

IN THE MIDDLE: HOW THE EXPERIENCE DEFINES MID-CAREER
FOR STUDENT AFFAIRS PROFESSIONALS

By

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Even though the first official mission statement of student affairs was not published until 1937, called the Student Personnel Point of View, the work of the field has existed in the American higher education system for much longer (Doyle, 2004). Once regarded by faculty as the caretakers of students while not in class, student affairs has matured into a valuable partner in supporting the educational success of college students (Astin, 1984). As the area of student affairs has evolved over the years into a solid, professional field in institutions of higher education, so has the need to understand the experiences of its working professionals. This includes how student affairs professionals develop professionally over their career life span. By using research to understand the career development and experiences of its professionals, student affairs will continue to remain a viable partner in the educational mission of higher education (Arnold, 1982; Carpenter, 1990; Fey & Carpenter, 1996; Harned & Murphy, 1998; Wood, Winston, & Polkosnik, 1985).

For the purpose of my study, student affairs professionals are individuals who work with students either directly or indirectly in areas such as residential life, student activities, counseling, career placement, student union management, or leadership development. Separated into three distinct professional segments in student affairs (new, mid, and senior), researchers have studied the professional development of individuals in these segments as they move through their career. However, in comparison to the research on new and senior professionals in student affairs, less research has focused on

the largest group of individuals in student affairs: mid-career professionals. In my study, I begin to examine the professional experiences of mid-career student affairs professionals and explore how the experiences of these individuals greatly affect their professional development in the field.

Purpose of Study

During the last 25 years, one way researchers have attempted to better understand the professional development experiences of student affairs professionals was to examine issues like professional development, attrition, and overall career satisfaction in student affairs. Much of the research on professional development in student affairs has focused on new and senior-level professionals (Arnold, 1982; Barr, 1990; Blimling, 2002; Harder, 1983; Harned & Murphy, 1998; Lunsford, 1984; Richard & Sherman, 1991; Rickard, 1982; Ward, 1995; Wood, Winston, & Polkosnik, 1985). However, research on mid-career professionals has focused less on professional development and more on issues such as skill transferability beyond student affairs, skills senior-level professionals are seeking when hiring mid-managers, or includes this group within larger studies involving mid-level administrators in higher education (Carpenter, Guido-DiBrito, & Kelly, 1987; Gordon, Strode-Border, & Mann, 1993; Komives, 1992; Rosser & Javinar, 2003; Rosser, 2004; Young, 1990). The existing literature fails to make any connection between the mid-career experience, professional development, and the intention to stay in field (Carpenter & Miller, 1990; Fey & Carpenter, 1996).

As mid-career professionals represent a large segment of the student affairs workforce, attention should be paid to their professional experiences, development, and intention to stay in the field because mid-career individuals become the core group of

experienced professionals advancing into senior-level positions in student affairs (Gordon, Strode-Border, & Mann, 1993). Any factors accelerating their premature departure from the field create a significant loss of skills and knowledge in the field, and a lack of talented professionals advancing into senior-level positions. It is also unclear how the mid-career experience is defined compared to new professionals (fewer years in the field) or senior-level professionals (vice-president or dean). Therefore, the purpose of the current study was to chronicle the experiences of individuals who self-define as mid-career professionals in student affairs, and examine how the challenges and supports they face at mid-career influence their professional development, satisfaction and intention to stay in the field.

With the limited availability of research on the experiences of mid-career student affairs professionals, the need for continued study of this topic is important for increasing the awareness of how these individuals develop professionally and remain connected to the field. By defining this segment more clearly and studying mid-career professionals' experiences more thoroughly, the field and institutions are able to create a more professionally enriching mid-career experience, which, in turn, promotes engagement and vitality within the segment, institutions, and the field. Without more research in the mid-career experience, student affairs faces a possible drain of its most talented middle managers and professionals, whose experiences are virtually unknown to their new or senior colleagues in the field (Benke & Disque, 1990; Carpenter, Guido-DiBrito, & Kelly, 1987; Evans, 1988). Understanding the mid-career experience helps the field and institutions create professional development opportunities that specifically address the

unique challenges and needs of this segment, and helps ensure that these individuals, who make up the core of the profession, remain vital, energized, and professionally viable.

Research on the mid-career experience, including an examination of the professional development needs, challenges, and satisfaction of this period timeframe raises the level of knowledge for this large segment of professionals working in higher education. This can provide best practices for the field and institutions and minimize periods of professional dissatisfaction and disengagement resulting in professional stagnation and exodus from the field. (Fey & Carpenter, 1996; Komives, 1992). It could also prevent erosion of the partnering role student affairs increasingly occupies with academics in the educational process in higher education. Such an erosion of educational significance not only affects mid and senior-level practitioners, but it also migrates into the ranks of new professionals entering the field.

Research Questions

The following questions served as a guide for my research in this study:

1. What are the experiences of individuals who self-define as “mid-career professionals” in student affairs?
2. How do these individuals define “mid-career”?
3. What challenges and supports are present for mid-career professionals in institutions and student affairs professional organizations?
4. How do the challenges and supports affecting mid-career professionals influence their decision to stay or leave student affairs?

Background of the Study

Currently, there is no specific undergraduate major or degree directly related to student affairs; many individuals enter the profession as recent graduates of masters programs (Clinte, Henning, Skinner Jackson, Kennedy, & Sloan, 2006). There are currently 198 graduate programs specifically designed to prepare individuals for work in student affairs at colleges and universities across the United States (NASPA on-line, 2005). The lack of undergraduate preparation in student affairs hinders understanding for practicing professionals of why individuals choose to enter the profession. Often graduate students in student affairs had a strong co-curricular experience as an undergraduate student in areas such as residence life or student activities (Harned & Murphy, 1998; Richmond & Sherman, 1991).

The undergraduate experience can often generate an interest in pursuing a career in student affairs and beginning a graduate program. In the graduate program, future practitioners are introduced to the career phases of the student affairs professional – early, mid-, and senior-level. These career phases have been created and supported by scholars, practitioners, and the field, and are most often based on title or position, years in the field, and responsibility. Even professional associations, such as ACPA and NASPA support these three distinct career phases by sponsoring institutes and workshops specifically designed for different phases, such as the New Professionals Institute, Mid-Level Managers Institutes and Senior Student Affairs Officers Institute, (ACPA, 2007; NASPA, 2007). The experiences felt during each career period are often unique and specific to that classification. The next section examines two of the three career phases:

graduate student/new professionals and mid-career, and how this research has attempted to examine professional experiences within each group.

The Graduate Student/New Professional Experience

Once individuals finish a student affairs graduate program and have accepted their first professional position, it can remain unclear why they have chosen to enter the profession except perhaps as a result of having had a positive undergraduate experience (Richmond & Sherman, 1991). This lack of understanding could explain why attrition rates for new professionals range from 32% to 61% during their first six years of entering the position (Evans, 1988; Hancock, 1988). Without understanding their professional experience, the field often struggles to understand why individuals begin working in student affairs and reasons why they stay or leave (Holmes, Verrier, & Chisolm, 1983; Wood, Winston, & Polkosnik, 1985). Additionally, Hancock (1988) argued most students in student affairs graduate programs are not receiving any career preparation or orientation to the actual field before even becoming new professionals. To better understand the new professional experience and how issues such as retention and attrition impact this experience, some literature calls for more research conducted at the graduate student level (Holmes, Verrier, & Chisolm, 1983).

As individuals become new professionals, there is more research about their professional experiences and how this influences issues such as professional development, career satisfaction, and attrition. As defined by the literature, new professionals are considered individuals with less than three years of related experience in the field, including new graduates of masters programs in student affairs (Barr, 1990; Bender, 1980; Richmond & Sherman, 1991). Bender found issues, such as dedication

service and independence highly valued by new professionals as part of an overall professional experience. However, he also found new professionals aged 23-36 appeared more dissatisfied with their current positions than did individuals older than 37 years. Additionally, 41% of new professionals indicated they were undecided about remaining in the student affairs field and 31% reported they were definitely not staying in the field (Bender,1980).

Job satisfaction of new professionals has also been researched during the last 25 years. Richmond and Sherman's (1991) study found only 39% of new professionals (within three years of graduating) were satisfied, given the perceived lack of career advancement in student affairs. When researching attrition among student affairs professionals, Evans (1988) found a significant number chose to leave the field because of their belief in the lack of career mobility. According to Barr (1990) a significant consideration for new professionals is the "pyramid look to the career ladder" (p. 60).

