The Search for Something Better: Narrative Inquiry into Why Women in Non-Faculty Roles Left Higher Education During COVID-19 Pandemic

Amanda Corsi
acorsi@wcupa.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.wcupa.edu/all_doctoral

Part of the Educational Leadership Commons, Higher Education Commons, Higher Education Administration Commons, Labor Relations Commons, and the Training and Development Commons

Recommended Citation
https://digitalcommons.wcupa.edu/all_doctoral/191

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by the Masters Theses and Doctoral Projects at Digital Commons @ West Chester University. It has been accepted for inclusion in West Chester University Doctoral Projects by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ West Chester University. For more information, please contact wcressler@wcupa.edu.
The Search for Something Better: Narrative Inquiry into Why Women in Non-Faculty Roles Left Higher Education During COVID-19 Pandemic

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

Amanda Corsi

May 2023

© Copyright 2023 Amanda Corsi
Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to all the women who worked in higher education during the COVID-19 pandemic. As women, we face hardships daily which challenge our strength, identity, and patience. This dissertation is dedicated to reminding you how strong, courageous, and powerful you are. Whether you decided to leave the field, leave your institution, or stay where you are, please know that your strength is inspiring. Keep fighting for what you believe in, what you value most, and for the students and your families.

To quote Ruth Bader Ginsberg, “Fight for the things that you care about but do it in a way that will lead others to join you.”
Acknowledgments

I want to thank the extraordinary individuals who helped support me through this program—first, my friends and colleagues, Evelyn, Holly, Eric, and Ann. I am so grateful we had the opportunity to experience this journey together – always remember to stand in your power! We started this program during a pandemic and sat in Zoom for hours, week after week. I am so grateful for your support, kindness, and words of encouragement. Thank you to Molly, Megan, and Rachel; our experience working during the pandemic inspired this project. I am grateful for each of you and stand in awe of your strength, creativity, and courage.

Thank you to my advisor, Dr. Alessandria, for all your support and guidance. For pulling me off the ledge and helping me find the guardrails time after time, I would not have been able to do this without your words of encouragement. Thank you to Dr. Hodes for talking me into earning my doctorate. You have been a part of my graduate school journey since day one of my master’s degree, and you have always helped steer me in the right direction. Thank you to my committee members, Dr. Kahen and Dr. Nolan, for all of your support, guidance, and feedback over the last year. Finally, thank you to my participants, you deserved a chance to share your stories, and I hope this dissertation does your experience justice. Your courage to try something new and perseverance are an inspiration to everyone.

Most importantly, thank you to my husband, Alex. I would not have survived this experience without your patience and support in keeping the ship afloat while I disappeared on weekends to write. You always find the bright spot in life, and I’m honored to call you, my partner. Thank you for your unconditional love during the last three years. I love you.
Abstract

Stressors brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic for women working in non-faculty roles in higher education still need to be understood. While there is extensive research on voluntary turnover, the influence of the pandemic on how and why women choose to leave the field is still lacking. Most research on higher education professionals fails to include the perspective of women in non-faculty positions. This study conducted a qualitative narrative inquiry to understand the experiences of women in non-faculty roles who worked in higher education during the COVID-19 pandemic and how that influenced their reasons for turnover decision-making. The results found that the pandemic amplified existing concerns for each participant. Ultimately, their relationship with their supervisor and leadership, lack of career growth, and role as a mother influenced why they left the field of higher education. Their relationship with their supervisor was salient in their reasons to leave, four subthemes were found: lack of support and personal risk, lack of humanity, constant change, and lack of flexibility. The COVID-19 pandemic directly influenced their turnover decision-making process by sparking the Great Resignation, which created opportunities for movement and provided them a chance to reflect on what they needed most from their careers. The findings of this study contextualize implications for future research by demonstrating the need to understand a woman’s experience in higher education, the factors that contribute to their decision to leave the field and provide a space in the academy for women in non-faculty roles to see themselves amongst literature.

Keywords: women in higher education, voluntary turnover, COVID-19 pandemic, narrative inquiry
Table of Contents

List of Figures ....................................................................................................................... ix

Chapter 1 ................................................................................................................................. 1

  Purpose of the Study ........................................................................................................... 3
  Problem Statement ............................................................................................................. 6
  Rationale ............................................................................................................................. 7
  Research Questions ........................................................................................................... 8
  Significance of Methods ................................................................................................... 9
  Significance of Study ....................................................................................................... 10
  Positionality ...................................................................................................................... 11
  Limitations ....................................................................................................................... 14
  Summary ........................................................................................................................... 15
  Definition of Terms ......................................................................................................... 16

Chapter 2 ............................................................................................................................... 18

  Impact of COVID-19 on Higher Education .................................................................. 19
  Women and Pandemic Policies ....................................................................................... 22
  Great Resignation ........................................................................................................... 25
    Higher Education’s Great Resignation ........................................................................... 26
  Work Environment .......................................................................................................... 27
  Women in Higher Education ......................................................................................... 29
  Voluntary Turnover ......................................................................................................... 30
    Turnover of Women in Higher Education .................................................................... 32
  Conceptual Framework .................................................................................................. 34
    Content vs. Process Models ......................................................................................... 36
March and Simon’s Content Model .......................................................... 37
Summary .................................................................................................. 44
Chapter 3 .............................................................................................. 46
Research Design .................................................................................... 46
Description of Methods .......................................................................... 48
Participants ........................................................................................... 49
   Inclusion criteria ................................................................................ 50
   Participant Demographics .................................................................. 51
   The Interview Setting ......................................................................... 51
Description of Materials ......................................................................... 51
   Recruitment Materials ....................................................................... 52
   Informed Consent and Demographic Survey ....................................... 52
   Interview protocol ............................................................................. 53
Procedures .............................................................................................. 53
   Participant Recruitment and Selection ............................................ 54
   Data Collection .................................................................................. 55
Data Analysis and Coding ....................................................................... 57
   First Cycle Coding ........................................................................... 58
   Second Cycle Coding ...................................................................... 59
   Thematic Analysis ............................................................................ 60
Credibility and Trustworthiness .............................................................. 61
   Member checking ............................................................................. 63
Summary of Study .................................................................................................................. 100

Research Question 1: Reasons for Leaving ........................................................................ 101
  Theme 1: Lack of Support from Leadership and Supervisor ........................................... 101
  Theme 2: Dissatisfaction with Career Growth ................................................................. 102
  Theme 3: Motherhood and Family Care ......................................................................... 103

Summary of Research Question 1: Reasons for Leaving .................................................. 103

Research Question 2: The Turnover Process ................................................................. 105
  Themes for Question 2 .................................................................................................. 106

Summary for Question 2: The Turnover Process .............................................................. 106

Connections to Conceptual Framework .......................................................................... 107
  Content Model ............................................................................................................. 107
  Process Model ............................................................................................................. 111

Limitations ......................................................................................................................... 112
  Limitations of the Study ............................................................................................... 112
  Limitations of Methodology ......................................................................................... 113
  Limitations of Analysis ................................................................................................. 114

Implications ....................................................................................................................... 115
  Implications for Practice .............................................................................................. 115
  Implications for Future Research .................................................................................. 117

Summary .............................................................................................................................. 119

References .......................................................................................................................... 120

Appendix A .......................................................................................................................... 129

Appendix B .......................................................................................................................... 132
List of Figures

Figure 1. March and Simon’s (1958) turnover model simplified (Content Model) ……….. 38
Figure 2. Current Conceptual Framework for Study (integrated process and content model) … 44
Figure 3. Timeline for Research ...................................................................................... 54
Figure 4. Template for Second Cycle Coding ................................................................. 59
Figure 5. Phases of Coding and Analysis ......................................................................... 61
Figure 6. Maria’s Timeline .............................................................................................. 67
Figure 7. Amira’s Timeline ............................................................................................. 71
Figure 8. Why They Left the Field ................................................................................ 75
Figure 9. How They Left the Field ................................................................................. 91
Figure 10. Why and How They Left the Field ................................................................. 99
Chapter 1

The COVID-19 pandemic was a challenge for many working in higher education, especially women. Stressors brought on by the pandemic, such as unplanned remote work, juggling multiple roles, staffing shortages, social distancing regulations, nationwide lockdowns, and remote learning, increased the likelihood of burnout and stress for women (Dahlberg & Higginbotham, 2021; Johnson et al., 2021; Young, 2020). As higher education continues to pivot through the current phase of the pandemic, understanding the unique experiences women face will help establish practices to reduce the likelihood of voluntary turnover. In addition, leaders on college and university campuses should understand how the pandemic affected women’s lives in higher education and how their work environment contributed to their decisions to leave the field entirely (Yildirim & Eslen-Ziya, 2020).

While there is extensive research on voluntary turnover, nothing explicitly addresses a woman’s decision to leave their field entirely. Limited research also considers the impact of a global COVID-19 pandemic on their decision-making or how that influenced a woman’s voluntary turnover decision. While multiple models on voluntary turnover offer ways to understand and predict turnover, this study sought to take a holistic approach to understand what influences a woman’s decision to leave the field of higher education during a pandemic. Specifically, this study aimed to understand how a woman’s experience working in higher education during a global pandemic influenced their decision to leave the field by allowing them to share their stories through a qualitative research design.

I start by reviewing a woman’s presence in the workplace which has evolved dramatically over the last several decades. From movements in the 1960s and 1970s to the creation of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission and the development of the
National Organization of Women, all were significant shifts in the workforce for women (Kersh, 2018; US Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2009). According to the US Bureau of Labor Statistics (2009), the number of women who earned a college degree tripled between 1970 and 2008, increasing the percentage of women in the workforce. In 2020, the number of women in the workforce fell by 1.2 percent to the lowest rate since 1987 (US Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2022a). The steep declines can be attributed to the COVID-19 pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic impacted the job market for many and varied by gender, race, and ethnicity. However, women were disproportionally more affected by the pandemic early in the spring of 2020 than men (US Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2022a). Women with children under the age of 18 only represented 72.5% of the workforce, which is much lower than the 93% of men with children under the age of 18.

Although gender representation does differ depending on the industry—the purpose of this study was to focus solely on the field of higher education—it is important to note that women account for more than half of all workers in the education sector (US Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2022b). Women predominately staff the field of higher education. Many women pursue careers in higher education and makeup almost 54% of the administrative roles (entry-level positions and mid-level managers) within higher education. However, few take on higher-level positions (Kersh, 2018). A survey by the Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education organization, known as NASPA (2022), found that women held over 60% of the entry- to mid-level student affairs positions and 37% of the upper-level student affairs roles. On average, women stay with their employer for 3.9 years, while men remain for 4.3 years. This is roughly unchanged from 2018-2020 (US Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2022.)
Jo (2008) discussed that individuals seek a career in higher education because colleges historically provide generous benefits, a high degree of job security, and a general mission to provide quality education. Unfortunately, there is very little research on why people, especially women, voluntarily leave their jobs in this field (Jo, 2008). Voluntary turnover creates problems for an institution's bottom line by impacting productivity, fostering poor morale, and overburdening remaining employees (Jo, 2008). Furthermore, researchers do not predict that turnover will improve soon. In a recent survey by the NASPA (2022), 39% of the participants indicated they do not plan or are undecided if they plan to stay in the student affairs profession for the next five years. NASPA (2022) also reported that 44% were unsure or would not encourage someone to enter the field of student affairs in the next five years. Higher education faces unique disadvantages when it comes to staff retention and recruitment. Most institutions of higher education (IHE) cannot compete with recruitment, hiring, and retention incentives in the corporate world. Therefore, it is essential to understand the influences on the voluntary turnover of women, who comprise most of the higher-education employees.

Research indicates that understanding employee turnover means organizations can work to reduce or prevent this behavior (Carmeli & Weisberg, 2006). However, frequent turnover is costly for the organization and the individual. Understanding motivations for voluntary turnover is one way for higher education to secure an institution’s investment as it seeks to adjust to the new normal after the COVID-19 pandemic. (Carmeli & Weisberg, 2006).

**Purpose of the Study**

This qualitative study sought to understand how and why women, who held non-faculty positions, viewed their institutions’ work environment amid a global pandemic and how their perceptions of the work environment influenced their decision to leave the field of higher
education through a narrative inquiry. An employee’s work environment is an overarching term that includes components such as relationships with colleagues, supervisor satisfaction, and satisfaction with job responsibilities (Zimmerman, 2008; March & Simon, 1958). Individuals working in higher education are tired and stressed after experiencing new levels of “unimagined hardness” due to staffing issues, additional responsibilities, and decreased resources (Morales, 2022, para. 1). This study examined women’s experiences through semi-structured interviews to understand their unique worldview and how factors such as workplace environment, relationships with colleagues, and their identification and involvement with an organization contributed to their decision to leave the field voluntarily.

A woman’s positionality can create unique challenges, which may ultimately contribute to their decision to leave employment in higher education and reduce the likelihood of securing a higher-level position. Positionality describes a person’s “world view and the position they adopt” within a task or social context (Holmes, 2020, p. 1). Understanding a woman’s positionality as it pertains to their views of their work environment, or more specifically, the field of higher education, required a qualitative approach to capture their lived experience accurately. Their view of their field plays a vital role in understanding how and why they arrived at their decision to leave the field. Women were selected as the primary focus of this study because of how unique their experience is working within this field, the social, cultural, and economic influences within their everyday life, and their presence in the field of higher education.

Voluntary turnover is defined as an individual’s decision to leave their position when the opportunity to continue employment is still present (Maertz & Campion, 2004). Understanding the motivational factors contributing to an employee’s decision to leave helps explain the probability of turnover (Carmeli & Weisberg, 2006). Affective organizational commitment is
defined as "the strength of an employee's involvement and identification with an organization" (Mowday et al., as cited in Zimmerman et al., 2019, p. 101) and is a common construct in most turnover models. Understanding what contributed to a woman’s decision to leave the field required inviting them to share their narratives. Thus, a qualitative narrative design was used so the women could tell their stories, capture their personal experiences working within higher education, and identify how and why they decided to leave the field.

Anthony Klotz of Texas A&M explained the term Great Resignation in an interview with Kellett (2022). Klotz explained that the term referred to a period when millions of workers decided to leave their jobs during the pandemic. The term describes “how COVID-19 upended the centuries-old notion of what work is and how it should be done” (Kellett, 2022, para. 3). McClure (2022) explained that the COVID-19 pandemic alone did not cause the Great Resignation in the field of higher education. While many predicted unemployment rates would increase, higher education was not able to foresee how the pandemic would create an existential reflection for employees on what is most important in their lives and how voluntarily leaving an organization was a way to regain control over their personal and professional lives, especially at a time when everything was so uncertain (Kellett, 2022). Instead, the pandemic amplified the problems higher education employees faced and the Great Resignation made it easier for employees to explore alternatives (Kellett, 2022; McClure, 2022). According to McClure (2022), issues within higher education, such as low morale and increased stress, all contribute to high turnover, which existed long before the pandemic but escalated as a result. The combination of exploring how women came to their decision to leave the field within the constructs of affective organization commitment, work environment, and ease of movement contributes to the literature
that focuses on why women voluntarily leave higher education and inform future research to contextualize why women are leaving the field.

**Problem Statement**

Unprecedented stress and pressure were present for women who worked in higher education long before the COVID-19 pandemic. Jo (2008) found three key variables influencing a woman's decision to leave an organization: their relationship with their supervisor, opportunities for career growth, and flexible work/life policies. The workplace environment, providing support for challenging students, and changes in higher education market logic have increased the workload for many (Gillespie et al., 2001). As early as 2019, women, the backbone of student affairs, left the higher education field disproportionately compared to men (Johnson et al., 2021). The global pandemic contributed to increased stress, along with the dissolution of work-life boundaries, and increased pressure associated with new policy implementation, such as remote work (Johnson et al., 2021; McClure, 2022; Young, 2020). In an interview with Kellett (2022), Klotz discussed quit rates and the influence an individual who voluntarily leaves an organization can have on the office’s work environment. According to Klotz, turnover can be contagious, and employees start to see others leave and begin thinking about doing the same (Kellett, 2022).

There is extensive literature on voluntary turnover, and almost all theorists and practitioners agree turnover costs are high for the individual and the organization (Maertz & Campion, 2004; Mitchell et al., 2001). Carmeli and Weisberg (2006) noted understanding employee turnover means organizations can work to reduce or prevent this behavior. From the organization's perspective, investing in the employee can be a vicious cycle when turnover is high. Time, energy, and resources are placed into training and developing staff. When an
organization can utilize literature to understand turnover motivations, it is taking a step toward securing its investment (Carmeli & Weisberg, 2006). Individuals often leave their jobs after stepping back to assess how they want to spend their time. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated issues that existed in higher education before the global shutdown. Morales (2022) explained people were tired, and the pandemic created new stress levels, exacerbated by staffing issues, increased duties, and crisis management.

Pazzanese (2021) interviewed Lawrence Katz, a professor of economics at Harvard University, about the shift in power between employees and employers which occurred during the pandemic. In the interview, Katz discussed what could contribute to this increase in voluntary turnover. They believed workers have adopted a new mentality of a “once-in-a-generation [who says] take this job and shove it movement” (Pazzanese, 2021, para. 14). The shifts made within the higher education field sparked by the pandemic, such as lockdowns, furloughs, and virtual learning, provided an opportunity for individuals across the nation to pause and think about what they value, what motivates them, and whether their organizations support their overall employee wellness and work-life balance (McClure, 2022). Additionally, researchers were urging leaders of colleges and universities not to be distracted by the pandemic as the cause of increased voluntary turnover amongst staff because doing so would “fail to address the real causes of employee dissatisfaction” (McClure, 2022, para. 14).

**Rationale**

This study sought to understand how and why women who held non-faculty positions in an institution of higher education (IHE) leave the field. For this study, an IHE is defined as a college or university, a public or private institution that leads to an associate degree, baccalaureate degree, master’s degree, or doctoral degree. It is essential for leaders who work
within an IHE to understand the decision-making process women go through and the reasons behind their departures to inform the retention of this population. Before the pandemic, researchers were beginning to explore the influence of workplace stress on women across various disciplines. Most literature before the pandemic typically focused on fields like nursing or teacher education (Dahlberg & Higginbotham, 2021; Kersh, 2018). However, there is very little literature on why women decide to leave the higher education field, which is more critical now than ever because of the significant impact the pandemic had on women within the field (Johnson et al., 2021).

Additionally, the literature emphasized an institution's work environment is the most critical aspect leaders can focus on to combat employee disengagement and voluntary turnover (McClure, 2022). This qualitative inquiry provided a chance to dig deep into the perception of workplace environment and the impact of enhanced stress brought on by the pandemic on women. Adding to the research on the retention of women in higher education benefits the women who are building careers in this field and provides data-driven insight to help leaders retain and recruit women in higher education.

**Research Questions**

Qualified, reliable, and well-trained staff are critical for student success and support. Carmeli and Weisberg (2006) noted understanding employee turnover means organizations can work to reduce or prevent this behavior. The research questions that guided this study of women who voluntarily leave higher education during the COVID-19 pandemic were:

1. Why did women in student service offices leave higher education during COVID-19?
2. How did the COVID-19 pandemic influence the turnover process of women who decided to leave their workplace?
The next section explains the importance of utilizing a qualitative study to capture the essence of voluntary turnover among women in higher education.

**Significance of Methods**

This study utilized a qualitative narrative inquiry research design to understand a woman’s decision to leave the field of higher education. According to Patton (2002), qualitative research allows the researcher to dive deeply into the participant's story through open-ended questions and increases the depth of understanding. A qualitative approach allows the researcher to understand a participant's viewpoint without using a predetermined set of categories like you find on a questionnaire (Butina, 2015; Patton, 2002). A narrative design has the participants tell their individual stories of their personal experiences working within higher education and what influenced their decision to leave. Using a narrative design approach for a qualitative study has many benefits. The first benefit allows the researcher to create a setting where the participants can tell their stories (Butina, 2015; Savin-Baden & Van Niekerk, 2007). One of the defining features of the narrative approach is the "collection of narrative stories from individuals" (Butina, 2015, p. 190). The second benefit is gathering in-depth data that provides better access to participants' identities (Lieblich et al., 1998). For this study, understanding the participant's positionality as a woman and their unique story helps inform how higher education can adapt to retain and recruit women in the field.

This narrative inquiry focused on two women who had worked in higher education prior to the start of the pandemic. The inclusion criteria required participants who worked in higher education prior to the pandemic for a minimum of one year and voluntarily left higher education between April 2020 and December 2022. Narrative inquiry typically examines one participant, but some studies include several participants (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). Additionally,
participants must identify as a woman, speak English, be over 18 years old, and have experience working with students directly or indirectly. Additionally, this study looked for women who worked for a college or university that is either public, private, four-year, or two-year. Employees of for-profit institutions did not qualify to participate in this study because the staff experiences at a for-profit institution could look different from a regionally accredited public or private institution. Participants participated in two semi-structured interviews where they were asked a total of twelve questions developed to address the research questions and delve into the experiences of working during a pandemic and then voluntarily leaving the field.

This study simultaneously was guided by two frameworks of turnover. The first is a content model proposed by March and Simon (1958) to explore why women leave higher education. The second is Maertz and Campion's (2004) process model for voluntary departure decision types that were used to understand how a woman arrived at their decision to leave higher education and the impact the global COVID-19 pandemic had on their decisions to leave. Both frameworks were used to develop the interview questions for this study.

