace pressure, assessing good stress from bad stress, healthy boundary setting). Overall, conducting a needs assessment for all those considered in the midlevel category can be valuable for midlevel SA administrators to identify topics and needs related to their ability to feel prepared and supported about their work, which can also influence the mindset of midlevel SA administrators.

Reviewing the SA Competencies

The ACPA and NASPA competency areas for SA professionals are more specific than the CACUSS competencies (ACPA & NASPA, 2015; Fernadez et al., 2016). However, for all associations, each topic area offers guidance in terms of one's skills and abilities for each of the specific foundational, intermediate, and advanced competency areas. Professional development categories are suggested for each competency so the individual can increase their SA understanding and competency skills and abilities.

Topics for ACPA and NASPA competency have not been reviewed with new additions since 2015, and the CACUSS competencies have not been reviewed since their development in

2016. Both sets of competencies have not been reviewed in nearly a decade. With this context in mind, the workplace experiences participants described continue to become increasingly difficult, requiring them to find solutions to escalating challenges consistently and continuously produce more evidence of outcomes with fewer resources. All participants described their SA work as significantly more challenging than before, causing them to do more with less and find creative ways to accomplish their basic work expectations. The competencies as written do not capture this level of complexity nor prepare SA administrators and educators to be competent to navigate what is becoming more predictably challenging work.

Buoyancy allows participants to pivot and adapt to the constant changes to the workday that are less strenuous than compounded issues causing stress and tension at work, requiring resilience. SA associations can review the competencies with mindsets in mind and offer professional development and learning opportunities for SA professionals to understand the state of SA work better. Furthermore, SA professionals can use a revised competency framework to learn about buoyancy and resilience mindsets that can protect them from burning out. Last, each association should consider the complexity of SA work, particularly related to contemporary issues affecting higher education that typically affect the work of SA. There were several common competencies participants described as using to respond to their workplace challenges, such as conflict management, adaptability, and self-reflection. Adding competency areas that meet the contemporary needs of midlevel SA administrators can add to their knowledge, abilities, skills, and characteristics, positively influencing their mindset and confidence about their work. Integrating skill development in buoyancy and resilience with the competency framework can better prepare SA professionals to self-identify realistic outcomes at work, as per the goals of the competency framework.

Implications for Theory

I introduced a conceptual framework for this study based on the literature reviewed. The conceptual framework presented in the first chapter focuses on the workplace conditions (e.g., personal experiences, identity characteristics) and situational factors (e.g., professional experiences, sociopolitical climate) that influence midlevel SA administrators to experience different mindsets. Based on my conceptual framework, one factor I did not consider was the notion of agency at work. In the context of education, agency is "the sense of being able to enact one's freedom (as opposed to conditioned and habituated patterns of thinking, perception, and action) grounded in personal knowledge and ethics" (Bai, 2006, p. 9). A theory that integrates my conceptual framework with the philosophy of agency could result in perspectives about how agency may leverage who and who does not have the opportunity to experience, shift, and adapt their mindset, and offer insight on specific factors related to employee workplace satisfaction.

How Agency, Mindsets, and Experiences Interact in the Workplace

All participants indirectly expressed ways agency helped or hindered their feelings of success at work, which suggests their agency can influence when they are engaging buoyancy, resilience, or experiencing thriving. Despite their workplace experiences being more challenging, those with seemingly higher agency (e.g., years at a specific campus, career experience in SA, identity) described their overall work experience more positively than those with seemingly less agency. This finding is particularly important when considering the social and individual natures regarding agency literature for each principal and agent actor.

For example, participants incidentally provided examples of high agency that were part of their thriving experience: autonomy to make decisions without checking in with their supervisor or other senior campus officials, being included by the senior administration in

academic planning meetings, and feeling confident about their work. Other participants used similar examples in the opposite view related to engaging buoyancy or resilience: feelings of being micromanaged, perceptions of not being "in the know" about campus planning, lacking feelings of acknowledgement of their work efforts. Specifically, one's thriving state in their personal context and example may be what provokes another person's resilience in their own context. Considering the participants from my study, this suggestion is true when considering the example of experiencing and managing change in senior leadership. This example relates to Maria's and Robin's thriving example, whereas Peter and Xiomara engaged resilience through their experiences of managing change in senior leadership.

Keegan's Subject–Object Theory of Development and Agency and Mindsets at Work

Keegan's (1982, 1994) work focused on an individual's perspective-taking about their stages of growth and development. In this view, one's perspective about their workplace environment and agency within may influence their mindset about their work and identity as an employee. Applying this theory to a workplace setting, I could further explore participants' constructed, emotional, and relational dimensions of their workplace identities. This lens could also offer insight into how mindsets are always interacting at work and are influenced by both the individuals' workplace and home environment and context. This approach is particularly relevant to the SA profession, which has a strong foundational professional identity.

Overall, an understanding of how agency influences mindsets and experiences at work is an opportunity to understand how an employee's identity, engagement, feelings of successes and challenges, and outcomes interact in the workplace. A theory that integrates agency with my conceptual framework can also test how change interacts with one's agency at work, such as

individual changes (e.g., personal experiences, personal circumstances) and situational changes (e.g., professional experiences), therefore shifting and changing one's mindset in the workplace.

Implications for Research

This study resulted in deep understanding of how midlevel SA administrators respond to their everyday challenges in the workplace and an understanding of ways these administrators' responses align with buoyancy, resilience, and thriving. Furthermore, this study offers clarity about what different factors have an effect on positive or negative work environments. However, there are multiple considerations for research. The implications focus on the understanding of the current—and likely continuous—state of SA work and the profession. Implications also focus on research on mindsets.

As noted, research has documented the various challenges related to SA work over time, and news reports continue to highlight personnel cuts due to budget (Mitchell, 2024) and postpandemic employee resignations from higher education (Schmiedehaus et al., 2023). This study allowed me to isolate what makes SA work so challenging for those in SA roles and functional areas on campuses today and what influences these employees' mindsets. I learned that one professional's most stressful workplace experience may be another's way of feeling like they did their best work.

It is imperative to understand the personal and workplace context of this group of employees, including areas the individual can influence and control and what campuses and professional associations need to consider adapting to best support midlevel SA administrators. My methodological decisions allowed me to have a rapport with participants, particularly considering how I had established rapport in my interviews by working with a subset sample from my initial study. This rapport started when I conducted an initial interview, which then led

invited participants to complete a preinterview reflection activity and additional interviews. Other researchers exploring SA professionals or wanting to learn more about workplace environments should consider the opportunity rapport provides, particularly when discussing challenging topics. Other researchers should also consider if and how identity characteristics and isolating these variables from the data can present additional findings. Other research can explore document analysis (e.g., job descriptions, salary grading, health benefits) to see if, where, and how job expectations and compensation align and differ.

Although different mindsets are sometimes used interchangeably in higher education, positive psychology and organizational research differentiate mindsets. This study affirmed that the experience of different mindsets completely depends on the individual. This study also highlights how employee experiences are fluid and unpredictable even when their environment is bound. Quantitative or mixed-methods research can provide deeper insight into employee experiences and their mindsets at work, particularly given the various tools, scales, and measures that are bolstered by research on mindsets—broadly or a specific mindset.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study offers multiple avenues for future research that can center on different aspects of workplace mindsets and the SA profession. Future directions for research can include:

1. A narrative study exploring how one's agency at work influences why and how midlevel SA administrators experience different mindsets: This approach can offer rich perspectives about the context and experiences of the understudied population of SA midlevel administrators working in universities and colleges and what the SA profession, a campus, and the individual can influence in helping them feel successful at work and about their efforts.