When specifically examining why new professionals might stay or leave the field, Barr (1990) described both positive and negative issues related to the attrition of new professionals in student affairs. For example, she reported sometimes people find a congruence or good fit between their preferred career reward structures and the field of student affairs. However, she noted that new professionals also may face value conflicts between what they entered the field to do and what they actually do. She did not, however, view this as particularly negative for the profession but rather considered it a natural development of career patterns.

Lorden (1998) questioned if career satisfaction issues like attrition in student affairs was "inherently negative and a cause for concern" (p. 211). Citing the lack of

longitudinal studies that examined the professional experiences and the conditions that influence career decisions in student affairs as cause for concern he called for more research on this topic, which he contends “could be invaluable to our understanding of individuals’ goals and experiences” (p. 214). According to Lorden (1998), studies of this type could also address “the question of whether people leave the profession because of dissatisfaction or simply to pursue attractive career alternatives” (p. 214). Interestingly, Lorden (1998) noted that research on attrition in most other professions outside of student affairs does not even exist. As research examined the job satisfaction and propensity to leave the field as part of the overall professional experience of new professionals, less is known about the experience of mid-career professionals.

The Mid-Career Experience

Because research on the experiences of mid-career professionals in student affairs is limited, this is a particularly important area on which to focus. A recent publication documenting the stories of women in student affairs and how they dealt with mid-career issues was released in 2004. One reason Renn and Hughes (2004) cited for focusing solely on mid-career was an abundance of research in the areas of new professionals and senior administrators in student affairs. In contrast, they cited the little attention paid to mid-career professionals in the field, as well as the lack of resources for mid-career professionals, as significant reasons to focus entirely on the topic of mid-career and the experiences of different individuals. In editing the book *Roads Taken* (2004), these researchers concentrated on the lives of mid-career student affairs professionals, specifically women, highlighting the challenges and possibilities of mid-career work and life. Renn and Hughes (2004, p. xviii) shared a definition of mid-career based on the

conception of Teresa Carter (2002) that includes “a shifting career identity that emphasizes both achievement needs and a strong desire to remain true to personal definitions of success.” This book represents one of the first contributions towards developing a richer, more in-depth understanding of the overall mid-career student affairs experience.

While not solely concentrating on the experiences of mid-career student affairs professionals, Rosser (2004) examined mid-level administrators in higher education and possible issues affecting their intention to remain in or leave the profession. Rosser randomly selected 4,000 mid-level administrators from a population of 11,300 public and private institutional administrators within five Carnegie classifications. Rosser concluded that while traditionally regarded as a problem for institutions, turnover can be both a cost and a benefit to an academic organization. Costs included a less loyal and knowledgeable labor force, while benefits ranged from a re-examination of current reporting structures, replacing entry-level with experienced individuals, to reducing salary costs. The contributing factors to job turnover varied from the quality of work life to issues such as demographic characteristics, morale, and job satisfaction. More importantly for this current study, Rosser determined there was not a single factor alone in the mid-level experience that contributed to the intention to stay or leave.

As the previous paragraphs begin to demonstrate, significant support for this study originates from the dated and often sporadic research examining the professional development experiences of mid-career student affairs professionals. The literature in Chapter Two reveals an almost 25-year spread of research on this topic with published findings occurring approximately every five to six years. Between these years there has

been no major research published specifically addressing the professional experiences of mid-career professionals and how the challenges and supports they face at mid-career affects the field. Of the studies that do exist, most are quantitative in nature with very little published of qualitative design with interviews of individuals at mid-career. This is problematic because the existing qualitative studies provide only small glimpses into the issues facing mid-career student affairs professionals. Unlike quantitative studies, qualitative studies allow the researcher to provide a rich, thick description of an experience. Additionally, within the mid-career experience, the inconsistent and often confusing experiences defining mid-career professionals creates additional challenges for understanding this important segment.

Defining Mid-Career

The lack of a coherent, accepted definition of who is considered a mid-career professional further complicates this research but also strengthens the need for this study. Some studies have used strictly age-related parameters to define mid-career in student affairs including age ranges or number of years in service to the profession (Arnold, 1982; Bender, 1980; Bossert, 1982). Other research has used positional descriptors to identify sample participants, such as a position title, while other studies have used actual position responsibilities and reporting structure to identify participants (Fey & Carpenter, 1996; Gordon, Strode-Border, & Mann, 1993). Research on new professionals clearly identifies them as within three years of beginning their careers; research on senior-level professionals is usually defined by positions and titles (e.g., vice-president, dean).

Mid-career professionals are not vice-presidents or deans (senior-level) and have been in the field longer than three years (new professionals), so what categories or

parameters define them? The absence of a consistent definition for mid-career among the sparsely published studies creates a strong need for a study focusing on individuals who have entered the mid-career period of their profession and what those career parameters look like. Specifically, this study examined and detailed the experiences of individuals on varied career tracks who self-define as mid-career professionals and are currently working or have recently worked in student affairs. Additionally, it examined issues affecting the professional development of mid-career professionals and how the challenges and supports they face at mid-career influenced their professional satisfaction.

For the purpose of the current study, the working definition of a mid-career student affairs professional was an individual between the ages of 27-55 who has completed a master's degree, is currently working in an area of student affairs (e.g., residence life, student activities, career education), and with more than three years of professional experience in the field. Recognizing the breadth across functional areas in student affairs and non-parity across institutions, the study did not limit its findings by using a more purposeful definition of mid-career, aiming instead to provide more general information to serve as a launching point for further research.

As one of the research questions indicates, a primary focus of this study was to chronicle the experiences of individuals who self-define as "mid-career professionals" in student affairs. As this is often a period filled with changes and challenges in their professional and personal lives (Renn & Hughes, 2004), it was important to provide an opportunity for the participants in this study to detail their experiences at mid-career. The rich and complex descriptions I detail in Chapters Four and Five weave a significant backdrop for the mid-career experience that is missing from the research about this

period. It also provides individuals, institutions, and student affairs with a more informed and inclusive definition of mid-career, and issues surrounding professional development, satisfaction and attrition. Instead of only using traditional student affairs identifiers such as position or title, I wanted to relate to the reader the common experience that all of the participants share: the journey that is mid-career.

An additional focus of the study as supported by the research (Barr, 1990; Fey & Carpenter, 1996) was to provide assistance to institutions and the profession grappling with understanding issues related to professional satisfaction and increasing attrition rates among mid-career professionals (Barr, 1990; Bender, 1980; Evans, 1988; Richmond & Sherman, 1991), and training future senior administrators in student affairs. In chronicling the different experiences of individuals and studying what factors, if any, influence the retention and attrition of mid-career student affairs professionals, institutions and associations can use this information to assist in addressing the challenges faced by mid-career professionals. Using identifiers related to position, responsibilities, and demographic information, my study examined themes drawn from the literature that potentially influence professional development and satisfaction, and chronicle the experiences of mid-career professionals. This was accomplished by first using a survey instrument to inform the research questions, which were then tested and expanded during the second portion of the study, participant interviews. Both datasets formed the basis for interpreting data, reporting results, and making recommendations.

As higher education changes, student affairs professionals should understand how these changes impact their roles on campus. This includes understanding and supporting the changing needs of professionals working in the field. Since research examining mid-

career student affairs professionals is incomplete and this period is often misunderstood in terms of how individuals experience this period, research similar to what is found in this study is vital to expanding this knowledge base. The survey data provided a view into the lives of mid-career student affairs professionals, touching on several general areas of concern identified in Chapter Two. The interviews allowed me to provide a more detailed description of the rich experiences of a few individuals and a more thorough understanding of who these people are and how their personal and professional lives are influenced by their mid-career status.

In this two-phase, sequential mixed-methods study (Creswell, 2003) I obtained demographic and quantitative results from a survey instrument sent to mid-career student affairs professionals, then conducted individual qualitative interviews to garnering more in-depth data. During the first phase, an on-line survey involving mid-level student affairs managers who have participated in an institute for mid-career professionals measured reactions to several areas identified from the literature. In the second phase of the study, I solicited a purposeful sample of mid-career professionals to participate in qualitative interviews, which were used to explore significant themes and responses from the survey and chronicle the experiences of their journey through mid-career.