**Significance of Study**

Research on voluntary turnover is vast. However, there is very little research on women's decisions to leave an organization (Jo, 2008). Barhate and Hirudayaraj (2021) explained women often face workplace policies and environments that work against their career development. Before the pandemic, women were more likely than men to change jobs for noneconomic reasons and were also more likely to leave positions for reasons such as work/family conflicts and gender-specific care taking responsibilities that fall on the woman's shoulders (Jo, 2008). Another reason women reported voluntarily leaving was a poor relationship with their supervisor (Johnson et al., 2021). Literature on turnover models fails to incorporate the antecedents of
turnover that affect men and women differently. Qualitative research can benefit organizations in understanding how the environment of an IHE influence a woman's decision to leave an institution. This study sought to understand why women leave higher education, a predominantly woman-based field during the pandemic. The participant’s stories were used as data to help leaders in higher education make informed, data-driven decisions on recruiting and retaining women in higher education (Wade, 2022).

With the Great Resignation triggered by the pandemic, employees are also adjusting how they value their work; some leave their jobs for work that will fit their personal lives instead of trying to fit their lives around work (Morales, 2022). Johnson et al. (2021) found women working full-time in higher education during the pandemic experienced situations that produced anxiety because of the nature of uncertainty resulting from the pandemic. How a woman responds to and copes with stress, anxiety, or uncertainty is unique to them as individuals (Keim & Erickson, 1998). The pandemic shifted employees’ perceptions of work (Pazzanese, 2021). Understanding why women are choosing to leave the field provides additional insights into voluntary turnover during a unique period.

**Positionality**

I have spent most of my professional career in higher education. Fourteen years ago, I started working part-time in a student service office at a two-year college while completing my bachelor's degree. Eventually, I transitioned to another part-time role in the career and counseling center, where I developed a passion for academic advising and college student counseling. I waited three years to secure a full-time position that would provide tuition reimbursement to earn a master's degree. It was hard; I worked long hours and shouldered responsibilities that did not always offer fair and equitable compensation. I found moments to
doubt myself, wondering when I would start to feel the benefits of all the work, such as higher pay, more strategic projects, and consistent hours. I understood working in higher education meant I needed to make sacrifices by taking on additional responsibilities to prove my commitment to the organization and demonstrate my loyalty. In addition, I worked for a department that consisted mainly of women; from my perspective, women who made this type of sacrifice were admired, respected, and rewarded. In 2015, I completed a master's in higher education counseling and student affairs within two and half years while working full-time. Continuing education would give me the skills essential to grow within higher education. I also understood that the culture required an advanced degree to move forward within my field because all open positions within advising required a master’s degree. There was also an understanding that navigating the culture's politics was critical to growth; you had to know the right people and form the right relationships. At the time, I felt I had found my passion and was committed to helping students succeed, so walking away or pushing back was not an option.

After nine years of working for my first institution, I accepted a position in a student service office at a large public institution. I had reached the ceiling at my previous institution, and there was no longer any opportunity to grow. I needed a new challenge at an institution with a salary that matched skill set and knowledge.

Part of what I enjoy about working in higher education is the opportunity to help my colleagues and students embrace vulnerability by bringing awareness to emotional wellness and balance. However, working through a global pandemic has been one of the biggest challenges I have experienced. The line between work and home became blurred. The amount of work increased as staff left our office and their positions sat vacant for months while the expectations for completing the work remained the same. Policy changes geared toward helping students
succeed were passed at a rapid pace. Because my office worked closely with policy implementation, these updates required a significant pivot in our business practices. The speed at which these changes rolled out meant confusion for students, faculty, and staff. They all looked to our office for support and sometimes to express their frustrations. This resulted in an increased amount of stress for my colleagues and myself. The Great Resignation affecting organizations all over the country, was now present at my institution. I felt the stress and pressure from absorbing additional responsibilities as my colleagues left our office. Our volume did not slow down for either. The demand from students and our campus community was still strong; everyone had a hard time adjusting to the pandemic and operating in a virtual world.

My experience living through a global pandemic has been privileged. My partner and I remained employed full-time to this day. We were incredibly fortunate to stay healthy, as did our loved ones. We did not have to juggle homeschooling or stepping in as full-time caretakers. I also understand that many were not as lucky and faced incredible hardships. I was committed to continuing to bring awareness of my positionality on the interview process as I navigated the interview process of this study with other women. The experience of living and working through a global pandemic has also been incredibly insightful. This experience has adjusted my world views regarding the criticality of supporting women in higher education. I watched many of my colleagues, nationwide, feel demoralized by policies and procedures made by leadership within their institutions. Working with the participants in this study and having the opportunity to share their voices and experiences, after making the courageous decision to leave the field to pursue something that brings them joy and happiness, has been a privilege.
Limitations

There are a few limitations within this study. The first limitation is my experiences as a woman who has worked in higher education before and during the COVID-19 pandemic and held a managerial-level position, as well as someone who was left to pick up the pieces and keep the office moving after so many had departed has affected my own positionality with respects to employee turnover. In qualitative research, my worldview had the possibility to influence the dynamic between myself and the participants. Krathwohl and Smith (2005) discussed the effect of reactivity, which is the effect of the perception that there is something special about the situation. To prevent the participant from making an assumption about my position as a woman who still works in higher education, it was important to enter our conversations without preconceived notions that could influence reactions to the interview questions or motivations for why I was conducting this study was critical for understanding their decision-making. The use of analytical memoing ensured I had a space to record my own reactions and reflect on any biases.

The second limitation is the power dynamic between the participants and myself during the interviews. I currently hold a leadership position at a large public institution. This dynamic may have influenced participants’ responses during the interview. While the previous place of employment is not something I screened for in the inclusion criteria, it was essential to remember there could be discomfort about discussing a workplace culture in which I was embedded. To mitigate this risk, I explained in detail, at multiple points throughout this study, how I would maintain confidentiality to protect their identities. I replaced any demographic data that could identify a participant with a pseudonym to protect confidentiality to help them feel comfortable discussing their experience. I asked both participants to select a pseudonym to be used in place
of their names in the study as well. Additionally, I prioritized establishing trust and building a rapport with the participants.

Another limitation of this study is the stigma that exists in discussing a previous employer or institution negatively. There were moments where the participants had to reflect on an unpleasant experience. To ensure participants did not hold back their authentic responses for fear of retaliation or retribution, I utilized the skills I learned in my counseling program to help them feel comfortable navigating any emotions that came up, within reason. I also felt prepared to provide recommendations for referrals to resources that may help the participant further unpack any feelings or emotions that was not appropriate to dive into during an interview, however this did not occur during my conversations with either participant.

**Summary**

Few women hold senior-level administrative roles in higher education (Keim & Erickson, 1998; Sandler et al., 1996). Retaining women within the field is critical for institutions committed to creating a diversified and equitable work environment. Understanding the reasons for the voluntary turnover of women within this field can help provide recommendations for leaders focused on supporting women in higher education. Institutions need to understand what motivates women to start thinking about leaving, how to retain them during stressful times, and how to help them develop their careers and move into higher-level positions (Johnson et al., 2021; Keim & Erickson, 1998). Higher education can no longer rely on the benefits of the work and an “internalized sense of duty to the university” as motivations for employees to remain in the field (Morales, 2022).

In Chapter 2, I review the literature on women in higher education, their value in the field of higher education, and the importance of retaining them within the field. I also review the
literature on voluntary turnover, the gaps and tensions in voluntary turnover models, and the importance of understanding turnover decision-making and voluntary turnover. Finally, I present the conceptual framework that guided this study, which includes March and Simon's (1958) content model and Maertz and Campion's (2004) process model framework for decision types. Utilizing two models on voluntary turnover simultaneously supported a holistic approach to understanding decision-making and voluntarily leaving a position.

**Definition of Terms**

**Voluntary Turnover:** Defined as an individual’s decision to leave their position when the opportunity to continue employment is still present (Maertz & Campion, 2004).

**Great Resignation:** A term coined by Anthony Klotz of Texas A&M that refers to the decisions millions of workers made to leave their jobs during the pandemic (Kellett, 2022).

**Affective Organizational Commitment:** Affective organizational is defined as the commitment as "the strength of an employee's involvement and identification with an organization" (Mowday et al., 1979, as cited in Zimmerman, 2019, p. 101) and is a common construct in most turnover models.

**Institution of Higher Education (IHE):** for this study, an IHE is defined as a college or university that is a public or private institution that leads to an associate degree, baccalaureate degree, master’s degree, or doctoral degree. Higher education institutions are typically recognized through a national accreditation body as well. For this study, I will exclude women who only worked at a for-profit institution.

**Work Environment:** The second common construct from March and Simon (1958) is the employee’s daily work environment the employees. I am using work environment as an overarching term that includes components such as relationships with colleagues, supervisor
satisfaction, and satisfaction with job responsibilities (Zimmerman, 2008; March & Simon, 1958).

**COVID-19 Pandemic:** The COVID-19 pandemic was caused by an infectious disease (SARS-CoV-2 virus). On March 11, 2020 by the World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 a pandemic after more than 118,000 cases in over 114 countries appeared (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2023). The word pandemic will be used to describe the COVID-19 pandemic throughout this dissertation.
Chapter 2

The experiences of many women who worked in a non-faculty role in higher education during the pandemic are nuanced and unique because what women face in these roles is very different from a faculty position in an IHE. Most literature on women in higher education also focused on women in faculty positions. The pandemic, which triggered a Great Resignation, has left higher education short-staffed, burnt out, and stressed. The academic community must understand the experiences of women who serve in a non-faculty role to prevent more women from leaving the field. To accomplish this task, this study highlights the unique perspective of women in non-faculty roles using a qualitative narrative inquiry.

In this chapter, I review the existing literature on the pandemic’s impact on higher education, the turnover of women in higher education, and the Great Resignation. This study aimed to understand how a woman’s experience working in higher education, in a non-faculty position, during a global pandemic influenced their decision to leave the field. Finally, I present the two conceptual frameworks for turnover decisions used concurrently to guide this study. The first is March and Simon’s (1958) content model, and the second is Maertz and Campion’s (2004) process model for voluntary departure decision types.

A content model focuses on why an employee leaves an organization and includes diverse variables influencing an employee’s departure decision (Maertz & Campion, 2004; Zimmerman, 2019). A process model focuses on how an individual arrives at their decision to leave an organization and follows the steps an employee goes through during the process of quitting, such as developing feelings of dissatisfaction and thinking about quitting (Zimmerman et al., 2019). Using two different models simultaneously provides an opportunity to take a
holistic approach to understand how the pandemic influenced a woman’s decision-making and the choice to leave the field of higher education.

In their article, McClure’s (2022) message to college leaders was “don’t blame the pandemic for worker discontent” in higher education. McClure’s message was straightforward. Discontentment has been present among higher education staff for longer than the length of the ongoing pandemic. The pandemic made it easier for higher education professionals to leave the field and increased the likelihood of desirability to leave after the accumulation of years’ worth of late shifts, low compensation, staff shortages, and prioritizing profit over employee’s health and well-being (McClure, 2022). Understanding how higher education operated during the pandemic was critical to studying a woman’s decision to leave the field entirely. The following section provides a review of the impact of the pandemic on higher education.

**Impact of COVID-19 on Higher Education**

On March 13, 2020, the Trump Administration declared a national emergency due to the spread of the COVID-19 virus. Quickly after, stay-at-home orders were released, and social distancing recommendations were provided across the United States. Travel bans were implemented, and restaurants, bars, and other nonessential businesses were forced to close. School systems, colleges, and universities remained open but were forced to scramble and remove students from campuses safely while rapidly transitioning to online learning, all within two or three weeks (Augustus, 2021). For many families, households were transformed into at-home offices, virtual schools, and daycares (Augustus, 2021; Clark et al., 2020).

By the end of May, the recorded death toll from COVID-19 had reached 100,000 people. On top of that, during the summer of 2020, protests increased across the country in the wake of the deaths of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor. The social stratification, the sharp partisan
divide, and racial injustices cast a dark shadow over the country (Morales, 2022). At the start of the pandemic, many senior leadership members believed the virus outbreak would be under control by the summer; however, in the summer of 2020, they shifted their mindset to establish a longer-term crisis management plan (Gardner, 2020b). This shift in perspective meant policies and practices were implemented reactively as the pandemic changed. This meant staff had to quickly adapt to these adjustments daily at the start of the pandemic. This study posited that constant crisis management and reactive policy implementation increased pressure on women in non-faculty roles, who were tasked with operationalizing these policies, ultimately contributing to their decision to leave the field. Exploring a woman’s decision-making within the parameters of this study helped to identify whether this was a contributing factor to their departure.

By the start of the fall 2020 term, vaccinations were still in clinical trials and not available to the public (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2022). As the death toll from COVID-19 rose to more than one million worldwide, IHEs shifted to remote learning for faculty and students for the 2020-2021 academic year. However, some offices which provided direct or indirect support for students were forced to report back to campus to support the operational need of the department. An example of a department with direct student contact is a counseling or advising center, whose staff works directly with students daily and has a higher rate of student contact. An example of an indirect student service is a registrar’s office, which functions mainly behind the scenes, updating and maintaining a student’s record, and whose staff has less daily student contact than a counseling center would. Offices with more indirect student contact support students but not at the same rate and volume of direct contact as other service offices. Both types of service offices ultimately operate under the same university mission, which usually aims to provide support to retain students within an organization. Women who work in higher
education in a role that supports students directly or indirectly have a different experience than those who serve in a faculty position or a position with no contact with students (Jo, 2008). There is very little research on women in non-faculty roles and why they leave higher education. A qualitative study would provide a detailed analysis of their lived experiences working in higher education during a pandemic within the constructs of their job responsibilities and roles.

Institutions of higher education took a significant financial hit from the pandemic’s start in March 2020 through the 2020-2021 academic year; for many IHEs, enrollment was on the decline. That, coupled with not being able to recover from issuing refunds for meals and housing during the Spring 2020 term, plus the loss of revenue from the cancellation of sporting events, and additional expenses incurred to adapt to the pandemic, such as technology infrastructure, plexiglass installation, cleaning supplies, masks, and signage meant institutions were panicking over their long-term survival (Gardner, 2020b). Colleges and universities rely heavily on tuition and fees to generate revenue for their budgets and support the education of students (Lake, 2022). When enrollment declined, many IHEs faced increased pressure to generate revenue by cutting budgets or increasing tuition (Lake, 2022). This pressure has a trickle-down effect on the staff in non-faculty positions. This may have contributed to the increased stress on higher education staff who remained employed during this period. They witnessed colleagues furloughed due to the budget cuts and were forced to absorb the duties of those who departed. The increase in job responsibilities coupled with the pressure of working from home while simultaneously supporting their families’ learning needs was a burden for many women (Augustus, 2021; Carlson et al., 2021; Clark et al., 2020; Collins et al., 2020). The next section of this review discusses the unique experiences of women who held non-faculty positions while working remotely during the pandemic.
Women and Pandemic Policies

At the start of the pandemic, many IHEs had to quickly pivot to adopt work from home (WFH) policies that aligned with collective bargaining agreements (i.e., faculty unions) and other compliance regulations (e.g., public institutions are held to state and federal regulations and often have rules about employees’ work locations). Working from home was a rare opportunity for employees who worked in higher education. One of the most significant shifts in work life for women in higher education was pivoting quickly to working remotely from home. The advantages and disadvantages of implementing remote work policies in higher education triggered by the pandemic have been discussed frequently in the literature (Johnson et al., 2021; Klein et al., 2022; Peterson, 2022). Work from home allowed women to avoid long commutes and office politics and enjoy essential benefits such as cooking meals at home throughout the day and using their own bathrooms (Peterson, 2022).

Women of color have reported enjoying remote work because they no longer must deal with the same microaggressions they would experience being physically around other people in the office (Peterson, 2022). However, as institutions made plans to bring students back to campus once the vaccination was available, WFH flexibility started to dissolve, and everyone was being asked to return to campus. By the fall of 2021, with vaccinations available, many campuses began inviting students, faculty, and staff back to campus again (American College Health Association, 2021).

The WFH “utopia” did come with a catch (Peterson, 2022). During the work-from-home pivot created by the pandemic, whether fully remote or hybrid, many women found the support they had relied on before the pandemic (e.g., network of paid childcare, after-school care, familial support) had shifted or completely dissolved. The closure of schools and a shift in virtual
learning for children meant parents were suddenly faced with providing increased learning support for their children, and most of that burden fell on the woman (Augustus, 2021; Yildirim & Eslen-Ziya, 2020). Literature confirmed that women tend to carry the mental load within a household, constantly planning, strategizing, organizing, and caring for everyone (Alon et al., 2020; Augustus, 2021; Clark et al., 2020; Peterson, 2022; Yildirim & Eslen-Ziya, 2020). The boundaries between work and home life balance that were in place pre-pandemic have dissolved, which resulted in a shift of domestic and caregiving responsibilities for women (Peterson, 2022). While this study did not seek to understand how their identity played a role in their decision to leave the field of higher education, questions were included in the participant’s interviews to give them a place to center their identity and discuss the influence of any burdens they faced from WFH policies or the pandemic.

Women who remained employed during the pandemic were forced to take on additional responsibilities to keep offices operational, especially after the pivot to online learning at the start of the pandemic (Gardner, 2020a). For example, when many offices transitioned to remote work, they had to adapt to new technology to maintain operational needs. Many needed to learn and adjust to further processes, training, and supporting their colleagues. Additionally, depending on the type of student service office one worked for (e.g., residence life, counseling services, financial aid), there was a struggle to operationalize the WFH policies from senior leaders on campus (Gardner, 2020a). Often, these policies did not prioritize the staff’s safety and were inconsistent across campus (McClure, 2022). For example, one office could have no in-person days required for their team and could function remotely. In contrast, other offices could not perform all their job functions remotely and needed an in-person presence to support students and the campus community. For some departmental leaders, the challenge to incorporate WFH
was too great, and they required staff to report to campus. From the start of the pandemic through the fall 2020 semester, the inequalities created with WFH policies, plus the implementation inconsistencies, put individuals at an increased risk of contracting the virus at a time when vaccinations were still unavailable (Johnson et al., 2021; Peterson, 2022; McClure, 2022). I sought to explore if one of the contributing factors in a woman’s decision to leave higher education was a forced return to in-person work.

For many women in student service offices, the volume and pace of the work did not slow down during the pandemic, which only amplified the stress and pressure that existed before the pandemic (Johnson et al., 2021). Peterson (2022) noted that the flexibility of WFH within their roles had become a requirement for women looking to build their careers in higher education. This study sought to understand how policies, such as WFH, enacted because of the pandemic impacted their perceived safety (e.g., being told to return to campus before the availability of vaccinations), the inequities that existed with the implementation of policies (e.g., only staff being asked to return to in-person operations while others remained virtual, and faculty being allowed to stay home) and these policies ultimately contributed to their decision to leave the field of higher education.

Barhate and Hirudayaraj (2021) highlighted that women often face workplace policies and environments that create obstacles to their career development. For example, even with new remote work policies, women face gender stereotypes that prevent them from fully utilizing these policies to create a work-life balance and support overall well-being. Peterson (2022) wrote about the work-from-home evolution for women as deceptively tempting. Remote work offers flexibility, but the line between work and home life can quickly fade, blurring both worlds. The benefits of remote work for women include having more time at home with reduced commutes,
monetary savings on wardrobe and travel expenses, and the relief of not having to work in proximity with individuals who might contribute to a toxic work environment. There are also downsides to remote work that affect women differently. For example, women in heterosexual relationships historically tend to bear the mental load of the home over their partner, often juggling multiple roles at once while working simultaneously (Peterson, 2022). Additionally, growing pains and scars from the pandemic have put women in a position of increased stress and burnout, with a greater likelihood of premature departure from an institution (Barhate & Hirudayaraj, 2021; Johnson et al., 2021; Rosalsky & Selyukh, 2022). Continued chronic stress can be harmful to women in education, especially when they do not have the proper techniques to manage the symptoms, leading to dissatisfaction with their jobs and negative impacts on their mental health (Kersh, 2018).

**Great Resignation**

The Great Resignation refers to the decisions millions of workers made to leave their jobs during the pandemic. The pandemic changed how workers felt about work and saw many voluntarily leaving to regain control over their personal and professional lives, especially when everything was uncertain. The US Bureau of Labor Statistics (2022) reported a record number of 4.5 million American workers left their jobs in November 2021 alone. Kellett (2022) found the pandemic changed a lot about how people viewed work and overturned historical notions of “what work is and how it should be done” (para. 6). Researcher Anthony Klotz noticed three trends unique to the pandemic that he predicted would contribute to higher-than-normal levels of resignations in the United States (Kellett, 2022). The first trend was the buildup of resignations as employees held on to positions longer than usual because of uncertainties created by the pandemic (Cohen, 2021; Kellett, 2022). People tend to stay with an organization when there is
uncertainty in the labor market (Cohen, 2021). The second trend was about re-evaluating what an
employee values the most. The pandemic created many “epiphanies” (Cohen, 2021, para. 1),
which resulted in employees turning their backs on their organizations and prioritizing their
families, values, and individual passions. The third trend is the spread of burnout among
employees (Kellett, 2022). Klotz’s explanation of the Great Resignation was interdisciplinary in
nature and not specific to one type of profession. The following section will explore the literature
on how the Great Resignation uniquely impacted higher education to understand the distinctive
experience of women who leave the field of higher education.

