ABSTRACT

Despite the critical contributions that student affairs professionals make to college students’ learning and development and campus operations, mid-level professionals are at risk of leaving the field altogether. The current study investigated the role of sense of belonging in mid-level student affairs professionals’ experiences and their turnover intentions through a qualitative, phenomenological analysis. Ten mid-level student affairs professionals from various institutions were interviewed about how they experience belongingness within their work, and how their evaluation of belonging influences their intention to stay at their institution or in the field of student affairs. The results demonstrate that sense of belonging is experienced by mid-level student affairs professionals, but in varied ways, and it is shaped through relationships, being trusted for professional expertise and competence, and feeling supported by others. Salient identities, especially marginalized identities, can shape the experience of belonging as can professional networks outside of institutional experiences. Furthermore, the findings demonstrate that sense of belonging, whether it was experienced or lacking, influenced the intentions of many participants to stay at their institution and in the field of student affairs more broadly. Should colleges and universities be committed to addressing the attrition of mid-level student affairs professionals, they should commit to supporting and cultivating sense of belonging as it does indeed matter.
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Over a decade ago, as a new student affairs professional, I found myself not in the comforts of my tiny, shared apartment in New York City, but in the woods of Bloomingdale, New Jersey trying to act casual as I instructed a handful of students to put down their phones and to keep walking quietly past the bear. It was not unimaginable that one of our students, many of whom had never before left the five boroughs of New York, would stop to take a photo of the bear for Instagram and the rest would be history. At the time, I was one of six student affairs professionals coaching approximately 100 students attending an off-campus leadership retreat. Fortunately, the bear wasn’t bothered by us, most of the students didn’t even notice it, and now it is just a good story to tell. The rest of the weekend unfolded without incident. However, I was disappointed when my boss told us that she wasn’t staying overnight, leaving me to anxiously sleep with one eye and ear open in case something happened. There were other minor hiccups along the way including a twisted ankle and some tears over a breakup, but all in all the weekend was a success and I relaxed on the school bus back to the city listening to the students chatter with new friends. I was still slightly bothered, however, by my boss’ unanticipated absence and didn’t understand why she would leave us.

More than 10 years later, in a different role, city, and stage of my career as a mid-level professional, I understand why my boss just couldn’t spend the night on this leadership retreat. After a full week of work, she simply needed to sleep in her own bed and be there on a Saturday morning when her eight-year-old daughter woke up instead of sleeping on a glorified cot in a room with staff whom she supervised. That boss has
become a friend and we still laugh about how she “abandoned” us and the absurd, or worse, the painful and challenging positions we have found ourselves in supporting and developing students and staff in our various roles within student affairs.

There have been times as a mid-level student affairs professional when I have felt like I “couldn’t” too. Times when I haven’t wanted to stay at work until 10 p.m. supervising a student event or miss my niece’s birthday party to present to admitted students on a weekend. Even worse has been when I couldn’t help my staff or a student because I didn’t have the agency to solve their problem. These are the times that make me question why I am in this field and if student affairs is truly where I belong.

I know that I am not alone in these frustrations and doubts, and that student affairs staff across functional areas and hierarchy are faced with difficult decisions and conversations on a regular basis. This has only been amplified during the COVID-19 pandemic, with higher education institutions scrambling to adapt and remain viable. Student affairs professionals have been very much on the front line of this response. Consider a laundry list of new needs or needs accelerated by the pandemic: coordinating quarantine and isolation housing, explaining and enforcing necessary public health behaviors, supporting food and housing insecure students, closing the digital divide through technology access – at many institutions, these have become “other duties as assigned” for student affairs staff members. A recent *Chronicle of Higher Education* article’s title and subtitle sum it up nicely: “They’re Called #TeamNoSleep. The pandemic has piled new demands on student-affairs staffers. They’re burning out and see no end in sight” (Pettit, 2021). There is a need, perhaps more urgent now than ever, to understand the experiences of the student affairs professionals who support
postsecondary students and to consider their job motivation, satisfaction, and intentions to stay or leave the field.

Overview of Previous Literature

Student affairs professionals play a critical role in campus operations and make significant contributions to the learning and development of students in higher education institutions. In spite of the vital nature of student affairs roles, research suggests that 30-60% of student affairs professionals leave the field within the first five years (Marshall et al., 2016). As an emphasis on fiscal responsibility and accountability increases within higher education, it is imperative that the cost of staff turnover and attrition be analyzed. There are financial considerations including the cost to recruit, hire, and train new staff; the loss of efficiency, continuity, and productivity due to turnover; and the ability for departments to maintain high quality services for students when losing experienced staff (Marshall et al., 2016; Rosser & Javinar, 2003).

The problem of student affairs staff attrition is of particular importance at the mid-level. Mid-level student affairs professionals are instrumental in interpreting institutional mission and vision from upper administration and clearly articulating action steps to front-line administrators (Mather et al., 2009; Wilson et al., 2016). Mid-level staff “may be distinguished by their position on an organizational chart, span of authority, control of resources, and complexity of programs and services supervised” (Wilson et al., 2016, p. 558). In many cases, they report to senior student affairs officers and oversee a functional area or supervise at least one professional staff member (Wilson et al., 2016). As such, they need to be equipped to navigate complex roles and provide leadership to their area, in addition to possessing technical abilities such as supervisory and budgetary
skills (Mather et al., 2009). Mid-level leaders have been called the “unsung professionals of the academy” as their dedication, commitment, and training contribute significantly to the student experience often without recognition or status (Rosser, 2004). While they represent one of the largest areas of personnel growth in higher education, they lack organizational visibility in higher education and their contributions are not always recognized or researched in the literature (Rosser, 2004). A growing concern about burnout and attrition amongst mid-level student affairs professionals specifically has spurned a body of recent research exploring satisfaction, morale, and turnover intentions (e.g., Marshall et al., 2016; Mullen et al., 2018; Tull, 2006; Wilson et al., 2016). The literature points to several reasons for attrition including job dissatisfaction due to job stress and burnout (Mullen et al., 2018; Marshall et al., 2016), ineffective supervision (Marshall et al., 2016; Tull, 2006), and lack of professional identity, career contentment, and community connection (Wilson et al., 2016).

Rationale for the Study

This problem of mid-level student affairs professionals’ attrition can be addressed through the application of sense of belonging. There is currently limited, if any, published research that explores the relationship between sense of belonging as a construct and the attrition of mid-level student affairs professionals. However, understanding the motivations behind the thinking, feelings, and actions of individuals through sense of belonging has value in a variety of fields including mental health and education. In higher education, sense of belonging has been used as a retention theory to understand the experiences and persistence of marginalized students (Goodenow & Grady, 1993; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Schlossberg, 1989; Strayhorn, 2019) and to understand the role
of belongingness during times of transition (Schlossberg, 1989; Strayhorn, 2019). While not extensively explored, it is possible that the concept of sense of belonging would be applicable in the academy beyond the undergraduate student experience and that it would be useful to understand the relationship between institution and administrator. One particular line of inquiry is the role of sense of belonging in staff retention and how it influences employees’ commitment to the organization. In student affairs, sense of belonging could be a factor in mitigating attrition for mid-level professionals, however there is limited, if any, current literature drawing this connection. Mid-level professionals’ satisfaction and morale are connected to feeling supported in their careers (Johnsrud et al., 2000; Rosser, 2004; Rosser & Javinar, 2003) and recognized or valued for their contributions and competence (Donaldson & Rosser, 2007; Rosser, 2004; Rosser & Javinar, 2003), and thus their intent to leave the field is influenced by their perception of being valued and mattering, two hallmarks of sense of belonging theory.

Furthermore, as sense of belonging is particularly significant during times of transition, it is an appropriate construct to consider as higher education institutions, and their administrators, navigate the change and transition thrust upon them due to the COVID-19 pandemic. While mid-level professionals are not the only ones navigating COVID-related challenges, it is significant to understand that being in the middle of the hierarchy with limited decision-making authority but responsibility to execute under such high stakes will undoubtedly influence employee satisfaction and morale. Thus, analyzing employee belongingness during times of transition could lead to a better understanding of staff retention and commitment.
The Current Study

At a more fundamental level, there is a gap in the literature in understanding the role of belonging for mid-level student affairs professionals. As such, the purpose of this current study is to understand the role of sense of belonging in mid-level student affairs professionals’ experiences through a qualitative, phenomenological analysis. The research questions that guide this study are as follows:

1. How do mid-level student affairs professionals experience sense of belonging at their institution or in the field?
2. How does their evaluation of belonging shape their intention to stay at their institution or in the field?

Significance of the Study

Mid-level student affairs professionals play a critical role in higher education, but the complexity of their roles influences their satisfaction, morale, and intent to leave the field. The current study is significant as it contributes to the limited research about mid-level student affairs professionals from a qualitative perspective. The study seeks to better understand how mid-level student affairs professionals experience belonging, including perceptions of mattering and feeling valued. By better understanding if and how mid-level student affairs professionals experience belonging, institutions, professional organizations, and senior administrators can design strategic interventions to nurture belonging and connectedness and potentially influence staff retention and commitment. In addition, this current project may inspire future related research such as a quantitative assessment of student affairs professionals’ sense of belonging; additional research about belonging at various career stages such as new professionals, senior
student affairs officers, or during a promotion; research focusing on belongingness in other functional areas in higher education; and further exploration into the influence of belonging on staff attrition and retention.

Definition of Key Terms

*Student Affairs*

Student affairs is the collection of departments, offices, and units that provide services and support to postsecondary students. Sometimes referred to as student services or student personnel administration, the role of student affairs is to deliver services and support that enhance the educational experience, learning, and personal development of college students. Depending on an institution’s organizational hierarchy, different areas may be represented under the student affairs portfolio or division. The five areas most commonly reported to be within student affairs are campus activities, student conduct, counseling, orientation, and student affairs assessment (Schuh et al., 2016). Other common areas include career services, wellness programs, disability support services, on-campus housing, recreational sports, and multicultural services, although depending on the institution, there will likely be many more functional areas housed under the student affairs umbrella (Wesaw & Sponsler, 2014).

*Mid-level Student Affairs Professional*

Mid-level student affairs professionals are administrators who are not part of institution's senior leadership team, but provide management and staff supervision within a student affairs unit. Sometimes referred to in the literature as mid-level managers or mid-level administrators, mid-level professionals are neither a Chief Student Affairs Officer (CSAO) nor an entry-level professional (Young, 2007). For the purposes of this
current study, mid-level student affairs professionals are defined as staff members working within the Division of Student Affairs at their institution, who do not serve as a senior student affairs officer, and who have at least five years of post-master’s degree professional experience or are post-master’s degree professionals serving as directors.

Sense of Belonging

Sense of belonging is an individual’s perception of feeling valued by and mattering to a group or community, which elicits cognitive, behavioral, and affective responses (Hagerty et al., 1992; Strayhorn, 2019).
CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

In this chapter, I provide a review of the literature about mid-level student affairs professionals, specifically the defining characteristics of their roles and how these characteristics relate to the attrition of professionals at this level. Subsequently, I will introduce the framework of sense of belonging including its theoretical origins, other concepts closely related to belonging, and provide an argument for the significance of sense of belonging as a theoretical framework. Finally, I will situate the current study given the gap of literature on the role of belonging for mid-level student affairs professionals.

Mid-Level Student Affairs Professionals

Student affairs professionals play an important role in higher education, supporting student learning and development and contributing significantly to campus operations. The historical roots of the field, originally called student personnel, can be traced to the late nineteenth century with the advent of deans of women supporting female students newly able to access higher education (Schuh et al., 2016). Since then, the field has continued to evolve and grow during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, adapting to the needs of students, responding to federal legislation, and approaching current challenges related to shifting student demographics, college costs, and the role of technology. Schuh et al. (2016) explores this evolution:

Largely created in response to the wants of students and their multifaceted needs and concerns, as well as to advocate on their behalf, student affairs has become a
very broad profession within higher education, ranging from orientation to residence life to career services and more. (p. 36)

Depending on an institution’s organizational structure or hierarchy, various staff or units may fall under the umbrella of “student affairs.” The Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (2019) has identified 47 functional area standards for higher education programs and services, providing guidelines for quality services to enhance student learning and achievement. The five areas most commonly reported to be within student affairs are campus activities, student conduct, counseling, orientation, and student affairs assessment (Schuh et al., 2016). Other common areas include career services, wellness programs, disability support services, on-campus housing, recreational sports, and multicultural services, although depending on the institution, there will likely be many more functional areas housed under the student affairs umbrella (Wesaw & Sponsler, 2014). In addition, the two preeminent national professional organizations for students affairs, ACPA—College Student Educators International and NASPA—Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education, developed and continue to refine professional competency areas expected of all student affairs professionals (2015). The professional competency areas articulate the knowledge, skills, and attitudes required in the field at a foundational level and beyond. These competency areas include personal and ethical foundations; values, philosophy, and history; assessment, evaluation, and research; law, policy, and governance; organizational and human resources; leadership; social justice, and inclusion; student learning and development technology; and advising and supporting.
Student affairs professionals as a collective have varied roles within higher education that require both a breadth and depth of knowledge and skill. Positional hierarchy amplifies this role complexity and mid-level student affairs professionals, in between entry-level professional and senior student affairs officers, face distinct challenges. The review of the literature on mid-level student affairs professionals will first describe the defining factors of the mid-level role, then explore attrition at the mid-level, and finally discuss additional ways to consider attrition.

**Defining Factors of Mid-level Student Affairs Professionals**

The 1960s-1970s saw strong growth in college administration, most of which occurred in middle-level positions (Scott, 1980). However, researchers have acknowledged that both the needs of mid-level college administrators and the group as a whole are not well-understood (Scott, 1980; Mills, 2009; Young, 2007). Scott (1980) described mid-level professionals as “lordes, squires, and yeoman,” a reference to England as a source of ideas about higher education as well as clearly illustrating the hierarchical ranking inherent to institutions of higher education, and described them as “knowledge professionals who do operating work” (p. 388). In *The Handbook of Student Affairs Administration*, Mills (2009) describes mid-level student affairs professionals as the bridge between entry-level staff and Senior Student Affairs Officers, providing support and linking the vertical and horizontal hierarchy within the institution. Young (2007) talks about mid-level managers as invisible leaders who “have the greatest potential of any group of administrators to effect collaboration and change in an institution” (p. 4). Beyond their place within the organizational hierarchy, there are some
common characteristics of mid-level student affairs professionals that will be further explained in this chapter.

**Role Complexity**

Perhaps the most common theme throughout the literature is that mid-level staff roles are complex, which can frequently result in role conflict, ambiguity, and a lack of authority (Adams-Dunford et al., 2019; Mather et al., 2009; Mills, 2009; Scott, 1980). The increase in administrative staffing in colleges in the 1960s-1970s adjusted the nature of the roles for mid-level managers and led to increased role specialization (Scott, 1980). The cost, however, of role specialization became decreased status in the organizations and a shift away from student interaction or service towards other responsibilities such as reporting and enforcement of federal policies or budget management (Scott, 1980). This shift continues to cause tension, and mid-level staff straddle the role of educating students and supervising staff and programs or “balance on the seesaw between the transformative goals and transactional realities of our work” (Young, 2007, p. 5).

Mid-level student affairs professionals are likely managers of people, financial resources, information, and programs (Mills, 2009). Bridging the gap between senior and entry-level staff, mid-level staff communicate information, carry out directives from above, and support and supervise frontline staff (Adams-Dunford et al., 2019). Although they have significant responsibilities and the potential to shape workforce culture, they often lack final authority to make decisions. Mid-level managers are tasked with implementing, interpreting, and enforcing policy, but rarely do they create it, which can be a challenge and can contribute to role ambiguity and questions of authority (Adams-Dunford et al., 2019, Mills, 2009). More recently, mid-level staff are often in a position
of managing multiple generations in the workplace, contributing to the complexity of their role (Mills, 2009).

Belch and Strange’s (1995) qualitative study of six middle managers in student affairs explored the meaning and experience of middle-management as it relates to their career. The results emphasized the complexity of middle management roles, as the experiences described by participants varied greatly. The dualistic nature of middle management was clear, with middle managers simultaneously tending to the people who work for them and the people who they work for, and all participants expressed role conflict related to this.

**Personal Responsibilities**

Mid-level staff may find themselves challenged by the competing demands of their professional role and their personal responsibilities such as parenting or caretaking (Belch & Strange, 1995). Administrators starting roles at the mid-level are less likely to have a built in network of peers and are more likely to make a transition that involves others such as partners, children, or parents (Mather et al., 2009). These personal responsibilities continue to influence mid-level staff as they consider career aspirations and advancement. Belch and Strange (1995) found that personal factors or “life markers” such as children, illness, or death of a family member played a significant role in how the middle-managers described their aspirations to more senior-level roles. There were also differences by gender with men more clearly articulating goals towards advancing in title and responsibility and women aspiring to growth and development while acknowledging family commitments of marriage or children. Advancement opportunities are significant
as they play a role in staff turnover intention. Staff attrition is explored in greater depth in the following section of this chapter.

Experiences of Mid-level Staff of Color

Massé et al. (2007) address a gap in the literature by exploring the experiences of mid-level staff of color. Acknowledging that professionals of color experience the same role-related challenges as their peers, their experiences are complicated by their various marginalized identities including a lack of representation, limited or “partitioned” advancement, and uneven job satisfaction. “The unfortunate truth is that many people of color continue to feel unwelcome in the academy” (Massé et al., 2007, p. 156). This unwelcoming climate may contribute to underrepresentation, and while many institutions may not be overtly racist, there is a “covert environment of white superiority” that contributes to feelings of isolation or a decrease in satisfaction (Massé et al., 2007).

Massé et al. (2007) conducted an ethnographic study of five mid-level student affairs managers who represented a diversity of races, geographic regions, institutional types, and functional areas. Issues of representation were prevalent as participants spoke of pressure to represent their entire ethnic group or about being the “tour guide” for their culture while still serving as a resource for students of color, requiring energy to balance this representation and their role responsibilities. Gender also played a role, specifically in consideration of job advancement for mid-level professionals of color. Female participants expected to stay at their current institutions, citing outside obligations that limited their ability or interest in relocating. The male participants, however, did not speak of family obligations and generally seemed freer from internal or external circumstances that would limit their advancement. This finding echoes that of Belch and
Strange (1995) with career aspirations differing by gender and women acknowledging external responsibilities while men did not. An additional theme that surfaced was the conflict of adjusting to institutional expectations to be successful, and the pressure felt to assimilate to the dominant white culture while remaining authentic and true to their identities. The participants spoke of their commitment towards helping students of color as a central part of their identity and a way to remain authentic. Finally, the importance of mentors, professional networks, and professional associations was discussed by all participants and cited as a space where they had freedom to be themselves and find peer networks where they were not alone.

Massé et al.’s (2007) contributions to the literature should not be understated as this is one of a few, if not only, studies focused on mid-level professionals of color. Despite the findings, gaps in the literature regarding the experiences of mid-level professionals of color remain. In contrast to Massé et al.’s (2007) study that explored the overall experiences of professionals of color, the current study seeks to understand the experiences of mid-level student affairs professionals specifically as it relates to sense of belonging.

*Competency-based Definitions*

More recently, scholars and practitioners have advocated for a competency-based definition of mid-level staff. Young Jr. (2007) critiques prior definitions of mid-level student affairs professionals that solely consider hierarchy or years of experience, excluding the role that these staff members play in student learning (Mills, 2009; Scott, 1980). Furthermore, not only are mid-level managers involved in the process of student learning, they are involved in educating and developing their staff. A competency-based
definition of mid-level student affairs professionals, then, may be more valuable in understanding the role. The competencies include: an ability to describe the issues or opportunities within student affairs to be able to allocate the resources and staff needed to support student learning and development; model communication and collaboration across levels with both internal and external stakeholders; and demonstrate the academic mission of the institution, especially as it relates to student learning (Young Jr., 2007). This definition differs substantially from prior definitions of mid-level management by addressing the role played in student learning and development at both the individual unit level and through advancing the institutional mission.

To address the complexities and challenges of mid-level roles, Adams-Dunford et al. (2019) build upon the competency approach to defining mid-level managers. These competencies include personal agency, or being able to self-manage, and having institutional breadth and depth, that is knowing their functional area (depth) and how it fits into the institution (breadth). Furthermore, mid-level managers must be adept at leading change and have strong competency in ethics, as they are often the ones responsible for monitoring and regulating policy and ensuring compliance with institutional, state, and federal guidelines. Finally, mid-level managers must be able to manage their area or work environment including supervision, navigating generational differences in the workplace, negotiating the political institutional landscape, and be adept at budgeting, planning, and assessment. Interestingly, Young Jr. (2007) and Adams-Dunford et al.’s (2019) competencies do not align and, while the approach is similar, there is still not a shared consensus around the competencies or definition of mid-level student affairs professionals.
Attrition of Mid-level Student Affairs Professionals

There is an additional body of research that explores the attrition of mid-level student affairs professionals. This section will provide context by exploring attrition in the student affairs profession, discuss the significance of attrition in student affairs at the mid-level specifically, introduce related studies of attrition in new student affairs student affairs professionals, and recommend additional ways to consider attrition.