Significance of the Study

The current study provides insight into the experiences of mid-career student affairs professionals. Specifically, the purpose of the current study was to chronicle the experiences of individuals who self-define as mid-career professionals in student affairs, and examine how the challenges and supports they face at mid-career influence their professional development, satisfaction and intention to stay in the field. Since current

research in the field focuses more on the professional development experiences of new and senior student affairs professionals (Barr, 1990; Bender, 1980; Harder, 1983; Harned, & Murphy, 1998; Lunsford, 1984; Richard & Sherman, 1991; Rickard, 1982), increased research on mid-career student affairs professionals is necessary to increase the understanding of who they are and how their experiences affect their professional development, satisfaction and intention to stay in the field. Acknowledging the existing gap of research on mid-career, in my study I sought to address the incomplete view of the mid-career professional experience and aid institutions and the field in trying to provide greater support and understanding during this important career segment. In my study, I employed a mixed-method research approach in an effort to provide a more deep and rich understanding of issues facing student affairs professionals moving through mid-career. The findings from my study ultimately assist the field of student affairs in preparing and supporting mid-career individuals in the hopes of better understanding this important career period.

Organization of the Study

To answer the research questions and provide useful and productive information, I proceeded in the following manner. I introduce Chapter One with an examination of the current gap in the literature on professional development and experiences of mid-career student affairs professionals, and I provide more detail on this gap in Chapter Two. In Chapter Two I briefly examine research from the private sector on professional and career development and theories from adult learning appropriate to this study. In the bulk of Chapter Two, I examine existing research on professional and career development within higher education by first drawing parallels from faculty and administrative

professionals to that of student affairs professionals before concentrating on new, mid-career, and senior student affairs professionals. In the final section of this chapter, I detail the issues affecting attrition within the student affairs field at all career stages.

In Chapter Three, I describe the study's methodology giving support for the choice of a mixed-methods research design. In Chapters Four and Five, I detail the results of the data analysis examining the experiences of mid-career student professionals, and the impact of professional development and satisfaction on issues such as retention and attrition. I include weaving the rich experiences of interview participants throughout both chapters. Finally, in Chapter Six, I summarize the findings, providing insight into the experiences of mid-career student affairs professionals and make recommendations for institutions and professional associations within higher education.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

As stated in Chapter One, there is very little published research on the mid-career status of student affairs professionals, which is the subject of this particular study. Therefore, much of the literature cited here is anecdotally based and concentrates primarily on other areas either within student affairs or closely related. This creates an incomplete picture of the experiences of affecting mid-career student affairs professionals and their professional development and satisfaction..

However, there is some relevant published research from other professional career areas that brings understanding and sheds light on the mid-career status of student affairs professionals. This chapter will examine that research which comes, primarily, from two venues: 1) research on mid-career professionals in private industry; how career stage research, including adult learning and transition, provides context for this particular study; and 2) research on faculty which concentrates on the mid-career stage of faculty development. This provides some parallels between research on mid-career faculty and that of mid-career professionals in student affairs.

This chapter will also concentrate on a discussion of the three career stages in the student affairs field: new professionals just entering the field, individuals at mid-career, and senior student affairs officers. Particular emphasis will be put on the past and current state of research on student affairs professionals at mid-career, particularly on its maturity as a field of investigation.

This review will conclude with a section detailing issues relevant to retention and attrition of student affairs professionals, the purpose being to provide a contextual link between the experiences, professional development and satisfaction of mid-career student affairs professionals and their desire to remain in the field.

Research on Mid-Career Professionals in Private Industry

Research literature found in the professional, private sector, concentrates on such areas as organizational management, vocational behavior, and employee development (Bolyard, 1981; Freiberg, Zbikowski, & Ganser, 1997; Holmes & Cartwright, 1994; Klingner & Nalbandian, 1985; London, 1990; Williams & Fox, 1995). Early research was based primarily on surveys that studied approaches for motivating employees and the techniques organizations were using to manage employees (Holmes & Cartwright, 1994; London, 1990). Later work began postulating strategies for managing different aspects of employee behavior throughout the career span, such as analyzing experiences at different career stages and mentoring for newer employees (Freiberg, Zbikowski, & Ganser, 1997; Williams & Fox, 1995). From these strategies emerged discussions about mid-career professionals and the different issues affecting their status as employees. The work focused on individual characteristics, such as psychological and biological maturity, peak performance, years of professional and personal development, affiliations in professional organizations and associations, and increased importance of family and lifestyle (Freiberg, Zbikowski, & Ganser, 1997; Williams & Fox, 1995).

The research on mid-career professional development originating from the private sector is beyond the scope of this study, however, whose thesis is embedded in that of higher education, specifically the differences and similarities in faculty, administrators,

and student affairs professionals as they work from within the mid-career time-frame. Individuals face different choices when reaching the mid-career period, and sometimes those choices involve a transition in their current career. Specifically, I was interested in understanding the experiences of student affairs individuals who self-define at mid-career, as well as examining how challenges and supports impact the mid-career, student affairs professionals professional development and satisfaction in the field. The following sections explore professional and career development, including transitional issues regarding faculty, administrators, and student affairs professionals.

One area of study in higher education affecting all three groups suggests that how individuals deal and learn from transition in their lives can influence how certain sociocultural and psychological factors influence possible career changes. Research in adult education examines how learning affects the professional lives of individuals as they progress through adulthood. These theories provide context for understanding the possible changes and transitions that often occur at different career stages and how individuals experience them. Of particular interest to this research is the transition that occurs during mid-career after having been a new professional in the field.

As individuals face new challenges and choices entering mid-career, it is important to understand how they learn, either in a traditional educational setting or in a professional or career situation. Merriam and Caffarella (1991) explore how transitions in lives are linked to learning in adulthood. The authors suggest that sociocultural factors affect development in adulthood including career issues “at least as much as psychological forces” (p. 111). According to these researchers, change in adulthood is “determined as much by the sociocultural context as by individual maturation” (p. 119).

Finally, the authors claim “socialization experiences and social roles are key concepts in understanding change and its relationship to learning” (p. 119).

A more recent discussion on how learning affects professional lives is derived from the concept of transformative learning. Studying the professional lives of nine nonprofit environmental activists, Kovan and Dirkx (2003) cited how emotions, imagination, and spirituality are actively involved in and central to transformative learning. The idea of transformative learning draws more on the self-awareness and consciousness an individual has gained throughout life and how that knowledge can be applied to a career or a vocation (Kovan & Dirkx, 2003). Grounded in psychology, this view suggests that transformative learning reflects the thoughtful and lifelong struggle of an individual to “be who he or she is called to be” (Kovan & Dirkx, p. 102). Linking this idea to mid-career timeframes, transformative learning suggests that as individuals face this period during their career, awareness of one’s self could enhance or detract from decisions about their experience during mid-career.

Research on the Professional and Career Development of Faculty

Research on the professional and career development of faculty has been developed more fully over the past 25 years than that found in the field of student affairs. The literature has documented such faculty development issues as job satisfaction, vitality, and institutional personnel policies. Because many of the same issues affect student affairs professionals, and both groups account for the largest employee base in higher education, it is relevant to this study to examine the literature on the professional and career development of faculty, which provides important parallels to the experiences

of mid-career student affairs professionals and highlights similar factors influencing their retention and attrition.

Research conducted on mid-career faculty focused on such intrinsic issues as job satisfaction and professional vitality, rather than reflecting on self-awareness and professional development. Early research by Baldwin and Blackburn (1981, 1990); Belker (1985), and Caffarella, Armour, Fuhrmann, and Wergin (1989) concentrated on faculty vitality, professional development programs at the institutional level, career planning, and personnel policies. Baldwin and Blackburn's (1981, 1983) research was the first published that studied faculty vitality.

However, there are also some noticeable differences between faculty and student affairs professionals. Entry level student affairs professionals tend to begin their careers immediately after graduate school without much formal training beyond what is learned during school (Richmond & Sherman, 1990; Wood, Winston, & Polkosnik, 1985), whereas faculty tend to receive their terminal degrees before entering academia with some experience in teaching and researching as part of their graduate school preparation. Notably, the farther student affairs professionals advance in their careers the more difficult it is to find positions, described by Carpenter et al. (1987) as the "bottleneck" for senior student affairs officers. Often, traditional faculty career paths advance in regular intervals toward tenure. However, as the research demonstrates, both professions struggle with similar developmental issues during their careers. Currently, faculty provide the most appropriate group of professionals to study within higher education with regard to proximity to student affairs professionals.

