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Attrition from Student Affairs: Perspectives from Those Who Exited the Profession

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Attrition of student affairs professionals is an issue of concern for the profession. This mixed methods study highlights reasons why participants left their student affairs careers. Seven general themes emerged from the study, including burnout, salary issues, career alternatives, work/family conflict, limited advancement, supervisor issues and institutional fit, and loss of passion. Challenges faced by those who chose to leave are presented with implications for practitioners and future research.

Attrition from the student affairs profession continues to be a subject of interest (Renn & Jessup-Anger, 2008), predominantly because 50–60% of student affairs professionals leave the field within first five years (Lorden, 1998; Tull, 2006). Student affairs professionals play an instrumental role on campus operationally and also in terms of their significant influence on college student growth and development. Employee turnover, as such, is an important issue, especially for higher education institutions struggling with declining fiscal resources and calls for increased accountability (Anderson, Guido-Dibrito, & Morrell, 2000; Montgomery & Lewis, 1996; Sagaria & Johnsrud, 1988). Despite these professionals' goal commitment, loyalty, and dedication, attrition from the field continues to increase (Rosser & Javinar, 2003).

The expenditures associated with employee turnover, such as recruiting, hiring, and training during a transition, are but a few of the costs associated with attrition. Additional costs are incurred because "units lose efficiency, consistency, and quality in the delivery of services, as well as the investment made in the knowledge base of the institutions or unit" (Rosser & Javinar, 2003, p. 825). High levels of attrition can cost the organization significant time and money and often impact institutional and departmental productivity due to challenges such as the time training new professionals who fill the holes in personnel as a result of attrition takes or the additional tasks that must be taken on by other employees after the loss of a co-worker (Allen,

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Bryant, & Vardaman, 2010). In addition to losing qualified newcomers, the loss of experienced student affairs personnel impacts the department and its mission to provide high quality assistance to students and also the divisional, campus, and professional morale (Boehman, 2007; Lorden, 1998). Attracting and retaining qualified professionals is important to the implementation of positive learning environments that promote student learning and development (Davidson, 2012). The financial and productivity losses experienced during employee transitions are significant and may disrupt the creation and sustainability of a positive and productive campus culture. This study seeks to provide increased insight into the reasons that underlie attrition in an effort to reduce the financial and organizational costs incurred when student affairs professionals leave the field. Such information is significant in that large numbers of professionals leaving the field early in their career may signal a need for better developed orientation and professional development programs that address the reasons for leaving verses other strategies targeted at more seasoned professionals.

Past research conducted through surveys of current student affairs professionals on the issue of attrition focused on their "intent to leave" the field. While intent to leave may be an apt indicator of future attrition (Rosser & Javinar, 2003; Silver & Jakeman, 2014), our study focused on the reasons professionals actually left the student affairs field. Collected data support and negate some of this earlier literature and qualitative findings add depth to understanding the challenges currently facing student affairs professionals. Increased understanding of those challenges may assist leaders in developing orientation and professional development programs designed to assuage some of the issues that contribute to attrition in the field. Findings from this study may be used when working to create a culture of professional flexibility and transformation versus traditional models that often provide limited options for professionals facing the challenges discussed in the literature review.

Review of Literature

Three decades of research indicate that student affairs professionals leave the profession due to overall job dissatisfaction (Berwick, 1992; Conley, 2001), work environment issues (Anderson et al., 2000; Boehman, 2007; Rosser & Javinar, 2003), declining morale (Rosser, 2004), and negative transitions from graduate school to professional life (Cilente et al., 2006). In these studies, job dissatisfaction was identified as "role ambiguity, role conflict, role orientation, role stress, job burnout, work overload, and perceived opportunities for goal attainment, professional development, and career advancement" (Tull, 2006, p. 465). Work environment issues included absence of professional development opportunities and lack of mentoring (Bender, 1980; Renn & Jessup-Anger, 2008), inadequate opportunity for advancement, incompatibility with one's supervisor, and high levels of role ambiguity (Blackhurst, Brandt, & Kalinowski, 1998; Rosser, 2004). Other studies cited lack of adequate supervision or a supervisor who could adequately socialize the new professional into the profession. Effective supervision is a key factor in new professional satisfaction (Cilente et al., 2006; Frank, 2013; Tull, 2009; Tull, Hirt, & Saunders, 2009). Other work-related issues included long hours, low pay, and limited career advancement options (Barr, 1990; Belch & Strange, 1995; Carpenter, 1990; Casey, 1995; Philipson, 2002). Limited involvement in institutional governance and decision making (Henkin & Persson, 1992; Rosser, 2004) and a potential disconnect between individual values and institutional mission and goals were also identified as reasons for attrition (Boehman, 2007; Rosser & Javinar, 2003). Lastly, other studies document limited opportunities for advancement as the impetus to leave the field (Clinte et al., 2006; Evans, 1988; Tull, 2006).