Student Affairs Attrition

There is an awareness and, for many, a concern about the high rate of attrition among student affairs professionals (Johnsrud et al., 2000; Lorden, 1998; Marshall et al., 2016; Mullen et al., 2018; Rosser, 2004; Rosser & Javinar, 2003). Lorden’s (1998) review of the literature about attrition in the field explores this phenomenon. Attrition rates in student affairs range from 32% to 61% within the first six years of work in the field. From the literature, Lorden identifies several factors that contribute to attrition. These factors include a general increase or acceptability of career switching over the decades, limited opportunities for advancement, burnout due to stressful conditions and long hours in these roles, unclear job expectations, and insufficient compensation. Lorden recommends a number of interventions to help recruit and retain qualified professionals including improving job satisfaction, adjusting graduate program curricula to clarify role expectations within the profession, and providing opportunities for growth and advancement. Acknowledging the narrow hierarchy in the field and the limited number of Chief Student Affairs Officer roles, Lorden advocates for broader definitions of professional success, including innovative ways to promote advancement that may not be vertical.
The question remains: is attrition within the field a cause for concern? Lorden (1998) questioned if professionals were leaving the field because of dissatisfaction or because of the transferable skills of student affairs professionals, they were able to find more attractive career opportunities outside of the field. Furthermore, it is difficult to compare the attrition rates of student affairs professionals to other industries. In other fields, turnover, or the rate at which people leave a specific role, is measured at the organization-level, not by the profession as a whole. There are, however, costs associated with attrition both to recruit and train new staff and the emotional tax on the morale of those who remain in the field. Ultimately, Lorden asserts that additional research is needed to better understand attrition in the student affairs profession and its causes, pointing out the benefit of examining attrition within specific populations, understanding the impact of attrition on student affairs work, and exploring attrition qualitatively.

Two recent studies address some of these concerns and contribute to the understanding of attrition in the field as a whole. Marshall et al.’s (2016) mixed-methods study of 153 student affairs professionals who had already left the field was revealing. Over 60% of participants left the field of student affairs within 10 years of starting, and 57% of those who left were identified as middle managers. The most frequently cited reason for leaving was stress and burnout, some of it attributed to the extreme hours often required in these roles. Other factors included non-competitive salaries and more attractive career alternatives, many with higher compensation. There was also an imbalance between personal and professional responsibilities, and a lack of flexibility which led to work-life conflict. Limited advancement opportunities were cited as a reason for leaving, and this was further compounded by those who had geographic restrictions.
Supervisor incompatibility and issues of institutional fit were mentioned, as well as an overall loss of passion for the work. Many of these issues including burnout, lack of compensation, and limited opportunities for advancement were also discussed in the literature nearly two decades prior (Lorden, 1998).

Mullen et al. (2018) expanded on this work through a large quantitative study of nearly 800 student affairs professionals. Citing many of the same factors related to attrition, Mullen et al. explored job satisfaction and turnover intention. Defining job satisfaction as an emotional response to the work, the researchers acknowledged that this construct is based on a variety of factors. Turnover intention, or the cognitive shift made when an employee starts to detach from a workplace, was analyzed as a potential predictor of attrition. While several studies have explored the connection between job satisfaction and attrition among student affairs professionals (Lorden, 1998; Rosser & Javinar, 2003; Tull, 2006), Mullen et al. examined job stress and burnout, a decreased feeling of accomplishment or condition of emotional exhaustion, to determine if the environment was exceeding the employees’ resources and endangering their wellbeing. Among the participants, there was a low self-report of job stress and burnout, although they did have high symptoms of burnout. Participants also reported high levels of satisfaction and low to moderate levels of turnover intention. In regards to intent to leave, there was a negative relationship found between age, work experience, and turnover intention with younger or newer professionals being more likely to think about leaving. While the results indicated a high level of satisfaction among participants, they also found that job stress and burnout were predictive of job satisfaction. That is, higher levels of stress or burnout were associated with job dissatisfaction and intent to leave. It is
important to note that the sample was primarily white females, thus additional research with more diverse participants is warranted. Furthermore, while the results depict a field of satisfied professionals, would student affairs professionals who are experiencing burnout or dissatisfaction agree to participate in the study? The answer is unlikely, thus further research, such as study of those who had recently exited the profession, is necessary.

Attrition at the Mid-Level

As suggested by Lorden (1998), there is a body of research that explores attrition at the mid-level, which has expanded within the last two decades (Donaldson & Rosser, 2007; Johnsrud et al., 2000; Rosser, 2004; Rosser & Javinar, 2003). Johnsrud et al.’s (2000) quantitative study of mid-level professionals explored the impact of morale on mid-level student affairs professionals’ work life and intent to leave. Building on what is understood from the literature, the researchers emphasize the challenges experienced by mid-level administrators including the nature of employment as a mid-level professional, or being in the role to execute decisions without being the decision-maker, a lack of recognition and appreciation for their contributions, and limited opportunities for career advancement. A further discussion about administrative mobility, or promotions or positions changes, outlines that it is this mobility that allows for an increase in skills, knowledge, and experience and the means by which individuals build careers. In student affairs in particular, there is a tendency for the highest positions to be filled externally, rather than by promotion of internal candidates. For mid-level professionals, this means that they must be willing to move between institutions for future advancement. As previously discussed, there are challenges related to turnover including institutional
inefficiencies, instability, and the cost of recruitment and training new staff (Lorden, 1998). Johnsrud et al.’s study makes the connection between these work-life issues at the mid-level, employee morale, and intent to leave. Morale is often used as a substitute or synonym for satisfaction or commitment. Defining morale as a multidimensional construct, the researchers argue that morale is an attitudinal response to work conditions that includes institutional regard, mutual loyalty, and quality of work. These items can be further defined by working in a caring organization and feeling valued and treated fairly (institutional regard), having loyalty to the institution and perceiving that their opinions are valued (mutual loyalty), and having variety in work, a common purpose, and satisfaction with work (quality of work).

Based on the analysis of survey data collected from 869 mid-level administrators defined as campus administrators below the dean level within a ten-campus system, Johnsrud et al. determined that morale does, indeed, matter. Work life, that is working conditions, career support, inter and external relations, had a direct effect on morale at the individual level and an indirect effect on participants’ intent to leave. At the mid-level, these work life issues include the supervisory relationship, recognition of contributions, and opportunities for advancement. Thus, an individual’s perception of these work life issues impacts morale and can influence mid-level administrators’ likelihood of staying at the institution. Although the study only included a survey of administrators within one campus system, there are significant implications to understanding the relationship between work life issues, morale, and intent to leave on an individual or supervisory level and at an organizational and policy level.
Rosser and Javinar (2003) expanded upon this research through a national study measuring mid-level administrators' work life, their satisfaction and morale, and their intent to leave the field. The researchers make a distinction between satisfaction as being an individual’s feelings about their job compared to morale as being an individual’s feelings about their organization. Their study examined both of these variables while providing a better understanding of the work life issues that would elicit affective responses to satisfaction and morale and subsequent intent to leave. Rosser and Javinar provide a distinct definition of mid-level student affairs professionals as being academic or non-academic “support personnel” within a higher education organization. In addition, “...they report to a senior-level administrator and their positions are differentiated by functional specialization, skills, training and experiences” (Rosser & Javinar, 2003, p. 817). The results of this national survey indicate that the perceptions that mid-level student affairs administrators have of their work life have a direct impact on both satisfaction and morale. Administrators’ perception of the quality of their work life, that is career development opportunities, recognition for expertise and competence, relationships, and perceptions of discrimination, has a strong influence on satisfaction and morale, which in turn influences intent to leave.

There were nuances based on the number of years worked at the institution and salary. Rosser and Javinar found that the longer administrators had worked at the institution, the lower their morale. While these administrators perceive themselves to be less committed to the institution, they are less likely to leave their position due to their years of service. The second characteristic that had a significant effect on morale was salary. Those paid higher salaries have lower levels of morale and were less likely to
leave their position or institution. Further exploration is needed to better understand the relationship between administrators’ financial compensation and intent to leave.

The results of Rosser and Javinar’s (2003) study supports previous research about mid-level student affairs professionals and the connection between work life and their satisfaction and morale (Johnsrud et al., 2000). Relationships were paramount to mid-level professionals, both within and between units, and positive relationships have positive impacts on satisfaction and morale. Relationships with external constituents, including students, senior staff, and faculty, were also found to play a role in satisfaction and could be a demonstration of mid-level professionals’ taking pride in their role as a liaison between these various groups. Although perceived discrimination did not directly effect professionals’ intentions to leave, it did result in lower morale, which had an indirect effect on intent to leave. There remain concerns about the mid-level role including role ambiguity, low pay, and professional development and career advancement options (Belch & Strange, 1995; Marshall et al., 2016; Mather et al., 2009;). However, this national study found that mid-level student affairs professionals were relatively satisfied with the quality of their work life, which had positive implications for satisfaction and morale. The study’s definition of mid-level student affairs professionals was clearly delineated by level, but less by functional area and could call into question which participants are truly members of student affairs departments.

Rosser (2004) continued to expand upon this research by exploring the perceptions of mid-level leaders’ work life on satisfaction and morale and subsequently on their intent to leave. Rosser hypothesizes that morale and satisfaction have an influence on mid-level leaders’ intent to leave, which is the best predictor of turnover. As
previously discussed, there are both pros and cons of turnover in student affairs. Rosser acknowledges the murky definitions of satisfaction and morale, often used interchangeably, but argues that they are two distinct experiences that can have separate influences on behavior. Morale, a multidimensional concept, includes employees’ sense that they are valued, that their opinions matter, and that the work is purposeful (Johnsrud et al, 2000). While morale attends to how an individual feels about their organization, satisfaction relates more closely with how the individuals feel about their job.

Rosser (2004) conducted a national quantitative study that included 1,966 mid-level leaders serving in roles within academic support, business/administrative services, external affairs, and student affairs. Of the participants, 28% identified as a minority by gender in their work unit, nearly nine percent, or 160 individuals, identified as an “ethnic minority,” with nearly 8% reporting that they were a minority by race in their work unit. The results of this study are congruent with previous findings by Rosser and Javinar (2003) that work life factors have a direct effect on satisfaction and morale and subsequently on intent to leave. Shared findings regarding work life factors include that those with higher salaries reported lower levels of morale, that those who perceived high levels of career support such as professional development and advancement opportunities had higher levels of satisfaction, that strong external relationships were positively associated with satisfaction, and that those mid-level leaders who perceive they are recognized or respected for the contributions have higher levels of satisfaction and are less likely to leave. An additional finding was that the work life characteristic classified as “review/intervention,” or evaluation and assessment reporting, budget review, and reporting from institutional, state, or federal policy had a positive impact on mid-level
leaders’ satisfaction and would make them less likely to leave. This could be interpreted as mid-level leaders are likely to accept and understand that their administrative roles include a level of reporting and accountability.

Rosser’s (2004) study expands upon prior research by examining the positive and negative effects that demographics have on morale, satisfaction, and intent to leave. Results indicated that mid-level leaders who identified as non-white had lower levels of morale and were thus more likely to leave. The non-white participants, however, did not have lower levels of satisfaction. This differentiation is significant in supporting that morale and satisfaction are perceived as distinct experiences. Perceptions of discrimination by age, race, or gender, had a direct effect on mid-level leaders’ intent to leave. This was the only variable that had no intervening effect from satisfaction or morale and directly influenced intent to leave. Ultimately, this study confirms that a combination of demographics, the perceived quality of work life issues, satisfaction, and morale contribute to mid-level leaders’ intent to stay or leave. It is important to note, however, the broad definition of mid-level and the relatively racially homogenous sample with only nine percent of the sample, or 160 participants, identifying as an “ethnic minority.” Considering the demographics and work life issues explored in this study, a more racially representative participant group would be beneficial to understanding the experiences of non-white mid-level leaders.

A further exploration of mid-level leaders’ morale and satisfaction was conducted by Donaldson and Rosser (2007) specifically examining continuing education professionals at the mid-level. This quantitative study included 169 continuing education administrators between the levels of coordinator and vice president. While in the specific
area of continuing education, many of the results confirmed findings from previous studies (e.g., Rosser, 2004; Rosser & Javinar, 2003) that suggest professionals who were less satisfied were more likely to leave and that those who intended to leave had lower morale. Additionally, there was a positive association between recognition of competence and job satisfaction. Furthermore, the level of pay and years of employment predicted intent to leave, with those earning more or with more years of service more likely to stay. Again, this confirms findings from prior studies (Rosser, 2004; Rosser & Javinar, 2003). For continuing education mid-level professionals, their perceptions of marginality on campus and a lack of high-level administrative support decreases morale and loyalty to the organization, increasing the likelihood of leaving. Additionally, continuing education professionals’ morale was closely related to the perceived level of support from senior institutional leaders. This confirms the importance of external relationships for mid-level leaders, regardless of role or functional area (Johnsrud et al, 2000; Rosser, 2004; Rosser & Javinar, 2003). There were no statistical differences by demographic characteristics, but there was a relatively small number of respondents and 91% of the participants were white. This study confirms previous findings that recognition of competence and expertise and career support increases mid-level leaders’ job satisfaction, morale, and probability of staying.

**Attrition of New Professionals**

There have been several studies examining attrition of new student affairs professionals that contribute to the understanding of the mid-level employee experience. Ward’s (1995) quantitative study of new student affairs professionals at four-year institutions explored how role conflict and ambiguity led to role stress, which is
associated with job dissatisfaction and propensity to leave. For new professionals, Ward concluded many experience moderate to high levels of role ambiguity and conflict, and despite being satisfied with their jobs, many experience role stress. Interestingly, role ambiguity was a stronger predictor of satisfaction and propensity to leave. For new professionals, there is an ability to reduce role conflict and ambiguity by providing a higher level of autonomy. While the same intervention may not be satisfactory for mid-level student affairs professionals, Ward’s research emphasizes the challenges of role ambiguity, which is a hallmark of the mid-level role.

Similarly, Tull (2006) explored the impact of organizational culture and supervision on job satisfaction and intent to leave of new student affairs professionals. Tull argues that new professionals in particular need to be oriented and socialized to the organization and profession. Part of this orientation and socialization process exists through supervision and there may be value in a more holistic approach to supervision that attends to both personal and professional development, referred to as synergistic staff supervision. Through a qualitative study of 435 new student affairs professionals, Tull concludes that synergistic supervision resulted in a significant positive correlation to job satisfaction and a significant negative correlation to turnover intention, emphasizing the value of providing social support via a supervisor within an organization for new professionals. While the participants of Tull’s study were new professionals with five years or less in the field of student affairs, the results provide additional insight about how the culture of an organization can influence job satisfaction and retention.

There is value in understanding the experiences of new student affairs professionals because, should they remain in the field, they will eventually become mid-
level professionals and have expectations about role ambiguity (Ward, 1995) or supervision (Tull, 2006). Furthermore, future research could determine whether similar outcomes would be found if the research participants were mid-level rather than new professionals.

*Alternate Ways to Consider Attrition*

As outlined above, there have been a number of studies that explore attrition within student affairs (Lorden, 1998; Marshall et al., 2016; Mullen et al., 2018), factors related to mid-level student affairs professionals’ attrition (Donaldson & Rosser, 2007; Johnsrud et al., 2000; Rosser, 2004; Rosser & Javinar, 2003), and intent to leave among new student affairs professionals (Tull, 2006; Ward, 1995). These studies collectively provide insight into the factors related to attrition for mid-level professionals. These factors include role ambiguity or role conflict (Rosser & Javinar, 2003; Ward, 1995), role stress (Marshall et al., 2016; Mather et al., 2009; Ward, 1995), perceived career support and advancement opportunities (Johnsrud et al., 2000; Rosser, 2004; Rosser & Javinar, 2003), and recognition for competence (Donaldson & Rosser, 2007; Rosser, 2004; Rosser & Javinar, 2003). If factors such as role ambiguity and limited advancement opportunities are both related to attrition and inherent to the mid-level role, how then might organizations consider strategies to mitigate mid-level employee attrition?

Boehman (2007) offers one potential strategy through the quantitative study of organizational commitment to student affairs professionals. Organizational commitment is an individual’s understanding of the organization’s goals and values, a willingness to work to achieve those goals, and a desire to stay in the organization, and “while commitment to the profession of student affairs is important, it is the commitment to the
campus where the individual works that leads to commitment to (and retention in) the profession” (Boehman, 2007, p. 309). Organizational commitment includes affective commitment or the emotional attachment to the organization, continuance commitment or the costs associated with leaving such as loss of networks and relationships or loss of prestige, and normative commitment being the sense of loyalty or moral obligation felt to the organization. There are four factors that have the greatest influence on organizational commitment for student affairs professionals including job satisfaction, organizational support, organizational politics, and a balance between work and non-work. The study concluded that a supportive work environment results in affective commitment, or an emotional attachment, for student affairs professionals. How individuals perceived organizational support, job satisfaction, and organizational politics all influenced affective commitment. Boehman argues, “How student affairs professionals are valued by the organization is a topic that is often overlooked when addressing the creation of a supportive work environment” (2007, p. 320) and thus, attending to value may be a strategy to mitigate turnover intention. Attrition may not be a signal that professionals are not committed to the organization. Rather, they do not feel valued by the organization.

An alternate way to consider attrition of mid-level student affairs professionals is through the concept of sense of belonging. Sense of belonging describes the ways that individuals think, feel, and respond when they believe they matter, fit, and feel valued. Higher education scholars have used the construct of belonging to understand student outcomes and retention (Freeman et al., 2007; Hausmann et al., 2009; Hoffman et al., 2002; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Strayhorn, 2019) but have not yet directed this knowledge towards understanding the outcomes and retention of college or university staff. Knowing
that mid-level student affairs professionals place value in feeling supported in their careers (Johnsrud et al., 2000; Rosser, 2004; Rosser & Javinar, 2003) and recognized or valued for their contributions and competence (Donaldson & Rosser, 2007; Rosser, 2004; Rosser & Javinar, 2003), the concept of sense of belonging could contribute to the understanding of mid-level professionals intent to stay or leave.

Sense of Belonging Framework

Humans experience connection, membership, and community in various ways or contexts and to varying degrees. The concept of sense of belonging makes meaning of these experiences by describing the cognitive, affective, and behavioral responses that individuals have when they do, or do not, feel that they belong. Through an analysis of the literature about sense of belonging, including the theoretical origins of the concept, its application in the fields of mental health and education, and an understanding of related concepts, there is clear evidence of the value and utility of sense of belonging as a theoretical framework.

Sense of Belonging Theoretical Origins

The theory of sense of belonging can be directly traced back to Maslow’s (1943) hierarchy of needs. Outlining five needs hierarchically, Maslow proposed that these needs drive human behavior and need to be fulfilled for an individual to reach the peak of self-actualization. Separating the needs into categories of basic needs, psychological needs, and fulfillment needs, Maslow posited that the most basic, the deficiency and psychological needs, must be met before humans are motivated towards higher-level needs of creativity and achieving one’s potential. Maslow identifies belonging as a fundamental human need, just above the physiological needs such as food, shelter, and
safety. Once these foundational needs are met, then the need for love and belongingness will emerge (Maslow, 1943). Maslow describes this need as a “hunger for affectionate relations with people in general, namely, for a place in his group” and this need will be motivation to make an effort to achieve this connection (p. 381). In most cases, the need for belonging supersedes the needs of esteem and self-actualization and must be met before moving on completely or at all to these higher-order needs that motivate behavior (1943). Maslow provides some scenarios where this fixed order may not be followed including an undervaluation of needs or individuals valuing self-esteem above love, but these are exceptions rather than generalities (1943). While Maslow does not provide a definition of belonging, his inclusion of belonging as a psychological need sets the stage for further research and exploration.

**Sense of Belonging and Mental Health**

There is a vein of research exploring the connection between mental health and belonging (Anant, 1966; Bollen & Hoyle, 1990; Hagerty & Patusky, 1995; Hagerty et al., 1992). Early research demonstrated that there was, in fact, a connection between relationships and mental health, with key components being involvement in social systems in which individuals feel recognized and accepted by others and feel that they are an essential part of the system (Anant, 1966). In fact, it was more important that the individual perceived their relationship to the group as being important than how other members of the group would describe the relationship (Anant, 1966). This perceived level of belonging has become a hallmark of the theory explored by other scholars (Bollen & Hoyle, 1990; Goodenow, 1993; Strayhorn, 2019)
Hagerty et al. (1992) created meaning of belonging through a concept-analysis strategy to understand its relevance for psychiatric nursing, defining sense of belonging as “the experience of personal involvement in a system or environment so that persons feel themselves to be an integral part of that system or environment” (p. 173). Hagerty et al. define the dimensions of belonging as being both valued involvement, or the sense of feeling needed or important in the environment, and fit, the belief that there are shared or complementary characteristics that fit the environment. Sense of belonging is dependent upon a number of items that need to be present before it can be realized including energy for involvement, desire for meaningful involvement, and potential for shared characteristics (Hagerty et al., 1992). Should these antecedents not be present, the theory posits that a reported lack of sense of belonging may be due to other issues such as clinical depression limiting the energy to be involved. Similar to Maslow’s understanding of belonging, Hagerty et al. identify that sense of belonging is a foundation for emotional and behavioral responses. Hagerty and Patusky (1995) continued to expand this research through the development of the Sense of Belonging Instrument (SOBI), a 27-item self-report tool that includes both the psychological state and required antecedents which has been used and adapted in further research.

The work of Baumeister and Leary (1995) further confirm the theory of sense of belonging by analyzing the empirical literature related to belonging and concluding that the need to belong is a “powerful, fundamental, and extremely pervasive motivation” (p. 497). Describing belonging as a basic desire to form social attachments, it requires both frequent, positive interactions and a bond of caring (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). The individual's perception of their interpersonal attachments is valuable in satisfying the
need, particularly the belief that there is a stable, mutual concern that will continue into the foreseeable future (Baumeister & Leary, 1995).

The literature points to benefits of belongingness for psychological well-being (Anant, 1966; Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Hagerty & Williams, 1998; Hagerty et al., 1996; Joiner, 2007). There is a demonstrated connection between sense of belonging and social and psychological functioning such as conflict, loneliness, depression, and anxiety (Hagerty et al., 1996). A 1999 study of the predictive value of interpersonal phenomena on depression found that a psychological sense of belonging had a direct effect on the experience of depression and may be a better predictor of depression than other phenomena such as perceived social support (Hagerty & Williams, 1998). More recent research around suicide explores how intentions of suicide may be connected to thwarted belongingness (Joiner, 2007).

