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The Fourth Pandemic: Photo-Narratives of Mid-Level Student Affairs Professionals During the Great Resignation

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THE FOURTH PANDEMIC: PHOTO-NARRATIVES OF MID-LEVEL STUDENT AFFAIRS PROFESSIONALS DURING THE GREAT RESIGNATION

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ABSTRACT

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This qualitative study explores the experiences of mid-level higher education professionals navigating workplace changes post-Coronavirus-19 Pandemic and during the subsequent Great Resignation. The study, framed by the theory of ambiguous loss to interpret the impacts of unresolved losses, underscores the importance of equipping higher education to adapt to ongoing transitions. To capture these nuanced dynamics, data were collected through individual interviews and participant photography using photo-narrative methodology. Eight participants, all mid-level student affairs professionals employed at a public research university in the Rocky Mountain region of the United States, completed a total of 15 interviews and submitted 53 photos for the study.

The data were analyzed using narrative, thematic, and symbolic methods. Findings revealed four key themes: compensation challenges, the dynamics of coworker relationships, the need for flexibility in role management, and the impact of the office environment on well-being. These themes highlight the complexity of workplace transitions, marked by both challenges and opportunities for growth. The photo-narrative approach effectively captured these experiences, offering rich insights into the participants' professional journeys. The study highlights the resilience of higher education professionals and suggests the necessity of supportive policies and practices that acknowledge their unique workplace experiences.

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my family members who passed away during this process.

Helen Richter
(Grandmother)

Gale Richter
(Aunt)

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Introduction to the Study

Navigating the complexities of higher education, particularly in a student support role, can be challenging and emotionally draining. In the aftermath of the Coronavirus-19 Pandemic and the ensuing Great Resignation, universities and colleges face significant challenges in retaining skilled staff members due to burnout, inadequate compensation, and challenging work environments. As a result, many talented and devoted higher education professionals seek alternative career paths where their expertise is acknowledged and cherished. Those who remain find themselves in critical roles that form the foundation of the university system. Therefore, this research study aims to explore the experiences of student affairs professionals and identify strategies that can contribute to their success and well-being within their roles.

Background of the Problem

The Coronavirus-19 Pandemic

The Coronavirus-19 disease 2019, also known as *COVID-19*, is caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus and was discovered in December 2019 in Wuhan, China (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2023). Its arrival on the world stage marked a turning point. It rapidly became a global pandemic that significantly disrupted daily life, public health systems, economies, and various industries, including higher education. The unprecedented nature and scale of the crisis necessitated swift and adaptive responses from governments, institutions, and individuals alike, as they grappled with the far-reaching consequences of the pandemic.

The first suspected COVID-19 case on a college campus was identified on February 17, 2020 (Crawford et al., 2020). In response to the pandemic, higher education institutions had to rapidly switch to remote instruction and service delivery (Garret et al., 2020). While prioritizing safety during this period was essential, focusing on immediate response led to an emergency shift toward remote teaching rather than a purposeful transition to well-designed online learning environment (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020; Gelles et al., 2020; Murphy, 2020; Wang & Houdyshell, 2021).

Virtual Learning Challenges

Even though online learning was already growing in the US higher education system before the Coronavirus-19 Pandemic, 43-50% of undergraduate students had never taken an online course (Calhoun et al., 2017; Garrett et al., 2020; Means et al., 2020). Furthermore, faculty members without experience teaching online courses were forced to adapt to this new format (Johnson et al., 2020). Barriers to a successful transition to remote learning encompassed limited access to technology, inadequate instructor preparation, and the challenge of upholding a high-quality curriculum within this new setting (Al-Sholi et al., 2021).

The move to online learning highlighted existing disparities in access to technology, disproportionately impacting students from low-income backgrounds and marginalized communities (Bartolic et al., 2022). A notable 23% of students faced challenges with internet connectivity, a more acute problem among low-income students (Means et al., 2020). At a Hispanic-Serving Institution, only 79% of students had the optimal combination of smartphone plus laptop or desktop (Bell et al., 2022). This technology gap was more pronounced among first-generation, low-income, Black, and older students, many of whom had to share devices within their households. Students with physical and learning disabilities may have been

particularly disadvantaged, as they reported dissatisfaction with their institution's accessibility technology even before the pandemic (Educause Center for Analysis and Research, 2019). To address these issues, some colleges urged faculty to provide asynchronous courses and minimize internet requirements (Means et al., 2020).

Financial Strain

The pandemic created challenging financial conditions for educational institutions. Institutional budgets were already under strain due to decreased state funding (Mitchell, 2019). As colleges dealt with the need to fund Coronavirus-19 testing, personal protective equipment, and digital learning tools, they faced decreased revenue from enrollment and on-campus housing and services (Whitford, 2021). For instance, a study involving 271 higher education business officers revealed that each institution faced unanticipated budget costs ranging from 2 to 10 million dollars because of the Coronavirus-19 Pandemic (Lederman, 2020). In 2020, the president of the American Council on Education wrote a letter to Congress, estimating that the collective expenses of colleges and universities in the United States in response to the Coronavirus-19 Pandemic had exceeded $120 billion (Mitchell, 2020). These costs, in turn, forced many institutions to make difficult decisions, such as cutting programs and reducing staff.

Isolation and Loneliness

The transition to remote work during the Coronavirus-19 Pandemic has profoundly impacted professional relationships, highlighting significant issues of isolation and loneliness. The abrupt shift to teleworking resulted in employees feeling isolated and disconnected (Shipman et al., 2023). Moreover, the Coronavirus-19 Pandemic lockdowns not only intensified loneliness but also widened the "loneliness gap" between social groups (Patulny & Bower, 2022). This gap was most pronounced in individuals with physical disabilities, lower incomes, or

fewer strong pre-Coronavirus-19 Pandemic social ties, leading to higher levels of persistent loneliness during and after lockdown. The pandemic's impact on social interactions was substantial and uneven, with increased reliance on digital communication failing to adequately replace lost physical contact.

This situation of heightened work-related loneliness can lead to emotional exhaustion and a disrupted work-life balance (Becker et al., 2022). However, increased job control can help mitigate these negative effects. *Job control*, or the autonomy employees have in their work, can counteract the adverse impacts of loneliness. Moreover, Bareket-Bojmel et al. (2023) challenge the notion that remote work inherently reduces employee engagement. Their research suggests that fostering hope is crucial for maintaining job engagement, particularly among those experiencing high levels of loneliness. This insight highlights the need to address emotional factors such as loneliness and hope in order to support employee engagement in remote work settings.

Faculty Well-Being

The consequences of campus closures were also felt deeply by faculty members as they struggled in their roles as educators, researchers, and mentors. The pandemic led to greater stress, hopelessness, anger, and grief among these faculty members (Chronicle of Higher Education, 2020). They also faced increased caregiving responsibilities, heavier workloads, a decline in work-life balance, and a longing for the personal aspect of face-to-face teaching. The pandemic may have had a disproportionate impact on women academics, as it exacerbated pre-existing barriers such as patriarchal institutional cultures, a lack of women mentors, gendered domestic labor resulting in competing family responsibilities, and implicit biases in recruitment, research funding allocation, peer review outcomes, and citation numbers (Gabster et al., 2020;

Howe-Walsh & Turnbull, 2016). These challenges led to many faculty members reconsidering their career paths, with over one-third contemplating leaving higher education altogether (Chronicle of Higher Education, 2020). The loss of experienced faculty may lead to a shortage of educators, impacting students' learning experiences and institutions' ability to maintain high academic standards.

Staff Well-Being

During the pandemic, professionals in higher education faced increased caregiving responsibilities, job losses, and increased work demands (Flaherty, 2020). The closure of schools and daycare centers disproportionately impacted women, often limiting their ability to work full-time (Ellis, 2021). This issue was especially pronounced in student affairs, a sector where women constitute a majority of 71%, compared to 58% in the broader field of higher education (Pritchard & McChesney, 2018). These professionals in student affairs faced an increased risk of burnout due to a combination of factors: elevated workloads stemming from staff furloughs or layoffs, the pressure of constant availability during remote work, and a general perception that financial concerns were being prioritized over the well-being of employees (Ellis, 2021; Winfield & Paris, 2022). Even though the work-life conflict had been a significant cause of attrition in student affairs before the pandemic (Marshall et al., 2016), these problems became more prominent, leading to physical and mental health declines among professionals (Winfield & Paris, 2022).

Student Well-Being

As people worldwide quarantined at home to follow social distancing guidelines, they confronted challenges such as increased caregiving responsibilities and mental health concerns including substance abuse, domestic abuse, anxiety, and depression (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020).

The global collective trauma from the Coronavirus-19 Pandemic further intensified feelings of isolation (Malone et al., 2020). Consequently, students were confused by communication from faculty and staff, likely due to the evolving knowledge base and uncertainties surrounding the Coronavirus-19 Pandemic (Gelles et al., 2020). The pandemic intensified mental health issues for many students as they grappled with stress, anxiety, and isolation from remote learning and uncertainty about the future (Means et al., 2020). The increased prevalence of mental health issues among students has led to a greater need for mental health services and a call for institutions to prioritize the well-being of their students and employees (Abrams, 2022).

Double Pandemic

Furthermore, the pandemic exposed and exacerbated existing health, economic, and social disparities that marginalized communities face, including higher rates of COVID-19 infections, hospitalizations, and deaths (Cokley et al., 2021). Simultaneously, the killings of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and others, along with the rise in anti-Asian hate crimes, highlighted the systemic racism and inequality that people of color continue to face in the United States (Graham et al., 2020). The overlapping impacts of the Coronavirus-19 Pandemic and the ongoing systemic racism and discrimination experienced by communities of color is called the *double pandemic* (Addo, 2020). Theopia Jackson, the president of the Association of Black Psychologists, said, “Every institution in America is born from the blood of white supremacist ideology and capitalism—and that’s the disease” (Abrams, 2020, p. 20).

Moreover, 2020 brought a *third pandemic* to the Rocky Mountain region due to wildfires. Wildfires can have far-reaching and long-lasting negative impacts on the environment, public health, and the economy. Wildfire smoke may have exacerbated COVID-19 cases and deaths, as it can compromise respiratory function and weaken the immune system (Zhou et al., 2021). For

residents of this region, the wildfires compounded the collective trauma they were already experiencing.

The Great Resignation

The ongoing stress and uncertainty brought on by the pandemic led to the *Great Resignation* (Klotz, 2021), a large wave of retirements and resignations. Unprecedented numbers of Americans were leaving their jobs, leading to over 11 million job vacancies, which surpassed the 8.4 million unemployed workers (Zhongming et al., 2021). A study conducted by the professional association of Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education (NASPA, 2022) revealed that about one-third of respondents were uncertain about remaining in the field of student affairs, and 25% were unsure if they would recommend a career in this area. Another study discovered that among the 37% of student affairs professionals actively seeking new employment, 19% were exclusively looking for opportunities outside of higher education (Southern Association for College Student Affairs, 2022). The *Facebook group*, "Expatriates of Student Affairs," was established for members to exchange resources and thoughts on departing from student affairs (Expatriates of Student Affairs, n.d.). The group has grown to over 26,000 members as of December 2023.

As the Great Resignation continues, many professional staff in higher education are re-examining their relationship with work (McClure, 2021). When confronted with mortality and uncertainty, it is common for individuals to reassess their priorities and values (Cox et al., 2021). This re-examination includes considering the trade-offs between work and personal life, re-evaluating job satisfaction, and exploring new career paths or work arrangements, such as remote work or flexible schedules. As a result, institutions should consider adopting more employee-centric practices that focus on work-life balance, job security, and personal well-being.

While many resignations occurred, not everyone may have the option to leave, especially women and people of color (Bauman, 2021; Howe-Walsh & Turnbull, 2016; Okello, 2021). Systemic barriers, financial constraints, and limited opportunities in the job market can make it more difficult for these individuals to find alternative employment, leading to a potential increase in workplace dissatisfaction and stress among those unable to leave their current jobs. Furthermore, employees in areas with staff vacancies often experience increased workloads from absorbing the responsibilities of the vacant position(s). According to the NASPA report (2022), respondents anticipated an increase in their responsibilities over the next five years in the areas of online services (e.g., advising, orientation, career services), online student communications (e.g., email, social media, SMS text, chat bots), and crisis management. As these responsibilities grow, higher education leaders must address the potential for burnout by implementing effective strategies for workload redistribution.

Declining Enrollment

Colleges and universities have been witnessing a gradual decrease in enrollment numbers due to factors such as increasing education costs, changing job market demands, less return on investment, and the growth of alternative education pathways like online learning and vocational training (NASPA, 2022). While this downward trend slowed in 2022, the population of college-age individuals is projected to drop by 15% between 2025 and 2029 (Copley & Douthett, 2020). This occurrence, known as the *enrollment cliff*, is attributed to demographic changes like declining birth rates and an aging population, leading to fewer students pursuing higher education (NASPA, 2022). The approaching enrollment cliff highlights the need for higher education institutions to cut expenses while preserving essential functions. At the same time, a significant majority (88%) of student affairs staff cite uncompetitive pay as a factor contributing

to employees leaving student affairs (NASPA, 2022). Considering these challenges, higher education institutions must adapt and innovate to remain sustainable and continue providing valuable educational experiences for future generations.

Positive Impacts of the Coronavirus-19 Pandemic on Higher Education

While the pandemic has been an unprecedented challenge, it has also served as a catalyst for change and innovation in higher education, prompting institutions to rethink their approach to teaching, learning, and resource allocation. First, new ways to connect people, particularly in pedagogy and education, have emerged. Virtual options have expanded access for various demographics, such as students with disabilities, those living in rural areas, students with caregiving responsibilities, military personnel, and students working full-time (Renes, 2015). Providing required courses online increases the probability of successful 4-year graduation and slightly reduces the time-to-degree (Fischer et al., 2021). Blended learning approaches, which combine online coursework with face-to-face sessions, yield similar learning outcomes as traditional classroom learning (Lapitan Jr. et al., 2021; Müller & Mildenberger, 2021). Given the promising outcomes of online or blended learning, future studies should examine the effectiveness of providing student services through digital platforms, particularly as student affairs professionals may adopt remote or hybrid work arrangements.

The pandemic has revealed the potential for more flexible and hybrid work arrangements, which could transform how student affairs professionals operate in the post-pandemic era. These flexible work setups can benefit student affairs professionals, such as reduced commuting time and improved work-life balance. In a recent study (International Work Group, 2023), 45% of respondents indicated they would contemplate changing jobs if required to work full-time in the office, and 61% expressed interest only in hybrid roles during a job search. This shift toward

more flexible work arrangements is particularly relevant when considering the importance of retaining student affairs professionals.

Problem Statement

The Coronavirus-19 Pandemic transformed the landscape of higher education. At the same time, higher education is slow to adapt. Even before the pandemic, *mid-level student affairs professionals* were grappling with burnout and attrition (Marshall et al., 2016). As their responsibilities increase and resources decrease, student affairs professionals deserve to work in environments that prioritize their well-being.

The problem framing this research study is the impact of the Coronavirus-19 Pandemic on mid-level student affairs professionals, particularly in terms of their well-being, burnout, and attrition. Examining the experiences of mid-level student affairs professionals in this unique context can provide valuable insights into the challenges and opportunities that emerged after the pandemic. This research will contribute to and inform the work of higher education leaders, ensuring better support for these professionals in the future.

Significance of the Study

This study is significant to the field of student affairs because it centers on the experiences and well-being of student affairs professionals. While discussions tend to focus on student success and retention, there is a lack of literature on the proactive retention efforts of student affairs professionals. When adequate support is provided to these professionals, it ultimately results in student affairs departments that can better serve their students.

Additionally, this discussion highlights the importance of promoting a culture of wellness on campus. Rather than placing the responsibility on individuals to practice self-care or increase their resilience, institutions should recognize and address the underlying causes of burnout. A

culture change will only occur when the entire campus community is responsible for creating change, ultimately leading to a healthier work environment for all.

Finally, this discussion will help the field of student affairs prepare for future transitions. The Coronavirus-19 Pandemic brought about significant changes, such as the shift to remote education. However, these transitions did not end. As higher education faces challenges like budget cuts, restructuring, the Great Resignation, and the approaching enrollment cliff, the invaluable work of student affairs professionals must be recognized and protected. Higher education leaders must explore innovative ways to support and retain these professionals, ensuring the continued success and stability of their institutions and students amidst constantly evolving circumstances.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to examine the narratives of mid-level, higher education professionals as they navigate workplace transitions. This exploration will enhance the understanding of how this critical workforce has been impacted by transitions. By analyzing their experiences, the study seeks to uncover the resilience and adaptability of these professionals in the face of evolving job roles and institutional dynamics. These insights can help higher education leaders make informed decisions regarding policies, resources, and support structures for student affairs professionals. Furthermore, this research contributes to the current body of knowledge on the experiences of student affairs professionals, providing recommendations for future research.

Research Questions

One central research question guides this study, drawing upon insights from existing literature, theoretical viewpoints, my epistemological foundation, and my personal experiences:

Q1 How do mid-level, higher education professionals make meaning of their experiences as they navigate workplace transitions?

This research question is intentionally broad and open-ended. Supplementary questions include:

Q1a How do mid-level, higher education professionals experience burnout while navigating workplace transitions?

Q1b How do mid-level, higher education professionals experience turnover intentions as they navigate transitions?

Q1c Which support systems are helpful for mid-level, higher education professionals while navigating workplace transitions?

These questions explore the difficulties professionals encounter during transitions, such as adapting to new roles, dealing with uncertainty, and managing relationships with colleagues and supervisors. The perceived effectiveness of various support systems, including institutional resources, mentoring, peer networks, and professional development opportunities, will also be explored.

In the current study, the employed inductive research method involves collecting data first and subsequently identifying patterns and themes from it (Creswell, 2003). As a result, new questions may arise based on the data collected, participants' responses, or the evolving understanding of the phenomenon being studied. Nevertheless, these additional questions will contribute to fulfilling the research purpose.

Overview of the Research Study

Framed in the interpretivist paradigm, I designed a photo-narrative qualitative study to explore the research questions. This study is guided by the theoretical framework of *ambiguous loss*, a concept developed by Boss (1999, 2006), which describes situations where there is a lack of closure or a clear understanding in relation to loss. This framework is particularly relevant in understanding the complex emotional and psychological experiences of individuals facing losses

that are unclear or unresolved, such as those often encountered in the context of the Coronavirus-19 Pandemic and the Great Resignation.

The study took place at a public research university in the Rocky Mountain region of the United States. The study's participants were mid-level, full-time student affairs professionals. Data were gathered through individual interviews and participant-generated photographs. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis (Riessman, 2008) and symbolic analysis (Müller, 2011). The technique of crystallization was used to interweave data collection and analysis, aiming to enhance the depth and breadth of understanding by viewing the data from multiple angles (Ellingson, 2009). This multifaceted approach ensures a comprehensive exploration of the experiences and perspectives of the participants. Criteria for rigor, including trustworthiness and authenticity, enhance the quality of the study (Lincoln & Guba, 2013).

Researcher Positionality

In qualitative research, the relationship between the researcher and the researched is a fundamental aspect of the research process (Jones et al., 2014). My voice, story, and experiences are connected to the research, influencing the collection and interpretation of the data. Therefore, in this section, I will explore my *positionality* and how it may affect my approach to the research study.

As part of the data collection process, participants were asked to submit photographs related to their workplace transitions. To further engage with the data, I contributed photographs as well. While not analyzed within the scope of this study, my photographs are included in this section to provide additional context to my positionality.

My academic and professional journey has been marked by significant transitions. After completing a master's degree in clinical psychology, I moved to Bismarck, ND and began

working at the University of Mary's Student Success Center. Eventually, I became an academic advisor and later led the student disability program.

I was accepted into a counseling psychology Ph.D. program at the University of Northern Colorado but switched my major to higher education and student affairs leadership when I realized the former was not a good fit. Over five years, I earned my master's degree, worked in two distinct student affairs roles, and participated in two distinct Ph.D. programs.

In my doctoral studies, I took on assistantships in disability services and then in Academic Community Engagement (ACE). After an extensive job search, I transitioned to a full-time, temporary role in disability services in Fall 2020. Around the same time, ACE was essentially dissolved due to the university's financial challenges, including a pre-pandemic $10 million budget deficit (Wenger, 2020).

My full-time role was initially fully virtual due to the pandemic (refer to Figure 1 for my home workspace).

Figure 1

Melissa's Photograph of Her Home Workspace

While I enjoyed spending more time with my dog, Timmy (Figure 2), it was challenging to build connections with my coworkers without any in-person contact.

Figure 2

Melissa's Photograph of Her Dog in the Dual-Purpose Guest Bedroom and Office

This role later transitioned to a hybrid format and became permanent. However, due to staffing shortages and heightened responsibilities, I experienced burnout. I was overworked and neglected my physical and mental well-being. I also began to feel that burnout was impacting my work. This strain began to manifest in cynicism toward students, caregivers, faculty, and staff.

I then transitioned to a new role as a re-engagement coordinator, funded by a Coronavirus-19 Pandemic stimulus grant (refer to Figure 3 for my in-person workspace).

Figure 3

Melissa's In-Person Workspace

My tenure here saw numerous changes, including organizational restructuring and multiple changes in supervision. Simultaneously, my doctoral program experienced several shifts. I have had five different research advisors due to unexpected departures, and none of the faculty from when I started the program remained at UNC.

For me, the most challenging part of navigating these transitions is the lack of closure. The constant shifts in my work and education left me with a lingering sense of uncertainty. The concept of ambiguous loss (Boss, 1999, 2006) aptly captures my experience, as the inability to fully grieve and find closure for these losses has profoundly influenced my journey.

During this research study, my perspective may be influenced by my own experiences of burnout and transitions. I was interested in hearing and listening to the stories of the participants and examining not only the challenges they encountered but also the joys they found. Applying my personal practice of mindfulness, I aimed to be fully present and engaged in the study and

open to any findings, whether expected or unexpected. Exploring the meaningful transitions of student affairs professionals provided valuable insights and enriched my understanding.

Chapter Summary

This chapter introduced the current study by outlining the background context, including the impacts of the Coronavirus-19 Pandemic, the Great Resignation, and declining student enrollment. The problem statement highlights the challenges faced by student affairs professionals, specifically regarding their well-being, burnout, and attrition. This study holds significance because it focuses on the well-being of student affairs professionals and aims to help the field prepare for future transitions. The purpose of this study is to explore the narratives of mid-level, higher education professionals as they navigate workplace transitions. Consequently, the central research question is: How do mid-level, higher education professionals make meaning of their experiences as they navigate workplace transitions? An overview of the research study briefly describes the methodology and approach used to gather and analyze data. The researcher's positionality section discusses how my personal experiences and biases may impact the study's findings and interpretation. This chapter lays the foundation for an in-depth examination of student affairs professionals' experiences amid the changing landscape of higher education.

Overview of the Dissertation

This dissertation is organized into five chapters. Chapter I introduces the significance, purpose, and research questions of the study and provides essential background context. Chapter II provides an extensive review and analysis of relevant literature. Chapter III presents the research design, including the epistemological paradigm, methodology, methods, criteria for rigor, and ethical considerations. Chapter IV presents the findings through participant vignettes, themes, and motifs. Chapter V includes a discussion on the findings and recommendations for

practice and research. After the references list, the appendices contain definitions of terms (Appendix A), identified in the manuscript using italics. The other appendices contain the Institutional Review Board approval letter (Appendix B), recruitment materials (Appendices C-F), data collection materials, participant photographs (Appendices L-AA), and photograph descriptions (Appendix BB).

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Introduction

Higher education institutions play a critical role in shaping the future of individuals and society. The success of these institutions largely depends on the effectiveness of their administration, particularly the mid-level, higher education student affairs professionals who bridge the gap between senior leadership and frontline staff. In recent years, a growing body of research has highlighted the challenges faced by mid-level administrators, including burnout and attrition. These challenges can impede their well-being and performance, ultimately affecting the success of the students they serve. The goal of this literature review is to provide a comprehensive analysis of the existing research on the challenges faced by mid-level student affairs professionals, which will serve as the basis for this study.

The review is organized into seven sections, each addressing a specific aspect of the student affairs professionals' work life. The first section, Campus Ecology, provides an overview of campus ecology theory and examines its potential impact on college staff. The second section, *Student Affairs,* discusses the roles and responsibilities of mid-level administrators in managing student affairs and the inherent complexities involved in this area. The third section, *Attrition*, explores the factors contributing to high attrition rates among these professionals and the implications for higher education institutions. The fourth section, *Retention of Mid-Level Administrators*, synthesizes the research on strategies for retaining these valuable employees and mitigating the adverse effects of attrition. The fifth section, *Burnout,* discusses the prevalence of

burnout among mid-level administrators and the factors contributing to this phenomenon. The sixth section, *Transitions,* focuses on the challenges and opportunities related to career transitions within and out of higher education administration. In recognition of the importance of personal well-being for mid-level administrators, the seventh section, *Self-Care and Community-Care,* discusses the research on promoting self-care and building supportive professional communities. Finally, *Gaps in the Literature* are identified with proposals for future research that can further our understanding of the challenges faced by mid-level student affairs professionals.

Campus Ecology

Campus ecology refers to the comprehensive and interactive environment of a college or university, encompassing not just the physical aspects of the campus—such as buildings, spaces, and natural environments—but also the social, cultural, and psychological environments (Renn & Patton, 2011). Campus ecology also considers how individuals and groups interact and are impacted by these various environments. The study of campus ecology is crucial in understanding and improving educational experiences, as it considers the holistic context in which learning and development occur.

The physical dimension of campus ecology, emphasizing campus design and space, including aspects like climate, architecture, density of students, and usage of space, plays a critical role in sending messages of inclusion or exclusion to both students and staff (Strange & Banning, 2001). For college staff, the physical architecture and the allocation of space are not just elements of their working environment; they also reflect the institution's values and priorities. The physical environment of a campus can either foster a sense of community and support for the staff or create a feeling of exclusion and disconnection, directly impacting their effectiveness and well-being.

Student Affairs

The story of *student affairs* is integral to understanding its impact on higher education. This field, a distinct professional area within *higher education*, focuses on the growth and development of college students (NASPA, n.d.). Student affairs professionals work in colleges and universities, typically operating outside the classroom through student support services with the exception of teaching first-year seminar courses. From deans of students to student personnel to student development, these professionals have adapted their roles to meet the changing needs of the students they serve (Hevel, 2016). Whether these new needs arose from events that impacted the entire country or the increasingly complex structure of the higher education system, they helped define the modern work and roles of student affairs professionals.

The publication of the 'Student Personnel Point of View' in 1937 by the American Council on Education marked a significant milestone in the evolution of the student affairs profession (American Council on Education, 1937). This document underscored the importance of holistic student development, encompassing both academic and extracurricular aspects. While academic affairs staff are responsible for facilitating student learning and experiences within the classroom, student affairs staff provide support services, such as advising and advocacy, that aid students in achieving their educational objectives (Long, 2012). The purpose of the student affairs profession has continued to evolve as students become more varied in their capabilities, ages, goals, and ethnic, racial, and cultural backgrounds (Coomes & Gerda, 2016; National Center for Education Statistics, 2022).

Student affairs professionals work in different departments depending on the institutional structure. These departments may include Residential Life, Dean of Students, Student Activities, Counseling, Career Services, Health Services, and other non-academic departments that are

essential to the success of the institution's daily operations. Student affairs professionals' role in the institution is vital as they influence students' growth and development (Marshall et al., 2016). For instance, those in Residential Life create a supportive living environment that fosters social skills and independence. In Career Services, the staff guides students in aligning their academic pursuits with career aspirations, offering tools for job searches and interview preparation. In Counseling and Health Services, professionals support students' mental and physical well-being, which is fundamental for their overall success. Additionally, the Student Activities office provides opportunities for leadership development and community engagement, enhancing students' social and organizational skills. The core purpose of student affairs has developed into emphasizing the student's holistic growth, extending beyond the educational classroom experience (Coomes & Gerda, 2016). Short-term goals and strategies typically focus on ensuring students strive during their college years and graduate, while long-term goals may include career development, critical thinking, and community engagement (Coomes & Gerda, 2016). In essence, student affairs professionals assist college students in maximizing their college experience.