Given the wide range of factors contributing to attrition, some scholars focused on particular groups of student affairs professionals in order to gain a better understanding of who and what was affected. Within this 30-year span of literature, new professionals and mid-level/mid-career professionals were more likely to leave.

New Professionals

The student affairs workforce is estimated to be 15–20% of new professionals (Renn & Jessup-Anger, 2008), who are identified as having between zero and five years of full-time professional experience (Clinte et al., 2006). New professionals leave the field for a number of reasons including supervision issues, lack or perceived lack of mentoring, inadequate professional development, and unrealistic expectations set in graduate preparation programs. Renn and Jessup-Anger (2008) suggested limited knowledge of institutional culture and lack of "fit" may detract from the professional experience and lead to increased attrition. Hancock (1988) speculated that some leave the field after graduate school because they never intended to pursue a long-term career in student affairs. Lorden (1998) found obtaining a student affairs master's degree allowed individuals to gain a broad-based skill set that transfers to other professions. Others argue, given the changing concept of long-term employment and Americans change jobs an average of seven times throughout their careers (Jo, 2008), the rate of departure may just be "endemic" within the field and should be accepted as inevitable (Frank, 2013). Others, however, argue the departure of professionals represents a loss of talent and training in the profession and is detrimental to organizational growth and effectiveness (Evans, 1988; Renn & Jessup-Anger, 2008; Tull, 2006).

Mid-Career Professionals

Johnsrud's (1996) research on mid-career administrators and faculty identified limited recognition for contributions and competency and decreased opportunity for advancement, which can stifle autonomy and growth as reasons for leaving the profession. In their study, Rosser and Javinar (2003) identified role ambiguity, supervision, professional development, low pay, and limited career advancement opportunities as concerns for mid-level professionals. Rosser (2004) identified middle managers' need for recognition and overall job satisfaction, which, when not experienced, can increase feelings of discontent and lead to higher attrition rates.

While decades of research provide information and some understanding about factors contributing to student affairs attrition, previous research on this topic does not give "voice" to those who left the field. Such lack of voice limits understanding of the deeper reasons behind attrition and may contribute to misperceptions and incorrect assumptions about the factors contributing to the decision to leave. This mixed-methods study provides an examination of current attrition rates augmented with the voices student affairs professionals who left the field. These qualitative responses convey depth and insight about this issue on the reasons student affairs professionals leave their positions and help to present a more complete understanding of current attrition issues. The purpose of this study was to ascertain the specific factors contributing to the departure of student affairs professionals from the field within the past 10 years and to better understand their reasons for departure.

Method

Instrument

A mixed-methods approach, using an online survey of quantitative and qualitative questions, was employed. The survey included 6 open-ended questions, 24 likert-type scale questions, and 32 descriptive questions. Sample open-ended questions included, "In your own words, why did you leave student affairs?," "Was there anything that could be done to keep you in the student affairs profession?," and "Have you ever considered returning and why?"

Likert-type scale questions were grounded in the attrition literature and explored variables such as job satisfaction, supervision, institutional fit, potential for advancement, burnout, stress, and loyalty to the profession. Sample descriptive areas included: demographic information (age, ethnicity, gender, relationship status, etc.) salary, education level, institutional type, and type of student affairs position last held before leaving the field.