Birnbaum (1991) cited the professional culture in higher education (comprised of faculty and administrators) as serving the “cause of knowledge and understanding, in intellectual honesty, and in the critical importance of academic freedom” (p. 74). According to Birnbaum, these ideas help “bind together the academic professions” (p. 74) across different disciplines and institutions. In comparing the career development of faculty with that of administrators, Birnbaum suggested that typical organizational theories are not always comparable to professionals in higher education. He contended that the “organizational characteristics” of academic institutions are different enough from other types of institutions that comparisons of traditional “theories cannot be applied to educational institutions without carefully considering whether they will work well in that unique academic setting” (p. 28). These issues invite equitable comparisons between the professional and career development of faculty and student affairs professionals.

In the early 1980s, Baldwin and Blackburn (1981, 1983) began publishing work on faculty vitality and various conditions affecting the professional lives of faculty. This work contributed to Baldwin’s future work on mid-career faculty and factors affecting job performance at different institutions (Baldwin, 1990). Baldwin and Blackburn (1983) studied national and state data published and distributed annually in higher education, and Baldwin used national data, surveys, and some personal interviews at different institutions (Baldwin, 1990). Baldwin (1979) also used an adult and career development model in studying the implications for faculty development, as well as one of the same adult development theories cited in the research by Cytrynbaum, Lee and Wadner (1982) to study faculty development, namely, Levinson’s theory of stability and transition

throughout the life course. Using Levinson's late settling down (36-40) and mid-life transition (40-50) stages, Baldwin aligned these with the associate and full professor stages (1979). As described by Baldwin, the associate and full professor stages are marked by characteristics of life and career reassessment and dealing with the disparities between achievements and goals (1979). To study these characteristics, he interviewed a sample of professors and found that the mid-life stage for faculty (associate or newly appointed full professor) was marked by assessing one's life situation and possibly revising their goals in hopes of achieving more satisfaction (1979). Like Cytrynbaum et al (1982), Baldwin called on universities to adopt policies and practices that were "flexible enough to accommodate the different vocational situations of professors at all career stages" (1979, p. 18).

The early work by Baldwin and Blackburn (1981) also focused primarily on quantitative techniques (survey data) with some qualitative data as well to examine economic factors and demographic variables. They interviewed 106 male college faculty members and categorized them into five career stages indicated by years of experience. They divided their findings into four categories: (1) stable faculty characteristics; (2) evolving faculty characteristics; (3) fluctuating faculty characteristics; and (4) critical events in the academic career (1981). As described by Baldwin and Blackburn (1981), the faculty members they interviewed described the time in their career when new or added responsibilities were assumed as "difficult" (p. 604). Additionally, the same faculty groups stated they most often considered career changes during the "nebulous mid-career period" (p. 606). Baldwin and Blackburn (1981) reported the two groups of faculty who considered career change most often were assistant professors with three

years of experience to full professors with more than five years before retirement (1981). Faculty in these same groups cited more often feeling their careers were at a “standstill” (Baldwin & Blackburn, 1981, p. 606). Finally, the authors called for further research on faculty vitality, career objectives, career satisfaction, and stress, but did not say how this was best accomplished.

By the mid to late 1980s more research focused on institutional practices and policies that affect faculty vitality, with a concentration on mid-career faculty (Baldwin, 1990; Caffarella et al., 1989). These efforts were based more on ongoing discussions about faculty than actual research studies. One exception was Belker’s 1985 study of mid-career faculty and professional development programs, in which he identified 25 institutions with existing faculty professional development programs and to which he sent each institution a survey instrument to gain further information about their programs.

Baldwin (1990) followed up this study on faculty vitality at research universities with a study of faculty at four selective private liberal arts institutions in the southeast. In this study, Baldwin continued to explore the link between vitality and career development in faculty and attempted to explore the distinguishing factors separating “vital” professors from those who plateau or in some way “reduce their professional momentum.” Although Baldwin (1990) did not specifically define what constitutes a “vital” professor for this research, he did use only faculty considered “star performers” on their campuses by other administrators and faculty.

Using descriptors such as scholarship, teaching, and engagement to identify “star performers in areas that his or her institution most prizes” (Baldwin, 1990, p. 163), 50 “vital” faculty were interviewed, along with 40 other faculty. Baldwin used these

findings to advocate for changes in policy and practice by colleges and universities to increase their numbers of vital faculty. Although Baldwin's research pointed to faculty development throughout their careers, his recommendations are highly concentrated during the mid-career stage. These recommendations included flexible academic personnel policies, fostering diversified academic careers, facilitating collaboration and risk-taking among faculty, and encouraging periodic career planning. Baldwin also called for future research to study the specific effects of mid-career on faculty vitality.

Karpiak conducted a study in 1996 on mid-career faculty and mid-life at a Canadian research university with a sample of 20 faculty members (15 men and five women) who held the rank of associate professor. Karpiak cited her use of a qualitative approach (interviews) for this study as it would permit an "insider" individual view. Her most notable findings were the need for "relationship, communion, and community; the sense among faculty that they do not matter to the university; and the importance of the investment they put into the tasks of care and generation" (Karpiak, p. 65).

Concentrating on all faculty, Cytrynbaum et al. (1982) expanded research on faculty development by using a lifespan model incorporating an adult development approach. Cytrynbaum et al. (1982) defined midlife faculty as men and women in their late 30s to mid or late 50s who were confronting midlife tasks. The researchers cited the "intellectually fallow" period faced by midlife faculty in their professional lives creating slowed research, uninspired teaching, and inadequate mentoring functions. Ultimately, Cytrynbaum et al. (1982) concluded that this period created minimal excitement among midlife faculty for the scholarly work of their professional past. To counteract these issues the authors called for universities to openly recognize the midlife struggles of

faculty and to create support systems to counter these effects. Examples of these systems include: open and confidential support systems for individual counseling, flexible sabbatical leaves, and a reduction in responsibilities to explore career shifts.

The finding indicated that as faculty develop professionally several factors affect how they remain engaged, active, and connected to their fields and institutions.

Individual research cited keeping faculty vital by providing support during periods of uncertainty and change, and encouraging career exploration (Baldwin, 1979, 1990).

Collectively, the research called for institutional policies and procedures to support the professional and personal development of faculty, especially during mid-career (Baldwin & Blackburn, 1981, 1983; Karpiak, 1996). Flexible work schedules and sabbatical leaves, and encouragement to work outside their fields of study were also examples of support cited in the literature (Baldwin, 1979; Caffarella et al., 1989; Cytrynbaum et al., 1982).

Despite the concentration of research on faculty development, there remain some gaps in understanding how professional and personal issues affect the development of mid-career faculty. The rapid changes in the professoriate over the past decade warrant new research on the experiences of part-time and adjunct faculty. The aging professoriate and more recent budget cuts create a need to understand the experiences of mid-career faculty as they become the backbone of teaching at most universities.

In addition to faculty, the other group which provides the core of professionals in higher education is that of mid-level administrators. Since the 1980s, administrators have become one of the largest areas of personnel growth in higher education (Rosser, 2004). Among administrative groups, midlevel professionals comprise a significant bulk of those individuals and work in areas like business affairs, student services, and academic

support services (Rosser, 2004). Researchers began studying administrators and their professional and career experiences in the early 1980s, focusing on their job satisfaction and morale. Since this group of administrators includes many mid-career student affairs professionals, the following section discusses the research on administrators in higher education with an emphasis on mid-level professionals.

Research on University Administrators

Some of the first work to study administrators in higher education, although originally not limited entirely to mid-level or student affairs professionals, was done by Austin (1984, 1985). In the early 1980s, she identified the functional importance of the mid-level administrator in colleges and universities (1984, 1985). Austin (1984) cited five areas that affect the work experience of middle administrators including: (1) extrinsic aspects (salary), (2) intrinsic aspects (professional acceptance), (3) power (creating institutional policy), (4) relationship of organization (autonomy, perceived value), and (5) personal outcomes (evaluation criteria). To enhance the work experience of administrators, Austin (1984) called for higher education to assert its sense of purpose, use collaborative approaches, improve opportunities for professional growth, and increase knowledge of administrators' worklife. Austin (1985) focused her work on mid-level administrators in which she discussed their job satisfaction.

