Career Longevity in Student Affairs: Implications for New Professionals from a Qualitative Study

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Career Longevity in Student Affairs:
Implications for New Professionals from a Qualitative Study

A Dissertation
Presented to the Faculty of the
College of Education and Social Work
West Chester University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the Degree of
Doctor of Education

By
Diane D’Arcangelo
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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my family for their love and encouragement every step of the way. To my parents, John and Joan, for their life-long support throughout my entire education. Thank you. To my brother and sister-in-law, David and Jacqui, the two most likely to have champagne at the end of this marathon. I couldn’t imagine any of life’s celebrations without you by my side. To Marco, my husband, thank you for your presence and support. On class nights and during long hours at the computer, you stepped in with meals and assisted our children when I needed time to focus. You have been a rock.

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Abstract

Over the past several decades, the retention of new professionals in student affairs has been a concern. Many newcomers leave the profession before completing five years in the field. This qualitative study explored factors contributing to career longevity in student affairs professionals through semi-structured interviews. I interviewed eight participants working at Mid-Atlantic University for more than five years. The semi-structured interviews were set up with a dual focus. The first half of the interview focused on the participants' experience as new professionals, followed by questions that explored their perspectives on supervising new professionals. Seasoned professionals who remained in the field for more than five years revealed contributing factors to their career longevity. Four early workplace experiences emerged from the study as contributors to career longevity: A platform for practice, substantial work, connection to professionals, and high-impact moments with students. This study also discovered how new professionals experience marginality and mattering during their entry-level positions and determined the three top mattering factors that positively influence student affairs retention: Sense of appreciation, sense of importance, and empathy during struggles. This study determined that supervisors primarily serve as coaches/cheerleaders and offer career assistance. The two mattering factors supervisors used most to guard newcomers against marginality also emerged: showing appreciation and empathy during struggles. The qualitative research study’s findings provide recommendations for practice and future research. This study contributes to efforts to sustain newcomers in student affairs.

Keywords: retention, new professionals, student affairs, career longevity, qualitative
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Chapter 1

As some student affairs professionals reprioritize work-life balance in a post-pandemic workplace, student affairs could be entering a perfect storm for increased attrition. A combination of uncontrollable occurrences may lead to a rise in turnover. According to national statistics, there is high turnover among new professionals in the workplace (BLS, 2020; Mahan et al., 2018). A Texas A&M professor, Anthony Klotz, predicted a rise in voluntary resignations and coined the Great Resignation (Cohen, 2021). Contrary to popular opinion, higher education also confronts a rise in voluntary drop-out rates from faculty and staff (Kelsky, 2022). According to Kelsky (2022), thousands of academic expats have left or are considering leaving university settings soon. A private Facebook group called the Professor Is Out, created by Kelsky (2022), consists of 17,000 members who seek other avenues of employment beyond higher education.

In addition to the Great Resignation, colleges and universities face a record turnover as the Baby Boomer generation, and upper administrators retire (Wicks, 2017; Heller, 2008), which combined could contribute to a mass exodus from higher education. Starting in 2011, extending through 2030, 10,000 Baby Boomers approach retirement age on a daily basis (Blackwell & Torres, 2019; Hoyt, 2021). Baby Boomers make up much of the institutional faculty and administrative leadership at colleges and universities (Heller, 2008). The overall landscape of higher education shows increased retirement age and high turnover rates due to the Great Resignation, which are serious employment issues. However, most people strictly think of faculty and neglect to recognize another group of educators who work in higher education.

Student affairs is another university area that works directly with students as educators. Like other disciplines in higher education, student affairs is a discipline where fundamental concepts are required to work in the field (Davenport, 2016). While faculty educates in the
classroom, student affairs professionals offer opportunities for learning and development outside of the classroom (NASPA, Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education [NASPA], n.d.). Student affairs professionals work in areas centered on leadership, social justice, career readiness, and civic engagement, to name a few. While working in the various areas, they create student-centered learning experiences in spaces beyond the four classroom walls, including outdoor settings, climbing walls, residence halls, and much more.

According to Best College Reviews (2021), student affairs comprises professionals dedicated to students' academic and personal development. The work helps students begin a lifetime journey of growth and self-exploration (NASPA, n.d.). In 2010, the American College Personnel Association (ACPA) and the Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education (NASPA) established a core set of competencies to guide student affairs work in higher education (ACPA & NASPA, 2015) regardless of responsibilities or roles. Job responsibilities range from individual counseling and crisis intervention to program planning and assessment (Mullen et al., 2018; Tull, 2014). Student affairs is a multi-faceted area within post-secondary education institutions that requires professionals whose job responsibilities are complex and shifting (Mullen et al., 2018; Renn & Jessup-Anger, 2008). It is essential to comprehend the purpose of higher education, and the broad scope of student affairs work to understand retention issues in this area.

Student affairs has seen troublesome employment rates for decades. More precisely, workplace turnover among new professionals in student affairs continues as a persistent dilemma. For nearly 40 years, research has cited alarming attrition rates among entry-level student affairs professionals (Buchanan & Shupp, 2015; Holmes et al., 1983; Renn & Hodges, 2007; Wood et al., 1985). Renn and Hodges (2007) reaffirmed that retention was an issue for
student affairs professionals, citing that 50-60% of the field leave within their first five years of employment. Twenty percent of the student affairs workforce are new professionals (Pittman & Foubert, 2016). According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor and Statistics (BLS) (2020), workers ages 25 to 34 years old typically stay in a position for 2.8 years. Although the BLS numbers suggest rapid turnover is a pattern among this age group in all industries, retaining newcomers to student affairs is still a concern for universities and the topic of this research.

When discussing new professional attrition in student affairs, it is essential to understand the educational requirements and significant investment of time and money that goes into working at the entry-level in this field. To begin, a professional career in student affairs generally requires a master's degree in Higher Education Student Affairs (HESA), a counselor education program, or another related field of study (Hirschy et al., 2015). New student affairs professionals traditionally enter the field through these academic paths. Yet, many new professionals leave the field within five years of earning their graduate degrees (Buchanan & Shupp, 2015; Holmes et al., 1983; Renn & Hodges, 2007; Wood et al., 1985). Thus, according to earlier studies, it seems drop-out from the field increases soon after (within five years) achieving professional career membership in student affairs.

Much has been said about the 50% to 60% of staff members who leave in the first five years (Pittman & Foubert, 2016; Renn & Hodges, 2007; Renn & Jessup-Anger, 2008; Tull, 2006). Yet less is said about the 40-50% of colleagues who remain in the field. After decades of asking why new staff members leave the field or intend to leave with very little change, it might be time for a paradigm shift. New questions need to be asked, and new data needs to be gathered, this time focusing instead on those who remain lifelong student affairs professionals. What leads
to successful retainment in the field? Therefore, to facilitate career longevity, scholars should also give attention to what experiences and factors have attributed to professional persistence.

**Purpose of Study**

The purpose of this qualitative study is to understand retention among new professionals in student affairs. Specifically, the study looks at factors in this industry that influence professionals who remain in the field. This case study focuses on members of Mid-Atlantic University who have served for more than five years in student affairs positions or units. The study explores the experiences that contribute to longevity among student affairs administrators through the perspective of seasoned professionals, focusing on the influences of marginality and mattering on career retention. The definition of *marginality* is a feeling of exclusion or self-consciousness that can lead to irritability and depression, and *mattering* is defined as receiving attention (notice and appreciate), feeling important, ego-extension (others are proud of you and have empathy for your struggles), and dependence (being needed) (Schlossberg, 1989). Schlossberg (1989) discovered that feelings of marginalization and mattering impacted a student’s likelihood of remaining at an institution. This researcher presumes marginality and mattering also impact newcomer retention within the professional field of student affairs.

Therefore, this study aims to uncover early professional experiences that impact newcomers’ decisions to remain in the profession. Seasoned student affairs professionals at Mid-Atlantic University, who also serve as supervisors with over five years of work experience, participate in a dual-focused semi-structured interview session. Questions during the interview concentrate on two perspectives. In the first half of the interview, participants recall experiences of marginality and mattering within their first five years in the field. In the second half of the interview, participants discuss their observations of newcomers in student affairs from a
supervisor’s perspective and their role as a supervisor to this group, specifically regarding practices that guard against marginality and foster a sense of mattering. The theoretical framework guides the questions for each perspective and centers on influential factors to career retention for student affairs. Finally, the study identifies how these supervisors of new professionals now work to influence retention among their supervisees. For this study, the term new professional is used synonymously with the terms "entry-level worker" and "newcomer" and is defined as anyone in their second year of graduate school through the first five years of full-time employment in higher education.

This study intends to highlight how professionals who remained in student affairs felt they mattered early in their careers. Participants with greater than five years in the field are the focus of this study. Through in-depth semi-structured interviews, this study intends to capture factors that influence new employees' longevity in student affairs, such as socialization, supervision, and community in the workplace (Hirschy et al., 2015; Hotho, 2008; Tull, 2009; Van Maanen, 1978). This study also adds to this area of inquiry by identifying what fosters persistence in student affairs as a profession during the early years to reduce entry-level exodus in the field. The research provides implications and recommendations for new professionals, graduate preparatory programs, colleagues, supervisors, and institutions themselves.

Rationale for Study

According to Wicks (2017), it is necessary to ensure the best and brightest of the younger generations consider student affairs as a viable career path. Their vitality and enthusiasm defend against professional stagnation in the field. However, along with Baby Boomer retirement (Blackwell & Torres, 2019), there is a current employment shift due to the global pandemic referred to as the Great Resignation (Klotz, 2021). These employment trends compound team
member turnover, loss, and continuation of the profession. As longtime student affairs professionals phase into retirement, the field must fill vacancies with candidates interested in remaining in the profession for a career lifetime. For student affairs, retirement and the Great Resignation contribute to an already existing problem with attrition. Below, I highlight the current-day employment realities of career changes and workplace burnout.

**Career Changes**

A sense of workplace insecurity has increased due to the global impact of COVID-19 (Hite & McDonald, 2020). Hite and McDonald (2020) pointed out that the current possibilities of career changes and new opportunities will impact individuals in the post-pandemic workplace. Higher education lost 660,000 workers throughout 2020 due to involuntary lay-offs and voluntary departures, with only one-third recovery of that loss since 2021 (Bauman, 2021). Among those hardest hit were those providing administrative support, food services, women, non-white employees, and those in the youngest and oldest age groups (Bauman, 2021). Adding to these losses, an online survey conducted by The Harris Poll on behalf of Personal Capital (a personal wealth company) confirmed 66% of U.S. workers are interested in switching jobs, with results as high as 91% of Gen-Z and 78% from the Millennial cohort (Personal Capital, 2021.)

In March of 2020, many institutions of higher education shut-down in-person learning, and many remained closed through the fall of 2020 (Shillington et al., 2020). As a result, faculty and staff had to take on the remote delivery of programs and services (Shillington et al., 2020). In an interview, Cathy Akens, the vice chancellor for student affairs at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, acknowledged that institutions need to be flexible and nimble in post-pandemic times (McCarthy, 2020). In fact, after the relatively successful switch to working from home, one in three workers surveyed by a market research firm said they would not work for an
organization that requires full-time on-site work (Ellis, 2021). The pandemic has revealed the importance of institutional reinvention of work schedules and formats to remain flexible and responsive to the changing needs of students and employees (Adjei et al., 2020). While institutions consider workplace flexibility, many student affairs workers have concluded they work too much (Ellis, 2021). For many, the compensation is not competitive with the experience and education required. Akkermans et al. (2020) postulated adverse career shocks, such as those generated by the coronavirus on the economy and employment, could result in career epiphanies leading employees to other career paths and life goals.

**Workplace Burnout**

The pandemic has contributed to the reconsideration of careers to chart a new path (Varagur, 2021), increasing the urgency to address workplace retention of new professionals. *The Chronicle* interviewed nearly 60 current and former members of student affairs during the summer of 2021 and found all desired a change between colleges and their employees (Ellis, 2021). Specifically, they wanted a better work-life balance and explored jobs outside of higher education (Ellis, 2021). They felt underappreciated by the institution, they were unhappy with long days and weekends, and the constant stress created by crisis management led to burnout (Ellis, 2021).

The president of NASPA recognized burnout and exhaustion, exacerbated by the pandemic, are pushing student affairs professionals to consider other career options (Ellis, 2021). Barely half of the new professionals surveyed said they plan to continue working in the profession for the next five years (Ellis, 2021). In 2016, Pittman and Foubert warned that asking too much from new professionals without enough transitional support or consideration for development could result in burnout, leading to a high attrition rate. To lose this cohort amidst
the chaos of the Great Resignation (Personal Capital, 2021) would be a significant loss to the profession of student affairs.

Student affairs has been concerned with retaining its newest members to the field for nearly four decades. Contemporary issues of today will exacerbate the issue of attrition in student affairs. Nearly 20% of the student affairs workforce consists of new professionals. Fifty to sixty percent of these new professionals leave the field within their first five years of work (Pittman & Foubert, 2016; Renn & Jessup-Anger, 2008; Tull, 2006). More than half of new professionals feel a sense of uncertainty about student affairs as a career choice. The added issues of turnover due to retirement, post-pandemic job insecurity, and burnout continue to threaten employment rates. Therefore, the study of retention is even more urgent in today's world.

**Problem Statement**

For nearly 40 years, research has cited alarming attrition rates among student affairs professionals and continues to be an issue for those within their first five years of employment (Buchanan & Shupp, 2015; Renn & Hodges, 2007). As far back as 1983, published research documents attrition rates as high as 61% (Holmes et al., 1983) and as low as 32% within the first five years of student affairs employment (Wood et al., 1985). Although the reasons for departure among this cohort are complex, new professionals are too valuable not to focus on their professional and developmental growth (Buchanan & Shupp, 2015).

Newer professionals contribute a great deal to the profession. Most HESA new professionals come directly to graduate school from undergraduate programs with strengths that include reference points, norms, and attitudes similar to undergraduate students (Fried, 2011). Each new cohort adds continual vitality to the profession. They have invested time and money
toward an advanced education required to work in the field. Therefore, student affairs administrators already in the field (St. Onge et al., 2008; Tull, 2006) and HESA faculty (Fried, 2011; Wilson, 2008) have a responsibility to keep talented new staff in the profession.

Although there is agreement among researchers that new professional retention is an issue in student affairs (Pittman & Foubert, 2016; Renn & Hodges, 2007; Tull, 2006; Wood et al., 1985), the problem remains nearly forty years later. The literature regarding attrition of new student affairs professionals primarily focuses on those intending to leave (Silver & Jakeman, 2014; Tull, 2006) or those who have already left the field (Buchanan & Shupp, 2015; Marshall et al., 2016) for other industries. Significant findings of these studies indicate that HESA graduate students may contemplate leaving even before entering the field (Silver & Jakeman, 2014). Those who left the field did so due to poor supervision (Buchanan & Shupp, 2015; Tull, 2006), devalued student affairs work (Silver & Jakeman, 2014), difficulties navigating institutional politics (Silver & Jakeman, 2014; Tull, 2006), ambiguities (Silver & Jakeman, 2014), emotional burden (Marshall et al., 2016; Silver & Jakeman, 2014;), and budgetary constraints including low wages (Marshall et al., 2016; Silver & Jakeman, 2014).

These studies provided reasons individuals left the field but ignored those experiences that have led to career retention in student affairs. In doing so, there is a lack of knowledge about the factors that contribute to career longevity. Researchers interested in retention among new professionals in student affairs have yet to discover what keeps 40%-50% of student affairs professionals in the field beyond five years. In contrast to the studies mentioned above, participants with greater than five years in the field are the focus of this study.

Therefore, this study asks committed professionals to reflect on their time as new professionals and discern what encouraged their commitment to student affairs. This study
centers on how feelings and perceptions of marginality and mattering contribute to career retention. The research aligns with *Appreciative Inquiry* (AI), which focuses on illuminating and affirming personal and organizational success factors or forces and learning for strategic planning, restructuring, and project evaluation purposes (Coghlan et al., 2003; Cooperrider, 1990, 2017). Although this study acknowledges a high degree of attrition in student affairs, it focuses less on how an individual felt marginalized and more on ways individuals sensed they mattered as a new professional. The proposed research utilizes a strength-based approach (Cooperrider, 2017) to identify best practices worth replicating to increase retention rates among new student affairs professionals.

**Research Questions**

The attrition numbers among the new professionals' cohort within the student affairs workforce represent a high turnover rate. However, some professionals remain in the field well beyond their first five years. In these cases, what did student affairs as a profession do correctly to help retain them as new professionals? The following research questions will guide this study:

1. Among student affairs professionals who have not left the field within their first five years of professional employment, what early workplace experiences contribute to career longevity?
2. In what ways did new professionals experience marginality and mattering during their entry-level positions?
3. How do these supervisors now work to influence retention among their supervisees?

**Rationale for Methods**

This study uses a qualitative case study research method to understand the influences on retention among new professionals in student affairs. According to Merriam (1998), a case is a
single entity, a unit around which there are boundaries such as a person, a program, a group, a policy where a phenomenon occurs in the bounded context. A case study can incorporate multiple perspectives, data collection methods, and interpretive strategies (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Qualitative research is interpretive, grounded in the human experience (Marshall & Rossman, 2016), and creates an intimate awareness and understanding of the human experience (Saldana, 2011). The case study has distinctive attributes; it is particularistic, descriptive, and heuristic (Merriam, 1998). For this research, a qualitative case study design help explore the past and present career experiences of Mid-Atlantic University student affairs administrators who remained in the field beyond five years.

Through a case study design, this study aims to gather information through the richness of semi-structured interviews. Rather than focusing on reasons why individuals leave the field, this study gathers qualitative data on why individuals stayed in the field. The asset-based perspective adds a unique contribution to the topic (Cooperrider, 1990, 2017). Specifically, the questions encourage reflective responses that delve into the experiences that support and encourage career commitment among newcomers to student affairs.

This case study is bound within the student affairs division at Mid-Atlantic University and its members who have worked in the field for more than five years. Within this division, it is estimated that 30% of the full-time staff members have been in the field longer than five years and serve as supervisors to second-year graduate assistants (GA) or entry-level professionals. As a member of this division and primary investigator, I have built a longtime collegial relationship and trust with potential participants, which should lead to richer qualitative data from semi-structured interviews.

Significance of Study
Although past studies looked at new professional retention in student affairs, this study does so from the perspective of those who remained in the field versus those who left the field. The significance of this study is to determine those factors that contribute to professional persistence beyond the fifth year. This study differentiates itself from others by taking a situational approach and emphasizing what the profession is doing well versus what it does wrong. Most studies focused on the attrition rate. Instead, this study focuses on the 40% - 50% of those retained in the field and situational factors that contribute to professional retention from an assets-based perspective (Cooperrider, 1990, 2017).

Therefore, this study addresses attrition from an Appreciative Inquiry perspective. *Appreciative Inquiry* (AI) is a methodology that is a collaborative approach to seek, identify, and enhance the 'life-giving forces' that are present when a system is performing optimally in human, economic, and organizational terms to guide social action (Cooperrider, 1990; Srivastva & Cooperrider, 1999; Watkins & Mohr, 2001). AI focuses on what worked well for an organization in the past (Hammond, 1998; Head & Young, 1998; Watkins & Mohr, 2001) and on the best an organization has to offer with the hopes of making it better (Lehner & Hight, 2006).