2. A descriptive, wide-scale study that identifies trends related to engaging mindsets at work across the SA profession and considers different participant characteristics (e.g., years of service, institution type, location): This can provide understanding about multiple factors that may have an effect on individuals' qualities and work attributes to see if there are specific elements that can improve the workplace experiences depending on these characteristics, and inform SA professional associations about these varying needs and elements.
3. A longitudinal study that follows SA professionals through phases of their career to understand their workplace mindsets in context: Although ambitious, this recommendation can capture the life of an SA professional from various functional areas that accurately informs research and practice about the post-pandemic professional experience of SA.
4. An exploratory study to understand why and how the broader population of midlevel administrators working in higher education (outside SA) experience mindsets similar to this dissertation research design: This can provide a comparative perspective on different areas of a campus and how midlevel administrators view and experience their work in similar and different ways.

Summary and Conclusion

In this chapter, I summarized the study, answered and discussed the research question that guided this study, offered implications for practice, theory, research regarding the SA profession, midlevel SA administrators, and understanding concepts about mindsets. Practical implications for midlevel SA administrators focus on their job roles have on influencing their individual mindsets and the considerations senior leaders on a campus and the broader SA

profession play in supporting positive working experiences and influencing the mindsets of SA professionals. Theoretical implications focus on how research on agency can offer a more focused understanding of how agency interacts with mindsets and experiences and whether this view can affect positive working conditions and employee engagement. Research implications centered on methodological successes and recommendations for the future to better understand the workplace experiences and mindsets of midlevel SA administrators, other groups of SA educators and professionals (e.g., specific functional areas, new professionals, senior leaders), and other administrators and professionals working at universities and colleges.

Findings conclude that all participants in this study were navigating changing and challenging workplace environments on their campuses, with most participants expressing their commitment to students and enhancing the student experience in ways that connect to the values of the SA profession. A buoyancy mindset allowed midlevel SA administrators to navigate unpredictable, continuous, and sometimes daily challenges. Midlevel SA administrators engage a resilience mindset when they are experiencing significant workplace stress yet adapt to these challenges by using self-reflection and other individual skills that protect the midlevel SA administrator from burning out. Some SA administrators remember thriving as an experience that reminds them of their successes and feelings of accomplishment with their SA work. Study findings support ways forward for making SA workplaces more humane and sustainable for midlevel SA administrators, as well as additional areas for theory and practice.

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APPENDIX A: OBJECTIVES OF STUDENT PERSONNEL SERVICES, 1937

1. Interpreting institutional objectives and opportunities to prospective students and their parents and to workers in secondary education.
2. Selecting and admitting students, in cooperation with secondary schools.
3. Orienting the student to his educational environment.
4. Providing a diagnostic service to help the student discover his abilities, aptitudes, and objectives.
5. Assisting the student throughout his college residence to determine upon his courses of instruction in light of his past achievements, vocational and personal interests, and diagnostic findings.
6. Enlisting the active cooperation of the family of the student in the interest of his educational accomplishment.
7. Assisting the student to reach his maximum effectiveness through clarification of his purposes, improvement of study methods, speech habits, personal appearance, manners, etc., and through progression in religious, emotional, social development, and other non-academic personal and group relationships.
8. Assisting the student to clarify his occupational aims and his educational plans in relation to them.
9. Determining the physical and mental health status of the student, providing appropriate remedial health measures, supervising the health of students, and controlling environmental health factors.
10. Providing and supervising an adequate housing program for students.
11. Providing and supervising an adequate food service for students.
12. Supervising, evaluating, and developing the extra-curricular activities of students.
13. Supervising, evaluating, and developing the social life and interests of students.
14. Supervising, evaluating, and developing the religious life and interests of students.
15. Assembling and making available information to be used in improvement of instruction and in making the curriculum more flexible.
16. Coordinating the financial aid and part-time employment of students and assisting the student who needs it to obtain such help.
17. Keeping a cumulative record of information about the student and making it available to the proper persons.
18. Administering student discipline to the end that the individual will be strengthened, and the welfare of the group preserved.
19. Maintaining student group morale by evaluating, understanding, and developing student mores.
20. Assisting the student to find appropriate employment when he leaves the institution.
21. Articulating college and vocational experience.
22. Keeping the student continuously and adequately informed of the educational opportunities and services available to him.
23. Carrying on studies designed to evaluate and improve these functions and services.

APPENDIX B: STUDENT AFFAIRS FUNCTIONAL AREAS — ACPA, NASPA 2024

1. Aboriginal Student Services
2. Academic Advising Programs
3. Alcohol and Other Drug Programs
4. Assessment Services
5. Auxiliary Services
6. Campus Activities Programs
7. Campus Information and Visitor Services
8. Campus Police and Public Safety Programs
9. Campus Religious, Secular, Spiritual
10. Career Services
11. Case Management Services
12. Civic Engagement and Service-Learning Programs
13. Clinical Health Services
14. College Honor Society Programs
15. College Unions: Programs, Services, and Community Center
16. Collegiate Recreation Programs
17. Conference and Event Programs
18. Counseling Services
19. Dining Services Program
20. Disability Resources and Services
21. Education Abroad Programs and Services
22. Financial Aid Programs
23. Fraternity and Sorority Advising Programs
24. Graduate and Professional Student Programs and Services
25. Health Promotion Services
26. Housing and Residential Life Programs
27. Indigenous Student Affairs
28. International Student Programs and Services
29. Internship Programs
30. Leadership Education and Development
31. Learning Assistance Programs
32. Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer+ Programs and Services
33. Master's Level Higher Education and Student Affairs Professional Preparation Programs
34. Multicultural Student Programs and Services
35. Orientation Programs
36. Parent and Family Programs
37. Post-Traditional and Commuter Student Programs and Services
38. Registrar Services
39. Sexual Violence-Related Programs and Services
40. Student Conduct Programs, Student Media Programs
41. Sustainability Programs
42. Testing Programs and Services
43. Transfer Student Programs and TRIO and College Access Programs
44. Undergraduate Admissions Programs and Services and Research Programs
45. Veterans and Military-Connected Programs and Services
46. Women's and Gender Programs and Services

APPENDIX C: PREINTERVIEW REFLECTION ACTIVITY

Please complete the following exercise prior to our first interview.

Materials needed:

- A blank 8"x11" (letter-sized) piece of paper and a writing instrument of your choice (e.g., pen, pencil, marker, etc.), or
- Open a blank 8"x11" (letter-sized) word processing document on your computer or digital device.

Directions: Please note, list, or illustrate your career journey/trajectory. Identify self-selected benchmarks (e.g., highlights, challenges, and/or milestones).