Guided by purposeful sampling (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2014; Patton, 2002), we sought participants who left full-time employment within the student affairs field within the past 10 years. Snowball sampling, or purposeful sampling, focused on finding information-rich participants and enabled the collection of potential participant names and contact information (Creswell, 2007; Patton, 2002). Patton (2002) described this sampling process as one that begins with the questions, "'Who knows a lot about ____?' 'Whom should I talk to?'" (p. 237). Asking for suggestions from others regarding whom to ask to participate in a study results in the "snowball" getting bigger and bigger as people make more and more suggestions for participants who may have experienced the phenomena studied.

Invitations to participate and/or to recommend potential participants were distributed through the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators and American College Personnel Association listservs and newsletters. Effort was made to notify professionals of the study with the idea they would then share the information with colleagues who left the field. One hundred and ninety-one participants were invited to complete the survey, which resulted in 168 participants who met the criteria for the study. Of the 168 participants, 153 responded to the survey, resulting in a response rate of 91%.

Data Analysis

The quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics. While descriptive statistics inform this article, the primary focus is on presenting the qualitative data. The open-ended survey question responses were coded using axial and selective coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Coding categories were not predetermined and the researchers examined themes that emerged from the data. We analyzed the qualitative data using the constant comparative approach (Charmaz, 2005, 2006). Peer debriefing probed potential biases, questioned unexplored meanings, and clarified the interpretations of the data collected to ensure the trustworthiness of the study (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Each researcher examined the open-ended responses independently and then compared emerging themes. Themes were adjusted and common definitions identified.

Limitations of the Study

Several constraints existed for this study. First, studying a group of individuals who were difficult to identify and contact resulted in a convenience sample. Another possible limitation concerns the accounts participants supplied regarding why they left the field. Despite the

Table 1.

Self-Identified Characteristics of Participants Upon Departure from Student Affairs (n = 153)

Characteristic	Number of Participants	Percentage of Participant Total
Gender		
Male	31	20.3
Female	122	79.7
Ethnicity		
Caucasian	137	89.5
African American	6	3.9
Asian American	5	3.3
Hispanic/Latino	4	2.6
Multiracial	1	.7
Age		
20–29	60	38.9
30–34	55	36.2
35–39	24	15.8
40–44	6	3.9
45 or older	8	5.2
Relationship Status		
Single	36	23.5
Married	91	59.5
Divorced/Separated	3	2.0
Domestic Partnership	17	11.1
Other	6	3.9
Number of Children		
0	83	54.2
1	27	17.6
2	35	22.9
3	5	3.3
4 or more	3	2.0
Highest Degree Earned		
Bachelors	1	0.7
Master's	123	80.3
Doctorate	22	14.4
Other	7	4.6
Field Study for Highest Degree		
Student Affairs	65	42.5
Higher Education	63	41.2
Counseling	12	7.8
Business	3	2.0

Table 1.

(**Continued**)

Characteristic	Number of Participants	Percentage of Participant Total
Law	3	2.0
Other	7	4.5
Division of Student Affairs of Last Position		
Residence Life	53	34.5
Career Development	21	13.8
General Student Affairs	19	12.4
Student Affairs Leadership		
(dean, vice president, etc.)	16	10.5
Student Activities	16	10.5
Other	12	7.8
Orientation/New Student Programs	5	3.3
Union Management	4	2.6
Academic Advising	4	2.6
Minority Student Services	2	1.3
Student Discipline	1	0.7
Years in Student Affairs		
Less than one	7	4.6
1–5	64	41.7
6–7	17	11.1
8–10	33	21.7
11–15	19	12.4
15 or more	13	8.5
Student Affairs Position/Level		
New Professional	42	27.5
Middle Manager	88	57.4
Senior Administrator	18	11.8
Other	5	3.3

potential for memory error and the fact that overall disenchantment with the field could affect the accuracy of the accounts, general attitudes and factual information are stable over time (Riessman, 1994). We recognize those who left the field did so because student affairs was not meeting their personal or professional needs. Possibly, in order to justify their decisions to leave, participants over-emphasized their dissatisfaction and unhappiness.