**Higher Education’s Great Resignation**

Higher education staff noticed a dissolution of work-life boundaries, balance and a lack
of support from senior leaders through policies aimed at prioritizing dollars over the well-being
of employees (Morales, 2022). Klotz recommended that a key takeaway we have learned about
resignations during the pandemic through the present day is that leaders need to be doing more to
invest in employees (Kellett, 2022). The Great Resignation was not about simply quitting or
leaving a field; it was about evaluating what is most important to people in the wake of a global
pandemic claiming millions of lives (Smith, 2022). It is essential to note that the problems higher
education staff face was not created by the pandemic but amplified by the pandemic (McClure,
2022). The pandemic amplified demoralization, increased burnout from long hours, and
disengagement from policies that did not support their well-being (McClure, 2022; Morales,
2022). Long before the pandemic, shifts in workplace dynamics, supporting the unique
challenges of students, and societal changes in the perception of higher education as a
commodity had increased the stress for staff who work in higher education (Kersh, 2018). The
pandemic only increased pressure by forcing people into isolation with mandatory work-from-
home policies that blurred the lines between work and home life and witnessed the virus’ toll on families.

To understand how the pandemic and the Great Resignation influenced a woman’s decision to leave the field of higher education, this study included questions in the interview with participants to explore how policies and practices influenced their decision to leave the field. In addition, conducting a study utilizing narrative inquiry can encourage others who read the narrative to mobilize and act upon the issues at hand (Riessman, 2008). This will ultimately contribute to understanding the social movement around the Great Resignation in higher education.

**Work Environment**

The COVID-19 global pandemic changed the lives of many employees who worked in higher education. The disruption of the quintessential college experience had widespread “financial, academic, social, emotional, and physical impacts” on students, faculty, and staff (American College Health Association, 2021, p. 1). One of the most significant changes in higher education has been the increased departure of staff and faculty. Morales (2022) discussed an increased workload for individuals who remained in their positions after the departure of their colleagues (e.g., nonvoluntary, voluntary turnover, or passing away due to the pandemic), which, combined with hiring freezes, exacerbated stress.

Additionally, existing literature indicated faculty and staff were fed up with senior leadership’s focus on political ideology and enrollment numbers at the sacrifice of staff health and welfare (e.g., forcing some staff to return to campus at the height of the pandemic while others were permitted to work from home; Ellis, 2021). The pandemic overwhelmed the higher education field while providing an avenue for employees to leave (Morales, 2022). It heightened
the need for work-life balance, which did not exist for many individuals in non-faculty roles. Finally, it highlighted the lack of empathy and support from leadership who prioritized dollars over common sense and employee well-being. As a result, the pandemic left individuals in the higher education field feeling demoralized, burnt out, and angry, so they started making decisions that focused on prioritizing their wellness over the best interest of their employer (McClure, 2022; Morales, 2022).

Since the pandemic's onset, stress and burnout have contributed to higher education's staffing crisis (Zahneis, 2022). In 2021, NASPA surveyed student affairs professionals to understand why they were leaving their roles or the field. Results revealed benefits and salaries in higher education needed to be more competitive. Dedication to higher education, an institution’s mission, and passion for helping others initially fueled career growth for many in the profession. This dedication to the field drew people to higher education, especially those who worked daily with students. In addition, the survey found professionals were experiencing an increased likelihood of burnout due to the ongoing crisis management (no doubt amplified by the pandemic) and increased stress. Many professionals reported that one of the contributing factors of burnout was the lack of perceived appreciation and feeling valued by leaders (e.g., requiring people to return to campus before a vaccination was available; NASPA, 2022). Eventually, the benefits of working for higher education, the ideology that brought so many to the field, no longer outweighed the turmoil felt by respondents (Ellis, 2021).

Institutions still struggle to return to pre-pandemic staffing norms (Zahneis, 2022). This study sought to provide insight into the experiences of women with their work environment that influenced their decision to leave higher education. It is also critical to explore ways IHEs can retain their existing staff before they decide to leave the field. To explore this phenomenon and
provide recommendations, this study incorporated questions into the interview that provided participants a chance to share their stories and explain what their IHE could have done to retain them.

**Women in Higher Education**

Since the early 1800s, women have found a specialty within education. During the first half of the 20th century, women faced barriers that prevented access to education (Parker, 2015). They were able to train and practice across various disciplines. However, barriers such as admission quotas, administrative regulations, and anti-nepotism rules prevented them from equal access to education (Cott, 1987; Parker, 2015). Historically women have not pursued a career in the same manner as men. According to Parker (2015), they often take on responsibilities in the home, such as raising children and supporting a partner pursuing a degree which alters their opportunity to step out into the field either to earn a degree or work. Generationally, women have chosen various paths but have centered their career decisions on social and familial structures (Parker, 2015). One of the most significant factors that impede a woman’s career in the field of education is the unique challenge they face balancing work and family (Britton, 2014). The pandemic imploded any structure that existed for women with families (Peterson, 2022).

According to the American Association of University Women (n.d.), only 30% of women are college presidents, but more than 50% hold a department head position. Historically, institutional regulation has hindered women’s access to different educational and professional job opportunities (Parker, 2015). Research attributed this lack of growth opportunities to the proverbial glass ceiling, wage disparities, “anti-mother” workplace environments, and systemic gender discrimination (Ginsberg et al., 2019, p. 222).
Most research on women in education focuses mainly on women holding faculty positions and lacks insight into the experiences of those who work in higher education in a non-faculty role (Ginsberg et al., 2019; Keim & Erickson, 1998; Kersh, 2018). The pandemic amplified the struggles women who work in in higher education face by increasing stress levels significantly more than their men counterparts. This can be partially attributed to the challenges of balancing home life duties while working and on top of living through a global pandemic (Johnson et al., 2021). A qualitative study that empowers women, who held non-faculty positions, and who have left higher education to share their experiences validates the reasons mentioned by Ginsberg et al. (2019) and provides a picture of how the pandemic amplified these struggles. Adding to the research on the retention of women who work in IHEs would benefit the organizations and the women who are building careers within this field. Leaders at IHEs need to understand why women in non-faculty roles leave higher education so they can identify the antecedents that influence turnover and make informed decisions to reduce turnover. Organizations must be interested in retaining women if they wish to remain top employers in their industry (Robyn & Du Preez, 2013).

**Voluntary Turnover**

Voluntary turnover is defined as an individual’s decision to leave their position when the opportunity to continue employment is still present (Maertz & Campion, 1998). While research on voluntary turnover is vast, Jo (2008) found very little research explicitly addressed women’s decisions to leave an organization before the pandemic. Research on the existing turnover models concluded understanding employees’ perceptions of and involvement and identification with an organization are critical in reducing turnover and retaining staff (Maertz & Campion, 2004; March & Simon, 1958).
Additionally, using existing models to understand employee turnover and decision-making can provide a clear understanding of turnover and is the preferred alternative to developing new models (Zimmerman et al., 2019). Literature supports this approach because inventing new models or frameworks can be arduous, and the “academic community tends to prioritize the creation of new theories over the refinement of current ones” (Hambrick, 2007; Leavitt et al., 2010; Zimmerman et al., 2019, p. 99). This study utilized two turnover models simultaneously to capture a holistic perspective of women who voluntarily leave the field of higher education.

Jo (2008) found, on average, Americans will change their jobs at least seven times throughout their careers. Research has proven essential for organizations, human resource professionals, and leaders looking to retain crucial employees. There is extensive research on models of voluntary turnover. However, there needs to be more discussion on the commonalities within these models. This section reviews some of the overlaps within the historic and new models of turnover, where they agree, and gaps within the literature.

Zimmerman (2019) cited, in their review of the literature, that “replication is a critical element of the scientific method; redundancy of constructs can have deleterious effects that extend beyond possible multicollinearity in a study” (p. 107). Carmeli and Weisberg (2006) tell us scholars are directing their efforts to understand turnover, specifically the factors that an organization could plan for and control to reduce turnover (e.g., work-from-home policies). Some argued that turnover intention strongly correlates with turnover (Carmeli & Weisberg, 2006). Turnover intention refers to the subjective estimate of an individual regarding the probability that they will be leaving the organization (Carmeli & Weisberg, 2006). Griffeth et al. (2000) and Hom and Griffeth’s (1995) analyses showed intentions to quit, such as quitting and
searching for another job, are significant predictors of employee turnover. However, the relationship between turnover intentions and actual turnover varies across studies and has been inconsistent (Carmeli & Weisberg, 2006). The field of higher education employs faculty, non-teaching staff, and students. While each institution’s campus environment is unique, the challenges for staff can create a stressful environment for employees, which is why this study selected a non-faculty participant pool.

The COVID-19 pandemic amplified the stressors experienced by employees through mandated remote work policies and the creation of policies and procedures aimed at enrolling students at the expense of protecting staff (Johnson et al., 2021). The following sections will synthesize literature on turnover for women and turnover for higher education. This study sought to demonstrate the extraordinary impact and challenges higher education faces when women decide to leave the field. Therefore, it is essential to review the existing literature discussing these issues.

**Turnover of Women in Higher Education**

This study focused on women who held non-faculty positions and departed from higher education and why they decided to leave. This research is significant for the field because there is a substantial gap in the literature that focuses on the voluntary turnover of women in non-faculty roles. The most recent study to explore this population was a quantitative cross-sectional study by Jo (2008), which focused on the “unfavorable conditions in the organizational structure” that may be unintentionally contributing to women who hold administrative positions leaving their current college or university (p. 567). The study included 30 participants who held full-time, mid-level administrative roles, were between the ages of 30 and 40, and had at least two years of job tenure before voluntarily leaving their positions (Jo, 2008). The results found
three key variables influencing a woman’s decision to leave an organization: (a) their relationship with their supervisor; (b) opportunities for career growth; (c) flexible work/life policies. Participants reported varied reasons for their turnover, but women’s relationship with their immediate supervisor was the most common reason women left their positions (Jo, 2008). Jo’s (2008) findings can contribute to informing retention programs for women in IHEs. The unwanted turnover of qualified and highly educated women in this field is critical for leadership to explore at colleges and universities. The “institutional issues that affect a woman’s professional work lives may ultimately influence how well they do their jobs” (Jo, 2008, p. 567).

Jo’s (2008) research has informed this study in a few ways. First, it provides support and justification for studying the turnover of women in non-faculty roles. Jo’s (2008) results support a consistent theme in all research related to turnover; increased turnover includes a loss of productivity for organizations, loss of well-trained talent, and poor morale for those left behind. Second, Jo (2008) confirmed that research was lacking on why women chose to leave the field of higher education up to a point. Third, Jo’s (2008) results support the argument around the criticality of reducing turnover behavior in higher education. Lastly, because Jo’s (2008) study is 14 years old, it is crucial current literature reflects the experiences of turnover amongst women in non-faculty roles, especially now that a new variable, COVID-19, has entered the equation.

Literature on the impact of COVID-19 is still new because we are only three years into the pandemic. However, some studies are starting to emerge that reviewed the initial impact of the pandemic on women in higher education, although they are not specific to turnover. These studies are essential to mention because they focus on the impact of the pandemic on IHEs and the effect that it has had on an institution’s work environment. Johnson et al. (2021) used a quantitative design to explore the relationship between perceived organizational support,
perceived supervisor support, and age with stress among women working in higher education at the onset of the pandemic. Johnson et al. (2021) defined perceived organizational support as a social exchange between the organization and the employees. Employees work harder, have an increased sense of loyalty, and feel more emotionally supported when they perceive they have organizational support. The results from Johnson et al.’s (2021) study found in times of crisis, women turn to their organizations for support to help deal with stress. When that support is not available, stress increases. Literature also highlighted the pandemic created a significant amount of stress for employees in higher education, which can be attributed to the increased workload from the loss of staff through turnover and constantly being focused on prioritizing everyone’s health and safety (Johnson et al., 2021; Klein et al., 2022; Peterson, 2022).

This is important for a few reasons. First, this study aimed to take a qualitative approach to understanding women’s experiences working in higher education during a global pandemic and how that experience influenced their decisions to leave the field. A qualitative approach allows for a deeper dive into the unique stories of women. Quantitative research that has begun exploring women’s narratives supports my argument that this population warrants a focused study, and previous studies have shown that this type of research is valid and necessary. Second, Johnson et al.’s (2021) study focused on perceived organizational support and found this to have a statistically significant relationship with stress. This justified exploring what contributed to a woman’s decision to leave higher education and how their institutional environments may have contributed to the decision to leave.

**Conceptual Framework**

There is extensive research and conceptual models on employee turnover (Carmeli & Weisberg, 2006; Maertz & Campion, 2004; Zimmerman et al., 2019). The copious number of
models can create confusion and redundancy for a researcher looking to pinpoint specific influences contributing to why and how an employee decides to leave. (Zimmerman et al., 2019). Additionally, many theories of turnover are driven by the state of the economy and the number of available alternatives (Jo, 2008). Therefore, this study simultaneously utilized two frameworks of voluntary turnover to guide this study. The first is a content model proposed by March and Simon (1958) to explore voluntary turnover. The second is Maertz and Campion’s (2004) process model for voluntary departure decision types that will be used to understand how a woman arrived at their decision to leave higher education and the impact the global COVID-19 pandemic had on their decisions to leave. Maertz and Campion (2004) included motivators (why) an individual voluntarily leaves a position which were developed from March and Simon’s (1958) model. For the purposes of this study, I used March and Simon’s (1958) model to understand why an individual voluntarily leaves an organization because their reasons for leaving have been empirically supported and are manageable for a novice researcher (Lee & Mitchell, 1994; Maertz & Campion, 2004; Zimmerman, et al. 2019). The global pandemic changed the experiences and perspectives of many people working in higher education, especially women. Therefore, reviewing and building upon existing turnover models and literature is critical to see how well they fit within today’s context. This study will consider how and why women decided to leave higher education through two conceptual frameworks, Maertz & Campion’s (2004) process model and March and Simon's (1958) content model. Most research on voluntary turnover does not focus simultaneously on why and how an employee leaves (Maertz & Campion, 2004). Therefore, a holistic perspective that includes a conceptual framework with a foundation in both process and content models will be essential to understanding women’s unique experiences leading up to their decision to voluntarily leave
higher education. The following section will review the differences and similarities between content and process models.

**Content vs. Process Models**

The extensive literature on voluntary employee turnover across various fields incorporates multivariate models that have been empirically tested (Maertz & Campion, 2004). However, process and content models are the most common multivariate models for understanding employee turnover. Content models focus on factors that cause an employee to leave, and process models focus on how an employee arrives at the decision to leave a position. (Maertz & Campion, 2004; Zimmerman, 2019). Content models concentrate on factors that cause employees to quit, incorporating constructs such as job responsibilities, relationship with the organization and its policies or procedures, relationship with supervisor, and the availability of alternative job opportunities (Zimmerman et al., 2019). Process models focus on how the employee reached their final decision to leave, including feeling dissatisfied and actively searching for a different job. (Maertz & Campion, 2004; Zimmerman, 2019). Many process model experts admit that a decision to leave an organization is a unique experience, and failing to illustrate the motives behind the decision leaves a blind spot in the research (Maertz & Campion, 2004; Griffeth & Hom, 2000; Zimmerman, 2019). Most researchers who study voluntary turnover agree that conceptual frameworks need to include a focus on why and how an employee decides to voluntarily leave a position (Maertz & Campion, 2004). Therefore, this study took a holistic perspective with a conceptual framework grounded in a process and content model. This was essential to understanding women’s unique experiences when they voluntarily leave higher education. The following section reviews the content model I used to guide this study.
March and Simon’s Content Model

March and Simon’s (1958) framework has been used in multiple studies to explore voluntary turnover by examining individual reasoning and decision-making. The work on employee turnover expands beyond the antiquated definition of employees as “machines” (March & Simon, 1958, p. 101). Instead, their framework is an “empirically based understanding of human behavior and social interaction” (Bromiley et al., 2019, p. 1520). March and Simon’s (1958) model for turnover focused on two general reasons employees leave organizations. These reasons include the perceived ease of movement and desirability of movement (Mitchell et al., 2001; Zimmerman, 2019). Figure 1 shows a simplified version of March and Simon’s (1958) model.
March and Simon (1958) viewed an organization as a system balanced by all that contributes towards the system’s existence (e.g., employees, managers, students, stakeholders, board of directors, etc.). For the employees who work within the organization, their balance is affected by two primary considerations, the perceived desirability of leaving a job and the perceived ease of movement away from the organization. Perceived desirability to leave is closely associated with their relationship with the organization. When satisfaction with the organization is higher, they are less likely to leave. An employee will have a greater likelihood of ease of movement when multiple alternative job positions are available. Suppose enough individuals within a subgroup of the organization begin to leave, either because of the
desirability of movement or ease of movement. This disturbs the entire organization’s balance and requires attention (Tosi, 1975). For this study, I focused on the desirability of movement within an organization: affective organizational commitment and work environment and ease of movement, perceived alternatives. They have been empirically tested in other studies on women in higher education turnover (Jo, 2008; Johnson et al., 2021). It is essential to note the pandemic that triggered the Great Resignation created many job alternatives for individuals in higher education. This could have allowed them to leave the field because they had various choices. Because the study focused on influences within the field of higher education and the pandemics’ impact on their decision, perceived alternatives were included as a central construct of the framework.

**Affective Commitment.** The first core construct is the employees’ affect towards the organization, which falls into March and Simon’s (1958) desirability of movement. Mowday et al. (1979) defined affective organizational commitment as “the strength of an employee’s involvement and identification with an organization” (Zimmerman et al., 2019, p. 101) and is a common construct in most turnover models. Employees’ attitudes toward their jobs are shaped by the organization’s environments, values, and goals (Zimmerman et al., 2019). An example of their identification with an organization is the development of policies that directly impact staff, like the WFH adjustment many institutions saw at the start of the pandemic and the removal of this policy when vaccinations were available. Maertz and Campion (2004) explained an individual could have an affective response towards their organization. This response can lead to either “psychological comfort or discomfort” (p. 569). The type of response they experience, comfort or discomfort, can motivate staying or quitting. Affective commitment allows the researcher to understand employees’ positive feelings and attachment toward their organization.
(Meyer & Allen, 1984). This construct has been at the core of most historical and recent voluntary turnover models. Researchers can agree that exploring this commitment does lead to a better understanding of voluntary turnover (Carmeli & Weisberg, 2006).

**Work Environment.** The second common construct from March and Simon (1958) is the employee’s daily work environment. I am using work environment as an overarching term that includes relationships with colleagues, supervisor satisfaction, and job responsibilities (March & Simon, 1958; Zimmerman, 2008). Employees can develop meaningful relationships with their coworkers and supervisors. Maertz & Campion (2004) argued such relationships “have shown to be that multidimensional and have independent effects on intentions to quit” (p. 569).

Because I was not explicitly studying the relationship between job responsibilities and turnover or supervisor relationships and turnover, I planned to keep this part of the framework broad. This allowed the participant’s narratives to capture their worldview without being predisposed to bias within the research questions or the interview questions.

Affective organizational commitment and work environment receive the most attention in the literature to explain employee turnover (Carmeli & Weisberg, 2006; Lee & Mitchel, 1994; Maertz & Campion, 2004; Zimmerman, 2019). Researchers stressed leadership needs to understand the antecedents that influence turnover so they can be corrected and adjusted. This remains true in the COVID-19 era. Historically, women have faced higher stress levels than their male counterparts. Hence, as higher education continues to pivot through the current phase of the pandemic, understanding the unique experiences women face will help establish practices to combat turnover antecedents brought on by the pandemic (Johnson et al., 2021).

**Perceived Alternatives.** The final common construct under March and Simon’s model (1958) is perceived alternatives, which falls under the ease of movement. According to March
and Simon (1958), one of the most accurate predictors of voluntary turnover is the state of the economy. When there are plenty of jobs, voluntary turnover rates are high. When jobs are scarce, turnover is low.

Additionally, they found that the greater the number of jobs visible to someone considering voluntary turnover, the higher the probability they will turnover (March & Simon, 1958). The COVID-19 pandemic sparked the Great Resignation across the nation. It was being discussed in predominant higher education newspapers, such as The Chronicle of Higher Education and Inside Higher Education. Understanding how each participant viewed the perceived alternatives while moving through the turnover process in a global pandemic can influence how turnover models can support research on women who are leaving the field of higher education.

**Maertz and Campions (2004) Process Model and Decision Types**

Maertz and Campion (2004) built a process model framework on understanding the decision-making process of individuals planning to voluntarily turnover. Maertz and Campion's (2004) research identified four decision types used by individuals planning to leave an organization, they include impulsive quitting, comparison quitting, preplanned quitting, and conditional quitting. For this study, I use voluntary turnover as a synonym for “quitter.” Their proposed framework has an advantage for researchers looking to study decision making in turnover because it can be “measured with relative ease and reliability” by using closed-ended questions (p. 569). This framework guided data analysis to understand how a woman decides to leave an organization. The following section explains the different types of decisions outlined by Maertz & Campion (2004).
**Impulsive Quitting.** Impulsive quitters voluntarily depart without having another job offer in hand (Maertz & Campion, 2004). Individuals in this decision type are typically motivated by a strong negative influence in their decision to quit immediately, without any plan. They can include anyone with a strong negative relationship with their organization to individuals who are not in the job for the financial benefits because they can step away at any point without warning (Maertz & Campion, 2004).

**Comparison Quitting.** Comparison quitters have engaged in some comparison of their current employment with other options prior to quitting and are typically lured away by alternative job offers (Maertz & Campion, 2004). This decision type is not strongly associated with a poor relationship with their immediate organization, and these individuals often perceive themselves as having a robust and positive connection with their organization (Maertz & Campion, 2004).

**Preplanned Quitting.** Preplanned quitters plan to leave in advance of their departure and have a specific time frame in mind for their last day (Maertz & Campion, 2004). This quitting is often associated with variables outside the control of the organization (e.g., partner relocation or pregnancy).