In this case, the study connects committed student affairs professionals in the middle of their careers to what experiences contributed to career longevity and what they do now that influences retention. Participants with greater than five years in the field are the focal point of this study for two perspectives. First, to provide insight into the experiences that encouraged their personal commitment or “stickiness” to the field. Secondly, as entry-level supervisors and mid-career administrators, they are poised to facilitate professional longevity in student affairs (Wilson et al., 2016). This perspective offers insight into how they contribute to retention as supervisors to professional newcomers. The terms *seasoned, mid-level, and mid-career*
synonymously refer to professionals with more than five years of experience throughout this study.

Secondly, this study follows recommendations to adapt theory intended for students to newcomers in student affairs (Pittman & Foubert, 2016; Shetty et al., 2016). By studying the effects of marginality and mattering on newcomers, research of this kind can simultaneously benefit the team member and the institution. Whether the new hire is supported and valued early on may reduce turnover and costs associated with repeat search processes. The utilization of student development theory geared at retention as a basis for the theoretical framework is described in more detail in Chapter 2.

**Positionality**

As a HESA professional with 20 plus years in the field, I am committed to the profession and desire to share my passion with those entering the field. As a white, middle-class female, I consider myself more fortunate than many, contributing to an overall optimistic viewpoint on life. My general positive attitude counterbalanced learning difficulties early on and is the basis for my growth mindset (Dweck, 2008). A growth mindset is defined as developing abilities and knowledge through strategic planning and hard work (Dweck, 2008). The AI approach to this research is rooted in social constructivism worldview (Cooperrider, 1990). Social constructivists believe there is no one reality or truth but multiple realities determined by an individual’s perceptions and understanding (Gergen, 2012).

My journey into student affairs began during my undergraduate experience. I worked for three women who became my champions. They never doubted or questioned who I was or my abilities. Encouraged to study HESA, my experience as a graduate student with a two-year assistantship as a graduate hall director was not without challenges. However, I felt a sense of
inclusion and worth through the classroom faculty, assistantship supervisors, and my internships' supervisors with the Dean of Students and the Director for the Office of Social Equity.

I spent my early years in student affairs, primarily in residence life. I worked at a large urban R1 institution for the first year and a half. Although I felt connected to my colleagues, my supervisors and the institution showed a lack of concern for my safety after a few scary situations. In hindsight, had I not felt connected to my peers, I would have left the field, but instead, I chose to leave the institution for a new position as a director of residence life. My seven-person peer group at this new college became the most dynamic, energetic team I have ever worked with in my professional career. Although our time together was short-lived, in two years, we pushed each other to be our best. We capitalized on what each of us could offer the group using a strengths-based approach. The sense of connection, values, ethics, and innovation we felt as a team created a sense of professional energy and excitement that cemented my commitment to student affairs.

My first five years in the profession solidified my career commitment to higher education and student affairs. Because of these experiences, I want to explore whether a sense of mattering during the early years led to career commitment or a "stickiness" among other professionals who have invested more than five years in the profession. I am aware that my current role as the executive associate for vice president for student affairs at Mid-Atlantic University contributes to my overall positionality. Participants of this study work indirectly for the vice president for student affairs (VPSA). As the investigator for this study, I am tied to the participants, the topic, and the division's culture at Mid-Atlantic University. I acknowledge that my work role may foster both a collection of rich data and perhaps hinder it in some cases. More specifically, some potential interview participants may find my proximity to the VPSA too close and thus choose to
withhold negative experiences. On the other hand, other participants may find it an opportunity to voice workplace concerns.

I am also aware that not all HESA professionals have similar experiences. Each participant brings their own lived experience and reasons for remaining in the field to this research. My job as the researcher is to offer their stories to this study as accurately as possible. Lastly, I acknowledge the difficult times in which this research is occurring. The global pandemic will add an employment perspective to the field that may not have been recognized before 2020. I have considered these possibilities and the impact my role in the division, differing participant experiences, and COVID-19 could have on the outcome of this research.

Summary

This dissertation reopens the conversation of retention among new professionals in student affairs when organizations face significant turnover issues due to the abundance of retirement age workers and job insecurities or the prioritization of work-life balance initiated by the global pandemic. As turnover increases, there is a greater need to re-examine what influences retention among new professionals in student affairs. This study attempts to learn how retention is achieved through the experiences of professionals who remain in the field beyond five years, using an asset-based approach.

Chapter 2 begins with an overview of how professional identity is developed specifically for those entering student affairs. The next chapter provides a literature review that outlines the content necessary for framing this study. The literature review will discuss socialization during transitions into the workplace and the historical struggle with retention for student affairs. Chapter 2 will conclude with an explanation of the theoretical framework used for this study.
Chapter 2

This chapter is composed of two halves: In the first half, I provide a review of four areas of literature which looks at (a) professional identity development, (b) socialization, (c) retention, and (d) Generation Z. In the second half of the literature review, I present my theoretical framework which uses Schlossberg’s (1981) transition theory and Schlossberg’s (1989) theory of marginality and mattering. This second section concludes with a figure display of the theoretical framework followed by the chapter summary.

The purpose of the literature review is to look at the information which provides a foundational understanding of the process to retain a new professional in student affairs. The chapter begins with a look at professional identity development. Professional identity development is the foundation, or beginning point, of an individual's journey to becoming a professional within a chosen field. Secondly, this chapter discusses the importance of socialization for new professionals transitioning into employment. The socialization process benefits graduate students preparing for a career in student affairs and new professionals in their first entry-level position. Third, I cover literature centered on workplace retention, particularly among newcomers to student affairs. The fourth and last section of the literature review looks at the incoming cohort of colleagues, Generation Z, to better understand their needs for retention purposes.

Professional Identity Development

Professional identity is the relationship between self and membership within a profession which is the basis for forming a connection to a profession. The internalization of norms of the profession, such as values, ethics, and standards, helps professionals derive meaning in their work (Wilson et al., 2016). Professional identity is the internalization of the profession's norms
into self-image, the acquisition of competencies, skill, judgment, and commitment to the profession (Bragg, 1979). In 1993, Bruss and Kopala added that professional identity development includes the evolution of professional pride, ethical, and moral behavior with personal responsibility toward one's work role. Although studies on professional identity development in student affairs are limited (Wilson et al., 2016), entering and studying in a HESA graduate program starts the trajectory of professional identity, which includes acquiring a body of knowledge, history, socialization practices, and skill development (Reid et al., 2008).

An individual's personal and social identities include their professional identity (Hotho, 2008). For most adults, profession or work is an essential component of how they regard themselves and their role in the larger society. A sense of self seems to be grounded in a career path, profession, or professional role at work. Professional values, ethics, and standards also help individuals derive meaning from their work (Wilson et al., 2016).

Although there are well-formed definitions for professional identity and a list of HESA competencies and skills (ACPA & NASPA, 2015), little is known about how student affairs administrators shape their professional identity over time. It seems the failure to construct a professional identity might limit effectiveness in professional roles, which may explain some attrition from the field (Wilson et al., 2016). Hirschy et al. (2015) attempted to explain the first step to developing a professional identity connects to exposure to the profession and organizational values. When new professionals adapt to new roles, responsibilities, organizational culture, and professional and personal values, they become accustomed to their new identities and become more likely to remain in the field (Wilson et al., 2016). A study by Silver et al. (2014) warned when graduate students experienced a shift in their values or views of student affairs, they also considered leaving the field - even before they officially began the
work. Therefore, it is crucial to recognize three touchpoints in which graduate students can compare and contrast their values with the field of student affairs. These three areas include graduate preparation programs, supervision, and professional associations.

**Graduate Preparation Programs**

Graduate preparation programs are created to teach students about the nature of the work through theoretical foundations of higher education and student affairs (HESA) (Perez & Haley, 2021). Coursework is often combined with practical experiences through internships, practica, and assistantships. Perez and Haley (2021) suggested that ideally, there is continuity between what people learn about “good practices” through coursework and fieldwork experiences. That alignment may result in a greater understanding of the field’s values, foundational knowledge, skills, and a strong sense of professional identity. HESA programs with academic enrichment activities such as theory-based curricula, high ethical and behavior expectations, collaborative peer culture, and primarily full-time enrollment are more likely to commit to student affairs (Liddell et al., 2014).

However, a study by Renn and Jessup-Anger (2008) showed a lack of salience of formal coursework in the lives of new professionals. They suggested that new professionals do not see the connection between intellectual preparation and work in the field. Their study participants said sometimes they do not know how to apply theory to practice. Another study discovered similar findings among new professionals and their academic programs. First-year employees often found a disconnect between theory and the day-to-day work (Lee & Helm, 2013). Many times, these discrepancies become apparent within the first few weeks of work (Lee & Helm, 2013). Participants in this study found the divergence lay in the increasing prioritization of
bottom-line and organizational efficiency, which does not align with student development goals (Lee & Helm, 2013).

The classroom was ideal for faculty and students to have ongoing conversations on professional, organizational, and personal values, which play an essential role in forming a professional identity (Tull & Merdano, 2006). However, there is a need for conversations regarding the growing entrepreneurial nature of the institution of higher education. Discussions preparing new professionals for the marketplace demands and student development tensions may help better prepare new professionals (Lee & Helm, 2013).

**Graduate Supervisors**

Fortunately, graduate students have high regard for their internship and assistantship supervisors, and these individuals can play a significant role in supporting professional identity development for new entrants. Supervisors often shape graduates’ decision to enter student affairs and understanding of good practice (Taub & McEwen, 2006). Supervisors can serve as a guide, advocate, challenge, and bar entry to the field (Perez & Haley, 2021). When asked, new professionals ranked their first supervisor at the top of the list for providing the most professional guidance (Wilson, 2008). According to Tull and Medrano (2008), values and characteristics of the profession are more significantly absorbed when mid-level supervisors socialize with new professionals. Supervisors can and should discuss job expectations with supervisees and how it aligns with departmental and institutional goals and missions (Davidson, 2012). Research indicates significant potential for success when staff members fully understand the institution (Tull & Medrano, 2008).

**Professional Associations**
Professional associations, such as ACPA and NASPA, also reinforce professional values and contribute to forming a professional identity (Duran & Allen, 2020; Liddell et al., 2014). Graduate students and new professionals understand that professional associations offer essential networking opportunities (Tull, 2009). In a qualitative study, Duran and Allen (2020) learned how graduates and new professionals acquired socialization messages through professional associations. This study reinforced the findings from Tull (2009). In one theme, new professionals relayed that networking through professional associations could lead to future job or leadership opportunities (Duran & Allen, 2020). An additional theme suggested that increased involvement could also open doors to leadership positions within professional organizations in professional interest areas. Faculty and internship supervisors can encourage graduate student involvement in professional associations for entry-level job searches, networking, and meeting seasoned professionals (Janosik, 2009). As increased involvement occurs within associations, graduate students find intra-professional and cultural homes that reflect their values, gain connections, and better understand career expectations (Gardner & Barnes, 2007). The profession could also consider the intersection of curricula and practice to focus particular attention related to standard professional competencies (Cuyjet et al., 2009; Liddell et al., 2014).

Entering and studying in a HESA graduate program starts the trajectory of professional identity development. Graduate supervisors and professional associations contribute to its progression. Yet, all three entities have a significant role in developing professional identities in new professionals, particularly regarding conversations on personal, professional, and organization values alignment. Weidman et al. (2001) added to the discussion on professional identity development by connecting it to workplace socialization. According to this research team, professional identity develops from critical socialization outcomes (Weidman et al., 2001).
Socialization processes focus on appropriate behaviors, values, role clarity (Hotho, 2008), and the relationships that are an intrinsic part of the professional culture (Tull, 2006). The second section of this literature review focuses on socialization.

**Socialization**

Socialization is the second body of literature in this review. As new professionals begin to develop a professional identity, they gain a sense of understanding and commitment to their chosen profession. The understanding and initial commitment to a career path help form a foundation for socialization. The introduction and assimilation into work, in this case, student affairs, is part of the socialization process. Van Maanen (1978) defined *organizational socialization* as the process in which an individual obtains the attitudes, behavior, and knowledge needed to participate in the profession successfully. Through this process, new members of an organization begin to appreciate, understand, and adopt the customs, norms, traditions, values, and goals of both their organization and their profession (Janosik, 2009).

In a study on entry-level professionals' perspectives on socialization in HESA, Hirschy et al. (2015) confirmed that socialization experiences during and after graduate school are associated with professional identity development (Weidman et al., 2001). Therefore, this section divides the two opportunities student affairs has to work on: socialization during graduate preparation programs and after graduate school when attrition is high.

**Socialization in Graduate Preparation Programs**

Graduate preparation programs are assumed to be a primary agent for socialization among scholars and practitioners in student affairs (Kuk & Cuyjet, 2009; Young & Janosik, 2007). Master's programs use a dual training model of concurrent coursework and fieldwork (Kuk & Cuyjet, 2009). Liddell et al. (2014) examined full-time graduate students with
assistantships. They found that in-class experiences were perceived as significantly more influential in getting involved professionally and modeling ethical practice. These same students perceived out-of-class field experiences such as internships, practica, and assistantships as more influential in understanding institutional culture, political landscapes, professional expectations, expanding professional networks, and developing career goals (Liddell et al., 2014). Fieldwork experiences have a more significant role in shaping graduate students’ understanding of the profession than their coursework (Liddell et al., 2014; Renn & Jessup-Anger, 2008).

Kowtha (2018) reinforced the importance of fieldwork as part of the education process in terms of school-to-work transition, acculturation, and retention. Yet, she also cautioned that many graduates enter organizations with unrealistic or idealized conceptions of their profession. These misconceptions often lead to poor outcomes, and as a result, organizations need to pay attention to socialized graduates to divest them of misconceptions early on (Kowtha, 2018). It seems dual preparatory experience offers a rich foundation, but there is a missing link of perception versus reality between graduate school and on-the-job experiences.

Weidman et al. (2001) offered a non-linear four-stage socialization framework for the socialization of student affairs graduates specifically designed at attracting and retaining student affairs newcomers. The stages were prospective students, professional communities, personal communities, and novice practitioners. At the center of the framework is the graduate HESA socialization experience. This framework of concentric circles represents the relationship between each stage during graduate education (Weidman et al., 2001). Despite this framework, Perez (2016) asserted a significant gap encountered between student expectations and experiences during graduate school and the subsequent transition to practice at this point in the individuals' socialization process.
Although there has been much research on curriculum content, less research has focused on the dual training structure and its implications for newcomers' socialization to the field (Perez, 2016). Perez (2016) created a model that featured the overlapping cultures of individual, institutional, functional area, and professional, with coursework and fieldwork. Perez (2016) also encouraged research focused on cohort socialization versus individual socialization as collective sensemaking may illustrate how group norms, culture, and values are acquired, reinforced, and changed.

**Socialization After Graduate School**

According to Hirschy et al. (2015), socialization is vital for new professionals transitioning into full-time employment from graduate preparation programs in student affairs. Pittman and Foubert (2016) agreed practices of socialization should take place early in an individual's career. Creating seamless curricular partnerships between graduate programs and worksites, in the form of socialization practices for new professionals, is the response needed (Hirschy et al., 2015). In a mixed-methods study of new professionals in their first five years, Cilente et al. (2007) found six developmental needs of student affairs newcomers. They were (1) receiving adequate support, (2) understanding job expectations, (3) fostering student learning, (4) moving up in the field, (5) enhancing supervision skills, and (6) developing multicultural competencies (Cilente et al., 2007).

According to Cooper-Thomas et al. (2012), socialization practices are more effective for newcomers fresh out of school versus experienced new hires that rely on their actions and can draw upon their previous experiences for socialization. Newcomers with basic professional knowledge (such as graduate preparation programs) will likely adapt well (Kowtha, 2018). Although new graduates do not have much experience to draw from, familiarity with workplace
norms, traditions, and expectations aids in the sensemaking of new jobs and organizations. However, newcomers are likely to adapt well (Kowtha, 2018) when reinforced by organizational socialization tactics (Van Maanen & Schein, 1977).

King et al. (2018) linked employee onboarding practices and retention in a qualitative report on academic staff in 30 institutions in the United Kingdom. They discovered employees expect a scaffolded introduction to their new work environment. Conversely, a lack of newcomer support or a “sink or swim approach” in academia can result in low professional self-esteem (King et al., 2018). According to Kowtha (2018), organizational socialization tactics reduce role uncertainty and ease newcomers' transition through social support. Yet Perez and Haley (2021) added that supervisors have the ability to reduce or amplify a newcomer’s socialization and desire to work in student affairs, given their power to confirm and disrupt the understanding of good practice in the field.

As new team members seek information, establish peer relationships, and receive organizational support, they adjust (Bauer & Erdogan, 2011). When team members begin to feel more well-adjusted in their role, they begin to put their personality into the position (Collins, 2009). Renn and Hodges (2007) referred to this stage as "settling in." At this stage, a new professional is ready to take responsibility for professional development and continued learning in student affairs with a greater sense of organizational culture, work relationships and politics, and expectations (Collins, 2009). Settling in is an excellent start to retaining new professionals. The third section of the literature review focuses on the retention of new professionals in student affairs.

Retention
Retention is the third body of literature in this review. The BLS published an employee tenure summary in September 2020. According to the BLS summary, younger workers were more likely than older workers to be short-tenured. The median employee tenure for workers ages 25 to 34 was 2.8 years (BLS, 2020). Therefore, these numbers indicate that today’s new student affairs professionals would leave an institution within their first three years. This study primarily seeks to understand what keeps new professionals in the field, not specifically at the institution.

A 2018 Retention Report gleaned the primary reasons for workplace attrition after reviewing 234,000 exit interviews. According to the report, in general, employers are not living up to employees’ expectations (Mahan et al., 2018). The top three reasons employees left the workplace were lack of career development, work-life balance, and manager behavior (Mahan et al., 2018). In the same report, it was discovered that 77% of employees who quit their positions could have been retained by their employers (Mahan et al., 2018). Retention is possible with organizations that anticipate turnover and a rise in retirement rate (Kyndt et al., 2009). Future-oriented policies that focus on recruiting, selecting, developing, and retaining promising new professionals will most likely improve their employment rates (Kyndt et al., 2009) and reduce the cost associated with filling position vacancies (Bauer, 2010; Bauer & Erdogan, 2011).

Although other industries may be experiencing similar patterns with their entry-level teammates, several studies have focused on reducing the turnover rate among new professionals in student affairs. Focusing on retention in the workplace keeps new professionals from moving to other industries after a significant investment toward an advanced degree required to work in student affairs, preserves institutional knowledge, fosters organizational and career commitment (Chillakuru, 2020; Fried, 2014), and reduces the cost associated with filling position vacancies.
As some student affairs professionals retire or reprioritize work-life balance post-COVID, finding creative ways to retain new professionals becomes more meaningful. Attention to the socialization process of new professionals during the transition from graduate school to work is critical (Hirschy et al., 2015; Perez, 2016), and the first five years of employment is a crucial time for new professionals to settle into the profession (Hirt, 2009). Employment rates in student affairs estimated 50-60% of new professionals drop out of the field during these five years (Pittman & Foubert, 2016). The following sub-sections discuss the literature centered on three factors to retaining newcomers in student affairs: collegial interactions, supervision, and job satisfaction.