Sample Characteristics

Descriptive statistics and frequencies were run to determine the characteristics of the sample derived from the snowball sampling procedure (see Table 1). Seventy nine percent (n = 122) of the participants were female and 21% (n = 31) were male. The largest number of participants self-identified as Caucasian. In total, 75% of the participants left the field before the age of 35. In

addition, 59% of the participants identified as married, and 44% had children. Eighty percent held master's degrees and 14% held doctoral degrees, with 84% earning these degrees in either student affairs or higher education administration.

Descriptive data revealed that 28% of participants identified themselves as new professionals, 57% as middle managers, and 12% as senior administrators at their time of departure. Thirty-five percent of the sample was employed in housing and residence life when they left student affairs.

Results

Results of the study indicated a majority (41.7%) of participants spent between one to five years in the field before leaving and was followed by 21.7% of participants who left the field after 8–10 years. When combined, over 60 % of participants left the student affairs field in 10 years or less of starting as new professionals.

Participants were instructed to indicate any and all of the reasons they chose to leave the student affairs field. Participants' reasons for leaving centered around seven general themes. Stress and burnout were the factors most frequently mentioned for leaving, followed by non-competitive salary, attractive career alternatives, and the evening and weekend responsibilities in student affairs. Table 2 provides frequencies for the themes by the number of participants' responses in each theme and the corresponding percentage of the total participant responses for each theme.

Excessive Hours and Burnout

Similar to the literature, burnout, long hours, and stressful conditions influenced attrition of those in this study (Barr, 1990; Carpenter, 1990; Forney, Wallace-Schutzman, & Wiggers, 1982; Guthrie, Woods, Cusker, & Gregory, 2005). Participants reported extreme work obligations, which lead to burnout, fatigue, and eventual departure from the field. Burnout is the "state of fatigue and frustration arising from unrealistic, excessive demands on personal resources leading to physical and mental exhaustion" (Guthrie et al., 2005, p. 111). Burnout and exhaustion were well documented, as only 52% felt they had enough time to complete their work, 51% felt the hours they worked were excessive, and 70% reported excessive weekend and evening work-related commitments. The intense number of hours led to stress, burnout, and work–family conflicts.

Table 2.

Themes Identified in Reasons for Departure from Student Affairs

Attrition Theme	Frequency	Percentage
Extreme hours leading to burnout	79	52
Non-competitive salaries	74	48
Attractive career alternatives	65	42
Work/life conflict	52	34
Limited advancement	49	32
Role of supervisor and institutional fit	42	27
Lack of challenge/loss of passion	35	23

Volkwein and Zhou (2003) found that compared to other areas within higher education, those in student affairs reported the highest level of job stress and pressure.

Commenting on their experiences in the field, 53% of participants felt their levels of burnout were high, and 63% said their stress levels were high. As one participant shared, her reasons for leaving related to the excessive hours, burnout, and salary:

> After 15 years, I needed something different.... student affairs sucks the life out of a person. I put myself out there and gave and gave and gave. Student affairs took and took and took.... When I went into training in a corporation, my salary doubled and the hours I had to work decreased. I still work very hard, but I don't work every day and evenings. I don't have meetings starting at 10 p.m. There's very little quality of life and few role models in student affairs. I was exhausted.

Some participants were quick to note even though their hours were more manageable outside of student affairs, they still worked very hard. In some cases, they worked more hours than in student affairs. The difference was they felt properly compensated for their time. The hours worked were not in direct conflict with their personal goals. One participant commented he worked more hours during the week but had every weekend free to be with his children.

Non-Competitive Salaries Leading to Alternative Career Options

The majority of participants commented on inadequate student affairs salaries. When they left the field, only 28% of participants were satisfied with their salaries. Many commented on how despite their advanced degrees, their salaries were not congruent with their educational levels. Others left the field because they did not earn enough money to maintain a minimum standard of living. As one participant stated:

> I was dissatisfied with my salary because I wanted to own my own home. I was only earning half of what is needed to own a home in my area. Second, somebody from the private sector recruited me into a research job. They offered me double what I was earning in student affairs. The notion of doubling my paycheck overnight was too tempting to pass. Seven years later, I've now met my financial goals. By moving to the private sector, my salary has now grown to over three times of what I made in student affairs.