Surveying 260 mid-level administrators at a large public research university, Austin (1985) examined several sets of variables for possible correlations to job satisfaction. The variables were separated into four categories including: (1) personal characteristics (e.g., sex, age); (2) perceived job characteristics (e.g., autonomy, skill variety); (3) perceived environmental characteristics (e.g., involvement in decision

making); and (4) extrinsic characteristics (e.g., salary level). Overall, Austin (1985) reported the participants indicated a high job satisfaction. Older participants tended to be more satisfied in their jobs. Austin (1985) argued that older participants were “more realistic and less idealistic in their expectations of their work than their younger colleagues” (p. 17). Through the survey and follow-up interviews, Austin (1985) reported that participants emphasized the importance of autonomy when they evaluated their satisfaction with their work. This finding led Austin (1985) to conclude that, “greater autonomy relates to increased levels of general satisfaction” (p. 23) for mid-level administrators. She also argued that senior administrators should strive to express “recognition and appreciation” (p. 23) for the work of mid-level administrators and that salary was important to mid-level administrators. Because Austin’s (1985) study was conducted at one institution, she acknowledged the limitations of her results. Fifteen years later, Volkwein and Parmley (2000) completed a much larger study covering almost half of the public and private Carnegie research and doctoral institutions in the United States.

Volkwein and Parmley’s (2000) comparative study from the late 1990s examined the satisfaction of almost 1,200 administrators at 120 public and private Carnegie research and doctoral universities. The researchers assumed a connection between “institutional autonomy, positive administrative work environments, and administrative satisfaction” (p. 96). One major finding from their study indicated no statistically significant difference between administrators at public and private universities in global satisfaction, satisfaction with intrinsic rewards, satisfaction with working conditions, and satisfaction with people with whom they came into contact. Additionally, the researchers

found the connection between institutional autonomy and the autonomy of the individual administrator in the work setting as “quite weak” (p. 113).

Started in 2000 by Rosser, Johnsrud, and Heck, and expanded in 2004 by Rosser, the researchers conducted a national study of mid-level leaders in higher education and their intent to leave their jobs. The researchers made a distinction between satisfaction in the work setting and morale (Johnsrud, Heck, & Rosser, 2000; Rosser, 2004). Focusing on morale instead of satisfaction, Johnsrud and Rosser (1997) found morale (high or low) was more related to administrators’ intent to leave their positions. Johnsrud et al. (2000) piloted a survey with 1,293 mid-level administrators within a 10 campus university system. Using earlier work from Johnsrud (1999), the study identified three sources of frustration in the worklife experience of mid-level administrators: (1) the nature of their role, (2) the lack of recognition for their contribution, and (3) their limited opportunity for career growth or advancement (Johnsrud et al., 2000). These researchers suggested “turnover decisions may reflect the perceptions held by employees regarding their current work situation as well as their opportunity for future advancement” (p. 5). The researchers found at the individual level, administrators’ perceptions of worklife had a “direct and powerful effect on their morale and a small indirect effect on their intent to leave or stay in their positions” (p. 12). Finally, the results of the study suggested if institutions want to reduce turnover and retain employees, it is “important to examine administrators’ perceptions of worklife conditions and the consequent impact on their morale” (p. 14).

In the 2004 continuation of the study from 2000, Rosser measured some of the same characteristics of mid-level administrators’ intention to leave, such as worklife,

satisfaction, and morale. Rosser (2004) randomly selected 4,000 mid-level administrators from a population of 11,300 public and private institutional administrators within five Carnegie classifications. She concluded that while sometimes a problem for institutions, turnover created both costs and benefits for an academic organization (Rosser, 2004). Costs included a less loyal and knowledgeable labor force as well as such benefits as a reexamination of current reporting structures and replacing experienced with entry-level individuals to reduce salary costs. A few other key findings from the study included: (1) being an ethnic minority mid-level leader had a significant and negative impact on overall morale but not on satisfaction or intent to leave; (2) mid-level leaders who were paid higher salaries had a lower level of morale; (3) working conditions had no impact on mid-level leaders' morale, satisfaction, or their intention to stay or leave their position or career; (4) the higher the mid-level leaders' satisfaction, the less likelihood of them leaving; and (5) if satisfaction is high and morale is low, mid-level leaders would be more likely to leave. Finally, Rosser determined that it was the combination of "demographic characteristics, worklife issues, morale, and satisfaction that determines their intentions to stay or leave" (Rosser, 2004, p. 334).

While not specifically focusing on student affairs professionals, the previous research on mid-level administrators provides a close proximity to the worklife and status of student affairs professionals. In the mid-1980s, Austin (1985) was one of the first researchers to study worklife issues of mid-level administrators in higher education focusing on issues of job satisfaction. Ten years later, Volkwein & Parmley (2000) also studied job satisfaction issues of mid-level administrators but expanded their sample to include 120 institutions, finding no difference in the responses of participants at either

public or private schools. Finally, in 2000 and 2004, Johnsrud, Heck, and Rosser began studying the intent of mid-level administrators to leave their positions by focusing on morale instead of job satisfaction. The researchers suggested if institutions want to address turnover of mid-level administrators, they should begin looking at worklife issues and how it affects professional morale (Johnsrud, Heck, & Rosser, 2000). Four years later, Rosser (2004) conducted a larger sample of mid-level administrators and concluded that a combination of different factors influenced the actual decisions of individuals to stay or leave. These studies, particularly the most recent two, began to explore issues related directly to mid-level or mid-career professionals who are also working in a functional area of student affairs.

Research on Student Affairs Professionals

As student affairs grew into a more professional field and expanded its scope on college and university campuses, the need to understand how individuals in the field develop professionally also increased. In the early 1980s, burnout, attrition, and career development became hot topics in the field. Like their faculty counterparts, research involving student affairs was conducted by practitioners in the field. However, these early researchers focused on qualitative techniques over small areas within the field. Also during this time, the research began to segregate into three distinct stages of career development: new, mid-career, and senior professionals. The research began to build on the experiences of entry-level and senior professionals, but lacked studying the mid-career time-frame. The following sections are a review of professional development research from these three areas.

New Student Affairs Professionals

A study of student affairs attrition suggested that a high attrition rate, ranging from 39% to 68% (Burns, 1982; Holmes, Verrier, & Chisolm, 1983; Wood, Winston, & Polkosnik, 1985) was related to the incongruence between young professionals and their work environments (Hancock, 1988). Hancock sampled graduate students with primary responsibilities in a residential housing office and supervisors of entry level housing positions who “assessed occupational reinforcers available in positions under their supervision” (p. 26). Hancock found the needs rated as most important in an ideal job by graduate students were ability utilization, achievement, creativity, and responsibility. Needs rated as unimportant included authority and independence. Hancock suggested addressing student needs by fostering “student self-awareness and providing a comprehensive, realistic orientation to the student affair’s world of work” (p. 29). He advocated that graduate preparation programs should provide introductory coursework focused on self-exploration and the fit of a student affairs graduate degree into a student’s individual career path. Finally, Hancock cited the work environment as an area for further research affecting graduate student and young professional attrition (1988).

Wood, Winston, and Polkosnik (1985) cited a growing concern over the attrition of young student affairs professionals as reason to study professional development in that field. The authors used the concepts of career anchors and orientations to frame their study of graduating master’s students in 1978 from four nationally known student personnel preparation programs. Using DeLong’s Career Orientations Inventory (COI) and Carpenter’s Student Affairs Professional Development Inventory (SAPDI), Wood and colleagues split the participants into two groups: (1) individuals still employed in

student affairs, and (2) those no longer in the field. The authors found an individual's career orientations were related significantly to the level of professional development in student affairs, and they tended to remain in the field longer as their years of experience in higher education increased. Individuals who remained in student affairs also indicated less importance in geographical security. Those who left student affairs expressed an increased need for autonomy. These researchers examined only the relationships between career anchors and professional development and their implications for young professionals in student affairs. They called for further study to include other variables such as the "low ratio of mid-level administrative positions to entry-level positions" (p. 538).