**Collegial Interactions**

Those who already work in HESA have a responsibility to keep talented newcomers in the profession (Fried, 2011; Wilson, 2008). Professionals at their midway point often hire, supervise, and frequently serve as mentors to entry-level employees. This group has the right amount of career longevity, experience, and influence to support young professionals through career development beyond the first five years, where retention is critical (Wilson et al., 2016). According to Tull and Medrano (2008), by socializing with mid-level supervisors and colleagues, new professionals more significantly absorb the character values of the profession. Their research indicated a significant potential for success and retention when staff members fully understand the institution (Tull & Medrano, 2008). Transmission of character values can occur intentionally or unintentionally through collegial team member interactions (Tull & Medrano, 2008). For example, managing new professionals' expectations through open discussions on professional relationships, institutional fit, salary, benefits, professional development, and career advancement could retain skilled newcomers (Buchanan & Shupp, 2010; Bauer & Erdogan, 2011).
The seasoned group brings the knowledge of previous experiences, priorities, and successes to strategically increase retention. In understanding how mid-level professionals have become committed to the field, student affairs and higher education can look at ways to achieve higher retention rates among new staff.

Further research suggested several approaches for retaining new professionals, including mentor relationships (Tull, 2006), involvement in professional associations (Janosik, 2009), and supervision practices (Tull, 2006). Buchanan & Shupp (2015) said lack of mentorship leads to attrition. Appreciative leadership, such as support, encouragement, respect, and opportunity by the direct supervisor enhanced team member retention (Butcher & Kritsonis, 2007; Howard & Gould, 2000; Taylor, 2004). Although not all mid-level colleagues are supervisors of new professionals, significant research identified how supervisors influence the retention of new professionals. The following sub-section explains the supervisory role concerning retention.

Supervision

Good supervision of new professionals reduces the desire to leave the field, but it is one of the most complex responsibilities for managers (Tull, 2006). Shupp and Arminio (2012) looked at these complex supervisor responsibilities. They identified four supervisory-related themes of entry-level supervision: (a) supervisor accessibility, (b) meaningful supervisor interactions, (c) proper use of formal evaluations, and (d) professional development (Shupp & Arminio, 2012). As a result, Shupp and Arminio (2012) recommended improving the supervisor experience. These suggestions included a commitment to supervision at all levels, finding value in the formal evaluation process, offering ongoing supervisory training, assessing supervisors, providing strong graduate school internship supervision, and focusing on experiences that tie theory to practice.
Unfortunately, entry-level residence life staff found that supervisors have divided attention, lack of in-office presence, and a delayed response time beyond what was acceptable (Davidson, 2012). Supervisory communication can influence the perception of the employer-employee relationship positively or negatively (Wilson, 2008). According to St. Onge et al. (2008), ineffective supervision is a top cause leading to the attrition of newcomers in student affairs (St. Onge et al., 2008). However, former supervisors ranked first when new professionals were asked about mentor relationships or those who provide professional guidance (Wilson, 2008), confirming a supervisor's significant role for first-time professionals. Buchanan's and Shupp's (2015) study on entry-level attrition cautioned that inadequate supervision led to new professionals second-guessing positions and their work in student affairs. This same study identified job dissatisfaction, lack of professional development, and the awkwardness of navigating campus politics as themes for departing the field (Buchanan & Shupp, 2015).

**Job Satisfaction**

Spector (1997) defined *job satisfaction* as the measure of connectedness between liking a job and individual aspects of the job, such as supervision, responsibilities, work environment, opportunity, policies, benefits, and compensation, to name a few. Buchanan and Shupp (2015) used job satisfaction theory as the basis for their study on turnover in student affairs. This theory contends that when an employee's responsibilities and outcomes align with their desires, job satisfaction is more likely to occur (Buchanan & Shupp, 2015; Herzberg et al., 1959). Tull (2006) looked at synergistic supervision and job satisfaction. Synergistic supervision is defined through a model that clarifies specific conversations on expectations, goals, attitudes, and performance (Tull, 2006; Winston & Creamer, 1998). Tull (2006) stated that job dissatisfaction could result from role ambiguity, conflict, stress and burnout, overload, and lack of perceived
advancement opportunities. However, his study showed that supervisors concerned with job dissatisfaction and turnover could work to avoid the issue through synergistic supervision (Tull, 2006).

While some studies looked at job satisfaction in student affairs overall, others looked at a specific area. For instance, Residence Life and Housing is a large functional area for student affairs and the initial entry-point for many starting in the field (Taub & McEwen, 2006). Therefore, research on retention from this functional area offers considerable insight into job satisfaction from the perspective of many newcomers to the field. However, Fu (2011) found that job satisfaction increases retention. Wilson (2008) looked specifically at residence life and housing and asserted that job satisfaction alone does not address issues related to retaining the best and brightest new professionals. While Buchanan and Shupp (2015) agreed that job dissatisfaction plays a role in an entry-level professional's decision to leave the field, they disagreed about it coming down to one singular factor. Although there may not be one factor to attrition, ineffective supervision is a top cause of job dissatisfaction (St. Onge et al., 2008).

According to national statistics, there is high turnover among new professionals in the workplace (BLS, 2020; Mahan et al., 2018). However, in student affairs, retention efforts can keep new professionals from moving to other industries. Professional persistence is essential for the longevity of student affairs. As some student affairs professionals retire and reprioritize work and life in a post-pandemic workplace, student affairs could be entering a perfect storm for increased attrition. A combination of factors may influence the next decade of retention rates among student affairs new professionals. Yet colleagues who often hire, supervise, and frequently serve as mentors to entry-level employees have the potential to slow the impact of these factors. Adequate supervision of new professionals reduces the desire to leave the field,
even though it is one of the most complex responsibilities for managers (Tull, 2006). The next and final section of the literature reviews the unique attributes Generation Z (Gen Z) brings to the workplace.

**Generation Z**

In this fourth and final section of the literature review, I discuss the predominant characteristics of the new generation of incoming student affairs professionals: Gen Z. Identifying and addressing themes leading to retention cannot occur unless the target audience is understood. Therefore, this section of the literature review is dedicated to understanding Gen Z's characteristics, their point of view, and how best to retain them.

First, a substantial proportion of new professionals in student affairs come into the field through master's HESA programs or a related field such as Counseling (Renn & Hodges, 2007). According to Pittman and Foubert (2016), new professionals account for 20% of the student affairs workforce. Most entry-level professionals who took the direct path from a bachelor's degree to a master's in HESA are between 23 and 28 years old. Today’s students of this age group were born between 1994 and 1999 (Kasasa, 2019). Gen Z children are defined by birthdates between 1997 and 2012. Therefore, new professionals between 23 and 28 will be considered Generation Z until approximately 2040.

Although it is essential not to pigeonhole an individual into a specific category, it is helpful to recognize some of this population's characteristics and how best to prepare them for the workforce. Each generation has distinguished itself concerning expectations, experiences, values, education, family, lifestyle, and work ethics (Chillakuru, 2020). Understanding Gen Z can help prepare for this group more effectively (Chillakuru, 2020).
The Gen Z cohort generally comes from greater economic security, is higher educated, and is more ethnically and racially diverse than any other generation (Chillakuru, 2020). Gen Z is considered the first generation of digital natives, distinguishing them from previous generations (Chillakuru, 2020; Wilkie, 2019). Generally, the Gen Z cohort expects meaningful work, performance management, work-life balance, personal connection, continued professional development, and anticipate implementing their ideas (Chillakuru, 2020). However, Schroth (2019) found they are less likely to have worked when they were young and are more likely to suffer from anxiety and depression.

In a global survey conducted by The Workforce Institute at Kronos, Inc. (2019), 3,000 members of Gen Z indicated they are achievement-oriented but do not tolerate working when they feel forced to work. However, with an intolerance for specific work (Kronos, Inc., 2019) and a lack of early job experiences, Gen Z could have unrealistic work expectations, which can trigger low levels of commitment and high turnover (Schroth, 2019). Therefore, managing Gen Z may be a challenge for supervisors of this group (Chillakuru, 2020). Yet, the group reported they could perform better if given clear instructions and on-the-job training (Schroth, 2019).

Gen Z feels confident when working collaboratively within teams, manages deadlines, and focuses on customer care (Wilkie, 2019). Although they are the digital generation, they prefer in-person to virtual interactions (Wilkie, 2019). They acknowledge training and onboarding as a necessary tool to reduce newcomer uncertainty and anxiety, introduce role clarity and understanding, and sensemaking of their new environment while also providing tangible and intangible resources to become valuable and fully functional on the job (Chillakuru, 2020; Schroth, 2019). Although this group is confident in many areas, they feel their education did not prepare them for work, and their anxiety holds them back from success (Wilkie, 2019).
New professionals are in a unique and valuable career stage (Fried, 2011). With each new professional generation to student affairs, their strengths include reference points, customs, and attitudes most similar to the undergraduate student population they serve. Newcomers also bring the ability to adapt quickly to ever-changing technology (Fried, 2011). Ensuring the success and satisfaction of new joiners is essential to a vibrant profession (Fried, 2011) and therefore is too valuable not to assist in professional growth (Buchanan & Shupp, 2015). Knowing the incoming cohort of new professionals helps create a better sense of how to retain this population. Gen Z is achievement-oriented, higher-educated, and more racially diverse than previous generations. They expect their work to be meaningful, but with that comes the potential for unrealistic expectations that could be difficult to manage or even harder to retain (Schroth, 2019). The profession depends mainly on those already settled in the field to retain and manage this incoming group.

**Literature Review Summary**

Professional identity development is the foundation, or beginning point, of an individual's journey to becoming a professional within a chosen field. Although there are several definitions for professional identity, little is known about how student affairs administrators shape their professional identity. However, workers with personal values congruent with the professional are more likely to remain in the field (Wilson et al., 2016). Graduate preparation programs, professional associations, and graduate supervisors can assist soon-to-be professionals with identifying whether their values fit with the values of the profession. The process of socialization benefits graduate students preparing for student affairs and new professionals transitioning to their first entry-level position. Role clarity and organizational culture are significant aspects of socialization. Workplace retention of new professionals is crucial in the first five years of
employment. Understanding the new generation of professionals helps better prepare for their on-the-job needs and appreciate the contributions they bring.

With decades of retention issues for newcomers to student affairs, in combination with the current-day workplace turnover issues, the literature reflects the need for continued support for new professionals on campus. However, the literature does not explain how some individuals transition from graduate student to committed student affairs profession while others do not. Yet evidence shows that feeling connected to work may lead to positive organizational outcomes such as improved retention (Buck, 2017). People in organizations need to feel they matter (Tull, 2009). How individuals feel within their environment can positively or negatively impact their desire to stay within a community (Schlossberg, 1989). In this study, I ask mid-level professionals about their experiences and perceptions that led to staying in student affairs. This next section of chapter 2 explains the theoretical framework for this research: intent and operational terms and the current problem of this study.

**Theoretical Framework**

Below, I present the second half of this chapter, which constitutes the theoretical framework. This framework is primarily based on Schlossberg’s two theories: transition theory (1981) and theory of marginality and mattering (1989). Throughout this section, I refer to the preceding literature which reinforces my selection of these theories for this study on retention. In the final section of the chapter, I bring the literature and theories together in a final paragraph with a figure display.

Unique to this study, the theories utilized in this research were initially intended for student development to foster a new approach to supporting entry-level staff members in their first several years on the job. The two theories that serve as the structure for this research are
transition theory (Schlossberg, 1981) and the theory of marginality and mattering (Schlossberg, 1989). While these theories apply to student situations, neither theory, as far as this researcher is aware, has been combined and applied to study the retention of student affairs professional newcomers. Although both theories play an essential role in this study, the theory of marginality and mattering is the primary focus of this study. During the qualitative data collection phase, this study explores the experiences that contribute to longevity among student affairs administrators through the perspective of seasoned professionals, focusing on how feelings and perceptions of marginality and mattering contributed to career retention. The following sections will provide an overview of transition theory (Schlossberg, 1981) and the theory of marginality and mattering (Schlossberg, 1989).

Transition Theory

Schlossberg's first contribution to understanding adult development was her transition theory, a model for how adults adapt to transitions (Schlossberg, 1981). The definition of transition for this research was informed by (Goodman et al., 2006) as an event or non-event that changes relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles of an individual who also recognizes it as a transition. A transition is a process without end that, over time, includes phases of assimilation and appraisal of people (Anderson et al., 2011). By this definition, it can be inferred the change from graduate student to a new professional qualifies as a transitionary stage, assuming the individual going through the process recognizes themselves in a stage of transition (Schlossberg, 1981). The introduction and assimilation into student affairs work is part of the socialization process. As previously stated, socialization is how an individual obtains the attitudes, behavior, and knowledge needed to participate in the profession successfully (Van Maanen, 1978).
Restated from the literature review, an initial sense of professional identity develops in the early stages of socialization, particularly during HESA graduate school with dual requirements of academics and out-of-class preparatory experiences (Liddell et al., 2014). There is a continued need for socialization during the transition from school to first-time work sites (Hirschy et al., 2015; Perez, 2016). There is good news that the socialization of first-time professionals is more effective for newcomers fresh out of school versus experienced newcomers (Cooper-Thomas et al., 2012; Kowtha, 2018). Student affairs professionals right out of graduate school possess the requisite knowledge and skills, have made the academic investment, and have positive job attitudes (McDevitt et al., 2002), unlike experienced newcomers who often come with individual career agendas (Cooper-Thomas et al., 2012). Schroth (2019) stated that Gen Z comes to the workforce with less work experience and more education than any previous generation, and this evidence is favorable for socialization outcomes for new professionals of today.

Although the literature points to a potential for positive outcomes, the progression through any transition is complex. Evans et al. (2010) stated that transitions involve integrations, and the time needed to integrate varies on the person involved and the situation. Again, the literature reinforced that socialization processes such as onboarding, training, and mentoring help new members of an organization begin to integrate professional and organizational customs, norms, traditions, values, and goals (Bauer & Erdogan, 2011; Janosik, 2009). Yet, understanding the transitional phases and factors in this theory helps readers better comprehend the adaptation of these theories for this study.

Goodman et al. (2006) reinforced Schlossberg’s original series of transitional phases, "moving in," "moving through," and "moving out." In each phase, the individual has common
and specific needs (Schlossberg et al., 1989). These phased needs include rule familiarity, regulations, norms, and expectations; sustaining commitment through the transition; and finally, grieving the loss of the previous environment, structure, friends, and support which gradually leads to integration (Schlossberg et al., 1989). All of these apply to newcomers transitioning from graduate school to a first-time, full-time position in student affairs.

While moving through the three phases, the individual progresses through a transition. Marginalization or mattering can result in two distinctly different outcomes to a newcomer's career path. In the "moving in" phase, professional identity development assists with "settling in" to the profession. In the second phase, "moving through," an individual brings strengths and weaknesses as part of the four S's that helps or hinders successful transition. In the final phase, "moving out," the individual has a choice on how they want to "move out" of transition, and they can choose to settle in for a long career or move out to a different career.

During Schlossberg's (1981) study of transitions, she identified four factors that help predict an individual's ability to transition. These four S's - Situation, Self, Support, and Strategies - look at the balance of resources and deficits to predict how a person will cope through the process (Schlossberg et al., 1989). Each factor has essential components that can positively or negatively affect success through a life transition, such as leaving graduate school to become a new professional in student affairs. Each of the four S's suggests how a person in transition may need more support in some areas versus others (Schlossberg et al., 1989). To adequately support an individual through this process requires comprehending the particular transition's meaning to that person (context, impact, type). The factors to consider are Schlossberg's (1981) four S's, which include:

- **Situation:** Timing, role change, duration, previous experience, and responsibility
• **Self:** Resilience, positive outlook, spirituality, self-care, and personal demographics

• **Support:** Family, friends, intimate support, workplace support network, a more comprehensive support network

• **Strategies:** Coping responses, reframing, modification, control, managing stress

Entering the workforce with a first full-time job is one of the five transitional markers to adulthood (Settersten et al., 2005). Adapting transition theory to entry-level student affairs professionals requires understanding the theory's original intent and recognizing that this phase of life may demand extra effort for a successful outcome. Student affairs can acknowledge new professionals have specific needs through each phase of moving in, through, and out of transition. Some needs may be specific to the individual, and some may be general to the Gen Z population. Awareness of the development needs of newcomers (Cilente, 2006), paired with clear communication of role expectations and workplace culture, are essential for organizational socialization and adjustment (Bauer & Erdogan, 2011; Hirt, 2009). The transitional coping mechanisms referred to as the four S's can help student affairs see an individual (and the cohort) with strengths and weaknesses in the context of transitioning to a new workplace. Their ability to successfully transition from student to first-time, full-time professional may require additional and intentional assistance from the institution, supervisor, and colleagues. The following theoretical component explains the importance of workplace acceptance to retention, which is primary to this study.

**Theory of Marginality and Mattering**

Schlossberg's (1989) theory of marginality and mattering extends her work on transitions which convinced her that every time an individual changes a role or experiences a transition, the potential for feeling marginalized increases. The theory of marginality and mattering, in its
original intent, addressed undergraduate student involvement and retention in higher education. How individuals feel within their environment can positively or negatively impact their desire to stay in that community (Schlossberg, 1989). Therefore, according to Schlossberg's theory, marginalization could explain why new professionals exit the field. The potential for marginalization rises when newcomers transition from graduate student identity to their new professional identity. Therefore, it also seems appropriate to serve as the framework for my study on workplace retention among new professionals in student affairs.

People in organizations need to feel they matter (Tull, 2009). In the literature reviewed, Strayhorn (2009) found that peer-to-peer socialization and ensuring a feeling of acceptance in the workplace increases retention. Buck (2017) found that personal connections to work may lead to positive organizational outcomes such as improved retention. These findings reinforce the idea that how an individual is made to feel early in their career impacts their decision to stay in the field or leave HESA behind.

Feelings of workplace isolation and acceptance are the basis of Schlossberg's theory. Schlossberg (1989) connected two concepts, marginalization and mattering, as components of assimilating into a community. This study uses Schlossberg's definitions of marginality and mattering that included four critical components for each concept. The components of *marginality* are feeling excluded and self-consciousness (which can lead to irritability and depression) (Schlossberg, 1989). The components of *mattering* are receiving attention (being noticed and appreciated), feeling important, ego-extension (others are proud of you and empathize with your struggles), and dependence (being needed) (Schlossberg, 1989). Although this work was an add-on to her transition theory, Schlossberg's understanding of how people need
to feel welcomed, included, and valued through transition reinforces the importance of mattering in the workplace and the long-term desire to remain in student affairs.

Social acceptance and workplace relationships are crucial to newcomer adjustment. The research by Strayhorn (2009) also supported the theory of marginality and mattering when new professionals reported that satisfaction with the work environment is highly correlated with coworker relationships (Strayhorn, 2009). Bauer and Erdogan (2011) reinforced that acceptance among peers and relationship building in the workplace are positively related to newcomer socialization, particularly for newcomers transitioning from school to work. Therefore, a lack of social acceptance or connection could lead to dissatisfaction, significantly increasing the odds of new professionals leaving (Strayhorn, 2009). The literature also suggests feeling connected, accepted, and a sense of mattering in the workplace may contribute to positive organizational outcomes such as improved retention (Bauer & Erdogan, 2011; Buck, 2017; Strayhorn, 2009, Tull, 2009). Yet, there is a significant gap between student expectations and experiences during graduate school and the transition to practice at this point in the individuals' socialization process (Perez, 2016). Although significant contribution has offered insight into socialization in student affairs, there is a continued need for socialization during the transition from school to first-time work sites (Hirschy et al., 2015; Perez, 2016).