Student affairs professionals intentionally create programs, services, and experiences that develop and educate the whole student. Long (2012) wrote, "Educating the whole student remains the foundation of the profession, and collaboration with faculty and others will become increasingly paramount as student affairs professionals seek to understand and foster student learning in new and innovative directions" (p. 35). By working together, academic affairs professionals and student affairs professionals can integrate academic and non-academic activities to foster a holistic approach to student success and increase student retention.

To support the students they serve, student affairs professionals manage a diverse workload of counseling, advising, coordinating large events, performing assessments, tracking retention outcomes, and dealing with crises (Daut, 2016; Tull, 2014; Wilk, 2016). In the past two to three decades, the field of student affairs has increasingly imposed excessive workloads on its professionals, including the expectation of working overtime and during evenings and weekends (Tull, 2014). As a result, student affairs professionals are experiencing increased levels of stress, job dissatisfaction, and burnout resulting in high job attrition (Dinise-Halter, 2017; Marshall et al., 2016; Mullen et al., 2018; Silver & Jakeman, 2014; Tull, 2014; Wilk, 2016). Treadwell and O'Grady (2019) asserted, "It is enormously stressful for our loved ones and us. But the future of higher education rests with our work toward students' holistic well-being (and staff). Our challenge, then, becomes doing the same for ourselves" (p. 402).

Attrition

Attrition occurs when an employee voluntarily leaves for a different position (Naifeh & Kearney, 2021). *Turnover intention*, the cognitive shift a person makes when they start to detach from a place of employment, is the precursor of attrition (Burris et al., 2008). Given this dynamic, higher education institutions, facing limited and decreasing resources, must prioritize employee retention (Archibald & Feldman, 2010).

The current economic crisis due to the coronavirus pandemic has put intense pressure on university budgets and forced institutional leaders to make challenging choices regarding resource allocation (Anderson et al., 2020). For example, institutional leaders may keep certain positions vacant to benefit from salary savings or implement budget reductions. Vacant positions can cause an increased workload for the existing employees as they absorb the tasks of those

who departed. Moreover, if the institution is neither filling vacant positions nor creating new roles, it is limiting opportunities for growth for its existing employees.

For decades, the student affairs profession has struggled with higher attrition rates than other functional areas within higher education (Rosser & Javinar, 2003). The attrition rate in the field ranges from 40-60% within the first five years of employment (Marshall et al., 2016; Renn & Hodges, 2007). Even before entering the field, master's students in student affairs programs consider leaving before graduating due to economic concerns, distance from an institutional mission, the devaluation of student affairs work, financial concerns, and mental health (Silver & Jakeman, 2014). Those who intended to leave described the field as a "devalued profession, lacking institutional support and legitimacy" (Silver & Jakeman, 2014, p. 176). They perceived student affairs as having less value when they encountered difficulties obtaining institutional resources for their offices or programs (Silver & Jakeman, 2014, 2014).

While attrition in organizations should be expected as employees seek career advancements or new opportunities, elevated voluntary attrition rates are problematic to organizations (Park & Shaw, 2013). Recruitment, hiring, and training costs are high during turnover transitions, with estimates of 50-100% of an employee's annual salary (Marsden, 2016; Marshall et al., 2016). Furthermore, Renn and Hodges (2007) stated that "once individuals and institutions have invested substantial resources into…job searches, to lose someone because of a poor institutional or vocational fit, dissatisfaction with a job, or some other reason may be seen as a loss for all" (p.370). In addition to the direct costs of separation and replacement, the indirect losses include the hours of training, supervision, and guidance provided by graduate programs and supervisors (Allen et al., 2010; Tull et al., 2009).

Quality higher education institutions are created and sustained by their employees (Mather et al., 2009). Employees are the core of student affairs because these professionals perform a wide variety of tasks that are integral to student satisfaction and success (Kuk & Banning, 2009). Therefore, understanding the reasons that compel these professionals to leave must become the focal point to ensure student success and the achievement of the institutional mission.

The most consistently named reasons why higher education student affairs professionals leave their positions include inadequate supervision, lack of mentorship, long hours, non-competitive salaries, low job satisfaction, stressful conditions, and burnout (Boehman, 2007; Buchanan, 2012; Lorden, 1998; Mullen et al., 2018; Rosser, 2004; Rosser & Javinar, 2003). The culture of student affairs work promotes working long and irregular schedules, being overwhelmed by duties, increased workloads due to working with diminished financial and human resources, as well as a professional culture that discourages employees from utilizing initiatives for work-life balance (Brewer & Clippard, 2002; Tarver et al., 1999). In fact, the conflict between personal and professional domains is one of the chief factors in departure and dissatisfaction in the profession (Lagana, 2007; Lorden 1998; Rosser & Javinar, 2003; Volkwein & Zhou, 2003).

Adding a contemporary dimension to this understanding, Artale (2020) introduced the concept of *work-life flexstyle* to the literature in student affairs. This concept highlights the methods individuals use to balance their personal and professional lives. The compatibility of an individual's preferred work-life flexstyle with their work environment significantly impacts job satisfaction and performance (Kossek & Lautsch, 2008). Satisfaction and performance are higher when individuals have greater control over the size of their work role boundary, a concept known

as *boundary control* (Kossek et al., 2023). This control allows for a better balance of work and nonwork demands. Although there wasn't a direct relationship between flexstyle and turnover intention, Artale (2020) found that individuals with less control over their work-life boundaries, such as being unable to disconnect from work emails or calls outside of office hours, were more inclined to consider leaving their jobs. These challenges are exacerbated by the increased use of smart technology, which often blurs the line between work and personal life, and the escalating pressures within student affairs divisions.

While these studies' findings help illuminate why student affairs professionals are leaving the field, they do not explain the reasons others are staying. Furthermore, these studies do not explore why student affairs professionals continue to leave the field in the wake of the Great Resignation.

Retention of Mid-Level Administrators

Much of the literature about the attrition of student affairs professionals is focused on new student affairs professionals. Prior research has extensively explored high turnover rates among new professionals utilizing factors like socialization, morale, and job satisfaction (Hornak et al., 2016; Lorden, 1998; Rosser & Javinar, 2003; Tull, 2006). However, the literature on why student affairs professionals stay in the field is scarce. This gap in literature is even more significant regarding why specific groups, like mid-level student affairs professionals, opt to stay in the field.

Mid-level student affairs professionals are integral to the institution's mission and constitute higher education institutions' most extensive group of administrators (Mather et al., 2009; Rosser, 2000). For this study, a mid-level professional refers to someone that has a bachelor's or master's degree in student affairs or a related field, and at least two years post-

graduate experience in student affairs. The definition does not include senior-level or executive-level administrators (e.g., executive director, assistant or associate vice president, vice president, dean) at their institution. While many of these experienced professionals are committed to the profession, they face unique challenges in their roles.

A review of the existing literature suggests that the reasons midlevel student affairs professionals opt to leave the field include: the lack of a voice (Marshall et al., 2016), lack of career development and advancement opportunities (Nasser, 2016), lack of recognition for their contributions (Johnsrud et al., 2000; Rosser, 2004), and lack of work-life balance (Mullen, 2018). Furthermore, even though leadership skills are the most critical attributes for successful mid-level student affairs professionals (Mather et al., 2009), these leaders receive minimal or no training to prepare them for the challenges of their roles (Adey & Jones, 1998). As more time is spent working at the institution, mid-level practitioners feel less valued for their work, making them less committed to the work (Rosser & Javinar, 2003). Their viewpoint on the value of work resonates with the perceptions of student affairs graduate students who believe their field is undervalued (Silver & Jakeman, 2014).

Burnout

Burnout has been studied in various contexts (e.g., Anderson, 2021; Maslach, 2003; Maslach & Leiter, 2008; Schaufeli et al., 2009) and has been associated with decreased job satisfaction among higher education professionals (Brewer & Clippard, 2002). Burnout results from chronic workplace stress characterized by exhaustion, negative feelings towards one's job, and lack of accomplishment (World Health Organization, 2019). Although burnout was initially identified in human services professions, it is now acknowledged to be a potential issue in any

workplace domain (Schaufeli et al., 2009). Burnout has been associated with reduced job satisfaction among higher education professionals (Brewer & Clippard, 2002).

Herbert Freudenberger, an American psychologist, is credited with popularizing the term *burnout* (Michel, 2016). Freudenberger (1974) defined burnout as a sense of emotional exhaustion, lack of motivation, and cynicism, observed initially among volunteer social workers. This concept became particularly relevant during the early 1960s with the initiation of The War on Poverty in the United States. This war on poverty led to the creation and administration of various social programs and services, such as educational initiatives, job training, healthcare services, and community development projects, aimed at alleviating poverty (Schaufeli et al., 2009). These programs required a significant number of professionals for effective implementation. This need intersected with a rise in social awareness and activism during the 1960s and 1970s. Movements like the Civil Rights Movement, anti-Vietnam War protests, and the Women's Liberation Movement fueled a surge in young, idealistic individuals entering human services professions (Altbach, 1979). Many of these professions were closely linked to higher education institutions, as universities became hubs for social change and training grounds for these new professionals. However, as these human services professionals, including those in educational settings, faced the immense challenges of eradicating poverty and enacting social change, they often grew disillusioned. Their frustrated idealism, stemming from the harsh realities versus their initial aspirations, became a defining feature of burnout, eventually manifesting as cynicism (Schaufeli, 2017).

Building upon Freudenberger's foundation, in the mid-1970s, Christina Maslach conducted a series of interviews with service employees to investigate the emerging phenomenon of burnout (Maslach, 1978). Maslach was interested in understanding how social workers cope

with difficult and complex situations while remaining detached from those they support. However, Maslach discovered that social workers struggled with emotional exhaustion and reduced feelings of professional competency due to their inability to separate their work experiences from their personal lives, resulting in negative feelings towards their clients and decreased professional ability (Maslach & Jackson, 1981). “Much like symptoms of depression, burnout was asphyxiating people’s ambitions, idealism, and sense of worth” (Michel, 2016, para. 4). Maslach and Jackson (1981) broadened the definition of burnout to “a syndrome of emotional exhaustion and cynicism that frequently occurs among individuals who do ‘people work’ of some kind” (p. 99).

Malach and Jackson (1981) identified three distinct dimensions of burnout particularly relevant in the high-pressure environment of higher education. First, *emotional exhaustion* refers to feelings of being emotionally drained and depleted of emotional resources, often observed in higher ed professionals who face continuous demands from students, faculty, and administrative tasks. Second, *depersonalization*, also known as cynicism, involves developing a detached, indifferent, or cynical attitude towards one's work, often as a self-protective mechanism. In higher education, this dimension might manifest as a disengaged attitude towards students or colleagues, viewing them impersonally or as sources of stress rather than as individuals with unique needs and contributions. Lastly, *reduced personal accomplishment*, also known as lack of self-efficacy, is characterized by a decline in feelings of competence and successful achievement in one's work. For higher education professionals, this dimension may appear as a sense of inadequacy in teaching, research, or administrative roles, doubting the impact of their work and their ability to make a difference. Together, these dimensions not only define the burnout

experience but also critically influence the overall well-being and effectiveness of professionals in higher education and student affairs.

Related Concepts

Stress

Often used interchangeably, the terms stress and burnout are similar but not interchangeable (Farber, 1984). Burnout is a consequence of persistent stress and occurs when individuals perceive that they can no longer adapt to the stressors in their lives (Shaw et al., 1981). Burnout differs from acute stress in that it is a more long-term and chronic experience that may result from repeated exposure to the same stressors over time (Schaufeli et al., 2009).

Compassion Fatigue

Compassion fatigue relates explicitly to the emotional toll of caring for others, particularly those experiencing significant emotional distress or trauma (Harr et al., 2014). Compassion fatigue can lead to emotional exhaustion, feelings of hopelessness, and a decreased ability to empathize with others (Cavanagh et al., 2020; Sinclair et al., 2017). While burnout can occur in any profession, compassion fatigue is typically associated with those in helping professions, such as nurses, social workers, and therapists, who are regularly exposed to others' trauma and suffering (Harr et al., 2014).

However, emerging perspectives challenge the notion of compassion fatigue, arguing that what fatigues is not compassion but empathy. Empathy, the ability to feel the emotions of others, can become overwhelmed, whereas compassion – the desire to alleviate another's suffering – does not deplete but rejuvenates caregivers by engaging different brain mechanisms related to reward and positive emotions (Dowling, 2018). This distinction emphasizes the importance of nurturing compassion to sustain those in caregiving roles.

Secondary Traumatic Stress

Secondary traumatic stress, also known as vicarious or secondary trauma, is the result of indirect exposure to trauma, typically through hearing about or witnessing the traumatic experiences of others (Molnar et al., 2017). The symptoms of secondary traumatic stress can resemble those experienced by individuals who have directly experienced trauma, including flashbacks, anxiety, and avoidance behaviors (Mordeno et al., 2017). While the terms *burnou*t, *compassion fatigue*, and *secondary traumatic stress* are often used interchangeably, some researchers define compassion fatigue as the combination of burnout and secondary traumatic stress (Adams et al., 2006; Bride et al., 2007; Newell & MacNeil, 2010; 2011).

Activist Burnout

Activist burnout is the process through which the accumulative stressors associated with activism wear away activists' physical and emotional well-being and sense of hope until they are forced to disengage from their activism at least temporarily (Rettig, 2006). Activist burnout is caused by various factors, including internal tensions within activist movements or organizations, threats of retaliation, and other conditions that impact the activists' health and hopefulness (Maslach and Gomes, 2006). Activist burnout can be exacerbated by the relentless demands of activist work, a lack of resources and support, and the feeling of being constantly overwhelmed by the enormity of the issues being addressed (Linder et al., 2019).

Racial Battle Fatigue

Individuals from racial and ethnic minority groups can experience physical and emotional exhaustion due to persistent exposure to racism, discrimination, and microaggressions, known as racial battle fatigue or racism-related stress (Smith et al., 2006). This exhaustion is linked to stereotype threat, which is the fear of being judged and treated according to a negative stereotype

about members of your group (Steele et al., 2002). Racial battle fatigue can lead to withdrawal or *John Henryism* (Massey & Fischer, 2005). This term describes the prolonged use of high-effort coping strategies in response to limited resources, inadequate support, and external obstacles, often to the detriment of one's own physical and mental health (James et al., 1983; James et al., 1984). The concept of John Henryism highlights the importance of addressing systemic barriers to success, such as racism and discrimination, rather than solely relying on individual effort and perseverance.

Burnout at Work

Leiter and Maslach (2003) developed a comprehensive model identifying six critical factors of workplace burnout: workload, control, reward, community, fairness, and values. Burnout occurs when employees' job demands intersect with their ability to cope with stress (Michel, 2016). Burnout becomes more profound when at least one of the six characteristics conflict with an individual and their job function. The Job Demands-Resources Model expands this idea, suggesting that burnout arises when employees perceive that workplace demands exceed the resources available to them (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). Thus, workplace demands alone do not necessarily lead to employee exhaustion. Sufficient resources, such as work climate, job autonomy, funding, social support, self-efficacy, optimism, and mindfulness, can act as buffers against demands (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Taylor & Millear, 2016).

Burnout in Helping Professions

Although burnout can occur in any profession (e.g., Hetland et al., 2007; Kang et al., 2010), burnout may be more prevalent in helping professions due to factors such as long working hours, high job demands, emotional labor, and exposure to traumatic events. Burnout rates are exceptionally high among healthcare workers (Norful et al., 2021), social workers (Lloyd et al.,

2002), mental health professionals (Lee et al., 2019), and teachers (García-Carmona et al., 2019). Emerging literature highlights burnout during the Coronavirus-19 Pandemic (e.g., Joshi & Sharma, 2020; Murat et al., 2021). Mental health professionals may have the unique experience of developing burnout while treating clients who are also experiencing burnout (Janeway, 2020).

Burnout in K-12 Education

Factors contributing to burnout in K-12 education include high workload, low autonomy, insufficient support from colleagues and administrators, lack of recognition or respect, and teacher-directed violence (Chang, 2009; García-Carmona et al., 2019; Peist et al., 2020). While research on burnout in this context mainly focuses on general classroom teachers, some studies have also examined burnout in special education teachers (e.g., Brunsting et al., 2014). Work-related stress is disproportionately high for teachers, making them more susceptible to burnout (Shernoff et al., 2011), leading to teacher attrition, teacher health issues, and adverse student outcomes (Herman et al., 2018; Madigan & Kim, 2021). The Coronavirus-19 Pandemic has further exacerbated teacher burnout due to limited resources, lack of administrative support, challenges related to remote teaching, and concerns regarding health safety in the school environment (Geraci et al., 2023).

Burnout in Higher Education

Research on burnout in higher education employees has primarily centered around faculty members, with potential risk factors including classroom-related stress, workload, lack of resources, poor student performance, negative interactions with colleagues or supervisors, personal characteristics such as low motivation and optimism, and stressors outside the workplace like family stressors and lack of support (Bates, 2012; Sabagh et al., 2018; Taylor & Frechette, 2022).

With the onset of the Coronavirus-19 Pandemic, faculty members experienced increased stressors such as emotional exhaustion, an increase in workload, the need to adapt to unfamiliar technology, an increase in student advisement and support, and a deterioration of work-life balance (Sacco & Kelly, 2021; Schmidt-Crawford et al., 2021). While research productivity has been shown to decrease burnout (Taylor & Frechette, 2022), social distancing measures, travel restrictions, and reduced funding due to the pandemic made it challenging for faculty members to conduct research (Kara, 2021; Wigginton et al., 2020). Insufficient research has been conducted on how burnout affects various appointments for higher education instructors (i.e., part-time or full-time, tenure-track or non-tenure-track, and permanent or short-term contract arrangements).

Extensive research has been conducted on student burnout. While academic workload has been identified as a possible cause of emotional exhaustion, the definition of workload can be subjective and thus, not a reliable indicator of burnout (Jacobs & Dodd, 2003). As students approach the end of the semester, especially during exam periods, they tend to experience higher levels of exhaustion and burnout, which can potentially carry over to the next semester (Law, 2010). Nevertheless, effectively managing academic demands can help reduce this exhaustion (Portoghese et al., 2018).

The Coronavirus-19 Pandemic had the unfortunate effect of amplifying the burnout effects on university students by significantly impacting their mental health, education, and daily routines (Chaturvedi et al., 2021; Cullen et al., 2020). The sudden shift to remote learning and the isolation resulting from lockdown measures disrupted traditional educational structures and social support systems. As a result, mental well-being and physical activity decreased, while perceived stress and sedentary time increased (Savage et al., 2020). The pandemic's

unprecedented nature imposed additional burdens on students, such as adapting to virtual learning platforms, coping with uncertainties about future academic and career prospects, and managing the stress of potential health risks to themselves and their loved ones. These multifaceted challenges not only strained students' coping mechanisms but also led to a significant alteration in their overall lifestyle, contributing to increased vulnerability to burnout during this period.

Although the lockdown period presented numerous challenges, an interesting development was observed post-lockdown: Salmela-Aro et al. (2022) found that student burnout peaked in April 2021, following the resumption of in-person instruction and activities. This peak in burnout could be attributed to several factors related to the transition back to in-person settings. First, the sudden shift from a remote to an in-person environment may have overwhelmed students as they rapidly adjusted to new schedules, social interactions, and learning methods. Additionally, the lingering anxiety and stress from the pandemic combined with the pressures of catching up academically and socially, likely contributed to heightened stress levels. Furthermore, the loss of the flexibility that remote learning offered may have played a role in escalating burnout. This complex interplay of factors suggests that the transition back to in-person university life, though a return to normalcy, brought its own set of challenges and stressors, culminating in increased burnout among students.

Burnout in Higher Education Student Affairs

The influx of professionals from nontraditional routes into the field of student affairs brings a wealth of diverse experiences and perspectives, but it can also lead to role conflict (Ward, 1995). These professionals, coming from fields like counseling, social work, or community engagement, often face a mismatch between their prior experiences and the

expectations in student affairs. For example, a counselor accustomed to one-on-one interactions may find the group dynamics and administrative responsibilities in student affairs challenging. Similarly, a social worker skilled in community-based interventions might struggle with the bureaucratic aspects or the broader scope of student affairs, which often extends beyond direct student support to include policy development and campus-wide programming. This disparity can lead to a period of adjustment where these professionals need to align their skills and understanding with the multifaceted demands of student affairs, a field that not only involves direct student support but also encompasses administrative, strategic, and sometimes political aspects within an educational institution. Furthermore, the culture and operational pace of student affairs, which may be different from their previous roles, can add to the challenge of adapting to this new professional environment.

In tandem with these adjustment challenges, the student affairs profession is recognized for providing extensive support to college students, often requiring round-the-clock availability (Bidner, 2017; Dubois & Mistretta, 2019). This aspect of the job, coupled with the demanding expectations, can lead to burnout among professionals (Marshall et al., 2016; Mullen et al., 2018). For example, roles in residence life frequently necessitate evening and weekend work to meet student needs, thereby extending beyond traditional job descriptions (Rubin & Moreno-Pardo, 2018; Wilk, 2016). The Coronavirus-19 Pandemic exemplified this, with added tasks like marking six-foot distances, monitoring temperatures, handing out personal protective equipment, and supplying meals to students in quarantine or isolation. Furthermore, the emotional labor inherent in managing student mental health and crisis situations often remains unrecognized, heightening the risk of burnout in these roles (Hoy & Nguyen, 2020; Lynch & Glass, 2020; Mullen et al., 2018; Preston et al., 2021). The tasks associated with advancing diversity, equity,

and inclusion initiatives also contribute to burnout, particularly due to the emotional toll they take on professionals, especially those who share the diverse identities they support. These initiatives often result in increased responsibilities without a commensurate increase in resources, further straining their capacities (Anderson, 2021). As a result, heightened stress levels and burnout in these roles have been linked to a higher likelihood of turnover intentions among student affairs professionals (Mullen et al., 2018).

The pervasive nature of such workplace conditions can significantly influence an individual's personal life. The quality of work-life directly correlates with well-being and quality of life, particularly for those who may experience compassion fatigue due to serving students (Chessman, 2021; Mudrak et al., 2018; Preston et al., 2021). This spillover effect can even extend to the family life of student affairs professionals. For instance, the children of these professionals are more likely to internalize their parents' "bad days" at work, indicating that the adverse effects of poor working conditions in student affairs are not confined to the professionals themselves but can also impact their families (Lehman & Krebs, 2018).

The challenging working conditions in higher education, particularly in student affairs, are often exacerbated by budget cuts, leading to a complex dynamic in how institutions respond to financial constraints. Staff may become disillusioned over time, especially when budget cuts repeatedly result in immediate measures like layoffs and furloughs instead of exploring cost-saving ideas within departments. Such reductions and furloughs often result in heightened expectations for the remaining staff, further contributing to job-related stress (Pelletier et al., 2015; Romano et al., 2010; Szekeres, 2006). This disillusionment can stem from a perception that more creative or less drastic financial solutions are overlooked in favor of quick fixes that have more immediate but potentially more negative long-term impactslike reduced staff morale

and increased workload for remaining employees (Romano et al., 2010). As these employees become increasingly disengaged and overwhelmed, they too become more likely to leave their positions, perpetuating a cycle of high turnover and continuous strain within the profession (Li & Guthrie, 2015).

Transitions

Organizational Changes

Universities today are increasingly undergoing organizational changes, marked by a shift away from traditional public state ownership and management structures towards models that resemble corporate entities. This transformation, known as the *corporatization of higher education,* involves embracing corporate funding, remodeling administrative structures, and adopting entrepreneurial approaches (Balzer, 2020; Cerver Romero et al., 2021; Gumport, 2019). A key aspect of this shift includes the implementation of corporate-style performance metrics for academic staff. These metrics often prioritize quantifiable outcomes such as publication rates, grant acquisition, and student evaluation scores, akin to performance indicators used in business environments (Lieberwitz, 2022). However, this approach can be incompatible with the traditional values and goals of higher education, which often emphasize intellectual exploration, academic freedom, and long-term educational development over immediate, measurable results. The pressure to meet these corporate-style metrics can lead to increased fatigue, anxiety, and job dissatisfaction among higher education employees (Kinman & Wray, 2020). The focus on quantifiable outcomes may not adequately capture the nuanced and complex nature of academic work, leading to a misalignment between the expectations of the corporate model and the realities of educational environments. This misalignment contributes to the diminished well-

being of employees, as they struggle to reconcile these competing demands and values within their professional roles.

Change Management

The change management process is a well-defined method for ensuring effective and sustainable change (Goyal & Patwardhan, 2018). It involves organizing, coordinating, and assessing transitions (Beşliu, 2018). In this regard, change is inevitable and necessary—to grow, organizations must shift from their current state to a desired state through change management (Galli, 2018).

Lewin's change management model (1947) is a foundational framework in organizational change theory, consisting of a three-step process: unfreezing the current state, changing to the new state, and refreezing the new state. *Unfreezing the current state* involves challenging the existing status quo, breaking down the old norms, and preparing the organization for the upcoming changes by creating awareness about the need and benefits of the change. *Changing to the new state* is the transition phase during which new behaviors, processes, or structures are introduced, learned, and adopted. This stage typically involves training, mentoring, and making adjustments along the way to implement the proposed change effectively. *Refreezing the new state* is the final step where the newly implemented changes are solidified, integrated into the organizational culture, and reinforced through positive feedback to ensure long-term stability.

Effective change relies on motivation, employee involvement, and adaptation support for impacted individuals (Galli, 2018). Motivation serves as the driving force that encourages individuals to embrace the changes, stemming from an understanding of the benefits of change, as well as the risks of not changing. Employee involvement, on the other hand, is critical in ensuring that those affected by the change are part of the decision-making process, shaping more

informed and effective changes. Lastly, providing adequate support for adaptation is crucial, as changes often can be stressful and challenging. This support may involve resources for learning new skills, psychological support to deal with stress or resistance, and clear communication about the process of change and its impacts. By understanding and implementing these principles, organizations can better navigate the challenges of change and foster long-term success.

School-To-Work Transition

Student affairs professionals experience many transitions in their work, beginning with the role transition from college student to full-time employee. Often, individuals in this field face a challenging adjustment period as they move from academic theory to practical application in their job roles. These challenges are particularly pronounced for those who enter student affairs with degrees in disciplines unrelated to the field (Fischer, 2013). They may struggle to reconcile their academic background with the practical demands and expectations of their new roles. The field of student affairs is unique in its openness to a variety of academic backgrounds and this diversity can enrich the field. At the same time, it also introduces complexity in terms of varying levels of preparedness and perspective among new professionals. This diversity can result in a mismatch between the theoretical knowledge of recent graduates, whether from undergraduate or master's programs, and the practical skills required in student affairs.

To navigate this complex transition successfully, individuals benefit from securing a job, excelling at work, and maintaining a positive outlook in their professional life (Ng & Feldman, 2007). Career adaptability, an individual’s resources for coping with current and anticipated tasks, and self-efficacy, an individual’s beliefs in their abilities to master specific tasks, serve as valuable assets in this transition (Bandura, 1986; Savickas & Porfeli, 2012). Transitioning from

school to work also implies the readiness to switch roles from student to worker (Medvide et al., 2019). This new work role identity isn't just about the job title; it's about how deeply an individual engages with their job and aligns their personal values with their work (Ng & Feldman, 2007). A positive work role identity facilitates the transition to employment and helps individuals feel more confident in making career decisions (Duffy et al., 2015; Koen et al., 2012).

Various external factors influence the process of transitioning from school to work. A comprehensive education system that promotes inclusivity and offers opportunities for students to advance at their own pace can prepare them for a successful career (Ilieva-Trichkova & Boyadjieva, 2018). In addition, educational institutions can facilitate a seamless school-to-work transition by providing progressive preparation for job integration in the final years of schooling (Ng & Feldman, 2007; Saks et al., 2007). Future research could explore whether student affairs professionals who have already started working part-time in student affairs during their undergraduate or graduate education experience a less abrupt school-to-work transition, particularly if they secure full-time employment at the same college they attended.

Unfavorable labor market conditions can negatively impact the school-to-work transition (Duffy et al., 2015). The 2007/2008 Great Recession demonstrated the significant effect of economic downturns on young adults, indicating they suffered disproportionately (Danziger & Ratner, 2010). More research is necessary to examine the impact of the prevailing economic environment on the transition from school to work and other types of transitions. In particular, the ripple effects of such economic downturns on higher education professionals need further exploration. These professionals often face unique challenges, including increased demands for student support services, budget cuts, and the need to adapt curricula to meet changing job

market demands. Moreover, the pressure to ensure that graduates are employable in a shrinking job market can strain resources and affect the quality of education and student services. Understanding these specific impacts is crucial for developing strategies that can better support both students and education professionals during economic downturns.