Building on the research of Wood, Winston, and Polkosnik (1985), Richmond and Sherman (1991) focused on career choices, satisfaction, and preparation programs of graduate students and new professionals in student affairs. Their study focused on understanding the types of individuals who have a better chance of succeeding in student affairs (Richmond & Sherman, 1991). They found although most individuals were satisfied with their graduate programs, students were still not adequately prepared for changing career options in student affairs (1991). Additionally, Richmond and Sherman (1991) believed the high attrition rate from student affairs could be linked to the new professional's "collision with chaotic surroundings and unfulfilling supervisory relationships" (p. 16). They found that individuals in the study who had received increased career knowledge, experience, and awareness of career options while in their graduate programs expressed higher rates of satisfaction in their first positions (1991).

Using knowledge and measurement techniques found in role stress literature to student affairs professionals, Ward (1995) studied the problem of attrition among new professionals. Sampling 158 new professionals employed full-time at 4-year colleges and universities, Ward (1995) studied relationships between role stress and the areas of employment, graduate program, autonomy, organizational formalization, job satisfaction, and propensity to leave. He found no evidence to support the relationships between graduate training, functional area, work place formalization, propensity to leave, and role conflict. Additionally, Ward (1995) found no relationship between graduate training and functional area with role stress. However, role ambiguity was found to be a stronger predictor of job satisfaction and propensity to leave, stronger than role conflict, career mobility, work place formalization, task overload, or dissonance between student development philosophies (Ward, 1995). Three years later, new research (Harned & Murphy, 1998) on new professionals leaving the profession seemed to bolster Ward's argument of role ambiguity and propensity to leave.

Harned and Murphy (1998) identified four elements involved in the development of new professionals: the supervisor, the new professional, the institutional leadership, and the student affairs leadership. The concerns associated with supervisors, institutional leaders, and leadership in student affairs could determine whether young experienced student affairs professionals leave the profession (Harned & Murphy, 1998). To combat this, they advocated strengthening the relationships of student affairs and institutions to new professionals and supervisors. Building "esteem and competence" (p. 5) among new professionals helps ensure the future of the profession. Building on the idea of developing relationships, Roper (2002) cited the importance of overcoming ineffective social skills

of young and mid-level professionals. He challenged his fellow student affairs professionals to develop an approach that places relationships with others at the “center of both our personal and professional lives” (p. 11).

New professionals become the mid-career and senior professionals in the field. Relevant research on the career and professional development of new professionals exists, assisting practitioners and institutions in supporting and maintaining their student affairs professionals. Even before new professionals accept their first position after graduate school, professional and career orientations are important issues for student affairs graduate programs to prepare individuals for the field. Issues associated with their first professional position such as autonomy and supportive supervisors become key determinants in new professionals remaining in the field after their first years. As new professionals mature and move into mid-level positions within student affairs, keeping them supported, vital, and engaged ensures a continued dedicated workforce as the career ladder narrows at the mid-level and senior student affairs levels.

Mid-Career Student Affairs Professionals

In supporting new professionals as they transition into mid-level and senior level student affairs professions, it becomes increasingly difficult to understand when those individuals move into mid-career. Compounded by the lack of research on the experiences of mid-career student affairs professionals is the lack of a clear target population to study. Two studies in the mid-1990s attempted to give form to the definition of mid-career student affairs professionals. Gordon, Strode-Border, and Mann (1993) studied competencies that top-level student affairs administrators seek when hiring for mid-level positions. For their research they identified a mid-manager as an

individual who reports directly to the chief student affairs officer (CSAO), or to a person who reports directly to the CSAO, and is responsible for the “direction, control, or supervision” (p. 290) of one or more student affairs functions or professional staff. The study authors did not identify why they used that particular set of parameters for the sample. Similarly, Fey and Carpenter (1996) used a participant sample which consisted of a) an individual who occupied a position that reported directly to the chief student affairs administrator (CSAA) or who occupied a position one level removed from the CSAA, and b) was responsible for the direction or control of one or more student affairs functions, or supervision of one or more professional staff members. Again, there was no mention of why they used that particular set of parameters to select individuals for their study.

At a 1990 student affairs conference, eight papers on mid-level managers in student affairs were presented. The papers cited assimilation of the mid-level student affairs professional’s needs within other aspects of career research as a reason for the discussion (Young, 1990). In particular, Carpenter (1990) argued that human development principles can be applied to professional development in student affairs and proposed a model of four career stages: formative, application, additive, and generative. Carpenter (1990) used his model to structure a series of professional development activities for mid-managers in student affairs based on the “author’s research, personal experience, and observations of student affairs professionals” (p. 93). He cited his own doctoral dissertation from 1980 about the professional development of student affairs workers as the foundation for much of what he had written in this paper. Carpenter followed up his work a few years later when he and Fey (1996) studied mid-level student

affairs managers in Texas. Four years earlier, Komives (1992) used Carpenter's (1990) career stages to frame her discussion of mid-career student affairs professionals.

Using Carpenter's (1990) four career stages, Komives (1992) suggested that "middlescence" for student affairs professionals brings new "dilemmas and opportunities" (p. 84) in their careers. Komives (1992) suggested strategies to assist individuals during this time, such as: being mentored and mentoring new professionals, creating new programs and strategies, writing for professional publications, and encouraging other professionals to serve as mentors. Contrary to research from Wood, Winston, and Polkosnik (1985) on student affairs professionals, Komives (1992) suggested autonomy is sometimes "antithetical" (p. 87) to professional practice. She argued being "too autonomous can be viewed as a negative behavior" (p. 87). Komives (1992) called for middle and top student affairs professionals to "redirect their energies to developing talent in younger staff" (p. 89). Doing this she claimed will "result in the continued professionalization of both individuals and the larger field of student affairs" (p. 89).

Fey and Carpenter (1996) surveyed 177 mid-level student affairs professionals in Texas. Researching the professional skills of the participants, the authors studied the importance of various skills and the need for further development of professional skills (Fey & Carpenter, 1996). They also discovered current favored methods for developing those same skills and interpreted the effects of setting and demographics on professional development. The average mid-level administrator from their sample was a 41-year-old female who held a master's degree and had been in the profession for over seven years. Of the skills listed in the survey, respondents chose personnel management, leadership,

and communication as most important. Fey and Carpenter (1996) concluded that for mid-level student affairs administrators to remain viable and marketable for promotion into higher mid-level or executive-level positions, they must increase their effectiveness by pursuing the skills listed in their research and continuing to pursue professional development.

Benke and Disque (1990) studied the mobility of mid-managers in student affairs and determined the research available in general on student affairs career mobility to be “sketchy” (p. 14) and even “scarcer still” (p. 14) for mid-managers. The authors urged researchers to resist the temptation to turn to research in business and industry to help fill in the gaps. Instead they offered examples of the organizational structure, employment patterns, and mobility patterns among mid-managers in higher education as reasons for finding differences in research from the business sector. Among other factors, the authors viewed attrition as another form of career mobility for mid-managers in student affairs. They also cited the lack of research focused on mid-mangers in previous studies in student affairs attrition as an overall concern for the profession. Benke and Disque concluded that more research was needed on the issue of career mobility to address questions of mid-manager mobility and advancement. They also argued for more research to understand what qualifications are needed for new professionals to advance to mid-managers within institutions because. Without this knowledge, new professionals are more at risk of limiting their career mobility and possibly increasing attrition rates in the field.

Finally, in 2004, one of the first attempts at capturing the rich stories of mid-career student affairs professionals was published. In *Roads Taken*, Renn and Hughes

(2004) compiled stories of women in student affairs who are currently in or have moved beyond mid-career. Started as a panel discussion in 2002 at a National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA), a group of mid-career student affairs women began discussing issues involving their personal and professional lives. From that panel discussion grew a collection of stories about different issues affecting mid-career women in student affairs. Those issues include pursuing the doctorate, motherhood and student affairs, dual career couples, the journey through mid-career, and alternative career paths for student affairs professionals. The five sections are written with a discussion of how each particular life issue impacts individuals at mid-career in student affairs.