*Sense of Belonging and Education*

The concept of sense of belonging has been helpful in understanding and informing motivation, integration, and experiences in academia. It was first explored in secondary education (Goodenow, 1993; Goodenow & Grady, 1993) and then later in higher education (Freeman et al., 2007; Hoffman et al., 2002; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Museus et al., 2017; Schlossberg, 1989; Strayhorn, 2019). Goodenow’s (1993) research about classroom sense of belonging in middle school students highlighted the connection between belonging and interpersonal connections and students’ academic motivation. Defining belonging as a “sense of being accepted, valued, included, and encouraged by others (teachers and peers) in the academic classroom setting and of feeling oneself to be an important part of the life and activity of the class,” Goodenow determined that
belonging was related to students’ own expectations for academic success and motivation (p. 25). Further research demonstrated that not only did a sense of belonging contribute to academic engagement and motivation, but it could potentially override the influence of peers who were less motivated or engaged (Goodenow & Grady, 1993). Similar to prior research (Anant, 1966; Hagerty et al., 1992), Goodenow (1993) makes the distinction that it is the students’ subjective evaluation of their belongingness and sense of support that influences their motivation, rather than an objective evaluation from the class.

In higher education, the concept of sense of belonging was initially explored through sociological and psychological theories of “fit” used to analyze the college student experience and student retention. Schlossberg’s (1989) research of mattering and marginality, specifically, expanded upon the work of Rosenberg and McCullough (1989), by identifying the significance of mattering at transitional or liminal periods in life (1989). Mattering, the feeling that others are interested in you, depend upon you, or are concerned about you, is a motive and drives behavior (Rosenberg & McCullough, 1989; Schlossberg, 1989). On the opposite end of the mattering spectrum is marginality. Marginality, which could be a permanent state or experienced during transition, can elicit feelings about mattering, most often a lack of importance, mattering, or belonging (Schlossberg, 1989). This identification of the role of mattering and the contrast with marginality expands upon the concept of belonging by emphasizing the significance of such in times of transition and as it relates to student involvement and community building. The concept of sense of belonging in higher education, then, connects to this demonstrated need of students to feel both connected and that they matter at their institution.
Hurtado and Carter’s (1997) seminal research on Latino college students’ experiences identified sense of belonging as a tool to assess which forms of interaction (academic and social) enhance students’ sense of identification and affiliation with their institutions. In this way, sense of belonging is a measure of the student’s perceived cohesion, connection, or “stuckness” to campus (Hausmann et al., 2009; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Strayhorn, 2019). Tovar et al. (2009) define sense of belonging in relation to the concept of mattering, explaining it as the need to be either formally or informally connected interpersonally. Strayhorn’s (2019) research on students’ sense of belonging provides both a more recent analysis of student belongingness as well as a model of belonging. Acknowledging that belonging is both a psychological experience and subjective evaluation, Strayhorn defines sense of belonging within higher education as “students’ perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, and the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the campus community or others on campus such as faculty, staff, and peers” (p. 4). Strayhorn (2019, p. 30) identifies seven core elements of sense of belonging as:

- Being a universal, basic human need
- Being a motive that drives behavior
- Being more significant in certain contexts, times, or populations
- Related to mattering
- Influenced by identities
- Leading to other positive outcomes
- Needing to be satisfied as conditions change
Strayhorn’s work is unique in outlining these elements explicitly, but there are clear connections to prior research and literature (Hagerty et al., 1992; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Maslow, 1943; Schlossberg, 1989). Interestingly, the acknowledgement of the subjective or perceived nature of belonging is absent from these elements (Anant, 1966; Goodenow, 1993) but is principal in Strayhorn’s definition of belonging.

The application of sense of belonging as a tool for understanding the experiences of marginalized students has led to further inquiry (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Strayhorn, 2008, 2019). Two related studies investigating Latino/a students’ sense of belonging indicated several findings. Students who excelled academically, as indicated by having higher GPAs and spent more time studying (Strayhorn, 2008), and who discuss course content outside of class (Hurtado & Carter, 1997), reported higher levels of belonging. Students who interacted with others from diverse backgrounds positively influenced Latino/a students’ belonging (Strayhorn, 2008) while perceptions of a hostile racial climate had a negative influence (Hurtado & Carter, 1997). Additionally, social experiences such as participation in religious and social-community organizations resulted in stronger feelings of belonging (Hurtado & Carter, 1997). It is important to note the generalizability of these results is limited as the studies focused explicitly on the experiences of Latino/a students. Additional research among students of other racial groups or marginalized identities would be beneficial to confirm a connection between belonging and academic and social engagement.

Beyond identifying the utility of the construct of sense of belonging in higher education, scholars have demonstrated positive academic outcomes linked to belonging (Freeman et al., 2007; Hausmann et al., 2009; Hoffman et al., 2002; Hurtado & Carter,
Freeman et al. (2007) adapted the Psychological Sense of School Membership (PSSM) developed by Goodenow (1993) to study undergraduate first-year students and found a positive association between academic motivation and sense of belonging in class, attributed to instructor characteristics such as an encouragement of participation, interaction, and warmth. While sense of belonging in a single class did not independently contribute to a feeling of belonging at the university-level, a sense of social acceptance did (Freeman et al., 2007). This study is limited because it only included first-year students and of the 283 participants, 162 identified as female. Furthermore, the results depend on the students’ self-report at a single point in time.

Additional research has been conducted to understand the connection between sense of belonging and retention, with the objective of designing intervention strategies or policies to deter student departure (Hausmann et al., 2009; Hoffman et al., 2002). Investigating the experiences of first-year college students in first-year student seminar courses and learning communities, researchers developed and tested a sense of belonging instrument (Hoffman et al., 2002). The results indicated that students in learning communities reported higher levels of belonging in terms of perceived peer support, perceived faculty support, perceived classroom comfort, and empathetic faculty understanding (Hoffman et al., 2002). Hoffman et al. concluded that sense of belonging at the institution was due to the students’ perception of “valued involvement,” meaning they had supportive peer relationships or friends who could help them during the transition or meeting challenges, and they believed that faculty are compassionate and see them more than just another face in the crowd (2002). Thus, learning communities were
deemed beneficial in facilitating relationships that led to academic and social integration (Hoffman et al., 2002) and could be seen as a valuable intervention to improve retention.

Hausmann et al. (2009) investigated the effects of an intervention on a smaller scale — written communications from senior campus leaders to individual students stressing that they, as an individual, were a valuable part of the campus community. They evaluated the effect of this intervention on students’ subjective sense of belonging and persistence intentions in first-year undergraduate students at a predominately white institution and concluded that sense of belonging has a direct, positive effect on students’ commitment to the institution and positive, indirect effects on intent to persist (Hausmann et al., 2009). There were, however, differing results based on race with white students reporting an increase in belonging and African American students’ belonging being unaffected resulting in the suggestion that perhaps the intervention was too minimal to meet the belonging needs of African American students who may already have heightened feelings of marginalization at a predominately white institution (Hausmann et al., 2009). This is consistent with the literature that acknowledges the significance of belonging for marginalized individuals and the importance of appropriately attending to this need (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Strayhorn, 2019). Ultimately, Hausmann et al.’s study provides strong evidence for the inclusion of sense of belonging in persistence models as well as strategic, customized interventions to make all students feel like valued members of the community (Hausmann et al., 2009).

Concepts Related to Belonging

As evidenced by the fluid definitions and descriptions of belonging, there are a number of concepts related to belonging including sense of community and cohesion.
Sense of community, as explored by McMillan and Chavis (1986), remains a strong complement to the theory of belonging. Although sense of community can be geographic in terms of neighborhoods or territories, it can also be understood as relational and the human relationships that form communities (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). In fact, one of the four elements of community is membership, defined as a feeling of belonging or the “feeling, belief, and expectation that one fits in the group and has a place there, a feeling of acceptance by the group, and a willingness to sacrifice for the group” (McMillan & Chavis, 1986, p. 10). This concept of membership is similar to Hagerty et al.’s identification of fit (1992). There are additional considerations about membership that are underscored by the theory of sense of belonging including that membership has boundaries, signifying that some people are included and some are not, and while these boundaries protect connections, they can also cause rejection or harm (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Furthermore, there are symbols associated with membership that demonstrate that members have earned their place such as rites of passage, specific language, or certain ways of dressing (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). While not explicitly outlined in other theories of sense of belonging, there are certainly ways that members are covertly excluded from communities or feeling that they belong because they do not have the right clothes or use the appropriate language. Symbolism and ritualization are also explored in Schlossberg’s (1989) analysis of mattering and marginality.

Another element of sense of community is influence, or the sense of mattering or making a difference to a group (McMillan & Chavis, 1986) which aligns with Hagerty et al.’s (1992) definition of valued involvement as well as Schlossberg’s (1989) discussion of mattering. There are other connections to be made between sense of community and
sense of belonging. The final two elements of sense of community include integration and fulfillment of needs, or the reinforcement of the belief that individual needs will be met through membership in the group, and the shared emotional connection that establishes the understanding that community members will share history, time, and similar experiences together (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Strayhorn (2019) draws the distinction between the two theories explicitly, arguing that sense of belonging is a precursor to sense of community, with belonging being the feelings or perceptions that accompany community membership.

Bollen and Hoyle’s (1990) scholarship of perceived cohesion directly aligns with the significance of the perception of belonging, rather than observed belonging, found in other research (e.g., Anant, 1966; Goodenow, 1993; Strayhorn, 2019). Explicating perceived cohesion as an independent concept from cohesion, Bollen and Hoyle defined it as encompassing “an individual’s sense of belonging to a particular group and his or her feelings of morale associated with membership in the group” (p. 482). There is further confirmation provided by this research that sense of belonging is both cognitive and affective (Bollen & Hoyle, 1990; Hagerty et al., 1992; Maslow, 1946). The experiences with individuals within the group and the group as a whole informs the judgement of belongingness as well as the feelings that result from the appraisal of these experiences or their morale (Bollen & Hoyle, 1990). These feelings of “morale” elicit not only an emotional response of valuing membership to the group, but also behavioral responses including engagement in group activities or tasks (Bollen & Hoyle, 1990). Through the specific articulation of the individual’s perception of their group cohesion, Bollen and Hoyle (1990) developed the Perceived Cohesion Scale and found that the
dimensions of belonging and morale are highly correlated, but two distinct elements of
the concept of perceived cohesion.

Value and Critique of the Theory of Sense of Belonging

The historical foundations of the concept of sense of belonging as well as the
applicability of the theory to different fields or areas of study demonstrate that there is a
utility for the inquiry and analysis of belonging. Across the literature, there is a shared
conclusion that sense of belonging elicits cognitive, behavioral, and affective responses
(Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Bollen & Hoyle, 1990; Hagerty et al., 1992; Maslow, 1946;
Strayhorn 2019). However, a primary critique of this concept is that there is not a shared
definition or broadly accepted theoretical understanding of sense of belonging. This
presents significant challenges in gaining broader scholarly acceptance, determining a
clear understanding of the concept, and ensuring the consistent application of the theory.
There are, however, common descriptions, themes, or characteristics that are shared
across the literature that will be further discussed in this chapter.

One critical theme of sense of belonging is that of mattering. There is a vein of
inquiry on this topic alone (Rosenberg & McCullough, 1989; Schlossberg, 1989) that
extends into understanding students’ experiences in higher education and their evaluation
of their importance and support on campus (Schlossberg, 1989; Tovar et al., 2009).
However, mattering is intimately connected to the concept of belonging. Strayhorn’s
(2009) definition of belonging includes the term explicitly, describing it as “the
experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and
important” (p. 4). Hagerty et al. (1992) use the terminology valued involvement or “the
experience of feeling valued, needed, accepted” (p. 173). In explaining sense of
community, McMillan and Chavis (1986) label this concept as influence, or “a sense of mattering, of making a difference to a group, and of the group mattering to its members” (p. 9). Goodenow’s (1993) research of sense of belonging in secondary education uses the terms “accepted,” “valued,” and “included,” indicating that it is “feeling oneself to be an important part of the life and activity of the class” (p. 25). While scholars have used related, and perhaps interchangeable, terminology, it is clear that mattering is a significant component of sense of belonging.

A second common thread across many definitions of sense of belonging is that of “fit.” Hagerty et al. (1992) describe this as “the person’s perception that his or her characteristics articulate with or complement the system or environment” (p. 173). McMillan and Chavis (1986) use the term membership to explain fit as it relates to sense of community, defining it as “feeling, belief, and expectation that one fits in the group and has a place there” (p. 10).

The final shared theme of sense of belonging is the explicit characterization of belongingness as being the perceived value to the community, group, or context. That is, it is an individual's subjective assessment of feeling valued by others, rather than an objective judgement from others. This concept of perceived value is evident in early explorations of the theory (Anant, 1966; Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Goodenow, 1993; Hagerty et al., 1992), in related research on perceived cohesion (Bollen & Hoyle, 1990), and in more recent literature that explores belonging in higher education (Freeman et al., 2007; Hoffman et al., 2002; Strayhorn, 2019).
Significance of Sense of Belonging

With an abundance of theories and concepts available to make meaning of human thoughts, feelings, and behavior, why should scholars investigate sense of belonging? The first argument is that the literature demonstrates that a positive assessment of belonging is associated with positive outcomes in the fields of mental health (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Hagerty & Williams, 1998; Hagerty et al., 1996; Joiner, 2007) and education (Freeman et al., 2007; Goodenow, 1993; Goodenow & Grady, 1993; Hausmann et al., 2009; Hoffman et al., 2002; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Strayhorn, 2019).

Additionally, this theory may be particularly appropriate during times of transition. Sense of belonging has been predominantly explored during academic transitions such as starting in a new class or entering college (Goodenow & Grady, 1993; Hoffman et al., 2002; Schlossberg, 1989; Strayhorn, 2019). Furthermore, the mental health-related sense of belonging literature references cases in times of transition such as divorce or relocation (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). This is not an exhaustive list of human experiences of transition, thus making sense of belonging a useful tool in exploring other experiences.

Finally, sense of belonging is a useful construct for understanding those with marginalized identities (Goodenow & Grady, 1993; Hausmann et al., 2009; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Schlossberg, 1989; Strayhorn, 2019). Belonging may be more critical for these individuals because the absence of such can lead to isolation, alienation, and further marginalization (Schlossberg, 1989; Strayhorn, 2019). In fact, Strayhorn (2019) emphasizes that belonging may be more significant in certain environments in which individuals expect to feel unsupported or are already marginalized. Of particular interest
is the application of sense of belonging in understanding the retention of students of color or marginalized individuals. An influential and oft-cited student retention theory, Tinto’s (1987) theory of departure and related integration, places responsibility on students to separate from precollege communities and integrate academically and socially to maximize success. Scholarly critiques of this theory (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Museus et al., 2017; Rendón et al., 2000) question the need for students to disassociate from previous communities and adapt to the norms of the institution, which would be more challenging for students of color (Museus et al., 2017). Furthermore, there is limited responsibility on the institution to analyze their role in retention (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Museus et al., 2017; Rendón et al., 2000). The concept of sense of belonging, then, is a more culturally conscious framework that describes the interplay between the individual and institution (Museus et al., 2017). Johnson et al.’s 2007 study of first-year students suggested that “a more appropriate goal may be attending to students’ sense of belonging through nurturing a mutual responsibility shared by the individual and the institution” (p. 537). Additionally, the construct of sense of belonging is founded upon an awareness that students’ backgrounds and experiences will shape how they engage and experience the institution in different ways (Museus et al., 2017). By taking into consideration students’ multiple identities and pre-college experiences, refuting the need for them to separate from pre-college communities, and shifting some of the onus to the institution, the concept of sense of belonging is a more culturally sensitive tool with which to analyze students’ college experiences and outcomes. While this specific application of sense of belonging is narrow (i.e., postsecondary education retention of marginalized students),
there is value in considering how and where else the theory of sense of belonging could be similarly applied.

Application of Sense of Belonging to Student Affairs Professionals

While there is a significant body of literature that explores the role of sense of belonging in the fields of mental health and in secondary and postsecondary education, there is a paucity of research that examines belongingness among professionals in those fields. If sense of belonging has been applied successfully as a student engagement and retention tool in higher education, could it have similar influence on staff engagement and retention? As sense of belonging has been found to be associated with positive outcomes, appropriate at times of transition, and important for the academic success of those with marginalized identities, it would be reasonable to consider the role of sense of belonging for staff.

It would be useful to understand the relationship between institution and administrator and sense of belonging is a lens to understanding student affairs professionals’ organizational commitment. However, there is limited, if any, literature drawing this connection. More specifically, the literature demonstrates that mid-level professionals’ satisfaction and morale are connected to feeling supported in their careers (Johnsrud et al., 2000; Rosser, 2004; Rosser & Javinar, 2003) and recognized or valued for their contributions and competence (Donaldson & Rosser, 2007; Rosser, 2004; Rosser & Javinar, 2003). Thus, professionals are attuned to their perception of being valued and that they matter, two hallmarks of sense of belonging, and their intent to leave is influenced by these perceptions. Furthermore, student affairs professionals across organizational hierarchy are experiencing tremendous change precipitated by the
COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, analyzing employee belongingness during times of institutional-level transitions, such as amid the COVID-19 pandemic, could lead to a better understanding of staff retention and commitment.
CHAPTER 3
RESEARCH METHODS

Study Design

To study this topic, I used a qualitative approach to understand the experiences of mid-level student affairs professionals and how they experience sense of belonging at their institution. Through a phenomenological analysis, I explored and described the lived experiences of the participants experiencing the phenomenon of belonging.

With origins in anthropology, sociology, the humanities, and evaluation, qualitative research has become more visible in recent decades (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The guiding purpose of qualitative inquiry has continued to evolve and shift from social construction, to interpretivism, and finally towards social justice. By studying things, questions, or problems in their natural settings, qualitative researchers seek to understand or interpret how individuals or groups experience and make meaning of social or human problems (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Acknowledging the difficulty of defining something with such a wide variety of historical, disciplinary, and philosophical influences, Merriam and Tisdell (2016) distill qualitative research to be “...understanding the meaning people have constructed; that is how people make sense of their world and the experiences they have in the world” (p. 15). There are an extensive number of approaches to qualitative research both in terms of methodology and in terms of analysis, often influenced by discipline or field (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). However, there are some more frequent or common qualitative methods including narrative research, phenomenology, case study, ethnography, and grounded theory (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Merriam
and Tisdell (2016) add a sixth approach of basic qualitative research that includes an interpretive study that does not distinguish a “type,” rather it seeks to understand without an additional dimension of the aforementioned methodologies.

Phenomenological research in particular has strong philosophical perspectives including a return to the original perception of philosophy as a search for meaning or wisdom (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A phenomenological study seeks to describe the common meaning found in participants’ lived experiences of a phenomenon such as grief, experiencing cancer, or anger. This description includes both what was experienced and how participants experienced the phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). To understand phenomenological methods, it is important to first address the historical development of phenomenology and resulting methodological considerations. While phenomenology is, at its core, a philosophical discipline, there are two schools of phenomenology: transcendental phenomenology and hermeneutic phenomenology. This section will briefly discuss these divergent understandings of phenomenology, highlighting the differences in methodology, and further explain the rationale for selecting this methodology.

**Transcendental Phenomenology**

Transcendental phenomenology, also known as descriptive phenomenology, Husserlian phenomenology, or simply phenomenology, is the study of the lived experience, or the world as lived by a person (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Laverty, 2003). Conceived by Edmund Husserl (1964), transcendental phenomenology is interested in the “study of phenomena as they appeared through consciousness” (Laverty, 2003, p. 23). In this school of thought, in advance of exploring the phenomena through participant
interviews the researcher must understand their own experiences with the phenomena to both examine their understanding and become aware of any biases or assumptions through a process called epoche (Moustakas, 1994). Then, the researcher must “bracket out” the external world and their individual biases to reach “essences” or hear the contributions of the participants with an open mind (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). In this way, the research can set aside preconceived notions to see the phenomena clearly.

Moustakas (1994) provides procedural steps for conducting phenomenological research including: determining if the phenomenological approach is the best method to examine the research problem, identifying the phenomenon of interest, specifying the philosophical assumptions of phenomenology, interviewing individuals who have experienced the phenomenon, generating themes and highlighting significant statements, developing descriptions of the experience and the context, describing the “essence” of the phenomenon, and presenting the understanding of this essence through writing.

*Hermeneutic Phenomenology*

Hermeneutic phenomenology, or interpretive phenomenology, is also the study of lived experience, but is more attuned to the historicality of the lived experience and emphasizes the interpretation. Hermeneutic phenomenology was conceived by Hans-Georg Heidegger (1962) who studied under Husserl and then disassociated from Husserlian phenomenology (Laverty, 2003). This type of phenomenology is concerned with the lived human experience and centers on “Dasein,” a German word to describe the mode of being human. “The focus is toward illuminating details and seemingly trivial aspects within experience that may be taken for granted in our lives, with a goal of
creating meaning and achieving a sense of understanding” (Laverty, 2003, p. 24).
Furthermore, hermeneutic phenomenology emphasizes the interpretation of these experiences, acknowledging that each experience is influenced by an individual’s background or history, that is, their historicality. Hans Georg Gadamer (1976) expanded upon hermeneutic phenomenology by concentrating on the role of language. Through hermeneutics, Gadamer asserted that understanding could be clarified through questioning, an essential and evolving part of the interpretive process. Furthermore, Gadamer argued that methodology could not be objective and that historicality plays a role in understanding, thus bracketing out the external world as suggested by Husserl is impossible.