**Conditional Quitting.** Conditional quitters are individuals who plan to quit if an unexpected event occurs. This type of quitter looks at departing as dependent on a condition to present itself. It can often include some planning time but is typically only carried out if the conditional variable they seek is fulfilled. Additionally, conditional quitting is only sometimes contingent on getting another job. Employees could have a dependent plan and say to themselves, “I will quit if my supervisor talks to me like that again” (Maertz & Campion, 2004, p. 579).
Maertz and Campion’s (2004) study proposed that someone who voluntarily leaves an organization uses one of the four decision types in making their final decision. Using a quantitative design, they compared the relationship between the motives (antecedents) for turnover and the decision type. Their simplified decision-making types allow for easier reporting amongst participants because it asks for a simple yes or no to assess if they had a job offer before leaving and the kind of plan they had in place. The motives or antecedents Maertz and Campion (2004) used for their study are slightly different but still grounded in March and Simon’s (1958) original framework (affective commitment and work environment). This is important because Maertz and Campion (2004) found a statistically significant relationship between motives and decision types, which justifies utilizing the selected constructs in this study.

Research indicates that understanding employee turnover means organizations can work to reduce or prevent this behavior (Carmeli & Weisberg, 2006). From the organization’s perspective, investing in the employee can be a vicious cycle when turnover is high. Time, energy, and resources are placed into hiring, training, and developing staff. Frequent turnover is costly for the organization as well as the individual. Higher education looks to adjust to a new normal after the pandemic’s height. If the field can utilize research to understand motivations for voluntary turnover, they will take a step toward securing their investment (Carmeli & Weisberg, 2006). This study aimed to understand how and why a woman who holds a non-faculty position is leaving the field. To accomplish this, I used the following conceptual framework to understand the process women take in making their decision (how) and what influences contributed to their decision to leave (why). Figure 3 depicts the current framework models for this study.
Simultaneously utilizing Maertz and Campion’s (2004) process model with March and Simon’s (1958) content model, I hoped to understand how the influences of affective organizational commitment, work environment, and ease of movement contributed to the participants’ decisions to leave the field of higher education within the constructs of impulsive, comparison, preplanned, and conditional quitting. This study helps to inform why women are leaving higher education and hopefully guide recommendations for retaining and recruiting women into the field.

Summary

This chapter reviewed the importance of women in higher education and the criticality of their retention. While there is extensive research on voluntary turnover, nothing explicitly addresses a woman’s decision to leave their field entirely, especially during a unique historical
moment like the COVID-19 pandemic. While multiple models work to understand and predict turnover, leveraging existing literature simultaneously using a content and process model allowed this study to take a holistic approach to understand what influences a woman’s decision to leave the field of higher education during a pandemic. Maertz and Campion’s (2004) results support utilizing a content and process model to understand the antecedents and decision types when studying turnover because they offer a chance to provide a more profound and content-rich understanding of turnover. Leaders on college and university campuses must invest in understanding how the pandemic affected women’s lives in higher education and amplified existing stressors within their work environment, ultimately contributing to their decision to leave the field entirely (Yildirim & Eslen-Ziya, 2020). Chapter 3 focuses on the methodology for this study.
Chapter 3

This qualitative study sought to understand how women, who held non-faculty positions, viewed their institutions’ work environments amid a global pandemic and how their perceptions of the work environments influenced their decision to leave the field of higher education through a narrative inquiry. This chapter includes an overview of the research design, the methodology, the participants, the procedures for data collection, coding, analysis, and credibility and trustworthiness.

Research Design

This study used a qualitative narrative design to examine how and why women are leaving the field of higher education. According to Merriam (1998), qualitative researchers “are interested in understanding the meaning people have constructed… how they make sense of their world and the experiences they have in the world” (p. 6). Qualitative research seeks to understand how all the pieces of participants’ lived experiences work together to form a whole picture. The data in qualitative research transforms from more than numbers and correlations and looks at the phenomenon from the participant's perspective. Qualitative research is “grounded in the lived experiences of people” (Merriam, 1998, p. 2) and includes data collection that highlights meaningful relationships and experiences. According to Mishna (2004), qualitative research increases our understanding of how lived experiences influence how individuals: work, build relationships, experience a connection with their organization, and find fulfillment. A qualitative research design can be flexible, comprehensive, holistic, and richly descriptive, with the ability to evolve and allow emergent themes to shine through. This differs from quantitative research, which is structured with a predetermined format, and where findings have limited context (Mishna, 2004).
A qualitative narrative design allowed for an in-depth understanding of each participant’s unique positionality and how factors such as workplace environment, relationships with colleagues, and their identification and involvement with their organizations contributed to their decisions to leave the field voluntarily (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). According to Valtierra (2013), a narrative researcher must be “deeply attentive to whom she will study” (p. 49). For this study, I selected two women who were employed in a position with direct student contact, had many years of experience working in higher education, and left the field after working for almost a full year during the COVID-19 pandemic. In summary, I selected a qualitative narrative design for three reasons. First, most research on women in higher education has utilized quantitative methods to understand why they were leaving their roles (Jo, 2008; Johnson et al., 2021). Jo (2008) used a quantitative cross-sectional study to explore the conditions women were experiencing in higher education that contributed to their desire to leave the field before the pandemic. Second, the pandemic is a historically significant moment that influenced a mass exodus from higher education that researchers know little about. Johnson et al. (2021) used a quantitative design to explore the relationship between perceived organizational support, perceived supervisor support, and age with stress among women working in higher education at the onset of the pandemic. While both studies were able to draw statistically significant conclusions from their studies, they could not capture the nuanced experiences of women in non-faculty roles and how the pandemic contributed to their decision to leave the field. Third, I searched for an in-depth exploration of the participants’ experiences, which would have been difficult to capture with a quantitative design. A qualitative narrative approach provided a chance to dive deeply into the experience of both participants while highlighting their unique
experiences through a narrative design. The following section provides an overview of the methods, participants, justification for the sample size, and participant demographics.

Description of Methods

I used semi-structured interviews and a detailed interview protocol to explore the stories of why and how the participants left the field of higher education. A narrative inquiry allowed participants to tell their higher education departure stories (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). Narrative inquiry goes beyond defining a problem and providing a solution; it carries “more of a sense of continual reformulation” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 124). Saldaña (2021) wrote, “telling stories is a way that people can reflect to make sense or make meaning of significant events in their lives” (p. 196). The participants in this study had the opportunity to tell their stories about why they left higher education and how they came to that decision through two separate interviews.

Capturing their participants’ voices and perspectives through their narratives was critical for understanding what motivated these women to step away from higher education and how the COVID-19 pandemic influenced their decisions to leave the field. Personal narratives can empower others to act in response to what is being shared by the participants. According to Riessman (2008), a narrative that describes the personal experience invites “mobilization and change as evidenced by the way stories invariably circulate in sites where social movements are forming” (p. 8). The Great Resignation of staff within higher education, triggered by the pandemic, was a topic swirling among higher education platforms and literature at the time of the study (Bauman, 2020; Ellis, 2021; Gardner, 2020b; Johnson et al., 2021; Kellett, 2022; McClure, 2022).
Mears (2008) tells us that some research questions require a more “complex and innovative design” that can only be achieved through a qualitative research design (p. 3). The open-ended questions allow the participant as much freedom to elaborate on why they left higher education and what contributed to their decision to leave the field. Additionally, narrative inquiry allows the researcher to glimpse the complex influences shaping a participant’s life (Chan, 2010). Finally, spending time with the participants in a semi-structured interview helps establish the study’s credibility (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Clandinin and Connelly (2000) indicated that narrative inquiry requires an interview that is less about being guided with specific questions and more about forming an interview into a conversation. Additionally, providing a transcript to the participant “ensures that everything said is preserved for analysis” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 131).

My intention for every interview was to help them feel comfortable sharing their experiences through guided conversation. This is important because their shared stories and experiences are personal, so establishing a sense of trust was important from the beginning of our interactions. Additionally, a woman’s identity and the intersectionality of their roles came through in the interview process (i.e., motherhood, caretaker, etc.). While this study did not seek to understand how their identity played a role in their decision to leave the field of higher education, I built questions into the interview protocol that gave participants a place to center their identity.

**Participants**

This section will describe the inclusion criteria established to answer the research questions and present the participant demographics.
**Inclusion criteria**

To participate in this study, I established the following inclusion criteria. First, participants must identify as a woman, be 18 years of age, and speak English without needing an interpreter. Second, participants should have worked in higher education for at least one year, starting in the field before the pandemic but voluntarily leaving the field between April 2020 and December 2022. Third, they needed to have at least one-year minimum working in higher education in a non-faculty role, with direct or indirect student contact. The experience of a non-faculty professional is different from those who served in a faculty position or a position with no-student contact. The inclusion criteria ensured I included participants whose experiences could answer the research questions about why and how they left the field. I intentionally cast a wide net by not specifying which area of higher education women worked in (e.g., a specific division of student affairs) because there are offices in higher education that have been influenced by the pandemic that are not all part of student affairs (e.g., admissions, registrar, financial aid, etc.). Lastly, participants needed experience working in higher education at a non-profit IHE before the pandemic started to understand its impact on their decision to leave the field because the experience working for a for-profit institution can be different from a non-profit.

Two participants were selected for this study using a purposeful sampling approach, snowball sampling. Qualitative researchers seek to dive deep into participants' lived experiences by building trusting relationships (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Working with a smaller sample size is strongly recommended for a narrative inquiry because it helps to develop quality data with deep and rich information (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Additionally, having a small sample size helped me build a deep connection with both participants through their interviews and data analysis. Unlike quantitative research, qualitative research does not aim to generalize results to
large-scale samples, so having a small sample size is more appropriate and typical (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). A purposeful sampling approach allows a researcher to identify participants who have experienced a key concept being explored in the study (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). The snowball sampling technique was appropriate for this study because the tight-knit higher education community and networking within my professional network increased the likelihood of finding willing participants who met the inclusion criteria.

**Participant Demographics**

Both participants identified as a woman, used she/her pronouns, and worked in a non-faculty role with direct student contact. They both started in higher education well before the pandemic and left during the Spring 2022 semester. Each participant was able to pick a pseudonym to protect their identity. Participant A selected Maria, and Participant B selected Amira. Maria worked for two public institutions for almost two decades, and Amira worked for three separate private institutions for over a decade. This study did not collect information on race, ethnicity, or age because that was outside the scope of the study. Both participants had earned a master’s degree in higher education, and were willing to participate in two separate 60-minute interviews.

**The Interview Setting**

The setting of this study took place over the Zoom platform, a virtual video conference meeting space. Offering Zoom as a setting for this study enabled me to meet with participants who lived in different states and provided an avenue for simulated face-to-face conversations.

**Description of Materials**

The materials used for this study included the Informed Consent (Appendix A), the Qualtrics Demographic Intake Form (Appendix B), the Email Invitations for participants
(Appendix C) and for professionals (Appendix D), Recruitment Flyer (Appendix E), and the Interview Protocol (Appendix F). The following sections will describe the materials used for this study. All materials used in this study were approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) (Appendix G).

**Recruitment Materials**

I created a recruitment flyer to send to potential participants over LinkedIn and via email to advertise the recruitment of participants for this study. I created the flyer in Microsoft PowerPoint and converted the document into a PDF (Appendix E). I created two separate email invitations for this study. The first was a recruitment message used on LinkedIn to send direct, private messages to potential participants (Appendix C). The second was a recruitment email I sent to professionals in my network outside of LinkedIn, asking for referrals to potential participants (Appendix D).

**Informed Consent and Demographic Survey**

The informed consent process is the procedure that researchers follow to ensure ethical practices are followed by the researcher (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Participants received a copy of the informed consent form (Appendix A) after they indicated an interest in participating in the study. The informed consent included an overview of the purpose of the research, the research questions guiding the study, the expectations for their participation, identification of any potential risks, how confidentiality would be maintained throughout the study, and an explanation that their involvement in the study was entirely voluntary. After they signed the informed consent, they completed a short intake form where they entered basic demographic information (Appendix B). The intake form also served to ensure the participants met the inclusion criteria. In addition, the intake form asked how long they worked at their previous institution, the type of
office they worked for, confirmation they were willing to disclose their reasons for leaving higher education, level of education, length of time they worked in higher education, confirmation they were comfortable being recorded, preference for in-person or Zoom interview, and a space to collect their contact information. The demographic information, such as years they worked in higher education and level of education, were used to help inform participant selection and present the participant demographics for this study.

**Interview protocol**

The interview protocol (Appendix F) was adopted from Valtierra’s (2013) dissertation and used twelve total semi-structured interview questions. They recommended using a protocol for novice researchers to help them feel prepared and rehearsed for each conversation (Valtierra, 2013). Each interview protocol served as a guide to gather information about the participant’s experiences working in higher education during the pandemic. They are “guides to structure” the conversation between the researcher and participant (Valtierra, 2013, p. 61).

**Procedures**

In November 2022, the dissertation committee approved my proposal for this study and the Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved my study in 2022 (Appendix G). Research with human participants follows ethical procedures grounded in principles, including respect for participants, beneficence, and justice (Krathwohl & Smith, 2005). In January of 2023, I started recruiting participants for this study. The sections below describe the procedures I followed in conducting this qualitative study.
Figure 3

Timeline for Research

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Phase</th>
<th>Timeline</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Phase 1 Participant Recruitment</td>
<td>January 2023</td>
<td>Distribute emails and messages on LinkedIn. Identify 2 participants.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phase 2 Participant Interviews + Member</td>
<td>End January 2023 - February 2023</td>
<td>Conduct semi-structured interviews with participants. Transcribe interviews and return to participants for validation of content.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Checking</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phase 3 Coding, Analysis, &amp; Triangulation</td>
<td>February 2023 - Early March 2023</td>
<td>Identify codes and analyze themes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phase 4 Draft the Results and Discussion</td>
<td>March 2023 - April 2022</td>
<td>Draft &amp; Complete Chapter 4: Results &amp; Chapter 5: Discussion.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapters</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Participant Recruitment and Selection

I have been in the field of higher education for fifteen years and have been fortunate to build an extensive network of professional connections. Recruitment was conducted nationwide. To identify participants, I reviewed the LinkedIn profiles of women in my network who had left the field of higher education to see if their professional work history met the inclusion criteria. I found three different women who had left the field and I sent them private messages on the LinkedIn platform to introduce myself, and the study, and provide further details, including the recruitment flyer. I heard back from one individual who was interested and sent her a link to the Qualtrics Survey to complete. She completed part of the survey and let me know via LinkedIn messenger she had a technical issue with the survey. After confirming via LinkedIn messages that she met the study inclusion criteria and was interested in participating, we agreed to complete the rest of the demographic questionnaire in our first meeting together.

To find a second participant, I turned to my professional network of individuals outside of LinkedIn to identify potential participants (i.e., snowball sampling). I emailed an individual in
my network who gave me names of women who had left the field that I could contact via LinkedIn. They helped to facilitate an introduction on LinkedIn because the platform does not let you direct message a person with whom you are not connected. In their direct message to participants, they provided a copy of the flier, and gave potential participants my email, in addition to the Qualtrics survey link. This generated interest in the study and helped me locate the second participant. At the same time these new connections were happening, I conducted the first interview with my first participant. She offered to send the Qualtrics Survey and flyer to women in her network as well (snowball sampling). In total, eight individuals completed the survey indicating interest in participating in the study. I was able to identify the second participant from the pool of interested participants.

After both participants completed the Qualtrics Survey, I used the email they provided on the survey to schedule an interview. In addition to using email to schedule interviews, I used this mode of communication to clarify dates or events in their timelines and for friendly banter, as we became comfortable with one another. After completing both interviews with each participant, I emailed the individuals who were not selected for the study, thanking them for their eagerness to share their stories.

**Data Collection**

Three elements were used in this study's data collection process: verbatim transcription of the interviews, each participant’s LinkedIn profile, and my analytical memo notes. The following sections will describe the components of each data collection element.
Interviews, LinkedIn, and Analytical Memo. Data was collected through two semi-structured interviews with each participant. There was a total of 12 open-ended questions, which were informed by the literature review (Appendix F). Each interview had its own interview protocol to help guide the conversation with each participant and build rapport. I started each interview with some casual conversation to help build a connection. I introduced myself, outlined the purpose of the study, and explained the study’s design and their role in a narrative inquiry. I reiterated the confidentiality measures, asked them if they had any questions about the informed consent, and reminded them they could opt-out at any time. I verbally confirmed their consent to being audio and video recorded as well. I had them change their names on Zoom to their original pseudonym (e.g., Participant A, Participant B) to keep their identities confidential because, at that point, they had not selected their new pseudonyms. I explained the member-checking process, so they were aware they would have a chance to review the transcripts, provide feedback, and have an opportunity to make any edits, deletions, or additions. Explaining this verbally over Zoom was important to help each participant understand their role in this narrative inquiry. Additionally, I checked in with them before starting each interview and after we finished each interview to ensure they were still comfortable with participating.

Each interview lasted 60 minutes, and each participant engaged in two interviews at separate times. I intended to complete the first round of interviews before moving to the second round with both participants to provide enough space for the participant and myself to reflect on their experiences and shared stories. However, in the first-round interview with the second participant, we experienced technical issues with Zoom and needed to cut our interview short. We set up a time to continue her first first-round interview a week later. During that period, I completed the second-round interview with the first participant to respect her time and schedule.
There was one week between the first-round interview and the second-round interview for both participants. Between interviews, I reviewed my field notes and wrote memos to reflection on ideas that needed clarification or a follow-up. I listened to their audio for language and tone of voice that I missed in the live interview, which I could revisit in the second interview. I spent time reviewing their story timeline, ensuring I remembered details about their lives and critical players in their stories. I did this to ensure I stayed present through the memoing process before starting the next interview. Additionally, I reviewed their LinkedIn profiles in between their interviews to ensure I was keeping track of their timelines accurately.

In total, there were five interview transcripts created, two for Maria (Participant A) and three for Amira (Participant B), because we had to complete the first round of interviews in two separate meetings. I utilized the Zoom-generated transcriptions as a foundation to start the verbatim transcription of each interview. I cleaned each transcript by checking for errors, and inconsistencies, and removed and replaced identifiable data with pseudonyms. While this process was cumbersome and time-consuming, I became further immersed in the data and their stories.

After both rounds of interviews were completed, each participant was provided a copy of a polished transcript for review, roughly 7-10 pages in length. Each participant reviewed both transcripts and returned them to me within a week. They were also offered the opportunity to meet with me to discuss any questions or adjustments they may have wanted to make, although neither asked to meet again. Finally, the cleaned, member-checked transcripts were used for the coding process, explained in the next section.

**Data Analysis and Coding**

Coding was completed electronically and on paper by hand. I did not use data software for coding or analysis. All electronic data was stored on Microsoft 365 OneDrive and backed up
to a flash drive in a locked filing cabinet in my home. All paper notes were kept in a locked filing cabinet in my house. I used inductive in vivo coding for this study. The following sections provide an overview of the coding process.

**First Cycle Coding**

The first coding cycle used the in vivo coding technique outlined by Saldaña (2021). First, I circled by hand with pen and paper what felt like relevant points which emerged from the narratives. Then I revisited the initial coding choices three to four times to ensure the points I circled were salient and spoke to the research questions. Utilizing in vivo coding ensured I was not missing any valuable insights from the narratives (Saldaña, 2021).

Additionally, because the impact of the pandemic on voluntary turnover is not well understood yet, utilizing codes that arise from the participant’s narrative assisted with developing new ideas or themes about the data. After initial hand coding, I transferred the codes into a template that included a column for the narrative, a column for the in vivo code, and a column to start organizing some focused coded categories. I adopted this strategy from Saldaña (2021) to become immersed in the data. The more I read the transcripts, listened to the audio, and typed their words, the more I could hear their stories. Figure 5 is an example of the template I used to organize the narrative, in vivo code, and category.
I kept their words in quotation marks to help me remember that this language comes from the participant, not me (Saldaña, 2021). At various points in the coding cycle, I listened to their audio on headphones, away from the written transcript. This helped me stay connected to their story, even when I was not coding.

**Second Cycle Coding**

In this coding phase, the primary goal was to develop a sense of the themes or categories from the participant’s narrative. I adopted Saldaña’s (2021) focused coding approach for this coding phase. Focused coding searches for a “thematic or conceptual similarity” (p. 364) and typically follows an in vivo coding cycle in qualitative research. Once the in vivo codes were transferred to the template (see Figure 5), I started to build the categories or groups on the same template for each transcript. Then, I copied the categories into Excel to organize them alphabetically. This helped me see the repetitive codes salient to each participant’s narrative and build groupings from the categories through a focused coding approach (Saldaña, 2021). After grouping the categories, I began to organize them into clusters to identify the salient themes of the study which spoke to the research questions.
Thematic Analysis

I looked for themes that answered the research questions during the thematic analysis. Thematic analysis and coding are a “blend of concepts from the humanities, literary criticism, and social sciences” and include an interpretation approached from multiple perspectives, such as sociological, psychological, and anthropological (Saldaña, 2021, p. 195). Thematic analysis has been criticized for being speculative; however, an argument can be made that thematic analysis can be used holistically to identify a phenomenon or view participants' experiences (Saldaña, 2021). Saldaña (2021) also indicated that thematic analysis is appropriate for exploring “intrapersonal and interpersonal participant experiences, relationships, and actions to understand the human condition through the story” (p. 195). To identify the themes that emerged from the data, I established three main groupings in a Word document which asked a question about the participant, (1) why they left the field, (2) how they left the field, and (3) who they are, to identify the salient themes which emerged from the data. Under each grouping, I built clusters, which became the subthemes that emerged from the focused data coding. I then organized the focused codes under each cluster. Figure 6 provides a visual for all three phases of the coding and analysis process.
This approach to coding helped me keep the salient themes at the forefront while holding true to the participants’ narratives. Each participant’s data had the same themes. However, their experiences with why and how they left the field after the pandemic were nuanced and unique.