Mid-career professionals and pursuing a doctorate. In introducing this section of *Roads Taken*, Howard-Hamilton (2004) suggests the struggle for women over pondering the question of “To Ph.D. or not to Ph.D.?” (p. 9) at mid-career is made much more difficult because of other personal, financial, and professional issues to consider. This question impacts women of all races but becomes even more important for women of color because of their small representation in the ranks of Ph.D.s in higher education. Howard-Hamilton concluded with several recommendations for institutions attempting to address the number of women pursuing Ph.D.s. All of her recommendations could directly or indirectly impact the retention of women within student affairs including mid-career individuals.

Dual-career couples. As Wolf-Wendel, Twombly, and Rice (2004) point out, in the year 2000, 37% of all married couples were dual-earners. They cited private employment sectors in business as being more responsive to this issue than higher education. Traditional approaches in higher education to assist dual-career couples have

been to either offer relocation services or hire the partner into a position at the same institution as their spouse. The authors studied relocation programs in higher education citing the relative newness of these kinds of programs without much formal evaluation to measure their success. Finally, the authors called for academic institutions to “acknowledge the growing number of couples vying for positions and for more institutions, especially those in isolated regions, remaining competitive for the best hires is likely to require some type of institutional response” (p. 62). This situation is compounded if both individuals are also positioned at mid-career facing a much narrower career ladder (Carpenter et al., 1987). Dual-career couples navigating the career ladder in higher education face additional challenges when starting a family. Often the burden continues to fall onto the mother even after re-entering the workforce.

Motherhood and student affairs. Marshall (2004) cited how little research exists that examines the complexity of how women manage a career in higher education and a family, especially in student affairs. While research exists examining women faculty with children, there is little known about women who are administrators and are also mothers (Marshall, 2004). This lack of research and the mixed messages women in higher education receive about having children creates a climate of difficult decisions for women in student affairs considering starting a family. Marshall (2004) concluded her section with several recommendations for higher education to address this issue. Of those recommendations, she cited examining “how professionals are socialized to think about their priorities both at work and at home” (p. 98). Specifically in student affairs, she cited her own experience of knowing “many talented women who have left student affairs because they felt it incompatible with their personal and familial needs.” (p. 98).

“I’ve arrived.” Using the work of Judith Bardwick, Hughes (2004) believed a very large group of talented professionals will be “at their best” (p. 135) between 35 and 45 years old but the number of upper and senior-level positions within corporations, nonprofits, and educational institutions may not adequately exist for these professionals. Because so many individuals believe “arriving” (p. 135) means reaching these upper and senior-level positions, Hughes advocated broadening the definition of “arriving” (p. 135) in terms of career development. Additionally, within student affairs, mid-career is the time when many individuals examine their situations to determine the benefits and liabilities of trying to reach the next level or remaining in middle management. Hughes suggested that it benefits all individuals working in student affairs, especially at mid-career or mid-level, to determine what job characteristics are likely to provide the most stimulation for professionals of the next generation.

Alternate routes. Renn (2004) cited the more traditional career track for the majority of mid-career student affairs professionals: a master’s degree, entry-level position, progressively more advanced positions leading to directorship of a functional area, and a move into deanship or vice-presidency. However, a growing number of mid-career student affairs professionals are breaking away from this track and exploring alternative careers or continuing their careers in alternative ways (Renn, 2004). Renn suggested that research points to lower levels of job satisfaction at mid-career for student affairs professionals, especially women. To combat issues of job satisfaction, Renn suggested finding alternative paths within the academy including using the skills acquired as student affairs professionals to use other areas such as institutional advancement, government relations, facilities management, and training and development. Outside of

higher education, opportunities exist in the K-12 system, nonprofit agencies, and scholarly associations. Renn concluded that individuals at mid-career in student affairs who leave the field should follow the lead of their senior student affairs officers and colleagues in considering an “exit strategy” (p. 179).

While all the past sections from the *Road Taken* text concentrate on the experiences of mid-career women in student affairs, they provide some parallel information on the experiences of all mid-career student affairs professionals. Certainly, the issues of whether to pursue a doctorate or gaining a sense that one has arrived are relevant to any mid-career student affairs professional regardless of gender, race, or institution type. Issues surrounding alternative career paths for student affairs professionals are important especially for individuals at mid-career as problems of job satisfaction and attrition are compounded during this timeframe. Unlike their new and senior student affairs colleagues whose experiences are documented with more frequency within the research, the stories of the women in this text provided one of the first in-depth discussions of the current challenges and successes experienced by mid-career student affairs professionals.

Senior Student Affairs Officers

Traditionally, as student affairs professionals have moved into later parts of their career they reach a position in their careers where some begin to consider becoming a senior student affairs officer (SSAO). Also referred to as the chief student personnel administrator (CSPA) or chief student affairs administrator (CSAA), this position usually represents the most senior student affairs professional on campus. The SSAO usually reports to the president of the institution and serves as a key advisor. As the position has

become more important at many institutions, the credentials to become a SSAO have also increased. Many SSAO positions now require multiple years of experience within higher education, not always within student affairs and a doctorate degree. As the SSAO position has gained in prominence, researchers began to examine the development of this position.

In 1983 Harder examined the career patterns of chief student personnel administrators (CSPA) by surveying 104 members of the Southern Association of College Student Affairs (SACSA). At that time the mean age for respondents was between 36-40 years of age with between 6-35 years of experience, and 81% of the sample having completed graduate work beyond the master's level (Harder, 1983). Harder concluded from his study that without major changes in higher education the number of CSPA positions over the next 20-25 years will become increasingly smaller. He based this conclusion on several factors derived from his research including:

- (a) indications that tenure in the positions of chief administrator is increasing;
- (b) chief administrators tend to be under 50 years of age;
- (c) nearly half of the administrators reported that at present they plan to stay in their positions until retirement;
- (d) changes in the mandatory retirement age for educational personnel may allow individuals to stay in their positions longer;
- (e) higher education is in a period of economic instability and student enrollment decline, resulting in reductions in force or consolidation of positions; and
- (f) the period of growth in the number of new colleges or campuses that occurred in the 1950 and 1960s is over. Indications are that the number of colleges or

campuses will remain steady or even decline. Therefore, new positions established in the past will not be available in the future.

Lunsford (1984) identified the relationship between academic training and experience as a student personnel professional and its effect on the advancement to chief student affairs officer (CSAO). He surveyed 147 active National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA) members who identified themselves as CSAOs at four-year institutions. Lunsford studied eight areas: academic preparation, areas of responsibility, academic preparation, professional job experience, factors influencing advancement, the value of academic preparation, required competencies, and job profile. According to Lunsford (1984), a clear path to the CSAO position emerged that included experience in student affairs administration above the functional director's level. He also concluded that the general rule "to move up you must move out" (p. 54) generally holds true in advancement to the position of CSAO (Lunsford, 1984).

Blimling (2002) posed questions to eight Senior Student Affairs Officers (SSAO) that were addressed in reflections and personal logs over the period of a year. Blimling, a vice chancellor for student development, offered these observations and isolated some examples of how these individuals balanced their professional and personal lives. Several themes emerged from the interviews, specifically, the struggle SSAOs face over whether to stay in their current position or move to a different position in higher education such as a college president or begin a faculty appointment. He reported many of the SSAOs he interviewed advised having an "exit strategy" (p.36) when considering moving on and out of student affairs. Finally, Blimling noted many of the SSAOs he interviewed lamented the loss of balance in their lives between their professional and personal lives.

Although written from the viewpoint of SSAOs the last two themes seem relevant to individuals in mid-career including finding balance between professional and personal lives and having an “exit strategy” when considering moving out of student affairs. Unfortunately, Blimling only interviewed SSAOs and did not comment on the applicability of the themes generated from his interviews to other career stages.

Using the annual and aggregate turnover data for two- and four-year public and private institutions, Rickard (1982) studied the turnover of chief student affairs officers (CSAO) from 1974-1981. Rickard found a 17% turnover rate in CSAOs during this period, of which 57% of this rate was from private institutions (four-and two-year) and 43% from public institutions (four-and two-year) (1982). Two important questions surfaced from Rickard’s research: To what extent was the turnover initiated by the individual or the organization, and what happened to CSAOs who left their position?