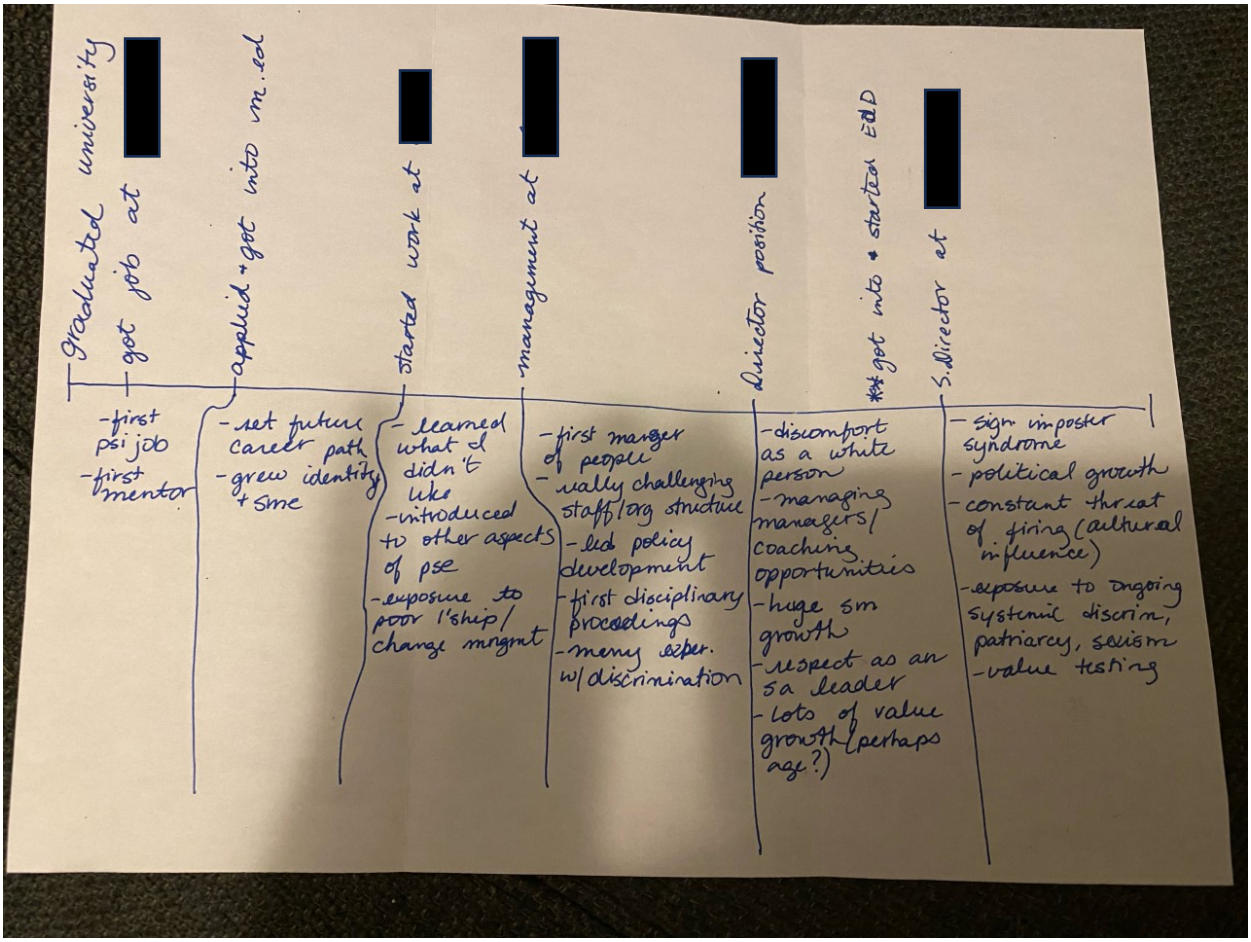
- You may spend as much time as you wish on this illustration. This will not be evaluated for quality, nor for effort.
- This is a creative exercise, and therefore there are few parameters limiting how you may complete this activity.
- This note, list, or illustration may be completed in any way you are most comfortable with.
    - Examples include, but are not limited to a list, short-form notes, a timeline, infographic, scribbles, drawings, symbols, and so on.
- You may complete this activity using singular or a combination of methods.
- You may also complete this activity in either a portrait or landscape layout.
- Overall, how you approach completing this activity is completely up to you.

I will ask for a scanned or PDF copy of your paper/document after our discussion in Interview One. I will rely completely on your narrative to explain your career and the self-selected benchmarks that you identify. This material will not be evaluated in any way but will be used for data analysis and to guide our first interview conversation.

APPENDIX D: PREINTERVIEW REFLECTION ACTIVITY ARTIFACTS

Figure 2

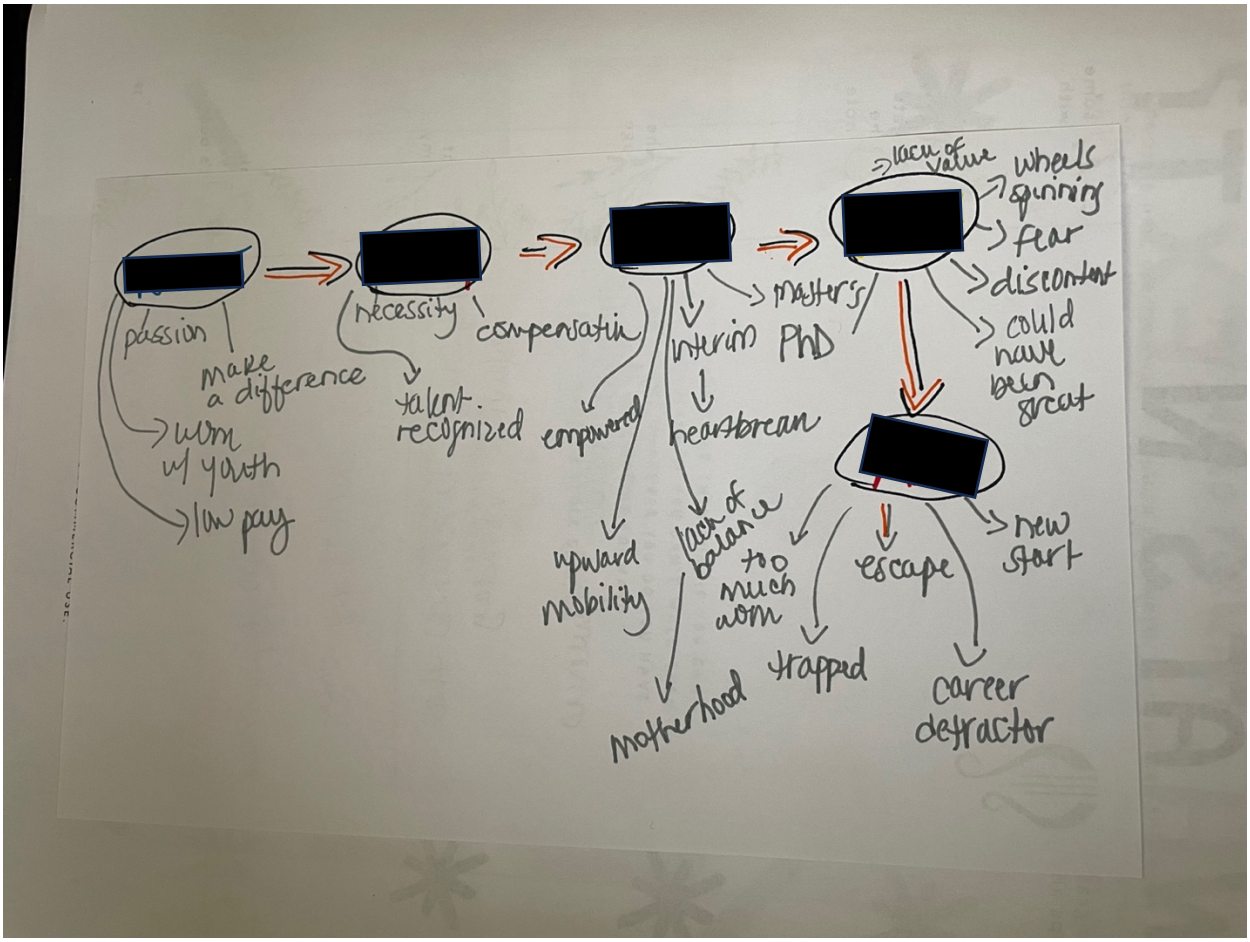
Preinterview Reflection Activity Artifact: Annie



Note. This is Annie's interpretation of the preinterview reflection activity prompt (Appendix C).