More recently, Max van Manen (1990) expanded on this understanding of hermeneutic phenomenology as a study of essences to “uncover and describe the structures of lived experiences” (p. 10). Describing phenomenology as the “dynamic interplay among six research activities,” van Manen outlines the methodology used to conduct phenomenological research. These six research activities include identifying a phenomenon of serious interest such as parenting, running, teaching, and investigating the experiences as they are lived. Throughout, the researcher thoughtfully reflects on the experience, identifying essential themes that characterize the phenomenon, and applies language and thoughtfulness to the phenomenon through writing and rewriting, maintaining a strong relation to the phenomenon while balancing the parts of the writing to the whole. Van Manen (1990) asserts that it is important that the researcher not lose their way or settle for preconceived opinions; rather they must maintain a strong relationship with the “abiding concern” (p. 31), that is, the phenomenon. While not meant
to be a “how to” guide, these activities provide researchers with an understanding of the methods involved in conducting this type of qualitative research and the challenges they may encounter.

Methodological Approach

While both phenomenology and hermeneutic phenomenology seek to understand the essences of the lived human experience and were born out of German philosophy, there are distinctions between the two methodologies (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Laverty, 2003). One primary difference is the researcher’s position. In transcendental phenomenology, the researcher’s reflection becomes part of the “bracketing” to remove themselves from influencing the analysis. By contrast, the researcher’s self-reflection is embedded in the process of interpretation in hermeneutic phenomenology. In fact, hermeneutic phenomenology depends on these multiple phases of interpretation as a strategy for reliability and validity, whereas phenomenology relies on bracketing.

Why then, is this methodological selection appropriate for this research problem? This type of qualitative research is meant to study “people’s conscious experience of their life-world” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 26) and to describe the common meaning found in participants’ lived experiences of a phenomenon. This research approach is well suited to study affective or emotional behaviors or experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). As this study explored how mid-level student affairs professionals experience sense of belonging, a phenomenon that has cognitive, affective, and behavioral responses, a phenomenological design of inquiry was a valid research strategy. Furthermore, phenomenology as a methodology and philosophy acknowledges that we live in a world of relationships and understand our existence in relation to others.
(Mobley Jr., 2019). As sense of belonging is attuned to the perception of being valued or mattering by others, the phenomenological approach honors the significance of relationships.

While there are two divergent schools of thought around phenomenology, they both seek the “essence” of lived experience through thematic reduction. This current study specifically followed the tradition of hermeneutic phenomenology, focusing on participants’ interpretations of their experiences as a way to understand the phenomenon, with the researcher’s self-reflection integrated into the interpretation of the data. The research design was informed by several characteristics inherent to qualitative research including focusing on the participants’ meaning of the problem, employing an adaptable and emergent research design, and researcher reflexivity (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The research questions that guided this study are as follows:

1. How do mid-level student affairs professionals experience sense of belonging at their institution or in the field?

2. How does their evaluation of belonging shape their intention to stay at their institution or in the field?

Study Participants

Participants in this study were mid-level student affairs professionals. There is not a clear definition of mid-level student affairs professionals due to the breadth and depth of the field (Young Jr., 2007). Therefore, for the purposes of this study, mid-level student affairs professionals were defined as individuals who work within the Division of Student Affairs at their institution, do not serve as a senior student affairs officer, and have at least five years of post-master’s professional experience or who are post-master’s
professionals serving as directors. There were no other exclusionary criteria to avoid limiting for the multiple and intersecting identities of participants, which is especially salient in exploring sense of belonging.

After receiving Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, participants were recruited nationwide for this study through several methods of outreach. A call to participate was distributed on professional organization messaging boards including the CSPTalk College Student Personnel discussion board and through the American College Personnel Association (ACPA) Mid-Level Community of Practice group newsletter (see Appendix A). To recruit additional participants, recruitment materials were shared on several social media networking sites and with colleagues to request that they share the study details with their networks as well (see Appendix B and C).

Purposeful sampling, specifically criterion sampling, was employed to ensure that selected participants led to information-rich cases (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Interested participants were asked to complete a screening survey (see Appendix D) in Qualtrics that provided information about the study, outlined participation requirements, and collected respondent information. This information included demographics (age, race/ethnicity, gender), years of post-master’s professional experience, current title and functional area, institutional affiliation and institution type, and if they would consider themselves the primary caregiver for someone else. At the end of the survey, participants were notified that they would be contacted by the student researcher if they were a fit for the study. At the conclusion of the current study, the responses collected in the screening survey will be deleted.
There were a total of 55 responses to the screening survey when data collection commenced in May 2021. The screening survey was used to identify individuals who were willing to participate in the study; who met the definition of mid-level student affairs professional as outlined above; and who differed in terms of demographics, institution type, and role within student affairs. There were 16 respondents who indicated that they did not work in the Division of Student Affairs at their current institution or they had less than five years of experience. These individuals were excluded as they did not meet the study criteria. An additional seven respondents were known to me as the researcher. I decided to exclude them from the study as I am mindful that existing connections or relationships between myself as the researcher and the participants could unduly influence the research.

In total, 32 respondents were eligible to participate. To further narrow the sample, respondents who indicated that they worked at a professional, graduate, military, or technical school were excluded. This decision was made to limit the variability of experiences based on institution type. In the first round of outreach, I selected a group of 11 participants who represented a range of functional areas; demographics such as race, age, and gender; and caregiver responsibilities. As there were several institutions with multiple respondents represented, I prioritized selecting only one or two participants from the same institution. Following the initial responses, I emailed an additional 15 respondents. Of the 26 potential participants contacted, several were not available at the time of data collection, one was no longer eligible, and a number did not respond. After completing the recruitment and screening process, I had 10 eligible and willing participants. Selected participants were asked to submit a current resume or curriculum
vitae to verify their eligibility. Participant profiles including demographic information will be further described in Chapter 4.

The target sample size for this study was 6-12 participants. Best practices in phenomenological research recommend sampling until the point of saturation or redundancy (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I found that following the initial outreach and interviews with these 10 participants, I began to hear similarities and redundancies in the data collected, thus the final sample size for this study remained 10 participants.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data Collection

As recommended in qualitative methodology, data collection and analysis occurred simultaneously (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In-depth interviews with participants who are asked to articulate their lived experiences are considered the primary data collection method for a phenomenological study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). As such, this phenomenological study relied on participant interviews as a means of collecting data that provided insight into the phenomenon of belonging. Semi-structured interviews were conducted virtually through Zoom with each participant, with one primary interview lasting, on average, 75 minutes in length. By conducting the interviews online via Zoom, I had access to both audio and video recordings of the conversation with the participants. Additionally, while I had to consider differing time zones when scheduling interviews, I was not constrained by geography when recruiting or selecting participants for the study. Fortunately, there were minimal distractions or interruptions as a result of the virtual nature of the conversation. The semi-structured interview allowed opportunities for me to probe for additional information and collect
views, opinions, reactions, and specific examples from participants. Furthermore, participants were able to provide historical and contextual information to describe their experiences.

An interview protocol was developed to record information from interviews and included an introduction, between 8-10 questions related to the participant’s professional experiences, and closing instructions (see Appendix E). Verbal consent was collected from each participant and the interviews were recorded on Zoom and transcribed electronically. An effort was made to create a comfortable environment for the interviewees by starting with a non-threatening opening question, “Why did you initially choose the field of student affairs?” This elicited a range of responses and helped to break the ice with participants and to begin to build rapport. Several of the interview questions referenced items from the Perceived Cohesion Scale (Bollen & Hoyle, 1990) and the Sense of Belonging Instrument (Hagerty & Patusky, 1995). The interview questions and procedures were developed and refined through pilot testing with student affairs professionals to receive feedback on wording and tone (Creswell & Poth, 2018). As a result of pilot testing, several questions were re-ordered to improve flow and two questions were added to the protocol. These additional questions included a question about salient identities and how they shape belonging and a question about the role of professional organization membership as it relates to belonging.

Due to the semi-structured nature of the interviews, not all questions were asked in the same order and some questions were omitted if the participant had already addressed it without being prompted. For example, several participants acknowledged the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic on their experience as a mid-level student affairs
professional, thus the follow-up question was not asked as it was already addressed by
the participant. Additionally, I used probes to elicit additional information or explanation
from participants. At times these probes were non-verbal such as nodding my head or
more affirming such as uttering “uh huh” or “yes”. This gentle probing was helpful in
gaining more information from participants (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). There were times
that participants drifted off topic or did not answer the questions directly. During these
moments, follow-up questions were helpful in redirecting the conversation. Additionally,
I found that allowing the participants an opportunity to share some experiences or
examples that were less related to the study’s research questions enabled me to build
rapport and trust as we continued the conversation. To protect the anonymity of the
participants, each individual was asked to choose a pseudonym to be used in all reporting
of the data. If a participant declined to select a pseudonym, a pseudonym was generated
using a random name generator.

Data Analysis

As previously mentioned, data collection and analysis occurred simultaneously.
Thus, the analysis began during data collection through observer’s comments, the writing
of researcher’s memos, and the adaptation of interview questions or pursuance of specific
“hunches” according to what had been found in previous observations (Merriam &
Tisdell, 2016). Interview questions were modified during the semi-structured interviews
and I followed my “hunches”, asking participants to restate, verify, or further explain as
needed. For example, participants were asked to share what came to mind when they
thought of sense of belonging. If participants did not come up with a coherent definition
of belonging, then they were subsequently asked to define the concept. Often, this
definition did not come immediately and required that I either reflect back their initial
tinking or to allow them to verbally meander a bit until they reached a conclusion or
coherent definition. In this way, my working hypothesis, that there is not a commonly
accepted or understood definition of sense of belonging, was refined and verified by
following this hunch. Thus, the data collection and analysis remained dynamic.

All interviews were recorded using Zoom, which recorded both the video and
audio and transcribed the interviews. The Zoom transcriptions were then uploaded into
the Otter.ai software platform to improve the quality and accuracy of the auto-
transcriptions. I subsequently used oTranscribe.com to listen to each interview at a slower
speed and cleaned the transcripts to improve the accuracy on each transcription. In
addition to the transcript, I documented comments and reflections during each interview.
These memos served as an additional data source and were helpful in identifying
comments, emotions, or moments that stood out during the initial interview that may not
have been as significant in listening to or reading the transcript at a later time.

Once each interview transcript was reviewed and cleaned, I put each transcript
into an Adobe file and highlighted significant thoughts, phrases, or passages. I then
assigned open codes, line by line, to the transcript. Subsequently, I entered the codes in
Microsoft Excel to organize the data. This allowed me to use the filter and sort functions
to look for patterns in the open coding. Following the initial assignment of codes, I
engaged in axial coding which enabled me to group open codes together such as “sorting
items in the grocery store,” or grouping notes and comments that seemingly go together
(Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Through this “sorting” process, I began to aggregate the data
into a small number of themes, categories, or patterns. In addition, I continued the
process of writing researcher memos as I immersed myself in the data. These memos were useful tools in allowing me, as the researcher, to reflect on the experience as well as jot down follow-up questions for the participants. I used these memos and questions as an opportunity to follow-up with select participants to gain clarification on what they initially shared. Most participants elected to respond electronically via email while one participant requested a follow-up Zoom conversation. The additional data collected were analyzed in a similar manner as outlined above.

As I continued the process of highlighting, assigning open codes, engaging in axial coding, and writing memos for each transcript, several themes and patterns began to emerge in the data. Staying true to the study’s design as a hermeneutic phenomenology, I searched for the essential themes that characterize the phenomenon of sense of belonging for mid-level student affairs professionals. These initial patterns were more carefully funneled and refined to form 11 sub-themes. These sub-themes were then grouped together to form three emergent themes which directly address the research questions and provide context to the experiences of the participants.

In the subsequent chapter, these themes and sub-themes are further analyzed and interpreted through rich, detailed descriptions to convey findings. This extensive narrative description gives voice to the participants and provides a structural description of how the phenomenon of sense of belonging was experienced by the participants. The data analysis continued at this stage as well as I used language to represent the phenomenon through writing and rewriting in the phenomenological tradition (Van Manen, 1990). Finally, in chapter five, a composite description of the phenomenon of
sense of belonging is included that addresses the “essence” of the experience (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Credibility and Trustworthiness

The deep analysis and methodological process of qualitative research results in trustworthiness and is a strength of this type of research. This study employed a number of processes to ensure the accuracy of the findings from multiple viewpoints including that of the participants, researcher, and readers (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). As is consistent with phenomenological methodology, the primary data source was participant interviews. Additional data sources including the participants’ resumes or curriculum vitae and follow-up correspondences or conversations were triangulated to develop themes and provide validity to the findings. Additionally, the use of “rich, thick description” in discussing the findings allows readers to make decisions about the transferability of the findings (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Finally, as a researcher, I engaged in reflexivity throughout the study to clarify the biases and experiences that I bring to this research, which will be further outlined below. While the goal of this inquiry is not to generalize findings, efforts were made to enhance reliability through detailed protocol, checking for transcript accuracy, and a clear defining of codes.

Researcher Positionality

My role as a researcher is inherent in both the design of the study and my interpretation of the data. I found that I had some professional experiences related to those of the participants as I also identify as a mid-level student affairs professional. I am aware that connections between the researcher and the participants may unduly influence the research and for this reason I avoided “backyard” research, or selecting participants
within my own organization (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Similarly, I excluded participants who responded to the study recruitment and were known to me as the researcher as previously outlined. However, I believe that my background assisted me in working with and connecting with the participants, as I routinely work with mid-level student affairs professionals and am comfortable engaging with others in this setting. My understanding of the context and environment as a student affairs professional enhanced my understanding of the participants’ experiences. I chose not to volunteer very much information about my current professional role as I was concerned it could distract the participant from sharing about their personal experiences. However, there were times that I was able some of my professional expertise with participants, when relevant, which helped with rapport building. For example, one participant and I share a mutual connection and I realized during the interview that we had been introduced to each other several years prior at a professional conference. Mentioning this during the conversation was helpful as the participant expanded upon the role of professional organizations in her experience. Similarly, another participant mentioned being involved in a specific program at their institution that I was aware of due to my position at a prior institution. This helped further establish our connection and, frankly, some excitement over our shared experiences.

As this is a hermeneutic phenomenological study, reflexivity is embedded throughout the study, as my background and experiences as the researcher plays a role in my understanding of the phenomenon (Van Manan, 1990). As such, it is significant to note that I have experienced belonging in several ways throughout my life, most recently as a member of a student affairs department, but also as a summer camper in my youth
and adolescence. These are times in my life where I truly felt that I mattered, belonged to a community with a shared purpose, and perceived that my being part of the group was valuable. By sharing my personal experiences with the phenomenon, it is my goal to identify my experiences and reflect upon them as I interpret and analyze the data.

Following the hermeneutic school of thought, I believe that the process of bracketing undertaken in traditional phenomenology further separates the researcher from the phenomenon itself. I do not believe it is useful, or perhaps possible, to set aside my own experiences entirely. Rather, my biases, experiences, and assumptions are included and essential to the research and interpretive processes (Mobley Jr., 2019). I am mindful that I bring my own biases and privilege to the study as a white, cisgender female. I made concerted efforts to remain as objective as possible while acknowledging that my identities and these biases shaped the way I approached and interpreted the data. I felt that this was particularly important as I asked my participants to share with me how their salient and marginalized identities have influenced their experiences in student affairs. I was very much aware of my white privilege, dominant identities, and positionality as the researcher in this line of questioning and I appreciated the willingness of the participants to share their experiences with me for the sake of the research.

To engage in reflexivity, I used the process of memoing and notetaking during the interviews and analysis. My reflections around my own biases and experiences happened both organically and intentionally. I intentionally scheduled time at the conclusion of each interview to write memos that included reactions to the conversation and notes to myself about how my experiences may have differed from those of the participants and if that was due to differing identities or biases or assumptions that I hold. This reflection
continued in a similar, although less structured way, as I transcribed the interviews and analyzed the data, really sitting with and living in the data before jumping to conclusions that may have been driven by my biases or assumptions. I found myself reflecting in different moments and various environments, hearing the participants’ voices in my head while walking my dog, or noticing clues to belongingness in conversations with colleagues at work. In fact, I have several trusted colleagues who have asked me at various times how my research has been progressing and describing my interpretations and findings to them was another way of engaging in reflexivity. Through their thoughtful questions and encouragement, I was able to clarify where my experiences and biases could be clouding my interpretation of the data and analysis.
CHAPTER 4
FINDINGS

Introduction

This chapter addresses findings from 10 semi-structured interviews and follow-up conversations or correspondences with the current study’s participants. Following the methodological approach of hermeneutic phenomenology, the data were analyzed to uncover and describe the essences of the participants lived experiences (Van Manen, 1990). This analysis, outlined at length in chapter three, resulted in three emergent themes that characterize the phenomenon of belonging for the mid-level student affairs professionals who engaged in this research. These three themes and their supporting sub-themes will be discussed here. Additionally, this chapter will more fully introduce the participants of the current study and will focus on their interpretations of their experiences as a way to understand the phenomenon of sense of belonging. The research questions that guided this study are as follows:

1. How do mid-level student affairs professionals experience sense of belonging at their institution or in the field?

2. How does their evaluation of belonging shape their intention to stay at their institution or in the field?

Participant Profiles

The experiences of the 10 student affairs professionals in this current study will be used to describe and illustrate the emergent findings. As outlined in Chapter 3, eligibility for this study included individuals who work within the Division of Student Affairs at their institution, do not serve as a senior student affairs officer, and have at
least five years of post-master’s professional experience or who are post-master’s professionals serving as directors. The participants represent a range of experience and functional area of expertise as well as diverse identities. The participants also work in various geographic regions at institutions of varying type and enrollment size. I used the NASPA, Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education, regional classification in the participant descriptions to indicate where geographically the participants currently work. The regions are outlined in Appendix F. Table 1 represents basic demographic information about the 10 participants. The table also indicates their years of experience, current institution type, their functional area, their region, and whether or not they identify as a primary caregiver. The next section includes brief descriptions of each participant.
<table>
<thead>
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<th>Name</th>
<th>Years of experience</th>
<th>Current institution type</th>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Functional area</th>
<th>Primary caregiver</th>
<th>Gender identification</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Race</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<td>Region II</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Public, 4-year with enrollment over 20,000</td>
<td>Region III</td>
<td>Assistant Director</td>
<td>On-campus housing</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>35-44 years old</td>
<td>Black and/or African American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Camille</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Public, 4-year with enrollment under 20,000</td>
<td>Region III</td>
<td>Director</td>
<td>Campus activities</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>35-44 years old</td>
<td>White and/or European American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diplomat</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Public, 4-year with enrollment over 20,000</td>
<td>Region II</td>
<td>Associate Director</td>
<td>Career services</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>35-44 years old</td>
<td>Black and/or African American</td>
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<td>Hannah</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>Public, 4-year with enrollment over 20,000 Community or Technical College with enrollment under 20,000</td>
<td>Region III</td>
<td>Assistant Director</td>
<td>Student conduct (academic integrity)</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>35-44 years old</td>
<td>White and/or European American</td>
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<tr>
<td>Isabella</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Technical College with enrollment under 20,000</td>
<td>Region III</td>
<td>Associate Dean</td>
<td>Student services</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>25-34 years old</td>
<td>White and/or European American</td>
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<td>Jeff</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Private, 4-year with enrollment under 20,000</td>
<td>Region II</td>
<td>Assistant Director</td>
<td>On-campus housing</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>25-34 years old</td>
<td>White and/or European American</td>
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<td>Rocco</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Private, 4-year with enrollment under 20,000</td>
<td>Region VI</td>
<td>Director</td>
<td>Academic advising</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>45-54 years old</td>
<td>White and/or European American</td>
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<td>Sarah</td>
<td>13</td>
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<td>Region II</td>
<td>Director</td>
<td>On-campus housing</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>35-44 years old</td>
<td>White and/or European American</td>
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<td>Serena</td>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>Public, 4-year with enrollment over 20,000</td>
<td>Region II</td>
<td>Assistant Director</td>
<td>Campus activities</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>25-34 years old</td>
<td>White and/or European American</td>
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Aanya

Aanya has 16 years of experience as a student leadership programs professional. Aanya worked in politics for several years after graduating from college, but realized it was not a fit for her. Knowing she wanted to pursue a master’s degree, she talked with mentors who introduced her to the field of student affairs. Aanya subsequently went to graduate school for student affairs and credited her graduate assistantships in student activities and leadership for starting her professional journey in the area of leadership development. Aanya has worked as a full-time professional at two different institutions and she currently serves as a director in leadership development at a public, four-year institution with enrollment under 20,000 students in Region II. She is involved in NASPA, Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education, specifically the student leadership knowledge community, and has contributed to the Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS) standards on student leadership. Aanya also has a doctorate of education in education, culture and society.

Antoine

Antoine has 14 years of experience as a student affairs professional. While initially pursuing a career and master’s degree in sports management, Antoine became a graduate assistant in residence life. Ultimately, he did not find sports management fulfilling, but did find the work in residence life to be meaningful. His graduate assistant position eventually led to a full-time opportunity as a residence hall director in housing and residence life. Currently, Antoine serves as an assistant director in residence life at a public, four-year institution with enrollment over 20,000 students in Region III. He is involved in a number of professional organizations and has held leadership positions.
within SEAHO, the Southeastern Association of Housing Officers. In addition, Antoine is a father and a primary caregiver for his children. He is also currently pursuing a doctoral degree in educational studies with a focus in higher education.

**Camille**

Camille has 19 years of experience as a student affairs professional. When asked how she entered into the field of student affairs, Camille reflected that she really “bloomed” in college. She was very involved as a student and an advisor had explicitly pointed out that student affairs was a career. She was excited by the idea of continuing to work at a college and help other students explore and develop, so her advisor connected her with a colleague searching for graduate assistants in campus programming. She went on to pursue her master’s degree in higher education while serving in a graduate assistant role. Since then, Camille has worked at three different universities, and currently services as the director in campus activities at a public, four-year institution with enrollment under 20,000 in Region IV-W. Camille has attended several national conferences for professional organizations including American College Personnel Association (ACPA) and NACA — National Association for Campus Activities. Connecting with others in ACPA’s Mid-Level Community of Practice was particularly affirming even though she has not been significantly involved in the group. Camille also has a doctorate of philosophy in educational leadership.