Just as Schlossberg's two theories served as a framework for undergraduate student retention (Schlossberg, 1989), the purpose of this framework aims to show how marginalization and mattering are also critical ingredients to retention among new professionals. The work by Rosenberg and McCullough (1981) served as the foundation for Schlossberg’s theory of marginality and mattering (1989), which is the adapted framework for this study. The first modification I used replaces the term attention with its definition: feeling appreciated
The second change replaces *ego-extension* with the term’s two-part definition: a sense that others are proud of you and empathize with your struggles. By expanding these two terms to the definitions, the framework for this study becomes more applicable to positive workplace experiences that influence retention. This research utilizes the framework in Figure 1 to explore those experiences and practices that positively impacted professional persistence from the viewpoint of those who have remained in the field of student affairs.

**Figure 1**

*Theoretical Framework*

*Note.* Figure 1 represents the purpose of the study to gain insight into the influences of marginality and mattering on new professional retention. As the individual progresses from the second year of graduate school through the first five years in student affairs, the impact of marginalization or mattering can result in two distinctly different outcomes to a newcomer's career path – attrition or retention, as depicted in the darker split center arrow.
Summary

This chapter considered the relevant literature on professional identity development, socialization, retention, and Gen Z newcomers in student affairs. Although previous work has looked at aspects contributing to attrition or retention of new professionals, the research does not address why some individuals remain committed to the student affairs profession while others do not. Yet evidence shows feeling connected to work may lead to positive organizational outcomes such as improved retention (Buck, 2017). People in organizations need to feel they matter (Tull, 2009). How individuals feel within their environment can positively or negatively impact their desire to stay (Schlossberg, 1989). To the researcher's knowledge, there has not been a study that utilized theory intended for undergraduate student retention to retain student affairs new professionals. This study will explore new professionals’ retention for student affairs using Schlossberg's transition theory (1981) and theory of marginality and mattering (1989) as a framework. This study will specifically consider whether experiences and perceptions of marginality and mattering made a difference in workplace retention in student affairs beyond five years. Chapter 3 provides details of the methodology proposed for this study.
Chapter 3

This research aimed to understand retention among new professionals in student affairs. This research explored the experiences that contributed to longevity through the perspective of seasoned student affairs professionals. This study identified what attracts and retains new professionals to student affairs and what the profession can do to ensure newcomers' growth, support, and development in the field and the profession at large through a strength-based, positive approach.

This chapter begins with an overview of the objectives of this study and the methodology used to explore factors that lead to career longevity in student affairs. The chapter continues with more specific information on the case selection, participant selection, site setting, description of materials, validity in qualitative designs, and the research procedures.

Overview

This qualitative case study (Merriam, 1998; Stake, 1995; Yazan, 2015) investigates what factors influence and support retention among new professionals in student affairs. This study sought to determine whether Schlossberg's (1989) theory of marginality and mattering applies to new professional career retention in student affairs. Previous research estimated that 50–60% of new professionals leave the field within their first five years of work (Pittman & Foubert, 2016; Renn & Jessup-Anger, 2008; Tull, 2006). However, previous research has not focused on those staff members who choose to stay in student affairs. Unlike the other studies, this case study considers the 40-50% who remained in the field for more than five years after graduation from their master's degree training programs.

This study adds to the field of inquiry by identifying what fostered persistence in student affairs as a profession during the early years through an asset-based approach. The researcher
focused on the participants’ early new professional experiences and supervision experiences that aligned with Schlosberg’s (1989) theory of marginality and mattering. Specifically, the researcher probed for clues that indicated feelings of mattering that contributed to their retention while also listening for asset-based solutions or practices which encouraged retention. For this study, the term the researcher and the first person singular, I, are used interchangeably from this point forward in the following chapters.

This approach was grounded in Appreciative Inquiry (AI) (Cooperrider & Srivastava, 1987; Cooperrider et al., 2013). AI is rooted in a social constructivist worldview which contends that there is no one reality or truth but multiple realities determined by individuals' perceptions, dialogue, and understanding (Gergen, 2012). AI is used with organizational development and positive psychology to find asset-based organizational solutions and has occasionally been used to frame other social science research (Cooperrider, 1999; Johnson & Leavitt, 2001; Moore, 2021).

AI assisted in capturing individual stories to identify common asset-based themes that influenced longevity in student affairs, such as practices and experiences aligned with factors of mattering (Schlossberg, 1989) in the workplace. Thus, the research design of this study used a modified version of AI. The Interview section of Procedures within this chapter explains the modifications.

Research Design

A case study design is used first to gain a deep understanding of a situation and meaning for those involved (Merriam, 2001), and secondly, it can affirm an existing theory (Merriam, 2001). Concerning these two design aspects, this case study first helped the researcher gain a deeper understanding of influential factors attributed to professional persistence in the field.
Secondly, the case study design considered to what extent Schlossberg's (1989) theory of marginality and mattering, intended to retain undergraduate students, applies to new professionals in student affairs.

**Qualitative Case Study**

According to Merriam (1998), the case study establishes parameters through a bounded context. The researcher provides an in-depth exploration of the bounded system (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). The case study has the flexibility to incorporate multiple perspectives, data collection methods, and interpretive strategies (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). The case study analyzes or describes an intensive, holistic phenomenon such as a program, a unit, people, or processes (Merriam, 1998).

The case study design has its advantages and disadvantages. Although it is one of the most utilized qualitative methodologies, one of the most significant disadvantages is the confusion created by the lack of structured protocols. (Yazan, 2015). The case study design was not consensually agreed upon (Yazan, 2015) among the three prominent methodologists (Merriam, 1998; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2002). For instance, Yin (2002) explained validity and reliability in a traditional quantitative sense. In contrast, Merriam (1998) and Stake (1995) acknowledged it is almost impossible to apply quantitative concepts to qualitative inquiry, which is oriented toward constructivism (Yazan, 2015). Secondly, the highly humanized processes are dependent upon the researcher's skill for this type of design (Merriam, 2001). In the case study design, the researcher is the instrument for data collection, which creates a greater need for research credibility and trustworthiness. Both are critical for developing qualitative research methodologies (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). A third disadvantage to this type of research design is that it is often considered time-consuming and laborious (Stake, 1995).
There are significant advantages to utilizing a qualitative case study design. Case studies offer an in-depth understanding of complex situations (Merriam, 2001) that cannot be gathered through numerical data (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). Finally, case study research can provide insights that can influence policy, practice, and future research (Merriam, 2001).

A critical case study permits logical generalization and maximum application of information to other situations (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). This critical case study was first bound within a student affairs division at a public university. Second, it was bound to the staff who worked in that division and those who had worked in the field for more than five years. The student affairs division at a large-sized, Mid-Atlantic institution of higher education was the site for this case study. The university enrolls approximately 14,600 undergraduate students and 3,000 graduate students and, according to the human resources department, employs nearly 1,900 faculty and staff. The interpretive technique for this research used semi-structured in-depth interviews to gather data from seasoned student affairs professionals who stayed in the field for more than five years, focusing on their early professional experiences and present supervisory perceptions that contribute to retention in student affairs. As with other qualitative techniques, the researcher served as the instrument for gathering and the detective for interpreting data (Merriam, 2001; Stake, 1995).

Participants

Ten participants were selected for a critical case study using convenience sampling. The purpose of convenience sampling was to involve participants that are easily accessible, which can leave the credibility open to doubt. In this situation, the participants and I (the researcher) work within the same student affairs division. Credibility, or trustworthiness, is addressed in the
section below. Participant selection occurred through two forms of electronic recruitment, direct email invitations and a two-week flyer posting in a division eNewsletter.

All participants of this study are full-time professionals employed at the university with a minimum of five years’ work experience in student affairs. It was assumed that their continued employment belies a certain level of commitment to the profession and constitutes a genuine interest in furthering the development of the field. Participants had (a) more than five years of full-time work experience in student affairs after obtaining their master’s degree, (b) obtained a master’s degree or higher from a HESA program or related field, and (c) must currently or have previously supervised entry-level professionals or GAs in their second year of a HESA program. New or entry-level professionals are defined as anyone with zero to five years in the field for this study. Participation in this study was voluntary. Participants who qualified for inclusion in the study were asked to complete an Informed Consent document (Appendix A) followed by a demographic questionnaire (Appendix B). The section below offers a more detailed description of the participant demographics.

**Participant Demographics**

There were a total of ten participants, and all worked in the student affairs division of Mid-Atlantic University. Table 1 displays the participant demographics. Sixty percent identified as White or Caucasian, 30% identified as multiracial or biracial, and 10% identified as Black or African American. The participants in this study were evenly balanced by gender identity: Fifty percent identified as male, and 50% identified as female. Compared with demographic data gathered by human resources at the institution where the study took place, the study’s racial and ethnic diversity was slightly greater than the larger institutional average. In other words, there
were more participants of color in this study than in the student affairs unit from which they were selected.

Regarding educational attainment among study participants, 90% had completed a master’s degree from a HESA program. In comparison, 10% earned a master’s degree from a related degree program, such as Organizational Leadership. Among the participants, 40% had also completed a terminal degree such as a Doctor of Philosophy or Doctor of Education, and 10% were enrolled in a doctoral program at the time of data collection.

Five participants in this study worked as full-time (FT) employees at institutions of higher education during their graduate studies. The other five participants held GA positions while completing their graduate master’s degrees. FT employees and GAs work different required hours, have different responsibilities, have access to different conversations, and have different experiences from each other. Due to the limited hours that GAs work, they are often shielded from specific experiences because of less time in the office, lighter workloads, and responsibilities. Now, all the participants in this study are FT employees of Mid-Atlantic University with more than five years of experience in student affairs.

One requirement of this study was that the participants must supervise FT new professionals with less than five years’ experience, second-year GAs, or both. At Mid-Atlantic University, FT employees work 37.5 hours a week, and GAs work up to 20 hours a week, dependent on their tuition credit waiver. Table 1 provides additional information on other demographic characteristics of study participants and the number of new professionals they supervise. All FT supervisees on this chart have less than five years’ experience in student affairs. All of the GAs on the chart are in their second year of graduate studies. To provide
anonymity to the participants, members of this study either chose their pseudonyms or the researcher assigned alternate names to protect participant confidentiality and identity.

**Table 1**

*Demographic and Professional Information*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th>Master’s degree</th>
<th>Employment status during graduate studies</th>
<th>Number of new professional supervisees</th>
<th>Years in the profession</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chase</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Related Field</td>
<td>FT employee</td>
<td>1 FT; 1 GA</td>
<td>11-15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rachel</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>HESA</td>
<td>FT employee</td>
<td>2 FT</td>
<td>11-15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hudson</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Non-white</td>
<td>HESA</td>
<td>FT employee</td>
<td>1 GA</td>
<td>5-10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dorothy</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Non-white</td>
<td>HESA</td>
<td>FT employee</td>
<td>1 GA</td>
<td>20+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joel</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>HESA</td>
<td>GA</td>
<td>2 FT</td>
<td>11-15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jane</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>HESA</td>
<td>GA</td>
<td>1 GA</td>
<td>5-10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leo</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Non-white</td>
<td>HESA</td>
<td>GA</td>
<td>5 FT</td>
<td>20+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>James</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>HESA</td>
<td>GA</td>
<td>1 FT; 1 GA</td>
<td>11-15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maddison</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Non-white</td>
<td>HESA</td>
<td>FT employee</td>
<td>3(^a) GAs</td>
<td>5-10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lucy</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>HESA</td>
<td>GA</td>
<td>1 FT</td>
<td>16-20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^a\)One out of the three GAs was a non-HESA graduate

**Description of the Setting**

This study took place within a student affairs division at a large-sized, Mid-Atlantic, public regional institution of higher education. The university enrolls approximately 14,600 undergraduate students, more than 3,000 graduate students, and employs nearly 1,900 employees. Almost 80% of the students are enrolled full-time, and most students are in-state or come from a tri-state region closest to the campus. The enrolled campus population is 74%
White, 12% Black or African American, 6% Hispanic or Latino, 3% Multiracial, 3% Asian, and < 1% American Indian, Alaska Native, Native Hawaiian, or Other Pacific Islander (Data USA, 2019).

**Division of Student Affairs**

The demographic data gathered from the institution’s human resources department indicated the student affairs division employed approximately 160 full-time student affairs at the time of the study. In the Spring of 2021, 22% of the division identified as Black/African American, Hispanic/Latino, Asian Pacific Islander, Multiracial, or Native American/American Indian staff members, and 77% identified as White/Caucasian. Ninety percent of the division are full-time employees. It was estimated that 30% of the staff members in this division had been in the field longer than five years and served as supervisors to 2nd-year GAs or entry-level professionals. Approximately 11% of the division's employees are new professionals with less than five years of full-time professional experience after earning their master's degree.

Mid-Atlantic University offers a Master of Science (M.S.) degree in Higher Education Policy and Student Affairs. The M. S. program prepares students to understand, analyze, and meet the needs of all college students. The program offers a theoretical foundation grounded in ACPA/NASPA Professional Competencies (2015) and experiential opportunities through two internship opportunities. Students must complete a thesis that proposes an intervention to a HESA program as the culminating project in this two-year degree program. One of the criteria for this study was supervisory experience, which could include supervision of GAs enrolled in their second year of the HESA program.

The division employs many graduate students as GAs. These positions play an essential role in the division, the academic program, and the student. The student affairs division and the
academic HESA department at the university benefit from this symbiotic relationship. Through the dual preparatory experience, a student gains valuable first-hand experience alongside the academic curriculum. The outcome serves as a rich foundation for work in student affairs. This year, twenty-one second-year GAs work for student affairs, of which 71% are enrolled in the university's graduate HESA program.

**Description of the Materials**

This section describes the materials used in this study. The study materials include the Informed Consent form (Appendix A), the Demographics Questionnaire (Appendix B), the Email Invitation (see Appendix C), the Recruitment Flyer (Appendix D), and the Interview Guide (Appendix E).

**Informed Consent**

The Informed Consent form (Appendix A) helps potential research participants decide to volunteer for a study by providing information about the nature of the study, participants’ rights, and the confidentiality of the study. The form ensured the participants had complete knowledge and understanding of the study, including the purpose, duration, and procedures of the study, potential risks, and benefits from participation, and had the decision to participate in the study voluntarily. Any full-time employee of student affairs at Mid-Atlantic University interested in volunteering for this study completed the Informed Consent form. The Informed Consent form was located through a link in the emailed initiation, and the recruitment flyer is explained in more detail below. I also shared my contact information if potential participants had questions about Informed Consent when they completed the form.

**Demographics**
Included with the Informed Consent was a Demographics Questionnaire (Appendix B). Qualtrics, a web-based assessment software program used to distribute and collect data from surveys and polls, was used for three primary purposes: (1) to determine whether a potential participant met inclusion criteria, (2) to communicate and secure the Informed Consent of potential participants, and (3) to obtain relevant demographic information from study participants. If an individual qualified for the study and signed the Informed Consent form, Qualtrics automatically funneled the person through a series of demographic questions. The demographic questionnaire contained 16 questions plus contact information needed to schedule individual qualitative interviews (Appendix B). Demographic information was collected on race, ethnicity, gender identity, sexual identity, age range, citizenship, educational information, and (dis)ability. The demographics were used to contextualize the data collected in the future steps of analysis and write-up.

**Email Invitation and Recruitment Flyer**

The appendices include an email invitation (Appendix C) and a recruitment flyer (Appendix D). Full-time employees of the student affairs unit received a direct email invitation. The email included a brief description of the study, the desired participants, and a link to Qualtrics. The email invitation resulted in 49 members of the division responding to the survey. Due to this high number, the response to the email invitation was enough not to warrant the additional flyer. Although the recruitment flyer (Appendix D) is included in the Appendix, it was not used during this study.

Participants first completed a series of questions through the link to ensure they met the inclusion criterion articulated above. Of the 49 email respondents, not all completed the survey or met the essential criteria for the research. Potential participants who met the inclusion criteria
were directed to the Informed Consent portion of the Qualtrics survey. Potential participants who did not meet inclusion criteria were thanked, and the survey and research interaction ended there. The selection process is explained in more detail in the Participant Recruitment and Selection section below.

**Interview Guide**

Semi-structured individual interview questions served as the instrument for data collection during the interview phase of this study. The Interview Guide (Appendix E) was the list of questions I used during the semi-structured interview with each study participant. The first question was an introduction question to ease the interviewee into a conversation about themselves. Following the initial question, six questions asked them to reflect on their experiences as new professionals. The second set of seven questions centered on their experience as supervisors to new professionals. Both sets of questions were designed based on Schlossberg's (1989) theory of marginality and mattering. One final question regarding COVID-19 focused on the pandemic's impact on new professionals’ experiences in student affairs. I scheduled private interviews with each participant at convenient times throughout November 2021.

**Validity**

This next section discusses potential threats to validity of this methodology. Trustworthiness, researcher bias, and generalizability were three threats to this qualitative case study on the retention of new professionals in student affairs.

**Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness is critical for the development of qualitative research methodologies (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). In qualitative research, sample sizes are small, and the depth of information depends on the participant-researcher relationship. As the researcher for this study, I
am also a seven-year member of the student affairs division in which this study takes place. I worked within one of the division's units as a career counselor. I am currently part of the Senior Leadership Team, serving as the executive associate for the vice president for student affairs. Having served many years in the division, I worked with colleagues on committees and projects, establishing the foundation for trustworthiness conducive to qualitative research.

Throughout the interview process, I was conscientious of two issues related to trustworthiness, participant reluctance, and my biases. Due to my connection to the setting and participants of this study, it is possible participants did not feel comfortable discussing potential shortcomings or want to speak negatively about situations, experiences, or mutual colleagues during the interview. To address these concerns, before each interview, I reinforced the confidentiality and anonymity of the study. I reminded each participant that they could skip any question they felt uncomfortable answering. The following section addresses the second concern, researcher bias.

**Clarifying Researcher Bias**

Personal experiences, passion, and excitement often guide the researcher to a particular area of study. In Chapter 1, I discussed my positionality in relation to this study to provide the reader insight into my background, experiences, and current connection to the participants of this study. The researcher's values, interests, and identity play a significant role in researcher bias (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Clarifying bias helps the researcher address personal emotions and remain objective throughout the research process. Clarifying bias from the onset is a strategy recommended by Creswell and Guetterman (2019) for qualitative researchers.

In addition to acknowledging my positionality within the study, I engaged in bracketing throughout the data collection process. Bracketing is a method used by qualitative researchers to
evaluate and separate personal beliefs from the collected data (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). The bracketing process aims to set aside researcher biases obtained through personal experiences related to the topic and knowledge gained through reading relevant research (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Bracketing occurred in three phases of the data collection: Before the interviews begin, during the interview process, and finally in the results. Views and biases were written down throughout the process and kept in a journal, locked in a drawer while not in use.

*Generalizability*

Generalizability refers to how the study's findings will be helpful to or transfer to similar research or situations (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). The most beneficial research studies provide transferable results beyond the context in which they were carried out (Krathwohl & Smith, 2005.) The selection of ten participants for this study was decided through a critical case, convenience sampling within a student affairs division at a large-sized, Mid-Atlantic university. This sample permits generalization to the specific division where the study occurred but not to all new professionals within all student affairs units at any post-secondary institution. However, the detailed description of the setting, procedures, and analysis enabled a comparison of whether components of this study apply to parallel situations (Merriam, 2001) at other institutions. Future research on other institutional types could consider some of the themes and insights that emerge from this study and apply them to other settings and contexts.