The coding process took roughly four weeks after the participants returned the member-checked documents. I visited their transcripts, coding templates, and audio almost daily. The results of these analyses will be presented in Chapter Four.

**Credibility and Trustworthiness**

Creswell and Miller (2000) proposed a framework that helps researchers provide a rationale for deciding which type of procedures to implement to build credibility for their study. In qualitative studies, credibility refers to the validity of the conclusions drawn from the
participants’ narratives (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Additionally, the essence of qualitative research is that the researcher, a human being, is the primary instrument of data collection and analysis. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), there are strategies a qualitative researcher can use to “establish the authenticity and trustworthiness of a study” (p. 238). These strategies include a robust philosophical worldview, how we accrue and absorb the knowledge about what we know, and how we conduct our research (Creswell & Clark, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Establishing trust starts with discussing various meanings of trustworthiness (reliability) and credibility (validity) in qualitative research. Establishing credibility in qualitative research involves understanding that the primary role of investigation is a person’s “construction of reality,” which is ever-changing and multidimensional (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 243). The key to establishing trustworthiness in qualitative research is ensuring the results are consistent with the data collected (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Additionally, qualitative researchers seek to understand and describe the world as the participants experience it (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Establishing reliability (trustworthiness) and validity (credibility) in a qualitative study will not yield the same results as a quantitative study. However, that does not discredit the findings.

To establish credibility in this study, I employed the following strategies, (a) member checking, where the researcher shares the data and interpretations with the participants to ensure accuracy, and (b) analytical memoing, which allowed me to reflect on my positionality (Marshall & Rossman, 2016; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The following sections explain member checking, analytical memoing, and reflective stance as ways to establish the trustworthiness of the data and analyses.
**Member checking**

Member checking is a way a researcher can ensure they accurately capture the participant’s worldview and is the most critical technique for building credibility (Creswell & Miller, 2000). In qualitative research, the assumption is that “reality is socially constructed, and it is what the participants perceive it to be” (Creswell & Miller, 2000, p. 125). This strategy is essential for qualitative researchers to check their biases and misunderstandings by having the participants correct the work (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

**Researcher Reflexive Stance**

Another pivotal strategy for building the study’s credibility is researcher reflexivity. This process allows the researcher to be transparent about their own “assumptions, beliefs, and bias” (Creswell & Miller, 2000, p. 127). Two perspectives governed my reflective stance. The first is the “lens the researcher chooses to validate their study” (Creswell & Miller, 2000, p. 124), and the second is the researcher’s paradigm assumptions. In Chapter 1, I presented my worldview and assumptions with the positionality statement. In addition to the positionality statement, I employed a technique called analytical memoing throughout the data analysis process. Analytical memos are the equivalent of journaling in research. It is a chance for the researcher to reflect upon what the participants shared, including different thoughts or phenomena that arrive throughout the data analysis process (Saldaña, 2021). According to Saldaña (2021), “memos are data” (p. 59). They can be coded, categorized, and sorted throughout the coding and analysis. Memos are different from field notes, which are observations of the participant’s behavior, social interactions, and interpretations. Memos are more than just a summary of the data, but rather a chance to reflect and put forth a new idea or theory from the data (Saldaña, 2021). I completed memos before each interview, immediately following, and during the analysis process. The
memos helped to shape ideas around the themes and provide structure to the analysis. I did not code the analytical memos for this study. They were used to keep me grounded and help me brainstorm ideas for the analysis. Additionally, the memos were part of the audit trail to support the formation of themes.

To establish trustworthiness within this study, peer-reviewed examination of the data and analysis and triangulation were applied. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), triangulation is a strategy utilized by qualitative researchers to establish trustworthiness by using more than one method to collect data. I reviewed the LinkedIn profiles of both participants at various points, including the participant selection phase, data collection process, and analysis. Their profiles helped me determine if they fit the inclusion criteria of the study. Both participants had a timeline of their employment history listed, which I used to help frame their stories in chronological order. It was also a resource during the data analysis to make sure their narrative matched their timeline. No information from LinkedIn was saved to my personal drives.

According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), a peer-reviewed examination can support both the credibility and trustworthiness of a study. This was built into the dissertation process, as my dissertation advisor provided the peer-reviewed examination of my raw data, audit trail, themes, codes, and review of my literature. Her review ensured the data, analysis, and findings were plausible.

**Threats to Credibility**

One threat to credibility is participant reactivity, a participant’s perception of providing a correct or right answer (Krathwohl & Smith, 2005). To mitigate this threat, I was transparent about the purpose of the study, the research questions, my commitment to protecting their
identity, and how critical their honesty was to the study. In addition, building a strong, trusting rapport with the participants was essential to minimize reactivity within their responses.

Another threat to credibility is instrument decay. In a qualitative study, the researcher is the instrument. As the researcher becomes more embedded in the research and literature, the level of and their ability to measure or identify themes can become inconsistent over time (Krathwohl & Smith, 2005). To avoid instrument decay, I used analytical memoing to help track any of my biases while analyzing data. I also revisited the data multiple times over six weeks before finalizing the themes and categories to ensure I had captured the essence of their stories. Additionally, member checking helped to make sure that I understood the participant’s stories. Lastly, I employed a peer-reviewed examination of the data, which is a strategy recommended to support the credibility and trustworthiness of a study.

Summary

This chapter described this study’s research method and design. It outlined the procedures, participants, sample size, inclusion criteria, recruitment plan, and materials used. I provided an overview of the coding and data analysis as well. A narrative inquiry is synonymous with storytelling, and utilizing semi-structured interviews established trust and rapport with the participants, creating a comfortable space to share their stories (Riessman, 2008). Both participants were able to narrate their stories through the interview process, which provided a chance to gather data-rich elements that can be used to contextualize their experiences working in and transitioning out of higher education during a pandemic. The next chapter will present the results discovered through the analysis of the data.
Chapter 4

This chapter is an overview of the findings for this qualitative study which sought to understand how women, who held non-faculty positions, viewed their institutions’ work environments amid a global pandemic and how their perceptions of their environment influenced their decision to leave the field of higher education through a narrative inquiry. This chapter presents the results of the thematic analysis of the data collected from semi-structured interviews which were conducted between the end of January 2023 and early February 2023. The first section of the chapter starts with an introduction to each participant, a timeline of their experience from March 2020 through their departures in May 2022, and includes a brief history of their start in higher education. The second section presents the results that answer the first research question: (1) Why did women in student service offices leave higher education during COVID-19? The third section presents the results that answer the second research question: (2) how did the COVID-19 pandemic influence the turnover process of women who decided to leave their workplace? The final section presents a summary of the results.

Maria’s Story

Maria was the first woman to respond to my invitation to participate in this study and was eager to share her story. She selected the name Maria to protect her identity and used she/her pronouns. During her undergraduate career, she received much support from student affairs professionals who showed her how to navigate being a student, encouraged her to get involved on campus, and helped her land her first job in higher education at a clerical level. Maria got her start in higher education over 15 years ago and spent her entire higher education career working in international higher education. She left University A during the Spring 2022 term after almost two decades of service.
Maria and I discussed her experience working in higher education in an area uniquely impacted by the pandemic because of the international policies and restrictions put in place by the US and other countries. Maria also shared her experience being pregnant, becoming a mother, and returning from maternity leave during the COVID-19 pandemic. Figure 7 shows Maria’s timeline, working in higher education when the pandemic started and the critical moments that ultimately affected how and why she left higher education.

**Figure 6**

*Maria’s Timeline*

The following sections provide a chance to get to know Maria, as I had the privilege of doing, to understand who she is as a professional, mother, and person working in higher education during a global pandemic. I will refer to various points in her timeline throughout the results and discussion in Chapter 4 and Chapter 5.
March 2020 Through the end of the Spring 2020 Semester

For Maria, the pandemic’s beginning in March 2020 was marked by countries rapidly reacting to COVID with lockdown policies and travel restrictions. This changed her day-to-day work.

It halted my day-to-day in that…so when it first happened, it was a flurry of chaos. We had to get students back amid border closings, which was absolute chaos. We had probably over 40 students traveling internationally, and we had to make sure that we could either get them home or find contingency plans that were changing daily. This was so similar to what was going on campus and having to move students off campus quickly. We were [having the same conversations] with how we help students who are overseas in the middle of a spring semester to get home safely and then complete that spring semester successfully.

Maria referred to this phase of working in the pandemic as chaotic, with plans constantly changing as more parts of the world began to shut down. This continued through the end of the spring 2020 semester for Maria and her office. They did not feel a reprieve until May of 2020.

Summer 2020 – November 2020

International travel was still heavily restricted as COVID cases continued to rise globally during the summer of 2020 (Taylor, 2021). The European Union discussed reopening borders with heavy restrictions except to travelers from the United States, as cases in the U.S. continued to set record breaking highs (Taylor, 2021). As a result, Maria’s office was “doing a little bit of planning, but then it [reopening/coming out of lockdown] just kept getting pushed out.” As a result, her office only built contingency plans in preparation for when borders would reopen instead of focusing on their usual day-to-day operations. There was so much unknown, they had
to plan for every possibility. Eventually, because the demand and volume for her office was temporarily paused, Maria's institution offered her the opportunity to support another office on campus that was experiencing COVID-related high volume in the summer 2020. This was a welcome opportunity for Maria to help her campus and students during a difficult time. She recalled her experience assisting the office fondly.

I’m the kind of person that doesn’t do well with not doing anything. When we were working from home, I wanted to ensure that I was earning my keep. I felt grateful to be able to do something to contribute, to feel like they weren't holding a job for me. There was a learning curve, but I felt like I had worked at the University and knew systems enough to pick up on it. I also worked with great people [across campus]. I just felt happy to be able to contribute and to be able to put some skills to use and help out an office, especially at that time.

She was passionate about helping her colleagues and the students who were struggling with the pivot to online learning. She continued to support her colleagues across campus until she went out on maternity leave in November 2020.

**January 2021- January 2022**

In November 2020, Maria delivered her first child and went on maternity leave through January 2021. When she returned from maternity leave, Maria found “much discussion about how we will bring our programs back. I spent a lot of [time] learning what the landscape of international education looked like.” At this point in the pandemic, vaccines were starting to be approved in different countries and the U.S. had administered more than 23 million vaccine doses (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2023). Maria spent time learning about her partners overseas and the restrictions they still had in place and trying to assess if they were still
open for business. She shared, they were trying to figure out how to rebuild the institutions international programs “with this new lens of COVID-19 and all the restrictions” that were involved in the planning process. For Maria, this was the “aftermath” of the lockdown and she was trying to figure out how to rebuild her office’s programs. In January 2022, Maria’s office was finally able to reinstate their programs, almost 22 months after the March 2020 lockdowns started.

Up until fall of 2021, Maria’s institution was still teaching courses remotely, and staff were predominately working remotely as students were not on campus. This meant Maria could continue working remotely and stay home with her daughter. She viewed this as one of the benefits of working as a new mother during a pandemic. In the fall of 2021, students, faculty, and staff were required to return to campus; student service offices returned with hybrid schedules. For Maria, this meant her daughter started daycare, and she went back to working on campus four days a week. As a new mom, this was a challenge for Maria. She missed the benefits of working from home and craved flexibility. Unfortunately, this resulted in tension between Maria and her relationship with her leadership and the environment of her institution and by Spring 2022, Maria had left her institution.

Amira’s Story

Amira worked in higher education for over a decade and left during the Spring 2022 term. During her time in the field, she worked for three separate institutions in various capacities. Much like Maria, Amira made connections with multiple support systems during her time as an undergraduate student. As a first-generation student, she believed their holistic approach to supporting her success helped her develop and grow throughout her tenure as a student. She admired the work of her advisors especially and wanted to pursue the same career, so she earned
a master’s degree in higher education. Amira spent most of her career working for multiple private non-profit institutions. Those institutions will be called University 1 (U1), University 2 (U2), and University 3 (U3). The institution where she voluntarily decided to leave the field was U3.

Her work at all three institutions focused on advising and academic support services. Amira and I discussed her experiences working closely with students, her incredible work on initiatives and programming within higher education, her approach to advocating for more flexibility during the pandemic, and how and why she decided to leave the field. You will learn how passionate Amira is about her family and her son, who was born in 2021. Figure 8 is a timeline of Amira’s experience working in higher education during COVID, including key moments that influenced how and why she left higher education. Amira selected her pseudonym and used she/her pronouns.

**Figure 7**

*Amira’s Timeline*
Amira did not speak much about how the pandemic changed her interaction with students, her transition to virtual advising was relatively seamless and even offered some benefits, such as new software systems to engage students via text messages. The sections below describe the critical moments in her experience working during the pandemic related to her interactions with her supervisor and leadership on campus, which became significant to her story in the Fall of 2020.

**March 2020 through August 2021**

Like most institutions, Amira’s institutions (U3) operated remotely from the start of the pandemic in March 2020 through Fall 2020. Although remote work was not a norm for higher education before the pandemic, Amira talked about how much she enjoyed working remotely during this time. She was grateful she did not have to deal with her grueling one-hour commute each way to work using public transportation. In addition, she retained the ability to connect with students directly over Zoom. Working from home reduced the risk of exposure and illness from the COVID-19 virus, which was incredibly important to Amira. In the Fall 2020 semester, Amira shared with her supervisor that she was expecting her first child and was due in March 2021. She was met with a response that left her feeling disappointed and undervalued. This was the moment she realized higher education may not be the right place for her anymore, however, this was compounded by other interactions with her supervisor and her overall experience working in the field. In March 2021, Amira and her partner welcomed their son, and she stepped away for maternity leave until July 2021. From July 2021 through August 2021, Amira continued to work entirely remotely. The following section will describe her experience returning to in-person work.
**Fall 2021 through Spring 2022**

In August 2021, her campus returned for in-person student, faculty, and staff engagement. This initiated a slow transition for staff returning to campus with a hybrid rotation that still allowed for work-from-home flexibility. The first struggle for Amira returning to in-person work was her commute. She faced inconsistencies with public transportation on her one-hour daily commute to and from work. The second struggle was navigating front-line student support with new policies such as mask-wearing and weekly testing. Amira's fear of the virus and her new role as a mother was prevalent. In addition to the university’s required weekly COVID-19 testing, Amira reported feeling frustrated by students’ not adhering to mandatory mask policies; “that was frustrating and scary because I had an infant at home. So many people in our office have young children as well. That was just scary, like I didn't want to come in.”

The increased risk of exposure was at the forefront for Amira because she was meeting individually with students in her role; she reflected on that experience, “…you had to meet with students in your office, so I always ask them to put their masks on, and I put mine on. So, there was just another layer of anxiety when we returned.” She remembered the increased number of cases her campus saw when they returned to in-person engagement in the Fall of 2021, “students on campus getting COVID once they returned to the dorms was really scary because everybody was quarantining almost immediately.” Not having the flexibility to work remotely was a struggle for Amira because she, like many other higher education professionals who remained employed over the pandemic, witnessed the benefits of working from home. They could still serve students and not put themselves or their families at risk. For Amira, the messaging from the top down was confusing, detached from the needs of the staff supporting students, and seemingly unaware of how to operationalize remote work while maintaining a presence on campus.
With the start of the Spring 2022 semester, Amira’s office decided they needed to increase their in-person presence and require staff to be in-person five days a week; “you had to be in the office because you were student facing, but students weren't coming into the office. Many of them were making appointments via Zoom.” Her team started questioning why there wasn’t more flexibility, so Amira wrote a proposal to get more flexibility to work from home.

“[I would think to myself] Fridays were slower, so why not wrap things up? I was sitting in the office twiddling my thumb because I didn't have a student, no one on my calendar, no work that couldn't wait till Monday, nothing really urgent to get done. So, I had to just come to the office, to come to the office.”

In response, her leadership offered a new schedule that required staff to report in-person four days a week and one day at home. During this time, the flexibility in her schedule became a boundary she valued in her professional career.

This timeline and introduction to Amira set the foundation for pivotal moments in her experience working during the pandemic, ultimately leading to her decision to leave the field of higher education. The next section of this chapter will cover the major themes that emerged from my analysis of why they left the field of higher education.

**Research Question 1 – Why They Left**

This section presents the results from the first research question that guided this study’s inquiry. Each section shows the findings and direct quotes that capture each participant’s experiences, which speak to why they left the field of higher education during the pandemic. The analysis of the data from each participant resulted in three major themes. The three themes were a lack of support from leadership and supervisor, dissatisfaction with career growth, and
motherhood and family care. Additionally, there are subthemes relative to each participant’s relationship with their leadership and direct supervisor. Both participants provided examples of situations that strained their relationships with their supervisor and leadership. The subthemes highlight the distinctions between both of their experiences.

The results of the data analysis showed that the COVID-19 pandemic influenced the relationship between the participants and the reasons they left the field. The pandemic amplified existing issues for both participants and provided an opportunity for both women to consider what they valued most in life, which ultimately led to their decisions to leave the field. Figure 9 depicts the major themes that arose from the analysis and shows COVID-19 an influence on why they left and their decision to voluntarily turnover.

**Figure 8**

*Why They Left the Field*
Lack of Support from Leadership and Supervisor

The first theme to emerge from the analysis was a perceived need for more support from leadership and supervisors. This was a catalyst for both participants in their decision to leave the field of higher education. Two subthemes emerged from each participant regarding their struggles with their leadership and supervisors. For Maria it was the constant change in leadership and the lack of support she felt from her supervisors. For Amira, it was the lack of humanity and lack of flexibility that emerged from the thematic analysis.

**Maria.** Maria had two subthemes specific to her experience of feeling a lack of support from her leadership and supervisor: 1) the constant change in her leadership and supervisor, and 2) a perceived lack of support from her leadership and supervisor, which contributed to a feeling of personal risk. The following sections will describe what that was like for Maria and includes direct quotes. I separated these two themes because each was salient in Maria’s decision to leave the field of higher education.

**Constant Change.** Maria experienced constant changes in leadership and supervision while employed at University A. The changes started before the pandemic began. Still, the added frustrations and lack of perceived support compounded over the years. Those frustrations, combined with the stress of navigating restrictions created by the pandemic, became too much to handle. She viewed herself as adaptable, as someone who can “go with the flow,” and has experienced change during her tenure as a higher education professional. She was familiar with the hierarchical structures that exist within the field of higher education.

Adapting to change was something Maria was very familiar with. There was “lots of change, all the time.” I asked her how the constant change made her feel and impacted her work and role. She told me, “in some situations, the change was good because it brought in new ideas
and new ways of doing things, and in some situations, the change felt like it was, “we will just put them there to get them out of the way; we don't have time to think about that [department] right now.” She was left feeling like her department was not a priority. For Maria, this constant change had pros and cons. But even the most adaptable person is going to have moments of frustration. She often felt like “decisions were being made without consulting anyone,” and some decisions did not “make any sense.” As the longest-standing employee in her small department, she had a broad understanding of her area of expertise and institutional knowledge that was critical to the success of her department. She saw frequent turnover of her supervisors in her role before and during the pandemic, which was compounded over the years and amplified by the pandemic; she shared:

I think that was the part that was frustrating. I felt like I was giving that [support] to those who I should have been receiving that training and development. I don't mean to sound arrogant in any way. I felt like the person in that role should have been developing me more, training me, and helping me to learn. I felt like I had an impact [on student success]. But it didn't necessarily feel like I was always getting that from those directly above me.

Maria also talked about the individuals in the role above her, with limited experience, who were making decisions without consulting her or her colleagues. She acknowledged that higher-level decision-making was not necessarily part of her role and that, as a “realist,” she knew what was “above her pay grade.” However, the lack of “consultation” was a continued frustration for Maria and her colleagues; “I knew my place in my role in those hierarchies.” It became clear her leadership were only interested in offering minimal investment in staff, “other than going to conferences, there wasn't a lot of day-to-day growth in my specific role from my supervisors.”
The constant change left her feeling isolated in her work, primarily within the context of supporting students in international travel. This is one of the reasons Maria felt like she needed to start looking for other opportunities outside of higher education. The following section will discuss the lack of support Maria experienced during her time at University A.

**Lack of Support and Personal Risk.** Another important subtheme that emerged from the data collected from Maria’s interviews was her lack of support, which resulted in a greater sense of personal risk. Maria’s office coordinated international programs for students. Because the pandemic influenced so many levels of the economy (e.g., forcing businesses to close, requiring restrictions on the number of people allowed within stores), there were quite a few unknowns that impacted the amount of planning her office could do when the pandemic started through January of 2022. The chaos of planning after the initial shutdown, the uncertainty of their plans, and the lack of knowledge and constant change within her leadership team left her feeling a “lack of support” from her institution. In March 2020, she experienced an immediate “flurry of chaos” to get students back from their international travel as borders began to close rapidly. She recalled the experience, “we had to make sure that we could either get them home or find contingency plans, and those were changing daily.” She remembered this experience was very similar to what students who were still on campus were experiencing. “How do we help students who are abroad in the middle of a spring semester to get home safely and then complete that spring semester successfully?” For Maria, this was absolute chaos. This experience from March 2020 through the end of the Spring 2020 semester was another building block in the decision for Maria to leave the field.