Self-Care and Community-Care

Carpenter (2003) emphasizes that "the foremost responsibility of a professional is to oneself" (p. 585). *Self-care* refers to the practice of individuals deliberately engaging in activities to maintain or improve their physical, emotional, and mental well-being (Neff, 2003). These activities include adequate sleep, proper nutrition, exercise, stress management, and nurturing social connections. Self-care is essential for personal resilience and overall health, allowing individuals to cope with life's challenges more effectively (Butler et al., 2019).

Mindful self-care combines self-awareness and mindfulness with conventional self-care practices (Cook-Cottone, 2015). *Mindfulness* is the act of "paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally" (Kabat-Zinn, 1994, p.4) and "bringing one's complete attention to the present experience on a moment-to-moment basis" (Marlatt & Kristeller, 1999, p. 68). Key dimensions of mindful self-care include mindful awareness (self-awareness practices such as meditation and yoga), mindful relaxation (calming activities), physical care (exercise, nutrition, and routine medical care), self-compassion and purpose (compassion toward oneself and a sense of meaning), supportive relationships (maintaining healthy connections), and a supportive structure (manageable workload, balancing demands, and a nurturing personal and professional environment) (Cook-Cottone & Guyker, 2018). Mindful self-care can provide unique benefits to those in student affairs roles, particularly when the organizational culture promotes holistic well-being (Burke et al., 2016; Duffield, 2022;

Preston et al., 2021). For instance, self-care can help prevent burnout during high-stress times and improve work-life balance by setting healthy boundaries (Hricová, 2020; Salloum et al., 2015).

While self-care theories and practices hold significant value for student affairs professionals' well-being, many overlook factors such as power dynamics, privilege, oppression, and the specific needs of individuals with marginalized identities (Bidner, 2017). Self-care has increasingly become a trendy term in student affairs, often neglecting the nuances of taking care of oneself. The prevailing self-care narratives emphasize work-life balance and a clear distinction between work and wellness (Miller, 2016). However, these self-care expectations fail to consider how one's social identity can shape their priorities and how personal experiences outside of work may influence how people express themselves at work. For example, the feasibility of engaging in physical activities might be limited for professionals with family responsibilities or those with disabilities. Similarly, adhering to a healthy diet can be particularly challenging for those living in food deserts or those who lack the time to prepare nutritious meals due to their work schedule (Karpyn et al., 2019).

Current perceptions of self-care may inadvertently lead to individuals feeling isolated in their journey toward healing and recovery because it often neglects the importance of communal care. The burden of self-care and recovering from work-related burnout or racial battle fatigue is placed on the individual, even though their job is the source of their exhaustion. Contemporary self-care models regard personal well-being as an additional component entirely separate from work (Lloro-Bidart & Semenko, 2017). Furthermore, these models emphasize colonialistic, individualistic values, often manifesting as specific time management strategies and routines (Squire & Nicolazzo, 2019). In doing so, diverse experiences and practices are marginalized.

Student affairs must expand the discourse of self-care by exploring *community-care* to challenge the individualistic approach of care. The traditional paradigm of self-care is focused solely on the individual. Community-care, on the other hand, posits that the needs of a group are best addressed when its members collaborate and share responsibility, fostering trust, reciprocity, and collective resilience (Sambile, 2018). In a viral post, community organizer Nakita Valerio emphasized that "shouting 'self-care' at people who actually need 'community-care' is how we fail people" (Valerio, 2019, para. 4). This statement underscores the need to acknowledge that self-care, particularly in the context of broader societal and systemic challenges is not always sufficient. Community-care can play an essential role in enhancing the well-being and resilience of individuals within a group, while simultaneously serving as a platform to challenge systemic oppression. This approach promotes an environment where everyone feels supported and provides support to others.

Gaps in the Literature

Research on student affairs attrition has largely concentrated on early career professionals, typically those with less than five years of experience, who have either left the field or are considering doing so (Hornak et al., 2016; Lorden, 1998; Rosser & Javinar, 2003; Tull, 2006). Yet, there's a notable gap in research regarding effective strategies for proactively retaining mid-level student affairs professionals. Rather than merely responding to staff departures, higher education leaders should take proactive steps to enhance the quality of work and retention of student affairs professionals.

Even though over three years have passed since the beginning of the Coronavirus-19 Pandemic, higher education professionals still face significant workplace transitions. Past research primarily concentrated on transitioning from school to work (e.g., Ng & Feldman, 2007;

Medvide et al., 2019). However, there is a growing need for further investigation into transitions amid the Great Resignation, budget reductions, and organizational restructuring in higher education. Particularly, with student affairs staff adapting to hybrid work models, there is a pressing need for research on how their working environments, both on-campus and at-home, affect their roles. As transitions become increasingly common, higher education leaders need more information on effectively supporting professionals while they navigate these ongoing changes.

Although existing research on self-care in student affairs is expanding (Burke et al., 2016; Duffield, 2022; Preston et al., 2021), future studies should incorporate mindfulness-based practices and community-care. Relying solely on self-care may be inadequate, as it does not address systemic oppression or the need for collective healing (Sambile, 2018). Student affairs professionals engaged in emotional labor, such as mental health support, crisis management, or advocacy (e.g., cultural center staff), would likely benefit from community-care to prevent or manage issues like activist burnout and racial battle fatigue. Examples may include shared resource libraries, mentorship programs, inclusive cultural events, collaborative advocacy projects, and communal wellness spaces. Incorporating these holistic approaches fosters individual well-being and strengthens the overall resilience and support networks within the student affairs community.

Chapter Summary

This literature review has provided a comprehensive analysis of the challenges and opportunities facing mid-level student affairs professionals in higher education institutions. The various sections have highlighted the complex roles of student affairs professionals, the factors contributing to attrition and burnout, and the importance of retaining these valuable

professionals. Furthermore, this review underscores the significance of self-care and community-care practices in promoting well-being and professional success for student affairs professionals. By identifying gaps in the literature, this review also paves the way for future research that can enhance our understanding of these challenges and serves as the foundation for the current study.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

Given the lack of research on mid-level, higher education professionals in the context of the Coronavirus-19 Pandemic and the Great Resignation, this study has the potential to provide valuable insights for higher education administrators. Accordingly, the purpose of this narrative inquiry is to examine the narratives of mid-level, higher education professionals as they navigate workplace transitions. The central research question of this study is: How do mid-level, higher education professionals make meaning of their experiences as they navigate workplace transitions?

This chapter outlines the qualitative research methods employed in the study. It begins by exploring the research paradigm, epistemology, ontology, and axiology from which the research is grounded. The chapter then provides a detailed description of the methodology and methods used to illicit the richest descriptions of the narratives of higher education student affairs professionals. Finally, the chapter concludes with ethical considerations and a summary of the chapter.

Research Overview

A defining feature of *qualitative* research is that the researcher strives to describe the meaning of the findings from the perspective of the research participants (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018). Qualitative studies include the researcher as the primary instrument of data collection and analysis, focusing on "process, meaning, and understanding" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015, p. 294).

Such studies typically employ an inductive inquiry strategy, and the end-product is richly descriptive (Merriam, 1998). Because I sought to understand the research topic through an exploration of participant meaning-making with the underlying philosophical framework of interpretivism, qualitative methodology was best suited for this undertaking. Table 1 presents a summary of the research design, which will be elaborated further in this chapter.

Table 1

Research Design

Type of research	Qualitative
Methodology	Photo-narrative inquiry
Paradigm	Interpretivism
Theory	Ambiguous loss
Research setting	Public research university in the Rocky Mountain region
Participants	Mid-level, higher education student affairs professionals
Sampling	Purposeful and snowball sampling
Data collection	Individual interviews and participant photography
Data analysis	Thematic, structural, performance, visual, and symbolic analysis
Criteria for rigor	Trustworthiness and authenticity

Research Questions

The advantage of using qualitative methods is that they allow researchers to answer questions about the *why* and *how* in the context of the participant's relationship with the researcher (Dobrovolny & Fuentes, 2008). Therefore, research questions focus on the meaning-making experiences of participants. The research questions define the scope of the study, set the direction for data collection and analysis, and ultimately determine the findings and conclusions of the research.

The central research question in the current study was:

Q1 How do mid-level, higher education professionals make meaning of their experiences as they navigate workplace transitions?

This research question is purposefully broad and open-ended. Additional research questions embedded in the central research question include:

Q1a How do mid-level, higher education professionals experience burnout while navigating workplace transitions?

Q1b How do mid-level, higher education professionals experience turnover intentions as they navigate transitions?

Q1c Which support systems are helpful for mid-level, higher education professionals while navigating workplace transitions?

Because qualitative research is characterized by an emergent nature, answers may be discovered to questions that were not formulated at the outset (Creswell, 2003). Qualitative research's dynamic and iterative nature allows for a more flexible and adaptable approach to the research process. This enables researchers to respond to unexpected findings and adjust their research questions and methods accordingly. Furthermore, the inherent flexibility of qualitative research places greater emphasis on participant perspectives and experiences; researchers can then adjust their research questions and methods to capture the unique insights and viewpoints of the participants. Therefore, the research questions and hypotheses evolved and were refined throughout the course of the study reflexively and interactively (Agee, 2009).

Paradigmatic Assumptions

Definitions

The ontological, epistemological, and methodological premises from which this study was approached are grounded in a research paradigm, a set of beliefs and attitudes about the world and how it should be comprehended and studied (Denzin & Lincoln, 2007). Paradigms

provide a lens through which to examine, think about, make sense of, and create and interpret knowledge in our world, which in turn guide our actions and practice (Guido et al., 2010; Mertens, 2019). By clearly stating the assumptions underlying the research process, readers of the study can understand the choices made throughout the research study as these choices connect to the researcher's philosophical understandings (Willis et al., 2007). Additionally, understanding the paradigmatic assumptions of a study can help readers evaluate the transferability of findings to other contexts and populations.

Paradigms are shaped by four primary components: ontology, epistemology, axiology, and methodology. First, ontology pertains to the nature of reality and asks, "What is the form of reality, and what is there that can be known about it?" (Guba, 1990; Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Second, epistemology describes the nature of knowledge using the question, "What is the nature of the relationship between the inquirer and what can be known?" (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Guido et al., 2010). Third, axiology is the study of values and value judgments that influence the research process (Guba & Lincoln, 2005). Finally, methodology explains and justifies how knowledge is realized, asking, "How can the inquirer find out whatever they believe can be known?" (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Mertens, 2019). As a result, the chosen paradigm strongly influences the research design (Guido et al., 2010).

Research Paradigm

Interpretivism is based on the notion of a subjective, socially constructed reality in which "the world is always interpreted through [one's] mind" (Schwandt, 2007, p. 143). Interpretivist researchers primarily aim to understand human behavior in its meaning and social context (Crotty, 1998). The perspective is rooted in the philosophy of idealism, which posits that individuals' perceptions and interpretations, rather than direct observations and measures, are

how the world is understood (Glesne, 2011; Schwandt, 2015). Interpretivist researchers seek to know "how people interpret and make meaning of some object, event, action, perception, etc." (Glesne, 2011, p. 8). They recognize that their perceptions and interpretations inevitably influence the data they collect and the meaning derived from said data in the research process (Crotty, 1998).

The label, *constructivist-interpretivist,* is often used to describe the combination of interpretivism and constructivism, despite a fundamental conflict between the two approaches (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). While both approaches aim to understand the way people make meaning, in constructivism, this meaning is created via the interaction between the researcher and participants (Guba, 1990; Mertens, 2019). Knowledge is co-constructed between the research and participants. In interpretivism, knowledge is produced through meaningful interpretations of participants' experiences, behaviors, and social contexts (Pascale, 2010). The focus is on interpreting the subjective meanings and understandings that participants attribute to their experiences and social realities. Therefore, the main distinction arises from the role and position of the researcher in the research process. Constructivism asserts the researcher as an active agent in knowledge production, whereas interpretivism positions the researcher as an interpreter of participant experiences (Jones et al., 2014).

While researchers tend to choose one central theoretical perspective for a study, Abes (2009) recommends working within *theoretical borderlands* by "bringing together multiple and even seemingly conflicting theoretical perspectives to uncover new ways of understanding the data" (p. 141). For example, Abes (2009) utilized a combination of interpretivist and postmodernist theoretical perspectives to provide an account of students' development of lesbian identity that was more comprehensive than could have been achieved by employing either

approach independently. Abes (2009) explained, “Using multiple theoretical perspectives to research student development theory highlights the complexity and messiness of student development; it challenges educators to view students from multiple perspectives simultaneously and to genuinely live and work within a context of multiple realities” (p. 150).

A theoretical borderlands approach (Abes, 2009) enables scholars to expand the range of a single theoretical perspective and encourages them to engage with the conflicts arising from diverse theoretical viewpoints. Instead of disregarding or neatly resolving these conflicts, researchers who operate at the intersection of two or more theoretical frameworks strive to coexist with the tensions, highlighting the presence of various worthwhile interpretations of phenomena (Lather, 2006; Plummer, 2005). The interplay between different methods often leads to complex methodological intersections. Yet, bringing different methods together can also help us gain a more detailed and insightful understanding of social realities (Guba & Lincoln, 2005).

This study primarily adopts an interpretivist approach, integrating constructivist elements to enhance the quality of the research. A notable constructivist element was introduced when a participant explicitly mentioned *campus ecology* during an interview. This instance guided the incorporation of constructivist methodology into the study, as it highlighted the interactive process of knowledge creation between the researcher and participants. Additionally, the study utilized an *enhanced member check* (Chase, 2017), offering participants a chance to review and contribute to the interpretation of the findings, thereby ensuring their views were accurately represented. This approach reflects a collaborative research design, allowing participants to share their experiences and actively participate in shaping their narratives. Despite this collaboration, the data were not co-constructed, maintaining the study's predominantly interpretivist nature. The participants' contributions enriched the research context and narrative without altering the

fundamental methodological approach, ensuring that the essence of interpretivism guided the analytical and interpretative processes.

Building on this integrative approach, the study's use of an interpretivist framework complements the narrative inquiry methodology. Narrative research is “always interpretive at every stage” (Josselson, 2006, p. 4), from conceptualization of research to data collection to writing a research text. Narrative inquirers do not take a neutral, objective position, merely presenting what was said (Chase, 2003). Chase (2003) encourages narrative researchers to “interpret what is being said and try to articulate your reasons – give evidence – for your interpretations” (pp. 92-93). Furthermore, Riessman (2008) defines narrative analysis as “a family of methods for interpreting texts” (p. 11). The following sections will elaborate on the study’s guiding principles within an interpretivist narrative framework, as illustrated in Table 2.

Table 2

Interpretivist Paradigm

Ontology	Multiple subjective realities
Epistemology	Inter-subject knowledge interpretation (lower *t* truth)
Axiology	Value-bound

Ontology

In qualitative research, ontology concerns the researcher’s beliefs regarding the objectivity or subjectivity of truth (Guba, 1990; Guba & Lincoln, 1994). In other words, ontology examines whether truth and reality are considered fixed, independent, and external to human perception or are perceived as fluid, constructed, and influenced by individual and social interpretations. The ontological stance adopted by a researcher has significant implications for the design, execution, and interpretation of a qualitative study.

The interpretivist paradigm is characterized by a relativist ontology, in which researchers construct the realities of the phenomena under study with participants (Crotty, 1998). Rather than attempting to capture an objective reality, researchers recognize that they only know reality through their representations of it (Denzin & Lincoln, 2007). Furthermore, interpretivist research is emic and value-bound, in which the researcher is part of what is being researched and cannot be separated (Guba & Lincoln, 2005). In this approach, the researcher's subjectivity is seen as an asset, as it allows them to understand and appreciate the complexities and nuances of the research topic from the participants' perspective.

Epistemology

Epistemology addresses how knowledge is derived or "how we know what we know" (Guido et al., 2010). It focuses on how we gain knowledge of what exists and the relationship between the knower—in this case the researcher—and the world (Jones et al., 2014). In the research context, epistemology raises essential questions about the nature and sources of knowledge, the justification of beliefs, and the reliability of various methods for acquiring knowledge. It encourages researchers to critically reflect on the assumptions that underpin their work, including their perspectives on objectivity, subjectivity, and the role of personal biases and values.

From an interpretivist perspective, subjective meanings and social phenomena constitute acceptable knowledge (Guba & Lincoln, 2005). In this approach, knowledge is mutually created between researchers and participants, evolving and transforming over time. Interpretivists claim truth with a small *t*—meaning that multiple findings are true in a specific context and time (Guido et al., 2010). This perspective emphasizes the importance of understanding the world through the lens of the research participants, acknowledging that people's experiences and

interpretations of reality are unique and complex. Interpretivists seek to explore the nuances of these subjective experiences, aiming to comprehend how individuals construct their realities and the impact of social, cultural, and historical contexts on these constructions.

Axiology

Axiology addresses the impact of the researcher's values and assumptions on the scientific process and the actions taken by the researcher based on the research findings (Lincoln et al., 2013). Contemporary qualitative research often assumes that research is *radically relational*, with the researcher's orientation, values, and personal attributes influencing and deliberately shaping the research process (Wertz et al., 2011). The researcher's experience is central to the process and may be vital to achieving the intended outcomes of the research.

In an interpretivist framework, social inquiry is value-bound because the researcher is part of what is being researched (Christie & Fleischer, 2009). The phenomenon under study is interpreted by the researcher, filtered through their understanding which is modified and evolves as more understanding accumulates over time (Guba & Lincoln, 2005). Since my researcher biases and assumptions inform my axiological beliefs about what is valuable and ethical, I included a positionality statement in Chapter I so that readers may understand how my beliefs may shape the collection and interpretation of data.

Research Theoretical Framework

The guiding theoretical framework for this research is ambiguous loss, developed by Pauline Boss (1999) as a model for understanding grief. Ambiguous loss is "a loss in which an important component is missing, thwarting mourning customs and rituals and preventing typical coping behaviors" (Lang et al., 2011, p. 187). Boss (2006) defined two types of ambiguous loss, with the first type characterized by a psychological presence but a physical absence. For

example, in adoption, birth parents may experience a sense of loss and grief due to their physical separation from their child, even if they remain psychologically connected to them. A physical presence with a psychological absence, such as a family member with dementia, characterizes the second type of ambiguous loss. Ambiguous losses have a particularly significant impact because traditional coping mechanisms often prove ineffective (Boss, 2006). Traditional coping mechanisms often rely on understanding and accepting the reality of the loss, but with ambiguous losses, that reality is unclear. The lack of closure can lead to helplessness and may prompt individuals to engage in sensemaking and searching for answers (Boss, 2006). While this theory was created in the context of family therapy, it has been applied to topics such as immigration (Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2009), climate change (Cunsolo & Ellis, 2018), military-related PTSD (Monson et al., 2009), and ghosting (LeFebvre & Fan, 2020).

The concept of ambiguous loss is relevant to the context of this study because the participants experienced the peak of the Coronavirus-19 Pandemic and subsequent lockdown measures. At the same time, the Coronavirus-19 Pandemic and its effects on higher education are still present in the forms of decreased enrollment, financial challenges, and heightened mental health concerns among students, staff, and faculty (Guppy et al., 2022; Porter et al., 2022). The lingering presence and impact of the virus underscores an ongoing, unresolved loss for those in higher education who are still contending with the pandemic's substantial upheavals.

These upheavals can be viewed as a series of unresolved transitions indicative of the ambiguous loss the sector continues to experience. The first major transition happened when all of higher education shifted to a virtual format except for “essential workers” (Blau et al., 2021). Then, the slow, staggered transition to back in-person. Mask mandates came and went (Donaldson, 2022). The Great Resignation continued to impact higher education (Ellis, 2021;

McClure, 2021; McClure, 2022). Student affairs professionals were asked to do more with less (Anderson, 2021; McCarthy, 2018). Therefore, this study is focused on the experiences of higher education professionals as they manage ambiguous loss amid an ongoing series of transitions.

Methodology

Qualitative methods are used when the objective is to gain a deeper understanding of complex and nuanced human experiences and phenomena (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Qualitative research allows for a holistic view of the research subject, and it emphasizes the importance of context, meaning, and interpretation. This approach is advantageous when exploring the human experiences, beliefs, values, and emotions that underlie a particular phenomenon. In contrast, quantitative methods tend to focus on numerical data and statistical analysis, making them more suited to studying phenomena that can be quantifiable. Therefore, this study employed qualitative methodology to understand how student affairs professionals derive meaning from their workplace transitions.

Narrative inquiry is "stories lived and told" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 20). Narrative inquiry is a form of qualitative research characterized by its interdisciplinary nature and exploration of participants' stories to understand and describe various aspects of people's lives (Robson, 2015). These stories can be collected through modalities, including biography, life history, oral history, life story, personal narrative, or arts-based narratives (e.g., poetry, novel, fiction, short stories, photographs, or visual narratives). Storytelling provides a rich source of data to represent and understand diverse experiences (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Consequently, this study is aligned with narrative inquiry methodology.

Narrative Inquiry

Connelly and Clandinin (1990) first used the term narrative inquiry to describe an already developing approach to teacher education that focused on personal storytelling. They assert that our knowledge in education stems from sharing stories of educational experiences with one another. Since then, interest in narrative as a method of inquiry has notably expanded across a diverse array of disciplines (Mertova & Webster, 2019). Narrative inquiry remains an emerging field that is "rich but complicated, approachable but elusive, and well defined but still perplexing" (Kim, 2016, p. xv).

As a methodological approach, narrative inquiry centers on the storytelling process in which individuals describe and comprehend their lives (Robson, 2015). It is grounded in "life experiences as narrated by those who live them" (Chase, 2013, p. 56). Through the inquiry, the participant and researcher's narratives become a shared narrative of construction and reconstruction (Clandinin & Connelly, 1991). Although researchers gather individual narratives, they also re-story them through analysis and interpretation, making narrative inquiry well-suited for an interpretivist lens (Jones et al., 2014).

Narrative inquiry has been a fundamental tool in depicting human endeavors from ancient times. Its capacity to capture and retell events that have significantly influenced us makes it particularly adept at addressing complex issues. We all have a basic need for storytelling, a way to organize and make sense of our experiences (Dyson & Genishi, 1994). Narrative should not be seen as detached from real life; rather, it forms meaningful connections with our lived experiences (Mertova & Webster, 2019). This approach is especially relevant for this study because narrative inquiry attempts to capture the *whole story*. Unlike other methods, which may provide snapshots of understanding at specific moments, narrative inquiry delves into the full

journey of the subjects or phenomena. It encompasses not only the beginning and end points but also the critical, often overlooked, intervening stages that contribute to the complete narrative (Mertova & Webster, 2019). This comprehensive approach ensures a deeper, more contextual understanding of the subject matter.

Photo-Narrative Inquiry

Traditionally, narrative research is concentrated solely on textual and non-textual data collection methods. However, emerging trends involve the use of multiple sources of data such as photographs, poetry, or collage (Yin, 2017). Combining visual and text-based information enables a more nuanced understanding and deeper insights into participants' experiences, enriching the meaning derived from the data. Consequently, this study will incorporate both photography and individual interviews.

Various terms describe the incorporation of photography in research methodologies: *photo novella, photo voice, photographic metaphor, photo elicitation, visual narrative,* and *photographic narrative.* These terms are prevalent in disciplines such as psychology, sociology, anthropology, and nursing. Although all these approaches involve participants' engagement with a photography assignment, they may differ in theoretical underpinnings or application. The methodological approach adopted in the current research study is photographic narrative, also known as *photo-narrative inquiry*. This approach highlights the role of photography in visual storytelling, where the image and text are closely intertwined, providing contextual richness while capturing unique, individual experiences (Kim, 2016).

Photographic narrative has roots in conceptual photography (Soutter, 2018). This contemporary use of photography, which gained popularity in the 1990s, employs photographs to express an individual's ideas (Kim, 2016). The narrative offers meaning and context to the

image. In combination, the text and the picture present a visual story. Clark-Ibañez (2004) asserts that while photographs may not be interesting in and of themselves, they can serve as a form of "communication between researcher and participant" (p. 1512). Researchers can use visual narratives to expand on questions and for participants to convey an additional layer of meaning that may not be evident otherwise (Richard & Lahman, 2015). In essence, the photographs facilitate the participant's storytelling and the researcher's interpretation of their stories.

Impression Management

Impression management refers to the process by which individuals consciously or unconsciously attempt to control the perceptions others have of them, particularly in social situations (Roberts, 2005). This concept, rooted in the sociological work of Erving Goffman (1959), involves shaping one's self-presentation to influence how one is viewed by others. It extends beyond mere presentation of self; it includes how individuals manage their appearance, behaviors, and communication to align with desired personal or societal standards.

In the context of a photo-narrative, especially in the social media age, impression management becomes highly relevant. When participants select and share photographs, whether in a research setting or on social media platforms, they often curate these images to project a certain image or identity (Laws et al., 2018; Lee & Lee, 2021). This act of curation is a form of impression management, where participants might choose to highlight certain aspects of their lives while omitting or downplaying others. For instance, they may prefer sharing images that depict positive, successful, or socially desirable aspects of their lives, while avoiding images that could convey vulnerability, failure, or negativity.

This tendency can be amplified in the social media age, where there is a pervasive culture of comparing one's life with others online. The photos shared become not just a representation of

one's experiences but also a tool for crafting and managing one's public persona. In photo-narrative research, this aspect of impression management can influence the data collected, as participants might be inclined to present a version of their reality that aligns with their desired self-image. Therefore, understanding impression management is crucial in interpreting the data from photo-narrative studies, especially when considering the broader implications of self-presentation in the digital era.

Research Setting

To provide participants with enhanced privacy and convenience, interviews were conducted virtually using *Zoom*. This approach offers a secure and convenient platform for conducting interviews remotely, allowing participants to engage from the comfort of their own environment. Additionally, the geographical barriers are minimized, enabling the inclusion of individuals residing outside the local area. This expanded reach brings in a wider array of perspectives and experiences.

Participants

Sample

I used purposeful sampling to identify and recruit participants in this study. This method enables the most effective use of limited resources by identifying and selecting information-rich participant criteria (Patton, 2002). I contacted participants by utilizing institutional listservs dedicated to student affairs staff members.

Since the purpose of the study was to learn how mid-level, higher education professionals make meaning of workplace transitions, the following criteria were established for participant selection:

- Higher education student affairs professional:
    - Higher education student affairs professionals' primary goal is enhancing student learning and personal development of college students, complementing the institution's mission (ACPA, 1996). These professionals are employed in higher education institutions, such as colleges or universities, rather than in the private sector.
- Employed at a public 4-year university with a population of at least 5,000 students.
    - Participants will be employed at a mid-size or large-size public university that offers bachelor's degrees. By narrowing the scope in this way, participants will provide valuable insights tailored to this specific context.
- Mid-Level Professional:
    - Mid-level professionals are not considered senior-level or executive-level administrators (e.g., executive director, assistant or associate vice president, vice president, dean) at their institution. They have a bachelor's or master's degree in student affairs or a related field, and at least two years post-graduate experience in student affairs.
- Full-Time Staff Members
    - Participants will be employed full-time, averaging at least 30 hours per week, with their primary role classified as staff. Participants may also teach in an adjunct, non-tenure track capacity.

Saturation

In narrative research, the focus lies on a small number of participants while collecting more data per participant than other types of qualitative research (Mertova & Webster, 2019). By

focusing on fewer participants and gathering more comprehensive data from each person, researchers can explore the depth and complexity of these experiences. For this study, 8 participants were selected.

The adequacy of the sample size is related to the notion of data saturation, which is reached when no additional themes are observed in the data (Guest et al., 2006). Data collection and analysis will coincide, allowing saturation to guide sampling and sample size. This iterative approach allows for modifications in data collection strategies or even the inclusion of additional participants if necessary, ensuring that the study captures a rich understanding of the participant's stories.

With narrative research, the researcher seeks to tell the *whole story*, acknowledging the myriad of individual stories comprising the whole (Leggo, 2004). The researcher's challenge is respecting this inherent multiplicity while crafting a narrative that engages readers in their own meaning-making process. Researchers must remain sensitive to each story's multiple perspectives and layers of meaning while weaving them into a comprehensive and meaningful narrative.