Figure 3

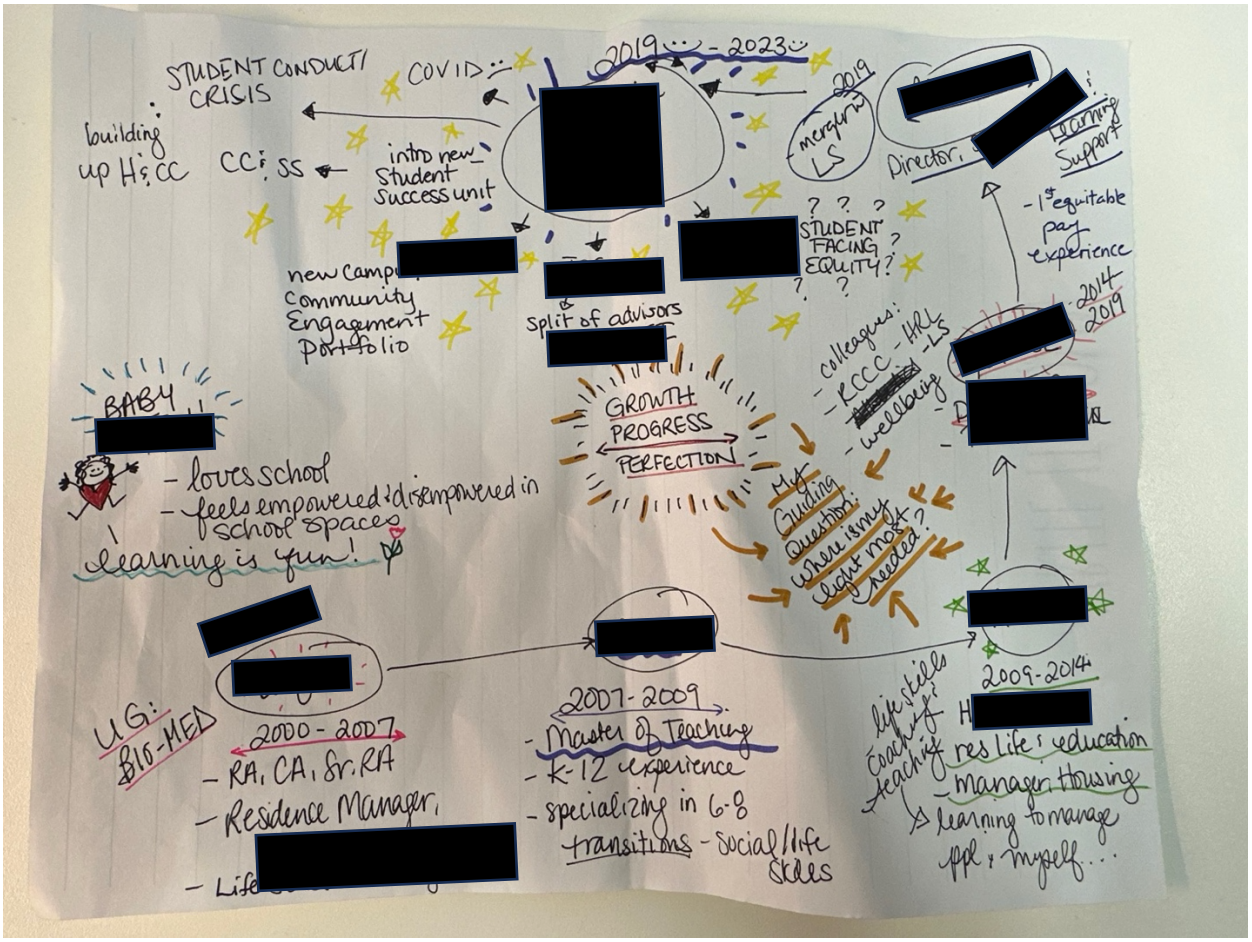
Preinterview Reflection Activity Artifact: Eliza



Note. This is Eliza's interpretation of the preinterview reflection activity prompt (Appendix C).

Figure 4

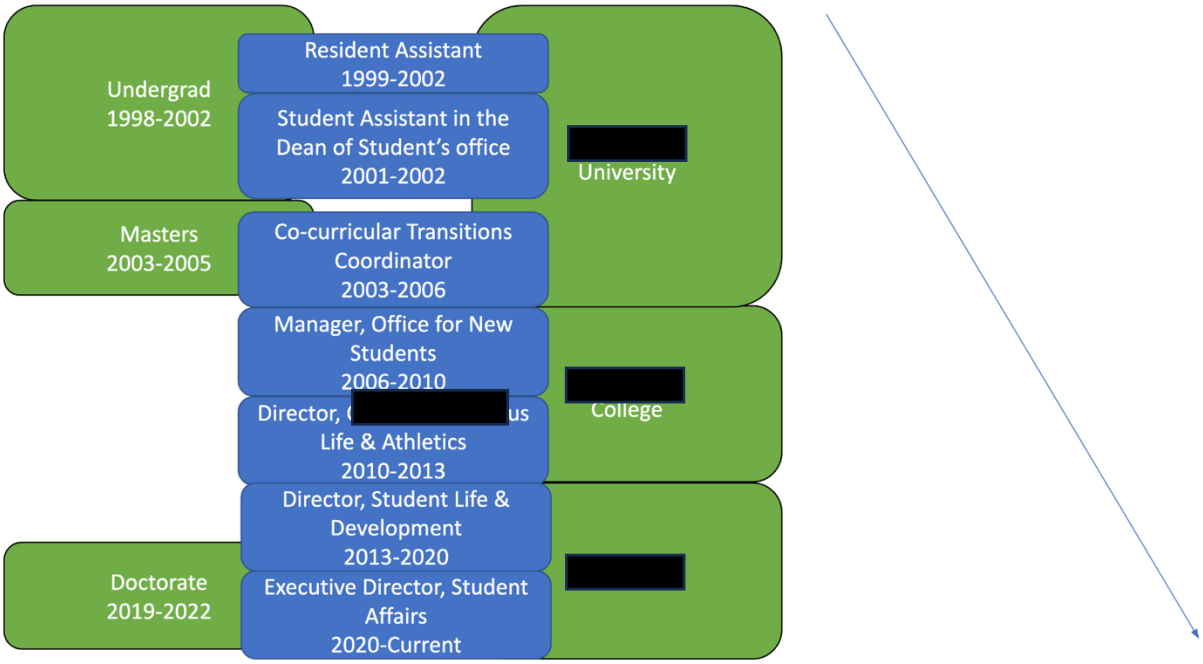
Preinterview Reflection Activity Artifact: Jacquie



Note. This is Jacquie's interpretation of the preinterview reflection activity prompt (Appendix C).

Figure 5

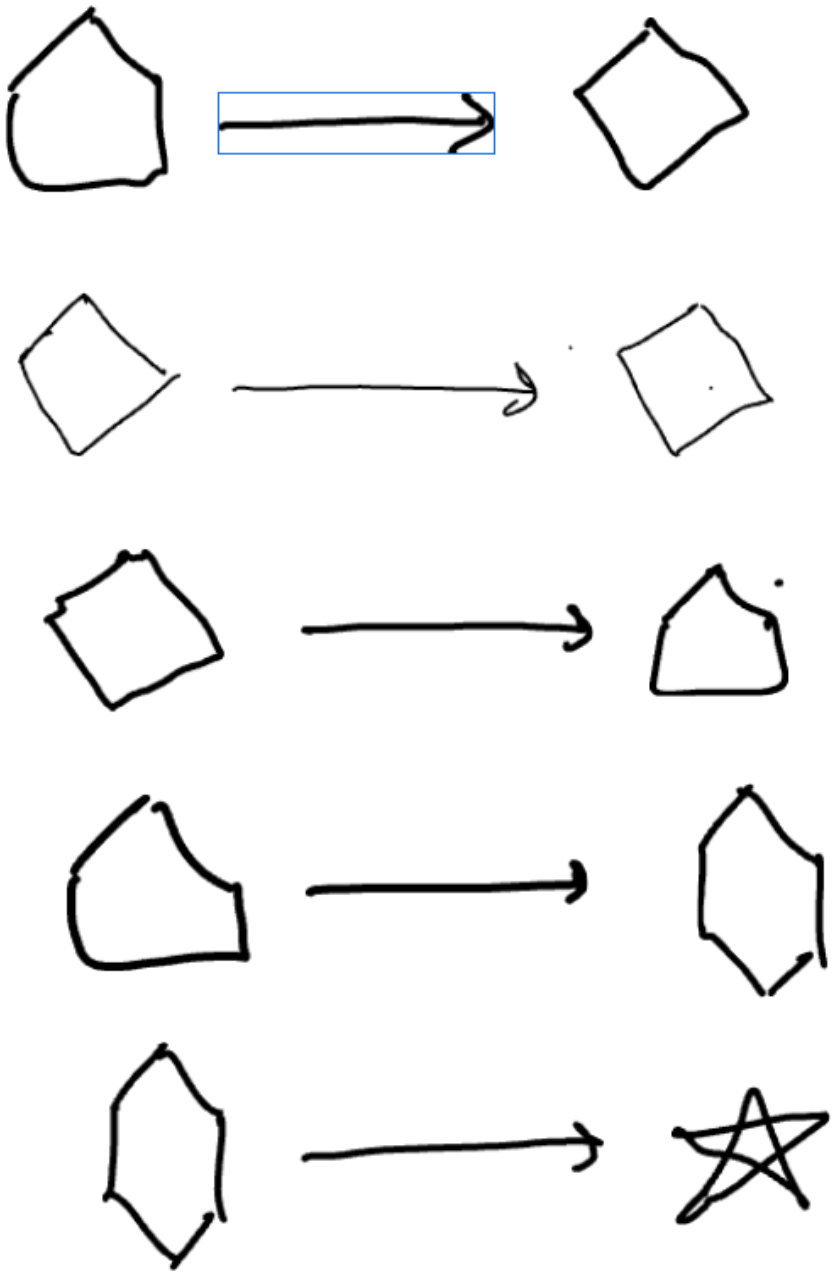
Preinterview Reflection Activity Artifact: Malcolm