During the pandemic and after returning from maternity leave, Maria worked on learning as much as she could about rebuilding their programs for students to return to international
travel. This experience was another layer of COVID chaos contributing to Maria’s decision to leave. There was constant planning for “what-if scenarios,” reviewing what other institutions were doing, and turning to professional organizations for best practices or discussions. As Maria reflected on this experience, she recalled,

We were doing much planning in really good faith and the best that we could, but nobody really understood the dynamic of what that looked like. I worked for years and years and years with “my programs,” and we've used the exact same bus companies to pick up our groups from the airport to take them to the hotel. But we had no idea if those bus companies had survived the pandemic financially, right? And so, there were all these elements of not only understanding the bigger picture of like government and international relations, and what are the requirements going to be? But it did feel chaotic in a lot of ways.

For Maria, this chaos created feelings of increased risk and contributed to her decision to leave. She said,

It felt riskier in a lot of ways like I've always known that there was a risk associated with my job, right? I’m sending students to another part of the world where you know, things could go wrong. And so, there's always a level of my understanding of personal risk that I’m assuming in doing this work, but post-pandemic, that felt tenfold. I just, I felt like it was just much riskier, and I think that was part of part of what helped, you know, what helped me make the decision [to leave].

With her new daughter at home, coupled with a lack of support from her leadership and her leader’s lack of knowledge of international travel, this level of risk became heightened and outweighed the benefits of working in higher education after becoming a mother. Maria said,
I’m the primary person responsible for developing the programs. And so, before having a child, the weight of that risk didn't feel as heavy as it did now. It felt like it would have so many more severe ramifications on my life and my family had something gone wrong than it did before having my daughter. I just felt like because it was all falling to me, and I didn't necessarily feel like there was the stability; if something went wrong, it wouldn't come back on me, and I didn't know [if there] was a structure in place where I felt like I would be backed up and secure if something went wrong.

This was one of the pivotal moments when she began to consider stepping away from the field. During our interview, she said.

the impact of the demands…being on campus, the commute, being available once we started kicking off our programs, and the weight of the risk of not knowing what our programs were going to look like in the future. The demands weren't sustainable long term, you know, paired with this new mom life. Fall 21 into Spring 22 was really when the weight of it just felt like it was not sustainable long term.

The pandemic was not the only layer that made international travel challenging to plan during this time for Maria. The instability overseas caused by the war in Ukraine would affect travel into Europe and added risk to her students. This contributed to the looming sense of risk Maria was already feeling.

Everything with Covid and the weight of like other things going on in the world, like the Ukraine War…the weight of feeling…like I always knew there was a certain level of personal risk in the work that I was doing. If somebody's student joins our programs and something happens, my name is on a lawsuit because I’m the primary person responsible
for developing the programs. And so, prior to having a kid, the weight of that risk didn't feel as heavy as it did now that I had a kid. It felt like it would have so many more severe ramifications on my life and my family had something gone wrong.

For Maria, the lack of support from her leadership left her feeling isolated in her work. The constant change in her leadership reporting structure and the constant turnover of her supervisors, who often had no experience in international travel, created a sense of feeling unsupported by her institution and a new sense of personal risk. These layers all contributed to why Maria left the field of higher education.

**Amira.** Amira had two subthemes specific to her experience of feeling a lack of support from her leadership and supervisor: (a) she perceived her leadership to have an overall lack of humanity in their approach to supporting staff, and (b) a lack of flexibility. The following sections will describe what that was like for Amira and include direct quotes. In addition, Amira’s lack of flexibility felt like a lack of humanity from her leaders and supervisor. I separated these two themes because each is salient in Amira’s decision to leave the field of higher education.

**Lack of Humanity.** The first subtheme was the lack of humanity extended by her leadership to Amira and her colleagues and was a predominant thread throughout our conversations. She also acknowledged that this was a pattern she saw throughout the institutions she worked for in higher education. As she told me her story, she saw this as a consistent experience throughout her higher education career. A specific example she recalled was when she informed her supervisor that she was expecting her first child and was met with an unexpected response. She said,
when I first told my supervisor [I was pregnant], I didn't get, “how can I support you?” I got a message that sounded more like, “Oh, crap, you're gonna go out on leave, and now I have to figure out who's gonna take all your stuff over.” So that’s when I realized, if it's gonna be like this now, it's gonna be like this later, so I really thought, even during the pandemic, maybe I should start looking, and then seriously start looking after I have [my son].

For Amira, it felt as if her supervisor was more concerned for herself rather than celebrating this milestone in Amira’s life. The lack of humanity and disconnection between herself and her supervisor was just one of the reasons she decided to leave higher education. Another example of the lack of humanity extended by leadership in her institution was after her maternity leave and her institution returned to in-person work. After her institution returned to in-person work in the Fall of 2021, Amira used public transportation to and from work daily. She recalled that the trains were running inconsistently right after they returned to work, and she asked for some flexibility to work from home one extra day per week to help with the transition and reduce the hassles of dealing with public transportation. Her supervisor said she was not allowed to do that because of the inequities it would create with the other staff. For Amira, this felt like “there was no flexibility, and she was really holding the line, and there was like no humanizing of anybody's situation.” It's also important to note that what fueled this perception of her supervisor and the leadership above her was that other offices were allowed to work from home more.

Another example of this disconnection between staff and leadership for Amira was when her family contracted COVID; her supervisor told her she needed to return to in-person work even though she was still exposed to people who were testing positive and she was not feeling well. Amira was very frustrated by this interaction with her supervisor. She felt like “the policy
was so backwards…. I can still get my work done [at home]. I can still meet with students virtually; we can still make this work.” This conversation took place when she was interviewing for other jobs, and so that just “solidified the decision” to leave for Amira. The interaction fueled her perception of a lack of humanity and grace not being extended to her or her colleagues. While she had already decided to step away from higher education, this would have allowed her supervisor to extend grace in a way that might have challenged Amira’s decision to leave the field, but it was too late.

**Flexibility.** Closely related to the lack of humanity and trust Amira experienced during her time in higher education was the lack of flexibility that she felt before COVID, during the peak of the pandemic, and then during the return to in-person learning. After the return to in-person learning and work at the start of Fall 2021, many were eager to continue to have options to work from home especially considering the last 18 months had been entirely virtual for many student support offices. That mindset was similar for Amira, especially since she was returning to work as a new mom with an infant and taking public transportation to get to work each day. The desire for flexibility was the most significant motivation for Amira to leave the field. She “felt like it was a lack of trust” for her office. Because others on campus were given more flexibility, she saw this as an inequity in the work-from-home policy. Her role involved working one-on-one with students but after spending 18 months learning remotely, students preferred to still meet online. The lack of flexibility also contributed to burnout for Amira. She was commuting five days a week while juggling being a new mom, “it's still a huge burden for me, like physically commuting an hour because the commute was brutal.” The pandemic brought on the ability to work from home. However, Amira said she experienced a lack of flexibility for
staff over the course of her tenure in higher education. This was also another consideration for Amira arriving at her decision to leave higher education; she told me,

I feel like everywhere I've worked, I've had the same pain points; for example, why is there no flexibility? Why is my manager so inflexible? I feel like I'm not asking for anything crazy, and neither are my colleagues. So why is there a lack of trust in higher education?

The lack of flexibility left her feeling like her supervisors did not have strong leadership skills, "they didn't know how just to be a human and see that life is kind of tough and you need the flexibility sometimes." Part of what fueled her decision to leave the field was the realization that this was a consistent theme across higher education and not just specific to her institution. She told me, "if I leave and go to another institution, I feel like it's going to be the same awesome things promised, and they're not going to meet my expectations in terms of just giving me a little leeway; I feel like that was like a common theme."

For Amira, the risk of contracting the virus and being exposed to in-person work on a large college campus was prevalent when they returned to in-person work in the Fall of 2021. As a result, Amira was at risk by being on the front line with students. She talked about how challenging it was to be tested weekly, watching her campus immediately move to quarantine after they returned to in-person learning and work, and the stress of students disregarding mask requirements. As a new mother with an infant at home, this was "scary and frustrating" for Amira. The lack of support Amira received around her fears was another layer of her decision to leave the field of higher education. The lack of humanity and flexibility made Amira feel like her leadership and supervisor did not trust her or treat her like an adult.
The literature discusses that faculty and staff are fed up with senior leadership, especially in a post-pandemic world (Ellis, 2021). It heightened the need for work-life balance, which did not exist for many individuals in non-faculty roles. Amira experienced a lack of empathy and support from leadership, who prioritized dollars over common sense and employee well-being. As a result of the pandemic, which amplified existing frustrations, Maria and Amira felt burnt out and frustrated, so they made a decision that focused on prioritizing their happiness and their family’s best interest.

**Dissatisfaction with Career Growth**

Not seeing a clear career growth and development pathway within their institutions was another reason both participants attributed to leaving the field of higher education. The results presented below answer the first research question. The following section describes both participants’ experiences with career growth and the lack of opportunity for advancement on their campuses.

**Maria.** Maria was able to climb the ladder quickly at University A. However, in her latest role as a mid-level student affairs professional, she began to realize she had hit a plateau. In our conversations, Maria often talked about the lack of opportunities for growth. She acknowledged the consistent turnover of her leadership but never saw herself as a candidate for that position because she did not have a terminal degree. Additionally, the lack of engagement and collaboration from the top down left her feeling like there was no hope for growth. She said,

Nobody ever had a conversation with me about [what I saw or thought for the office]. How can we grow here and do things differently outside of my role? Having been heard or having had a conversation with my supervisor and having them ask what are your thoughts on this or that would have showed a little bit more investment in the fact that
they were interested. A lot of times, it felt like my office…as long as we were doing our jobs and staying out of the way, [we were left alone because they had] bigger offices, bigger problems.

For Maria, the lack of interest shown by her leadership on campus made it challenging to picture a long-term future at University A. From her perspective, there was much opportunity for her programs to expand and grow, which would have created opportunities for her to succeed. Additionally, leaving the field was seen as the only way she was going to be able to learn and grow. Moving to another institution, she predicted, would land her in the same position she was in at University A, “the only way I was going to learn [in higher education] was either get my doctorate or go somewhere that I could work for somebody who had years of experience.” Maria’s desire to learn and develop her knowledge and skills outweighed the title, salary, or level within the hierarchy. She wanted a position that would challenge her, support her, and move away from the stagnant, “cyclical nature” her work had started to become. Unfortunately, as the pandemic progressed, she felt like University A was not proving they could provide that support.

Maria also said nobody at her institution asked her about her career hopes and dreams. She trusted and respected her senior leaders (her boss’s boss), but nobody was having conversations with her or her colleagues, demonstrating an investment in staff. Part of the reason she stayed for so long and hesitated to leave was because of the potential she saw.

**Amira.** For Amira, a constant thread throughout our conversations was the realization that most IHE’s would be the same. This is important to understand because the lack of opportunities that she perceived to be available to her within the field of higher education was limited. For her, the only option was to leave the field entirely. Amira had experienced three universities during her career and identified similar pain points at each institution. Amira
advocated for herself on multiple occasions; she had conversations with her supervisor and the Dean of her division, hoping to explore different opportunities to expand her knowledge and support the other functional teams within her department. Unfortunately, the red tape that binds higher education policy and practice made it difficult for these ideas to be put in place before she left. These conversations also happened at the tail end of her time at U3, and at that point, she had already made the decision to leave. This highlights that even though she was leaving the field, she was still fighting for growth for herself and her colleagues.

During our conversations, she talked about the lack of progression that she experienced throughout her time in higher education; “I was there four years, and I wasn't moving up. But I was doing a lot of stuff that was helping to advance the department but no advancement, no increase in salary, no title bump, nothing.” Feeling seen by her leadership was essential to Amira. She was an accomplished professional and an invaluable team member. As a result, she could recognize her worth, but she felt like her institution and supervisor shared a different perspective. This was ultimately another reason she decided to leave the field of higher education.

Motherhood and Family Care

Motherhood and family care are another emerging theme that influenced why they left the field. Both participants in this study became first-time mothers during the pandemic. Both had unique experiences being pregnant during the pandemic and returning to in-person work after maternity leave. The sections below will provide an overview of their experiences and how they contributed to their decisions to leave the field of higher education during a pandemic.

Maria. For Maria, having her daughter in the Fall of 2020 was one of the “biggest blessings” during the pandemic because of the flexibility of working from home as her body
adjusted to being pregnant. She realized that her experience being pregnant, going out on
maternity leave, and returning after would have been very different had her university not been
learning and working remotely because of the pandemic. Her daughter was able to start daycare
much later than she would have if Maria’s institution had required in-person work. She also saw
many of her friends who were becoming mothers begin to leave the field of higher education
when they had to return to work after six weeks of leave. The pandemic, for Maria, created a
space for her to stay at home with her daughter longer than expected. She also had a sense of
peace during this time because her programs were not on the ground yet. If her programs had
been on the ground, there “wouldn’t have been support for me going on maternity leave in terms
of the work that would have needed to be done.” This is because her colleagues would not have
been able to support the work because she was the most experienced with how they functioned.

Becoming a new mother also created a lot of additional costs for Maria and her family.
The cost of daycare put an extra financial burden on her family, and her salary at University A
did not align with the increasing prices of childcare. This major expense contributed to her
decision to step away from higher education. She told me, “When you add up the daycare and
commuting expenses, I was paying to go to work, so the salary did not align.” The health
insurance’s low cost helped her stay a little longer, but ultimately that was not enough to keep
her in the field.

Amira. The pandemic was a formidable experience for Amira. Becoming pregnant left
Amira with much fear of exposure to the virus. “I kept hearing about people who were pregnant
and getting COVID and passing away. That was terrifying; I [wondered] what we did do? That
was scary.” Amira reduced interactions with family and friends while pregnant. Returning to in-
person work after she had her son increased her fear of exposure. Nevertheless, she viewed that
experience as an opportunity that also helped her set boundaries in her personal and professional life that she still uses today. Her family and her son were at the core of her decision-making, which helped her uphold her boundaries. “I’m not afraid to make people upset. I think everything I’m doing is within reason and what is best for him.” Becoming a mother helped Amira find inner strength; she became an even stronger advocate for herself and her family. She said, “I don’t know if I would have been doing it [advocating] so fiercely because there’s so much behind it – I need to protect my baby; it’s very biological.” After returning to work after her maternity leave, Amira said, “that’s when I realized, if it's gonna be like this now, it's gonna be like this later, and [that’s when I thought, I should] seriously start looking.” The field of higher education was no longer meeting the needs of Amira or her family.

Motherhood also gave Amira a newfound voice. She used this voice to advocate for herself and her colleagues and proposed a more flexible work-from-home policy. She drafted a proposal to submit to her leadership team, which allowed her office to work from home one day a week. In discussing this experience, Amira recalled how her newfound voice empowered her to “push boundaries.” She was no longer concerned about “upsetting someone; I am asking for what I needed.” Ultimately, the compromise for one additional day at home was not enough to help Amira feel supported in her work. She perceived the administration’s response to be lackluster, and she knew it was time to explore other options outside of higher education.

Summary of Results to Research Question 1

The three major themes that answer the first research question for both participants: are lack of support from leadership and supervisor, dissatisfaction with career growth, and motherhood and family care. The pandemic amplified issues that existed for both participants. The pandemic introduced remote work to the field of higher education. Almost all institutions
pivoted quickly to support their operational needs and were forced into remote work. However, many staff started to enjoy the benefits of working from home offices. A contributing factor to why both participants decided to leave the field of higher education was the lack of flexibility offered surrounding remote work after their institutions returned to in-person engagement. The pandemic also created a greater sense of risk within their positions and personal lives, indirectly influencing why they left the field. Maria felt a greater sense of risk when planning her programs for international education. Amira felt a greater sense of risk of being exposed to the virus as a new mother.

Additionally, they both had different experiences with their supervisors that led to feeling an overall lack of support from their leadership on campus. Maria talked about feeling invisible and undervalued, and Amira spoke about the lack of humanity extended to staff on her campus. Lastly, both participants did not believe their institutions were invested in helping them grow, learn, and develop within their respective institutions. The following section will discuss how both participants left the higher education field during a global pandemic.

**Research Question 2 – How They Left**

The second research question that guided this study was, “how did the COVID-19 pandemic influence the turnover process of women who decided to leave their workplace?” I answered this by analyzing the responses to the interview questions (see Appendix F) that were specific to each participant’s process for leaving the field, starting with how they decided to leave, how they explored their options to leave, and what their process and experience were like once they decided to leave. Additionally, I analyzed the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic as a common thread throughout each conversation, bringing their experiences of voluntarily leaving the field to the forefront.
Three major themes emerged from the data. The first theme is the initial thought process each participant went through when they first decided to leave the field. The second theme is the process they went through searching for a new job. Finally, the last theme is the ease of movement they both experienced, an attribute of the pandemic. Lastly, the pandemic was again an influence for the participants’ relationship with their turnover process and their decision to leave the field. Figure 10 depicts the relationship between the themes related to research question two and their turnover decision-making process.

**Figure 9**

*How They Left the Field*

![Diagram of the relationship between themes and turnover decision](image)

In the sections below, I will share the findings for each participant and include direct quotes followed by a summary of the results related to research question two.

**Initial Thought to Leave**

The following sections present the findings surrounding Maria and Amira’s realization that there was something better out there for them and describe their experiences and
perspectives when they had the initial thought and the incident that sparked the idea to leave the field of higher education during a global pandemic.

Maria. At first, Maria was hesitant about leaving the field of higher education. She always saw the potential her university had to grow within her functional area. However, her family and friends pushed her to consider alternatives as they witnessed her struggling with the lack of support from her leadership and her overall unhappiness. Maria experienced guilt about leaving her university and higher education. She always saw herself as a lifelong higher education employee. It was important to Maria that I understood what a "big decision" it was for her to leave and that she "wasn't somebody who was constantly applying for the next job." She said it "took a lot of time for me to come to the place where I felt like…. that it was time.” Maria received some outside influence from her friends and family to make the decision to leave University A. She reflected on this experience, she had “thought about it on and off for a while, but I had never really thought I’m definitely gonna do it.” But because her support systems continued to encourage her, their words were always in the back of her mind.” She never felt like she was “ready to pull the trigger,” and it took her a long time to feel ready to even explore what opportunities were available to her outside of higher education.

Eventually, Maria reached her breaking point during the pandemic and realized it was time to start looking for something outside the field. So, at the end of the Fall 2021 semester and early Spring 2022, Maria committed to her friends and family that she would “put feelers and see what happens.” While deciding to apply for other positions and potentially leave the field, she had conversations with her partner about whether this would be the “right decision” for their family. For Maria, the decision to leave her field “wasn’t just impacting me; it was impacting [my daughter’s] health care and our overall family financial situation.” She and her partner had a
lot of conversations about “what this would look like and does this make sense?” They explored “what are we giving up by leaving higher education.” She saw staying in higher education as an investment in her daughter’s future as well because of the free tuition benefits, but that meant committing to the field for another 18 years. Additionally, she thought about her options and what she would be able to do in a career outside of higher education:

I think the biggest thing that I struggled with was if I’m not working at higher education, what would I even do? How do you take decades of specifically international education experience and translate that into something different?

Ultimately, she decided to explore her options and was pleasantly surprised by her experience because of how quickly she was offered an interview followed by a job offer.

Amira. Amira’s experience was different from Maria’s. Amira’s supervisor's reaction to her pregnancy announcement prompted her realization it was time to leave higher education. However, she did not start to apply for jobs until after her son was born, but her initial thought process started during the Fall 2020 semester, at the height of the pandemic. In July of 2021, she returned to in-person work after maternity leave and continued to experience frustrations with the lack of flexibility within the lens of her new identity as a mother. The many pain points she experienced during her time in higher education taught her that higher education would never meet her needs and that she needed to find a better fit. She thought about her options and what she could do next outside of higher education. However, she did not waver in her decision to leave the field either; she said, “what pushed me over the edge, was the lack of flexibility they were giving us, and I felt like it was a lack of trust that came with it because other folks across campus were given more flexibility. It just solidified the decision.” This demonstrates Amira’s decisiveness about her choice to leave the field of higher education.
Amira felt the shift in mindset as a result of the pandemic, which contributed to her exploration of other opportunities outside of higher education. She said,

It made me realize there's so much more. I think so many people thought this way, like there's so much more to life than this, and I actually don't have to deal with this, and I can find something else that's going to work better.

Amira’s process for deciding to leave the field of higher education was internal. She identified the boundaries that were important to her, prioritized her family needs, recognized the opportunities the pandemic created, and sat confidently in her decision to leave the field. The following section will discuss the process both participants went through in searching for a new job.

**Searching for a New Job**

The process of searching for a job was very similar for both participants. However, their feelings surrounding this process were very different. The sections below will discuss Maria and Amira’s experiences searching for a new job during the pandemic.

**Maria.** Maria was not feeling supported, had an increased level of perceived personal risk, and felt guilty about leaving her university and the field. It took a while for her to come to this decision, but ultimately the cost her career had on her life outweighed the benefits. When she decided to start looking, it was only a commitment to “put feelers” out there, not necessarily feeling ready to step away from the field. Her biggest question was about what she could do outside of higher education. She recalled considering all the opportunities she was seeing at the time she was having this existential reflection; “Could I go get a job at Target? Yeah, sure. But would I be would I have a sense of fulfillment?” For Maria, she felt a sense of grief having to
potentially abandon decades worth of higher education experience and knowledge, “what types of positions would I even want to apply for and be interested in? How do you take all these years of specific higher education experience and translate that into something different?” Maria persisted by applying for two different jobs and letting her close network of friends know she was looking for something new. Maria was amazed as her inquiries were immediately met with interest and an interview invitation. She was shocked by how quickly this happened because that is not a norm for higher education.