Recruitment

University of Colorado's Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved this study, under Protocol 2305049759, prior to the start of recruitment (as shown in Appendix B). To recruit participants, I distributed emails (see Appendix C) to institutional listservs with audiences that include student affairs professionals who would meet the specified participant criteria. The email with attached flyer (see Appendix D) outlined the study's objectives, expectations of participants, and incentives. I received funding for these incentives through a Graduate Student

Association Dissertation Grant, providing each participant with a $50 gift card in appreciation of their time and involvement in the research project.

Potential participants were asked to complete a Qualtrics survey (as shown in Appendix E). In the survey, participants provided qualifying information for participant selection, demographic information, and contact information. Certain identifying information was omitted from the final manuscript to maintain the confidentiality of participants.

After identifying qualified participants, I sent an email asking them to schedule the first interview through the Calendly scheduling platform (see Appendix F). The Interview #1 Protocol was attached to this email to allow participants time to reflect on the questions prior to the interview. Participants received another email through Adobe e-sign software, prompting their signature on the informed consent form (see Appendix G). Through this software, a copy of the completed informed consent form was sent to the researcher and participant after both signatures were completed.

Out of 39 potential participants who expressed interest in the study and met the qualifications, eight were selected. Participants were chosen to gather a diverse sample in terms of position at the university, years of full-time experience, age, gender, sexual orientation, racial/ethnic/cultural identity, first-generation student status, and other identities shared in the open response question.

One of the participants, Brandon (pseudonym) chose to discontinue the study after the first interview. This participant expressed strong negative sentiments about their employer, stating, “It actually embarrasses me to work here. I'm not proud of it, to be quite honest.” He expressed cynicism about the institution of higher education, saying,

> It's a capitalist institution. And if they just said they're capitalists — if they're just like, 'Hey, we're Amazon. We don't care.' You know, that's great. You're a capitalist, but they're pretending to be something else. And then it's not that way at all. Yeah, it's completely disgusting. That's my opinion.

This negative perspective may have influenced his decision to withdraw from the study. Furthermore, given that cynicism is a defining feature of burnout (Maslach & Jackson, 1981; Schaufeli, 2017), it is possible that this participant is experiencing high levels of burnout, and their continued participation in the study could have exacerbated their feelings in a detrimental way.

Tables 3 and 4 provide details regarding participants' pseudonyms, position at their respective university, years of full-time experience, age, gender, sexual orientation, racial/ethnic/cultural identity, first-generation student status, and other identities shared in the open response question.

Table 3

*Participant Demographics**

Pseudonym	Position	Years of Experience	Age	Gender
Andrea	Residence director	5	28	Woman
Anne	Advisor	10	45	Cis-ish female
Brandon	Advisor	10	43	Male
Elizabeth	Senior Coordinator	4	27	Cisgender female
June	Associate Director	6	28	Woman
Natalia	Assistant Director	6	30	Cis-gendered woman
Noah	Advising manager	9	32	Cisgender male
Olivia	Advisor	4.5	26	Female

*Responses have been preserved verbatim as entered in the survey.

Table 4

*Participant Demographics (Continued)**

Pseudonym	Sexual orientation	Racial/ethnic/cultural identity	First-generation student	Other identities
Andrea	Heterosexual	Latina - Mexican	No	International scholar
Anne	Asexual	White	No	N/A
Brandon	Straight	White	No	Jewish
Elizabeth	Heterosexual	Chinese Asian American	No	N/A
June	Questioning	Latinx	Yes	N/A
Natalia	Straight	White Latina; Chicana; Mexican-American	Yes	Disabled; limited-income student
Noah	Straight	White	No	Atheist
Olivia	Bi/pan	White	No	N/A

*Responses have been preserved verbatim as entered in the survey.

Data Collection

Incorporating participant-generated photography (visual narratives) alongside semi-structured interviews (verbal narratives) enabled participants to interpret their own lives and social context, thereby amplifying their voice and authority in both image creation and interpretation (Lapenta, 2011). Data collection included an initial 60-minute interview, followed by participant-generated photography, and concluding with a 90-minute semi-structured interview (see Table 5). A total of 15 interviews were conducted, comprising 8 initial interviews

and 7 second interviews. Additionally, 53 participant photos were submitted for inclusion in the study.

Table 5

Data Collection Methods

Method	Length	Procedures
Interview 1	60 minutes	Informed consent
		Demographic and background information
		Photography prompts
Photography	1 week	Participant-generated photography
		Up to 10 photos
Interview 2	90 minutes	Process consent
		Photo-elicitation
		Narrative interview

First Interview

The initial 60-minute interview began with a review of informed consent and the opportunity for participants to ask questions about informed consent (refer to Appendix H for the interview #1 protocol). Participants were asked to give permission to video record the interviews. I provided an overview of data collection methods. Additionally, I collected information on participants' current and previous positions in student affairs and significant work-related transitions since the beginning of the Coronavirus-19 Pandemic, which served as the focus of the second interview. In the first interview, I also inquired about participants' experience and comfort level regarding their research study participation and photography. By collecting this information during the initial interview, I established a baseline understanding of the participants' background and experiences, which informed subsequent interviews and data analysis. This approach also enabled participants to become more comfortable with the research

process and provided an opportunity to address any questions or concerns had at the outset of the study.

Participant Photography

Upon concluding the initial interview, participants were asked to take photos related to their workplace transitions since the onset of the Coronavirus-19 Pandemic. Participants were asked to take up to 10 photos (refer to Appendix I for the participant photography protocol). These photos were taken during the study period and not pre-existing, featuring meaningful subjects such as people, places, objects, nature, or locations. The rationale for including photographs taken during the research study period, as opposed to pre-existing images, is to document the meaning-making that occurs within the study's context. The photography protocol was reviewed at the end of the first interview and emailed to the participant. This email (see Appendix J) also contained the Interview #2 Protocol (see Appendix K).

Photographs that contained identifiable information, such as an individual's face, were excluded from the manuscript and any materials published as part of this study to maintain confidentiality. Participants were asked to send their photos directly to the researcher's secure institutional email address. The images were stored in a secure institutional Microsoft OneDrive account.

Second Interview

The second, more comprehensive, semi-structured interview allowed participants to share their stories. Free-flowing conversations facilitated the interaction between the researcher and the narratives (Hollingsworth & Dybdahl, 2007). Pre-prepared questions prompted discussions on the content of each photograph and the related experiences of transition and ambiguous loss. As individual stories unravel, additional questions will emerge, leading to a rich depiction of

personal experiences. Participants were encouraged to determine the order in which the photographs are discussed and to focus on details that hold personal relevance. This participant-centered method aligns with the core principle of qualitative research, which emphasizes representing participants' real-world experiences rather than the researcher's assumptions (Yin, 2017).

A fundamental principle of narrative interviewing is to let a story fully develop during the interview without any immediate interpretation (Jovchelovitch & Bauer, 2000). Once the story has been shared, any questions that arose were asked to clarify and gain a deeper understanding of the story and its impact on the participant's life. Table 6 depicts the process of the narrative interviewing. These interviewing strategies, which are minimally structured, seek to minimize the role of the interviewer while allowing for the thorough, in-depth narrative of the participant's story (Muylaert et al., 2014).

Table 6

Phases of the Narrative Interview

Phases	Rules
Preparation	Exploring the field
	Formulating *exmanent* questions (from outside the interviewee's narrative)
1. Initiation	Formulating initial topic for narration
	Using visual aids
2. Main narration	No interruptions
	Only non-verbal encouragement to continue storytelling
	Wait for the coda
3. Questioning phase	Only question: What happened then?
	No opinion and attitude questions
	No arguing on contradictions
	Do not ask: Why?
	Go from *exmanent* into immanent questions (from within the interviewee's narrative)
4. Concluding talk	Stop recording
	Why-questions allowed
	Memory protocol immediately after interview

Interviews were video-recorded and securely stored in an institutional Microsoft OneDrive account. Otter.ai was employed to produce transcripts in real-time. I further immersed myself in the data by viewing each video recording. Additionally, I examined transcripts for accuracy and included subjective notes, such as emotional content and shifts in body language. This familiarity with the data enabled me to recognize subtle connections between different data points, enhancing the overall analysis and contributing to new insights.

Crystallization

Crystallization is an approach used in qualitative research that involves gathering and analyzing multiple types of data through various methods, multiple researchers, and numerous theoretical frameworks (Ellingson, 2009). By recognizing the inherent complexity and subjectivity of human experiences, crystallization captures nuances and subtleties that might otherwise be overlooked. It embraces a more multifaceted perspective than the conventional method of triangulation that encompasses several approaches, such as various data collection methods, diverse data sources, varied theoretical frameworks, or researchers (Denzin, 2009; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). In contrast to a rigid, fixed, two-dimensional triangle, Richardson (2000) proposed:

> …the central imaginary is the crystal, which combines symmetry and substance with an infinite variety of shapes, substances, transmutations, multidimensionalities, and angles of approach. Crystals grow, change, alter, but are not amorphous. Crystals are prisms that reflect externalities and refract within themselves, creating different colors, patterns, and arrays, casting off in different directions. What we see depends upon our angle of repose. (p. 934)

Like triangulation, crystallization encourages the use of multiple data types, methods, researchers, and theoretical frameworks (Ellingson, 2009). A key distinction between the two approaches is that crystallization does not assume the objective of multiple methods to be a more valid singular truth. Instead, it facilitates a more intricate and complex, albeit partial, understanding of the issue (Richardson, 2000). Given its alignment with an interpretivist philosophical framework that acknowledges multiple subjective truths, crystallization is better suited for this study.

Data Analysis

The data analysis process in qualitative research plays a critical role, enabling researchers to extract meaningful insights through a cycle of comparison and continuous evaluation of the data collected. By adhering to a systematic procedure, researchers work to reveal and comprehend the core experiences of participants (Creswell, 2017; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). This approach emphasizes the dynamic nature of analyzing qualitative data, during which understanding deepens as the analysis progresses.

Researchers compare and contrast various data points, participants' perspectives, and themes during the comparative phase to identify similarities, differences, and relationships. This step allows them to assess emerging themes' prevalence and relevance and explore discrepancies or unique cases. Researchers continuously revisit their data and refine their interpretations throughout the data analysis process. This iterative approach helps ensure the analysis remains grounded in the participants' experiences.

Finally, researchers integrate their findings into a cohesive narrative, presenting the data in figures, tables, or textual descriptions. This synthesis allows researchers to communicate the results of their analysis, connect the emergent themes to existing literature and theoretical perspectives, and provide valuable insights that contribute to the broader understanding of the phenomenon under investigation.

Narrative Analysis

In narrative inquiry, researchers analyze data to understand the meanings that participants give to themselves, their surroundings, their lives, and their lived experiences through storytelling (Kramp, 2004). Analyzing narratives is a process of representing an experience. Riessman (1993) outlines the flow of the narrative from the original experience to the final

published text. This journey begins with the individual (1) ‘attending’ or living the experience, followed by (2) ‘telling’ or sharing the experience with others as a story. Once shared, the story represents the authentic experience that can be (3) ‘transcribed’ by the researcher and then (4) analyzed as an illustrative tool. The final stage of representation occurs when others (5) read the written report, which becomes an experience itself.

Riessman (2008) identifies four primary methodological approaches for narrative research: thematic analysis, structural analysis, performance analysis, and visual analysis. *Thematic analysis* is concerned with identifying patterned meaning across a dataset. This approach centers on what was *spoken* in the narrative, the content or themes conveyed. *Structural analysis* examines the organization of narratives to understand the narrator’s objectives, emphasizing how the story is told. *Performance analysis* is concerned with interpreting the interaction of dialogue in the socio-cultural context. The focus of performance analysis is on the who, when, and why of the context. Performance analysis interprets dialogue interactions within the socio-cultural context, concentrating on the *who*, *when*, and *why*. *Visual analysis* explores the storyteller’s images and words, often incorporating other forms of analysis. Indeed, Riessman acknowledges that these four categories are not mutually exclusive, characterizing them as continuously overlapping, fluid, and interconnected.

Narrative Thematic Analysis

In this study, thematic analysis served as the foundational method for analyzing participants' narratives, emphasizing the identification of themes. The process of narrative thematic analysis begins with a thorough examination of the raw data. Researchers immerse themselves in the material to comprehensively understand the participants’ perspectives. This immersion process involves reading and re-reading transcripts, viewing and listening to

interview recordings, reviewing the research journal, and examining visual materials. As a visual learner, I found the practice of listening to the interview recordings while simultaneously reading the transcripts particularly beneficial, as it enhanced my engagement with and interpretation of the data.

Next, researchers identify themes and patterns by using coding and recoding processes. Coding involves assigning labels or tags to portions of the data (e.g., quotes, paragraphs, or images) that reflect the underlying meaning or concept. Open coding is used to identify discrete concepts and patterns in the data, and axial coding is used to make connections between those patterns (Corbin & Strauss, 2014; Saldaña, 2021). Selective coding is used to start forming the overarching themes that arise from the data and narrow the themes to those that best address the research questions. Throughout this process, I used a codebook to capture the five most prominent codes identified in each interview. Each code was linked to the respective participant, a specific quotation, and notes that provide additional context. This process ensured a clear connection between the themes and the participants' narratives. For example, in Anne's first interview, she said, "This is a very low paid position... It was like, the lowest paid." This quote was connected to the code "underpaid" and accompanied by the note, "In public higher education, salaries are public, so advisors know they are underpaid." In axial coding, the open codes of "cost of living," "salary equity", and "underpaid" were grouped under the overarching category, "compensation." Categories should be exhaustive and mutually exclusive (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). From the categories, four were selected due to their relevance to the research questions. This process resulted in four themes: compensation, coworker relationships, flexibility, and office environment.

Symbolic Analysis

By integrating multiple data analysis approaches in narrative research, a more profound understanding of the intricate dynamics present in participants' stories can be achieved. Employing *symbolic analysis* allows for a deeper exploration of the layers of meaning within these narratives. *Motifs* are symbolic elements within a narrative or culturally shared visual signs and connotations (Müller, 2011). As the smallest element in a narrative that persists in tradition, independently or within a cluster, motifs are crucial in connecting individual experiences to broader cultural or societal contexts (Lüthi, 1962). Motifs can take various shapes, such as visual symbols, words, phrases, or actions (Daemmrich, 1985). Examples of motifs include a sunrise symbolizing a new beginning or a stop sign representing a sudden change in the direction of thought. Motifs directly influence the narrative by moving the action along, actively involving the storyteller's intentions (Lüthi, 1962).

Motifs highlight the underlying emotions, values, and beliefs that shape the participants' viewpoints and experiences (Daemmrich, 2003). Analyzing motifs in narrative inquiry can illuminate the connections between individual stories and collective experiences. For instance, recurring motifs may suggest shared struggles, aspirations, or cultural norms that influence how participants interpret and navigate their experiences. Researchers can uncover deeper levels of significance within participants' stories by exploring how participants use motifs to derive meaning from their narratives.

In the symbolic analysis of this study, the process paralleled the coding method used in thematic analysis, adapted to uncover symbolic meanings. This analysis involved assigning symbolic tags to narrative segments and photographs and then examining their interconnections. For example, the motif of *pursuit of knowledge* emerged when connecting Anne's narrative to

the photograph of " Edith," a significant tree on campus. Anne's appreciation for the educational environment echoed her interaction with Edith. She said, “Just walking around, it's a learning lab. You're not even going into a building, and you're learning and reading about stuff.” Her belief in higher education as the best work environment reinforces this motif: “I love education. I love higher ed. There’s just no better environment that I have come in contact with.” Therefore, the tree “Edith” is a representation of the learning and growth that occurs on a college campus, a nurturing environment that has contributed to Anne’s retention and connection to higher education.

Criteria for Rigor

Lincoln and Guba (1985, 1986) introduced the criteria of trustworthiness and authenticity to address concerns about the quality of qualitative research. These criteria are used to enhance the *rigor* of the study and ensure it has the qualities that would make it convincing to audiences (Schwandt, 2015). In narrative inquiry, the researcher aims to tell a story that accurately reflects the participants’ experiences and produces a sense of *likehood* (Polkinghorne, 1988). The researcher creates representations that reduce the gap between what participants say about their experienced meaning and the meaning itself, leading to a more authentic portrayal of the participants’ experiences (Polkinghorne, 2007).

Trustworthiness

Establishing *trustworthiness i*s crucial in producing a study that is convincing and meaningful to readers. Patton (2015) noted that “the credibility of your findings and interpretations depends on your careful attention to establishing trustworthiness” (p. 685). The conventional approach to trustworthiness involves the following criteria: (a) credibility, (b) transferability, (c) dependability, and (d) confirmability.

Credibility

This criterion refers to the extent to which the data and interpretations in a study are trustworthy and match reality (Lincoln & Guba, 2013). Credibility means that the findings and interpretations represent the participants' experiences, as close to their subjective reality as possible. It involves ensuring that the research methods are appropriate and rigorously applied, and that the interpretations are grounded in the data. In other words, the researcher must establish a strong connection between the participants' views and the researcher's representations of those views.

Strategies to enhance credibility include maintaining a research journal, codebook, and member checking (Lincoln & Guba, 2013). In this study, a researcher journal was used to write and store field notes and track any changes, additions, or modifications to the data collection process and research design. A research journal helps maintain an audit trail by archiving and monitoring alterations and updates to the research framework in one place (Ravitch & Mittenfelner, 2020). A codebook also helps maintain an audit trail by documenting the thematic coding process.

Member checking involves seeking feedback from participants to clarify information from interviews and photos, provide feedback on the process, and share any additional information (Lincoln & Guba, 2013; Patton, 2015). By incorporating participant feedback, this enhanced member checking enables a collaborative research design, leading to more impactful findings (Chase, 2017). Member checking was conducted throughout the research process, with follow-up questions asked to clarify any ambiguities.

Transferability

Transferability concerns the relevance of research findings to different contexts or participants (Lincoln & Guba, 2013). It involves extrapolating the conclusions of a study to other situations that share similar, but not completely identical conditions (Patton, 2002). The determination of relevance in transferability lies with those who seek to apply the findings and interpretation (Lincoln & Guba, 2013). To enhance the transferability of this research, I employed the strategy of providing a *thick description* of the participants' experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Thick description involves going beyond the surface-level description of events and actions to uncover deeper meanings and understandings. This approach often involves incorporating direct quotes or narratives from participants, which can help to bring their experiences to life and provide a more nuanced and genuine portrayal of their perspectives.

Dependability

The dependability criterion is focused on the extent to which the research findings are consistent with the data gathered during the study. (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Satisfying this criterion requires presenting the research findings meticulously and transparently, including a detailed description of the research context, participants, and findings. Additionally, presenting verbatim examples from the data collected can further promote the dependability of the research results.

Confirmability

Confirmability refers to the extent to which the research findings and interpretations result from a reliable process of inquiry and data collection (Lincoln & Guba, 2013). Strategies such as a researcher reflexive journal are designed to satisfy confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 2013; Patton, 2015). A reflexive journal is a powerful tool for understanding the human as an

instrument and exploring prior constructions (Lincoln & Guba, 2013, p. 57). A reflexive journal, also known as a reflective journal or a research diary, is a tool researchers use to document their reflections, thoughts, and experiences throughout the research process (Smith, 1999). It may include personal reflections on the research topic, observations of the research setting, and critical reflections on the research process. This approach differs from the research journal because it fosters critical awareness rather than primarily serving as a record of research decisions. By consistently revisiting the reflexive journal to document critical awareness of prior interpretations, I aim to confirm a reliable research process that peers can review and assess. Furthermore, both journals can serve as supplementary data sources for analysis (Josselson, 2013).

Authenticity

Alongside trustworthiness, *authenticity* is used to evaluate the quality of research and ensure that the methods employed align with the guiding inquiry paradigm (Lewis-Beck et al., 2004). In narrative inquiry, authenticity is critical to maintaining ethical integrity throughout the research process (Clandinin et al., 2018). The criteria for authenticity include (a) fairness, (b) ontological, (c) educative, (d) catalytic, and (e) tactical (Guba, 1990; Lincoln & Guba, 2013).

Fairness

The primary objective of fairness in authenticity is to provide an equitable view that presents all constructions and the values that support them (Lincoln & Guba, 1986). When conducting qualitative research, researchers must be mindful of their own biases and the potential for power imbalances that may influence the research process. For example, researchers may have more education and be more familiar with the research process than participants.

Researchers typically have control over how results are interpreted and presented. Therefore, fairness aims to address and mitigate these imbalances as much as possible.

In this study, fairness was attained by providing participants with opportunities to discuss the research process and review how their stories are presented, ensuring their voices are accurately represented and their perspectives are reasonably conveyed. Participants were given an opportunity to review the research findings before publication. Additionally, the approach of *process consent* (Ellis, 2007; Munhall, 1988; Usher & Arthur, 1998) was used by thoroughly reviewing the informed consent document with participants before the first interview, emphasizing important sections such as contact information and the participant's right to withdraw their participation at any time (Lahman, 2018). I sought consent from the participants for video recording the interviews and including photographs in the manuscript, thereby ensuring transparency and respect for their autonomy and preferences throughout the research process.

Ontological Authenticity

Ontological authenticity pertains to the degree to which the participants and researcher have gained a greater awareness of their constructions (Guba, 1990; Lincoln & Guba, 1986). Fulfilling this criterion requires researchers to disclose their perspective and positionality, self-reflect on personal growth, and critically examine the final research findings (Lincoln & Guba, 2013). Acknowledging and reflecting on these factors, researchers can strive to represent the research topic in-depth, leading to more trustworthy and impactful research findings.

To satisfy the ontological authenticity criterion, I verbally communicated my perspective and positionality to participants and described it in writing in the manuscript. Additionally, I maintained a reflexive journal that documented my reflections on the research process, including critical awareness of any previous interpretations that may have influenced my approach to the

study. This process helped me remain aware of my biases and assumptions and continuously reflect on my development as a researcher. Furthermore, during the member-checking stage, participants were given a chance to examine the data and provide feedback on my interpretations of the data. This feedback can help further enhance the ontological authenticity of the research by challenging or reinforcing the researcher's perspectives.

Educative Authenticity

Educative authenticity refers to expanding awareness about the diversity of perspectives and value systems that exist (Lincoln & Guba, 1986, p. 23). To strive toward this criterion, I shared my detailed findings with participants, allowing them to give feedback on the *whole story* of the data. Feedback can enable participants to reflect on their own experiences and perspectives, as well as learn from the experiences of others, potentially leading to a deeper understanding of the research topic. Participant data and pertinent literature contribute to a more *complex construction* (Lincoln & Guba, 1986) of transitions in higher education student affairs. This process facilitates the development of a multifaceted and nuanced understanding of the research topic, providing valuable insights that can inform future research and practice in student affairs.

Catalytic Authenticity

Catalytic authenticity refers to the extent to which the research process is capable of inspiring change or transformation in the participants or the larger community (Lincoln & Guba, 1986). The significance of catalytic authenticity lies in its potential to bring about long-lasting, valuable impacts not only for the participants but also for the broader community, extending beyond the study's limits. Approaches to satisfying this criterion include sharing a final report with participants (Lincoln & Guba, 2013). Additionally, this manuscript includes practical

recommendations for higher education administrators to adapt their practices as the field continues to experience significant transitions.

Tactical Authenticity

The final measure of the study's quality is tactical authenticity, which evaluates whether the research empowers participants and the researcher (Lincoln & Guba, 1986). Participants must be actively involved in the research process, giving them a sense of agency, ownership over their experiences, and a feeling that their voices are being heard and valued. I strived to approach participants with an inclusive attitude, acknowledging their role as contributors who shape the research process. Seeking feedback from participants on the research process and interpretation of data also enhanced tactical authenticity.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical dilemmas and concerns are part of the everyday practice of doing research. Ethical standards in qualitative research can be divided into two dimensions: procedural ethics and aspirational ethics (Lahman, 2018). Procedural ethics includes institutional review boards (IRBs) and institutional policies. While these mandatory ethical codes may be considered the minimum ethical standard for research, they are imperfect and do not provide sufficient ethical guidelines for research. Qualitative research is emergent, requiring researchers to adjust their strategies in response to what they learn as the study unfolds (Schwandt, 2015). Therefore, researchers should develop their own personal, aspirational research stance that is flexible to emergent issues that may occur during the research. With this stance in place, researchers can be responsive to emergent research in a way that incorporates both procedural and aspirational ethics.

From in Loco Parentis to Ethics of Care

The roots of today's comprehensive student affairs programs in the United States can be traced to the founding of colonial colleges (Leonard, 1999). At this time, students were viewed as immature adolescents requiring counsel, supervision, vocational guidance, and, frequently, remedial classes. Colonial colleges were empowered to act *in loco parentis* or in place of a student's parents. College student personnel services, now called student affairs, were mainly limited to housing and discipline when first developed. The doctrine of *in loco parentis* persisted in some form until the 1960s. Today, this field no longer follows *in loco parentis.* The focus is on maintaining an educationally supportive environment; not controlling student life so completely that students do not have the opportunity to learn from their own mistakes. This is a delicate balance, but it should ultimately lean toward promoting self-advocacy and self-efficacy among students.

While the student affairs field no longer practices *in loco parentis*, Noddings (1992) brings a basic tenet back in the ethics of care. Nel Noddings, a feminist scholar, is well-known for her contributions to the philosophy of education. This groundbreaking theory on the ethics of care suggests that the primary responsibility of schools is to take care of children and prioritize students at the center of the educational process. In contrast to the focus on standardized test scores in K-12 or persistence and retention in higher education, an ethics of care reframes the priorities. Caring requires teachers to listen to students' feelings, evaluate their purposes, and engage in self-evaluation. Ethics of care is a relational theory that focuses on the following:

- Engrossment by the one caring with the one(s) cared for
- Displacement of motivation from the one caring to the one(s) cared for
- Commitment to the well-being of the one(s) cared for, the one caring, and the relationship, and
- Confirmation of the best possible motives of the one(s) cared for (Noddings, 1992).

Personal Ethical Stance: Applying Ethics of Care to Research

Applying ethics of care to research is my personal ethical stance, that is, shifting the focus from caring for *students* to caring for *participants*. This approach prioritizes human beings' relational and connection-based aspects rather than their individual, atomized aspects. The following sections will outline how ethics of care will be applied in this study.

First, in a research study, the ethics of care approach shifts the language from caring *for* the participant to caring *about* the participant. This form of caring carefully avoids a paternalistic or *in loco parentis* approach, as it is essential to maintain professional boundaries between researchers and participants to ensure ethical conduct in research. Clear boundaries should be established at the outset of the research, and a professional demeanor should be maintained throughout the research process, avoiding any actions or behaviors that could be perceived as inappropriate or unprofessional.

The ethics of care approach involves a collaborative approach where participants are considered competent and active contributors to the research. This framework focuses on conducting research *with* participants rather than on them. By involving participants as collaborators, the research can positively impact their communities. This approach helps to break down power dynamics between researchers and participants and maximizes the potential benefits of the research. Researchers can also encourage participants to use the research to advocate for

systemic change, similar to how student affairs practitioners empower students to advocate for themselves.

Researchers need to be adaptable and responsive to the unpredictable nature of the research. Nonetheless, they should establish a guiding framework to assist them in making essential decisions during the research process. The process of developing this framework contributes to the researcher's reflexive sense of self. Reflexivity involves intentional, self-aware analysis of the interactions between the researcher and the researched (Finlay & Gough, 2003). The researcher is an instrument of the research and must understand their role in the research (Dodgson, 2019). By integrating ethics of care into my personal research stance, I approached this research with a focus on caring about the participants, involving them in the research, and optimizing the benefits of research to those who participate. In doing so, I entered research with a better understanding of myself and my impact as a researcher.

Chapter Summary

This chapter outlined the research questions, inquiry paradigm, methodology, and study methods. The central research question is: How do mid-level, higher education professionals make meaning of their experiences as they navigate workplace transitions? To address the research question, I situated this study in the interpretivist paradigm, guided by the theoretical framework of ambiguous loss (Boss, 2006). I selected a photo-narrative methodology with individual, in-depth interviews and participant photography as the primary forms of data collection. I identified the following approaches to data analysis: narrative analysis (Riessman, 2008), symbolic analysis (Müller, 2011), and crystallization (Ellingson, 2009). I described the criteria for rigor employed to enhance the trustworthiness and authenticity of the study (Lincoln & Guba, 2013). Finally, I discussed ethical considerations and my personal ethical stance on

ethics of care (Noddings, 1992). With careful attention to methodological soundness, this study has the potential to profoundly advance the understanding of how higher education student affairs professionals navigate workplace transitions.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to examine the narratives of mid-level, higher education professionals as they navigate workplace transitions. To that end, the overarching question of this research study was the following:

Q1 How do mid-level, higher education professionals make meaning of their experiences as they navigate workplace transitions?