Note. This is Malcolm's interpretation of the preinterview reflection activity prompt (Appendix C).

Figure 6

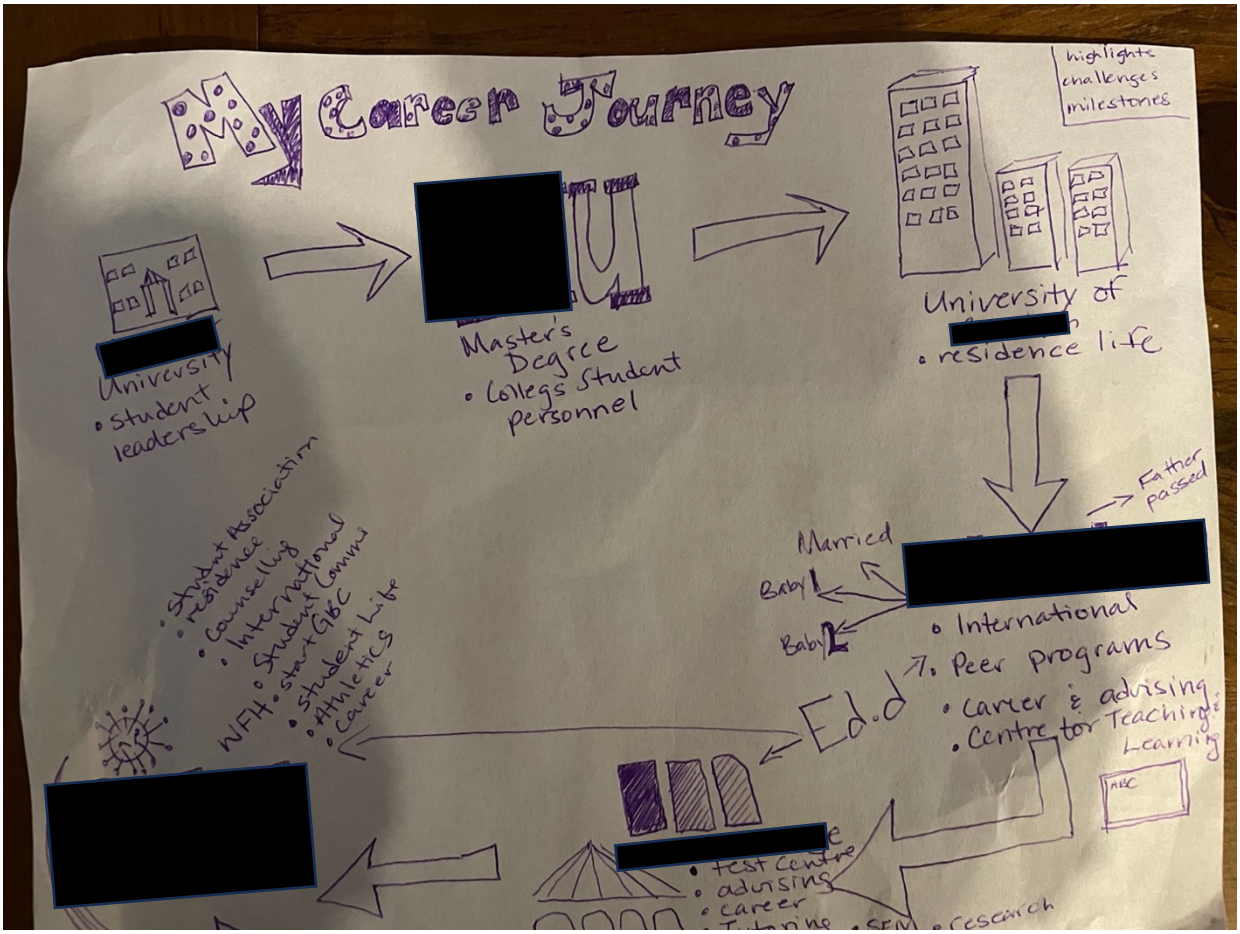
Preinterview Reflection Activity Artifact: Marc



Note. This is Marc's interpretation of the preinterview reflection activity prompt (Appendix C).

Figure 7

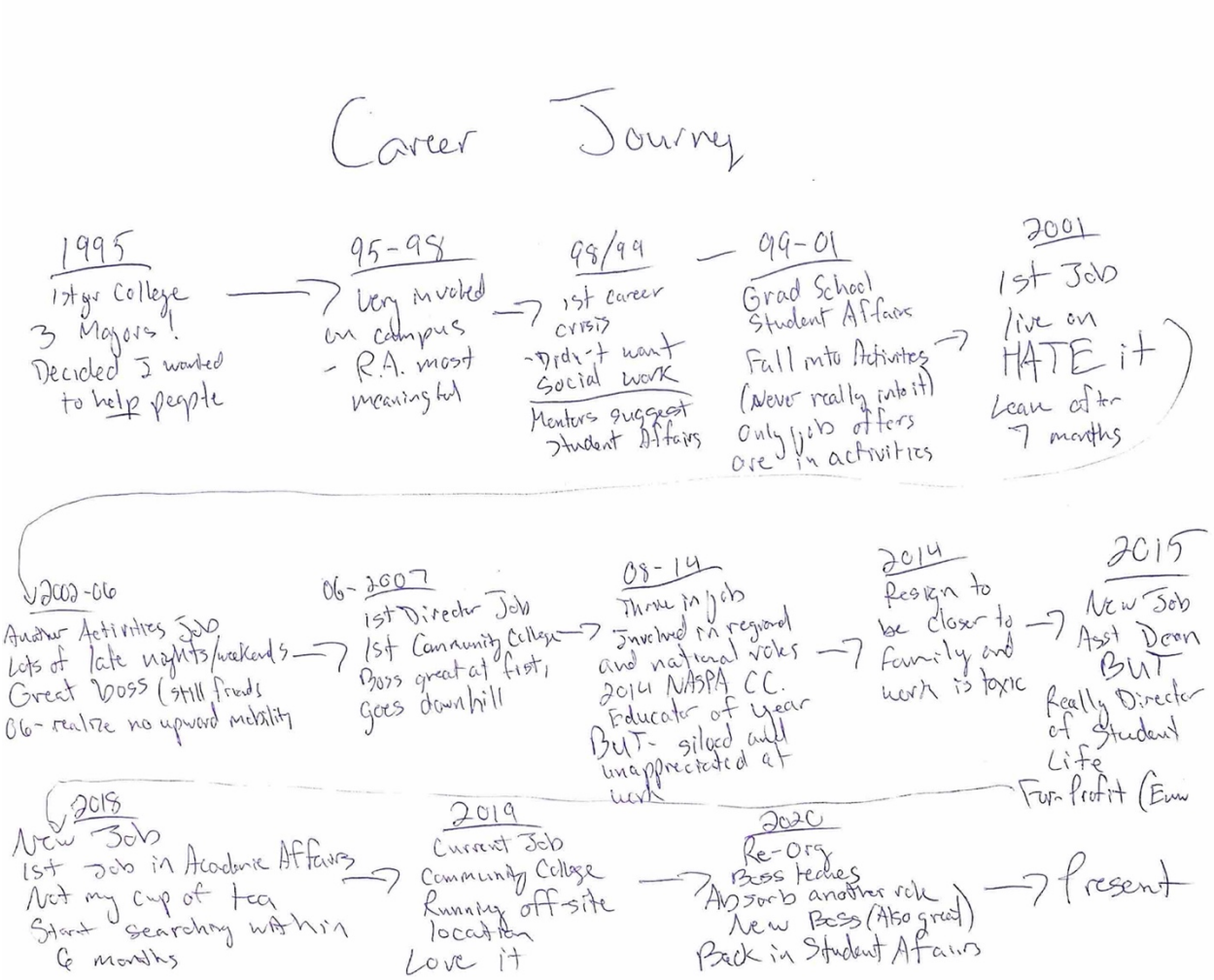
Preinterview Reflection Activity Artifact: Maria