Trustworthiness, clarifying researcher bias, and generalizability are three components that affirmed the validity of this case study. In addition to the components described above, following a pre-established set of procedures is essential for a robust qualitative research design (Merriam, 2001). The next section of this chapter pertains to the procedures for this study which provides a step-by-step process for data collection.
Procedures

This section provides a narrative description of the procedural timeline for data collection. This research study followed a pre-set procedure using a qualitative case study design (Merriam, 2001; Stake, 1995) and an adapted Appreciative Inquiry (Cooperrider, 1990) approach. Participant recruitment, interviews, data collection, coding, and triangulation are the five-step procedures for this study. Below is the breakdown of these steps beginning with participant recruitment.

Participant Recruitment and Selection

Once the Institutional Review Board (IRB) and research proposal were approved, in July 2021 (Appendix F), I sent out one direct email (Appendix C) to members of the division seeking interested and qualifying participants. The email invitation included a brief description of the study, the desired participants, and a link to the Qualtrics Informed Consent and collection of demographic information (Appendix B). I created the email invitation through the mail merge feature in Outlook, which personalized each invitation on a first-name basis. I received 49 initial responses from this personalized outreach to participate in the study.

Respondents first completed a series of questions intended to meet the inclusion criterion as articulated above through the link attached to the email. Potential participants who met the inclusion criteria were directed to the Informed Consent portion of the Qualtrics survey. Of the 49 email respondents, not all completed the survey or met the essential criteria for the research. Several respondents did not have the supervision experience needed. Respondents who did not meet inclusion criteria were thanked, and the survey and research interaction ended there. At the same time, others did not check off the three informed consent questions in the selection process.
If the potential participant agreed, they signed the consent to become a study participant. Once the Informed Consent was obtained for any given individual, that individual was then directed to a series of demographic questions within the final portion of the Qualtrics survey (Appendix B). Demographic information was collected on race, ethnicity, gender identity, sexual orientation, age range, citizenship, educational information, and (dis)ability. The demographics were used to contextualize the data collected in the future steps of analysis and write-up.

In total, 19 members of the division were eligible to participate in the study based on greater than five years in the field, supervision of new professionals, and an earned master’s degree. I eliminated some of these respondents based on the type of earned degree. Several had a Master of Business Administration, and a few had a master’s degrees in sports and health sciences. I selected candidates that completed a master's degree in Higher Education and Student Affairs or related areas of study such as counseling, leadership education, or organizational leadership. Of the 19, I selected ten division members to participate in the study. The selection process focused on balancing the participants' gender, diversifying racial identity, and years of experience in the field. The importance of diverse representation was to represent as many perspectives and experiences as possible while also increasing the generalizability of this study. The final selection was a ten-person participant group, of which 40% identified as non-white and one participant with a non-HESA master’s degree. This individual had a master’s in Organizational Leadership. The following section provides an overview of the participants' demographics. Respondents that qualified for the study, but were not selected, were sent a personalized thank you for their willingness and interest in the study.

As the primary researcher, I was acutely aware of my positionality and bias toward the participants throughout the selection process. Having worked in this student affairs unit for
nearly seven years, I am familiar with most of its employees. Therefore, while looking at the survey results, I hid the names of the respondents, so I was not inclined to select the participants based on my biases. By removing names until the final ten were selected, I eliminated the temptation to select based on stronger relationships, comfortability, or someone I perceived as having a better new professional experience.

Once successfully through the participant recruitment and selection process, I scheduled interviews, and data collection followed the scheduled outline in Table 2. Table 2 displays each of the procedural steps and the approximate timeline for this research study. The second step in the procedure was the interview stage. The following section, below the table, details the integration of the theoretical framework and the nature and number of questions in the interview procedures.

Table 2

*Researcher Timeline*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Phase</th>
<th>Timeline</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participant Recruitment</td>
<td>Late October 2021</td>
<td>Distribution of recruitment email. Selection of 10 participants.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviews and Data Collection</td>
<td>November 2021</td>
<td>Semi-structured in-depth interviews of staff members who served &gt;5 years and supervise or have previously supervised professionals 0-5 years in student affairs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coding</td>
<td>December 2021-January 2022</td>
<td>Analysis of interview transcripts around themes connected to Schlossberg’s (1989) theory of marginality and mattering.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Triangulation</td>
<td>On-going November 2021-January 2022</td>
<td>Comparison of themes and theoretical framework</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Interviews

This section details the procedural methods planned for the third step of the procedures, the interview process. The purpose of an interview phase is to ask questions that provide the researcher with meaningful information from another person's perspective (Merriam, 2001). In this case study, I formulated some questions based on Schlosberg's (1989) theory of marginality and mattering. The purpose of these questions was to determine if positive career experiences within the first five years influence a professional's decision to remain or leave the field of student affairs. I aimed to conduct a total of ten individual interviews.

Ten student affairs administrators participated in the dual-focused semi-structured in-depth interviews through a convenience sampling selection process. I interviewed each participant within an approximate 90-minute conversational question and answer format consisting of 14 questions. The interview questions were directly tied to the three research questions that guided this study's inquiry. The questions mainly centered on the positive experiences, observations, and perceptions that impacted the participants’ decision to stay in the field.

By focusing primarily on the positive experiences, this study takes a strength or asset-based approach to attrition for newcomers in student affairs. The purpose of this asset-based approach was to identify best practices worth replicating to increase retention rates among new student affairs professionals. This primarily asset-based approach gives acknowledgment to AI as a core value of this research study. However, I do not follow an AI-only approach. The theory of marginality and mattering looks at both negative and positive experiences for undergraduate students and argues that both play a role in retaining students at colleges and universities (Schlossberg et al., 1989). Following the structure of Schlossberg's theory, this study modified
the asset-based approach used in AI to accommodate a few questions centered on marginality – a more negative approach to asking questions about retention. Thus, I included a few questions in the Interview Guide, allowing participants to share negative experiences (Appendix E). However, the primary intent of this study was to seek positive experiences that lead to retention in student affairs.

The qualitative nature of semi-structured interviews allows the researcher to adapt interview questions as needed (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). First, I asked the participant to recall experiences of their early years in the field through semi-structured questions to begin the interview. After the first set of focused questions, I shifted the semi-structured questioning to center on the participants’ experiences as supervisors of new student affairs professionals (Appendix E).

Each interview was scheduled for 90 minutes. Since all interviews were conducted through Zoom rather than in person, Zoom captured a recording in audio and video formats. I prepared a loose-leaf notebook for notetaking, divided by participants, and I took notes on observations and reflective thoughts not captured through the recording. Verbatim interview transcription occurred immediately following each interview to provide narrative text as the data source.

All data was collected through the recorded semi-structured interview process. In addition to the interview, participants had an opportunity to share additional thoughts after the interview through email. I provided this opportunity to the participants to convey important and relevant afterthoughts as a line of communication. Following the interview, the participants had one week to submit any afterthoughts. None of the participants used this option to provide additional thoughts and reflections.
**Data Collection**

In addition to the recorded interviews described above, verbatim transcription and researcher memoing were part of the data collection process. This section reviews two sub-components of the data collection process, transcription and researcher memoing.

**Transcription.** Immediately following the interview, I began the transcription process. Transcribing the interview into text was a critically important task. The transcription took raw, spoken data and transformed it into processed, written data (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). However, the spoken word is not conveyed logically or organized (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Although Zoom recordings assisted in a significant portion of the transcription of the spoken word, each transcription required thorough editing due to some inaccuracies captured through Zoom technology. Additionally, editing included the deletion of filler words, such as um, ahs, and likes.

**Researcher Memoing.** Memoing provides an opportunity for the researcher to reflect on data collection for patterns and themes that may or may not be developing (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Researcher memoing occurred following individual interviews and transcription.

All information from the data collection stage was saved in OneDrive on the researcher's computer in a locked office and shared with the Faculty Advisor (see Confidentiality section below). This process was repeated beginning with each participant interview. Once the data collection was complete through each interview, coding began.

**Coding**

Coding is a qualitative research process in which the researcher makes sense of text data by dividing the text, labeling, and creating themes for analysis (Creswell & Guterman, 2019).
This section discusses two coding procedures: inductive and deductive coding for the first cycle of coding, which initially summarizes data segments (Miles et al., 2020).

I utilized inductive coding to analyze the transcripts around emerging themes in the first round of coding. Inductive coding permits the researcher to develop codes through the analysis process. Unseen ideas and themes come to the surface in complex situations. In this instance, any In Vivo codes were identified in participants’ responses. In Vivo coding is a form of qualitative data analysis that emphasizes the spoken word (Manning, 2017) and real-life experiences (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). The inductive coding method helps generate broader views (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). The researcher followed the inductive method of data analysis for responses related to Research Question 1. This method was used for the interview questions that did not ask the participants to reflect on the factors of marginality and mattering.

The second form of coding, deductive analysis, is flexible but predetermined before analysis. This form of analysis was used for Research Question 2. A Priori code, also called deductive analysis, is built from the theoretical framework or theory-based codes (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). This method begins with a “start-list,” often from the literature review, theoretical framework, research questions, or key problem areas or factors brought to the study (Miles et al., 2020). In this case, I used Schlossberg’s (1989) theory of marginality and mattering factors as my predetermined start list. I used this method when analyzing the two interview questions that asked the participants to look at the list of Schlossberg’s (1989) factors and respond with their experiences related to each factor. Lastly, inductive and deductive methods were used for analysis that informed the final response to Research Question 3.

Throughout the coding processes, I looked for words used in the narrative that evoked a sense of marginality or mattering. I looked for words such as isolation, depression, loneliness,
overwhelmed, stressed, dissatisfied, different, belonging, happy, community, team, clarity, and connection. After the initial inductive or deductive coding round, the second cycle of focused coding helped identify frequent and significant themes (Patel, 2014), grouping the first cycle codes into smaller categories and concepts (Miles et al., 2020). After the second coding cycle, I integrated the codes and phrases for a detailed qualitative analysis summary (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). Table 3 displays how an Excel spreadsheet assisted with hand-coding and analysis.

Table 3

Sample Coding Categories

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Interview Question 1</th>
<th>Interview Question 2</th>
<th>Interview Question 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participant 1</td>
<td>Verbatim response</td>
<td>Verbatim response</td>
<td>Verbatim response</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 2</td>
<td>Verbatim response</td>
<td>Verbatim response</td>
<td>Verbatim response</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 2</td>
<td>Verbatim response</td>
<td>Verbatim response</td>
<td>Verbatim response</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. This sample table displays how a verbatim transcript helped establish hand-coding and analysis. Within the verbatim responses, I looked for common themes or words that evoked marginality and mattering feelings, depending on the question.

Triangulation

Triangulation was the final step in these research procedures. Triangulation helped validate the research study for accuracy, objectivity, and robust topic representation (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). This final step uses multiple methods to confirm emerging themes (Merriam, 2001) to strengthen the study's usefulness for other settings (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). For this study, the researcher used multiple methods to confirm the findings, such as comparing
coded themes between participants and comparing data to outside expertise offered through the literature review and theoretical framework. These methods helped establish the case study's validity (Marshall & Rossman, 2016; Merriam, 2001).

Data collection and analysis are simultaneous activities in qualitative research that accommodate semi-structured interviews, the interaction between researcher and participant, and the interpretation of perceptions for rich data content (Merriam, 2001). Although this section provides a narrative and pictorial representation of the procedures used in this study, qualitative research is not linear (Merriam, 2001). Consistent with this non-linear process, data from the questions focusing on experiences of marginality and mattering required an initial deductive phase and then an inductive phase to analyze data into experiences of mattering that influence positive retention. This double process of coding added to the rigor of this study.

Summary

This chapter described the methodology proposed for this case study on retention of new professionals in student affairs through interviews with mid-level student affairs professionals. I interviewed ten participants through 90-minute semi-structured in-depth interviews on their experiences and perceptions, which led to their career longevity and the ways in which they influence retention in their entry-level supervisees. The validity of this case study was established through the researcher's trustworthiness, clarifying researcher bias from the onset, and the study's generalizability. Through an adapted AI approach and Schlossberg's (1989) theory of marginality and mattering, I discovered themes centered on mattering as a factor in professional persistence during data collection, coding, and analysis. Chapter 4 details the results of the data analysis.
Chapter 4

This chapter provides an overview of the findings of this qualitative study to explore newcomer retention among student affairs professionals. Specifically, the study sought to find what experiences and factors worked to retain new student affairs professionals beyond their first five years in the field. The chapter starts with a demographic overview of the ten participants in the study. The second section of the chapter is organized under the three research questions that guided this study: (1) Among student affairs professionals who have not left the field within their first five years of professional employment, what early workplace experiences contribute to career longevity? (2) In what ways did new professionals experience mattering and marginality during their entry-level positions? And (3) How do participants, as supervisors, work to influence retention among their supervisees? The third section of this chapter presents a final summary of the results.

Findings

This section presents the findings of the three research questions which guided this study’s inquiry. The findings for each research question include descriptive responses and direct quotes that capture the participants' sentiments and wording.

Research Question 1

The first research question asked, “Among student affairs professionals who have not left the field within the first five years of professional employment, what early workplace experiences contribute to career longevity?” I answer this by first exploring four early workplace experiences that participants identified as contributing to long-term commitment as student affairs professionals: (1) a platform for practice, (2) substantial work experiences, (3) connection to professionals, and (4) high-impact moments. Next, I share a surprising finding related to
undergraduate academic doubt and the intention to work in student affairs. I conclude by summarizing the findings related to Research Question 1.

**Early Workplace Experiences.** Participants in this study reflected positively on the workplace when describing these early experiences. When these were experienced simultaneously or in a combination, new professionals reported that these experiences resulted in being more tied to the field.

**A Platform for Practice.** The first experience that participants highlighted in their early career that contributed to career longevity was “a platform for practice.” One participant, Dorothy, described new professional positions as “a platform for practice.” This means that the first jobs out of graduate training can sometimes be a learning ground for new professionals. She said, “You don’t always get it right, but that’s what practice is all about.” In her own experiences, she explained that she wasn’t chastised or made to feel ashamed when she made mistakes. Therefore, as a new professional, she could regroup and revise for the next time. This study emphasized the importance of forgiveness as a key component of the platform, especially during the early stages of career development. Participants spoke about making mistakes and receiving grace and forgiveness from supervisors. Their supervisors helped them process situations and see things differently.

This concept of “a platform for practice” was something multiple other participants referred to throughout the interviews, although not using this exact wording. For example, Rachel also stressed the importance of supervisors who supported and guided her through rough patches. Rachel recalled times when things got “messy.” One supervisor sat on the office floor with her after a challenging situation and worked through the messiness with her, discussing a particularly emotional situation and helping her come to terms with the outcome. Rachel also
recalled another moment that involved a complicated student staff situation where she needed some coaching and guidance with her supervisory decisions and skills. In this instance, her boss helped her by offering advice and a supportive perspective. Rachel explained that without such support and the platform for practice, “[o]ften, these are the moments when people get disillusioned and start to walk away.”

Dorothy also recalled a story when her direct supervisor and the vice president for student affairs (VPSA) helped her gain perspective after a challenging phone call with a student’s parent. Dorothy was very upset and distraught after this tense interaction. Her direct supervisor took some time and asked her a few questions that Dorothy claimed she would never forget in the future. These questions helped build up her confidence. They were, “Are you incompetent? Are you ineffective? Are you inefficient? Do you care about your students?” After Dorothy responded to each of these questions, her supervisor finally asked, “Then what does it matter what [the parent] thinks?” Shortly after talking with her direct supervisor, the VPSA also called her into his office. Dorothy nervously explained the story to the VPSA. He told her of his own experiences with angry parents, admitting that sometimes he held the phone away from his ear. He said, “I’m not telling you to take abuse, but sometimes people just need to vent.” He concluded by telling Dorothy to continue doing great work. In other words, both the direct supervisor and the VPSA provided Dorothy with support and understanding that led to renewed confidence in her ability to work in student affairs.

In these moments, as new professionals, Rachel and Dorothy were provided a platform for practice, and the supervisors’ responses reduced the shame associated with making a mistake. They offered time to discuss tricky situations and created teachable moments while rebuilding confidence. Throughout this study, a platform for practice – that is, the ability to make mistakes
without the risk of shame – was identified as having played a significant part in early professional growth and long-term commitment to the field.

**Substantial Work Experiences.** The second theme that participants described was substantial work experiences that contributed to a sense of commitment. In other words, minor projects and activities were insufficient to retain their interest and give them the sense that they were contributing to a greater purpose. “Substantial” meant more along the lines of involvement in long-term university committees, being trusted to create or develop a new program, or co-presentation with their supervisor or a faculty member at a conference. These “substantial” experiences seem to lead to professional growth and development. When sharing stories about these experiences, participants used action verbs such as “led,” “organized,” “managed,” “presented,” and “created” to convey a sense of inclusion and the ability to contribute to meaningful work opportunities. Many talked about immediately getting involved in projects, serving on committees, and being included in decisions.

Chase recalled his first five years and said he was trusted to represent student affairs on the university committee for the strategic plan. Because of this and other opportunities, Chase added, “I was seen as such a strong member of the community. That really made me feel valued as an employee and as a member of that community.” Joel talked about getting involved with a curriculum project that led to working closely with a faculty member and having the opportunity to teach and present at a national professional conference together. Maddison talked about co-presenting to parents and families with her supervisor at new student orientation. These instances of substantial work opportunities made the participants feel important and that they had something to offer or contribute to the overall purpose or mission of the university.
Connection to Professionals. The third theme that participants deemed an essential early workplace experience was a connection to professionals. During graduate school and in the workplace, a connection to other coworkers within the university made a difference in the participants’ career longevity. While a positive supervisory connection tends to influence retention in the field (Shupp & Arminio, 2012; St. Onge et al., 2008; Tull, 2006; Wilson, 2008), this study revealed that other coworkers could also fulfill this role. Participants shared different connections that positively impacted their desire to remain in the field. These connections spanned a range of experience levels, starting with divisional leaders such as VPSA, supervisors, coworkers with more experience in student affairs, and coworkers at the same level (peers).

For example, interviews showed that a VPSA’s investment in a new professional had an impact that perhaps increased value due to their organizational position within the hierarchy. Most participants mentioned connecting with more than one person, except when connecting to an individual with a prominent role in the division and the university, such as a VPSA. Three participants talked about a VPSA who had an interest in their career. Two of them spoke of the VPSA as the only person of influence.

Dorothy, Leo, Jane, and Maddison spoke of connections made with a supervisor or another professional with significant knowledge and understanding of the field and the institution. In these instances, the supervisor or mid-level professional guided them through the early years. Dorothy, Leo, and Maddison had support from their peers, mid-level coworkers, and supervisors. Joel spoke primarily of multiple peers who connected him to the workplace. Participants such as Joel and Leo also attended programs with an academic cohort structure and felt an immediate sense of community with their classmates.
Although a special connection to someone with institutional rank or status is impactful, a combination of connections to the people within a division of student affairs, such as mid-level professionals and peers, also played a vital role in a new professional’s desire to stay in the field.