The focus questions to guide this research included:

Q1a How do mid-level, higher education professionals experience burnout while navigating workplace transitions?

Q1b How do mid-level, higher education professionals experience turnover intentions as they navigate transitions?

Q1c Which support systems are helpful for mid-level, higher education professionals while navigating workplace transitions?

To answer these questions, I positioned this study within the interpretivist paradigm, guided by the theoretical framework of ambiguous loss (Boss, 2006). To capture the richness of their narratives, I employed a photo-narrative approach, which involved individual in-depth interviews and participant photographs as the primary data sources.

This chapter presents the findings from the photo-narratives of the participants. First, each research participant is introduced through narrative vignettes. Next, through thematic analysis, this chapter articulates the emergent themes of compensation, coworker relationships, workplace flexibility, and office environment, which are central to understanding the role and

impact of these transitions. Finally, the chapter employs symbolic analysis to examine the deeper meanings within the photo-narratives, providing a nuanced interpretation of the data. Employing a multifaceted analytical framework that integrates narrative inquiry, thematic analysis, and symbolic interpretation, this study provides a comprehensive understanding of the ways in which professionals comprehend their roles and navigate through changes, aligning with the concept of crystallization as discussed by Ellingson (2009).

Throughout this chapter, selected participant quotations and photographs that exemplify the research findings are shared. Verbatim quotations have been lightly edited for clarity while preserving the original intent of the speaker's words. The remaining photographs are included in Appendices L to AA. Photographs that contained identifying information have not been displayed. Instead, a written description of the photograph was included in Appendix BB to capture the significance of that experience for those participants.

Participant Vignettes

In this section, I present participant vignettes to offer a closer look at the narratives and perspectives of selected participants. The vignettes that follow are constructed from transcripts and photographs, illuminating the ways in which each participant perceives, contextualizes, and finds significance in their professional life.

Andrea

Andrea (pseudonym), a Residence Director, sat down in her small office at a large, public university, glancing at the photograph on her wall. It depicted a group of students smiling, each one immersed in their own story yet connected to the others. Whenever Andrea felt drained or questioned her choices, she'd gaze at this image, reminding herself of why she chose this line of

work. It encapsulated her purpose—fostering genuine connections, creating spaces for open dialogue, and embracing each student's unique humanity.

A 28-year-old Latina-Mexican woman, years of dedicated work in student affairs had certainly taken a toll on her. There were times, particularly when managing student staff, when burnout threatened to consume her. But despite the challenges, the core of her passion remained unchanged: her connection with the students. Although the needs and personalities of each incoming batch of students varied, this variability was what kept her work dynamic and fulfilling. She took pride in adapting, learning, and growing alongside her students. She shared:

> It's a good reminder for me that I need to continue to like prepare myself, because their needs are so very different than they were so many years ago. And so, it doesn't really matter how much, or how many years I have done my same job. There's always something that I'm going to need to learn or I'm going to need to redo because they're different.

As Andrea moved up the ranks, she couldn't help but notice a shift in perception. She was aware that "the way that I was going to be perceived, compared to my peers, was going to be very different, for many reasons, like the identities I carry in race and age." Sometimes, she could almost sense the undercurrents of those wanting to see her fail. It was a sobering reality, but she constantly reminded herself that not everyone harbored such sentiments.

In moments of self-reflection, Andrea often pondered the changing dynamics of her role. As responsibilities grew, it became easy to feel disconnected from the very essence that drew her to the job. She had seen many in higher positions lose touch with their initial motivations, and she was determined to never let that happen to her. She anchored herself to her "why" – the reason she committed to this path in the first place. She said, "The work that I've done with my

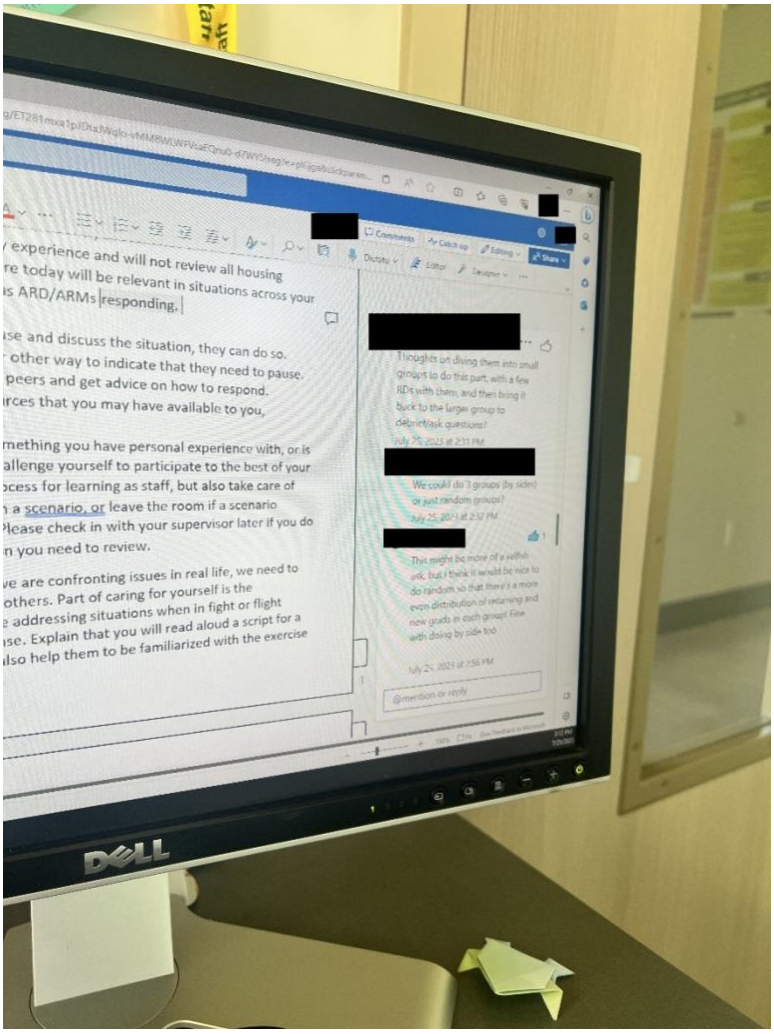
students has always kept me going. And it’s always felt like one of my reasons to want to stay in my job.” As she prepared for her new role, she couldn't ignore the overarching problem that gnawed at her: the well-being of the staff. While the institution was focused on addressing students' basic needs, the same courtesy wasn't extended to the employees. Staff members were burning out, sacrificing their own well-being in the name of student support. She shared:

> We're constantly thinking about the basic needs of our students. But we're not necessarily thinking about the needs of our staff. And it's like we're burning people to the ground. Because we say that we want to support students and we forget that we're doing it at our expense.

The system, in Andrea's eyes, was unsustainable and needed change. Figure 4 shows Andrea leading a workshop on self-care for her staff, visually embodying her dedication to fostering a healthier work environment despite the institutional challenges. Identifying information has been redacted.

Figure 4

Andrea's Photograph of a Presentation Outline



In the face of all these challenges, Andrea remained undeterred. An international scholar, she had weathered storms before and had always found a way to reground herself. With her purpose clear and her commitment unwavering, she was ready to make a difference, not just for the students but for her colleagues too. After all, change had to start somewhere, and she was willing to lead the charge.

Anne

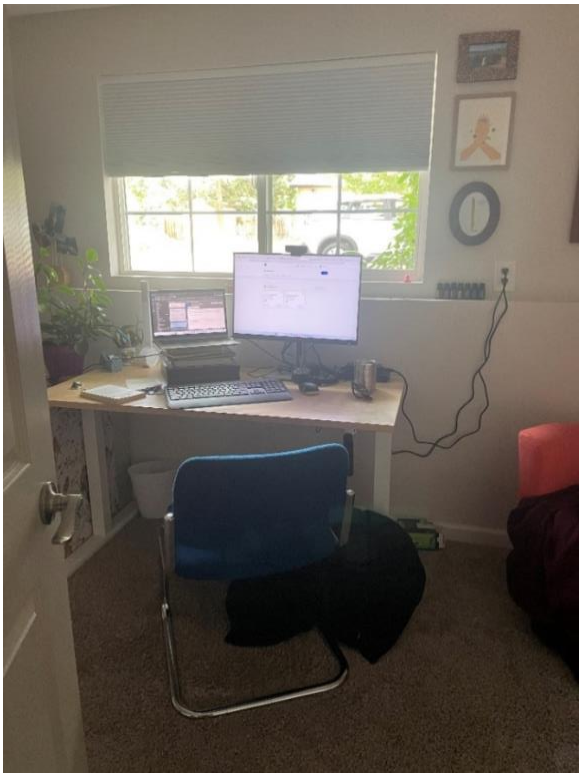
Anne (pseudonym), a committed Academic Advisor at a large, public university, has committed over two decades to helping students navigate their educational paths. A 45-year-old White cis-ish woman, Anne's dedication to her students was evident in the way she shared her insights, providing clarity and encouragement. While she had gathered a wealth of knowledge from her academic pursuits, it was her innate ability to connect with and inspire the students she advised that truly set her apart.

Anne emphasized that academic advising was “the best job I’ve ever had.” It was not just the longest position she had held, but it was also the most enjoyable. Her deep love for education and higher education was evident in every word she spoke. For Anne, there was no better environment than the academic realm. She relished being part of a team, sharing ideas, and contributing to the growth and development of both her students and her institution.

Adding a personal touch to her workspace was her loyal dog, who Anne fondly referred to as her “coworker”. The joy of having him by her side during work hours, thanks to her remote setup (Figure 5), was immeasurable.

Figure 5

Anne's Photograph of Her Home Workspace



Their connection was evident in her statement:

> It is so interesting how when I'm hanging up with a student, I kind of usually say the same things… He knows my leaving practices. Because if he's upstairs and I say goodbye to someone, he comes down, and he's like, 'Are we done?'
>
> Another personal touch was her desk which was crafted by her father. She said, I love this desk so much because I get a stand-up desk at home, and that my dad, like, made it for me.

Working from the comfort of her home provided Anne with the flexibility to integrate her personal and professional lives, making each day both fulfilling and comfortable. She shared, "This is convenient. Comfortable. Wonderful. Lovely. Nice. I feel so lucky. I feel so grateful. And boy, things have changed for me."

As we began our conversation about her experiences and insights, it became clear that Anne's journey into academia was more than a career; it was a calling. Her commitment to guiding and supporting students through their academic journeys was not just a job—it was her life's work. Anne was more than a participant; she was a testament to the transformative power of education and the role of advisors in guiding the paths of learners.

Brandon

Brandon (pseudonym), a dedicated Academic Advisor and Instructor at a large, public university, finds himself at the crossroads of his higher education career. A 43-year-old White Jewish man, he empathizes with the challenges students face and dedicates himself to providing unwavering support at his institution.

For over a decade, Brandon has navigated the complexities of his role, helping students from various backgrounds chart their academic journey. His dedication to student success and retention shines through in the strong personal connections he fosters with each student, often going the extra mile to ensure their needs are met in a timely manner. “I send emails on the weekend pretty much every weekend… I’ll send emails as I’m hiking,” he admits, highlighting his commitment but also hinting at the blurred lines between work and personal time.

This non-traditional schedule is designed to maximize his availability to students; however, it suggests an erosion of boundaries that might put Brandon at risk of burnout over time. The seamless integration of his work into all hours and spaces can potentially compromise essential downtime. Brandon stands by his flexible scheduling, noting, “I am serving the students and [the university] better by having a more flexible type of arrangement, where I’m not locked into these artificial hours, because students don’t work that way.” Yet, this approach may jeopardize the sustainability of his commitment.

Brandon has witnessed the revolving door of his colleagues, with some leaving for higher-paying positions while others flee the demanding work environment altogether. Despite his commitment to his students, Brandon can't ignore the glaring issue of salary equity. The underpaid staff members like himself feel undervalued and overworked. This harsh contrast against those who earn high salaries within the same institution gnaws at him.

Brandon's desire for equity extends beyond salary. He yearns for greater transparency in decision-making processes and more effective communication at his university: “There’s a lack of transparency. I don’t know anything.” His frustration is palpable when major transitions, such as leadership changes, remain shrouded in mystery, leaving employees like him in the dark.

The lack of resources adds another layer to his struggle. Brandon's aging office computer, lacking a webcam and microphone, doesn't meet the demands of modern advising. His plea for an upgrade is overlooked, highlighting a disconnect between the university's proclaimed support for staff and the tangible challenges they face.

As he reflects on his journey, Brandon grapples with a pivotal decision: Should he remain steadfast in his commitment to student success, despite the institutional challenges, or should he explore opportunities elsewhere, possibly in the private sector? He's explored the job market and has even been presented with offers. Yet, the fear of the unknown holds him back; he's reluctant to transition without a clear picture of what a new role might entail: “I’ve applied to positions. And I’ve gotten accepted positions, but you don’t know what you’re getting into. So yeah, I mean, as much as I’m complaining, that’s obviously good enough to retain me for the last 10 years.” The intrinsic value of advising and his unwavering connection to the students keep him anchored to his current role, but the adversity he faces looms large. Since Brandon discontinued study participation after the first interview, a photograph to accompany his story is absent.

Elizabeth

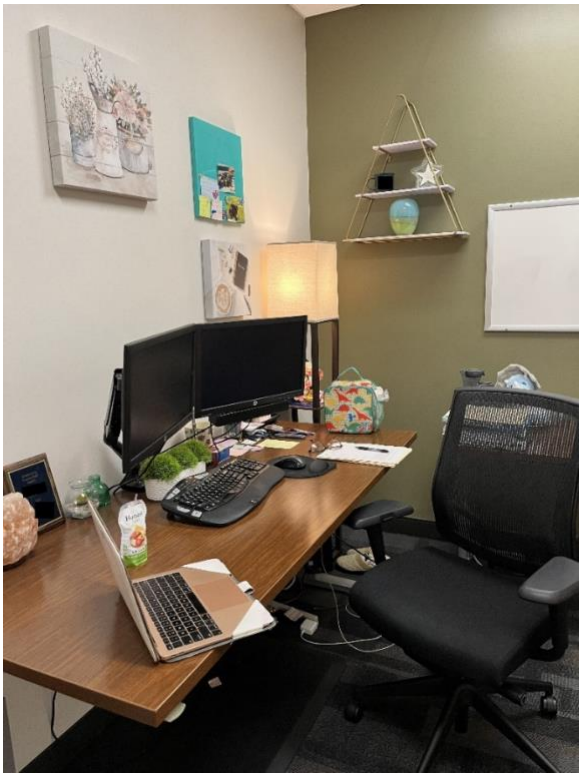
A 27-year-old Chinese Asian American woman, Elizabeth (pseudonym) navigates her role as a Senior Coordinator at a large, public university with both pride and challenges. She vividly recalled her motivation for stepping into this role: a deep desire to use her supervising skills to create meaningful relationships with students. Elizabeth cherished the opportunity to work with smaller caseloads to "get to know students on a much deeper level than just kind of that almost transactional feeling when you have so many students — it's kind of, 'in and out,' 'in and out.'"

She often reminisced about her own days as a student and felt an inherent need to give back to the communities that once supported her. Especially dear to her heart was the program focusing on first-generation, low-income, students of color, mirroring many of her own identities.

However, just as Elizabeth was settling into her new role as a young professional, the world plunged into a pandemic. Adapting to working from home, confronting technological challenges, and coping with the isolation of just her and her cat became her daily realities. She missed the spontaneous office chats. She said, "I was kind of much more like, trying to figure it out on my own, which sometimes felt like I didn't know what I was doing. I didn't know really who to ask for help in that regard." Elizabeth's on-campus office is shown below (Figure 6). Identifying information has been redacted.

Figure 6

Elizabeth's Photograph of Her On-Campus Office



Elizabeth's department witnessed various shifts in staffing over the years, causing a few to seek positions elsewhere for more flexible work conditions. Yet, amidst these transitions, Elizabeth's supervisors played pivotal roles. Their transparency, especially regarding salary equity and their holistic "people-first" approach, deeply resonated with her. She said:

> I really appreciated how supervisors have given us some of that autonomy, some of that freedom, like being able to talk through everyone's own circumstances… They really asked us, like, what is the situation looking like? What are the responsibilities? What are you needing? Because we all had such different situations.

Elizabeth found solace and empowerment in having two women of color in leadership. This connection opened doors to deeper discussions about identity, enriching her experience. Moreover, the team's diversity and caring attitude was a keystone in her decision to continue her

journey with them. She said, “that is what’s really kept me, is that they really care. They let me take classes. And that I don’t feel like a number, like an employee. They actually care about me as a human.”

Reflecting on her experiences, both before and during the pandemic, Elizabeth realized her enduring commitment to the world of higher education. Her students were her “why.” Seeing them grow, graduate, and prosper was her intrinsic reward. Yet, amidst her dedication, Elizabeth acknowledged her moments of burnout and hoped for continued flexibility and understanding from her institution.

June

June (pseudonym), a 28-year-old Latinx woman, serves as an Associate Director at a large, public university. She is responsible for operationalizing a grant for minoritized students and supervising professional staff. Determined to uplift student voices, June worked diligently to help them navigate institutional barriers. She said, “I’m really passionate about elevating those student voices and also helping them to see how much power really is there.”

Yet, recent turnover had thrust more tasks upon her plate, a testament to the unspoken reality that mid-level staff frequently face increased burdens when vacancies arise in the team. She said, “We have like twice as much work as we normally should. And so, it has created some imbalance there.”

Referring to her undergraduate years, June shared, “I always knew that I wanted to be in some sort of helping profession. But again, being first generation, I didn’t necessarily know what the full breadth of being in a helping profession might look like.” Her role as a resident assistant, coupled with the influence of key mentors, propelled her towards a master's degree and a dedicated career spanning large public universities to community colleges. These varied

experiences deepened her understanding of the higher education landscape and prepared her for the complexities she now faces. She said, “The transition [to Associate Director] for me, I think, was smooth because I understood the larger systems behind institutions and how they work.” She's optimistic about her professional growth at the institution:

> There has been a learning curve for me. And so, I feel like I’ve had to just learn a lot on the fly. And thankfully, I feel very confident and comfortable with my problem-solving and, you know, just skills in general, but it has definitely made for some transitions that have been hard to navigate.

For June, professional transitions were complicated by a high rate of colleague turnover. As many of her previous acquaintances moved on, June recognized the importance of building new relationships in the close-knit world of student affairs. She believed in "really leaning into those special things that help someone understand that you see them, and you see their humanity, because I think what ties us all together is our community."

Outside of work, the pandemic introduced a unique set of challenges. Her pets, a dog and a cat, provided much-needed comfort during the isolation of remote work. She said:

> Reflecting on COVID, and all the transitions that happened, my pets, I think, were one of the most grounding things for me. And one of the things that just really helped to, I don’t know, pass the time, I guess, especially when we were indoors and couldn’t really, or at least for me, I felt like it was dangerous at times to be outside.

June's love for plants, a passion inherited from her family, served as another source of solace. Each plant in her care holds a distinct memory, grounding her amidst the chaos.

The pandemic also ushered in a new hobby for June: mountain biking (Figure 7).

Figure 7

June's Photograph of Her Mountain Biking Helmets

Beyond the physical challenge, the trails became a metaphor for navigating life's obstacles and provided unexpected moments of connection with fellow bikers. She shared:

> Through COVID, which was a time where I felt like a lot of us had a lot of obstacles, for me, going through the literal obstacle of a bike trail really helped to process a lot of what was going on in life.

June's narrative exemplifies a blend of professional challenges, personal passions, and adaptive resilience. It underscores the essential role of perseverance and connection in challenging times.

Natalia

Six years ago, Natalia (pseudonym) stepped into the world of higher education, driven by a fervor to make a difference. As a 30-year-old disabled, limited-income, first-generation

Chicana student, she had personally known the struggles that many students faced. This knowledge fueled her passion to support and uplift them, ensuring they had better experiences than she did. She said, “It was really meaningful to me to work with students and to be able to kind of do what I can to make sure that they had a better experience than I did.”

She had started her career in a more traditional setting – the brick-and-mortar campuses before the era of COVID-19. Yet, in the blink of an eye, she found herself navigating the whirlwind of a pandemic, with institutions transitioning rapidly between in-person and remote settings. She shared,

> It was a really weird transition for me to have been at an institution that we were already in-person before most other institutions were. And then work for an institution that was fully remote still. And then move states in the middle of all of that, and then go back to in-person again.

As she advanced to her current position as Assistant Director at a large, public university, Natalia found herself in a whirlpool of staffing issues. The department was constantly understaffed, and with the institution growing at an unprecedented rate, it felt like they were always playing catch up. She shared, “Honestly, we have not been fully staffed since I started. Like, someone will get positions in and then somebody else leaves. And so, we’ve had to actually kind of rearrange our staffing structure.”

Navigating relationships at work had its own set of complexities. She reminisced about her previous supervisor, with whom her values aligned almost seamlessly. Their bond had been strong, built on mutual respect and understanding. However, in her current role, adapting to her supervisor’s different work ethics and communication styles had initially been challenging. She said, “We had to have some pretty, like, direct and serious conversations, which I wish would

have happened earlier than they did. But I'm glad that they happened. And now we have a really great relationship."

The weight of her responsibilities often spilled into her personal life. She struggled with "the boundaries and like the constant pressure and the sense of urgency, and like, everything feels urgent in higher ed. And like, it's not. Not all the time." Exhaustion seeped in, and there seemed to be no respite, no downtime. Her passion – powerlifting (Figure 8) – which once served as her escape, felt sidelined.

Figure 8

Natalia's Photograph of Herself Powerlifting

Reading, surrounded by her beloved plants, was one of the few solaces she found amidst the storm. She shared:

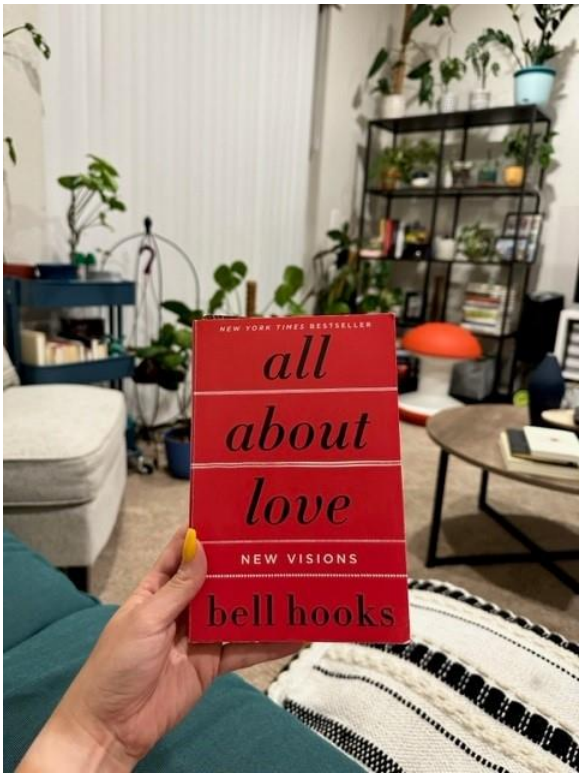
> This is one of the like, along with powerlifting, one of the hobbies and the things that I do that bring me joy and that really center me. I tried to find those things to balance the work stress, right, to find things that recharge me and re-center me.

Her commitment to marginalized populations remained unwavering, but she was increasingly aware of the sacrifices she was making for an institution that often failed to reciprocate in kind. Referring to "All About Love" by bell hooks (Figure 9), she said,

> This concept of an ethic of love is partly of like, what keeps me doing this work. And my commitment to working specifically with historically marginalized populations and wanting to serve them and promote their success and support them and do that through a loving ethic.

Figure 9

Natalia's Photograph of "All About Love: New Visions" by bell hooks



The thought of working outside of higher education, where she could earn significantly more, frequently crossed her mind. She loved working with her students, but she also knew she needed to prioritize herself. The question loomed – how long could she continue in this role without compromising her well-being?

Noah

In Noah's (pseudonym) home office, a desk crafted by his father stood prominently, serving not only as a nod to family but also a symbol of how transient adaptations during the pandemic had found permanence. A 32-year-old White man, this space had become central to Noah's hybrid working style, meshing personal and professional seamlessly.

While working from home as an Advising Manager at a large, public university, Noah took up bread baking. He said, "I think about kind of that work-life balance, and that's a huge

part of this. And being able to, you know, take little breaks and have a product to show for it throughout the workday.” The hands-on task was a welcome break, and it wasn't just for him. Bringing fresh loaves to the office became a meaningful way to connect with others. During the pandemic, Noah realized the significance of making deliberate efforts to connect with colleagues, recognizing that preserving these bonds was essential for preserving a sense of community and camaraderie.

When not at his desk or in the kitchen, Noah was on the move. Lunchtimes were reserved for runs, a habit he'd grown to rely on for clarity. He said:

> I can feel like when I come back from a run after lunch, I definitely focus better at work on whatever I’m doing. It kind of removes some of the, you know, distracting thoughts or other things that I might otherwise think about, to kind of get that out on the run. And so, I have really felt the benefit there.

On days he was in the office, he opted for his bike, enjoying the brisk commute (Figure 10).

Figure 10

Noah's Photograph of the Bike Trail

His dog, always eager for a midday stroll, benefited from this hybrid work model too. Those quick breaks, a walk around the block, meant more to Noah than just stretching his legs. It was a chance to reset with his loyal companion by his side. He shared:

> There's two ends of it in terms of having the companion because I would otherwise have been alone in my apartment if it weren't for him, throughout the pandemic. And so, it was really important, I think, to my well-being and having another living creature around me to care for and hang out with and cuddle with. But then also, like, it made it easy to have a dog, you know, being home a lot.

Over time, working remotely became more than just a necessity; it was a lifestyle. Noah appreciated the advice and resources others provided during this change. He came to value these

habits beyond mere coping strategies, yet acknowledging and expressing gratitude to others remained a skill he was still honing. He reflected:

> I don't know that I've given others that appreciation for, you know, giving me tools or supporting me in finding a healthy way through working remotely. And then, now that I don't need those as coping mechanisms, but now enjoy them, you know, fully as hobbies. Again, kind of giving appreciation to others is not something I'm good at, which is what I learned about myself.

Olivia

In the small confines of a 1000-square-foot apartment, Olivia (pseudonym), a 26-year-old White woman, and her husband who was diligently pursuing his master's degree, squeezed into a shared 10x10 office. The pandemic brought close quarters closer, with headsets (Figure 11) becoming essential tools to maintain privacy in their professional worlds.

Figure 11

Olivia's Photograph of Her Laptop and Headset

She said, "When I was thinking about the resources needed for the transition, or like, how I needed to really like imagine what meeting with students was like, I always think of my headset." As an Advisor, Olivia found innovative ways to adapt her communication style and support techniques within the virtual environment, ensuring that the personal connection and effectiveness of face-to-face interactions were preserved despite the physical distance.

However, change was on the horizon for Olivia. Transitioning from a tight space, she soon found herself in a new, private office where she could display physical resources for students, traveling across campus to gather materials. The significance of this move was "being able to move not only into a new office, but like, a good office. I have a closed door and I was actually able to, like, put up resources." This move was symbolic of her growth at a university that not only provided her with increasing professional opportunities but also enabled her

personal ambitions. She said, “I’ve been able to get raises. I’ve been able to kind of update my living situation to kind of fit the needs that I wanted. And like get the things that were important to me.”

From the constraints of a campus apartment, Olivia upgraded to a rented house, a decision motivated by more than just space. A backyard (Figure 12) became a reality, much to the delight of their dog.

Figure 12

Olivia’s Photograph of Their Backyard

She said, “We’re able to upgrade our house and upgrade our backyard. We are able to fulfil my husband’s dream of having a large dog.”