The second, I was like, okay, I’m open, I’ll look now; I got a job. So, it happened super quickly. So fast that I like almost didn't really have time to change my mind. But it took a long time for me to come to terms with the fact that I was thinking about leaving higher education.

Maria immediately felt wanted by the new company,

It was a whirlwind; I didn't really have time to really like fester about it, right? Because the emotional attachment to [working in higher education]…I would have festered over a decision, but because they [current employer] were so fast, and they were so excited about me, which so flattering! The fact that they were so decisive about their want to hire me so quickly it was almost validating this is the right thing. [I thought to myself] things could be different for me in a different place, and I think that was helpful in making that decision.

The support she felt moving through the search process, which initially seemed daunting, ended up helping to confirm that she was making the right decision to leave the field.

**Amira.** When Amira decided to leave in Fall of 2020, she mainly watched the job market and saw the Great Resignation happening. This was an opportunity to change; she recalled that
the “job market was booming. There were so many opportunities, especially when I started looking.” Amira went into the process for interviewing in early January 2022. She had a list of options for what she wanted from her new employer and new position and used that as a guide for finding the right fit.

I talked to a friend in the early fall of 2021 at a party. I told her I was not happy and I have no flexibility, and she was like, you should work for my company, I’ll look out for a job. And she did, which was awesome. I just networked within our family and friends and they helped me.

Her process for applying for jobs was quick like Maria’s. She made her decision, applied for two positions, and had two interviews within a month, and left the field.

**Ease of Movement**

Both participants were shocked at the speed at which they could secure a new opportunity outside of the field of higher education. Additionally, both of their employers’ responses confirmed that their decision to step away from higher education was correct. Maria’s institution never offered an exit interview. Amira’s institution did, but the conversation left much to be desired. While a salary increase may not have been feasible given the state of higher education at the time because of the uncertainty of student enrollment, the lack of flexibility and humanity they experienced could have been adjusted. The pandemic had an important influence over their ease of movement because of the available jobs and the demand in the market.

**Maria.** The company she is currently working for made it easy for her to leave the field of higher education. Their interview process was swift, much quicker than higher education. They negotiated with Maria, offered flexibility to work from home, and, most importantly, made her feel wanted. Her entire demeanor changed when she talked about this experience. The
whirlwind of the process felt exciting, and Maria was flattered by their approach; it made her feel wanted for the first time in a very long time. This helped solidify her decision because her institution had left her feeling unsupported and ignored. Her new role offered more compensation and flexibility, and the company actively engaged in recruiting her for the new position.

Amira. Amira was aware of the Great Resignation happening in the job market. She was watching the trends keenly, aware of her skill set. She interviewed for two different jobs and accepted an offer within a month. She approached that process with a list of conditions that were important to her, and her company was able to offer her the right benefits to meet the needs of her family. Amira’s experience in higher education also made it easier for her to transition through the interview, search, and acceptance process. In addition, she had worked on various projects and programming for students on career development. Many of those skills she had cultivated and taught to students supported her through her transition out of the field of higher education.

Summary of Results of Research Question 2

This section presented the themes that answered the second research question. The three themes were the initial thought process, their experience searching for a new job, and the ease of movement leaving higher education. For Maria, the pandemic did not directly influence her perception of the process from start to finish. She did not have an isolated incident that triggered the initial thought to leave; she also took thoughtful care in deciding to leave the field. Amira’s experience paralleled Maria’s story, though she was slightly more confident and decisive about leaving the field. They both realized that going through the voluntary turnover process was the best way to support the needs of their families and themselves.
Summary of the Results

This study sought to understand how and why women, in non-faculty roles, were leaving the field of higher education during the COVID-19 pandemic. The results of the analysis showed three reasons both participants decided to leave the field of higher education, including: (a) lack of support from their leadership and supervisor, (b) dissatisfied with career growth, and (c) their role of becoming a new mother and prioritizing family care. The results also brought forward three reasons for how they left the field, (a) initial thought to leave, (b) searching for a new job, and (c) ease of movement.

The COVID-19 pandemic amplified issues for both participants which existed before the start of the pandemic and were compounded between March 2020 and the day they both left the field. The pandemic acted as a modifier for the relationship between the participants’ reason for leaving the field and how they went about leaving the field. Figure 11 shows the pandemic as a modifier for the reason why and how they left the field of higher education.
In the next chapter, I will make a connection to the conceptual framework, discuss the implications for future research and practice, and the limitations of the study.
Chapter 5

This qualitative study aimed to understand how and why women, who held non-faculty positions, decided to leave the field of higher education during the COVID-19 pandemic. This chapter starts with a summary of the study and the results, followed by a discussion of the themes identified in the analysis and their connection to the conceptual framework. This chapter will also review the study’s limitations and provide suggestions for practice and future research.

Summary of Study

This study explored the experiences of two women who worked in non-faculty roles and voluntarily left the field of higher education during the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic was a unique historical moment that sparked a mass exodus of higher education professionals from the field (Kellett, 2022). Using semi-structured interviews, I was able to immerse myself in the participants’ stories and dive deeply into their experiences working in higher education during the pandemic and making the decision to leave the field. Our conversations included their reasons for getting into the field of higher education, how the pandemic influenced their day-to-day work, perceptions of their campus and environment, and we explored why they left the field and how they went about voluntarily leaving.

Two research questions guided this study. The first aimed to understand why they decided to leave the field of higher education (a) why did women in student service offices leave higher education during COVID-19? The second research question aimed to understand how they decided to leave the field; (b) how did the COVID-19 pandemic influence the turnover process of women who decided to leave their workplace? The following section explains the themes discovered during the data analysis to understand how and why they left the field of higher education.
Research Question 1: Reasons for Leaving

There is very little literature on why women decide to leave the higher education field, especially within the frame of the global pandemic (Johnson et al., 2021). The literature on turnover also acknowledges that an individual’s reasons for voluntarily leaving can be nuanced and vast (Jo, 2008; Zimmerman et al., 2019). Additionally, the hiring crisis, which has plagued higher education in the wake of the Great Resignation, is getting worse (Zahneis, 2023). In a survey of 60 college leaders, 62% responded that hiring staff got worse in January, February, and March of 2023 compared to 2022 (Zahneis, 2023). As employees leave their positions, it is taking months to refill their positions. The staff who are left on their campuses are disengaged and burnout (McClure, 2022; Zahneis, 2023). Voluntary turnover can be contagious as employees start to see others leave (Kellett, 2022). This is important to understand so higher education leaders can work to reduce unnecessary voluntary turnover.

The first research question aimed to understand why women who held non-faculty positions left the field of higher education during a pandemic. The sections below present the findings from the analysis of the data. Three themes were identified to explain why each participant left the field of higher education during the pandemic: lack of support from leadership and supervisor, dissatisfaction with career growth, and motherhood and family care.

Theme 1: Lack of Support from Leadership and Supervisor

The data showed there was a lack of support from leadership and supervisors. Both participants felt frustrated and experienced a strained relationship with their supervisors as supervisors were not responsive to their evolving needs. While they both experienced frustrations with the leadership, they each had unique experiences that were salient to their reasons for leaving. Maria experienced frustrations because of the constant change in her
department’s leadership and a lack of support for her growth and development as a professional in international education. Amira talked about the lack of humanity and flexibility she felt from her leadership and felt like she was not being treated like an adult. They both reported feeling their needs were not prioritized and felt undervalued and disposable by their leaders. The pandemic amplified their existing frustrations with their leadership and contributed to a greater sense of discontent with higher education. The pandemic also introduced flexibility and work-life balance through a work-from-home policy. However, the return to in-person work in the Fall of 2021 saw a retreat from the flexibility work from home offered and left both participants wanting positions that offered a better work-life balance.

Theme 2: Dissatisfaction with Career Growth

The next theme that emerged from the analysis was the perceived lack of growth opportunities for both women. They discussed hitting the ceiling in their career as mid-level student affairs professionals. Neither woman could see a clear pathway for career advancement within their institutions. They both acknowledged that any growth would have potentially required drastic changes, such as a move to a new institution or completing a doctoral program. The lack of support from their leadership also contributed to not seeing a future with their institutions or within the field. Neither felt their institution was willing to invest in staff to support learning and growth and help them “climb the ladder.”

In the wake of a global pandemic, which was claiming millions of lives, many individuals who were socially distancing stopped to assess what was most important (Smith, 2022). The pandemic provided an opportunity for both women to assess what was most important to them as women, mothers, and professionals. Both women discussed an existential reflection on who they were as professionals, what they valued with their work, and what would be most essential for
them as they considered transitioning out of higher education. Realizing the field of higher education was not going to provide a supported path contributed to their decision to leave the field.

**Theme 3: Motherhood and Family Care**

The final reason why both participants left the field of higher education was because of their new identities as mothers. Both became pregnant, took maternity leave, and welcomed their first child into the world during the pandemic. They discussed how they appreciated working from home while pregnant while their institutions operated remotely. They talked about how they relished the work-from-home period of the pandemic because it gave them an opportunity to stay home with their infants longer than if they’d had to return in person. As they returned to work, the burden placed on them by juggling being a new mom coupled with the stressors of returning to in-person work during the pandemic was onerous. Their priorities shifted with their new identities. Protecting their health, financial security, safety, and work-life balance was critical for both participants. Ultimately, leaving the field of higher education was the only path they saw to achieve this balance.

**Summary of Research Question 1: Reasons for Leaving**

Both participants’ reasons for leaving the field were layered and nuanced. They each cited multiple catalysts that prompted their decisions to leave the field. It was not just one unique moment that prompted the decision to leave higher education. One of the fascinating realizations from this study was their similar experiences. They both experienced frustrations with their leadership and craved growth and development, which never came. They both concluded that higher education was never going to be able to afford them a healthy work-life balance, which became a priority for them during the pandemic and as new mothers.
Johnson et al. (2021) discussed how the pandemic amplified the stressors experienced by employees. Additionally, the pandemic added a burden to women, who are predominately seen as the main caregiver in a household while juggling working remotely (Augustus, 2021). The results of this study support research conducted by Yildirim and Eslen-Ziya (2020), who found that the pandemic “disproportionately affected” the day-to-day routine of women in academics (p. 2). Both Amira and Maria discussed how difficult it was to work full-time, with their long commutes, while feeling like their supervisors did not respect their need for flexibility. Reversely, Maria talked about how she enjoyed working from home at the height of the pandemic as her body adjusted to being pregnant. Amira talked about how she was grateful to be home while pregnant because it reduced her risk of exposure. The themes of this study confirmed Jo’s (2008) observations that relationship with supervisor is a common reason for women to leave their positions.

Understanding what contributed to a woman’s decision to leave the field is critical for retention, especially since women make up 60% of entry-level to mid-level administrative positions and 37% of upper-level roles (NASPA, 2022). Understanding why women are leaving the field is essential for higher education. Historically women have not pursued a career in the same manner as men. According to Parker (2015), women often center their decision-making around social and familial structures. Both participants discussed how focusing on what was best for their family was most important in their decisions to leave the field. They were searching for flexibility that would allow them a better work-life balance and an infusion of humanity in their relationships with their leaders. The difference for women working in higher education, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic and its aftermath, will differ from men’s experiences. It is essential to understand the variables that influence their decision-making separately.
The analysis also found that the frustrations experienced by women in non-faculty positions were not isolated to one institution; this is an inherent issue in higher education. Each participant worked for different non-profit institutions, one private and one public. Both discussed the idea of moving to another institution to find development opportunities. However, they both concluded they would experience the same pain points. They both felt their only option for better work-life balance, financial stability, and to feel supported by their leadership was to leave the field. This is important to understand for a few reasons. First, it supports the literature that discusses an overall issue with higher education’s inability to retain staff, especially post-pandemic (Zahneis, 2022; 2023). Second, it highlights that the pandemic did not cause this problem; it amplified the existing issues and allowed staff to reflect on what was most important to them. Finally, it brings attention to the existential reflection the pandemic brought about for employees (McClure, 2022; Morales, 2022; Zahneis, 2022, 2023). Both participants reflected on their identities as professionals within this field and considered what was most important to them as mothers. Their new perspective and the Great Resignation showed them there was “something better” out there.

**Research Question 2: The Turnover Process**

The second research question aimed to understand how the COVID-19 pandemic influenced the turnover process of women who decided to leave their workplace. The conceptual framework developed by Maertz and Campion (2004) and March and Simon (1958) guided the development of the semi-structured interview questions used to understand the participants’ experiences of deciding to leave the field of higher education during the pandemic. The following sections will summarize and discuss the themes that were identified through the analysis of the data.
Themes for Question 2

Three major themes emerged from the data that describe how each participant navigated the turnover process during the pandemic: (a) the initial thought to leave, (b) searching for a new job, and (b) ease of movement. First, the pandemic amplified existing pressures and frustrations with higher education, ultimately leading to both participants’ decision to leave the field. The initial decision to leave for both participants was unique, and their experiences navigating that process looked different and reflected their positionality. Maria experienced guilt about leaving and was hesitant to consider leaving. Amira was decisive and started to create a plan to leave months before she started to interview for new positions. However, both knew they needed to leave the field, not just their institutions, to find something better. The pandemic did not directly influence how they searched for a new job. Both participants considered what opportunities aligned with their current skills as higher education professionals and networked with their families and friends. Third, the pandemic directly impacted the ease of movement. They both experienced a quick interview and hiring process, with interviews and offers happening within a month of applying. The speed at which they were interviewed and hired left them feeling valued and important to their new employer. The new employers had the means and resources to offer more compensation and flexibility and seemingly had the emotional capacity to approach the process more humanely.

Summary for Question 2: The Turnover Process

Research on why women leave the field of higher education is limited. However, one study by Jo (2008) conducted before the pandemic found women leave the field for three reasons, their relationship with their supervisor, opportunities for career growth, and flexible work/life balance. The pandemic was a new variable in a woman’s process of leaving the field of
higher education. The findings which answer the first research question align with Jo’s (2008) findings for reasons to leave the field. However, what is missing from the literature, including Jo’s (2008) study, is a woman’s process for how they go about voluntarily departing. The pandemic amplified the existing struggles and escalated the participants’ need for flexibility within their roles. It influenced the relationship between their initial thought to leave, their search process, and ease of movement.

**Connections to Conceptual Framework**

This study utilized two conceptual frameworks of voluntary turnover as a guide for understanding why and how women are leaving the field of higher education. The first was a content model proposed by March and Simon (1958) to explore why individuals voluntarily turnover. The second was Maertz and Campion's (2004) process model for voluntary departure decision types. Maertz and Campion’s (2004) decision types were used to understand how a woman arrived at their decision to leave higher education during a global pandemic. The following sections will describe how the data aligns with their turnover models on why and how employees turnover.

**Content Model**

March and Simon’s (1958) content model focused on two general reasons employees leave an organization; the ease of movement and desirability of movement. The content framework grounded the semi-structured interviews conducted with both participants. The desirability of movement is closely associated with the employee’s relationship to the organization, their affective commitment (i.e., their attitude towards their job), and work environment (e.g., supervisor satisfaction, work/job satisfaction, pay and promotion satisfaction, and coworker satisfaction). Additionally, March and Simon (1958) view an organization as a system balanced
by all that rely on the system’s existence. Individuals who work for the organization receive inducements in return for their participation or support of the organization. When the inducements begin to decrease, the likelihood of leaving increases. The original inducements valued by both participants, including lower health insurance costs, work-from-home introduced by the pandemic, supporting students’ success, and tuition reimbursement for family members, were no longer enough to keep them in the field. The following sections will discuss how the findings fall into the content model’s framework of affective commitment, work environment, and perceived alternatives.

**Affective Commitment.** Affective commitment is how employees identify and feel involved in the organization (Mowday et al., as cited in Zimmerman, 2019). Amira and Maria expressed a strain on their relationships with their respective organizations and, more importantly, on their relationship with the field of higher education. The pandemic overwhelmed higher education. It highlighted the lack of empathy and support from leadership who prioritized financial obligations over common sense and employee well-being. As a result, the pandemic left individuals in the higher education field feeling demoralized, burnt out, and angry, so they started making decisions that focused on prioritizing their wellness over the best interest of their employers (McClure, 2022; Morales, 2022). This rang true for both Maria and Amira. They both experienced moments where they realized the wellbeing of themselves, and their families was more important than their careers in higher education. Employees’ identities within their institutions were strained due to the policies and procedures put in place in response to the pandemic. The pandemic also shifted the balance of what the participants valued the most. Initially, the draw to higher education was their passion for the field and supporting students.
**Work Environment.** Work environment is the second common construct from March and Simon’s (1958) model. This overarching term includes relationships with colleagues or coworker satisfaction, supervisor satisfaction, satisfaction with job responsibilities, and pay/promotion satisfaction (March & Simon, 1958; Zimmerman, 2008). Being forced to return to in-person work without the opportunity for flexibility and a perceived lack of humanity felt by both participants supports March and Simon’s (1958) framework for why employees leave because of the work environment. Amira was frustrated by the risk of returning to campus. Everyone on her campus had to abide by new policies, such as weekly testing and new quarantine guidelines. She felt like her family was put at risk because of this decision as COVID outbreaks began to increase immediately upon the return to her campus. Maria was frustrated at the added perceived personal liability risk placed on her while sending students to travel internationally under new guidelines and restrictions set up in response to COVID-19.

Additionally, both participants discussed having a solid connection with their coworkers on campus. They both still feel connected to the individuals they worked with and have nourished those relationships after their departure. They were also passionate about their work with students. They entered the field to influence students’ educational journeys positively. They both indicated they would have stayed in the field to continue their work helping students. However, their dissatisfaction with pay, supervisors, and the lack of upward mobility ultimately overpowered their passion for helping students.

**Perceived Alternatives.** The ease of movement is integral to why an individual decides to turnover. The number of opportunities outside their current role can influence how easily they perceive turnover (March & Simon, 1958; Zimmerman et al., 2019). They were both shocked at how quickly they found a new position and the pace at which the new employers moved to
recruit them for their roles. This was a result of the Great Resignation sparked by the pandemic. Both participants were stunned at how quickly they could secure a new position outside of higher education. This was a sign for Maria that she was meant to leave higher education. An outside employee, whom she had only met a few times during the interview process, expressed more interest in her skills and abilities than the individuals at the institution at which she worked for almost two decades. They both expressed concerns surrounding the transferability of their skills into a new field as they had spent most of their careers in higher education. The ease of movement experienced by both was new for them as well. The higher education hiring process is notoriously long because of the steps that needed to be taken (e.g., background checks and antiquated human resource procedures). Nevertheless, both participants had an interview and job offer within a few weeks.

The benefits that historically would entice the desire to work in higher education (i.e., inexpensive insurance, free tuition dollars, and helping students) were no longer enough to retain staff in higher education. Relying on this as a retention strategy is antiquated. The findings from this study also align with Jo’s (2008) study, which found three key variables influencing a woman's decision to leave an organization: (a) their relationship with their supervisor, (b) opportunities for career growth, and (c) flexible work/life policies. This is important to note because women were leaving the field before the pandemic for the same reasons discovered in this study. The themes discovered in this study confirm Jo’s (2008) results. The pandemic made it even easier for them to leave. This is an ongoing problem for higher education, and researchers have been arguing to focus on the retention of women in higher education for years (Robyn & Du Preez, 2013).
The results of this study are supported by the conceptual framework on why and how employees leave the field of higher education. The content model framework supported the development of the interview questions. It provided a space for each participant to discuss how their affective organizational commitment and work environment influenced their decision to leave the field. The results of this study also supported the process model framework for decision-making, both participants were able to discuss their process from the initial thought to leave through their ease of movement and into their new positions outside of higher education.

**Process Model**

Maertz and Campion (2004) identified four different decision types: (a) impulsive quitting, (b) comparison quitting, (c) preplanned quitting, and (d) conditional quitting. For this study, I use voluntary turnover as a synonym for “quitter.” Both participants experienced multiple moments which led to their intention to leave. Both participants fit within Maertz and Campion’s (2004) description of a comparison quitter. Comparison quitters have engaged in some comparison of their current employment with other options prior to quitting and are typically lured away by alternative job offers (Maertz & Campion, 2004). Both participants compared the new job offer against their current jobs and decided the new job would meet their needs. Neither participant had a predetermined specific time they were going to quit. They both had alternative job offers in hand before they left higher education, and they had conditions that had to be met by the new employer that were negotiated when an offer was made (e.g., flexible hours or work-from-home options). This suggests the COVID-19 pandemic influenced the relationship between the participant’s process for leaving and their voluntary turnover.

Additionally, the pandemic may have made their decision making more nuanced and fluid. Amira initially started as a conditional quitter. Which is defined as individuals who plan to
quit if an unexpected event occurs. This type of quitter looks at departing as dependent on a condition to present itself (Maertz & Campion, 2004). For Amira, she advocated for greater flexibility for herself. It could be argued that each time she advocated which was met with an unfavorable response could be considered an event that created a condition that sparked her decision to leave.

Limitations

According to Creswell and Guetterman (2019), the limitations of a study are the weaknesses or issues within the study that the researcher has identified. The sections below will present the study’s limitations related to methodology and analysis.