**High-Impact Moments with Students.** The final theme that participants described as a critical part of early workplace experiences that contributed to their retention in the field was high-impact moments with students. A high-impact moment with students was a shared experience a new student affairs professional had with a student that positively affected the life or circumstance of that student. As a result, the new professional felt a calling to this field as a helper or change agent. The student affairs worker and student created long-term bonds in these moments and made lasting impressions not forgotten. These moments often swayed a new professional’s decision to continue working in student affairs. I share two examples of high-impact moments with students below, one from Maddison and one from Dorothy.

Maddison explained a high-impact student situation with a resident in her building. As acquaintances from the same hometown, Maddison developed a mentor-mentee relationship with the student while coaching her through a difficult time. According to Maddison, the student was in an abusive relationship and was being bullied by a student leader. In her first hands-on experience as a graduate student, Maddison provided the student with tough love and guidance. She commented:

> I think that [experience] really just drove me to stay because I realized the impact I was able to have on this individual. That’s what propelled me – Student Affairs and Res. Life,¹ in particular, is where I am needed! This is where my skill set is best served! Watching [the student] grow, [I realized that] I made the right decision.

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¹ When I write “Res Life” I mean Residence Life; internal language used widely in the profession.
Maddison recognized that she could help students by listening, offering guidance, and occasionally even tough love. Although she admitted she wasn’t perfect, she felt like this experience would have driven many new professionals out of Residence Life. Instead, Maddison impacted the student’s life for the better. She helped a student through difficult times, and the student went on to be successful in her own right. This ability to make a difference in a student’s life led Maddison to stay in the field.

Dorothy also shared a high-impact story from her graduate school days at a Catholic institution of higher education. She told a story of transporting a student to the hospital who had just attempted suicide. While waiting for the student to receive a medical evaluation, Dorothy spent considerable time talking to him to keep his mind occupied and engaged. After the assessment from medical professionals, Dorothy learned the student had a chemical imbalance, and he would have to stay at the hospital for at least a week. Dorothy was told that the student wanted to see her before she left the hospital for the day. In the hospital room, he told her that she was the only person who had shown him any care in a very long time. Years later, retelling this story during our interview, Dorothy admitted she still gets emotional thinking about him. She felt a spiritual connection with this young man, and she thanked God that she was his touchpoint at such a critical time in his life. Dorothy then emphasized:

So, for me to be able to make that type of connection and that impact from just talking, driving someone, and chatting all the way there and stuff, I was like. “Okay, I can do this, and I’m supposed to be here. This is my calling.” And so, I’ve had a lot of experiences like that, but that was the one that was like, “Okay, this is the field.”

Dorothy felt she made a significant difference in this student’s life, even connecting this to spirituality and a sense of divine purpose that she could fulfill in service to others. Her presence
assisted him in receiving medical help, but more importantly, she learned how showing care for another individual can have a lasting positive impact on a life trajectory.

For both new professionals, these high-impact moments with students made the difference of a lifetime for both the students and the student affairs professional. As a result, each study participant described having a sense of “being called” into the field of student affairs.

**Undergraduate Academic Doubt.** After learning about the participants’ academic and institutional career paths during the study interviews, I asked if they considered any other career out of graduate school. All ten study participants confirmed that they did not consider any other career after graduating with a master’s degree. Jane insightfully said, “I questioned my career as an undergraduate, so that crisis was over.” This response struck me because I had recalled several others before Jane commenting that they also had questioned their undergraduate degrees. I went back to the data and compared all other students’ descriptions of their undergraduate experiences. I discovered a surprising finding between career longevity for student affairs professionals and undergraduate academic doubt they experienced earlier in their academic experiences. In other words, all participants had already experienced significant confusion in their career trajectory during their undergraduate years. Since they felt that they had already passed that challenge, they did not experience it again when choosing their graduate and post-graduate career fields.

For example, Leo shared that he changed his major four times while in college, and finally, he said, “I defaulted to psychology.” He also had a career crisis near the end of his undergraduate program. A student organization advisor sat Leo down in his comfortable office and asked him, “What do you love?” For Leo, the answer was leadership and involvement in his
clubs and organizations. Once this became clear to Leo, he pursued student affairs as his career with a newfound clarity of purpose. I call this experience “undergraduate academic doubt.”

Nine participants had stories of student involvement paired with academic and career doubt related to their undergraduate major. In fact, nine out of ten participants questioned their undergraduate degrees. The tenth participant spoke of her undergraduate involvement but liked her major. Unfortunately, she could not find a job after graduation with her bachelor’s degree in recreation and a minor in events planning and promotion. As a result, she pursued student affairs in her work.

Further, all ten participants admitted being very involved in co-curricular activities during their undergraduate studies, a standard pipeline to student affairs. However, this lesser-known experience of undergraduate academic doubt may also be common for students who discover student affairs as a career option. The combination of student involvement and undergraduate academic doubt inspired a curiosity toward working in student affairs rather than their field of undergraduate studies. Doubt and career crisis in undergraduate school may have resolved career ambivalence while also solidifying study participants’ attraction and intention towards student affairs after graduate school.

**Summary of the Findings to Research Question 1.** This study revealed that new professionals are more likely to stay in the field when they have a platform for practice, participate in substantial work responsibilities, connect to people in the workplace, and have a high impact on student lives. When new professionals had one or more of these experiences in the early career workplace, they noted an overall positive experience.

In this study, one participant recalled all four early workplace experiences that contribute to career longevity. Five participants had a combination of three experiences, two mentioned two
early workplace experiences, and two mentioned only one experience. It is logical to assume that any of these four workplace experiences might help contribute to career longevity. However, when experienced simultaneously or in a combination, there is a powerful effect toward keeping a new professional more tied to the field.

In addition to the findings related to work experiences that lead to career longevity, the data revealed that new professionals who were highly involved with co-curricular activities as undergraduates and doubted their academic major did not second-guess their decision to enter student affairs after earning a master’s degree. Career uncertainty tended to happen during their undergraduate years and was often not repeated once they had committed to graduate studies in the field of student affairs. In other words, their career exploration was resolved when they had completed the graduate-level studies required for most entry-level professional positions in student affairs. The combination of undergraduate involvement and academic doubt followed by a HESA graduate program resulted in a strong intention toward a career in student affairs.

**Research Question 2**

The second research question asked, “In what ways did new professionals experience mattering and marginality during their entry-level positions?” According to Schlossberg’s (1989) theory of marginality and mattering, mattering contributes to social acceptance. In contrast, marginality contributes to a feeling of isolation (Schlossberg, 1989). This study revealed that all the participants experienced some factors of mattering and marginality during their first five years, whether they perceived their overall experience to be positive or negative. During the interview, I asked each participant to reflect on how they experienced factors of mattering and marginality while they were new professionals.
The participants reviewed and reflected on a list of factors they may have felt in their first five years. For this study, the mattering factors included others showed pride in the individual’s accomplishments, a sense of inclusion, dependence on the individual’s contribution, empathy during struggles, a sense of appreciation, and a sense of importance. The marginality factors that study participants described included feelings of exclusion, depression, self-consciousness, and irritability. I share my findings in two sections below, starting with the factors of mattering and the second on marginality factors. After these sections, I include an extended vignette about Hudson. Hudson’s experience was significantly different than the others in this study. I found his persistence in the field remarkable and worthy of additional thought and attention. Finally, Research Question 2 ends with a summary.

**Factors of Mattering.** Seven participants recalled all the factors of mattering. However, participants recalled some mattering factors with more consistency than others. The section below includes the top three factors of mattering the participants mentioned most frequently by recalling their early years in the profession: Sense of appreciation, sense of importance, and empathy during struggles. I begin with the factors they seemed to experience the most. The top two factors of mattering consistently named by all except one participant were a sense of appreciation and a sense of importance.

**Sense of Appreciation.** A sense of appreciation was demonstrated by thank you’s, small gifts, handwritten notes, and perks and bonuses associated with the job. When reflecting on a sense of appreciation, Maddison used the term “mattered” to convey a sense of appreciation. Maddison shared, “I got shout-outs all the time. I had a close relationship with my first direct supervisor. She always thanked me and told me how much she appreciated me. She told us that we mattered.”
**Sense of Importance.** Feeling important was also recognized by nearly all participants. Chase said, “I felt important because I did something and was recognized for what I did that impacted the greater community.” James added an example of feeling important:

I got invited to a meeting with the president of the university and the alumni director. I felt important and self-conscious at the same time. It was nice to have that audience and get in front of people who mattered.

In this instance, James felt important because he was asked to present based on his expertise. Therefore, he associated this experience with the president and the alumni director with a factor of mattering.

**Empathy During Struggles.** Empathy during struggles occurs when others show concern for a new person and are saddened by their failures. It is vital because it reconfirms when others matter to someone (Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981; Schlossberg, 1989). In this case, the larger context for empathy is in the workplace. In this study, most study participants reported feeling that teammates or supervisors empathized with their struggles. Rachel and Dorothy reflected on the ability to make mistakes as a sign that others empathized with their struggles. They had someone to talk through their situations and lean on for support and guidance.

Dorothy also recalled a time when she felt particularly homesick, and her colleagues created the on-call schedule so she could travel to see her fiancé every other weekend. Later, she fondly told me about colleagues who jumped in when she struggled with work and new motherhood. She conveyed she had a strong support system through her connection to professionals in the workplace.

**Factors of Marginality.** Marginality is often defined as a sense of not fitting in (Schlossberg et al., 1989). All participants felt factors of marginality (self-consciousness,
exclusion, irritability, and depression) but with less consistency. Five participants recalled experiences associated with marginality more than the other five participants. Yet, eight study members said their first five years were positive. This finding could mean that some sense of mattering outweighs occasional feelings of marginality. This section shares the top two factors of marginality, followed by a third section devoted to coping with marginality.

**Self-consciousness.** Most participants acknowledged feeling self-conscious during their early years in the profession and frequently referred to self-consciousness as imposter syndrome. Leo said, “I had initial feelings of imposter syndrome, thinking, ‘Am I ready?’” He went on to add, “I don’t think it lasted long because I always felt supported and received lots of feedback.” Chase, on the other hand, did not get support and feedback. He said, “I’ve never had a mentor, and I’ve had bad supervision my whole career. So, I’m always a little self-conscious, thinking, ‘I’m not good enough’ and wondering, ‘are they going to keep me?’” Schlossberg (1989) reported that marginality could be temporary, which we see through Leo’s experience, yet it seems it can also come and go throughout a career. For Chase, the lack of good supervision has led him to second-guess his employment status from time to time. Had Chase had more supervisory support, these feelings of self-consciousness could have been reduced.

**Irritability.** Irritability, the likelihood of annoyance, impatience, or anger, is often a result of not fitting in with others around you (Schlossberg et al., 1989) and can lead to a feeling of marginalization. Lucy talked about being overworked during her first five years, making her irritable. Chase and Dorothy shared similar sentiments of irritability. They felt most irritable when someone wasn’t held accountable due to favoritism or when others didn’t step up. Chase admitted, “I felt irritable when we carried people along. Good people get more work. Bad people get less work, don’t step up, and get paid the same.” It seems unequal distribution of work
among colleagues contributed to irritability. Favoritism toward others or increased work without increased compensation can lead to irritability and a sense of marginality in the workplace.

Self-consciousness and irritability are two feelings that often lead to a sense of marginality. In extreme cases, or when felt for extended amounts of time, self-consciousness and irritability can lead to depression (Schlossberg et al., 1989).

**Coping with Marginality.** About half of the study participants recalled more instances of marginality than the other five participants. I asked all participants what they did to cope with their negative feelings and experiences. Remarkably, the participants intuitively solved their own problems by initiating the coping mechanisms from Schlossberg’s (1981) transition theory. Each referred to one or more coping mechanisms which align with the four S’s (Situation, Self, Support, Strategies) (Schlossberg, 1981). Situation considers timing, role change duration, previous experience, and responsibility (Schlossberg, 1981). Self includes resilience, positive outlook, spirituality, self-care, and personal demographics (Schlossberg, 1981). Support indicates family, friends, intimate support, workplace network, or a more comprehensive support network (Schlossberg, 1981). Strategies means coping responses, reframing, medication, control, and stress management (Schlossberg, 1981). For that reason, I will describe the methods used by some of the participants below, followed by which strategy they employed, as indicated in parenthesis.

Lucy made daily calls to her mother (support) and went for runs (self) as a form of self-care when feeling overworked. James leaned on his peers (support) and commented several times how much he liked exploring the area he lived in (situation and self) during his first five years. Dorothy had her colleagues (support) and her faith (self) to lean on during the difficult times.
Maddison admitted that her peers (support) and therapy (strategy) helped her situation. Finally, Hudson employed the four S’s to get through the first five years of his career.

**Hudson’s Vignette.** This section features one particular participant in this study, Hudson, who had the most challenging start in student affairs. During the interview, he was pointedly candid about his experience as a new professional. He had a significant responsibility while transitioning into a new profession and attending graduate school. Below is Hudson’s story.

Hudson said he attended graduate school through an online HESA program. He chose this program because it offered the flexibility he needed as a new parent and full-time employee. He said this program did not prepare him for student affairs. He could not form relationships or have in-person discussions regarding student affairs work. Hudson remarked he never met with his faculty; “the program was very cut and paste.”

While in graduate school, Hudson also worked as a full-time employee in an administrative office at a university. He said he felt very little support from his supervisor during this time. According to him, the office provided no onboarding and very little instruction or training on how to do his work. These situations could easily discourage anyone. Yet, Hudson persisted with a solid connection to a VPSA at another institution (support). Hudson described how he felt at the time and his decision to remain in the field:

I kind of felt stuck. I was not sure of my next step. I was a young parent; I couldn’t take time to look into other things. I needed to put food on the table, pay for childcare, and doctor’s appointments. I was under a lot of pressure.

Hudson reported that he felt depressed during this time in his career. Parenting and financial responsibilities, such as graduate school debt, tied him to this field (situation). Yet, without his personal responsibilities, he would likely have pursued another career. Upon the advice and
support from the VPSA in the field, Hudson relocated to a new state (strategy) for a fresh start. After his first experience in an unsuitable position with limited training, finding a new position was his best option.

Although Hudson has remained in the field for slightly longer than five years, there is no guarantee that he will remain for another five or six years. Hudson added:

One experience wasn’t for me, but it’s not the end of the world. So, I wasn’t going to give up (self) on student affairs and the degree that I put so much money and time into have. I’m still having an internal struggle with how far I want to take student affairs. I’m still in that balancing act. I’m still trying to figure out what it is that I want to do moving forward, though I enjoy what I do.

At the time of this study, Hudson reported that a new supervisor had made an impressionable difference in his growth. He had never had a supportive supervisor until this point but now felt supported in his role. He also reported he had found his functional area of interest.

Although he was tentative about his career longevity, Hudson showed promise for remaining in student affairs. He worked against significant odds to make it to this point in his career. What was notable from his experience were three key pieces that contributed to his persistence: (1) a connection to someone influential in the profession, (2) his ability to use various coping mechanisms to deal with factors of marginality and challenges as a young adult, and (3) a new supervisor that provided the support he needed as a newcomer. This story about Hudson suggests that these three points, particularly his ability to apply coping mechanisms to a feeling of marginality, have contributed to his retention for the early part of his career.

**Summary of the Findings to Research Question 2.** According to Schlossberg (1989), how individuals feel within their environment can positively or negatively impact their desire to
stay within a community. This study revealed that all participants experienced both factors of mattering and marginality at some time throughout their first five years. Participants from this study recalled feelings of mattering with greater frequency than factors of marginality. A sense of appreciation, a sense of importance, and empathy during struggles were the three top factors of mattering tied to early workplace experiences that influence career longevity. Most participants of this study felt like they mattered, as demonstrated through the examples shared in connection to each mattering factor. It is, therefore, reasonable to believe that factors of mattering contributed to their professional persistence.

This study also discovered that all participants felt some factors of marginality from time to time during their first five years. Self-consciousness and irritability were the factors most experienced during the first five years of work. The coping mechanisms study participants reported using are supported by Schlossberg’s (1981) transition theory and influenced retention beyond five years in student affairs. It is reasonable to assume that newcomers may feel marginality. However, newcomers are more inclined to remain in student affairs when paired with a greater sense of mattering and strategies for coping with marginality.

**Research Question 3**

The third research question asked, “How do these supervisors now work to influence retention among their supervisees?” In other words, now that these study participants are themselves in leadership positions where they supervise new entrants to the field of student affairs, how are they working to retain new employees? During the interviews, each participant shared their supervisory practices. As a result, this section describes four methods of how these participants intentionally improve the newcomer experience in the workplace. Three out of the
four are methods the individuals named themselves, and the fourth focuses on Schlossberg’s (1989) factors of mattering.

The first method is coaching/cheerleading, which includes two techniques entitled “flipping the script” and “sharing experiences.” The second method focuses on the importance of career assistance. “Breaking the cycle” is the third method revealed by the data in this study. The fourth method is the inclusion of factors of mattering in their supervisory practice. This section ends with a summary of the findings for Research Question 3.

Coach/Cheerleader. The participants of this study defined the coaching role as helping others unlock their potential for success through “support,” “training,” and “guidance.” The role of a cheerleader was defined as offering “validation,” “encouragement,” and “motivation” to newcomers as they take on new and more challenging responsibilities and “navigate” the intricacies of the institution. Jane offered a particularly vivid analogy:

I’m seeing it as a path. Where [new employees are] on their path, and I’m over here on the sides, like bowling bumpers. For example, “Here’s how we navigate work politics,” which can be brand new for new professionals, so we guide them back, “here’s how we navigate self-consciousness” - bump you back on course (gestured bumping in with hands), “Here’s how we navigate time management,” (gestured bumping in with hands), “Meet your deadlines,” (gestured bumping in with hands), - bump you back in the lane (gestured bumping in with hands).

A bumper guides the individual through workplace politics, or any unfamiliar territory related to the job or institution, therefore potentially increasing the individual’s confidence to do student affairs work. This is a particularly evocative metaphor that lines up with the coaching and
cheerleading role. As part of the coach/cheerleader role and keeping newcomers on the path, the participants described using two specific techniques outlined below.

**Flipping the Script.** Maddison, Rachel, Jane, and James talked about empowering new professionals to figure things out on their own first. Maddison referred to a technique she called “flipping the script” by asking, “what would you do?” before giving new professionals all the answers. Rachel says she does the same (which she admitted may annoy some people) by frequently asking, “What do you think about that?” In other words, instead of immediately providing supervisees with a set of rules to follow, the supervisor listens to responses and provides feedback on anticipated challenges and obstacles, discusses alternatives, and reinforces the likelihood of success. Rachel added, “There is power in helping someone solve a problem. Also, the grace piece is important too.” Rachel points out that it feels good to help newcomers solve their own problems and feel empowered by their abilities to make the right decisions. Yet, Rachel also warns that sometimes newcomers may come to you after making a mistake. The extension of grace and forgiveness during follow-up discussions encourages learning and development before and after the moment.

**Sharing Experiences.** In addition to flipping the script, supervisors often coach/cheerlead by “sharing experiences” from their professional past. This is a form of storytelling where current supervisors tell newcomers about similar situations from their past. Joel provided this thought:

I think it’s important to be able to empathize about where we’ve been because I think when supervisees are looking at us, they’re looking at us as role models and looking to learn from us. So, for me, it’s important to be able to use the positive and the negative
experiences that shape their experience. And also provide context for their experiences -
while unique to them, they’re not necessarily unique to this field.