Olivia's home office became a sanctuary of self-expression and a testament to her job's flexibility. She was excited to share, “This is my new office at home. It’s very me.” Surrounded by quilting materials, paints, and her own stained-glass creations, she had space for work and her

myriad of hobbies. Whenever stress loomed, she had an array of creative outlets to turn to. She said,

> When I'm stressed or something is happening, I have different outlets to go to. Especially when I was like really working from home, I could have a rude email or something like that. I kind of like, step away, and it's like, hey, let's work on this quilt top.

The benefits of working at a large, public institution were numerous for Olivia. The prospect of the Public Student Loan Forgiveness plan weighed heavily in her favor, although the shadow of unpaid student loans and the allure of potentially higher-paying jobs in the industry kept her vigilant. She said, "I've actually had notifications for different jobs set up since I first started this job." Daily job notifications remained a constant, subtle reminder of the volatile nature of the student affairs industry and the consistent turnover it witnessed.

Despite the occasional uncertainties, Olivia felt secure in her role. The flexibility it offered was unparalleled. Whether it was visiting the botanical gardens with her parents or hosting her grandparents for a week, Olivia's job allowed her to seamlessly blend her professional and personal worlds, emphasizing the balance she had achieved in her life.

Narrative Thematic Analysis

Though the experiences of the participants were individual, there were common themes that emerged when considering how they navigate workplace transitions. To discern these patterns, narrative thematic coding was employed to analyze participants' narratives (Riessman, 2008). This approach focuses on what was *spoken* in the narrative, the content articulated in the narrative and the meaning it conveys. The themes included (1) compensation, (2) coworker relationships, (3) flexibility, and (4) the office environment.

Compensation

At a large public university situated in an area known for its elevated cost of living, the theme of "compensation" emerged among mid-level student affairs professionals. These professionals, often holding master's degrees or higher, find themselves caught in a difficult financial situation. Despite their advanced education and their critical roles in shaping students' college experiences, their compensation often does not reflect the demands of their work or the cost of living in their area. Natalia expressed a sentiment shared by many participants: “Higher ed just does not pay a living wage. And cost of living just keeps going up.” In fact, this issue of inadequate compensation was the most frequently cited reason the participants gave for considering leaving their current positions.

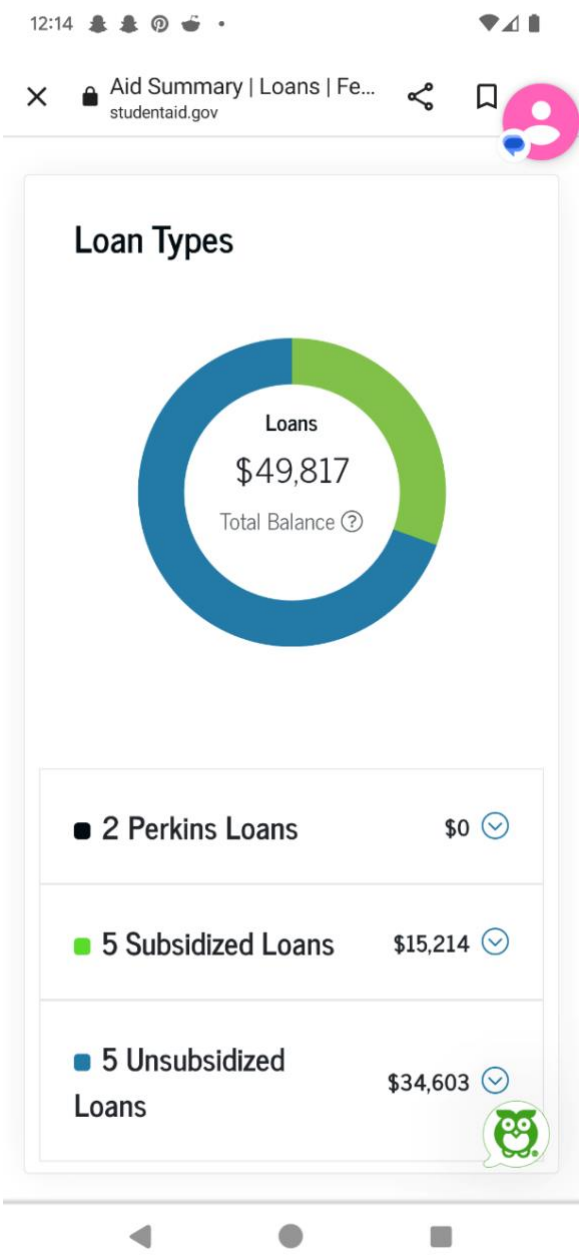
Noah's assertion, “Our salaries are and have stayed competitive across campus,” underscores an implicit dimension of the issue that often remains unspoken but is deeply felt. At a public university, where transparency is paramount due to public funding, salaries are readily available information. This transparency, while fostering a sense of accountability, can also give rise to discontent and comparisons among staff. They can easily compare their earnings against colleagues in similar positions, leading to potential feelings of inequity. June's observation sheds light on this nuanced dynamic: “Depending on where you work, because it depends on, you know, your budget, there can be someone doing similar work with similar students and get paid a lot less.” Her comment captures the inherent disparities within the system, where the allocation of funds can vary greatly between departments, even if the roles and responsibilities remain largely comparable.

Working at a public university, despite its challenges, presents some unique advantages that private institutions might not offer. For example, through the Public Service Loan

Forgiveness (PSLF) program, a borrower's public student loan balance may be forgiven tax-free after making 120 qualifying payments, translating to a decade of dedicated service. Olivia, highlighting the tangible benefits of this program, shared a screenshot (Figure 13) of her looming federal student loan balance, which stood at $49,817.

Figure 13

Olivia's Photograph of Student Loan Balance



This amount, often daunting for many graduates, could potentially be erased with the PSLF program. She remarked that the potential for Public Service Forgiveness was both a financial relief and a key reason she remained in public higher education. Her sentiments underscore the impact of both salary and benefits on professionals' choices to stay in their field.

Coworker Relationships

During the height of the pandemic, the shift to remote work profoundly impacted coworker relationships among student affairs professionals. As educational institutions quickly transitioned online, many in this domain navigated new roles and responsibilities from home. June reflected on the pandemic's paradoxical role in fostering connections: “We had to find connection points with people through COVID when we felt like we very much had to keep to ourselves.” Her words underscore a theme of unexpected solidarity and adaptability in the face of isolation.

This abrupt shift especially affected those newly onboarded, complicating their integration into their teams. June illuminated the shared struggles of those who joined teams in the midst of the pandemic:

> There was a lot of people who were hired through the pandemic, and it seems like all of them had similar experiences in that it was hard to find connection and truly feel like you’re part of a team through, you know, that online onboarding.

The statement underscores the inherent challenges of building relationships without traditional face-to-face interactions.

Even amidst these challenges, the importance of building and maintaining relationships took center stage. June further emphasized, “I’ve always really been a relationship-focused person, but especially through the pandemic, like it became so important to build those

relationships, the connection." This sentiment of prioritizing relationships echoes through the experiences of many professionals in the study.

For some, like Noah, innovative and personal strategies emerged to intentionally connect with colleagues. His love for sourdough bread baking became a conduit for building relationships, as shown in Figure 14.

Figure 14

Noah's Photograph of His Sourdough Bread Loaf

As he shared, "Now I bring it into the office and give it out to folks. And connect with people that way." This approach highlights the unique and personal ways in which professionals sought to establish and nurture connections despite the challenges.

The pandemic period, with its enforced remote work conditions, tested the adaptability and ingenuity of professionals in various fields. For student affairs professionals, who often thrive in interpersonal environments, finding ways to maintain and foster connections was

paramount. Anne's sentiment underscores the enduring significance of relationships: "There's nothing more important than relationships. There's nothing more important than communication, or the communication with empathy, or communication with energy."

Flexibility

As the landscape of professional environments has evolved, the desire and need for a balance between remote and in-person work has become more pronounced. This flexibility offers multiple advantages, from alleviating logistical challenges related to commuting and parking to providing opportunities for personal development and wellness. Moreover, it addresses the practicalities of modern living, such as childcare, pet care, and educational pursuits.

Elizabeth's reflection underscores the benefits of this flexible approach, particularly in the context of continuing education. She stated, "As a working professional, I have a lot of privilege and opportunity to be able to continue working and take classes residentially." Such a model not only facilitates personal and professional growth but also emerges as an appealing factor in both recruiting and retaining staff. June echoes this sentiment, mentioning, "Having that flexibility was definitely something that drew me to [the institution] because I knew there were more remote work opportunities available." Noah explained the benefits of integrating exercise into his workday:

> I kind of had started getting into running prior to the pandemic, but with the flexibility of being at home, being able to run over lunch and come back kind of sweaty, and that being okay, or you know, right before work or whatever. And just that added flexibility in life to fit in working out and running and getting outside, integrating that more fully or closely with my workday has really allowed me to dive really deep into, you know, running as a hobby.

A touching element of this theme revolves around the benefits of working from home and having pets around. Anne captures the essence of this beautifully by highlighting the emotional bond humans share with their pets. She mentions, “The sheer joy of being able to be around them more. Because you know, it’s fun to be around family, and pets seem to be like family members now in our culture.” When reflecting on her dog (Figure 15), Anne emphasized the comfort and companionship pets provide, highlighting another dimension of workplace flexibility.

Figure 15

Anne’s Photograph of Her Dog Resting on an Armchair

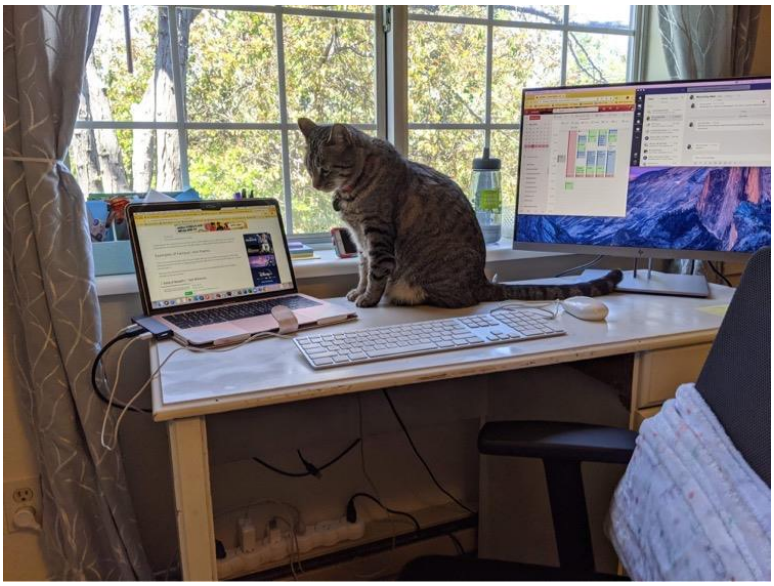
Notably, 5 out of the 7 participants who underwent a second interview spoke about their pets and emphasized their significance in providing emotional support and companionship during challenging times.

Office Environment

The physical environment of a workspace, whether at home or on campus, plays a significant role in the well-being and productivity of student affairs professionals. An aspect that emerged strongly from the discussions was the value placed on having natural light in one's office. On campus, possessing an office with a window is coveted. This sentiment was mirrored by many who have the privilege of a window in their at-home office, cherishing the natural light and views it affords. Elizabeth articulated this sentiment, stating, “Being able to have that big, bright window is something I really appreciate, and I actually really love about being remote because I can look outside and see the sunshine.” A glimpse of Elizabeth's home workspace, showcasing the mentioned window (and furry companion), can be seen in Figure 16.

Figure 16

Elizabeth’s Photograph of Her Home Workspace

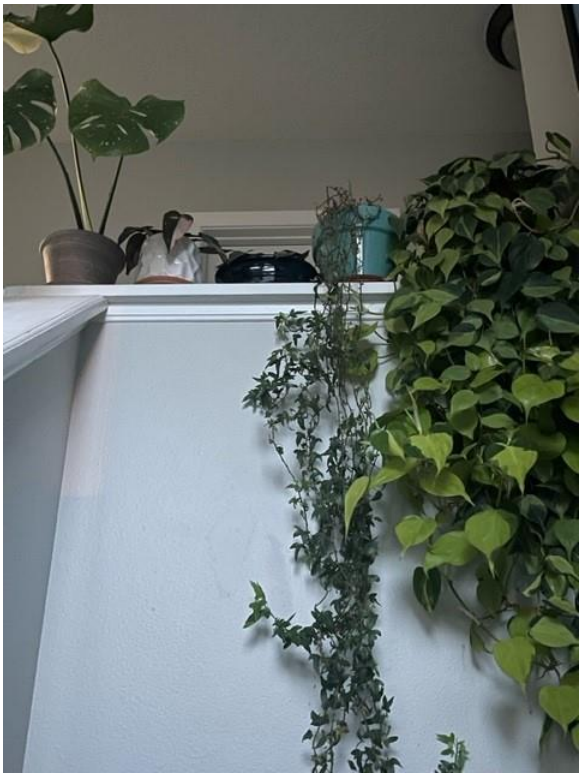


Beyond the luxury of natural light, the personalization of an office space greatly impacts one's sense of belonging and motivation. Infusing one's unique style, whether through paint choices or decorations, can transform an office into a more inviting and inspiring environment.

Plants, often easier to maintain at home due to more favorable conditions, became emblematic of this personal touch. June reflected on the therapeutic value they bring, saying, “Plants really were there to help comfort me, bring literal grounding. There’s nothing like having your hands in soil and just feeling connected to something greater than yourself.” June’s plants are shown in Figure 17.

Figure 17

June’s Photograph of Her Plants



However, the transition to remote work was not universally embraced, with some professionals grappling with the blurring boundaries between personal and professional spaces. Natalia shared her challenges, noting,

> I totally forgot to take a photo of like my home office, which is in my bedroom, and I absolutely hate, like I hate that. I think about the fact that I can't even separate my personal space, like my own bedroom, from work because that's the only place where it fits for me to have a desk in my space.

This merging of spaces can be particularly taxing for professionals like Andrea, who works in residence life. She commented on the intricacies of her role, mentioning, "The hard part with the live-in role is that you do have to set really strict boundaries with that, because you work where you live."

Symbolic Analysis

Symbolic analysis presents a robust tool for delving into the rich layers of meaning embedded within participants' narratives. At its core, this analytical approach hinges on the identification and exploration of motifs, which are symbolic elements within a story or culturally shared signs that convey specific connotations (Müller, 2011). Such motifs, whether visual symbols, phrases, or even actions, serve as bridges, linking individual experiences to broader cultural or societal contexts (Lüthi, 1962). By focusing on these motifs, we can discern patterns that underscore shared struggles, common aspirations, or prevailing cultural norms that influence participants' lived experiences. In this section, I will delve further into how these motifs have surfaced in the narratives and what they reveal about deeper significances and shared themes among participants.

The Tree, "Edith"

Within the verdant expanse of campus, the sprawling tree affectionately named "Edith" (pseudonym) emerges as a profound symbol laden with motifs of *growth, transformation,* and *resilience,* as shown in Figure 18.

Figure 18

Anne's Photograph of a Tree on Campus

Its majestic structure, having withstood various seasons and challenges, is reminiscent of an individual's journey through the transformative phases of life. As a silent observer set against the backdrop of evolving campus buildings, Edith epitomizes *continuity amidst change*.

Anne's ritual of capturing Edith's essence through photographs year after year signifies the *cyclical nature of life*. Each snapshot, representing a distinct season, becomes a metaphor for the myriad experiences and transitions of collegiate life. Her deep-seated adoration for college campuses, underlined by their beauty and maintenance, reflects an innate affinity for spaces characterized by the *pursuit of knowledge*, *growth*, and *community*.

The act of naming the tree infuses it with a human-like persona, transforming it into a figure that is reliable, welcoming, and imbued with a deep emotional significance. Edith is more than just a tree; she becomes a cherished memory, a gift to departing colleagues, encapsulating

their collective journey at this higher education institution. The tree's shade, often chosen for picnics and sit-downs, transforms into a symbol of *unity*, a communal space that nurtures relationships, shared experiences, and moments of bonding among colleagues.

The enormity of Edith, described vividly as "more than an octopus," mirrors the intricate tapestry of relationships and shared narratives at this institution. Further enhancing the campus's ethos of learning and discovery is the initiative to label trees and rocks, emphasizing the continuous *interconnectedness* between knowledge and the natural environment.

In essence, Edith stands not merely as a physical landmark but as a repository of rich symbolism. She weaves together motifs of *community*, *cyclical experiences*, and the *pursuit of knowledge*, intricately linked to Anne's memories and the collective spirit felt at the college campus.

Television Dinner Table as a Workspace

The photograph of the unassuming television dinner table (Figure 19) carries with it a wealth of motifs that encapsulate June’s experiences during the Coronavirus-19 Pandemic.

Figure 19

June's Photograph of Her Television Dinner Table

One primary motif is that of *transformation*: a simple table, typically associated with leisurely activities and transient uses, is repurposed into a daily workstation, symbolizing the adaptability required in the face of unforeseen challenges. The table's enduring familial history embodies the continuity of memory and the preservation of personal histories amidst the changing nature of life's circumstances. It symbolizes the steadfast thread of *continuity*, weaving together past experiences with present moments, preserving individual histories through the fluctuations of life.

June's narrative vividly depicts a reality where homes transformed into workplaces, mirroring a broader societal transition where the lines between personal and professional realms grew indistinct. This fusion serves as a motif, highlighting the *adaptability* that many exhibited in adapting to this emerging standard. This intermingling of spaces not only redefines the concept of work and home but also symbolizes the human capacity to evolve and thrive amidst significant changes.

June's empathetic connections with her students, noting their shared struggles, introduces the motif of *solidarity*. This narrative isn't just about an individual's adaptation but speaks to a communal experience of making do, of understanding, and of affirming each other's realities. This motif is further emphasized when she talks about students' backgrounds being visible on video calls - a tableau of lives in transition, each with its own narrative yet sharing common elements of challenge and adaptation. Her story serves as a reminder that during periods of upheaval, it's the shared experiences, no matter how mundane, that foster solidarity and understanding among individuals.

Reading “No Longer Human” on the Balcony

In Natalia's photograph (Figure 20), a compelling visual narrative speaks to a motif of *refuge*.

Figure 20

Natalia's Photograph of Herself Reading on the Balcony

The photograph presents a balcony in an urban environment, but it's not just any balcony—it's a space that has been transformed into a personal sanctuary, contrasting the often-impersonal nature of city living.

Furthermore, the photograph's urban backdrop reinforces the theme of *urban isolation*. The soft lighting and the evening setting evoke a sense of calm and stillness, contrasting with the usual perception of cities as places of constant activity and noise. This juxtaposition highlights

the solitude that individuals often experience in urban settings, where despite being surrounded by thousands of people, one can feel alone.

Her plants, subtly hinted at, introduce another motif: *nature as a sanctuary*. Natalia's affection for her plants and their calming presence becomes an emblem of nurturing, growth, and rootedness amidst urban chaos, emphasizing the recurring motif of *self-care and grounding*. The act of reading on a balcony, a liminal space between the confines of a personal apartment and the sprawling external world, introduces a motif of *boundary negotiation*. It reflects a fine balance between engagement with the outer world and the introspective self-care rituals she so dearly values.

Her narration offers deeper insights into these motifs, revealing a significant shift towards introversion over the years and an increasing reliance on alone time for rejuvenation. This paints a broader motif of *transformation and self-awareness*, suggesting that one's coping mechanisms can evolve in response to external pressures and internal revelations.

Finally, the motif of *burnout* is undeniably strong in Natalia's account. Her exhaustion, not just from the long workday but seemingly from the demands of life and emotional labor, resonates as a universal sentiment in modern urban settings. Her *refuge*, both in literature and her balcony sanctuary, becomes emblematic of the myriad ways individuals seek solace amidst the relentless pace of contemporary life.

Personalized Home Office

In Olivia's vividly detailed space (Figure 21), the intertwining of work, creativity, and personal sanctuary converge, spotlighting several key motifs.

Figure 21

Olivia's Photograph of Her Home Office

At its heart, the room embodies the motif of *duality*—serving as both a functional workspace and a haven for diverse hobbies. The presence of quilting materials, paints, and stained-glass pieces—each with their distinct textures, colors, and functions—symbolize the layers of Olivia's multi-faceted personality and passions. This intricate blend underscores the motif of *adaptability*, evident in how she pivots between professional tasks and creative outlets.

The stained glass in the window, handcrafted by Olivia, stands as a testament to the motif of *personal accomplishment and pride*, illuminating her space with colors that carry stories of their creation. The meticulously arranged books, tools, and hobby-related items serve as visual metaphors for planned structure and the motif of *intentionality*, mirroring her proactive approach to carving out time for personal endeavors amidst work. The couch, positioned alongside her

work and hobby stations, hints at the motif of *comfort and introspection*, providing a cozy space to rest or reflect.

Olivia's narrative adds depth to these motifs, particularly when she recounts the flexibility her job offers, allowing her to interweave moments of creativity within her workday. The act of stepping away from a stressful email to engage in a creative endeavor, like quilting or embroidery, emphasizes the motif of *therapeutic escapism*. Lastly, her intention to keep work and rest separate, avoiding computers in the bedroom, further cements the room's role as a bridge between her professional commitments and personal joys. This practice exemplifies the motif of *boundary negotiation*, nurturing a harmonious balance in her life.

Chapter Summary

This chapter delves into the nuanced experiences of mid-level student affairs professionals as they navigate transitions within their workplace. Utilizing a qualitative approach from an interpretivist lens, the chapter presents rich narrative vignettes of each participant, bringing to life their individual journeys and the meaning they derive from their evolving roles using photographs and interviews.

The core of the chapter is anchored in a thematic analysis that uncovers four major themes: compensation, coworker relationships, flexibility, and office environment. Each theme is explored through the participants' voices, uncovering the multifaceted challenges and adaptations that characterize the mid-level professional experience in student affairs.

June's story is particularly illustrative. Her insights lay bare the often-invisible pressures shouldered by those in similar positions: "I feel like a lot of times, it is mid-level leadership like myself that does often feel the brunt of vacancies and having to step up and step in to help

support.” This sentiment captures a recurring motif of *burnout* as mid-level professionals try to balance the pressures from upper management with the needs of their teams.

In addition to thematic analysis, the chapter employs symbolic analysis to tease out the deeper significances within the narratives. Photographs and participant interviews reveal motifs such as *transformation* and r*efuge*, reflecting the adaptive strategies mid-level student affairs professionals employ to navigate the shifting landscapes of their careers.

In summary, Chapter IV presents a compelling and layered analysis of how mid-level student affairs professionals interpret and respond to their workplace transitions. The chapter presents the participants' narratives, providing insight into how individual choices, organizational barriers, and the pursuit of purpose interact in the higher education workplace. Building upon these insights, Chapter V will extend the discussion to the wider implications of these findings, proposing recommendations for practical applications and future research.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Introduction

This chapter serves as the culmination of a qualitative inquiry into the experiences of mid-level, higher education professionals amidst significant workplace transitions. In a context altered by the Coronavirus-19 Pandemic, the phenomenon of the Great Resignation, and the challenges of declining student enrollment, these professionals find themselves at a crossroads in redefining their roles and responsibilities.

This study is framed around the central research question: How do mid-level, higher education professionals make meaning of their experiences as they navigate workplace transitions? Grounded in the interpretivist paradigm and steered by the theoretical framework of ambiguous loss, this research adopted a photo-narrative methodology, connecting the participants' rich, detailed narratives with photographs that represent these narratives. Through individual, in-depth interviews, the study uncovered emergent themes of compensation, coworker relationships, workplace flexibility, and office environment—each narrating a part of the complex story of adaptation and change.

This chapter provides a reflective summary of the findings and connects these findings with existing literature. The theoretical implications will shed light on the resonance of ambiguous loss theory within the context of higher education and workplace transitions. Additionally, the limitations and delimitations of the study and methodological choices, alongside a reflective critique of the methodology are addressed. To inform policy and practice

in meaningful and impactful ways, practical recommendations for mid-level student affairs professionals and higher education leaders will be shared. This chapter concludes with recommendations for future research, aimed to inspire continued scholarly dialogue and foster a deeper understanding of the complexities faced by higher education professionals in evolving environments.

Summary of Findings and Relationship with Current Literature

Compensation

Mid-level student affairs professionals at a large public university report a significant gap between the demands of their profession and the compensation they receive, a discrepancy that is especially pronounced in areas with a high cost of living. Despite their critical role and high level of education, these professionals often find that their salaries do not keep pace with living expenses, leading to feelings of frustration and disillusionment. The transparency of salaries in public universities further intensifies these feelings of inequity, as it allows for easy comparison of compensation among colleagues. While programs like the Public Service Loan Forgiveness offer some financial relief, this benefit takes 10 years of full-time service to materialize. Consequently, these professionals must endure the pay discrepancy for a prolonged period, which raises serious concerns about equitable and sufficient compensation, impacting career satisfaction and influencing decisions about remaining in the field.

These findings are reflected within current literature on the challenges facing student affairs professionals. The Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education (NASPA) report (2022) indicated that 88% of staff view uncompetitive pay as a catalyst for turnover, aligning with the expressed frustrations of the research participants. These low salaries are incompatible with the high cost of living, reinforcing the notion that salaries in higher education do not meet

the economic needs of these employees. While the existing body of literature has underscored issues such as inadequate supervision, lack of mentorship, extensive working hours, diminished job satisfaction, taxing conditions, and burnout as significant factors influencing attrition in student affairs (Boehman, 2007; Buchanan, 2012; Lorden, 1998; Mullen et al., 2018; Rosser, 2004; Rosser & Javinar, 2003), this study highlights compensation as the primary concern driving considerations to exit the profession among the participants. This finding highlights the urgent need to address the financial aspects of these roles to attract and retain qualified professionals.

Coworker Relationships

The pandemic's shift to remote work brought unique challenges in maintaining coworker relationships, underscoring the importance of connection in changing work environments. The transition to online onboarding processes, for instance, highlighted how the absence of face-to-face interaction can hinder the natural development of relationships. This suggests a pressing need for work environments that prioritize and facilitate relationship-building, especially during upheaval. Shared experiences, even in virtual settings, play a crucial role in fostering a sense of solidarity and understanding among coworkers, reinforcing their sense of belonging and connection.

Research in organizational behavior during the pandemic (Patulny & Bower, 2022; Shipman et al., 2023) has shown that the lack of physical presence in the workplace can disrupt traditional patterns of interaction, leading to feelings of loneliness and disconnection. Creating a cohesive work environment that supports relationship-building becomes even more vital in these circumstances. This need aligns with the principles of mindful self-care, as described by Cook-Cottone & Guyker (2018), which extend beyond individual practices to include the nurturing of

interpersonal relationships. In this context, the cultivation of shared experiences and solidarity among coworkers is not just beneficial for mental well-being but is also a critical component of a supportive work culture.

Flexibility

Building on the importance of self-care, the study's findings on flexibility highlight a preference for a balance between remote and in-person work. Attributed benefits of this increased flexibility include reduced commuting time and enhanced ability to manage childcare, pet care, self-care, and continuing education. The option for remote or hybrid work models is particularly appealing to job seekers, suggesting that such arrangements could be leveraged as recruitment strategies. Additionally, the concept of flexibility is closely linked with opportunities for personal and professional development. This implies that employees highly value the capacity to adjust and grow, particularly in response to evolving workplace dynamics and broader societal shifts, such as technological advancements and changing market demands.

The blending of work and personal lives, accelerated by societal shifts due to the Coronavirus-19 Pandemic, has necessitated resilience and resourcefulness. While employees appreciate the integration of creativity into their daily routines, there remains a conscious effort to maintain a clear distinction between work and rest. This distinction aims to preserve the integrity of both spaces, acknowledging the importance of well-defined boundaries to prevent burnout and enhance overall well-being.

This study's findings resonate with the literature on work-life flexstyle and boundary management (Artale, 2020; Kossek & Lautsch, 2008; Kossek et al., 2023). The preference for hybrid work models underscores the significance of customizable work arrangements that meet individual needs, including familial responsibilities and personal pursuits. Such an approach

aligns with the principles of work-life flexstyle, advocating for work environments that support diverse life circumstances and preferences. Moreover, Kossek et al. (2023) emphasizes the growing importance of work-life flexibility policies like telework, flextime, and part-time work, especially in the context of the Coronavirus-19 Pandemic. They argue for a nuanced implementation approach that considers cultural and structural aspects within organizations. Rather than a one-size-fits-all approach, this method involves the careful customization of policies. It considers the specific values and norms of the organization, accommodates different management styles, and strives to meet the individual needs of employees.