Attractive Career Alternatives

As speculated by Lorden (1998), "despite the bleak rhetoric often used in discussing attrition in student affairs, workers may not leave the field because of dissatisfaction, frustration, or disillusionment—they simply may be pursuing other attractive career paths" (p. 209). This trend was reflected by some participants (n = 65) who left the field because of attractive career alternatives. As one participant explained:

> I had an opportunity to move into a challenging opportunity in the business world that would allow me to build new skills, receive a better salary, have more opportunities for advancement, and have MANY FEWER (almost NONE!) weekend and evening commitments.

Of those who availed themselves of attractive career alternatives, most were satisfied with their positions in student affairs, but a better opportunity had presented itself. These participants were not necessarily dissatisfied with their position in student affairs; they simply found more attractive employment alternatives.

Work–Life Conflict

Work–life conflict or perceived imbalance between personal and professional needs was another theme that emerged. In their last position, 59% of participants did not feel they had enough time to spend with friends and family. Sixty-nine percent felt they did not have balance between their personal and professional demands. Twelve percent decided to leave the profession to stay at home to care for children. The demands of their student affairs positions did not allow them to be attentive to their children.

One participant, who was a mother, commented that although she would have preferred to remain in student affairs, she perceived little support as she explored flexible work schedules or other career accommodations. Rather than consider ways to align her current position to meet her personal and professional needs, the perceived lack of flexibility by the institution and her supervisor left her no choice but to leave the field.

> I didn't feel I could do the job well and be a good mother/wife/friend/daughter, etc. The demands did not allow for me to have the quality of family life that I wanted. Furthermore, my institution was reluctant to consider creative employment alternatives such as job sharing, flextime, etc.

Another participant reported, due to excessive work demands, his personal life suffered. His level of satisfaction declined, and when he examined his priorities, he chose the needs of his family over the stressors of student affairs.

> I loved my position but I was working every day of the week and had late work nights (midnight– 2:00 a.m. everyday). I had no balance of personal and professional life. My life was totally focused on work. I wanted to have a family of my own and live closer to my family and friends to have more of a balanced life. My student affairs position required me to devote almost all of my time to events and students.

Though this theme is illustrated through two quotes, the majority of participants commented about the lack of work–life balance when they worked in student affairs. This finding has serious implications for the field. The culture of student affairs dictates long hours. Student affairs professionals are expected to sacrifice personal time to put students' needs first. This unhealthy expectation can result in burnout, work–life conflicts, and eventual departure from the field.

Limited Opportunities

The literature confirmed our finding that limited opportunities to advance due to geographic restrictions also motivated participants to leave the field (Clinente et al., 2006; Rosser & Javinar, 2003). Prominent among these restrictions was the fact that some participants were unable to secure employment in the field after a spouse's or partner's relocation:

> My wife and I relocated for her career. I was at a point in my career where I was ready for a director of residence life position and the opportunities just have not been there. It was a difficult time in my career to look for a new position as I was too qualified for many mid-management positions but other higher level opportunities were not available. I am very disappointed it worked out this way and a little bitter that all the hard work I gave for 11 years ended up getting me nowhere.

Only 40% of participants, reflecting on their time in the field, saw any possibility for advancement within their institution. Since they were restricted to a geographic region, these professionals had limited opportunities for advancement and had no choice but to leave the field. As one participant stated:

> I was bored with residential life and could not easily identify another area of student affairs that interested me. I live in a small area with few schools and did not wish to relocate. Although I attempted to secure other positions (at a higher level) in student affairs at the same school as my final position, I was not selected.

This circumstance is often a reality within student affairs. As one advances toward senior-level positions, the number of hiring opportunities decline. That limited opportunity for advancement is one of the top reasons cited for leaving the profession is not surprising (Evans, 1988). If one is unable to relocate or has limited ability to move, the reality of advancing within a single institution is limited.

The majority of participants—57%—identified they were middle managers when they left the field. Given the limited number of senior-level positions, it is not surprising that those in middle management sought non-student affairs careers rather than compete for fewer positions (Carpenter, Guido-DiBrito, & Kelly, 1987). Middle managers are often at the midpoint in their careers. Fifty-two percent of survey participants were between the ages of 30–39 years old, which are often years when adults make key decisions about their personal lives including long-term relationships, children, and their financial futures and when many decide whether or not a career in student affairs will best meet their personal and professional needs.