Hudson didn’t have a supportive coach/cheerleader supervisory experience, but he
explained how his experiences benefit new professionals. In other words, even though he did not
have positive supervisor experiences to draw from, he is thoughtful and intentional about how he
responds to his new professional staff members:

My path getting to where I am wasn’t all sunshine and roses. I had to struggle, and I
understand some of the things that they might struggle with. And if it’s an experience that
I had prior or previously, make sure that I am upfront and honest with how I maybe
mishandled or handled that experience. And if they were looking for advice, offer that to
them at that time. Or if they’re not, just say, “If you want someone to talk to or you’re
needing to just vent about an issue, you can always come to me.” I’ve had a lot of really
good-what-not-to-do examples; I think that they can learn from.

Supervisors of new professionals serve as a coach/cheerleader. Two techniques of
doing so are flipping the script and sharing their experiences with their supervisees.
Several members of this study use these techniques to encourage learning and development
among new professionals.

**Career Assistance.** The participants of this study overwhelmingly felt it was important
to help new professionals figure out their next career step in student affairs. Through career
conversations, supervisors can help employees improve upon the skill sets needed to reach their
next goal and encourage professional growth. Joel said his role as a supervisor was to prepare
them for their next step. Hudson felt that exposure to different functional areas was important to
finding their niche and not feeling pigeonholed or stuck in one area. He suggested supporting the idea of talking to different departments if a new worker was interested and wanted to learn more.

All participants recognized that today’s new professionals do not stay in one position for very long. The literature on Gen Z supports this finding of a gig mindset. A gig mindset refers to workers, although often salaried employees, who approach their work as freelancers hired to use their skills in exchange for money, only for a short time (Estes, 2020). Jane and other participants felt that current new professionals stay one to two years and are ready to move on. Jane pointed out that new professionals should stay more than one year to witness the semesterly cycles which occur in student affairs, “It takes three semesters to really feel like you can start to make the job your own or really see the impact of any small or early changes you may have made.” Some members of the study believed entry-level positions are just a way for new professionals to get their foot in the door. Many commented it is helpful to recognize their tendency to move on rather than fight the tendency for new professionals to move on to other jobs quickly. Chase provided this thought:

Once [new professionals’] learning is done, they want to move forward. They want to learn the next thing. And they have the right to. And so, we, as old-timers (I can’t think of a better term), need to be prepared, ready, and okay with that and need to support that.

Even though it means our turnover is going to be high.

Understanding and embracing the tendency for newcomers to come and go quickly in entry-level positions is a reality of student affairs. When student affairs professionals acknowledge and accept the pattern, supervisors can support the individual in their professional growth and make plans for transition and succession in these entrance roles.
Supervisors of this group are aware that new professionals do not intend to remain in their first positions for long. As part of this acknowledgment, supervisors would rather engage in career conversations that encourage new professionals to take the next step within the field instead of outside of the field.

**Breaking the Cycle.** For this study, I wondered if any method to improve workplace experiences was passed down or inherited from their experiences as new professionals. When asked to talk about behaviors they may have inherited from their early supervisors, very few talked about behaviors they inherited or practices they continue. Instead, and to my surprise, participants consistently mentioned that they were attempting to “break the cycle.” Maddison said, “I always do what I don’t feel like I got.” Lucy similarly commented, “All things I felt - I try to make sure that the folks that work for me don’t feel that.” Hudson also confirmed this practice:

> A lot of this comes back from my experience early on as a professional and understanding and recognizing the things that I wish my supervisors did that made me feel the way that I feel and making sure that I don’t, quote-unquote, don’t repeat those mistakes.

Later, Hudson went on about breaking the cycle, “I care about their personal experiences in student affairs, especially because I don’t want them to have the same experience that I had.” For many supervisors, intentionally not repeating bad behaviors is a conscious decision in their day-to-day supervision of newcomers. More than half of the participants spoke of breaking the cycle from their early supervisors.

**Factors of Mattering.** Finally, I presented the participants with a predetermined list of factors of mattering and asked them to share ways in which they incorporate these factors into
their day-to-day supervisory practice as another way of improving the new professional workplace experience. When presented with the list (inclusion, appreciation, importance, pride toward accomplishments, empathy during struggles, and dependence on contribution), all participants were able to talk about how they incorporated each factor into their practice. All ten talked significantly about showing appreciation and empathy during struggles.

Leo explained that he says thank you and highlights what he loves about his supervisees. Chase said, “I learned during the first few years that caring for the person is sometimes more important than the day-to-day work.” Chase shared that he sends birthday cards in the mail. Rachel leaves little notes of appreciation on her supervisee’s desks. According to Jane, “People who feel appreciated are going to feel included, are going to feel better, are going to be more successful employees, ideally happier employees.”

When asked about showing empathy during struggles, many provided examples in their daily work. However, Dorothy offered a particularly valuable perspective:

We didn’t [all] start on the same starting line. I hate the saying “pull yourself up from your bootstraps” because some people don’t have boots. They don’t have socks. Take a moment to listen. New professionals share what they need. Sometimes struggles are minor; sometimes they’re major. We could support and make it a little bit easier. Not disabling them. This is very, very important, key to their professional development. Dorothy pointed out that recognizing how people struggle differently is just as important as recognizing the struggle itself. Not everyone will experience things the same, and as supervisors, there shouldn’t be the assumption that each newcomer starts from the same reference point.

**Summary of the Findings to Research Question 3.** This study revealed three experiences supervisors named for themselves as practices they utilized to create a positive
workplace for new professionals. The fourth experience referred to by the supervisors came from factors of mattering.

First, supervisors revealed that their primary role was to serve new professionals as a coach/cheerleader by flipping the script and sharing experiences. It was not necessarily reported that they intentionally incorporated these practices to influence retention; however, they have created a supportive environment for new professionals from which to learn and grow. Second, it was clear that supervisors of new professionals preferred open, honest discussions about career goals. They recognized new professionals of Gen Z were not likely to stay in one position for a long time. Supervisors, therefore, preferred to help new professionals think about their next career step within the field. Third, there was an intentional desire to break the cycle of inadequate supervision among those who did not have good supervisory experiences in their early years in the field. I noted that very few supervisors reported repeating the negative behaviors of their previous supervisors.

Lastly, each participant in this study reported incorporating all six predetermined factors of mattering in their supervisory practice. Out of these six, interviews revealed two factors were prioritized most by the participant supervisors: showing appreciation and empathy during struggles. By incorporating these factors in their day-to-day supervisory practice, supervisors demonstrated that new professionals matter. Therefore, it is reasonable to say these supervisory participants improved the workplace experience and guarded against marginality in the workplace.

**Overall Insights**

This qualitative case study revealed the factors that influenced career longevity in student affairs, guided by three research questions. Four early workplace experiences made a difference
in new professionals’ decision to remain in student affairs which were discovered through in-depth semi-structured interviews: a platform for practice, substantial work experiences, a connection to professionals, and high-impact moments with students. In other words, for the new professional experience, a platform for practice is where mistakes are a part of a forgiving learning process. Substantial work experiences helped new professionals feel essential and contributed to a common goal. When work was substantial, new professionals felt their work concretely tied to the university’s mission. Therefore, they felt like their work contributed to the greater community. Ideally, connections with other professionals occurred with the supervisor. Still, it was not essential as long as someone, such as another colleague with more experience, supported and guided the way. Lastly, high-impact student moments generally reaffirmed new professionals’ decision to work in student affairs. High-impact moments with students are unpredictable and cannot be planned occurrences. Nevertheless, participants reported a combination of these experiences had a powerful influence on a newcomer’s likelihood of staying in student affairs.

Participants confirmed that mattering and marginality were essential factors in career longevity. Yet, all participants of this study experienced some marginality during their first five years regardless of whether they perceived their overall experience positively or negatively. Participants recalled factors of mattering with greater frequency than factors of marginality. The two factors of mattering the participants experienced the most during their new professional years were a sense of appreciation and a sense of importance. The participants also revealed the four S’s (Schlossberg, 1981) of coping aided in response to factors of marginality in the workplace, not just during workplace transitions.
Finally, participants who are now themselves in supervisory positions reported primarily serving as coach/cheerleader and providing career assistance to improve their newcomer supervisees’ experiences. In addition, this study uncovered a common desire among supervisors to break the cycle, or not repeat, the poor supervision they received as new professionals in an effort to improve the new professional experience in student affairs. All reported demonstrating ways to incorporate factors of mattering while supervising new professionals, such as showing appreciation and empathy during struggles. While it was undetermined that study participants incorporated any of the six factors of mattering intentionally for the sake of retaining new professionals, it can be said that these supervisors guarded against feelings of marginality and fostered a sense of mattering in their supervisees. Yet, the participants revealed factors of mattering did influence their professional persistence when they were newcomers to student affairs.

This study could not ignore the Great Resignation and the impact the global pandemic has had on student affairs. Chapter 5 will include the connection I make to the research findings as part of the discussion and limitations, and finally, make recommendations for future study.
Chapter 5

This qualitative study aimed to determine factors contributing to retention among new professionals in student affairs. This chapter begins with a summary overview of the study, followed by a discussion of the results based on the three research questions. The chapter will also briefly highlight study limitations, acknowledge and refer back to the theoretical framework, and explore implications for practice and future research.

Summary of Study

This study delved into the arena of career longevity in student affairs. Through a qualitative study design, I interviewed seasoned professionals who had remained employed in the field for more than five years, asking them to reflect on those experiences that contributed to their career persistence. I also asked questions that revealed the behaviors and practices in their current daily work as supervisors to entry-level professionals.

Through this study, I sought to answer three research questions to understand better what retains some student affairs professionals beyond five years while others leave when they are relatively new to the profession. The section below summarizes the three research questions, followed by a discussion of the interconnections that explain how mattering factors connect the findings together. Overall, after summarizing each research question below, the study provided a greater understanding of the factors influencing retention of new student affairs professionals.

Research Question 1

The first research question asked, “Among student affairs professionals who have not left the field within their first five years of professional employment, what early workplace experiences contribute to career longevity?” Data revealed that new professionals are more likely to remain in student affairs when they have four early workplace experiences/factors: A Platform
for Practice, Substantial Work, a Connection to Professionals, and High-Impact Moments with Students. When newcomers had these experiences, they described an overall positive recollection of their first five years working in student affairs that led to career longevity. When all four Early Workplace Experiences happened simultaneously or in a combination, there was an increased likelihood of a new professional staying more attached to the field of student affairs. High-Impact Moments with Students are in-person and spontaneous. They cannot be predicted, controlled, or created. Subsequently, High-Impact Moments with Students are less likely to occur when a university converts from in-person to remote operations such as the global pandemic or other safety precautions. Therefore, High-Impact Moments with Students are less common but still significantly meaningful experiences.

**Research Question 2**

The second research question asked, “In what ways did new professionals experience marginality and mattering during their entry-level positions?” The findings revealed that all participants experienced both factors of marginality and mattering (Schlossberg, 1989). Participants recalled feelings of mattering more frequently than feelings of marginality. Therefore, this study maintains that factors of mattering contributed to their professional persistence in student affairs. The factors of mattering described included: Appreciation, Inclusion, Importance, Empathy During Struggles, Pride in Accomplishments, and Dependence on Contributions. Most participants of the study described feeling Appreciated and Important during their entry-level years in the student affairs profession.

All participants shared the intuitive ability to use coping mechanisms to overcome difficult times when feeling marginalized. The coping mechanisms were Situation, Self, Support, and Strategy, referred to as the four S’s in transition theory (Schlossberg, 1981). It is
undetermined if these coping mechanisms retain new professionals, but it is reasonable to assume that the ability to cope contributes to persistence to some extent.

**Research Question 3**

The final research question in this study asked, “How do participants, as supervisors, work to influence retention among their supervisees?” The question aimed to investigate what supervisors are doing with new professional staff members to encourage positive experiences and ultimately influence retention. This question guided the second half of this study. The responses from the participants revealed two primary roles that they played as supervisors to entry-level professionals: first, the Coach/Cheerleader role, and second by offering Career Guidance, followed by a common desire to break the cycle of bad supervision.

The findings indicated that as supervisors to new professionals, the participants felt their primary role was to serve as Coach/Cheerleader by offering Support, Guidance, and Encouragement. As a Coach/Cheerleader, the supervisor provided the new professional with intangible resources to do their jobs confidently in this role. Supervisors often used techniques such as flipping the script or sharing experiences from their past work experience. As a Coach/Cheerleader, the supervisor answered questions, remained open to discussing ideas, and explained the complex nuances of institutional politics. The same participants also reflected on a sense of reassurance and connection when their early supervisors acted in a Coach/Cheerleader role during their years as newcomers.

In addition, supervisors reported feeling that their responsibility was to offer Career Guidance to new professionals. They provided this through ongoing career conversations that focused on skill-building for the next step, career goal setting, and professional development. The sense of responsibility to hold ongoing career conversations aligns with Wilson’s (2008)
finding that new professionals ranked their first supervisor at the top of the list for providing the most career guidance. However, this study did not determine that supervisors initiate career conversations to retain entry-level employees. Instead, it seemed to serve as a strategy to plan against turnover and to support the continuity of student services. Yet, it is reasonable to say holding regular career conversations that focus on the next step in student affairs is a method to encourage newcomers to search for positions within student affairs rather than in another field or industry.

**Interconnections**

There are meaningful interconnections between the findings of the three research questions, and I have illustrated them below in Figure 2. The connection between mattering and early workplace experiences is illustrated in the figure by using the double-sided arrow. For example, Schlossberg’s (1989) factors of mattering (i.e., Empathy, Contribution, Importance, and Inclusion) are tied to Early Workplace Experiences (i.e., Platform for Practice, Substantial Work Experiences, and Connection to Professionals). More specifically, Empathy during struggles connects to the Platform for Practice. When a supervisor shows Empathy, they create an environment for new professionals to learn from their mistakes. Substantial Work Experiences encourage a sense of Importance and Dependence on Contributions. When a supervisor asked a new professional to join a committee or work on a project due to their expertise, the newcomer felt an increased sense of Importance and dependence on their Contributions. Finally, a Connection to Professionals spawns a sense of Inclusion in the workplace. When new professionals interact and connect to others, such as their colleagues, they begin to feel like they belong and fit into the culture and environment. The reverse can also be said that when they feel included, they are likely making Connections with Professionals.
There are also connections between the finding of supervisors acting as a Coach/Cheerleader and factors of mattering, as illustrated in Figure 2 below by the double-sided arrow between these related components. Supervisors demonstrated mattering factors such as Empathy, Contribution, Importance, and Inclusion when providing Support, Guidance, and Encouragement. In reverse, when a new professional experienced these factors of mattering, they reported having someone in the workplace who Supported, Guided, and Encouraged them along the way.

Lastly, a connection emerged between Coach/Cheerleader and Early Workplace Experiences. As new professionals Connected to other Professionals, mainly if it was a supervisor, participants reported feeling a sense of Support, Guidance, and Encouragement. When supervisors offered Support, Guidance, and Encouragement, they created a Platform for Practice. This is illustrated in Figure 2 by the double-sided arrows.

The exchange demonstrates a strong alignment between mattering and the other findings. The four factors of mattering, Empathy, Contribution, Importance, and Inclusion connect with the other findings. These interconnections across the data further strengthen the assertion that Schlossberg’s (1989) factors of mattering connect to career longevity in student affairs.
**Figure 2**

*Interconnection Between the Findings*

![Diagram showing interconnection between Mattering, Coach/Cheerleader, and Early workplace experiences.

Mattering includes:
- Empathy
- Contribution
- Importance
- Inclusion

Coach/Cheerleader includes:
- Support
- Guidance
- Encouragement

Early workplace experiences includes:
- Platform for practice
- Substantial work
- Connection to Professionals

*Note.* This figure demonstrates the interconnectedness between the findings from the findings.

**Connections to the Theoretical Framework**

The following sections apply the findings of this study to the insights presented in the theoretical framework. Schlossberg’s transition theory (1981) and theory of marginality and mattering (1989) served as the lens to understand the experiences contributing to retention among new professionals in student affairs. Below, I discuss how these theories connect with the findings presented in Chapter 4. I argue that my study expands the use of both transition theory and the theory of marginality and mattering by applying them to new populations. I also
recommend the addition of a new factor of mattering (i.e., Support) and a new factor under the conceptualization of marginality (i.e., Feeling Overwhelmed).

*Transition Theory*

This study expanded the application of transition theory (Schlossberg, 1981) by asking participants to recall a longer timeline rather than limiting it to one transition, like a job change that is typically shorter in time. Instead, I looked at the time from an individual’s second year of graduate school through a professional’s first five years. During these years, newcomers often experience multiple new situations, new responsibilities, and growth, requiring adjustment and the coping skills to deal with ever-present changes and challenges. I found that the coping skills used for temporary or short-term transitions are also used when dealing with difficult situations over a longer time frame. These situations included poor supervision, no supervision, lack of preparation in the form of onboarding and training, homesickness, feeling disconnected, increased personal and financial responsibilities, and a loss of a family member. The youngest professional in this study was in her fifth year in student affairs in March 2020, when the global pandemic began in the United States. She also demonstrated the use of coping skills during this time.

In this study, the four S’s were also evident as coping mechanisms among participants. Situation, Self, Support, and Strategies were reported to have increased participants’ ability to cope and therefore increased the likelihood of their remaining in the field of student affairs. Although Schlossberg (1981) initially identified the four S’s as a coping mechanism for transition, this study illustrated that these same skills helped new student affairs employees combat feelings of marginality often experienced throughout these early years of professional work.
Marginality and Mattering

The present study also extended the theory of marginality and mattering (Schlossberg, 1989) beyond undergraduate students and served as the lens to identify factors contributing to career longevity in newcomers to student affairs. When individuals from this study had positive workplace experiences or experienced mattering, they reported feeling optimistic about their work environment and remained in student affairs. Nearly all the participants in this study said they had a positive first five years in the field. They could quickly identify Early Workplace Experiences that attributed to positive feelings and demonstrated how and when they felt factors of mattering.

Participants referred to a sense of Support when talking about a Platform for Practice. They explained the experience as being Guided, similar to Coaching, and Encouraged, similar to Cheerleading. Additionally, those who had a cohort experience during graduate school referred to the sense of Support they felt throughout those years. Therefore, I recommend adding the term “support” to factors of mattering for the workplace. Support, in this case, would be defined as feeling guided and encouraged.

Conversely, I recommend adding “feeling overwhelmed” as a new marginality factor for the workplace. A sense of being overwhelmed was a common negative feeling referred to throughout this study. Participants with negative experiences spoke of moments when they felt overwhelmed and stressed. In these cases, they had taken on too much, worked too many hours, or had too much responsibility without Support and Guidance from supervisors, mid-level or same-level professionals. Therefore, I would recommend the addition of Feeling Overwhelmed as a new factor specifically for the higher education and student affairs workplace, defined as being stressed and feeling overworked.
Limitations

Common to all research, limitations are those characteristics of the research design that influence the interpretation of the findings, often in the form of weaknesses (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). This section will share the limitations of this study in three parts: Researcher Bias, Methodology, and Generalizability.

Researcher Bias

As the primary researcher for this study, I recognized the potential for researcher bias with connections to the setting and participants. I attempted to reduce researcher bias throughout the research process by notetaking and the reflexive practice of bracketing. It is possible that during transcription and analysis, the interpretation of the participants’ spoken words differed from what was intended due to this bias. It is also possible that participants were not as free with their responses due to my positionality in this student affairs division, particularly as it pertained to responding to questions regarding feelings of marginality. To limit these potential biases, I anonymized their identities, kept all responses confidential, and offered each participant the opportunity to skip a question if needed.