Office Environment

The exploration of factors influencing mid-level student affairs staff revealed the office environment as a key theme, spanning both remote (at-home) and traditional (on-campus) settings. For the participants in this study, the physical workspace greatly impacts their well-being and productivity. Essential elements contributing to this finding include access to natural light, a connection to nature often facilitated by plants, and the opportunity for individuals to personalize their space to create a ‘cozy’ atmosphere. The importance of having distinct and functional workspaces, whether at home or on campus, was underscored, especially highlighting the challenges for those in live-in roles and the relationship between salary levels and the ability to afford suitable housing.

Utilizing symbolic analysis, the research further delved into the dynamic interaction between the cognitive demands of student affairs work and the natural environment, suggesting a symbiotic relationship where nature serves as a rejuvenating sanctuary. Participants' incorporation of colors and personal items in their workspaces enhanced their comfort, introspection, and a sense of personal accomplishment and identity. This study underscores the

vital role that office environment design plays in the job satisfaction and effectiveness of student affairs professionals.

Campus ecology theory, which considers the comprehensive and interactive environment of a college or university, is traditionally applied to the broader campus setting (Renn & Patton, 2011; Strange & Banning, 2001). However, this study extends its application to the office environments of student affairs staff, both in remote and on-campus contexts. The emphasis on the physical dimension of campus ecology, including climate, architecture, and space usage, parallels the findings that a staff member's physical workspace profoundly influences their well-being and productivity. Elements like natural light, a connection to nature, and the ability to personalize workspace mirror the theory's focus on how physical environments send messages of inclusion or exclusion. In the context of this study, a well-designed office environment, akin to the thoughtful campus architecture and space allocation discussed by Strange & Banning (2001), can foster a sense of community and support among staff or generate feelings of exclusion. Additionally, the personalization of workspaces with colors and items enhances comfort, introspection, and a sense of accomplishment, reflecting the psychological and cultural dimensions of campus ecology.

Theoretical Implications

The findings of this study on mid-level student affairs professionals resonate profoundly with the theoretical framework of ambiguous loss (Boss, 1999; Boss,2006). Ambiguous loss is a type of grief characterized by uncertainty and lack of closure, in which an important component is missing, complicating traditional mourning customs and hindering typical coping behaviors. This model, initially conceptualized to understand grief stemming from indistinct or unresolved

losses, offers a lens through which to interpret the experiences of these professionals during the rapid, ongoing transitions within higher education during the Coronavirus-19 Pandemic.

Ambiguous loss is typically categorized into two types: one where there is a psychological presence but physical absence (e.g., missing persons), and another where there is a physical presence but psychological absence (e.g., Alzheimer's disease). In this study, the experiences of the professionals align more closely with the first type of ambiguous loss, where there is a psychological presence but a physical absence. Professionals in their dynamic work environments experience ongoing, unresolved losses and transitions, notably seen in the absence of physical co-presence with colleagues or students. Despite this, they continue to maintain professional relationships and responsibilities. The ambiguous loss framework is particularly relevant here, as it encapsulates these experiences, enriching the understanding of their professional challenges. It also opens avenues for developing targeted support and interventions tailored to the unique nature of their professional grief and loss.

Compensation

The theme of compensation can be seen through the lens of ambiguous loss, particularly in the impact on employees grappling with vacant positions left by departed coworkers. These individuals face the dual burden of keeping up with their own responsibilities and those of the unfilled roles, leading to overwork without commensurate compensation. This situation amplifies the notion of ambiguous loss in a unique way. Although these professionals maintain a psychological commitment to their duties and their students, they experience a tangible absence: the support of a fully staffed team and fair financial compensation. This gap between their high qualifications and the inadequate pay, especially as living costs increase, intensifies their experience of ambiguous loss. They confront a professional situation in which their dedication

and labor are not matched by financial stability, leading to a distinct form of professional grief and disillusionment. This type of ambiguous loss is characterized not only by the absence of colleagues but also by the absence of fair recognition and compensation for their increased workload.

Coworker Relationships

The shift to remote work and its impact on coworker relationships highlight transitional ambiguity, a key facet of ambiguous loss (Boss, 1999). Transitional ambiguity refers to the uncertainty and confusion experienced during changes that lack clear boundaries or definitions, such as the sudden move to virtual work environments. The discrepancy between the physical absence of colleagues and their psychological presence in virtual environments creates a sense of loss for the familiar dynamics and rituals of in-person interactions. When the lines between presence and absence become blurred, as they often do in remote work environments, our traditional understandings of connection and interaction are challenged.

Flexibility

The desire for flexibility in work arrangements reflects an adaptive response to the ongoing ambiguous loss within higher education. The balancing act between remote and in-person work aligns with coping mechanisms suggested by Boss (2006) for dealing with ambiguous loss. These strategies include adjusting mastery, finding meaning in the loss, normalizing ambivalence, and revising attachment to the lost object or person. Specifically, adjusting mastery involves individuals adapting their sense of control and competence in response to change. For instance, a student affairs professional might embrace this approach by shifting traditional in-person student engagement activities to an online format. They could develop virtual events and forums to maintain student interaction and community building. This

form of flexibility allows professionals to create a semblance of control and balance amidst the ongoing, unresolved transitions.

Office Environment

Building on the idea of coping strategies for ambiguous loss, the focus on enhancing the office environment, with elements such as natural light and opportunities for personalization, also reflects this adaptive approach. Just as adjusting mastery and other strategies help individuals navigate changes in work dynamics, the attention to creating a comfortable and personalized office setting can be seen as another way to mitigate the sense of loss and disconnection that may come with shifts in the workplace. The act of personalizing these spaces not only improves their aesthetics but also asserts control and re-establishes a sense of stability and familiarity in a period of transition.

Recommendations for Practice

These findings provide numerous possible implications for practice for mid-level student affairs professionals and higher education leaders, pivotal roles in shaping higher education. This section aims to provide actionable strategies and insights that can be effectively implemented to enhance job satisfaction and wellness for mid-level student affairs professionals. Prioritizing their well-being can create a ripple effect that improves the overall work environment and climate for everyone involved. This approach not only acknowledges the unique challenges faced by these professionals but also underscores the importance of their well-being in fostering a thriving and supportive educational community.

Compensation Recommendations for Mid-Level Student Affairs Professionals

Negotiate Raises Using Publicly Available Information

Professionals should leverage data from job postings, industry salary surveys, and institutional benchmarks to negotiate raises. Being informed about the current market rates for similar positions both within and outside the institution provides a solid foundation for salary negotiations.

Document and Highlight Achievements

Professionals should maintain a comprehensive record of accomplishments (e.g., projects, initiatives, professional development, certifications) and the positive impact on the institution. This portfolio can be a powerful tool during performance reviews or when discussing potential raises.

Utilize Institutional Resources for Skill Development

Professionals should take advantage of any skill development resources offered by the institution, such as training programs or tuition reimbursement for further education, which can justify a higher salary bracket.

Explore Lateral Moves for Growth

Professionals should consider lateral moves within the institution that may offer better compensation or more desirable responsibilities. These opportunities could be used as a stepping stone for further career advancement.

Coworker Relationships Recommendations for Mid-Level Student Affairs Professionals

Organize Intentional In-Person and Virtual Connection Events

Professionals can proactively arrange for in-person and virtual gatherings to foster coworker relationships. Examples could include organizing regular lunch meetups, walking meetings, or virtual coffee breaks. These intentional gatherings provide valuable opportunities for team members to connect on a personal level, share experiences, and strengthen their professional bonds in both physical and virtual workspaces.

Develop and Participate in Peer Support Networks

Professionals should establish or join peer support groups within the institution or a professional organization. These networks can serve as platforms for sharing experiences, offering mutual support, and discussing professional challenges.

Flexibility Recommendations for Mid-Level Student Affairs Professionals

Advocate for Nontraditional Work Hours

Professionals may want to advocate for nontraditional work hours that cater to both personal responsibilities—such as childcare, pet care, or exercise routines—and continuing education pursuits. For example, they might propose starting their workday earlier or later to allow for extended lunch breaks or picking up children from school. Instead of seeking entire days of remote work, they could ask for certain hours of the day to be remote. These adjustments can help achieve a more balanced daily routine, support ongoing professional development and learning, and counter the negative impacts of work-related loneliness (Becker et al., 2022). Additionally, they can advocate for compensatory (comp) time or overtime for work conducted

outside these hours, such as evening or weekend student programming. This strategy ensures fair compensation for extra hours worked and acknowledges the diverse demands of their roles.

Offer Hybrid Meeting Options to Students

If possible, professionals could offer students the choice between in-person and remote meetings. This approach caters to diverse student needs like work schedules, extracurricular activities, and class schedules. They could gather data such as no-show rates and student preferences for meeting formats to support and justify the need for a hybrid work schedule, demonstrating its effectiveness in meeting student engagement goals. These data-driven approaches ensures that the work schedule aligns with student preferences, thereby enhancing student services and support.

Make Self-Care a Priority

Professionals should prioritize self-care by consciously setting aside time for activities that promote overall well-being, such as exercise, mindfulness practices, and hobbies that bring joy and relaxation. Recognizing and addressing the importance of both mental and physical health is essential in maintaining a sustainable work-life balance and coping with life's challenges and transitions more effectively (Butler at al., 2019; Hricová, 2020; Salloum et al., 2015). Self-care practices should be inclusive, taking into account the specific needs of individuals with marginalized identities (Bidner, 2017).

Office Environment Recommendations for Mid-Level Student Affairs Professionals

Create a Welcoming and Inclusive Office Space

Professionals should aim to cultivate an office atmosphere that is both inviting and inclusive, emphasizing the personalization of the workspace with cozy furniture, inclusive decorations, and ensuring accessibility. Incorporating elements such as plants can add to the

ambiance, creating a more nurturing and pleasant environment. Such an approach can greatly improve the experiences of employees and students alike, promoting a sense of belonging and support within the community (Strange & Banning, 2001).

Advocate for Adequate and Modern Technology Resources

Professionals should advocate for access to essential technological tools that enhance efficiency and health in the office environment. Examples include adequate technology such as laptops, dual monitors, webcams, and ergonomic equipment like standing desks. It may be particularly useful to ask for resources at the start of employment or during periods of budget surpluses.

Optimize Home Office Setups for Remote Work

For professionals who work remotely or have hybrid schedules, optimizing the home office setup is crucial. This strategy can involve investing in ergonomic furniture, ensuring good lighting, setting up a dedicated workspace free from household distractions, and setting aside time on a regular basis to clean, organize, and declutter your workspace.

Compensation Recommendations for Higher Education Leaders

Enforce a Commitment to Salary Equity

Leaders should prioritize and enforce a commitment to salary equity among student affairs professionals. This approach involves regularly reviewing and adjusting salaries to ensure they are competitive and fair, considering factors like experience, expertise, and market standards. Additionally, salary equity is crucial for recognizing the value of these professionals.

Offer Hiring and Retention Bonuses

Leaders can utilize hiring bonuses for new employees and retention bonuses for current employees to attract and keep talented student affairs professionals. These bonuses can be

particularly effective in competitive job markets and can act as a strong incentive for professionals to join and stay with the institution.

Establish Clear Career Advancement Pathways

Leaders should develop and communicate clear career advancement pathways for student affairs professionals. This process involves outlining potential growth trajectories and the corresponding compensation increases. By providing clarity on how professionals can progress and improve their earnings, they demonstrate a commitment to their staff's career development and financial stability.

Coworker Relationships Recommendations for Higher Education Leaders

Recognize and Celebrate Achievements

Leaders should regularly recognize and celebrate the achievements of student affairs professionals, both individually and as a team. Encouraging team members to support and celebrate each other's achievements not only builds community but also highlights the significance of these employees' contributions.

Implement Mentorship and Peer Support Programs

Leaders can implement mentorship and peer support programs to encourage knowledge sharing, provide support for professional challenges, and foster a culture of mutual growth and respect. Engaging in affinity groups, or communities with shared identities, can be particularly beneficial, as they offer support and understanding tailored to the unique experiences and obstacles faced by employees.

Encourage Cross-Departmental Collaboration

Leaders should encourage collaboration across different departments by setting up joint projects, interdepartmental committees, or shared initiatives. This type of collaboration can

enhance teamwork and provide opportunities for staff to connect and appreciate diverse perspectives within the institution.

Flexibility Recommendations for Higher Education Leaders

Model Healthy Work-Life Balance

Leaders should exemplify a healthy work-life balance, contributing to an organizational culture of wellness. Practices such as scheduling emails to be sent during regular work hours and refraining from expecting responses outside of these hours, including weekends, holidays, and leave time, model healthy boundaries. These actions foster an environment that values and prioritizes the holistic wellness of its members (Preston et al., 2021).

Understand Individual Needs

Flexibility isn't one-size-fits-all. Engaging in open conversations with employees about their specific needs and acknowledging that these may change over time is key. Strategies could include offering flexible hours, remote work options, or adapting roles to suit life changes. Leaders should regularly assess the effectiveness of flexible working arrangements and be open to making changes based on feedback and evolving needs.

Provide Adequate Resources and Support

Leaders should ensure that staff have the necessary tools and resources to work flexibly. This support could involve investing in technology for remote work, offering training for digital tools, and ensuring that communication channels are effective and inclusive.

Promote a Culture of Trust and Accountability

Leaders should build a culture where employees feel trusted to manage their responsibilities effectively, regardless of their working hours or location. Emphasizing accountability for outcomes rather than focusing on the number of hours worked can encourage a

supportive and adaptable workplace that values productivity and well-being over mere presence. This approach should be supplemented with clear communication channels.

Office Environment Recommendations for Higher Education Leaders

Utilize Accessible and Inclusive Design

Leaders should ensure that all areas are inclusive to everyone. Examples include accessible entrances, elevators, restrooms, lactation rooms, and adjustable workstations.

Encourage Personalization of Workspaces

Leaders should allow and encourage staff to personalize their individual workspaces. Examples can range from displaying photos and art to choosing wall colors that make the space feel more comfortable and reflective of their personality and identities. Personalization can lead to increased comfort, a sense of belonging, and higher job satisfaction (Strange & Banning, 2001).

Limitations and Delimitations

This study was designed to be as rigorous as possible. However, the following limitations and delimitations could have impacted the rigor of the study.

Limitations

Common methodological challenges inherent in narrative research occur in two potential areas: (a) the difference in people’s experienced meaning and their ability to describe this meaning in narrative form and (b) the trustworthiness of the connections between storied texts and the researcher’s interpretations of those texts (Polkinghorne, 2007). Strategies to enhance rigor, such as enhanced member checking and the inclusion of participant quotations, diminish these concerns by ensuring the authenticity of the narratives and the credibility of the researcher's interpretations. These strategies allow for the accurate representation of participants' experiences

in their own words and provide a means of reinforcing the trustworthiness of the connections between the narratives and the researcher's conclusions.

Delimitations

In this study, I conducted virtual interviews to ensure the safety of participants due to the Coronavirus-19 Pandemic, as well as for convenience and privacy. However, subtle cues and non-verbal communication may have been missed, potentially affecting my ability to sense and inquire about areas meaningful to the participants. To address this, strategies such as reviewing the video recording, maintaining a researcher journal containing detailed observations, and conducting enhanced member checks provided opportunities for in-depth reflection and clarification.

The influence of the study's setting, a public university in the Rocky Mountain Region of the United States, presents another dimension of consideration, particularly regarding the findings on compensation and connection to nature. The Rocky Mountain Region is known for its relatively high cost of living, which likely had a significant impact on the study's findings concerning compensation. The experiences and sentiments expressed by the student affairs professionals regarding inadequate compensation must be contextualized within this geographical and economic setting. The high cost of living in this region could have exacerbated their feelings of financial strain, making it a more prominent theme in their narratives than it might have been in a region with a lower cost of living.

Moreover, the setting's natural environment likely influenced the findings related to the connection to nature and the prevalence of dogs as pets. The Rocky Mountain Region, characterized by its picturesque vistas and outdoor lifestyle, may have heightened the participants' appreciation for natural elements in their workspaces and their personal lives. This

regional characteristic could explain the emphasis on natural light in offices and the therapeutic value of plants, as these elements resonate with the broader environmental ethos of the region. Similarly, the prominence of dogs as pets in the narratives could be reflective of the outdoor-centric culture prevalent in the Rocky Mountains, where having a pet, especially a dog, aligns with the lifestyle and values of the community.

Methodological Reflections

The photo-narrative design employed in this study proved to be a powerful methodological tool, uncovering the hidden sides of work and workspace. The inclusion of photographs as a central component of the narrative allowed for a more evocative and comprehensive understanding of the participants' experiences. This visual aspect facilitated participants' ability to communicate complex feelings and thoughts, which might have been challenging to articulate solely through words. Furthermore, these photographs granted the researcher valuable insight into the participants' experiences, adding a tangible dimension to the data analysis process. In essence, the visual component not only aided participants in sharing their narratives but also enhanced the researcher's understanding of said narratives.

Participants generally found the process of taking and sharing photos both interesting and reflective. This task encouraged them to view their daily environments and experiences through a new lens, often inspiring them to incorporate similar practices in their own projects or class assignments. The photos served as visual reminders of the significant transitions they underwent, symbolizing their resilience and adaptability in the face of changing professional environments. Moreover, these visual narratives prompted some participants to reflect critically on their career paths and future options, as evidenced by Natalia’s remarks. Her statement highlights the introspective power of this method:

> What are those things visually, that are those reminders that I gotta go… I can't stay here forever. This is not a conducive environment for me, just as a person and my humanity and my mental health in the long run.

The concept of impression management may have played a significant role in shaping the results, particularly in how participants chose to represent themselves through their photographs. Impression management, as Goffman (1959) describes, involves individuals curating their image in social interactions, akin to an actor performing on a stage. In the context of this study, participants were aware that their photographs would be viewed and analyzed by the researcher and potentially included in the final dissertation, which likely influenced their choice of imagery. The tendency to select photos representing positive memories or motivational aspects, as opposed to images that might reflect challenges such as burnout, suggests an intentional effort to maintain a favorable impression. It not only influences the kind of data collected but also sheds light on the participants' self-perception and the ways in which they navigate their professional narratives.

In this study, the inclination of participants to include screenshots of digital conversations, such as emails, text messages, and *Microsoft Teams* chats, reflects the evolving nature of how individuals document and share their experiences in the modern era. The integration of digital media represents a significant shift in how we perceive and utilize photos in research methodologies, not only acknowledging the modern context of communication and self-expression but also underscoring the ease and efficiency of working with digital media. I chose to incorporate digital media, recognizing that significant interactions and moments in the digital age are often documented in formats beyond traditional photographs (e.g., screenshots of text

conversations), this inclusion was aimed at capturing a more comprehensive and nuanced array of participant experiences and perspectives.

Recommendations for Future Research

Building upon these findings, several avenues for future research emerge, which can deepen our understanding of the complexities and nuances within the field of student affairs. Below are key recommendations for future research, aimed at expanding the scope of inquiry and addressing the gaps identified in this study.

Compensation

In light of the identified concerns regarding compensation among mid-level student affairs professionals, future research could include mid-level student affairs professionals at comparable public universities in different cost-of-living areas. This approach would allow for a broader understanding of how cost-of-living variations impact compensation disparity and employee satisfaction. Additionally, researchers could investigate the potential implications of underpaid student affairs professionals on student experience and success, including the quality of services they receive and how it might be affected by staff turnover. Another area of research could explore institutional solutions, such as merit-based pay increases, cost-of-living adjustment, or alternative benefit structures, to evaluate the effectiveness of these initiatives and explore potential new strategies for improving financial equity and employee satisfaction.

Coworker Relationships

Future research should investigate strategies for fostering coworker relationships in remote and hybrid work settings within student affairs. This research could involve examining the effectiveness of technological tools and organizational interventions in promoting team cohesion and interpersonal connections among geographically-dispersed staff. By exploring the

impact of these strategies on relationship quality and team performance, they could offer insights for institutions to enhance support for staff navigating the complexities of remote work and ensuring a collaborative and connected work culture.

Flexibility

Future research could explore the long-term impacts of flexible work arrangements on employee performance, well-being, and attrition within the context of student affairs and broader educational settings. Additionally, examining the role of organizational culture and leadership in supporting and sustaining flexible work practices could offer insights into best practices for implementing these arrangements. Studies could also assess the psychological effects of remote work on employees, particularly in relation to isolation, motivation, and engagement. This knowledge can inform strategies for designing and implementing flexible models that contribute to a more supportive and productive workplace.

Office Environment

Incorporating campus ecology (Renn & Patton, 2011) as a theoretical framework in future studies can illuminate the significant impact of sociocultural campus settings, as well as the office environment, on student affairs staff experiences. This approach would allow for an exploration of how individuals interact with their environments, offering insights into how aspects such as office design and workspace personalization influence staff well-being, job satisfaction, and professional development.

Exploring Specific Identities and Roles

Future research may focus on specific identities and roles within student affairs. Particular attention could be given to staff who have live-in roles, as this aspect significantly impacts work-life balance. Additionally, exploring the experiences of international staff, who

often face unique challenges due to work visa constraints, would provide valuable insights into their professional lives. Understanding these specific contexts is crucial for developing targeted policies and support mechanisms.

Utilization of Focus Groups

Given the interest expressed by participants in discussing their experiences with peers and hearing others' stories, employing focus groups in future studies would be beneficial. This methodological approach can facilitate rich, interactive discussions, providing a platform for shared experiences and collective reflection (Kruger & Casey, 2014).

Role of Digital Media in Professional Settings

The inclusion of digital media, such as screenshots, in this study opens the door to exploring the role of digital media and communication platforms in shaping professional identities and interactions in the higher education sector. Future research could delve into how impression management plays out in these digital spaces, particularly how professionals curate their digital presence and its impact on their professional relationships and self-perception.

Chapter Summary

This dissertation has provided a comprehensive exploration of the experiences of mid-level student affairs staff, delving into themes of compensation, coworker relationships, flexibility, and office environment. Through photo-narrative methods, this study has illuminated the nuanced realities faced by these professionals in a large public university setting in the Rocky Mountain Region.

Key findings highlighted the challenges related to adequate compensation, particularly in a region characterized by a high cost of living. The study underscored the complexity of coworker relationships, especially in the context of the Coronavirus-19 Pandemic and the shift to

remote work. Flexibility emerged as a vital theme, reflecting the evolving nature of work-life balance in the modern higher education context. The physical and digital environments of workspaces were found to be pivotal in shaping the well-being and productivity of staff, revealing significant insights into their professional lives.

This research contributes to the field of higher education by offering a deeper understanding of the multifaceted experiences of student affairs professionals. It underscores the importance of considering geographical and economic contexts when evaluating compensation and job satisfaction. The study also reveals the intricate dynamics of professional relationships in an era increasingly dominated by digital communication, emphasizing the role of digital media in shaping professional identities and interactions.

The findings call for a nuanced approach to policy and practice in higher education, advocating for attention to the specific needs and challenges of diverse staff groups. This study provides a foundation for future research and practice, aiming to enhance the experiences and support structures for these vital contributors to the higher education community. The study stands as a testament to the resilience, adaptability, and dedication of student affairs staff, navigating the ever-evolving nature of higher education in the 21st century.

Conclusion

The Coronavirus-19 Pandemic heavily impacted higher education, introducing many multifaceted challenges. The concept of a double pandemic, encompassing systemic racism and discrimination, along with a third pandemic of devastating wildfires, underscored the compounded challenges in higher education. These concurrent pandemics have significantly influenced the context of this study. As we conclude this exploration, it is evident that higher

education, and particularly the field of student affairs, is facing what may be considered a fourth pandemic: The Great Resignation.

The extensive vacancies created by this wave of resignations have had a ripple effect, leaving many professionals feeling overburdened, overworked, and undercompensated. This phenomenon has exacerbated the already challenging conditions within student affairs, contributing to a climate where staff are stretched thin, struggling to balance increasing workloads with personal well-being. In this context, Anne's reflection becomes particularly poignant:

> That is a benefit of COVID - I shouldn't even say it that way. Just more of the ability to think differently about work. COVID, for better or whatever it is, it gave us the ability to think differently about work.

Her words encapsulate a silver lining amidst these challenges – the opportunity to reconceptualize the nature of work in student affairs.

The participants' narratives underscore the urgency of this issue. The sentiment of being undervalued, despite taking on additional responsibilities due to staff shortages, resonates throughout the findings. The dual pressure of maintaining high standards of student support, while navigating their personal challenges amidst the ongoing crises, has placed an immense strain on these professionals.

Institutions must recognize and address the cascading effects of the Great Resignation. There is a need for systemic changes that go beyond temporary solutions. Institutions must engage in proactive measures to retain talent and ensure that the workforce is not only adequately staffed but also valued and supported. This might involve rethinking organizational

structures, increasing compensation, enhancing support systems, and creating more inclusive and equitable work environments.

In conclusion, the fourth pandemic of the Great Resignation presents both a challenge and an opportunity for higher education. It serves as a critical juncture for institutions to reassess and reimagine their approach to staff welfare and organizational health. Addressing these issues is not just a response to a crisis but an investment in the future resilience and effectiveness of the student affairs profession and, by extension, higher education as a whole.

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APPENDIX A

DEFINITIONS OF TERMS

Definitions of terms are provided to facilitate communication of the specific concepts in the research. This practice promotes consistency of terminology, establishes clear boundaries for concepts, enables comparison of findings across different studies, and improves the transferability of study findings. Ultimately, these factors contribute to the overall quality and impact of the research.

Ambiguous loss: A type of loss characterized by uncertainty and lack of closure, complicating the mourning process (Boss, 1999, 2006; Lang et al., 2011).

Attrition: Occurs when an employee voluntarily leaves their position (Naifeh & Kearney, 2021).

Authenticity: The extent to which the research genuinely represents the participants' experiences, perspectives, and the social context under study; emphasizes the importance of portraying the complexity and richness of the phenomena being investigated while also acknowledging the potential biases and subjectivity inherent in qualitative research (Lewis-Beck et al., 2004).

Boundary control: The degree to which employees feel in control as they manage the boundaries between their work life and personal life (Kossek & Lautsch, 2008).

Burnout: "A syndrome of emotional exhaustion and cynicism that frequently occurs among individuals who do 'people work' of some kind" (Maslach & Jackson, 1981, p. 99).

Campus ecology: The study of the dynamic and interconnected environment within a college or university, considering the entirety of the campus's environment, including physical elements like buildings, open spaces, and natural surroundings, as well as the social, cultural, and psychological aspects (Renn & Patton, 2011).

Community-Care: Model of care and healing that centers community (Sambile, 2018).

Constructivist-Interpretivist: The combination of interpretivism and constructivism, despite a fundamental conflict between the two approaches (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).

Coronavirus-19 Pandemic: Global outbreak of a novel coronavirus, SARS-CoV-2, which causes a potentially severe respiratory illness called coronavirus-19 (COVID-19); discovered in December 2019 in Wuhan, China, and the first confirmed case in the United States was reported on January 20, 2020 (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2023).

Crystallization: Gathering and analyzing multiple types of data through various methods, multiple researchers, and numerous theoretical frameworks to achieve a multifaceted perspective (Ellingson, 2009).

Double pandemic: Overlapping impact of the pandemic and the ongoing systemic racism and discrimination experienced by communities of color (Addo, 2020).

Enhanced member check: Process that involves researchers sharing their interpretations with study participants for validation, ensuring the accuracy and trustworthiness of qualitative research findings (Chase, 2017)

Enrollment cliff: Projected 15% decrease in the population of college-age individuals between 2025 and 2029, primarily attributed to declining birth rates (Copley & Douthett, 2020; NASPA, 2022).

Facebook group: Virtual community within the social media platform Facebook where members can connect, learn, and share across similar interests (Facebook, n.d.).

Great Resignation: Widespread phenomenon observed during the COVID-19 pandemic, in which a significant number of employees across various industries voluntarily chose to leave their jobs (Zhongming et al., 2021).

Higher education: Level of post-secondary, formal education typically provided by colleges, universities, or vocational schools; encompasses a diverse range of academic programs, including undergraduate degrees (e.g., associate's or bachelor's), graduate degrees (e.g., master's or doctoral), and professional certification.

Impression management: The conscious or unconscious effort to influence the observations and opinions of others, often through the manipulation of personal or environmental cues. (Goffman, 1959).