Note. This is Maria's interpretation of the preinterview reflection activity prompt (Appendix C).

Figure 8

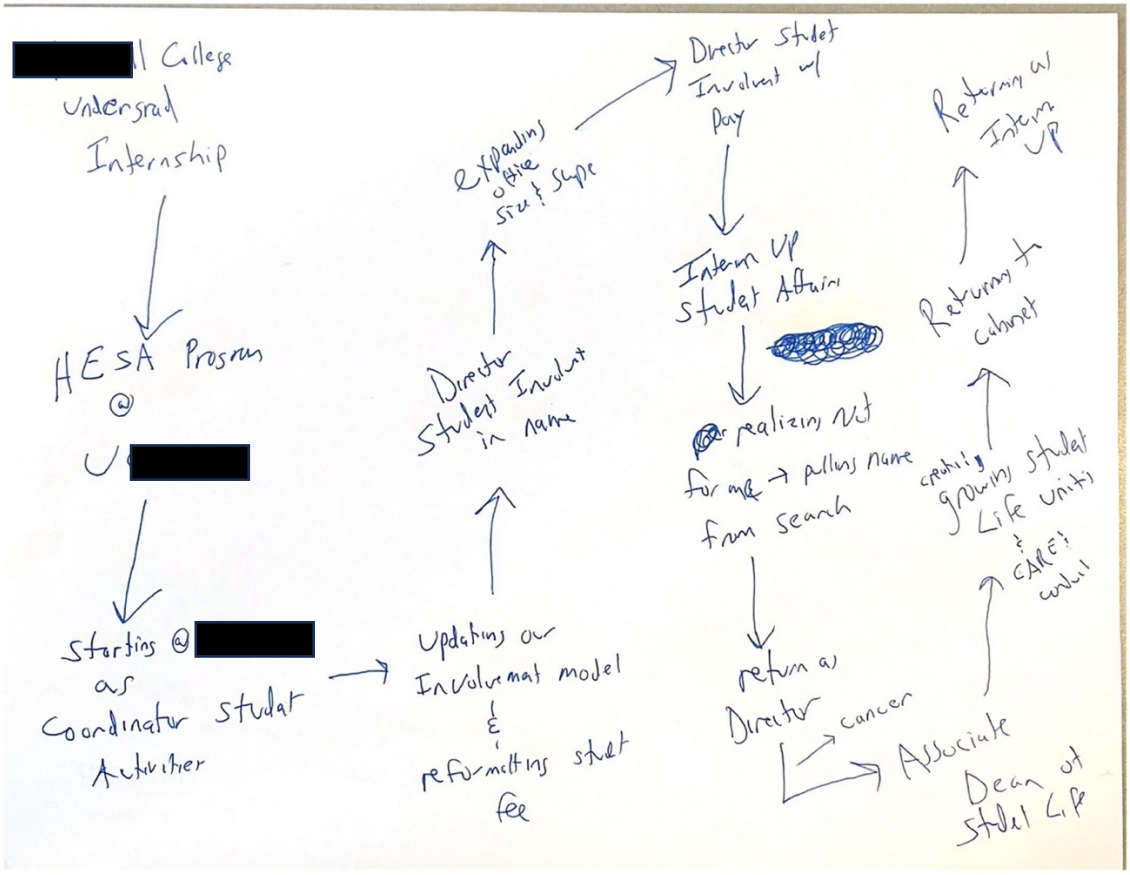
Preinterview Reflection Activity Artifact: Peter



Note. This is Peter's interpretation of the preinterview reflection activity prompt (Appendix C).

Figure 9

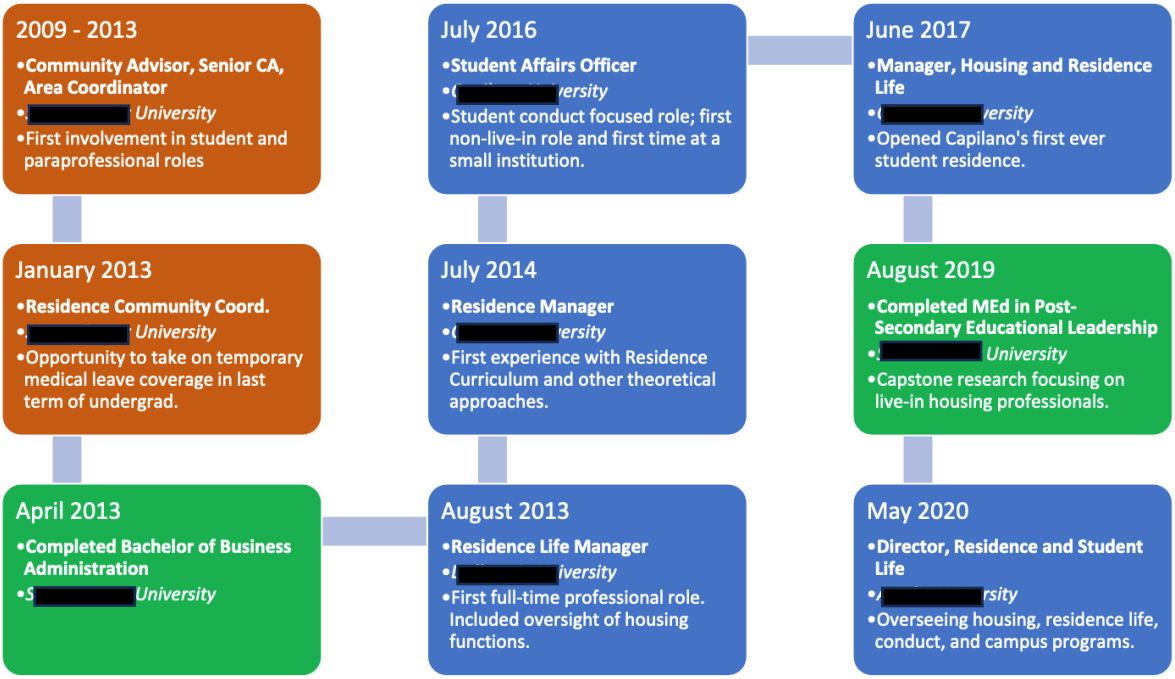
Preinterview Reflection Activity Artifact: Robin



Note. This is Robin's interpretation of the preinterview reflection activity prompt (Appendix C).