Role of the Supervisor and Institutional Fit

Another key theme that emerged from the data was incompatibility with supervisors. Echoing the findings of Creamer and Winston (2002) and Tull (2006), a principle factor influencing attrition was the perceived lack of effective supervision.

Boehman (2007) asserted that a supportive work environment leads to affective attachment among student affairs professionals. This situation includes supportive and challenging supervisors in addition to recognition of work/non-work–life balance, empowerment, valuing of professionals, open communication, adequate pay and promotion. Tull (2006) asserted, synergistic supervision and style directly impact a professional's intent to leave.

Many participants commented on ineffective supervision as a reason for leaving the field and others discussed the larger organizational culture issues at their institutions that eventually led to their departure. Responding to survey questions regarding workplace culture, 69% of participants reported that they appreciated their coworkers, but 42% did not appreciate their supervisors. The following comment illustrates how employees were undervalued by their supervisors:

> My supervisor did not value the work I was doing nor did she support the student life area. There was incredible strain in our relationship and I felt as though my hands were tied in trying to do my job. This led to high levels of stress and probably burnout.

Others had difficulty respecting their supervisors and the decisions made.

> A combination of factors created the "perfect storm"—a supervisor who made decisions that benefited him and not the students; a supervisor who left the difficult decisions to me (with the understanding of what he expected me to do) so that I would be the one liable if there were problems; and constantly being on call. Had my supervisor changed, I would have stayed. However, I did not feel supported by him in this challenging position.

The role of a supervisor is important within any organization and may impact the overall satisfaction one has with the workplace. The number of participants who reported lack of

supervisory support, conflicts with supervisors, and overall mistrust of their supervisors was surprising. While some participants noted that the overall institutional culture was not a good fit for them personally, most acknowledged this lack of fit stemmed from disconnect between the individual and his or her supervisor.

Lack of Challenge and Loss of Passion

Sixty percent of participants felt challenged in their final student affairs position. However, a noteworthy theme that emerged was that some participants, though challenged by the profession as a whole, did not feel challenged in their specific position. This lack of challenge eventually led them to seek out more meaningful and rigorous work. As one participant stated:

> I was not challenged enough in my work, found it to be very stressful because I was frequently bored, and found a work opportunity in research that seemed like a better fit with more challenge and opportunity to end up in a faculty position.

Other participants felt that once they lost their passion and desire to connect with students, it was time to leave the field.

> My passion for the work left and I did not want to be one of those professionals that stayed for job security and affect my students or department in a negative way. I respect the profession too much to stay just because.

Discussion

Previous research indicates that attrition rates range from approximately 32% within the first five years in student affairs (Wood, Winston, & Polkosnik, 1985) to 61% within the first six years (Holmes, Verrier, & Chisholm, 1983). This study found that 45% left within the first 5 years, 11% left in Years 6 or 7, 22% left the field in Years 8–10, and 22% left after 11 or more years in the field. Reasons for leaving the field varied, with most responses echoing the research findings highlighted in the literature review. Some responses, however, countered or added to previous studies. The study adds to the knowledge on this topic as related to degree attainment, middle age and middle management effects, and institutional support.

Lorden (1998) speculated individuals leave student affairs because they were not educated in the field or properly socialized into the profession (Tull, 2006). The data in this study indicated that 84% of the participants held master's or doctoral degrees in higher education or student affairs, contradicting this assumption. The data also indicated that participants felt their graduate preparation programs adequately prepared them for a student affairs career.

Lorden (1998) posited that some in student affairs enter into graduate programs never fully intending to stay in the field. More than 90% of the participants claim they were very or extremely committed to a student affairs career upon the completion of their master's degrees. Eighty-two percent were glad they chose a student affairs career and 71% characterized themselves as loyal to the profession. Sixty-three percent felt student affairs was a great career opportunity and 60% felt at the beginning of their student affairs career they would stay in the field for their entire career. These statistics contradict the idea people leave the field due to a lack of initial commitment to the profession.