Interpretivism: Philosophical perspective based on the notion of a subjective, socially constructed reality in which "the world is always interpreted through [one's] mind" (Schwandt, 2007, p. 143).

Job control: The amount of autonomy and discretion employees have over how they perform their tasks (Becker et al., 2022).

Microsoft Teams: A cloud-based communication and collaboration platform, part of Microsoft 365, offering integrated services such as chat, meetings, calls, and file sharing within a unified interface (Microsoft, n.d.).

Mid-Level Student Affairs Professional: Not considered senior-level or executive-level administrators (e.g., executive director, assistant or associate vice president, vice president, dean) at their institution; have a bachelor's or master's degree in student affairs or a related field, and at least two years post-graduate experience in student affairs.

Mindfulness: Intentionally focusing one's attention on the present moment with an attitude of openness, curiosity, and acceptance; the practice of being fully engaged with the current experience, without judgment; promotes a deeper awareness of the self and one's

surroundings, enabling a more grounded and centered way of being present (Kabat-Zinn, 1994).

Motif: Culturally shared visual signs and connotations; the smallest element in a narrative that persists in tradition, independently or within a cluster (Lüthi, 1962; Müller, 2011).

Performance analysis: Examination of the interaction of dialogue in the socio-cultural context of the narrative (Riessman, 2008).

Photo-Narrative: Research methodology that combines photography and storytelling to enable participants to describe and comprehend their experiences, perspectives, and social realities (Kim, 2016).

Qualitative research: Approach to inquiry that seeks to explore, understand, and interpret complex social phenomena, human behavior, experiences, and perspectives; emphasizes the collection and analysis of non-numerical data, often in the form of words, texts, images, or observations; aims to uncover the meanings, motivations, patterns, and underlying structures that govern these phenomena rather than focusing on quantifiable measurements (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018; Merriam, 1998; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

Researcher positionality: Self-awareness and critical reflection of a researcher's social, cultural, and personal background and how these factors may influence their perspectives, assumptions, and interactions throughout the research process (Finlay, 2002).

Rigor: Systematic, thorough, and consistent application of qualitative research methods and procedures; the quality criterion of the research (Guba, 1981).

Self-care: The practice of individuals deliberately engaging in activities to maintain or improve their physical, emotional, and mental well-being (Neff, 2003).

Structural analysis: Examination of the organization of narratives to understand how the narrative is told (Riessman, 2008).

Student Affairs: Professional domain with higher education, consisting of personnel dedicated to fostering the growth and development of college students (NASPA, n.d.).

Symbolic analysis: Examination of the ways in which participants use symbols, motifs, and metaphors to construct meaning within their narratives (Müller, 2011).

Thematic analysis: Examination of patterned meaning, or themes, across a dataset, emphasizing the content of the narrative (Riessman, 2008).

Theoretical borderlands: Using multiple theoretical perspectives in a research study to uncover new insights into the data (Abes, 2009).

Trustworthiness: Set of methodological criteria for judging the quality of qualitative inquiry (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Turnover intention: An employee's cognitive decision to detach from a place of employment, which is the precursor of attrition (Burris et al., 2008).

Visual analysis: Examination of the narrative's images and words (Riessman, 2008).

Work-Life flexstyle: The psychological and physical methods individuals utilize to manage the flexibility between their personal and professional lives, aiming to achieve a favorable balance (Kossek & Lautsch, 2008).

Zoom: "A communications platform that allows users to connect with video, audio, phone, and chat" (Zoom, 2022, para. 1).

APPENDIX B

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL LETTER

UNIVERSITY OF
NORTHERN COLORADO

Institutional Review Board

Date:	07/14/2023
Principal Investigator:	Melissa Lafferty
Committee Action:	**IRB EXEMPT DETERMINATION – New Protocol**
Action Date:	07/14/2023
Protocol Number:	2305049759
Protocol Title:	Voices in transition: Unraveling the narratives of mid-level higher education professionals
Expiration Date:	

The University of Northern Colorado Institutional Review Board has reviewed your protocol and determined your project to be exempt under 45 CFR 46.104(d)(702) for research involving

Category 2 (2018): EDUCATIONAL TESTS, SURVEYS, INTERVIEWS, OR OBSERVATIONS OF PUBLIC BEHAVIOR. Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording) if at least one of the following criteria is met: (i) The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects cannot readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects; (ii) Any disclosure of the human subjects' responses outside the research would not reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the subjects' financial standing, employability, educational advancement, or reputation; or (iii) The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects can readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects, and an IRB conducts a limited IRB review to make the determination required by 45 CFR 46.111(a)(7).

You may begin conducting your research as outlined in your protocol. Your study does not require further review from the IRB, unless changes need to be made to your approved protocol.

As the Principal Investigator (PI), you are still responsible for contacting the UNC IRB office if and when:

UNIVERSITY OF
NORTHERN COLORADO

Institutional Review Board

- You wish to deviate from the described protocol and would like to formally submit a modification request. Prior IRB approval must be obtained before any changes can be implemented (except to eliminate an immediate hazard to research participants).
- You make changes to the research personnel working on this study (add or drop research staff on this protocol).
- At the end of the study or before you leave The University of Northern Colorado and are no longer a student or employee, to request your protocol be closed. *You cannot continue to reference UNC on any documents (including the informed consent form) or conduct the study under the auspices of UNC if you are no longer a student/employee of this university.
- You have received or have been made aware of any complaints, problems, or adverse events that are related or possibly related to participation in the research.

If you have any questions, please contact the Interim IRB Administrator, Chris Saxton, at 970-702-5427 or via e-mail at chris.saxton@unco.edu. Additional information concerning the requirements for the protection of human subjects may be found at the Office of Human Research Protection website - http://hhs.gov/ohrp/ and https://www.unco.edu/research/research-integrity-and-compliance/institutional-review-board/.

Sincerely,
Michael Aldridge
Interim IRB Administrator

University of Northern Colorado: FWA00000784

APPENDIX C

RECRUITMENT EMAIL

Title: Volunteers needed for dissertation research

Attachment: Recruitment Flyer

Dear [group name]:

You are invited to participate in my dissertation research, which will explore the narratives of mid-level student affairs professionals as they navigate workplace transitions.

Criteria:

- 2+ years full-time experience in a student support or advocacy role

Participation includes:

- 2 interviews
- Taking up to 10 photos
- Receive a $50 gift card, courtesy of the UNC Graduate Student Association

This study has received Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval at University of Northern Colorado (UNC). Please see attached for more information and feel free to forward to others who may fit the criteria.

If you are interested, please complete this short form.

Thank you!
Mel

Researcher: Mel Lafferty, M.A.
Ph.D. Candidate, Higher Education & Student Affairs Leadership, UNC
Phone: 970-599-1935
E-mail: laff6691@bears.unco.edu

Supervisor: Gardiner Tucker, Ph.D.
Program Director, Higher Education & Student Affairs Leadership, UNC
Phone: 970-351-2598
E-mail: gardiner.tucker@unco.edu

APPENDIX D

RECRUITMENT FLYER


VOLUNTEERS NEEDED FOR DISSERTATION RESEARCH
Who can participate:
2+ years full-time experience
Student support or advocacy role
Examples: Advisor, coordinator, assistant director
Participation includes:
Initial 60-minute interview
Taking up to 10 photos
90-minute interveiw
Receive a $50 gift card
SIGN UP HERE!
bit.ly/43VBJzq

APPENDIX E

RECRUITMENT QUALTRICS SURVEY

Survey Link: https://unco.co1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_0p51VYWtjFLTnPU

You are invited to participate in a research study as a part of my dissertation research. Please answer the questions below and I will contact you soon. Thank you for your time!

Q1. Name:

[text entry]

Q1. Do you consider yourself to be a higher education student affairs professional?

Definition: Higher education student affairs professionals' primary goal is enhancing student learning and personal development of college students, complementing the institution's mission (ACPA, 1996).

- ○ Yes
- ○ No
- ○ Unsure

Q2. Position title:

(e.g., academic advisor, coordinator)

[text entry]

Q3. Please list any degrees in progress or completed and the major/discipline

(e.g., bachelor's in psychology; master's in education)

[text entry]

Q4. Approximately how many years of full-time equivalent experience do you have in student affairs?

For example, a 2-year half-time graduate assistantship is equal to 1 year full-time.

[text entry]

Q5. Do you work full-time in a staff role at a college/university?

Definition: Full-time employees work at least 30 hours per week, on average, with their primary role considered as staff (as opposed to faculty). They may also teach in an adjunct, non-tenure-track capacity.

- ○ Yes
- ○ No
- ○ Unsure

Q6. What is your age?

[text entry]

Q7. How would you describe your racial/ethnic/cultural identity?

[text entry]

Q8. How would you describe your gender identity?

[text entry]

Q9. How would you describe your sexual orientation?

[text entry]

Q10. Do you identify, or did you previously identify, as a first-generation student?

[text entry]

Q11. Do you hold other identities that you would like to share?

[text entry]

Q12. Email address:

[text entry]

Q13: Phone number:

[text entry]

Q14. Participants will receive a $50 e-gift card at the conclusion of the first interview, in recognition of your time and participation. Funding is provided by the University of Northern Colorado (UNC) Graduate Student Association.

Which do you prefer?

- ○ Amazon
- ○ Best Buy
- ○ Target
- ○ Other: [text entry]

Q16. Additional comments or questions:

[text entry]

Thank you for completing the survey! If you qualify and open spots remain, I will send you a link to schedule the first interview. I will also let you know if I was not able to interview you for this project.

If you have any questions about the research, please contact us:

Researcher: Mel Lafferty, Ph.D. Candidate, Higher Education and Student Affairs Leadership
Phone Number: 970-599-1935 email: laff6691@bears.unco.edu

Research Advisor: Gardiner Tucker, Ph.D., Higher Education and Student Affairs Leadership
Phone Number: 970-351-2598 email: gardiner.tucker@unco.edu

APPENDIX F

EMAIL TO ACCEPTED PARTICIPANTS

Title: Dissertation study invitation

Attachment: Interview #1 Protocol

Dear [First Name],

Thank you for completing the Qualtrics study to be a part of my dissertation study!

After receiving your information from the Qualtrics survey, I would like to schedule your first interview. Please use the following link:

https://calendly.com/laff6691/60min

During this interview, we will review these topics:

- Informed consent – you will receive a separate email to request your signature
- Confidentiality
- Permission to audio or video record the interview
- Data collection methods
- Initial interview (see attached)

Please let me know if you have any questions or concerns.

Thank You!
-Mel

Mel Lafferty
Ph.D. Candidate, Higher Education & Student Affairs Leadership
University of Northern Colorado

APPENDIX G

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

UNIVERSITY OF
NORTHERN COLORADO

Informed Consent Form for Participation in Research

Title of Research Study: Voices in transition: Unraveling the narratives of mid-level, higher education professionals

Researcher(s): Mel Lafferty, M.A., Higher Education and Student Affairs Leadership
Phone Number: (970) 491-2476 email: laff6691@bears.unco.edu
Research Advisor: Gardiner Tucker, Ph.D., Higher Education and Student Affairs Leadership
Phone Number: 970-351-2598 email: gardiner.tucker@unco.edu

Procedures: We would like to ask you to participate in a research study. The purpose of this study is to understand how mid-level student affairs professionals experience workplace transitions. You will be asked to complete an initial 60-minute interview, a 90-minute interview, and additional interviews if needed. Between the first and second interview, you will be asked to take and provide up to 10 photographs. You will have an opportunity to give feedback on the research study and its findings. By choosing a pseudonym, your responses will be confidential. You will receive a $50 gift card during the initial interview.

Questions: If you have any questions about this research project, please feel free to contact Mel Lafferty at laff6691@bears.unco.edu. If you have any concerns about your selection or treatment as a research participant, please contact the University of Northern Colorado IRB at irb@unco.edu or 970-351-1910.

Voluntary Participation: Please understand that your participation is voluntary. You may decide not to participate in this study and if you begin participation you may still decide to stop and withdraw at any time. Your decision will be respected and will not result in loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

Please take all the time you need to read through this document and decide whether you would like to participate in this research study.

If you agree to participate in this research study, please sign below. You will be given a copy of this form for your records.

_____ _____
Participant Signature Date

_____ _____
Investigator Signature Date

APPENDIX H

INTERVIEW #1 PROTOCOL

Interview questions:

- What is your experience with research study participation?
- How did you start working in student affairs?
- Which positions have you held?
- What is your current position?
- Tell me about any major work-related transitions since the start of the Coronavirus-19 Pandemic:
    - In-person, virtual, or hybrid work
    - Restructuring of units and positions, including supervisor changes
    - Losing staff and the Great Resignation
    - Changes in resources
- Have you received any hiring or retention bonuses? Raises?
- Has your employer conducted a retention or "stay" interview?
- Have you thought about leaving your current position? Why or why not?
- Have you thought about leaving the field of student affairs? Why or why not?
- Do you feel comfortable taking photos on your phone for the research study?

APPENDIX I

EMAIL BEFORE INTERVIEW #2

Title: Dissertation Study: Photography and Interview #2

Attachments: Participant Photography Protocol; Interview #2 Protocol

Dear [First Name],

Thank you again for your time today!

I have attached the photography instructions and possible questions for the second interview. You should receive a separate email with the gift card.

Please let me know if you have any questions or concerns.

-Mel

Mel Lafferty
Ph.D. Candidate, Higher Education & Student Affairs Leadership
University of Northern Colorado

APPENDIX J

PARTICIPANT PHOTOGRAPHY PROTOCOL

Instructions: Take up to 10 photos during the next week in response to these topics:

1. Work-related transitions during the Coronavirus-19 Pandemic
    a. In-person, virtual, or hybrid work
    b. Restructuring of units and positions, including supervisor changes
    c. Losing staff and the Great Resignation
    d. Changes in resources
2. Navigating student crises
3. Burnout or compassion fatigue
4. Thoughts about leaving your position, university, or higher education
5. Motivation to stay in your position, university, or higher education

You will receive an email reminder. Please email photos to the researcher prior to the second interview:

Mel Lafferty

laff6691@bears.unco.edu

APPENDIX K

INTERVIEW #2 PROTOCOL

Guiding questions will be asked for each photo that the participant chooses to talk about.

1. Which photograph would you like to talk about first?
2. What made you choose to take this particular photo?
3. What are the key elements?
4. Could you tell me the story of this photo?
    a. Where is the photo taken?
    b. What was happening at the time?
    c. What does it represent?
    d. What does it mean to you?
    e. What was your experience of taking this photo?
    f. How does this photo relate to your experience of transitions?
    g. Which memories would you like to share that are related to this photo?
5. Are there any photos that you wished you had taken?
6. Are there any photos that you wouldn't want to share publicly?
7. Any other thoughts or comments you wish to share?

Concluding questions:

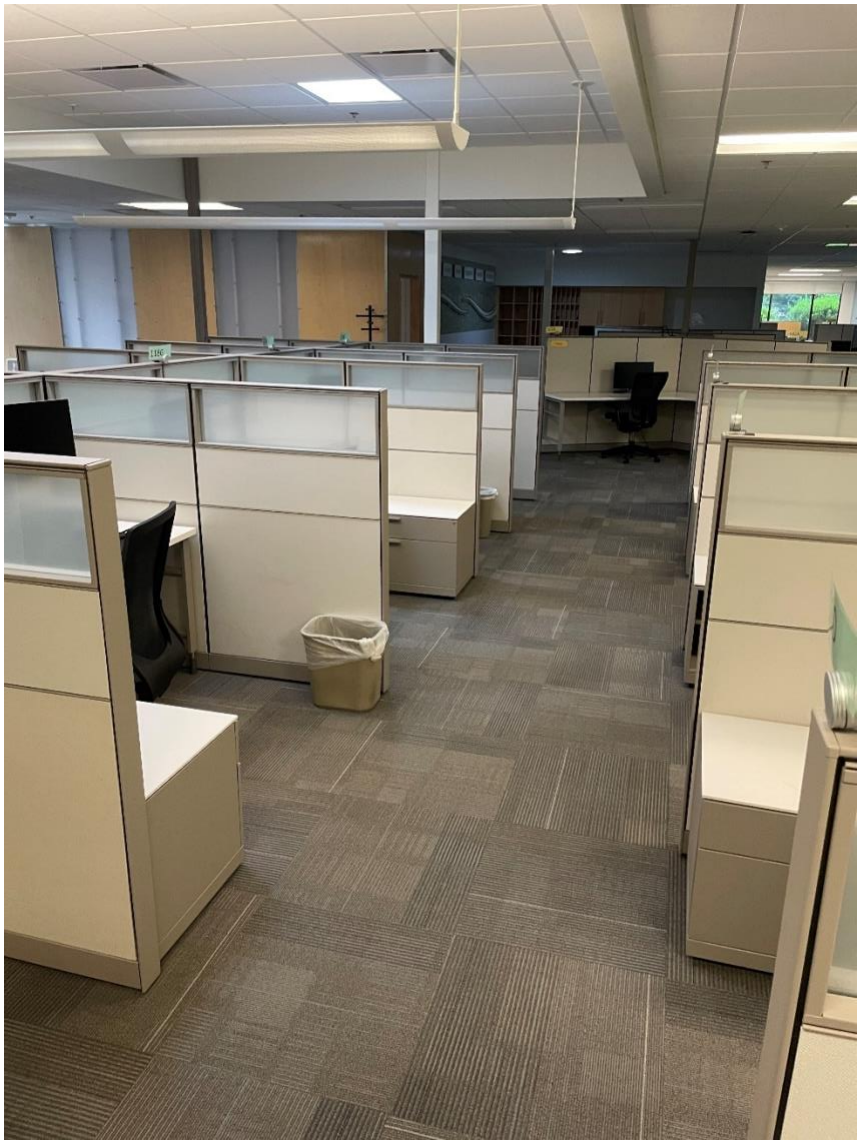
1. What did you think about this process?
2. What did you learn about yourself through this process?
3. What recommendations do you have for higher education administrators on supporting staff through workplace transitions?

APPENDIX L

ANNE'S PHOTOGRAPH OF CONFERENCE ROOMS

APPENDIX M

ANNE'S PHOTOGRAPH OF CUBICLES



APPENDIX N

ANNE'S PHOTOGRAPH OF AN OFFICE

APPENDIX O

ANNE'S PHOTOGRAPH OF A RECEPTION DESK


If no one is present,
please ring bell for
assistance.
-Thank You

APPENDIX P

JUNE'S PHOTOGRAPH OF A TABLE WITH PET PHOTOGRAPHS

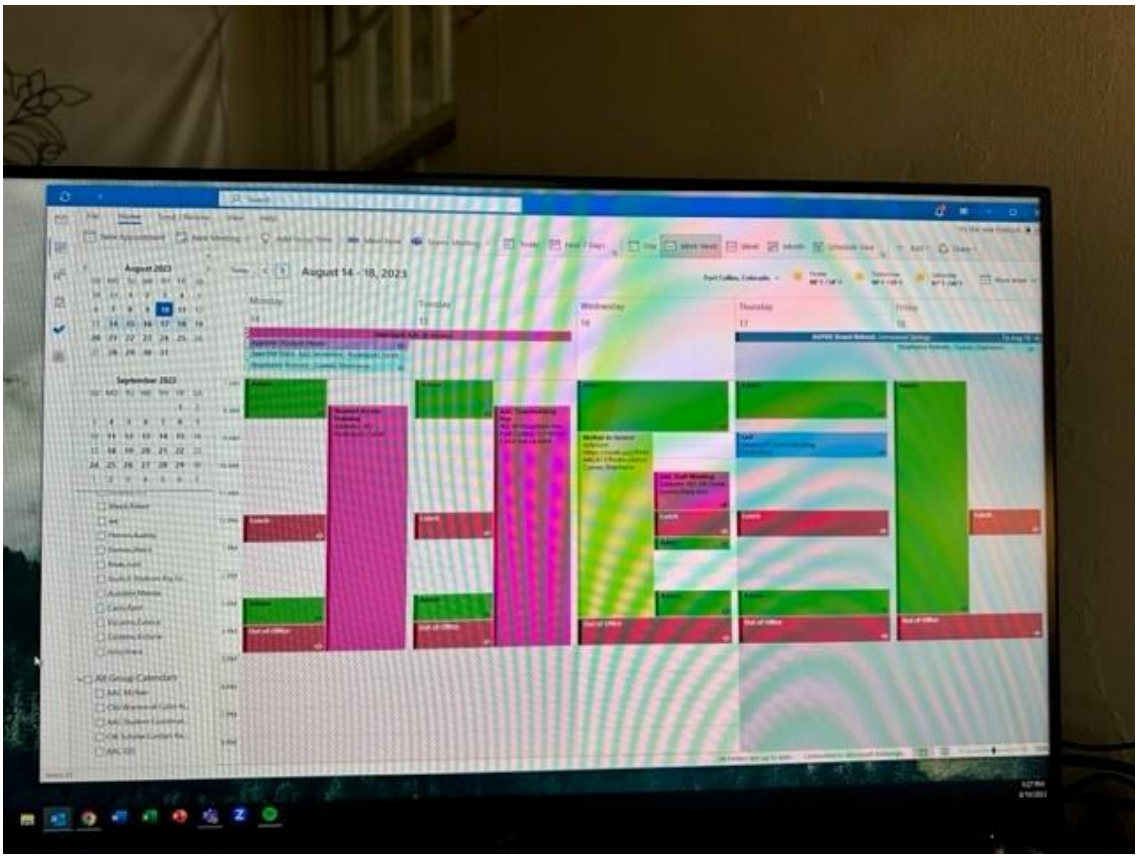

DASQUIN

APPENDIX Q

NATALIA'S PHOTOGRAPH OF THE SUNRISE AT A RETREAT

APPENDIX R

NATALIA'S PHOTOGRAPH OF HER OUTLOOK CALENDAR


August 14 - 18, 2023
Monday
Tuesday
Wednesday
Thursday
Friday

APPENDIX S

NATALIA'S PHOTOGRAPH OF A STUDENT STUDY SPACE

APPENDIX T

NATALIA'S PHOTOGRAPH OF A WALL IN HER OFFICE ON CAMPUS

APPENDIX U

NATALIA'S PHOTOGRAPH OF HER OFFICE ON CAMPUS

APPENDIX V

NATALIA'S PHOTOGRAPH OF BOOKS AT HOME


EBONY & IVY
whitney hanson
home
KAUR
HEALING THROUGH WORDS

APPENDIX W

NOAH'S PHOTOGRAPH OF HIS DOG

APPENDIX X

NOAH'S PHOTOGRAPH OF HIS SHOES


BROOKS

APPENDIX Y

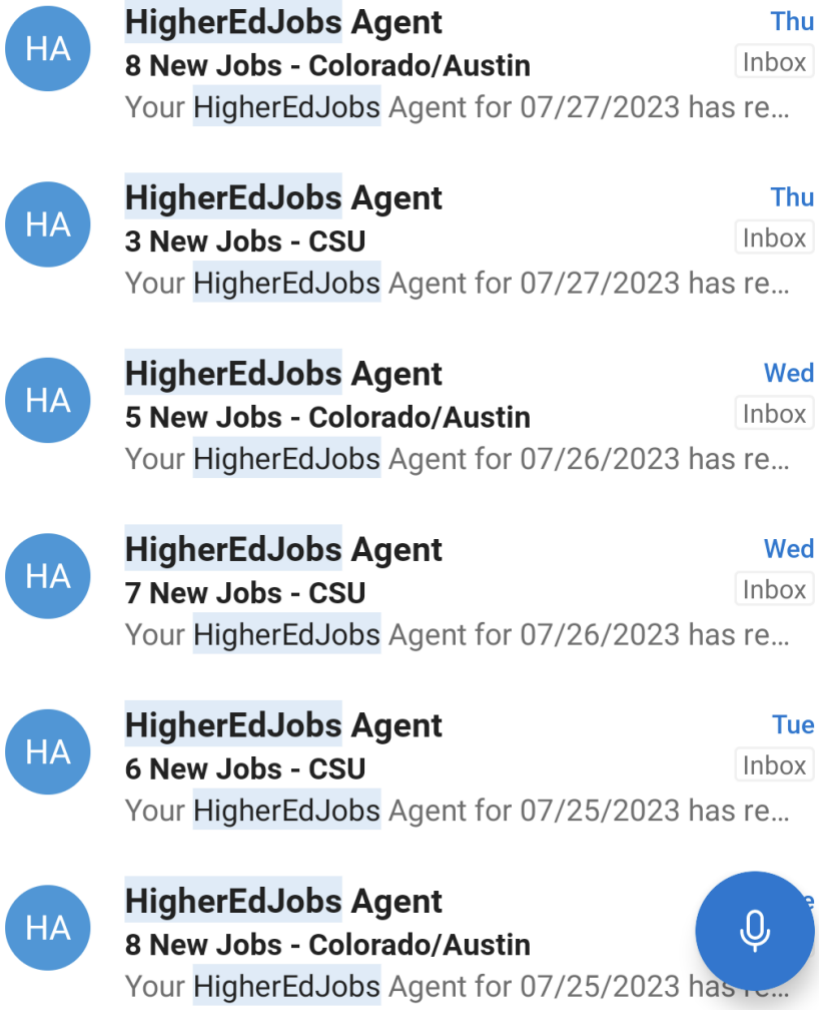
NOAH'S PHOTOGRAPH OF HIS DESK AT HOME, MADE BY HIS FATHER

APPENDIX Z

OLIVIA'S PHOTOGRAPH OF HER DOG

APPENDIX AA

OLIVIA'S SCREENSHOT OF JOB POSTING EMAIL NOTIFICATIONS


HA
HigherEdJobs Agent
Thu
8 New Jobs - Colorado/Austin
Inbox
Your HigherEdJobs Agent for 07/27/2023 has re...
HA
HigherEdJobs Agent
Thu
3 New Jobs - CSU
Inbox
Your HigherEdJobs Agent for 07/27/2023 has re...
HA
HigherEdJobs Agent
Wed
5 New Jobs - Colorado/Austin
Inbox
Your HigherEdJobs Agent for 07/26/2023 has re...
HA
HigherEdJobs Agent
Wed
7 New Jobs - CSU
Inbox
Your HigherEdJobs Agent for 07/26/2023 has re...
HA
HigherEdJobs Agent
Tue
6 New Jobs - CSU
Inbox
Your HigherEdJobs Agent for 07/25/2023 has re...
HA
HigherEdJobs Agent
8 New Jobs - Colorado/Austin
Your HigherEdJobs Agent for 07/25/2023 has

APPENDIX BB

PHOTOGRAPH DESCRIPTIONS

Descriptions of Photographs Withheld for Confidentiality Reasons

Participant Name	Type of File	Description
Andrea	Photograph	Andrea and other instructors participating in a classroom presentation on trauma-informed teaching methods.
Andrea	Photograph	Andrea in a classroom facilitating conversations between students
Andrea	Photograph	Graduate student worker at a desk under a cluttered bulletin board, making door signs
Andrea	Photograph	Group of 5 students walking across a lawn on campus
Andrea	Screenshot	Text message conversation between Andrea and a coworker, in which Andrea shares the news of her new job and the coworker is supportive
Andrea	Screenshot	Email from Andrea's future supervisor, who says they are looking forward to working with her
Andrea	Photograph	15 students at a party, smiling, with cake and balloons
Anne	Photograph	Laptop screen open to the authentication portal Anne uses to access the university's systems remotely, taken at a tilted angle
Anne	Photograph	A cup of yogurt, spoon, French press coffee maker, and filled coffee cup with the institution's logo, on a stove showing the time of 7:07
Elizabeth	Screenshot	Elizabeth's team members on Microsoft Teams
Elizabeth	Pdf	Organizational chart of Elizabeth's unit
Elizabeth	Photograph	Elizabeth in her office at home, wearing her business name tag, smiling and standing next to her cat
Elizabeth	Pdf	Flexible work arrangements and teleworking guidelines
Elizabeth	Photograph	3 graduating students, Elizabeth, and her supervisor
Elizabeth	Photograph	Elizabeth and 15 of her classmates, wearing a shirt with their program name
June	Photograph	T-shirt quilt from a former workplace

June	Photograph	Framed photograph of June's wedding, with the guests standing in front of the mountains
June	Photograph	Polaroid on a bulletin board of June and 3 coworkers
Olivia	Photograph	Flyers of Campus Resources on a Bulletin Board