**Diplomat**

Diplomat has nine years of experience as a career services professional. Upon graduating from college, Diplomat intended to become a history teacher. Unable to secure a full-time position during the Great Recession, Diplomat joined a nonprofit
organization that helped young adults complete their high school diplomas or GEDs and eventually transitioned into a career development facilitator role within the organization. Through a combination of networking and advice from mentors, Diplomat transitioned to career services in postsecondary education and has worked at two different institutions. He currently serves as an associate director in career services at a public, four-year institution with enrollment over 20,000 students in Region II. Diplomat is involved in committee work within his institution as well as in NACE, National Association of Colleges and Employers, a professional organization for college career services professionals. He is also currently a doctoral student pursuing a degree in administration and supervision and instructional leadership.

**Hannah**

Hannah has 14 years of experience as a student affairs professional in both housing and residence life and student conduct functional areas. She has worked at a number of institutions in several regions during her career as a student affairs professional. When asked why she initially chose the field of student affairs, Hannah responded that she had once heard a presenter say, “getting into Student Affairs is like asking how you get into the Bermuda triangle. Some people stumble into it, others get sucked in.” Hannah said she was one of those who got sucked in. A self-proclaimed overachiever as an undergraduate student, Hannah credits student affairs mentors during her undergraduate studies who identified this as a profession and encouraged her to pursue student affairs as a career. Currently, she works as an assistant director in student conduct at a large, public, four-year institution with enrollment of over 20,000 students in Region III. With more than five years of post-master’s degree professional experience
working within student affairs, Hannah meets the study’s definition of a mid-level professional. While she identified with the mid-level role due to the scope of her position and even attended a professional institute for mid-level managers, she could not connect to the “manager” piece due to her lack of full-time staff supervision. She is involved in the Association for Student Conduct Administration (ASCA) and considers it her “professional home”. Hannah is also currently a doctoral student pursuing a degree in student affairs leadership.

**Isabella**

Isabella has 10 years of experience as a student affairs professional. As an involved undergraduate student, Isabella initially had the goal of pursuing a doctoral degree after graduating with her bachelor’s degree. However, a mentor encouraged her to consider a short-term role on-campus, which led Isabella to a community-based AmeriCorps VISTA position on a college campus. While she describes this as falling into student affairs, she noted that she can remember when she “chose” student affairs which was early on in this first job. Since then, Isabella has worked at four institutions and currently services as an associate dean of support programs at a two-year, public college with enrollment under 20,000 in Region III. Her portfolio includes veteran services, first-generation college student scholarship programs, and multicultural affairs. Isabella is involved in several professional organizations and has served in leadership roles within NASPA, Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education. She is also pursuing a doctorate of philosophy in educational leadership and policy studies.
Jeff

Jeff has seven years of experience as a student affairs professional and has worked primarily in housing and residence life. With an educational background in theology, Jeff had anticipated working in a nonprofit organization or religious institution such as a church. He had the opportunity to pursue a master’s degree in higher education while working within housing and residence life and saw parallels between working in ministry and student affairs. Ultimately, he “fell in love” working with college students and that led his career trajectory to student affairs. Jeff has worked at four different institutions, including two institutions that were faith-related. He currently works as an assistant director in housing and residence life at a private, four-year institution with enrollment under 20,000 students in Region II supervising graduate staff. He has an interest in being more involved in professional organizations and has attended several conferences at the national and regional level, but shared that he is still trying to determine how and where to get more involved.

Rocco

Rocco has 30 years of experience in higher education, working in enrollment management and academic advising. As a student, Rocco worked in the Office of Admissions at his undergraduate institution. His experience in the office led to a full-time admissions role upon graduating and launched him into a career in higher education. Currently, Rocco serves as the director of academic advising at a private, four-year institution with enrollment under 20,000 in Region VI. He has been involved in several professional organizations, including the National Academic Advising Association (NACADA). Rocco holds a doctorate of education in organizational leadership. In
addition to his work in academic advising, he also has extensive post-secondary teaching experience and has served on several dissertation committees.

Sarah

Sarah has 13 years of experience in student affairs, working in residence life and housing at three different institutions. Sarah shared that having been a resident assistant as an undergraduate student, she fell into the field of student affairs acknowledging that she saw it as an opportunity to help people, it was something she was good at, and it aligned with her values. She currently serves as the director in residential life at a public, four-year institution with enrollment over 20,000 in Region II providing supervision and leadership for a team of full-time staff members, graduate staff, and undergraduate student staff. Sarah has been involved in professional organizations including the Association of College and University Housing Officers – International (ACUHO-I) and has held several leadership roles within the Mid-Atlantic Association of College and University Housing Officers (MACUHO). In addition, Sarah is a mom and a primary caregiver for her children. Sarah also recently completed a doctoral degree in educational leadership.

Serena

Serena worked as a student affairs professional for six years. After graduating from college, Serena worked at an education nonprofit. When she was considering future career opportunities, she remembered advice from a mentor in college whom she had gotten to know while working at the college’s Welcome Center who had encouraged student affairs as a profession. Subsequently, Serena enrolled in a master’s degree program for higher education administration and that solidified her interest in working in
the field. She worked at two different institutions. At the time of this study, Serena served as an assistant director in campus activities at a public, four-year institution with enrollment over 20,000 students in Region II. Her institution was part of a large, public university system and Serena was involved in several committees that bring together colleagues across the system, such as those who work in student life. Since initially participating in the study, Serena left student affairs to work for a computer software company.

Emergent Themes

The following section outlines the themes that emerged from the data and characterized the phenomenon of belonging for mid-level student affairs professionals. The first theme speaks specifically to the experience of being a mid-level student affairs professional. While this theme does not directly address the research questions, these findings provide important context about how belongingness is experienced at this level and how the participants consider their intention to stay in the field. The second theme addresses this study’s first research question by discussing the varied ways that the participants have experienced sense of belonging. The third theme addresses the second research question by exploring ways that sense of belonging influences the participants’ intentions to both stay and leave the field of student affairs.

Theme 1: Professional Rewards and Challenges in the Middle

Many participants discussed their work in student affairs as a calling, a passion, and an opportunity to serve others. Either following their own experiences as involved undergraduate students or at the advice of a mentor, many participants spoke about “falling” into this work. Having explained how he got into the field, Antoine, a mid-level
professional working in residence life, summed it up nicely, “So yeah, I tripped and fell in love with the work.” While this sentiment of love and passion was shared by many, it was not universal to their daily experiences as mid-level student affairs professionals. I will share how participants made meaning of being at the mid-level, the professional rewards at this level, the shifting relationships in this role, and how the complexity of the mid-level role leads to challenges.

*Understanding the Mid-level Role*

For several of the participants, there were questions about what, exactly, did it mean to be a mid-level student affairs professional. While the challenges and opportunities at this level will be discussed in more depth throughout this section, it is important to acknowledge how participants made meaning of this identity. For Hannah, a student affairs professional with 14 years of experience in housing and residential life and student conduct, the label of mid-level student affairs professional is unclear, “I think even the concept of what defines mid-level...I haven't done the literature review, so I have no idea of what that actually means.” She shared that based on the scope of her role and years of experience she is seen as “mid-level management,” but that she does not supervise anyone. For her, even though she does consider herself a mid-level student affairs professional, her lack of full-time staff supervision is a distinct separation from others at this level. Conversely, two participants, who are more seasoned professionals, had a different perspective on the mid-level label. Camille, a student activities professional with nineteen years of experience, shared more about her experience accepting and appreciating her experiences at this level:
I struggle, identity wise, a lot with having a PhD as a mid-level person in a regional state institution. Like, I don't need my PhD. But to go, it is okay to be comfortable being a mid-level person. It took me a lot to get there. I'm a woman in higher ed and I could be a dean, I could be a vice president. But I don't really know if I want to do that. So it took a lot for me to go I'm really good at this mid-level. I'm really good. It's a perfect mixture for me. I'm a good administrator, but I also get to do fun programs if I want to and host a birthday party for our mascots where I can give out cupcakes. I love the mix of it. I love that I have contact with students in different ways.

Similarly, Rocco, an enrollment and advising professional with thirty years of experience, discussed a shift in his professional aspirations. He shared:

I think all too often, depending on our age, and depending on how long we've been in the in the career, you know, I question sometimes, am I mid-level? Am I considered upper-level? I still consider myself mid-level, because I'm not at that senior level, you know, a dean or a vice president or something along those lines. I think like most of us, I started with a goal in mind of being a vice president at some point. And I will tell you that over the 30 years that I've been doing this, I really have no desire to get to the senior level, because I see all the politics and I see, you know, certainly they're serving students in their own way, but from my vantage point, I still have the opportunity to see and feel the impact that I'm having on students, even though I no longer have direct student contact.

Additional participant reflections on the mid-level role and label will be shared throughout this discussion, but it is clear that there is ambiguity around the definition of
mid-level professional as well as the potential for varied experiences based on career aspirations or goals.

*Competence and Opportunities as Mid-level Student Affairs Professionals*

*Professional competence.* There was a strong sentiment amongst participants that what is enjoyed at the mid-level was being seen as competent or an expert in their area. For Hannah, she discussed the professional confidence that comes with those years of experience remarking, “I think something that I appreciate is that I actually know what I'm doing.” Others, such as Diplomat, a career services professional with nine years of experience, described this as being trusted to do their work. Diplomat expressed, “I think, at the mid-level position, you're trusted a lot more to be able to create and develop programming, you know, things of that nature. And so that's what I especially love about it.” For Rocco, his three decades of professional experience has translated into having a seat at the table:

I think being mid-level, you bring a level of credibility to meetings and discussions that you didn't have before. And, you know, you have that proverbial seat at the table that again, I like to convince myself that, you know, my voice is valued and all of that by other members of the university that I interact with. So that's important.

The appreciation for the earned seat at the table was echoed by Jeff, another participant. Jeff has been in the field for seven years working primarily in housing and residential life. He contrasted his experience from being an entry-level professional to now at the mid-level by sharing:
But it gives me the opportunity now because I'm in a mid-level role, I'm in more of those important meetings...And I'm part of those sit down conversations, which then helps me network and I connect with more people from more offices, because it seemed like the entry level roles is like you just stayed within your department.

Professional opportunities. While the professional competence and trust were appreciated, many participants spoke about the opportunities that they had as mid-level professionals as being valued and appreciated, both within their area of expertise and at the institutional level. Rocco described the importance of this as “the opportunity to initiate and lead efforts that can have a wider impact than I could have at the entry level.” For Aanya, who has worked in the area of leadership development, she has had opportunities at the mid-level to become an expert in other areas too. Working at a smaller, public, four-year institution, Aanya’s job includes not only leadership development for students, but advising Student Government and ROTC as well. Aanya observed that this was, perhaps, a function of being a smaller institution rather than her positionality at her institution and she appreciated the opportunity. “So it allowed me to still do leadership which is what they wanted me to focus on, but allowed me to open up some doors to explore different areas within Student Affairs.” Having been at the institution for eight years, she noted that her role has shifted and changed and things are added to her proverbial plate or removed from it. For Aanya, this keeps it fresh and avoids the feeling of doing the same thing every academic semester or cycle. She discussed how these opportunities, such as providing leadership to ROTC on campus, have led to more professional growth, “I feel like it's given me a little bit more
confidence in my abilities to be able to manage crisis in a way that I wouldn't have thought about before.”

**Leadership and control.** Participants also discussed the ability at the mid-level to have some control or ownership over their area. While this is connected to establishing their competence and expertise, the ability to have some ownership was significant.

Camille talked about how at this level she has more freedom professionally:

This environment is good for me because I have a lot of leeway in my job of what I want to do. If I see an idea and go, "Ooh, I want to do that”, they kind of let me do that. So that's really good. I look at my boss, who's the Dean, and he reviews a lot of policies and procedures. And that seems very not fun to me at all. So I really think this gives me the good administrative aspect that I like and I'm good at, but also the student interaction, the fun stuff.

Jeff talked about this experience similarly, sharing how he appreciates that at the mid-level he has more influence to make decisions about things like programming events, for example. He shared that he also enjoys having more ownership and control and the opportunity to “give away power,” by empowering his staff to take ownership of different projects. Sarah, who has 13 years of experience in residence life and housing, also talked about this being part of what she enjoys at the mid-level. While she talked about the challenges that accompany the mid-level role, which will be discussed in more depth later, she described the opportunity for leadership as follows:

You oversee your team and you manage them and you lead them and depending on the size of your institution, you are a bigger fish in a smaller pond or a smaller
fish in a bigger pond. But you have that opportunity to lead and to impact and influence and guide and all those like leadership, warm fuzzies.

The Significance of Shifting Relationships with Students and Staff

All participants spoke about the role of relationships within their work. More specifically, participants were specific about ways that they, at the mid-level, were able to influence the student and the staff experience. The role of student interaction was significant for some of the participants. This was true for Serena, a student affairs professional with six years of experience working in student activities at a large, public university. She discussed how her positionality in the middle enables her to better advise the student leaders who she works with:

I enjoy having a deeper understanding of institutional goals and strategic planning and having access to being included in those conversations. And then having that awareness to bring into my conversations in meetings with students. I work particularly in my current role with student leaders and Student Government members, so really students who are like advocates within the institution, so it's really enjoyable to see them and support them through their leadership growth as leaders, but also help them understand the context and the landscape of the institution through my own understanding and awareness of those things. I almost see [the] middle professional being like in the middle of working with students and also having access to upper level decision making and planning. So it's a good balance.

For Aanya, the opportunity for frequent interactions with students is a motivating factor to stay at the mid-level as more senior-level professionals generally have less
student interaction. Isabella, a professional with 10 years of experience working in support programs, mentioned how she appreciated the opportunity for both student interaction and staff development at the mid-level. This direct student interaction, however, was not true for all participants. Rocco noted the challenges of stepping away from day-to-day student support:

I still have the opportunity to see and feel the impact that I'm having on students, even though I no longer have direct student contact...I guess it's been seven years now, since I've been in this position. It was really hard to move out of that direct student contact role. And I really had to sort of go through those mental gymnastics of, okay, where am I finding my purpose now? And so now I find my purpose in terms of helping those who are coming up behind me as entry level or, you know, new to the profession. And I find, honestly, as much if not more gratitude and gratification in that role, then I probably ever did, in direct student support.

Participants spoke of staff development and supervision as one of the things they enjoyed most about their roles at the mid-level. For Diplomat, who supervises two full-time staff members, the staff support and mentorship is a way to “pay it forward” at the mid-level. Reflecting on how important it was that someone believed in him as a professional, he spoke about how his goal is to help staff dream bigger, even if it means that they outgrow their current position, “I love to help them also develop as a professional to be able to, you know, achieve things that maybe they didn't think about at first, or some goals that they had in mind when taking on the position.” Antoine, who “tripped and fell in love” with student affairs, talked passionately about the significance
of staff supervision and development and how each is a motivating factor for him at the mid-level:

My mantra is I want to restructure Student Affairs, to prioritize professional staff.

Because right now, the Division of Student Affairs shows that our sole focus is students. And that should not be the case. I think professionals are malnourished, at times, from being prioritized, from being developed on purpose.

*Role Complexity Leads to Ambiguity and Challenges*

Participants easily identified how the complexity of their roles as mid-level student affairs professionals leads to both ambiguity and challenges in general. Jeff talked about how, as an entry-level professional, he used to look at his supervisors and think that he could do their job “in a heartbeat”. However, once he advanced to a supervisory role, he realized that there was a lot more to it than what entry-level staff are seeing their supervisors do on a day-to-day basis.

*The uncomfortable middle.* It was clear that being in between senior administration and entry-level staff and students resulted in challenges for mid-level professionals. With several decades of experience, Rocco talked about how the positionality of the middle can be challenging:

I think the middle piece is sort of understanding where you fit within the hierarchy and what needs to be done. Because you need to be doing this higher level thinking, but do you have that ability because there's somebody above you already doing that? And you really shouldn't be down in the weeds because there are people that are doing the more student facing daily grind of the work that you used to do.
For Hannah, while she felt valued for her experience, she acknowledged that she was not the decision-maker or goal-maker. This caused conflict when she had identified an initiative for her area and her director, who was the decision-maker, was not willing to support the initiative moving forward. Sarah spoke candidly about this experience in the middle, identifying herself as the go-between:

You're not the singular boss. But for me, that is really a very appealing place to be in. It's challenging as well, because you're managing up as well as managing down. And I personally love it. Because I can collaborate, I can utilize my strengths to do that managing up, right? Especially if you understand the political climate that you're in, especially if you kind of align with the philosophy of your supervisor, or your Dean or Vice President, or whatever that might be. And you can really help guide and steer the ship, kind of from like a number two position. And I think that that's a really unique position to be in because you have to be able to know yourself well enough to both lead and follow simultaneously.

Speaking specifically about the challenges that she has experienced at the mid-level, Sarah noted a feeling of helplessness at times:

A dean or a VP or an executive director, they have bosses too, but they're still in charge of their entire unit. I'm not in charge of my entire unit. So like, my team doesn't get that I'm in the middle, I'm just a little bit higher on that middle. I think folks just frequently lose sight of that and think that because my title is Director, therefore I am in charge of all of the things. I am not in charge of all of the things. And I think that that's incredibly challenging when truly I can't fix and I can't control.
Isabella acknowledged the challenges of the mid-level role directly, “So I think that there's just something about the mid-level that's inherently ambiguous, right? Like how much power, authority, leadership do I have?” While not dissuaded by this, she described her positionality at the mid-level as being a “pressure point,” having supervisory responsibilities without being the decision maker. Sharing an experience about having to enforce a policy that she didn’t create or necessarily agree with, Isabella shared, “So you feel like sometimes you have to be the bad person at the mid-level, right? You are the one delivering the message, you are the one helping your staff make sense of the message, right?”

**Organizational politics.** Many participants discussed the role of organizational politics in navigating the mid-level role. This was experienced at both local and more global levels in the institution. At the divisional level, Sarah and Camille both spoke about the challenge of staying in their “lane.” While Sarah has housing operations experience, her current role specifically oversees residence life and the organizational structure does not encourage collaboration across departments that would let her share that housing expertise. Alternately, Camille talked about how she is intentional about contributing to work that fits within her office’s mission, and how it can be a challenge to walk away from a problem that does not align with her office’s role even if she knows she can fix it. She has, however, made these problems “fit” at times when she knows it needs to get done, as was the example for taking up a family newsletter in her area but justifying to herself that it can be considered a resource for students.

Many spoke about the politics that exist at a higher, institutional level and how that creates challenges at the mid-level. Jeff talked about the frustration of these politics
and while even though he knew to expect it, the politics still interfere with his work:

At the end of the day, there's still office politics. In order to get things passed you have to build connections with the right people. And trying to figure out like, if I want to propose a big idea, I can throw all the stats, all the facts. But at the end of the day, there might be someone that says no, that's not the direction we want to go into. And then it's like starting at the bottom. Okay, what is your direction? And then what's my direction? And what are some of the commonalities? So playing a little bit of the office politics, it seems like every school I've worked at it's there, unfortunately.

For Serena, the organizational politics left her feeling stuck between the students and the administration and wishing for a “playbook”:

The students are on one side and the executive leaders are on the other, there's not much opportunity for them to directly communicate with each other. And so I feel like, you know, the leadership of the college doesn't have a strong awareness of the student experience. And then the students don't have a strong awareness of what happens at the upper levels of the institution. And I have like an awareness of both of those things...and I kind of have to toe the line and be like an ally and advocate for both, while also speaking on behalf of the institution and making sure that I'm not overstepping my role, in terms of representing the institution.

This was particularly apparent during the summer of 2020 when conversations about racism and police brutality were of great concern to students and they were raising concerns about it to both student-facing staff and the institution more broadly. She noted how difficult it felt to be caught in the cross hairs and wanting to work for institutional
change and support students, but not having the control to do so.

Antoine shared similar sentiments of how politics wear on him as a mid-level student affairs professional. Speaking about politics that are more embedded into institutional structure or culture, Antoine talked about the toll it takes to navigate or break down these politics:

Especially now, I feel like a double agent at the mid-level. Whereas I'm calling out the problem, but I'm also the problem. So it's like, damn. It's frustrating at times, because there are times when I feel like, alright, I can use positionality and power within my position to make effective change, to make an immediate change. But there are other times, like, I know I can't do anything about this, the only thing I can do is soften the blow about the politics at play. Or I found myself in that double agent pieces, I have to be very conscious of how I'm really working to name systems at play. Name the politics. And not trying to socialize people into how to play the politics.

From staying in their lane, to wanting a playbook, or feeling like a double agent, it is clear that organizational politics shape the experience at the mid-level.

*The influence of the COVID-19 pandemic.* Participants spoke about the challenges to their roles as mid-level student affairs professionals wrought by the COVID-19 pandemic. While everyone described the influence slightly differently, it was clear that many of the challenges and tensions that exist at the mid-level were only heightened by the COVID-19 uncertainty and the participants’ varied roles in their response on campus. Sarah, working in residence life, described it like this:
So I constantly try to tell myself, what can I control and let's focus on that.
Because I can't fix a global pandemic. I can't fix the budget circumstances. There's a lot of things that I can't control. But what can I control? So I'm always trying to shift and refocus. But I will definitely say, yeah, it's a struggle when you feel helpless.

Sarah also started in her role a few weeks prior to the start of the COVID-19 pandemic and she spoke about how it has affected her ability to make genuine relationships with colleagues. Antoine, Diplomat, and Rocco also pointed to the disruption of COVID-19 in relationship-building, especially with new colleagues and hires.