Lorden (1998) and Frank (2013) also speculated some student affairs professionals leave the field because they lacked proper mentoring or were not involved in professional associations. Embedded in this hypothesis is the assumption persons who leave the field may not have a strong

connection to the profession. This study, however, found 77% of participants had mentors and 62% were actively involved in professional associations. Such findings suggest participants were, indeed, connected to the profession with some participants having deeper connections than others.

Implications

Several implications for higher education professionals and faculty in student affairs preparation programs may be drawn from this study. The significance of the potential disconnect between student affairs graduates, the student affairs field, and the influence institutions, and specifically, supervisors at institutions have on retaining student affairs professionals are key implications.

Understand the Field of Student Affairs and New Professionals

The field of student affair administration tends to place extremely high and sometimes unrealistic demands on the time and energy of its constituents. Those entering the field need to obtain accurate information regarding the realities of a job. Results suggest that many participants did not effectively understand or consider the salary, workload, and work–life balance issues that accompany certain positions. Participants' comments clearly indicated that many failed to consider the long-term implications of this career path. This conflict became particularly acute when future personal goals such as marriage, children, and home ownership were considered.

The student affairs field is a traditionally low-paying one, particularly in the beginning, requiring more hours of effort than is reflected in financial compensation. The intrinsic rewards motivated participants with longevity in the field. In order to decrease attrition in the field, new professionals, in particular, must educate themselves about the realities of long hours, minimal compensation, and work–life conflicts. With such an honest assessment, new professionals can realistically consider their personal and professional long- and short-term goals. Graduate preparation programs, mentors, and seasoned student affairs professionals can assist with the development of this knowledgebase by sharing their own experiences, having constructive class discussions about the realities of the profession, and sharing insights specifically related to these topics.

Supervision and Support

Strong supervision is essential to job satisfaction. When supervisors do not effectively supervise, job dissatisfaction and attrition can result (Saunders, Cooper, Winston, & Chernow, 2000). In an effort to reduce attrition, supervisors must find ways to adequately compensate employees and offer alternatives to the rigid work week. Job share programs and "flextime," telecommuting, compressed work weeks, or other creative staffing models may increase job satisfaction as well as assist professionals in achieving work–life balance. These flexible work options may help offset the perceived lack of financial compensation.

Though 77% of study participants noted that they had mentors in the field, most did not find their supervisors to be their mentors and often noted a lack of leadership and role modeling by supervisors as a key contributor to attrition. A lack of supervisors who modeled effective work behaviors, leadership, and passion for the profession was apparent. To combat this problem, the creation of work environments where employees are valued, challenged, and rewarded may decrease disenchantment. An equally important task is ensuring that employees feel valued. Employee recognition programs and words of gratitude from managers can let colleagues know

that their efforts are appreciated. Such recognition could be a divisional and/or institutional expectation and woven into the culture of the work environment.

Conclusion

The results of this study shed light on the reasons attrition is an issue of concern within student affairs. It remains an open question whether or not attrition in this field exceeds other careers or if it is a natural progression for many individuals, regardless of the profession. Nevertheless, significant concerns do exist about the quality of professional life for many student affairs professionals, and such concerns should be considered and addressed in an effort to enhance and strengthen the overall professional experience in the field of student affairs.

Current fiscal constraints within the field as a whole often result in staff downsizing, dwindling material, capital, human resources, and unfilled positions. During these times, increasing employee loyalty, satisfaction, and job commitment is imperative. Enhanced attention to effective communication, mentor programs, and skills to balance work and life are paramount and may lead to increased job satisfaction and retention.

As professional associations continue to review best practices and create core competencies for new professionals, engagement in an honest and forthright conversation about student affairs attrition is required. Professional associations and graduate preparation programs must strive to paint a realistic picture of the profession, emphasizing the altruistic nature of the field and preparing new professionals for the high expectations placed upon student affairs. It is often easier to highlight those outwardly rewarding facets of the profession while skirting the less appealing components of the profession. Such conversations will help ensure that only those who view the profession as a vocation rather than simply a job will enter and remain in student affairs field.

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