Limitations of the Study

Part of establishing credibility and trustworthiness with narrative inquiry is having the participant confirm their voice and essence come through in the data. Carlson et al. (2021) discussed the potential traps within the member-checking process and provided best practices. I provided both participants with a polished copy of their transcript. Both participants reported feeling self-conscious about seeing their verbatim transcription, which could have taken the focus away from the content they reviewed. However, if I had more time, I would have had them review the themes that emerged from their stories after the analysis. Another limitation that influenced participant recruitment was some confusion with the definition of for-profit institutions on the Qualtrics survey. Both participants confused this with the definition of a private institution. After further clarification, they understood the difference and confirmed they had never worked at a for-profit institution. I should have included a definition of a for-profit institution to reduce confusion. The last limitation of this study was the length of time required to recruit participants. I started the recruitment process by using the individuals in my LinkedIn
network and waited to use the snowball sampling method. I should have started the snowball sampling connections right away to identify potential participants quicker. The approach I took to recruiting participants created delays in the recruitment process. Lastly, while qualitative research cannot be generalized, the themes uncovered in this study confirmed themes that exist within literature. The next section will describe the limitations of the methodology.

**Limitations of Methodology**

The goal of qualitative studies is to be able to conceptualize the experiences of the participants. The narrative inquiry design aims to explore the understanding of their unique experience (Valtierra, 2013). The results of this methodology cannot be generalized to explain why all women leave the field of higher education. However, the narrative approach provided a chance for me to tell their stories in a way that will allow readers to make sense of Maria and Amira’s experiences working in and departing from higher education during a global pandemic (Saldaña, 2021).

Both participants who self-selected into this study were mid-career married women who gave birth to their first child within the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic and who left the field for reasons amplified by the pandemic. They not only had a young child at home, but their pregnancies were during the phase of the pandemic when vaccines were in development and being newly released. The taste of an extended period at home with their infants changed their perspective of what was most important to them as working mothers. I cannot conjecture about the influences of COVID-19 on the departures of various groups of women. Including women without kids or women with older, school-aged children. Additionally, women who may be in an earlier or later phase of their career or single (either with or without children) who choose to
leave the field, could have very different experiences and reasons for leaving the field of higher education. Unfortunately, the nature of this study did not permit additional participants.

Another limitation is the participant’s narrative and the information they chose to share. Both women were open, honest, and grateful for the chance to share their stories. However, there could have been moments where they edited their responses because I still work in higher education. The field of higher education is a small, close-knit community. While I talked about how my goal was to protect their identities, they could have still subconsciously or consciously left pieces out. Also, they were telling their story from their memory which could have been skewed because it had been almost seven to nine months since they went through this experience. Lastly, narrative inquiry requires the researcher to spend much time with their participants. Each participant and I spent two hours discussing their experiences and exchanging emails. However, due to the limitations of the timeline for completing this dissertation, more time could not have been spent with both participants.

**Limitations of Analysis**

An important limitation of the study analysis is my positionality as a woman who still works in higher education and has remained employed throughout the pandemic. Over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic, I have watched many colleagues leave my institution or the field of higher education. As a result, I was the one who was left behind to pick up the additional job responsibilities, which was often difficult and resulted in an increase in stress and burnout. Considering my positionality, my aim through the analysis was to understand the experiences of the participants who also identify as women and why they left the field of higher education. Additionally, both of my participants became mothers over the COVID-19 pandemic. As someone without children, I will never be able to understand their experience entirely. While I
aimed to ensure my positionality did not influence the analysis, there are pieces I will never understand about their experience because I do not have children.

**Implications**

There are many important implications for leadership professionals in higher education in relation to the retention of women in non-faculty positions. In the next section, I will discuss implications for practice and future research.

*Implications for Practice*

An important implication of this study is how eager women who departed higher education are to share their stories. Both participants were appreciative of the chance to discuss their reasons for leaving the field. They also acknowledged this was the first time they had a chance to discuss the nuances of their reasons for leaving in a safe and non-judgmental space. Amira thanked me for choosing to focus on this specific topic and Maria was grateful she had the chance to share her story in this format. Additionally, there were a total of eight women who indicated an interest in participating in the study. While the results of this study provided helpful insights into the experiences of both participants, there is still much to learn about the distinct experiences of women who decide to leave the field of higher education and the role of the pandemic in their process to leave the field. The response from the participants and those not selected for the study provides a justification for continuing this research.

Participants’ institutions invested years of training and resources into staff members but ultimately failed to retain both participants. Maria and Amira had a collective of almost 30 years in the field of higher education. Maria was able to climb the ladder within her institution until she felt like she hit her ceiling, and Amira worked her way up every time she started at a new institution but still felt like her last institution did not provide a clear path for growth.
Additionally, they both had earned master’s degrees in the field of higher education. Presumably, they both would have received training in their onboarding process, and both reported overseeing various programs which contributed to the students on campus and their respective institutions. Their institutions relied on their expertise to support the operational needs of their departments and the strategic needs of the institutions. Their respective institutions lost Amira and Maria’s skills, expertise, and institutional knowledge. Additionally, their institutions would have presumably needed to search for replacements (both participants indicated their positions were re-posted and filled) and repeat the onboarding process again. In addition, the strain felt by those left behind who must pick up the slack from being short-staffed can lead to additional departures. Understanding the impact on those left behind during a period of high staff turnover is something to be explored with future research. One recommendation is to review how an institution’s human resources department supports individuals in non-faculty roles. Every woman in a non-faculty role is going to have different goals for their careers. This is an opportunity for programs, professional development plans, and initiatives to support the unique needs of women in these roles. Another consideration is the systemic barriers that exist on a college campus within non-faculty departments and their reporting hierarchies. Understanding how these barriers are contributing to perceptions staff have about their options for career growth, opportunities for advocation on policies and practices, and overall professional growth could be a way to reduce voluntary turnover behavior. Lastly, there is much to learn from those who stay behind when turnover is high. Understanding their perspective, how they view their work environment, areas of development that should be prioritized could tell leadership a lot about where to start to retain non-faculty staff in the field.
Implications for Future Research

Both participants discussed a strained relationship with their supervisors. Literature also cites a predominant reason for turnover is the relationship with the supervisor (Augustus, 2021; Jo, 2008). There are a few ideas for future research that come from this study. First, we cannot see what required training and support (or lack of support) the participants’ supervisors and leadership were receiving. Understanding that information within the context of an employee’s voluntary turnover decision-making could be an interesting insight into what is missing from leadership development programs. Second, the pandemic was a unique moment in our history. The mid-level administrators in this study reported feeling undervalued and underappreciated, which was amplified by the pandemic. It would be interesting to see whether their supervisors and senior leaders experienced the same feelings within their own work and if there is a relationship between the supervisor’s feelings of underappreciation and how that affects their relationship with their direct reports. Third, the goal of this study is not to criticize or judge the fine individuals who serve in leadership positions. The pandemic created a space that diverted the attention, time, and energy of many (Yildirim & Eslen-Ziya, 2020). This was a difficult time for many individuals, regardless of their level of employment. It’s important to acknowledge the struggles we all faced during a unique moment in history. Understanding how the pandemic influenced multiple levels within an institution with high staff turnover or within a single department through a case study, could provide an expanded understanding of the pandemic’s influence on turnover.

The literature discusses the need for more flexibility and a focus on campus culture to help with the retention of staff (Augustus, 2021; McClure, 2022; Jo, 2008). Both participants cited dissatisfaction with the lack of flexibility with work-from-home policies, not being treated
like adults, and not feeling a sense of trust from the top down among their reasons to leave the field. Additionally, both participants in this study discussed how important working from home was for their work-life balance and families. They both confirmed they were still able to be present for their day-to-day responsibilities and balance their family needs as well. However, there seems to be tension between the ways in which campus leadership approached cultivating a stronger sense of community and the dissatisfaction staff are reporting. Some leaders are even questioning if work-from-home policies are contributing to the lack of engagement their campuses see with staff (Zahneis, 2023). Further studies could explore the correlation between initiatives offered by leadership (i.e., in-person community events, reduction of work-from-home initiatives) and the retention of women in non-faculty roles.

One of the trends facing colleges and universities today is the need to support students’ well-being. To provide the necessary support for students, all employees on a college campus who interact directly or indirectly with students need to have the capacity to provide intentional, thoughtful, and equitable support. Those professionals also need to feel valued in their work, which is directly influenced by the institution’s leadership and community. Future research could focus on the correlation between institutions with a high employee attrition rate and student retention and enrollment through a mixed methods study or quantitative study.

Another idea for future research would be a mixed methods approach that seeks to understand the relationship between the pandemic and women who leave the field of higher education on a larger scale. The nature of a mixed methods approach could expand the exploration of this topic to a greater scale, including a larger sample size of women, to gain a generalized recommendation. Additionally, combining a quantitative approach would provide a chance to understand the causal relationship between the pandemic and women who have left the
field and would mitigate research bias (Bhandari, 2022). This methodology would provide the chance to understand how a participant’s identity (i.e., a woman with no children, single mother, women of color, etc.) influences the voluntary turnover process. Lastly, future studies could use Gilligan’s theory of moral development, which focuses on a woman’s use of an ethics of care for decision making. While it was beyond the scope of this study, future studies could use this as a theoretical foundation to understand a woman’s decision making on a deeper level as it relates to their identity.

**Summary**

This chapter provided a summary of the results of the study, connections to the conceptual framework, and a discussion of the limitations and implications for practice and future research. Women are an invaluable part of the higher education system. Retaining women in the field is critical for the continued success of the universities and colleges they serve, as well as the students they support. Being able to explore my participant’s experiences through their stories was an honor and privilege.
References


https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK570977/

Ellis, L. (2021, August 25). The Great disillusionment: College workers are burning out just when they’ll be needed most. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*.

https://www.chronicle.com/article/the-great-disillusionment


https://www.chronicle.com/article/covid-19-has-forced-higher-ed-to-pivot-to-online-learning-here-are-7-takeaways-so-far/?cid2=gen_login_refresh&cid=gen_sign_in


https://doi.org/10.5465/amj.2007.28166119


https://doi.org/10.1080/19407882.2017.1372295

https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pdig.0000065


https://doi.org/10.4102/sajip.v39i1.1106


https://doi.org/10.1080/03098260601071324


https://www.chronicle.com/article/higher-eds-hiring-crunch-was-already-bad-it-got-worse-over-the-

summer?utm_source=Iterable&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=campaign_517234

4_nl_Academe-

Today_date_20220927&cid=at&source=&sourceid=&cid2=gen_login_refresh


getting-

worse?utm_source=Iterable&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=campaign_6521982_nl_Academe-

Today_date_20230403&cid=at&source=ams&sourceid=


https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1744-6570.2008.00115.x


http://dx.doi.org/10.1002/hrm.21938
Appendix A

Informed Consent

Project Title: The Search for Something Better: Narrative Inquiry into Why Women in Non-Faculty Roles Left Higher Education During COVID-19 Pandemic

Primary Investigator: Amanda Corsi

Faculty Sponsor: Dr. Kathryn (Tina) Alessandria

Project Overview:

Participation in this research project is voluntary and is being done by Amanda Corsi as part of her Doctoral Dissertation. The purpose of this study is to examine how women who have left higher education viewed their institutions’ work environment amid a global pandemic and how their perceptions of the environment influenced their decision to leave higher education. This study uses the following research questions to guide the study. If you would like to take part, West Chester University requires that you agree and sign this consent form. Participation in this study will include consent to be recorded as part of the interview process.

Research Question:
1. Why did women in student service offices leave higher education during COVID-19?
2. How did the COVID-19 pandemic influence a woman’s decision to leave their workplace?

Your participation will include two interviews with the researcher for 60-90 minutes per interview. You will be asked to complete a short survey and then you will be invited to participate in an interview. You will also be asked to review the written transcripts and the researcher’s interpretation of the interview themes. If there is anything in the transcripts you would like to have edited, you will have the option to do so. Participant must identify as female and be 18 years or older.

There are no major risks with this research study. One potential risk could be some discomfort discussing a challenging workplace environment or decisions to leave an institution. It is important to note that you may withdraw from the study at any point. Another risk could be loss of privacy. The participants name, any identifiable demographic information, and place of previous or current employment will be kept confidential to mitigate any risk.

To maintain confidentiality, all transcriptions recorded interviews, and memos from interviews will be kept in a secure, password-protected OneDrive cloud account and a backup will be stored on a flash drive that will be kept in a locked filing cabinet in the researchers office.

You may ask Amanda Corsi any questions to help you understand this study. If you don’t want to be a part of this study, it won’t affect any services from West Chester University. 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?**
   The purpose of this study is to examine how women who have left higher education viewed their institutions’ work environments amid a global pandemic and how their perceptions of the environment influenced their decision to leave higher education.

2. **If you decide to be a part of this study, you will be asked to do the following:**
   Your participation will include two interviews with the researcher for 60-90 minutes per interview. You will be asked to complete a short survey and then you will be invited to participate in an interview. You will also be asked to review the written transcripts and the researcher’s interpretation of the interview themes. If there is anything in the transcripts you would like to have edited, you will have the option to do so. The estimated amount of time for the review is no more than 60 minutes. Participation in this study will include consent to be recorded as part of the interview process.

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

4. **Is there any risk to me?**
   There are no major risks with this research study. One potential risk could be some discomfort discussing a challenging workplace environment or decisions to leave an institution. It is important to note that you may withdraw from the study at any point. Another risk could be loss of privacy. The participants name, any identifiable demographic information, and place of previous or current employment will be kept confidential to mitigate any risk.

5. **Is there any benefit to me?**
   Participation in this research could provide a space for the participant to have a non-judgmental safe place to discuss any challenges they faced at work, reflect on their experiences, feel encouraged to self-reflect through the interview process, and feel heard or important as they tell their story. They will also be contributing to the research on the retention of employees who identify as women in higher education.

6. **How will you protect my privacy?**
   - In order to respect individuals' comfort levels with meetings during a pandemic, interviews will be offered either in-person or over zoom. Zoom sessions will be recorded in order to transcribe the interview. The recordings for all sessions will be stored on a password-protected computer, in Microsoft Office 365 OneDrive, which is also password protected and a backup will be stored on a flash drive that will be kept in a locked filing cabinet in researchers’ home. Only the researcher has a key to this cabinet.
   - Your records will be private. Only Amanda Corsi and Dr. Kathryn (Tina) Alessandria, and the IRB will have access to your name, interview and responses.
   - Your name will **not** be used in any reports.
   - 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 with this study, contact:
     - **Primary Investigator:** Amanda Corsi at 610-436-3001 or acorsi@wcupa.edu
     - **Faculty Sponsor:** Dr. Kathryn (Tina) Alessandria at 610-436-3976 or kalessandria@wcupa.edu

9. **What will you do with my Identifiable Information?**
   
   Concluding all interviews, the researcher will transcribe each participant’s interview and change their name to a pseudonym, e.g. Participant A, Participant B, etc. The researcher will also change the name of any other identifiable information the participant provides, such as the name of their previous institutions or names of other individuals that come up in their stories. Data from this study will not be used in future research.

   For any questions about your rights in this research study, contact the ORSP at 610-436-3557.

I, _________________________________ (participant will enter name on text box), 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 not possible to know all possible risks in a study, and I think that reasonable safety measures have been taken to decrease any risk.

- [ ] I agree to take part in this study
- [ ] I do not agree to take part in this study
Appendix B

Qualtrics Demographic Intake Form

Section 2: Collection of Demographic information

The information provided below will be kept confidential.

Q1: Are you 18 years of age or older?
   Yes
   No

Q2: The purpose of this study is to explore the experiences of individuals who identify as female who have left the higher education field. Do you identify as female?
   Yes
   No

Q3: Are you currently working for an institution of higher education?
   Yes
   No

Q4: Was the last institution you worked for, prior to leaving higher education a for-profit institution?
   Yes
   No

Q5: How long did you work at your previous institution?

Q6: Indicate the type of office in higher education you have worked for:

Q7: Are you willing to share your reasons for leaving higher education as well as discuss how you went about making the decision to leave? Please note, your identity will be kept confidential. Your name, the name of your previous institutions and any other identifiable information will be replaced with a pseudonym.
   Yes
   No

Q8: Please indicate your highest level of education:

Q9: Please indicate the length of time you have worked in higher education:
Q10: The interviews will be recorded either over zoom or audio recorded if you opt for an in-person interview. Do you consent to be recorded for the interview?
   Yes
   No
Q11: Would you prefer to meet in-person or over Zoom with the researcher?
   In-person
   Over Zoom

Q12: Please enter your preferred name: __________________________

Q13: Please enter your preferred email: ________________________

End of Survey Message:
Thank you for taking time to complete this survey. The researcher, Amanda Corsi, will reach out via the email provided above to schedule some time for the interview.
Appendix C

Recruitment message to be used via email or LinkedIn

Dear [Name of Participant],

My name is Amanda Corsi and I am currently a doctoral student at West Chester University. For my dissertation I’m seeking participants who would be willing to share their stories about why they decided to leave the higher education field. Attached you will find the flier with more information on the study.

If interested, please complete this short survey where you will also find an informed consent to participate. Additionally, if you know of anyone who may be interested in participating in this study please feel free to forward this email and flier to them or provide their contact information to me directly.

I look forward to working with you.

Best,

Amanda
Appendix D

Recruitment email to professionals who could refer a participant

Dear Colleague,

My name is Amanda Corsi and I am currently a doctoral student at West Chester University. For my dissertation I’m seeking participants who would be willing to share their stories about why they decided to leave the higher education field. Attached you will find the flier with more information on the study.

If you know of anyone who may be interested in participating in this study please feel free to forward this email and flier to them or provide their contact information to me directly.

I look forward to working with you.

Best,

Amanda
Appendix E

Recruitment Flyer

Retaining Women in Higher Education

Study participants needed!
Looking for women who have left positions in higher education to discuss their experience and reasons for leaving.

WHAT WILL PARTICIPANTS BE ASKED TO DO?
Volunteers will complete a short survey online and participate in interview with the researcher. Identity and place of employment will be kept completely confidential in the study. Amount of time for participation will not exceed 120 minutes.

WHO CAN JOIN?
We are looking for volunteers who identify as a woman/female, who have worked in a higher education office for 1 year or longer with direct or indirect student contact but have since left for a different field.

WHY YOU SHOULD PARTICIPATE:
The pandemic changed many aspects of our lives. Higher education leaders are looking to understand how to retain employees and one way is to explore an individual’s decision to leave. This study is your chance to tell your story with complete confidentiality and contribute to existing literature on voluntary turnover of women in higher education.

STUDY PURPOSE:
The purpose of this study is to examine how women who have left higher education viewed their institutions’ cultures amid a global pandemic and how their perceptions of the culture influenced their decision to leave the field.

Questions? Contact
Amanda Comi
aco691@wvu.edu

Approved by WCU IRB-FY2023-35
Appendix F

Interview Questions and Protocol

Interview 1 Questions and Protocol

This interview aims to gather information about the individual’s experience and build a rapport with the participant. In this interview, the researcher will explain the purpose and rationale for this study, the participant’s role in a narrative inquiry, and includes questions aimed at understanding the participant.

Introduction: The researcher will start the interview with some causal conversation to help establish rapport. The researcher will review the purpose of the study, review the informed consent, remind the participants they can opt-out at any time, review the process of member checking, and share the plan for the interview process with the participant (i.e., two interviews total). The researcher will ask for consent to record the interview. The researcher will also inform them that any identifiable information will be deidentified in the transcript.

Interview Questions:

1. Can you tell me a little about yourself and what contributed to your decision to start working in higher education?

2. What roles have you held while working in higher education?

3. Can you provide an overview of your role(s) in higher education? What did your day-to-day look like?

4. How did the pandemic change your day-to-day work experience? What was that like?

5. Can you tell me a little about why you decided to leave higher education?

6. How did the pandemic contribute to your decision to leave higher education?

Closure: Thank you for your time today! And for sharing your stories from your experience. Next time we meet, we will dive into why you left the field and how the pandemic influenced those decisions. Let’s schedule a date and time for the following interview at a time that is convenient for you. I will also send you a transcription of this interview, so you have a chance to review provide additional information or context, ask questions, and confirm that your narrative is accurately portrayed.
Interview 2 Questions and Protocol

The purpose of the second interview is to dive deeper into the experience the participant faced during the pandemic and how they navigated leaving the field of higher education.

Introduction: The researcher will review some of the points from the first interview and ask if anything came up for the participant after we finished our first interview.

Interview Questions:

1. Since our last interview, has anything new come up about how the pandemic contributed to your decision to leave higher education?

2. How did you go about deciding to leave? What contributed to your decision-making process? How much time did you spend between deciding you wanted to leave and leaving?

3. I am interested in learning how the culture of your institution may have influenced your decision to leave. By culture, I'm referring to policies, practices, colleagues, and supervisors.
   a. Were there any policies or practices that impacted your decision to leave?
   b. Did your colleagues or supervisor impact your decision to leave?

4. Was there anything your institution could have done to convince you to stay? Or is there anything that would convince you to return the higher education?

5. Thank you for taking the time to share all of your stories. Is there anything else relevant to this topic you would like to share?

Closure: I appreciate your time and the opportunity to hear your story. After transcribing the interviews, I will send you a copy of the transcripts for your viewing. Similar to the first interview, you will have a chance to review the transcripts, provide additional information or context, ask questions, and confirm that your narrative is accurately portrayed. You are also more than welcome to ask for a follow-up meeting if you want to discuss any questions about the transcript.
Appendix G

IRB Approval Letter

Sep 26, 2022 8:33:38 AM EDT

To: Amanda Corsi
Col of Education & Social Work, Counselor Education


Dear Amanda Corsi:

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 How to Retain Women in Higher Education: A Narrative Inquiry.

Decision: Approved

Selected Category: 6. Collection of data from voice, video, digital, or image recordings made for research purposes.

Sincerely,
WCUPA Institutional Review Board

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