Figure 10

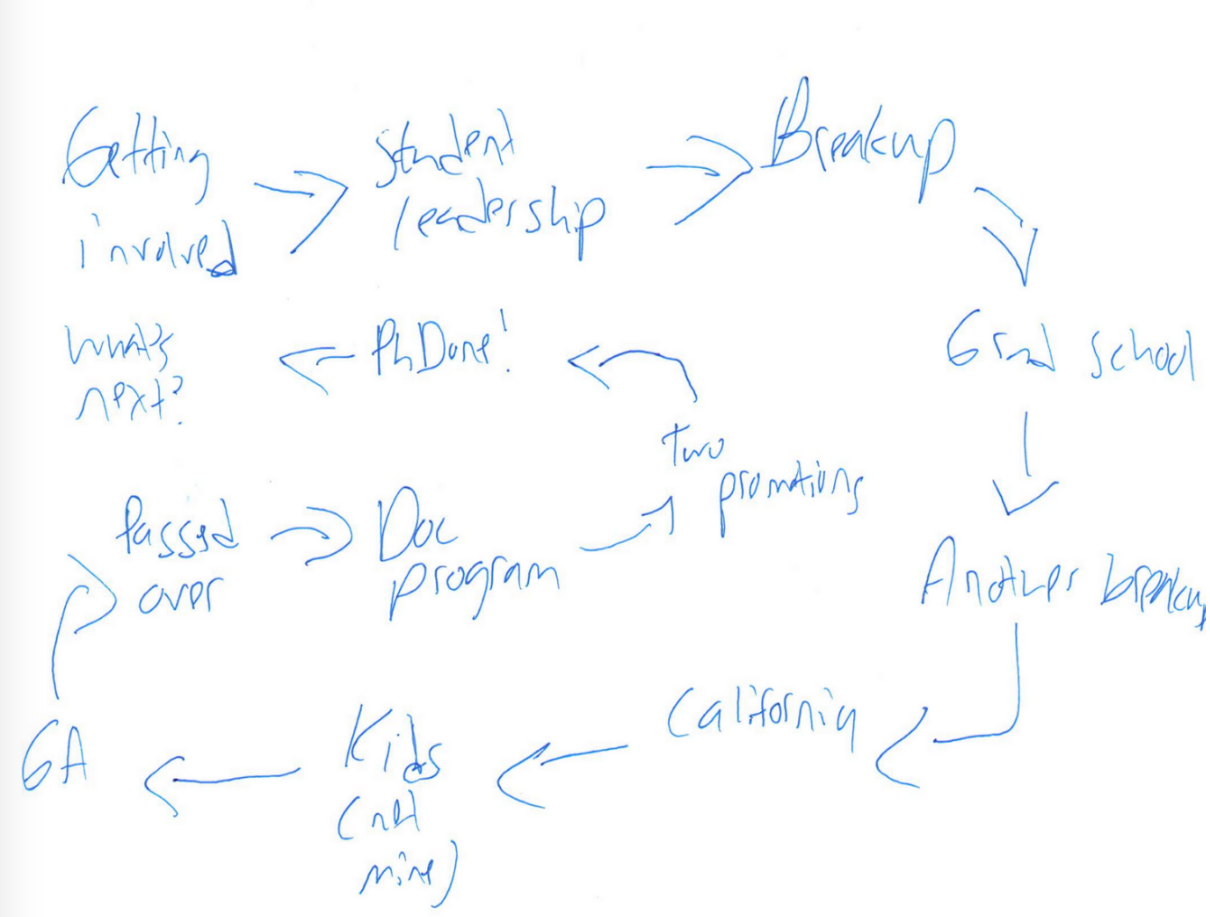
Preinterview Reflection Activity Artifact: Simon



Note. This is Simon's interpretation of the preinterview reflection activity prompt (Appendix C).

Figure 11

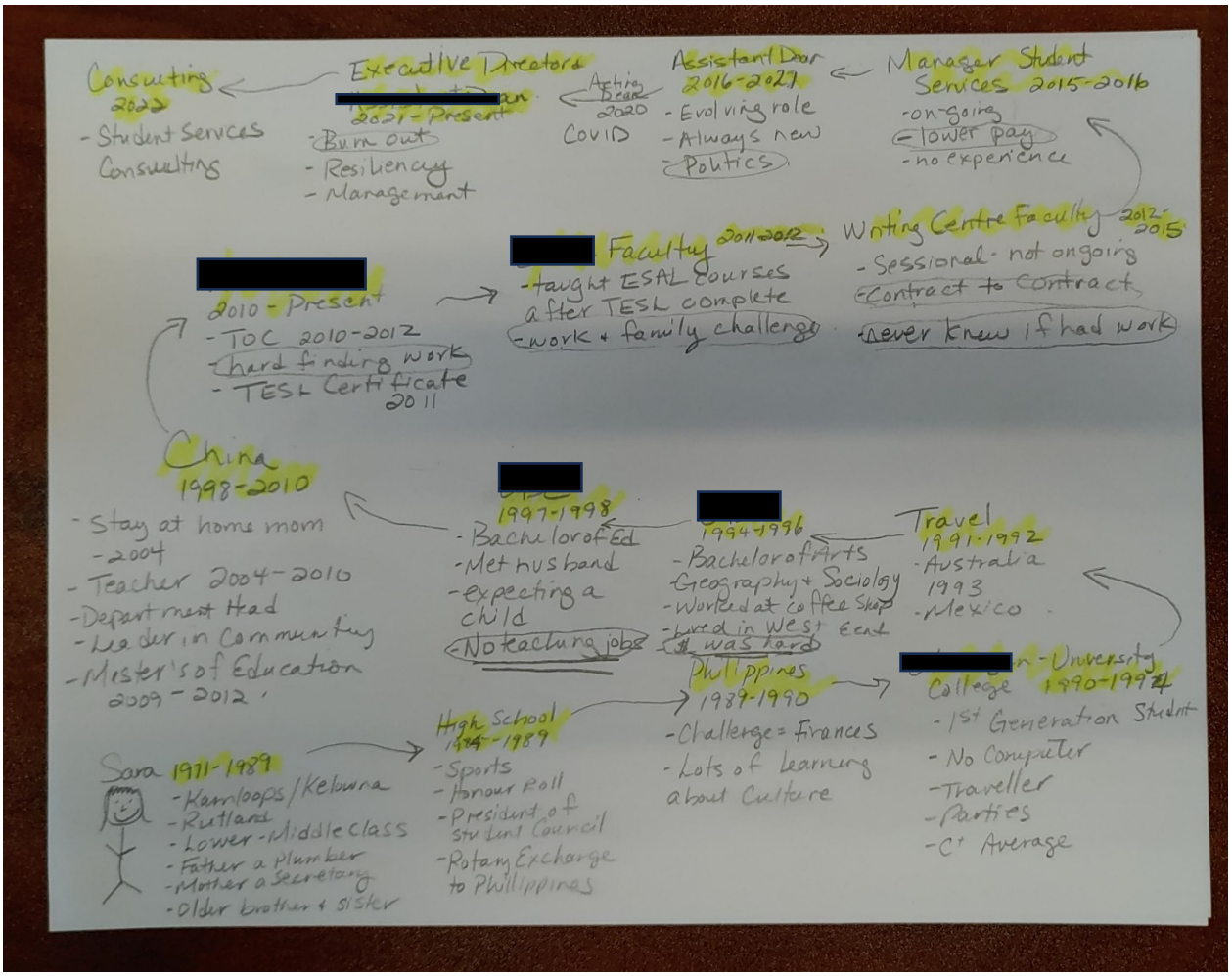
Preinterview Reflection Activity Artifact: Steven



Note. This is Steven's interpretation of the preinterview reflection activity prompt (Appendix C).