Methodology

There are a couple of methodological limitations to keep in mind. First, this research design filled a gap created by previous studies seeking to understand retention in student affairs. This study filled the gap by uniquely seeking to understand retention from those who chose to remain in the field rather than those who left or intend to leave. However, this study relied on participant recall for the first half of the dual-focused interview. I acknowledged that over time, participants’ recollections of stories and situations might not be as accurate as they once were. However, the second half of this study asked participants questions based on their present-day
roles and work situations. The hope here is that participants could accurately recount present-day situations and circumstances. Finally, since data collection occurred during a global pandemic, perceptions and judgments shared by participants during this time may have been predisposed to workplace negativity due to overall low morale, stress, and fatigue widely experienced by workers of all types during the pandemic.

Generalizability

While acknowledging that qualitative studies do not aim for generalization, this study’s sample permits some degree of application to the larger division of student affairs in the study’s setting. However, this study may not apply to all new professionals at any post-secondary institution’s student affairs unit. Nonetheless, insights generated by this study may apply to other institutions. In addition, this participant group was selected based on demographics such as gender identity, race, and a range of experience in the field, and it was a convenience sample. Lastly, this study launched in the middle of the global coronavirus pandemic. The Great Resignation (Cohen, 2021) affected employment nationally and in all industries during data collection. I acknowledge factors that influence retention during such an unprecedented time for employment typically may not be as generalizable to times without a global crisis. However, it is essential to note that the participants were new professionals before the pandemic.2

Implications

There are many important implications based on this study. The findings suggest intentional ways to improve retention among new professionals in student affairs. Below I will

2 One participant was in her fifth year as a new professional when COVID-19 began in the United States - March 2020.
present two suggested implications for practice and five implications for future research in student affairs.

**Implications for Practice**

Student Affairs divisions and practitioners regularly engage in reflection on their practices and policies, all with an aim to improve how they serve students and the institution. This study also has important insights that can contribute to this ongoing reflexivity and improvement that so clearly marks the larger field. In this case, student affairs would benefit from new and revised supervisor training. GAs and new professionals may have supervisors with limited supervision training or experience, leading to poor supervisory behavior simply due to a lack of preparation. This recommendation would support the findings from previous studies that reported ineffective supervision was the top cause for attrition for newcomers to student affairs (Buchanan & Shupp, 2015; St. Onge et al., 2008; Tull, 2006). It might be helpful to position new supervisor training during the summer or before new supervisees arrive on campus. Seasoned professionals who have more than five years of experience supervising other professionals in student affairs might serve as the best facilitators of such a training. Supervision training is essential to develop highly confident managers capable of guiding, supporting, and encouraging new professionals to circumvent resentment and uncertainty, which leads to attrition in this group. Earlier studies referred to appreciative leadership such as support, encouragement, respect, and opportunities created by the direct supervisor enhanced team retention (Butcher & Kritsonis, 2007; Howard & Gould, 2000; Taylor, 2004). Therefore, supervisor training promoting the same skills discovered in this study, including Coaching and Cheerleading, creating a Platform for Practice, and Early Workplace Experiences specific to functional areas in
student affairs, as well as other topics such as relationship building, conflict resolution, and accountability, would be beneficial to the profession.

Based on the findings from this study, I also recommend the exploration of recruiting and hiring in cohorts. Cohorts are groups that start and finish a program together. By recruiting and hiring graduate students or new professionals in this manner, they arrive on a campus with a built-in peer group. New professionals highly correlate positive coworker relationships to workplace satisfaction (Strayhorn, 2009). Acceptance among peers and relationship building are also positively related to newcomers’ socialization, particularly for those transitioning from school to work (Bauer & Erdogan, 2011). Therefore, entering as a group is essential because feeling connected to a community is integral to guarding against marginality, particularly for newcomers coming from graduate school. This practice could significantly reduce new employee melt within the first five years of employment. Perez (2016) supported a cohort model for the collective, arguing that this model aligns with the interpersonal and collaborative nature of the student affairs workplace structure and encourages institutional sensemaking, group norms, culture, and values acquired in group socialization versus individual socialization. Hiring managers could create entry-level positions with pre-determined three to four-year contracts for new professional cohorts. This type of cohort recruiting and hiring process ensures a built-in peer group, standardizes career conversations, and works as a deterrent to high turnover.

**Implications for Research**

For decades, researchers have studied retention in student affairs in various ways. These studies all looked at new professionals with under five years of experience. The findings from my study indicated that many new professionals are only in a role for one or two years and then leave, and Gen Z is reported to view work more like a freelance opportunity (Estes, 2020). A
study of this type could inform us if the new professionals of today leave sooner than five years. A longitudinal study of employment in student affairs could also track the patterns of new professionals in the first five years to determine if they are transitioning to other roles within student affairs or leaving the field altogether.

The selection of the participants in this study was primarily based on experience in the field, followed by current or past experience supervising new professionals. I attempted to diversify the sample based on gender, race, and ethnicity as best as possible. As a result, the sample group was half female and half male. Forty percent identified as non-white, and 30% identified as gay. I did not find a connection between increased marginality or mattering from underrepresented or marginalized participants in this study. However, further research specifically looking at factors that contribute to retention among new professionals in historically marginalized communities would be a worthy research pursuit for retaining new professionals with specific identities.

My study also discovered that employees implement coping skills typically used for temporary or short-term transitions when dealing with difficult situations over a longer timeframe. Therefore, a longitudinal study on the four S’s would be beneficial for application not only for an individual in transition but for difficult workplace situations, such as poor supervision and feeling overworked, underprepared, and isolated. This study could follow participants through the tenure of a position to see whether they use these coping mechanisms to deal with the stresses of student affairs.

I also recommend researchers design studies to compare the long-term retention of two groups of employees included in this work. These groups are those who worked in part-time, temporary GA positions during their years of graduate training and those who worked in full-
time employee positions while pursuing their graduate studies. Although I did not request information on the participants’ graduate school employment status on the demographic form, this difference became clear upon analysis. It is essential to distinguish these two groups due to their differing experiences. Full-time employees and GAs work different required hours. GAs work a limited set of hours which is, at most, half of the hours of a full-time employee. Therefore, GAs are often shielded from specific experiences because of less time in the office, lighter workloads, and responsibilities. One group may have a more realistic perspective on work in student affairs due to the different experiences. Exploring whether one group experiences marginality or mattering would be essential to understanding the potential for increased attrition or retention among one group versus the other in future studies.

Finally, I recommend further research on the new factors of marginality and mattering discovered through this study. Continued study on these factors in the workplace would determine if they are common experiences in other university settings and higher education units or strictly limited to those participants in this study at Mid-Atlantic University. Therefore, comprehensive research would determine the inclusion or exclusion of Feeling Overwhelmed and Feeling a Sense of Support in a workplace model.

**Summary**

The study of retention among new professionals is essential for the viable future of student affairs. This chapter provided a summary of the study, connections to the theoretical framework, a discussion of limitations, and a presentation of implications for practice and continued research on achieving career longevity for student affairs.
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Appendix A

Informed Consent

Project Title: New Professional Retention in student affairs

Investigator(s): Diane D'Arcangelo; Dr. Orkideh Mohajeri

Project Overview:

Participation in this research project is voluntary. Diane D'Arcangelo is conducting this study as part of her Doctoral Dissertation to investigate low retention rates among new professionals in student affairs. For more than a decade, greater than 50% of new professionals leave student affairs within five years of post-graduate studies. The loss of new professionals is a concern for the profession, their institutions, higher education and student affairs faculty, their colleagues, and the individual. This study will explore the experiences that contribute to career longevity in student affairs through the perspective of seasoned student affairs professionals who have remained in the field. Your participation requires a one-on-one interview and the completion of a brief demographic form. The interview will take about 1.5 hours to complete. There is a minimal risk which includes loss of your time spent in the interview conversation and potentially mild discomfort with some questions if they bring up any emotional memories for you. If you would like to participate, Mid-Atlantic University requires that you agree and sign this consent form. You may ask Diane D'Arcangelo any questions to help you understand this study. If you do not want to be a part of this study, it won't affect any services from Mid-Atlantic University or your employment there. If you choose to be a part of this study, you have the right to change your mind and stop being a part of the study at any time.

1. What is the purpose of this study?
   ○ Explore the experiences that contribute to longevity among student affairs administrators through the perspective of seasoned student affairs professionals. This study intends to learn from current professionals and supervisors about successful retention in the field.

2. If you decide to be a part of this study, you will be asked to do the following:
   ○ Complete a demographic questionnaire.
   ○ Participate in a recorded one-on-one qualitative interview conversation.
   ○ Provide any follow-up insights via a voice memo or Zoom recording (optional).
   ○ This study will take about 2 hours of your time (participation form, interview, and optional follow-up).

3. Are there any experimental medical treatments?
   ○ No.

4. Is there any risk to me?
   ○ Possible risks or sources of discomfort include time spent on the interview and potentially mild discomfort with some questions.
   ○ All identifying information will be removed from documents and data.
   ○ All information will be saved in locked or password-protected electronic files.
   ○ The researcher respects the right of the participant not to answer any questions that may make them feel uncomfortable.
   ○ Participation is voluntary, and therefore anyone in the study may refuse to participate or stop participation.
   ○ If you become upset and wish to speak with someone, you may speak with Diane D'Arcangelo.
   ○ If you experience discomfort, you have the right to withdraw at any time.

5. Is there any benefit to me?
   ○ Benefits to you may include an opportunity to share your experiences and reflect with a dedicated listener.
Other benefits may include contributing to student affairs development through implications and recommendations for new professionals' retention in student affairs for graduate preparatory programs, supervisors, and institutions of higher education.

6. How will you protect my privacy?
- The interview session will be recorded via Zoom or a voice recorder, and each recording will be downloaded and saved to the primary investigator's laptop on OneDrive.
- In addition to the recorded interview, participants will have an opportunity to share afterthoughts through individual recordings using voice recording apps and emailed to the primary researcher. These will be downloaded and saved to the primary investigator's laptop on OneDrive.
- Your records will be private. Only Diane D'Arcangelo, Dr. Orkideh Mohajeri (Faculty advisor), and the IRB will have access to your name and responses.
- Your name will not be used in any reports; Diane will use pseudonyms to refer to participants and anonymize individuals' identifiable characteristics.
- Records will be stored:
  - Password Protected File/Computer
  - On OneDrive
- All research documents and data will be stored on a password-protected university laptop used by the Principal Investigator, Diane D'Arcangelo, Executive Associate for the Vice President of Student Affairs. The primary location of the laptop is 624 S. High St., 2nd floor, and the secondary location is the personal residence of the Primary Investigator.
- The researcher and the faculty sponsor for the Ed.D. dissertation process, Dr. Orkideh Mohajeri, will have access to the documents and data.
- Documents and data will be shared through OneDrive using a password-protected link.
- All participant names and identifying information will be removed from the research results.
- Records will be destroyed three years after study completion.

7. Do I get paid to take part in this study?
- No.

8. Who do I contact in case of research-related injury?
- For any questions about this study, contact:
  - Primary Investigator: Diane D'Arcangelo at 610-436-3302 or ddarcangelo@wcupa.edu
  - Faculty Sponsor: Orkideh Mohajeri at 610-436-2941 or omohajeri@wcupa.edu

9. What will you do with my Identifiable Information?
- Your information will not be used or distributed for future research studies.
- For any questions about your rights in this research study, contact the ORSP at 610-436-3557.
- I, _________________________________ (your name), have read this form and I understand the statements in this form. I know that if I am uncomfortable with this study, I can stop at any time. I know that it is impossible to know all possible risks in a study, and I think reasonable safety measures have been taken to decrease any risk.

Subject/Participant Signature ______________
Date ______________

This study has been approved by the WCU IRB, protocol IRB-FY2021-240.
Appendix B

Demographic Questionnaire

New Professional Retention in student affairs: Participant Form Selection Survey

Q1 - I have worked in student affairs for more than five years.
True
False

Q2 - I supervise one or both of the following:
1. A 2nd-year HEPSA Graduate Assistant (GA)
2. A full-time employee with less than 5 years of experience in student affairs
3. I do not supervise a 2nd-year HEPSA GA or a full-time employee with less than 5 years of experience in student affairs

Q3 - I have a master’s degree or higher in Higher Education Student Affairs or a related field.
True
False

Q4 Informed Consent
[Project Overview and all content] –(Appendix A)

Q5 - You must select all that apply for consent.
1. I have read the Informed Consent and understand the statements in the form.
2. I know that if I am uncomfortable with this study, I can stop at any time.
3. I know that it is impossible to know all the risks in a study, and I think reasonable safety measures have been taken to decrease any risk.

Q6 - Sign for consent to participation.
Sign for consent to participation. - Name

Q7 - Enter today's date.
Enter today's date.

Demographic Questionnaire

Q8 - To which gender do you most identify?
1. Female
2. Male
3. Transgender Female
4. Transgender Male
5. Non-conforming
6. Not Listed
7. Prefer Not to Answer

Q9 - Which of the following best describes you?
1. Asian or Pacific Islander
2. Black or African American
3. Hispanic or Latino
4. Native American or Alaskan Native
5. White or Caucasian
6. Black or African American
7. Multiracial or Biracial
8. A race/ethnicity not listed here
Q10 - Which best describes you?
1. I have a (dis)ability/learning difficulty and need support
2. I have a (dis)ability/learning difficulty and may require support as a participant in the study
3. I have a (dis)ability/learning difficulty but do not need support
4. I prefer not to say
5. I do not have a (dis)ability/learning difficulty

Q11 - Which age group best describes you?
1. 18 to 29
2. 30 to 39
3. 40 to 49
4. 50 to 59
5. 60 or over

Q12 - I am a US citizen.
1. Yes
2. No

Q13 - How long have you worked in student affairs?
1. 5 to 10 years
2. 11 to 15 years
3. 16 to 20 years
4. 20 years or more

Q15 - My highest level of education is
1. Master’s Degree
2. Doctoral Degree

Q16 - What is the name of your degree and field of study? (EX: Master of Science/Higher Education Student Affairs)
What is the name of your degree and field of study? (EX: Master of Science/Higher Education Student Affairs)

Q17 - Please provide your name, email, and phone number for contact purposes only. (This information will be kept confidential.)
Please provide your name, email, and phone number for contact purposes only. (This information will be kept confidential.)
Appendix C

Email Invitation

Dear [Name]:

I am conducting my doctoral research study on new professional retention in the field of student affairs. This case study explores the experiences that contributed to career longevity through conversations with seasoned student affairs professionals who have remained in the field. Your experience in student affairs may provide valuable insight into this topic, and I am seeking your consideration and involvement in this study. Below are more details regarding your potential contribution.

Participation includes a one-on-one interview with me, lasting approximately 1.5 hours. Participation will be made on the following criteria:

- Participants must have more than five years of full-time, post-masters professional experience in student affairs.
- Participants must have earned a Master’s degree from a Higher Education Student Affairs graduate program or related program.
- Participants must be a current or previous supervisor of new professional(s). This study defines new professionals as 2nd-year HEPSA graduate students and full-time employees in their 1st – 5th year in student affairs.

The risks of this study are minimal, but some reflection on past and present experiences may stir up emotions.

All participant information will be kept confidential, and identifying information will be removed from the final paper.

If you are interested in participating in my study, please click the link here to complete the selection criteria survey, Informed Consent Form, and the demographic questionnaire. This should take no more than 5 minutes to complete.

If you have any questions, please let me know.

Thank you,

Diane D'Arcangelo
Executive Associate for the Vice President for Student Affairs
West Chester University
ddarcangel@wcupa.edu
610-436-3302

This study has been approved by the WCU IRB, protocol IRB-FY2021-240.
Appendix D

Recruitment Flyer

DOCTORAL RESEARCH

PARTICIPANTS NEEDED

RETENTION IN NEW STUDENT AFFAIRS PROFESSIONALS

- Must be a student affairs pro with 5+ years in the field
- Must have a Master's degree or higher in student affairs or a related field
- Must have supervisory experience of new student affairs professionals (2nd year HEPSA GA's - 5 yrs. in the field)

Interested candidates should click here for more information, selection survey, informed consent, and demographic information questionnaire. All information is confidential.

QUESTIONS: CONTACT DDARCANGELO@WCUPA.EDU

This study has been approved by the WCU IRB, protocol IRB-FY2021-240.
Appendix E

Interview Guide

1. Tell me a little bit about yourself. Where did you do your undergraduate studies, what graduate degrees do you have, and how did you come to student affairs as a profession?

2. What types of jobs have you held in student affairs? Which did you like most, least, and why?

3. Thinking about your graduate experience, is there anything significant during that time that encouraged your desire to remain in student affairs? Right out of graduate school, did you consider other career paths? Why?

4. Thinking back to graduate school through your 5th year in the profession of student affairs, would you say your overall recollection of that time was positive or negative? Can you provide one story or remembrance that would support how you feel?

Look over the list in question 5:

5. Reflecting on your first five years in student affairs, highlight the ones that applied to you:
   - You felt self-conscious.
   - You felt excluded.
   - You felt important.
   - You felt depressed.
   - You felt appreciated by others.
   - You felt included.
   - You felt irritable.
   - Others shared pride in your accomplishments.
   - Others empathized with your struggles.
   - Others depended on your contribution.

Can you tell me about the items you selected?

6. At what point in your career would you say you experienced a high point in working as a student affairs practitioner, and can you tell me about it? At what point did you go through a low point in your career, and can you tell me about it?

Shifting to your experience as a supervisor of new professionals:

7. Tell me about your supervisees. What period of their new professional experience are they in, and how many do you supervise? How long have you been a supervisor?

8. In general, how would you describe new professionals today?

9. Looking at the list below, do you prioritize, incorporate, or demonstrate any or all of the items on the list as a supervisor of new professionals. If so, in what ways? Please highlight those that are relevant.
   - Inclusion
   - Appreciation
   - Pride in their accomplishments
   - Empathy during struggles
   - Importance of their contribution

10. How do your early experiences in student affairs inform how you supervise?
11. Is there any one thing you do as a supervisor that you feel was passed on to you from a previous supervisor from time as a new professional?

12. In your opinion, what is the most important role you play as a supervisor to young professionals?

13. Do you think your supervisees will remain in student affairs beyond their fifth year? What perceptions, observations, or knowledge leads you to believe that?

14. We’ve gone through a lot in the last year and a half with the pandemic. In your opinion, or based on your perception, what has this whole experience done to new professionals for good or the bad?
Jul 28, 2021 8:18:36 AM EDT

To: Diane D'Arcangelo  
Education Policy, Planning Adm, Educational Found. & Policy St

Re: Expedited Review - Initial - IRB-FY2021-240 Retention of New Student Affairs Professionals

Dear Diane D'Arcangelo:

Thank you for your submitted application to the WCUPA Institutional Review Board. Since it was deemed expedited, it was required that two reviewers evaluated the submission. We have had the opportunity to review your application and have rendered the decision below for Retention of New Student Affairs Professionals.

Decision: Approved

Selected Category: 7. Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.

Sincerely,

WCUPA Institutional Review Board

IORG#: IORG0004242  
IRB#: IRB00005030  
FWA#: FWA00014155