For Aanya, one of the most substantial influences was the lack of day-to-day student interaction or the casual interactions that happen in the hallway or when a student drops by her office. Serena found herself strained as she tried to navigate how to be both a trusted advisor to students and an institutional representative during conversations around racial injustice made even more difficult by the virtual nature of things due to COVID-19:

Harkening back to concerns of racial inequity and racial tensions and over policing, as student-facing staff, students were raising concerns about the institution in those realms to us. We, as middle professionals don't have any influence in moving the needle on a significant scale for the institution.

For Isabella, COVID-19 was not used as an opportunity to demonstrate more flexibility for staff. Rather, additional reporting and work was required such as filling out
activity logs and tracking the number of email responses. This impinged on her ability to be successful as a mid-level administrator:

So it's been like...a surveillance state. And that's just not my vibe as a leader. And I actually don't feel like often the expectations that leadership has of me allows me to be the type of leader that I want to be.

Similarly, Sarah spoke about the strain of the COVID-19 pandemic while her institution experienced staffing changes and furloughs and how managers and mid-level administrators were asked to justify their positions. Camille spoke candidly about how the COVID-19 pandemic put things into perspective:

COVID has made me realize that as much as I love my job, it's a job... So it's giving myself and my office staff a lot of grace to go, it's a job at the end of day. Yes, I love it. I love what I do. But it's a job.

Many of the participants discussed not only the challenges associated with the COVID-19 pandemic as student affairs professionals, but also the opportunities. Camille, for example, spoke with enthusiasm about ways that the pandemic forced her area to rethink what they did or how they had always done things, which resulted in connecting with new and different students. Related more directly to their roles as mid-level administrators, Antoine and Sarah shared that it has changed their relationships with the staff they supervise. Sarah noted specifically that she made an effort to provide to her team what she felt was missing from more senior-level administration:

I just really wish there was more empathy. I am going to now be more empathetic with my team and think more holistically about the folks that I serve. So
everything is a lesson. Like I said, I can't control everything, but I can control what I do.

Similarly, Antoine talked about the challenges of supporting and supervising staff during a global pandemic, especially considering there were staff members concerned for their health and wellbeing and the safety of those they care for or live with. For him, this was accomplished through vulnerability, which he identified as both necessary and difficult:

I think the hardest thing about demonstrating vulnerability is just the practice. We don't practice enough giving grace to ourselves in our leadership models. How do I be vulnerable [while] at the same time being strong and demonstrating leadership for my staff, who are also vulnerable and are trying to be strong?

Regardless of the challenges, many of the participants found the opportunities or “silver linings” brought by COVID-19 whether it be within higher education as a whole or at a more departmental level as Camille discussed. For Sarah, the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic have served as a motivating factor to stay in the field and engaged in the work:

There's challenging things for sure, and COVID and everything that we've done on the fly this year has absolutely highlighted those challenges and exacerbated those challenges and made it much less fun year, I think, for everybody. But I think, if reframed, it's also really motivating.

Theme 2: Sense of Belonging is Experienced by Many, but in Different Ways

Participants shared openly and honestly about their experiences as student affairs professionals. While there was not a standard or shared definition of sense of belonging
amongst participants, there were keys to how belongingness takes shape through relationships, being trusted for expertise, and through mutual support. Additionally, this section will explore both the role of salient identities and professional associations in shaping sense of belonging for participants.

A Fuzzy Definition Leads to Varied Interpretations

To better understand how participants experienced sense of belonging as mid-level student affairs professionals, I started by asking them how they define sense of belonging. While it is a commonly recognized phrase, there was not a consistent understanding or shared definition of sense of belonging amongst the participants. Some participants, such as Serena and Hannah, recognized sense of belonging through an academic lens, specifically through the literature of Terrell Strayhorn (Strayhorn, 2019). While unable to recite Strayhorn’s definition of belonging, they discussed how they were introduced to the theory through academic coursework and that was their foundation for understanding. Others talked about sense of belonging as a current buzzword in higher education, especially as it relates to the student experience. Many provided examples of their own experiences when defining the concept. There were some commonalities and differences in the ways that participants understood the concept of belonging, which I will elaborate on further.

The first commonality is that individuals talked about sense of belonging in connection with relationships. Words such as collaborative, community, and connection were shared by participants when asked to define sense of belonging. Diplomat shared, “I would define it as being a part of the team, you know, or feeling as if you are a part of the team.” There was also the significance of being connected to a shared mission or purpose.
Aanya talked about how when the mission and culture of her institution aligned with her values, that is where belongingness has occurred. At her institution, she described it as a “culture of care.” For Camille, the shared mission was significant and defined sense of belonging as being “all in the same boat...working towards the same thing.” Sarah was skeptical of how the concept of sense of belonging has become a buzzword in the field of student affairs and was evaluated without being clearly defined. She described it as an intangible thing and went on to say, “It's about respect. It's about feeling safe, feeling happy, wanting to be there, feeling like you are a part of the bigger thing that's happening around you.” For other participants, sense of belonging was defined by, as Sarah mentioned, feeling respected and trusted. Serena echoed this by sharing that she doesn’t belong in spaces where she’s not valued or respected. Hannah talked about experiencing belonging once she started seeing other people trust her experience as a professional. Similarly, Rocco talked about credibility, support, and mutual respect. Finally, there was a feeling of not only being accepted, but supported and celebrated. Isabella shared how sense of belonging has become a “fancy theoretical framework” for how her institution is approaching student success. Eschewing an academic definition, she shared:

I just think at the end of the day, sense of belonging is feeling like you can bring your whole self to where you are, and that it's not just going to be, like, accepted or tolerated, right. There's going to be opportunities for celebrating who you are and acknowledging the unique strengths and attributes that you bring. For me, I just think that that's ultimately what sense of belonging is.

Antoine shared this sentiment of feeling both supported and celebrated, especially as it relates to his seen and unseen identities. “Are they supported? Are they appreciated?
Are they celebrated in spaces? Yeah, that's what I feel when it comes to professionally when it comes to sense of belonging.”

The key differentiating factor was how participants interpreted the role of “fit” in their definition of sense of belonging. When asked what comes to mind when thinking about sense of belonging, Aanya’s first response without hesitation was fit. She expanded upon that, describing how the culture of care at her institution which aligns with her personal values makes her feel that her current institution fits much better than other institutions. Alternately, Antoine was adamantly anti-fit:

Because when you say, sense of belonging, I used to think it meant fit, right? Where do I fit in? I am a rage against the system person...I'm anti-fit. I'm a recruiter for my current position as well. And, you know, I despise when somebody brings up like, "well, this person is not gonna fit." I'm like, "talk to me a little bit more, what do you mean fit? Like, come here and not challenge inadequacies? Like you mean, become a part of a monolithic dominant identity and our syst[em]...like, what do you mean? Because that's not what I'm looking for." So we need to have a larger conversation. I think fit is the opposite of sense of belonging.

How Belongingness Takes Shape

While the definition may be fuzzy, participants affirmed that they had experienced a sense of belonging, at times, in their professional lives. This was driven by a few interconnected themes including the role of relationships, being trusted for their expertise, and when mutual support exists.
Role of relationships. Perhaps unsurprisingly, one of the key factors of experiencing sense of belonging for participants was the significance of relationships with others. Speaking from her personal experiences, Serena described it as follows:

Throughout your life, when you encounter like-minded individuals, and you feel like you can be honest and open with particular people in particular spaces, and that there's no sense of judgment or hatred and you feel that sense of connection to one another. In those instances, you understand what it means to have a sense of belonging.

Serena talked about having a group of trusted colleagues, members of her department including her supervisor, and how having those individuals with whom she could be her authentic self created a strong support system and sense of belonging. Similarly, Diplomat found that the relationships he has developed and cultivated have contributed to his belongingness, sharing, “They have reinforced that I do belong, and I do have value. That has helped me tremendously.” When pressed further, he shared that what is significant about these relationships is that these individuals see him beyond simply being a colleague or professional, but they care about him as an individual. Furthermore, they give him space to share his expertise. This will be further explored in the next section.

Sarah talked about the significance of relationships as both a new staff member and as a supervisor. Having started her role right before the COVID-19 pandemic, she found that it took longer to build relationships, but that she was feeling like she belonged at her institution in that moment more than she did 18 months prior. Acknowledging the circumstances wrought by the pandemic in playing a role in that, she offered:
But one might argue, that would have been the perfect time to have gone the extra mile to make folks feel included. Which is what I'm trying to do as a mid-level manager. It wasn't the best year, but gosh dang if I did not try and my team did not try to make our team feel like as cohesive of a team as we could. Just because you have the barrier of virtual engagement does not mean you don't put in the effort to try to build a team and try to make a sense of belonging. We had a lot of resignations for sure. We had a lot of turnover, but the folks who stuck with [us], truly did feel as if they belonged on the team. So I will take that as a win.

**Trusted for expertise and competence.** Many individuals spoke about how they felt a sense of belonging when they felt that they were being trusted for their experience and their professional competence. Diplomat explained how seemingly simple acts such as being invited to meetings by colleagues made him feel that they valued his input or getting a student referred to him directly from a colleague emphasized that the colleague has confidence in his expertise, thus enhancing the relationships that reinforce his sense of belonging. For Jeff, being recognized for his expertise came over time and helped enhance his sense of belonging:

So I think I felt more sense of belonging, because it seemed like the longer I was at institutions, the more trust upper administration had with me. And then I was part of those bigger conversations. I was part of those committees.

Hannah also talked positively about experiencing a sense of belonging in her professional life, both at a previous institution and at her current institution. She acknowledged the role of relationships in that by sharing that relationships are “really important for me to thrive”. As she discussed this further, however, it became clear that it
wasn’t just having friends or relationships at work that was significant to feeling like she belonged, it was that individuals in the workplace started to trust her experience as a student affairs professional:

I mean, some of the most important people in my life now are the people I met when I worked in Florida. I really felt like I belonged in that space. And again, I think that's when I started to see people trusting my experience as a professional.

This was reinforced in subsequent roles when she was trusted to create different processes or systems. Hannah went on to discuss how having ownership of certain projects like this, fail or succeed, has helped her to feel valued as a staff member. “I think that makes me feel like I belong here. That I belong in my position. I belong in this university because I'm providing a service to students that they're trusting me to do.”

For Rocco, being seen as credible by others was also connected to his sense of belonging professionally. Asked if he feels like he belongs to his division at his current institution, he responded affirmatively and expanded:

Yes. That's the level of credibility that I believe I have created for myself, certainly over the last seven years in this position. And, I think, it's not about being liked, but it's about building a level of connectedness with other leaders within the division, that that collaboration piece is very much in place. That's important to me.

Isabella shared how, at times, she does feel a sense of belonging at her current institution, but not always. The COVID-19 pandemic brought significant challenges to her work and there was a large reorganization during which she had to reapply for her job to maintain it, which resulted in being hired into a new role that she didn’t actually apply
for. However, she shared that she had a renewed sense of hope around experiencing a sense of belonging:

I find myself in this place where I'm like, actually, this really does align with what I want to do, because I can maybe, you know, really create a sense of belonging for minoritized students, you know, so students who are veterans or military connected, students who have aged out of the foster care system. I had this sense of hope and this sense of belonging last week when I got to submit, literally, a $10 million budget request, because I was empowered to dream big. I think when you're empowered to make the decisions that are right, that's when I feel a sense of belonging.

While being recognized for their competence or credibility was significant to participants, participants spoke about times when this didn’t happen or other ways that would contribute to them feeling valued by their divisions or institutions. Jeff shared that he compiles and sends a detailed report to his supervisor each month and he never gets any feedback beyond being told by his supervisor that he will be asked if there are any questions. Jeff shared that not only is this disappointing, but it makes him feel like he is not recognized for his strengths and contributions. Compensation also came up as a tangible way that some participants felt undervalued by their institutions. Isabella, in particular, shared that while she felt valued by her Division of Student Affairs, she did not feel that she was recognized in a fair way. Asked what it would look like if her contributions were recognized in a more equitable way she responded:

I would have a different title, actually, to be really blunt with you. So, you know, if the Vice Chancellor has to come three levels down the organization to find
someone to clean up graduation at the last minute, like, maybe I shouldn't be an L5 [title classification]. Maybe if my AVC [Associate Vice Chancellor] uses me as their thought partner for what our strategic plan is, maybe I should be one of her Deans. It's great that you always think of me for the special projects, but maybe you should pay me to do them.

Isabella went on to share that while she felt valued for her strengths and accomplishments, she found it exploitative that she wasn’t adequately compensated for them with money or title.

_Mutual support._ Finally, participants shared some moving stories about how both feeling supported and being able to offer support to others strengthened their sense of belonging. This took different shapes and forms depending on the participant. Aanya talked about how colleagues have supported each other, whether it was trying to be helpful to a colleague going through a difficult divorce or acknowledging the COVID-related challenges of childcare for some staff and pitching in to lighten their load professionally. When asked if he had experienced belonging within the Division of Student Affairs at his current institution, Antoine stepped out of the frame of the Zoom interview to bring a letter into view. He explained that right around the time that he was starting this new role, he received an award from a professional organization and, not only was it acknowledged verbally in a meeting, but the Vice President of Student Affairs sent him a handwritten note congratulating him:

This is a handwritten note that I picked up in my mailbox on my way home one day, where he [the Vice President of Student Affairs] said he had heard great things about me. He recognized me because I was also receiving an award for
something…But that to me said a lot, right? For someone who is several positions removed from me, to see me. He mentioned that they believe in what I can bring here. I didn't even know he knew my name.

This experience was meaningful for Antoine and he keeps the note on his desk near his computer as a reminder. Similarly, when asked if she felt recognized for her strengths or accomplishments, Hannah shared that yes, she did, but it was not necessarily being nominated for awards or praised that made her feel this way. Rather, she pointed to a wall behind her saying, “I’ve got a few back there.” She went on to share that her father had passed away within the past year and when she came back to work a team that she works closely with had sent her flowers and a card and now she keeps the card on her wall. For Hannah, this made her feel supported and recognized for what she went through as a person.

Without hesitation, Diplomat also confirmed that he feels that he belongs in the Division of Student Affairs at his institution. He talked about how division-wide meetings were a way to build relationships with others and learn about and celebrate divisional successes and that having those relationships have really helped with the sense of belonging. He went on; sharing animatedly, that he and his wife were expecting a child and that colleagues threw them a virtual baby shower. “I was super surprised! And we had, I think it was over 35 people…and so that meant so much to me. I'm still not sure how to thank everyone.” When I followed up with Diplomat approximately two months later, I asked him if his new identity as a parent had shaped his sense of belonging at his institution. He responded saying:
Yes. While my new identity as a parent is still fresh, it has already started to shift my sense of belonging at the college and within the division. For example, many colleagues have reached out during these past few weeks to connect and talk not about work, but about the baby. They have been very supportive and have provided a lot of support in many ways including advice, check-ins, and gifts. I now consider my relationship with these individuals to be even more connected than before.

The Role of Salient Identities

For many of the participants, their salient identities were significant to their experience of sense of belonging. There was a general sentiment among participants that feeling like they could be their full self in the workplace led to either their understanding of sense of belonging or their experience of sense of belonging. This played a large part in my conversation with Isabella. When asked how she would define sense of belonging, she shared:

I just think at the end of the day, sense of belonging is feeling like you can bring your whole self to where you are, and that it's not just going to be, like, accepted or tolerated. There's going to be opportunities for you know, celebrating who you are, and acknowledging, like the unique strengths and attributes that you bring.

For me, I just think that's ultimately what sense of belonging is.

Throughout our conversation, Isabella referenced her marginalized identities, specifically her identity as a woman and as a member of the LGBTQIA+ community, and ways that they have shaped her experiences as a student affairs professional. She described it as getting mixed messages of having recognition and promotions that affirm
that she belongs in the profession, but also encountering barriers as well as discrimination and harassment. She acknowledged this saying:

So I can also own that, like, I'm a kick ass student affairs professional. I am good at what I do. I am an expert in many areas, I'm a good supervisor, people like working for me. And yet, I have also been made to feel like I don't belong, you know?

Isabella also talked about the role that other women played in her sense of belonging, describing it as “relationships of solidarity that I’ve created at institutions to survive”. She shared that she has a group chat with other female administrators who commiserate about ways that they are subjugated based on their gender identity and make them question their belonging. While this spoke to a lack of belonging at an institutional-level, Isabella felt a sense of belonging among that group of women. Ultimately, she acknowledged that her identities have led to both high points of experiencing affinity and a strong sense of belonging and times when her identities have contributed to her feeling marginalized.

For Antoine, his salient identities as a student affairs professional were being a Black man and a Black father. Similarly to Isabella, he also talked about the opportunity to be supported and celebrated. When defining belonging he described it as follows:

Yeah, so I think just feeling supported for who you are in your most authentic form. And not feeling like you have to alter any, any aspect of your identity or any aspect of who you are, in order to exist or in order to feel a part of a culture or an environment.
Antoine shared that he experienced a sense of belonging at a predominantly white institution (PWI) in the state of Georgia. Having attended and first worked at HBCUs (historically black colleges and universities), he acknowledged that there was a culture shock working at a PWI. He talked about how connecting with other Black professionals gave him a “cultural sense of belonging” and permission to not have to change himself to be successful in that space. He did, however, establish a larger sense of belonging, which he talked about in more depth:

Those people love celebrating you. Like, I'm presenting at a conference, which I didn't know how to do, and they helped me develop it, but they celebrated me presenting at this conference as if I thought about it by myself and did it on my own. I'm like, "No, there's so many people. Like I have a village." That also made me feel like I belong here. In other offices on campus when they were asking to work with me on different projects, particularly one when it came to the development and identifying resources for students of color, that really contributed to like "yeah, I belong here, I feel like my pure self. I feel like I'm fully supported. These people are invested in who I am and want me to succeed.” I don't feel like that culture was problematic or negative or had any consequences to me being my pure self.

While several participants identified as a primary caregiver, that identity did not always connect directly to the experience of sense of belonging. Antoine, for example, talked about how being a father has made him more empathetic and has provided professional clarity for what he’s willing to tolerate or not in terms of responsibility and expectations outside of the office. Sarah shared similar sentiments, both about trying to
balance caring for those at work and caring for her children at home. Her identity as a mother also shaped her awareness of others and empathy. “It's remembering they're more than who's on the Zoom screen or who's in the office next to me.” When asked if she had experienced a sense of belonging in her professional life, she responded confidently, “Oh, absolutely”. She went on to provide an example of feeling belonging at a previous institution while a live-on residence life professional:

I felt like I was a part of that community, that community felt like it was a part of me. I was pregnant and had children and brought them home to that space. But that space also made that accessible and welcomed that. There were a lot of things that that particular institution did to support me, enabling me to bring my family home, and making it feel like home. So professionally, for sure, at a physical brick and mortar institution that they saw me for me, they valued what was important in my life, I had the support and the flexibility that I needed to be the best mom, and to be the best staff member simultaneously. So that was a very clear sign of a sense of belonging.

In this moment for Sarah, it was less about how her identity as a mom shaped her sense of belonging, but how that belongingness helped to shape her experience as a mom. Sarah summed up how her identity as a mom has shaped her sense of belonging overall by sharing:

It's made me a better supervisor, and it's made me acknowledge whether a campus embraces that identity of myself and for peers and my staff...So, for me, again, a campus, a department, a group needs to see the whole person and embrace what that is. Not just in the nine to five.
The Role of Professional Associations

It was clear that professional associations played a significant role in shaping a sense of belonging in the field of student affairs as a whole for some participants. Aanya shared how her involvement in NASPA and specifically within the Knowledge Community for her functional area has increased both her professional confidence and her network, while providing external recognition for her expertise. She shared that being asked to contribute as a consultant recently as a result of her work within NASPA was an ego boost and that her work has “opened up some doors for me to feel more confident with my abilities as a leadership educator and as a student affairs professional that I could do this work.” Aanya described that she has a sense of belonging within this Knowledge Community and how reassuring it has been to know that. While she also has a sense of belonging within her current institution, she talked about how she is less fearful of losing that because she experiences it in other spaces:

That's what I leaned on the KC [Knowledge Community] and being able to look at other colleagues that are doing this type of work or other women that were in the field that were able to support in those pieces. So now I feel more comfortable with that, because I have that other support system outside of [my institution], that would potentially support and continue this work in a different way. And knowing that it wasn't just higher ed, or student affairs or leadership. There's this other support system that's there as well.

Isabella had a similar sentiment, sharing that she has been intentional about pursuing opportunities within professional organizations when she was dissatisfied or disenfranchised at work:
I think that I have actually used professional association involvement to supplement a lack of sense of belonging at my institution...So actually, it was pretty intentional that I've sought out other communities associated with student affairs, to try to like, reinvigorate my sense of belonging in the profession.

Another participant, Sarah, shared that she had been involved in a number of different ways within professional organizations at the national and regional level and even served as the president of her regional professional association at one time. She talked about why she got involved:

I would definitely say [I] have also sought that out in the form of professional associations, whether that's been MAUCHO or ACUHO-i or NASPA or you know, ASCA, you pick them, finding other kind of like-minded professionals that, you know, we start talking about niche things when you're at conferences, and that's always really fueled my soul. But also provided that sense of community that I feel as if I belong in those settings.

Describing her leadership role within professional organizations as the “biggest labor of professional love,” she talked enthusiastically about how she both contributed and benefited, getting even more in return:

I get to contribute my knowledge, my wisdom, my expertise, to a broader group of people. In return, I've learned from them because they are giving of themselves. That diversity of thought or even if it's the same thought it's a different angle of approaching it or it's adding, you know, again, their lens, their slant, their take on it. It's coming together and commiserating. But it's validating, and, again, at the end of the day, these people, these professionals, we're doing the
same stuff at different institutions. So it's a slightly different flavor, but we all are here to serve. And it renews my spirit. It, you know, renews my faith in this profession, and why we do it.