Figure 12

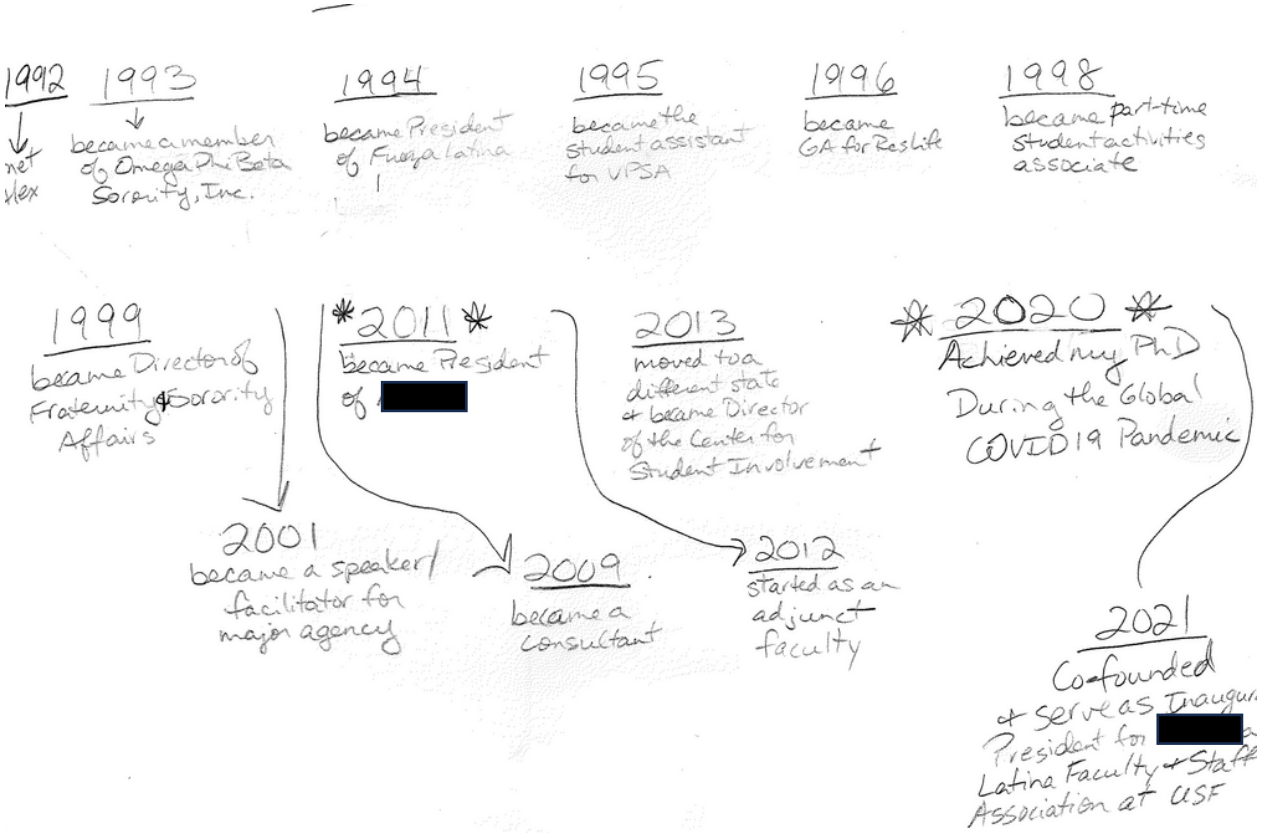
Preinterview Reflection Activity Artifact: Susie



Note. This is Susie's interpretation of the preinterview reflection activity prompt (Appendix C).

Figure 13

Preinterview Reflection Activity Artifact: Xiomara



Note. This is Xiomara's interpretation of the preinterview reflection activity prompt (Appendix C).

APPENDIX E: PROTOCOL, INTERVIEW ONE

- This interview will be up to one hour and recorded using Zoom.

- This study focuses on the mindsets of midlevel administrators in student affairs and how these mindsets are activated in the workplace. Questions will focus on your workplace, including day-to-day responsibilities but could also consider everyday factors which may cause you to be responsive to unexpected demands in the workplace.

- This interview will be the first of two. Data will be deidentified and you have the opportunity to skip any question.

- Do you have any questions? Do you consent to participating in this dissertation research study? What pseudonym would you like me to use?

1. Using the paper/document, please tell me about your note/list/illustration.

2. Have there been any notable challenges you have experienced in your caeer? If so, please describe for me how you overcame this challenge in your career?

3. Considering what you just shared with me, or generally, what ultimately motivates you to continue doing [this work/continuing in the profession]?

4. Imagine an ideal working day for you. Please describe this in detail from the beginning to the end of the day.
    a) How is this <u>similar</u> to your typical working day?
    b) How does this <u>differ</u> from your typical working day?

5. Considering your current position, please tell me about <u>responsibilities, and/or experiences</u> that influence or weigh-on your workday.
    a. Please share a story that illustrates how this has an effect on your workday.

6. Considering your career to-date, are there any <u>professional experiences</u> that influence how you look at and/or conduct your work? This can be related to relationships, skills, training and development, foundational experiences, mentorship, milestones, etcetera.

7. Are there ways in which <u>sociopolitical influences</u> happening on or off-campus that Influences your work.
   -*PROMPT IF NEEDED:* You can consider social and political pressures you have observed or experienced over time, specific events, or your own observed trends.

APPENDIX F: PROTOCOL, INTERVIEW TWO

CONSENT

- This interview will be up to one hour and recorded using Zoom.
- This study focuses on the mindsets of midlevel administrators in student affairs and how these mindsets are activated in the workplace. Questions will focus on your workplace, including day-to-day responsibilities but could also consider everyday factors which may cause you to be responsive to unexpected demands in the workplace.
- This is our final interview for my dissertation study. Data will be deidentified and you have the opportunity to skip any question.
- Do you have any questions? Do you consent to participating in this dissertation research study? What pseudonym would you like me to use?

SUMMARIZE INTERVIEW 1

- Did I capture everything accurately? Is there anything you would like me to remove, or you would like to clarify?

As a reminder, my research explores how midlevel SA administrators activate different mindsets (e.g., thriving, buoyant, and/or resilience) in response to everyday challenges in the workplace.

Research on mindsets focuses on the cognitive and emotional development within someone, and how this development influences their behaviour. In this context, mindsets may influence how someone experiences and navigates their work.

[PASTE DEFINITIONS OF MINDSET, RESILIENCE, BUOYANCY, THRIVING IN CHAT]

Resilience

A resilience mindset is described as "negotiating, managing, and adapting to significant sources of stress or trauma. Assets within the individual, their life, and environment facilitate the capacity for adaptation and "bouncing back."

1. Please describe for me times in your career, if any, where you felt that you were activating a resilience mindset.

2. Please describe any factors at work that influence a resilience mindset.

Buoyancy

Buoyancy is related to academic success research. Buoyancy as a mindset is described as "more 'everyday resilience' that is typical of the ordinary course of life."

3. Please describe for me times in your career, if any, where you felt that you were activating a buoyancy mindset.

4. Please describe any factors at work that influence a buoyancy mindset.

Thriving

A thriving mindset is described as “progress and momentum, marked both by a sense of learning and a sense of vitality.”

5. Please describe for me times in your career, if any, where you were activating a thriving mindset.

6. Please describe any factors at work that influence a thriving mindset.

Final Questions

7. Think about a time when you felt you were feeling ‘at your best’ in your career. Tell me about this point…

a. In your current role, what would help you feel like you were ‘at your best’?

8. Is there anything else you would like to share with me? … This concludes our interview. Do you have any questions for me?