Antoine also spoke passionately about the role that professional organizations have played in his sense of belonging in the field of student affairs:

I will say it has informed my sense of belonging. It's been like a bloodline. Like it's fed me, it's fueled me. Actually, it's been a parent. It's given me shelter. It's made me feel home.

He shared more about attending his first conference and while he initially felt out of place, he was ultimately embraced:

I will say that at the first conference, people saw that lost kid in the city look and like, immediately wrapped their arms [around me] like, "you look lost, come here." And it was specifically professionals of color who said, "Hey, young brother. Somebody did this for me. You look lost, and we can't have you looking lost out here. Let us show you the way", right? So people were taking me under their wing. But then I had a really diverse board of mentorship that evolved out of that professional conferencing.

He went on to say that now he serves in a leadership role within that professional organization and only made it that far because he was made to feel that he belonged. He talked with great emotion about the connections and genuine relationships that he has made in that space:

I will say one of the things that emerged out of that professional conference is a group who I call them my Higher Ed Homies. All of us are mid-level
professionals, and all of us are Black males. Like we have a homie now he, you know, just finished his doctorate. So we spent a good week celebrating him. And then somebody was applying for a job. So we was getting their resources, doing prep interviews. Another person had a child and we're also getting their registry...And all this was birthed out of the professional home, like, we didn't know [each other], like we are all still at different institutions. Nobody's in close proximity to each other. But you would feel like we all grew up together. And I think we grew up in Student Affairs together. We become family, we become that we want to see each other thrive. And I think that's the other component of sense of belonging. You have people who are invested in you, and they want you to be better, and they're going to help you.

Some of the other participants talked about similar experiences in these spaces. For Hannah, they have provided her confidence and validation in her work and Camille appreciated the opportunity to commiserate with others. Not all participants were involved at the same level or even found a way to get involved. Serena and Diplomat talked about how conferences or system-wide involvement was meaningful to them in terms of networking and connecting with trusted colleagues. Rocco shared that while he encourages his staff to get involved in professional organizations, he’s personally been minimally involved, explaining that he has a strong network of people. Jeff expressed an interest to get more involved and Camille talked about how recently finding the ACPA Mid-Level Community of Practice has been affirming.

I never really think about kind of where I am in the hierarchy, I just do my job.

And that really helped me realize there are other people like that this is a
legitimate hierarchy place to be in. And there are other people that are. So that actually I really enjoyed that group...but that was really where I felt that those people are in the same boat as me. Like, they understand what it looks like. And they, they have the same struggles. And that's kind of the group that I really, whatever I volunteered a couple of times and they just never picked up on that. But yeah, that's kind of the one that I really felt that made me kind of realize this is a good level that I'm at and I like and other people who are in this level too. And I kind of never really thought about it like that.

The Impermanence of Belonging

While all of the participants responded affirmatively that they experienced a sense of belonging in their professional life, it was clear throughout the conversations that sense of belonging is not linear or permanent. Aanya talked about feeling valued at certain points and in certain ways in her work, but discouraged in others. Sarah shared that she was coming to feel belonging at her institution, but that it did not currently exist. She and Isabella talked about the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic on needing to justify their positions at their institution which subsequently influenced their impressions of feeling valued and that they mattered at their respective institutions. Isabella talked at length about the complexity of belongingness, describing it as a roller coaster, and being made to feel both that she does and doesn’t belong. Ultimately, while sense of belonging has existed for all, it was experienced in different ways for different people.

Theme 3: Sense of Belonging Plays a Role in Intention to Stay in the Field for Some

This final theme addresses the second research question by discussing how the participants’ evaluation of belonging shapes their individual intention to stay at their
Should I Stay or Should I Go?

When asked if they had ever considered leaving the field of student affairs, all participants responded affirmatively, some with more gusto than others. Many participants talked about compensation and being “tempted by” opportunities in fields outside of student affairs primarily for increased earning opportunities. Some participants, such as Camille and Rocco, acknowledged that they had, in fact, left student affairs for different reasons but ultimately came back to the profession. Rocco, who shared that he had left student affairs briefly, said that he “hated it” and there was a mission incongruence that eventually brought him back. Camille had a similar experience when she took a break from student affairs for a few years. During that time she ran her own business and she shared that she realized that she didn’t mind having a boss “that tells me this is what you need to do” and that she wasn’t effective in all areas of business such as marketing. One participant, Aanya, responded hesitantly that she hadn't considered leaving and then went on to share that she had, in fact, considered it when she was in a negative work environment. “I knew I had a timeframe of about six months that I needed to leave within that time frame. And if I didn't find anything within Student Affairs, maybe I would have considered going outside of it.”

Serena responded, without pausing, that yes, she had considered leaving. Her immediate reaction even caught her off guard, saying, “Wow, that was so powerful. I didn't even hesitate.” She talked about how the “middleness” of her role between
supporting students and serving as an institutional agent left her feeling in the middle of conflict without any influence to make change. While she acknowledged parts of her role that she enjoyed and found meaning in such as watching students grow and develop, she was discouraged by the unwillingness at the institutional level to change and adapt:

I feel like we have a service oriented mindset and intention to, you know, care and help folks develop and improve structures. But the structure of higher education itself, you know, is built in a very rigid, unmoving way. And I'm getting to a point, especially with COVID, that it's like, very illuminating to me that even though I have the intentionality to foster change and show compassion and to help others, it doesn't move the needle in a larger, significant way. Like I can support an individual student and their growth, but I can't motivate the institution to change what my inner perspective is saying is a racist policy, right? So, in that way, it's like even though I have a small impact, I'm really just complicit in the structure.

Serena went on to talk about how even if she was in a higher position of authority, while she might have more influence, she would lose the student interaction and have to deal more with the bureaucracy which would “add more stress and complexity to my life, and it would remove a lot of the aspects of my role that I do enjoy, which is working with students.” When I followed up with Serena several weeks after our initial conversation, my email outreach to her bounced back. Curious to know more, I connected with her on LinkedIn and found that she had, in fact, since left higher education and was working for a computer software company. Her early impressions there will be shared in more depth later in this chapter.
While all participants had considered leaving student affairs, and one subsequently has, participants talked passionately about various reasons to stay in the field whether or not it is at their current institution. For a number of participants including Sarah, Aanya, Jeff, Diplomat, and Rocco, they talked about professional opportunities and were motivated as they continued to feel challenged in their roles. Diplomat shared that he had considered leaving higher education completely when working at a previous institution and the institution transitioned to a more transactional, business-oriented environment. When asked what keeps him in the field now, he talked about institutional fit and how at his current institution he believes in the resources and programs being offered to the students. Aanya shared that the students were what keeps her in the field and, in fact, keeps her satisfied at the mid-level:

I can't imagine not working with students. And that's part of the reason why I feel like the director level is as high as I really want to go. Because I don't want to lose that interaction with students in the same way.

Jeff talked about the role that students play in keeping him in the field as well and how the cyclical nature of new students keeps it exciting and fresh:

They're [new students] teaching me new technologies I've never even heard of. So just like the newness, the new cycles every three, four years of different college students that come in with their different needs, expectations and demands.

He went on to share the significance of mission congruence that was echoed by other participants such as Rocco and Camille, “Like my heart, I always love working at a university as long as it fits like my personal mission and goals in life.”
Many of the participants drew a connection between their intention to stay in the field—or not—and the sense of belonging that they have experienced as a mid-level student affairs professional. Diplomat, who had talked about considering leaving higher education completely, affirmed with a smile:

It [sense of belonging] certainly does influence my decision to stay within Student Affairs especially. Because I understand and value the work that we do. And, you know, just a couple of years ago, I was looking to vacation completely. So this is a complete turnaround.

Jeff had a similar response, sharing that he is still drawn to the opportunity to impact lives and be a part of people’s journeys, even if the compensation is not where he wishes it was:

I still feel like I belong. I feel like I can bring different perspectives. That's what I feel like why I'm here. I like helping people, assisting people. I don't do it for the paycheck, because if I did it for the paycheck, I'd be gone in a heartbeat.

Rocco, the most seasoned professional of the participants, had a different perspective. Having already devoted 17 years at his current institution he doesn’t foresee himself leaving, or even leaving to go to another institution, having been given “enough opportunities to grow as a professional and develop that sense of belonging that you're referring to that at this point in my life.”

Sarah shared that while she has considered leaving, it was not the time for her to make the jump out of higher education, sharing, “I'm not in a position right now that I want to because I still like what I'm doing. I still feel valued. I still feel like the work
matters.” With aspirations towards senior-level leadership in student affairs, Sarah talked about how the COVID-19 response year has “fueled her fire” to want to do it more, identifying an opportunity to provide leadership in a way that prioritizes empathy and vulnerability. When I followed up with Sarah several weeks after our initial conversation, she remained steadfast in her commitment to “make it better than I found it” and for her this is connected to sense of belonging.

For Aanya, who shared that students were a strong motivating factor keeping her in the field, her sense of belonging at her current institution is another factor. She talked about how feeling supported and being perceived as competent in her area of expertise has contributed to that belongingness. She also shared that her sense of belonging in the field influences her intention to stay in the field more broadly:

I think that sense of belonging with areas outside of [my institution] have continued to support me to think about staying in the field. Because there's that extra support system that says it doesn't have to just be at [my institution].

As previously mentioned, Serena left student affairs during the span of this study. In our first conversation, Serena had talked about wanting to experience belonging at a higher, institutional level and how significant that would be for her intention to stay at the institution. In our follow-up conversation she shared:

Ultimately, the burnout from not having my own personal values and student-focused approach met and reflected on an institutional level led to my decision to seek and try out a new position outside of higher ed. That lack of belonging on this institutional level was absolutely a main motivating factor to leave.
She went on to talk about how she had only had professional full-time experience in higher education and wanted to understand what work is like outside of higher education. Specifically searching for companies with “positive company culture” when looking for new jobs, she was hired at a computer software company and talked about how this was a positive transition:

I'm only on week three of this new position and already feel more sense of belonging and appreciation than I ever felt in my six plus years in higher ed. I do miss working and interacting with students and seeing their growth and development. But even at this early stage of my new role, I don't think I would transition back to higher ed.

For Isabella, who shared that she has both felt that she does and does not belong in student affairs in various ways discussed previously, the fact that she lacked belongingness at times was a major motivator for her to stay in the field of student affairs. Isabella talked about wanting to prove that people with marginalized identities belong in student affairs and to make it better for the people who are in the field. She stays because she feels a “responsibility to be here disrupting.” Antoine similarly talked about staying in the field out of a sense of responsibility to make it better. He talked about how belongingness has been central to his experience as a student affairs professional and how he feels that his “tank” is continually filled in different ways through sense of belonging and how, hopefully, he can be able to fill other peoples’ tanks through belongingness. Seeing sense of belonging as a way to support, develop, and retain staff, Antoine described creating environments that nurture a sense of belonging as a “critical necessity”. Antoine offered an interesting reflection on how, from his
perspective, student affairs professionals are conditioned to sacrifice or put their needs aside because of their love for students. He offered up the possibility that you can both love the students and support each other. He went on to share:

Professional sense of belonging needs to be an institutional and divisional priority. So those values that people are listing, professional sense of belonging should be a part of it. It needs to be named and needs to be committed to. It needs to be active.

Summary

This chapter provided a detailed description of this current study’s findings. Mid-level student affairs professionals experience both rewards and challenges due to the “middleness” of their role. Participants spoke about the confidence and value that comes from being recognized as competent and having access to professional opportunities at the mid-level, while simultaneously discussing how the complexity of mid-level roles can lead to ambiguity and challenges, many of which were amplified due to the COVID-19 pandemic. While not directly related to the study’s research questions, understanding how the participants navigate their roles provided additional context to their experiences of sense of belonging and their intention to stay in the field. The participants spoke honestly and passionately about ways that they have, or have not, experienced a sense of belonging in the professional space and the role of their salient identities as well as professional associations in shaping a sense of belonging in the field. While the phenomenon of sense of belonging was experienced by many, it was experienced in varied and different ways and it was not a permanent state for most. Ultimately, sense of
belonging was found to influence both the intention to stay and leave the field of student affairs for the individual participants.
CHAPTER 5
DISCUSSION

Introduction

Student affairs professionals make significant contributions to campus operations and the learning and development of students in higher education institutions. Mid-level student affairs professionals in particular are instrumental in interpreting and enacting institutional mission, communicating and collaborating with students, faculty, and administration, and providing management of staff, programming, and finances within their area of expertise (Mather et al., 2009; Rosser, 2004; Wilson et al., 2016). As a result of the challenges of these roles, there is a concern about burnout and attrition amongst mid-level student affairs professionals specifically (Marshall et al., 2016; Mullen et al., 2018; Tull, 2006; Wilson et al., 2016). The purpose of this current study was to understand the role of sense of belonging in mid-level student affairs professionals’ experiences. Through a qualitative, phenomenological analysis, this study explored how sense of belonging was experienced by mid-level student affairs professionals and questioned how their evaluation of belonging shaped their intention to stay in the field. This chapter will first address the current study’s findings as they relate to the research questions and the literature. After discussing the results of the current study, the chapter will address the significance of the study as well as acknowledge the study’s limitations. Subsequently, this chapter will explore the implications for practice while providing recommendations for future research.
Discussion of Results

In this section, I will address the current study’s findings as they relate to the research questions. First, I will discuss the finding of professional rewards and challenges experienced at the mid-level, then explore how sense of belonging was experienced in varied ways, and lastly discuss the role that sense of belonging plays in influencing intent to leave. Finally, I will address the question of who is responsible for creating belonging and where it matters most.

*Professional Rewards and Challenges in the Middle*

The findings of this current study contribute to the existing literature about mid-level student affairs professionals. It was clear from my interviews with the study participants that there are both professional rewards and challenges in the middle. As mid-level student affairs professionals, participants experienced a significant amount of role complexity, at times amplified by the COVID-19 pandemic, which led to challenges. This finding was consistent with the existing literature around the complexity of mid-level staff roles which can result in role conflict, ambiguity, and a lack of authority (Adams-Dunford et al., 2019; Mather et al., 2009; Mills, 2009; Scott, 1980). Additionally, the ambiguity in the status or label of mid-level itself that several participants discussed was echoed in the literature (Adams-Dunford et al., 2019; Young Jr., 2007). Furthermore, the study highlighted the significance of professional competence and opportunities achieved at the mid-level. Participants spoke at length about how being seen as competent and given professional opportunities shape their experience in the middle. This aligns with the existing literature drawing a connection between recognition for competence and job satisfaction and morale (Donaldson &
Rosser, 2007; Rosser, 2004; Rosser & Javinar, 2003). While this finding did not directly
relate to the study’s research questions, it did provide substantial context to the
environment and experience of mid-level student affairs professionals.

_Sense of Belonging is Experienced by Many, but in Different Ways_

There is a shared conclusion throughout the existing literature that sense of
belonging elicits cognitive, behavioral, and affective responses (Baumeister & Leary,
However, a primary critique of this concept is that there is not a shared definition or
broadly accepted theoretical understanding of sense of belonging. This study echoed the
current assessment in the literature that while sense of belonging is a commonly
recognized phrase, there was not a consistent understanding or shared definition of sense
of belonging.

For the purposes of this current study, sense of belonging was defined as an
individual’s perception of feeling valued by and mattering to a group or community
(Hagerty et al., 1992; Strayhorn, 2019). An additional characteristic or theme found in the
literature around sense of belonging is the idea of fit, the belief that there are shared or
complementary characteristics that fit the environment (Hagerty et al., 1992). There was
some polarization around whether or not fit is an appropriate component of sense of
belonging, although it was not explored at depth in this study and warrants additional
exploration.

While there was not a shared definition articulated by the study’s participants,
they spoke confidently and affirmatively of having experienced belongingness in varied
ways. One of the ways that participants spoke about feeling that they were valued or
mattered within their organizations was feeling trusted for their expertise and competence. Not only does this align with what participants talked about as being something they enjoy at the mid-level, but this echoes findings in the existing literature that mid-level professionals place value in being recognized for their contributions and competence (Donaldson & Rosser, 2007; Rosser, 2004; Rosser & Javinar, 2003). This will be further addressed in the discussion of the study’s significance from a theoretical lens.

Additionally, it was clear that identity, specifically marginalized identities, played a role in sense of belonging for several participants. Participants spoke about experiencing belonging when they could bring their full self to the workplace and when they formed strong relationships with others who shared their identities. The current literature indicates that mid-level professionals of color experience the same challenges at this level as their peers, but that their experiences are complicated by their marginalized identities and influences advancement and job satisfaction (Massé et al., 2007). In addition, Massé et al.’s study (2007) points to the importance of mid-level professionals of color having an avenue to support students of color as well as having mentors and professional networks where they could be themselves and not alone. The participants in this study with marginalized identities had similar experiences, specifically as it relates to student interaction and professional networks. This was not only experienced by participants of color, however. Jeff, for example, is a first-generation college student and shared that his passion and heart is with working with first-generation students and low-income students. Other participants spoke about the importance of having networks, such as Antoine’s “Higher Ed Homies” or Isabella’s group chat with other female
administrators, in shaping their experiences and contributing to their belongingness in the field. Furthermore, existing literature indicates that career aspirations for mid-level professionals differ by gender with female participants indicating external responsibilities such as childcare or eldercare limiting their ability or interest in advancing or relocating (Belch & Strange, 1995; Massé et al., 2007). While this study included female participants and primary caregivers, there was no indication that career aspirations were partitioned based on gender or responsibility, thus additional research may be warranted.

\textit{Sense of Belonging’s Influence on Intention to Stay in Student Affairs}

The study’s participants talked candidly about their career aspirations and their intentions to stay or leave the field of student affairs. The literature suggests that for mid-level student affairs professionals, factors such as role ambiguity or conflict, role stress, and limited advancement opportunities influence attrition (Johnsrud et al., 2000; Rosser & Javinar, 2003). There was evidence that role ambiguity and stress played a role in the participants’ experiences. Existing research about student affairs attrition as a whole indicates that non-competitive salaries or a lack of compensation influences attrition (Marshall et al., 2016), and this was echoed in this study’s findings. Compensation was a consideration that participants discussed when talking about their intentions to stay or leave the field. The literature also indicates that a lack of advancement opportunities are a factor in mid-level professionals attrition (Belch & Strange, 1995; Johnsrud et al, 2000). In contrast to the literature, this study’s participants did not indicate that limited advancement opportunities at the mid-level were a consideration factor for leaving their institution or student affairs.
This study’s second research question addressed how the participants’ evaluation of belonging shaped their intention to stay at their institution or in the field. The study’s findings indicated that sense of belonging, whether it was experienced or lacking, did influence the intentions of many participants to stay at their institution and in the field of student affairs more broadly. In fact, Serena left the field of student affairs during the span of this study and shared that the “lack of belonging on this institutional level was absolutely a main motivating factor to leave.” The existing literature posits that mid-level student affairs professionals’ satisfaction and morale are connected to feeling supported in their careers and recognized and valued for their contributions (Donaldson & Rosser, 2007; Rosser, 2004; Rosser & Javinar, 2003). Not only does the perception of mattering and feeling valued influence student affairs professionals’ satisfaction and morale, but this study’s findings indicate that it influences belongingness and subsequently their intention to stay or leave the field of student affairs.

Who is Responsible for Creating Belonging and Where Does It Matter Most?

As participants discussed their experiences as mid-level student affairs professionals and ways that they have experienced belonging or exclusion, I could not help but wonder, who is responsible for creating belonging and where does it matter most? There was no conclusive finding in this study, however, it seemed significant to address and does indicate that additional research is warranted to explore this more broadly.

In several of my conversations with participants, they spoke about the role of their supervisor in creating an environment conducive to belongingness or not. For Aanya, her supportive boss did contribute to her feelings of mattering and belonging and her
institution. Isabella talked about the message sent by supervisors when they are noticeably absent or not making the time for supervisory conversations sharing, “How do you belong if no one is even remembering that you're there?” Antoine was aware of this and talked about being intentional around how he could make other people feel that they belong at his institution. Camille shared this sentiment, affirming that she belongs at her current institution and explaining, “I think that's because I work hard to. And I work hard to make sure my staff feels part of that.” The literature echoes the significance of supervision and previous studies (e.g., Rosser & Javiner, 2003; Tull, 2006) indicate that supervision plays a role in turnover intention.

Several participants including Diplomat, Jeff, and Rocco also spoke about the significance of onboarding as it relates to sense of belonging. This is consistent with the literature in acknowledging that sense of belonging can be particularly significant during times of transition (Schlossberg, 1989; Strayhorn, 2019). Rocco talked about this more at length, sharing that in his role he makes an effort to go beyond what is written in his job description to be involved in the hiring and onboarding process. For him, part of this is breaking down the hierarchies that exist within the organization and making mid-level and senior leaders accessible to new staff:

Because again, I remember back when I was an entry-level person, I was scared beyond belief to think that I can talk to somebody, you know, at a director level or higher. And it's really important to me that we try to remove that barrier as much as we can for that new person in our system.

Lastly, this study’s participants had different experiences as it relates to the role of professional organizations in supporting belonging within the field more broadly. Some
participants talked about professional organizations being a lifeline or, for Antoine for example, a home. However, two participants, Jeff and Camille, shared that they felt they have tried to get involved and engaged and have felt unseen or not acknowledged.

These varied experiences and responses led me again to wonder, who is responsible for creating belonging? Some of the participants described it as their responsibility to make themselves feel as those they belong. However, I challenge that notion. While an individual’s sense of belonging is their perception of feeling that they matter or are valued by their community, I do not think that as individuals we are solely responsible for creating that. There are various ways that we, as community members, can influence belonging. From hand written notes and flowers of support in times of tragedy, to attentive supervision and intentional onboarding, this study’s participants demonstrated tangible ways that help belongingness take shape which will be emphasized in discussing implications for practice. Ultimately, the questions of who is responsible for creating belonging and where it matters most remained unanswered, but warrant further exploration which will be outlined in the recommendations for future research.

Significance of the Study

This study makes an important contribution to the theory of sense of belonging as well as to the understanding the experiences of mid-level student affairs professionals through both the study’s design and findings.

Theoretical Significance

As discussed in the previous section, there is not a shared definition in the literature around the concept of sense of belonging, nor was there a common definition shared amongst this study’s participants. However, the findings suggest a refined
conceptualization of sense of belonging for mid-level student affairs professionals specifically. For the purposes of this current study, sense of belonging was defined as an individual’s perception of feeling valued by and mattering to a group or community (Hagerty et al., 1992; Strayhorn, 2019). This study found that a key component of sense of belonging for mid-level professionals was feeling trusted for their professional expertise and competence. This was demonstrated in multiple ways for participants such as being included on key committees or having ownership and agency in their area of expertise. As such, the data suggests that an expanded definition of sense of belonging at the mid-level is warranted and would include an individual’s perception of feeling trusted for their professional expertise by their colleagues. Thus, the findings of this study contribute to the theoretical understanding of sense of belonging through the conceptualization of a revised definition of belonging for mid-level professionals.

Contributions to Understanding Mid-level Student Affairs Professionals

The current study offers significant contributions to the understanding of mid-level student affairs professionals through both the study’s design and findings. This study contributes to the limited research about mid-level student affairs professionals from a qualitative, phenomenological perspective as the existing literature studying this population is primarily quantitative in nature. In addition, the findings contribute to better understanding both the mid-level role and the experiences in the middle.

As previously discussed, there is not a clear understanding of what it means to be a mid-level student affairs professional. For the purposes of this current study, a mid-level student affairs professional was defined as an individual who works within the Division of Student Affairs at their institution, does not serve as a senior student affairs
officer, and has at least five years of post-master’s professional experience or is a post-master’s professional serving as a director. Interestingly, the more experienced professionals who participated in this study discussed coming to terms with or accepting staying at the mid-level. Some participants also spoke about not wanting to move beyond their current role or title as it would take them away from work that they enjoy doing, such as interacting frequently with students. Knowing this, how can we perceive the mid-level differently for individuals who do not have aspirations towards senior-level leadership? Scholars and practitioners have advocated for a competency-based definition of mid-level staff (Adams-Dunford et al., 2019; Young Jr., 2007), however there is yet to be a shared consensus around the competencies that would define mid-level student affairs professionals. In addition to or in conjunction with shifting towards a competency-based model of mid-level professional, perhaps a different term that is not associated with expectations for climbing the proverbial career ladder would be appropriate at this level.

While sense of belonging has been used in the academy as an undergraduate student retention theory (Goodenow & Grady, 1993; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Schlossberg, 1989; Strayhorn, 2019) and to understand the role of belongingness during times of transition (Schlossberg, 1989; Strayhorn, 2019), the experiences of student affairs administrators had not previously been analyzed through the lens of belonging. Thus, the findings of this study are important as they provide an understanding of how mid-level student affairs professionals experience belonging, including their perceptions of mattering and feeling valued. Additionally, this study’s findings demonstrates that sense of belonging does influence the intention of some mid-level student affairs professionals to stay or leave the field of student affairs. As such, sense of belonging
could be a factor in mitigating attrition for mid-level professionals, however additional research is warranted and will be subsequently discussed. Lastly, the findings of this study support the literature that sense of belonging can be particularly important during times of transition (Schlossberg, 1989; Strayhorn, 2019). The influence of the COVID-19 pandemic on shaping this study’s participants’ professional experiences were clear and as higher education continues to adapt and transition navigating the pandemic, sense of belonging continues to be a useful lens in understanding and supporting staff during this transitional time. Ultimately, by better understanding how mid-level student affairs professionals experience belonging, there are implications for practice at the institutional level and, more broadly, in the field of student affairs which will be more fully discussed in a subsequent section.

Limitations of the Study

While this study’s design and findings provide important contributions to the field, it does have limitations. In terms of methodology, this study had two primary limitations. First, while there was broad outreach to recruit a diverse pool of participants, those who completed the screening questionnaire and subsequently responded affirmatively to participating in this research may not be representative of the racial and ethnic diversity in the field of student affairs more broadly. Additionally, phenomenological research relies upon collecting data from participants who have experienced the phenomenon during in-depth and multiple interviews (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The semi-structured interviews that I conducted during data collection were comprehensive and thorough and led to significant findings that uncovered the essences of the experience. Follow-up outreach was sent to many of the participants requesting
clarification following the initial conversation, although not all participants responded to
the follow-up request. It is possible that the time of year the initial outreach was made, at
the end of the academic year in May, impinged on the ability of interested participants to
engage in this research. Similarly, the time of year when the follow-up outreach was
made, in August before the start of the next academic year, could have been a factor in
some of the selected participants being unable to follow-up. Furthermore, following more
than a year of responding and adapting to COVID-19 in student affairs, eligible
participants may not have been motivated or interested in participating in this study at the
time of data collection in May 2021.

There were also limitations to the analysis in this current study. I am the sole
researcher and interpreter of the data. While I employed validation strategies including
engaging in reflexivity throughout, seeking participant feedback and clarification, and the
use of rich, detailed descriptions, the interpretive process in this hermeneutic
phenomenology is shaped by my own biases, experiences, identities, and assumptions
(Mobley Jr., 2019).

Lastly, this study has limits in terms of generalizability. This study was designed
to capture the essence of sense of belonging experienced by mid-level student affairs
professionals, not to achieve a generalizable result. However, this study attempts to have
user generalizability, whereas the findings of this qualitative study may be useful or
applicable to others in similar situations (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This will be discussed
at more length in the subsequent section, implications for practice.
Implications for Practice

This study highlights the importance of belongingness for mid-level student affairs professionals and the findings suggest improved practice for higher education administrators and the field of student affairs as a whole. Sense of belonging can and should be cultivated at an institutional level. Within the Division of Student Affairs, there are opportunities to signal or highlight the value of student affairs professionals through interventions such as a formalized onboarding process and acknowledgement of staff contributions and successes. These mechanisms could range in scope and size. Some of the interventions mentioned by this study’s participants as being meaningful included formalized staff awards or acknowledgements and making an effort to celebrate or remember significant life experiences for employees. Additionally, there may be an opportunity for intentional identity-based connections or communities which, in this study, helped some participants make meaning of their experiences at an institutional level and contributed to their belongingness. Special attention should be paid to the supervisory relationship with mid-level student affairs professionals as well. The findings of this study suggest that there are significant challenges at the mid-level and there may be value in naming these challenges and creating an open dialogue to address or process them. Furthermore, mid-level staff felt valued when they were trusted for their expertise and given opportunities such as serving on committees. Thus, emphasis should be placed on recognizing and honoring administrators’ professional competence and experience while continuing to provide and support professional opportunities. At an institutional level, senior student affairs officers, such as the Dean of Students, have a strategic opportunity to invest resources including time and money to encourage and cultivate
belongingness among their supervisees and within their units. Lastly, there is an opportunity to better understand staff attrition or turnover as it relates to belonging and an effort could be made to better assess and track that through employee exit interviews.

The findings of this study highlight opportunities for the field of student affairs more broadly. First, a more consistent and clear definition of a mid-level student affairs professional is warranted. More recently, scholars and practitioners have advocated for a competency-based definition of mid-level that expands beyond hierarchy or years of experience (Adams-Dunford et al., 2019; Young Jr., 2007) and this study’s findings support that. Additionally, professional organizations like NASPA, Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education or ACPA—College Student Educators International, play a role in supporting sense of belonging for student affairs professionals and the potential to influence professionals’ intentions to stay or leave the field. Professional organizations should continue to create avenues and opportunities for engagement, with specific attention paid to convening mid-level administrators in particular, such as the ACPA Mid-Level Community of Practice. Lastly, these professional organizations play a role in the scholarship and research around student affairs professionals, thus they should advocate and support more research as it relates to mid-level student affairs professionals, attrition, and sense of belonging. Recommendations for future research will be explored in detail in the following section.

Recommendations for Future Research

While this phenomenological study provides important insight into the experiences of sense of belonging for mid-level student affairs professionals, more research is warranted to better understand this population and to better understand the
influence of belonging. First, there is not a clear or consistent definition of sense of belonging and additional scholarship is important to clarify and better define the concept of sense of belonging. Similarly, there is not a clear understanding of what it means to be a mid-level student affairs professional and, as previously discussed, a more expansive or nuanced definition is needed.

Additional research is warranted to understand student affairs professionals’ sense of belonging and to address the questions previously raised of who is responsible for creating belonging and where it matters most. This study explored, specifically, the experiences of mid-level student affairs professionals through a qualitative, phenomenological methodology. A quantitative assessment of student affairs professionals’ sense of belonging could add value by surveying a larger population and help to increase the generalizability of findings. Furthermore, a quantitative study would provide opportunities to explore trends or patterns based on institutional-level information such as institution type or size. Similarly, research about belonging at various career stages such as new professionals, senior student affairs officers, or during a job transition or promotion, could help uncover the role of belongingness throughout the student affairs lifecycle. While this study analyzed the experiences of student affairs professionals exclusively, it is likely that sense of belonging influences the experiences of staff in other functional areas in higher education such as enrollment management or alumni affairs, however additional research is required to draw this conclusion and understand the distinctive experiences in other units. Lastly, further research that more directly explores the influence of sense of belonging on staff attrition and retention is warranted. While the findings of this study indicate that sense of belonging influences
intention to stay or leave the field, it was outside of the scope of this study to determine the impact of belonging on retention.

Reflection

This research was deeply meaningful and purposeful for me as a scholar and practitioner. Reflexivity has been embedded throughout this hermeneutic phenomenological study, as my background and experiences as the researcher undoubtedly played a role in my understanding of the phenomenon (Van Manan, 1990). I approached this study with a hunch that belongingness does, indeed, matter to the experiences of student affairs professionals, knowing that it certainly has for me. I also wondered if sense of belonging would have an influence on intention to stay or leave the field, similar to the application of sense of belonging in student retention theory. So much of what the participants shared resonated deeply with me. From their stories about why they got into the field, to the challenges that they faced as mid-level professionals, I could empathize and relate. Speaking with this study’s participants about their experiences of belonging on a deeply personal level, I could connect with both their genuine joy and appreciation for feeling seen and valued and their disappointment and disillusionment when this fundamental need was not satisfied. I too have experienced belongingness professionally in concrete ways including working with a supervisor who challenged and supported me, being acknowledged for my competence and expertise, and being encouraged by others, including this study’s participants, during this doctoral journey. In contrast, I have also felt that I don’t belong in student affairs at an institutional and broader level and this has made me question if this is the long-term field for me.
Considering the findings of this study, I am more motivated than ever to continue to create environments and spaces where people feel that they matter and that they belong. I acknowledge that this is not a linear path and that feeling valued looks differently from individual to individual, as evidenced by the study’s findings that belongingness was experienced by many, but in different ways. However, I believe that this work is critical, not only to retain professionals in the field, but to fulfill a fundamental human need for relationships, community, and connection. Like many of this study’s participants, I got into the field of student affairs to help and develop others, and I believe that working towards belongingness is both a responsibility and privilege in my work.

Summary

Mid-level student affairs professionals, the “unsung professionals of the academy” (Rosser, 2004), play a significant role in advancing institutional mission, supporting campus operations, and contributing to student learning and development. While they are valuable campus administrators, their roles are complex and challenging. This hermeneutic phenomenological study explored and described how mid-level student affairs professionals experience belonging. Sense of belonging, a phenomenon with cognitive, affective, and behavioral responses, is attuned to the perception of feeling valued or mattered by others. While the experience of belonging for mid-level student affairs professionals is varied, and not always linear, the essence of the phenomenon speaks to the role of relationships, being trusted for professional expertise and competence, and feeling supported by others. Salient identities, especially marginalized identities, can shape experiences of belonging as can professional networks or
associations outside of institutional experiences. This current study describes not only the phenomenon of sense of belonging for mid-level student affairs professionals, but the influence of belongingness on professionals’ intentions to stay or leave their institutions and field of student affairs more broadly. The findings of this study suggest that belongingness matters and that it is impermanent. For many of the participants in this study, their commitment to developing and serving students and staff have helped them remain committed to the field of student affairs, even when belonging was lacking. However, one participant’s intention to leave the field, which was influenced by a lack of sense of belonging, had already resulted in her departure by the time this study concluded. Colleges and universities, and the field of student affairs more broadly, must make an investment in and commitment to supporting and cultivating sense of belonging for student affairs professionals as it does, indeed, matter.
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APPENDIX A

RECRUITMENT EMAIL – LISTSERV

Greetings,

My name is Deanne DeCrescenzo and I am a graduate student at Temple University’s College of Education and Human Development. I am seeking participants for a qualitative research study that explores the role of sense of belonging in mid-level student affairs professionals’ experiences.

Mid-level student affairs professionals represent an important group of educators whose work and leadership are critical, yet often overlooked, in advancing institutional mission. By participating in this study, your experiences will contribute to an area that has been underexplored in the literature.

Participants will be asked to complete up to two 60-90 minute interview(s) via Zoom, complete a shorter follow-up interview (if needed), provide a resume/vita for document analysis, and may choose to review their interview transcript(s) for accuracy (total time: 2-3 hours). With permission, the interview(s) will be recorded. Participation in this study is completely voluntary and participants may choose to withdraw at any time without repercussion.

I hope that you will consider joining me in this research. If you are interested in participating, please complete this brief screening questionnaire and you will be contacted by me to learn more about the study and determine participation.

Thank you for your consideration,
Deanne DeCrescenzo
Ed.D. candidate, Higher Education Administration
Temple University
deanne@temple.edu
APPENDIX B

RECRUITMENT EMAIL – COLLEAGUE REFERRAL

Dear colleagues and friends,

As many of you know, I am a student in the Higher Education doctoral program in the College of Education and Human Development at Temple University. I am excited to share that I have received IRB approval to conduct a qualitative study titled “Understanding Mid-Level Student Affairs Professionals' Experiences through Belonging”. I am seeking participants who currently work in the Division of Student Affairs at their institution and identify as a mid-level professional (5+ years post-master’s experience or post-master’s serving as a director). If you are willing to do so, I would love your assistance in recruiting participants for my doctoral study by sharing this blurb within your networks.

Are you a mid-level student affairs professional? Please consider participating in a doctoral research study that explores the role of sense of belonging in mid-level student affairs professionals’ experiences. By participating in this study, your experiences will contribute to an area that has been underexplored in the literature. Participants will be asked to complete interviews via Zoom at the end of May/early June and provide their resume or CV for document analysis (total time: 2-3 hours). If you are interested in participating, please complete this brief screening questionnaire. Feel free to share with others who may qualify. Questions about this research? Contact the student investigator, Deanne DeCrescenzo, Ed.D. candidate of Higher Education at Temple University, at deanne.decrescenzo@temple.edu.

Thank you in advance for your support of this research!
With gratitude,
Deanne

Deanne DeCrescenzo
Ed.D. candidate, Higher Education Administration
Temple University
deanne@temple.edu
Are you a mid-level student affairs professional? Seeking participants for a research study.

The purpose of this study is to understand the role of sense of belonging in mid-level student affairs professionals’ experiences.

Participation criteria:
- Mid-level professional (5+ years post-master's experience or post-master's serving as a director)
- Currently working in the Division of Student Affairs at your institution

Participants will be asked to complete interviews via Zoom and provide their resume or CV for document analysis (total time: 2-3 hours).

Interested? Complete this brief screening questionnaire.

Questions about this research? Contact the student investigator:
Deanne DeCrescenzo, Ed.D. candidate
Higher Education Administration
Temple University
deanne.decrescenzo@temple.edu

Feel free to share with others who may qualify.
APPENDIX D
PARTICIPANT SCREENING SURVEY

Understanding Mid-Level Student Affairs Professionals’ Experiences through Belonging

This research project explores the role of sense of belonging in mid-level student affairs professionals’ experiences. Your experience and insight will contribute to an area that has been underexplored in the literature.

If you are interested in participating in this study, please share your name and email address. The additional information you provide will verify your eligibility for this project. If you are a fit for the study, you will be contacted by the researcher to confirm your interest in participating, review the consent form, and request that you submit your curriculum vitae or resume for document analysis. The researcher will also be able to answer any questions you may have at that time.

If you have any questions, please contact the researcher, Deanne DeCrescenzo, at deanne.decrescenzo@temple.edu.

First name

Last name

Email address

How many years have you worked as a student affairs professional?

Do you have a master’s degree?

☐ Yes

☐ No
What is the name of the institution where you are currently employed?

What best matches your current institution type?
- Public, 4-year with enrollment over 20,000
- Public, 4-year with enrollment under 20,000
- Private, 4-year
- Community or Technical College
- For-profit
- Other

What is your current title?

Is your current role at your institution within the Division of Student Affairs?
- Yes
- No

Would you consider yourself the primary caregiver for someone else (e.g. children, parent, friend)?
- Yes
- No

What functional area do you currently work in?
- Admissions
- Campus activities
- Career services
- Civic learning and democratic engagement
- Clinical health programs
- College unions
- Community service/Service-learning
- Commuter student services
- Counseling services
- Disability support services
- Enrollment management
- Greek affairs
- International student services
- LGBTQ student services
- Multicultural services
- Nontraditional-student services
- On-campus housing
- Orientation
- Recreational sports
- Spirituality, spiritual life, campus ministry
- Student affairs assessment
- Student affairs research and evaluation
- Student conduct/Academic integrity
- Student conduct/Case management
- Student media
- Veterans’ services
- Wellness programs
- Other

What is your gender identification?
- Agender
- Gender queer or non-binary
- Man
- Other
- Transgender
- Woman
- Prefer to self-describe
Understanding Mid-Level Student Affairs Professionals’ Experiences through Belonging

Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey. If you are a fit for the study, you will be contacted by the researcher to confirm your interest in participating.

This research has been reviewed and approved by an Institutional Review Board. Participants will be asked to complete up to two 60-90 minute interview(s) via Zoom, complete a shorter follow-up interview (if needed), provide a resume/vita for document analysis, and may choose to review their interview transcript(s) for accuracy. With your permission, the interview(s) will be recorded. Participation in this study is completely voluntary and participants may choose to withdraw at any time without repercussion. Initial interviews will be scheduled in May.

If you have any questions, please contact the researcher, Deanne DeCrescenzo, at deanne.decrescenzo@temple.edu.
APPENDIX E

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Thank you so much for making the time to speak with me today. This interview is for a study I’m doing which is trying to better understand the experiences of mid-level student affairs professionals, specifically as it relates to sense of belonging. I’d like to talk to you today about your personal experiences. To confirm, is it okay if I record this conversation? Thank you!

I’m going to ask you a handful of questions and I’d like you to think about your experiences not only in your current role, but across your career as a student affairs professional.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Why did you initially choose the field of student affairs?</th>
<th>Mid-level experiences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tell me about your experience as a mid-level student affairs professional.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● What aspects of your position do you enjoy?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● What aspects of your position do you not enjoy or find challenging?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*If not explicitly mentioned:*  
How has COVID-19 influenced what you enjoy or find challenging about being a mid-level student affairs professional?

*If not explicitly mentioned:*  
You indicated on your questionnaire that you are the primary caregiver for someone. Can you tell me more about that?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Have you ever considered leaving the field of student affairs? If so, what keeps you in the field?</th>
<th>Intention to leave</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What words come to mind when you think of sense of belonging? Based on that, how would you define sense of belonging?</td>
<td>Sense of belonging phenomenon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can you tell me about a time when you felt a sense of belonging? Have you ever experienced this in your professional life?</td>
<td>Sense of belonging phenomenon</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Now I’d like you to think about your experiences in your current role at your institution.

| Tell me about the Division of Student Affairs at ____________ | Sense of belonging phenomenon |
There’s not a lot of literature that explores the connection between privileged or marginalized identities and sense of belonging. I’d like to talk to you a little bit more about that.

- Which identities are salient to you?
- How do those identities shape your sense of belonging at your institution?

*If not explicitly mentioned:*
Has your identity as a caregiver shaped your sense of belonging?

Have your feelings about the Division of Student Affairs changed at all due to COVID-19?

*If not explicitly mentioned:*
How has your involvement in professional organizations (e.g. ACPA, NASPA) shaped your sense of belonging in the field?

Given all the things that we’ve discussed, how does your evaluation of your sense of belonging at your institution influence your intention to stay at your institution or in the field of student affairs more broadly?

This was really helpful to better understand how you’ve experienced belonging (or not) in your current role. Those are all the questions that I have today. Is there anything that I didn’t ask you about that you think would be important for me to know?

Thank you so much for your willingness to share not only your time, but your experiences with me. Once I transcribe the interview, I will share a copy with you. Please feel free to add or clarify anything if you would like to. To protect your privacy, I will be
assigning pseudonyms to the participants when reporting data from this project. Do you have a preferred pseudonym that I can use?

Would you be open to me contacting you again for a follow-up interview or with any clarifying questions? Thank you! I can’t thank you enough for your participation in this study.
APPENDIX F

NASPA REGIONAL CLASSIFICATION

NASPA Regions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region number</th>
<th>States and districts within region</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Region I</td>
<td>CT, ME, MA, NH, RI, VT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Region II</td>
<td>NY, PA, WV, DE, NJ, MD, Washington D.C.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Region III</td>
<td>AL, FL, GA, KY, LA, MS, NC, SC, TN, TX, VA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Region IV-E</td>
<td>IL, IN, IA, MI, MN, OH, WI</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Region IV-W</td>
<td>NM, CO, WY, ND, SD, NE, KS, OK, MO, AR</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Region V</td>
<td>UT, AK, ID, OR, NV, MT, WA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Region VI</td>
<td>Northern California, Southern California, Arizona, Hawai‘i</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>