Arnold (1982) looked at the career development of experienced student affairs professionals. The work was primarily based on her experience as the Director of the Career and Placement Services at Indiana University and did not draw from any qualitative or quantitative research. She reported that many mid-career student affairs professionals could be characterized as “vocationally adjusted.” However, when mid-career conflict occurred it was centered on two values: commitment and loyalty within the profession. She also cited external factors facing mid-career professionals such as relocation difficulties and two-career family concerns. According to Arnold (1982), the career development of student affairs professionals needs further study with a focus on mid-career issues because feelings of employment dissatisfaction tend to build for individuals in their late 30s and early 40s.

As burnout, a declining career ladder, continuing education, and increasing mobility become hallmarks of the senior student affairs officer (SSAO) position in higher education, the situation is compounded by institutional retrenchment and declining enrollments, all of which combine to create issues of turnover and attrition in the SSAO position. As SSAOs mature and retire from the profession, it is important to understand how these issues continue to influence their professional development. Understanding these issues will assist institutions and associations in creating supportive career paths for the mid-career student affairs professionals who will become the future SSAOs.

Attrition in Student Affairs

One of the first studies to examine why individuals leave the field was done by Burns (1982). She used a survey instrument and “career path matrix” to assess reasons for career position changes, as well as to obtain an overview of lifestyle characteristics affecting career decisions. She used two different universities with active graduate programs in student personnel administration, which yielded a sample size of 182 practitioners (90 males and 92 females). Burns sent surveys to individuals who graduated within nine years from either institution. Some individuals could be considered mid-career. Wiggers, Forney, & Wallace-Shutzman (1982) studied factors associated with burnout for student affairs professionals. Their article was designed as a tool for practitioners to identify and combat the factors contributing to burnout in student affairs.

Evans (1988) studied the research related to attrition of student affairs professionals finding a “lack of opportunity for advancement” as the most frequently mentioned reason for leaving the field. Supporting this reason, Bossert (1982) and Bender (1980) cited the perceived lack of career advancement opportunities in student affairs for

mid-level and individuals under 36 years of age as an important issue affecting attrition. Evans (1988) advocated redesigned environmental strategies and strategies created for personal and professional development as a way to overcome the lack of career advancement. In his conclusions, Evans called for any further research on attrition in student affairs to include examining when in a person's career attrition is more likely to occur.

Tarver, Canada, and Lim (1999) wrote about job satisfaction and locus of control among college student affairs administrators and academic administrators. They observed that job satisfaction is an important and much investigated topic, but "most of the relevant higher education research in this area focuses on faculty members" (p. 97). Their study used randomly selected student affairs administrators who in turn selected an academic administrator with an equal responsibility level on their campus. Three instruments were used in the study: an information sheet (demographic data), Job in General scale (measured job satisfaction), and the Internal-External Scale (measured locus of control). The study examined administrators at the director level or higher. Although this study used more quantitative data and measures than previous research, it still did not address the issues facing mid-career student affairs practitioners such as job satisfaction, advancement, or disillusionment.

Are there other reasons why individuals might leave the student affairs field besides job satisfaction or lack of career advancement? According to Lorden (1998), individuals also leave the profession because they are pursuing other attractive career paths outside of student affairs. However, Lorden (1998) cautioned that there is no definitive research on the experiences of individuals who leave student affairs to

determine if their experiences caused them to leave or if they were ready for a new career. One possible reason Lorden (1998) cited for this lack of knowledge was that most of the previous research has been focused on quantitative methodologies without providing meaningful insight into the experiences of individuals who leave the field. Lorden offered several suggestions for the profession to consider in retaining and attracting quality individuals including enhancing job satisfaction, increasing professional preparation through graduate programs, and expanding the definition of professional development and advancement. However, sometimes these factors have little or no effect on why individuals choose to leave the student affairs field. Often considerations to leave the field are based on individual decisions that are not related to professional development within student affairs.

The idea has been proposed that sometimes individuals who leave the student affairs field do so because they never intended to remain even after completing a student affairs graduate program. A few authors have suggested that the skills these individuals gain while working in student affairs are highly transferable to other professions outside of higher education (Barr, 1990; Carpenter, Guido-DiBrito, & Kelly, 1987). Carpenter, Guido-DiBrito and Kelly (1987) reviewed studies of competencies and skills fostered by student affairs preparation and practice and compared them to indicators of success in business and management. They concluded that the student affairs profession requires varied and “excellent management and communication skills, and these valuable talents are readily transferable to other fields of endeavor” (Carpenter, Guido-DiBrito, & Kelly, 1987) (p. 12). Barr (1990) suggested that student affairs professionals are not “wasting” their time with a career in student affairs because they “gain good experience for the

future whether their future is in the field or not” (p. 63). Finally, Barr (1990) suggested that the “winnowing out process” (p. 63) often discussed in research of student affairs attrition may have benefits both for individuals who remain and those who decide to leave.

In comparing themes from the existing research in student affairs on new, mid-career, and senior student affairs professionals, several key ideas about professional and career development surfaced. Throughout the literature from the past three sections, the importance of the skills needed for student affairs professionals to continue advancing in their careers was continually highlighted. Additionally, the literature suggested Senior Student Affairs Officers (SSAO) should assist retention in the field by helping new professionals remain. Research called for SSAOs to create opportunities for new professionals to become professionally engaged and active. Mid-level professionals and SSAOs were also called upon to mentor new professionals as a way to challenge new professionals and keep them in the field. The literature also cited the continual building of dissatisfaction within the field as one of the bigger concerns not often addressed by the profession. Finally, much of the research on all career levels in student affairs called on practitioners and scholars to advance the understanding of retention and attrition within student affairs. This is found in every decade of research used during this literature review, yet there still exists a gap of understanding among all student affairs career levels, in particular, mid-career professionals.

Conceptual Framework

There are three theoretical frameworks that provide a sufficient base for studying the experiences, professional development and satisfaction of mid-career student affairs

professionals. Person-environment theory and professional development and a career issues lens theory have been drawn from the literature on student affairs professionals. The third theory was used to study the development of faculty. All three of the frameworks have been used to study professional and career development within higher education as professionals progress through various stages of their careers. Levinson's (1978) and Lofquist and Dawis's (1969) theories were developed outside of higher education but have been adapted by Baldwin (1979) and Hancock (1988) to create a theoretical framework for studying individuals working within higher education. The frameworks also serve as lenses to view data collected from this study and reported in Chapters 4 and 5.

Adult Development Theory and Its Implications for Faculty

Baldwin has written extensively on the career and professional development of faculty. Throughout his research he has spent time studying how faculty remain vital in their careers, how institutions can foster and support the development of faculty, and the effects of adult and career development on faculty (Baldwin, 1979, 1990; Baldwin & Blackburn, 1981). In one research study, Baldwin (1979) used Levinson's theory of adult development. In Levinson's model, adulthood is composed of alternating periods of stability and transition (1978). This is a stage theory in which an individual progresses through six different stages, each with its own characteristics.

Particular to mid-life and mid-career, Levinson (1978) identified three major tasks that, in his words, "must be worked on" (p. 191) during the period of transition from early adulthood to middle adulthood. Generally applied, each of the three tasks have

some application to mid-career issues. The first task calls for a man¹ to “review his life in this era” and “reappraise what he has done with it” (p. 191) up to the point of mid-life. The second task constitutes the time to “modify the negative elements of the present structure and to test new choices” (p. 191). Finally, in the third task one is to “deal with the polarities that are sources of deep division in his life” (p. 191). Levinson’s four polarities form this third task and include: 1) young/old, 2) destruction/creation, 3) masculine/feminine, and 4) attachment/separateness. There are elements of each task, particularly the first two, that still resonate with the issues associated with mid-career. Certainly, taking stock of one’s career at the point of mid-career and considering different choices are still relevant professional development issues. The four polarities of Levinson’s (1978) third task are applicable to development at perhaps any stage of a career, including mid-life.

Baldwin (1979) used Levinson’s (1978) six stages and compared the professional stages of faculty career development from newly hired assistant professor to shortly retired full professor. Levinson’s theory also includes specific age separations that accompany the corresponding characteristics. Baldwin did not restrict himself to very narrow age-related parameters for this study. He used a range of years to give each career stage with faculty rank a more concrete timeframe (1979).

Studying Baldwin’s (1979) findings revealed similarities common to all of the five faculty career stages, such as reviewing one’s professional life and a desire to learn new skills or traits. These findings might also relate to new research on mid-career student affairs professionals using Levinson’s (1978) adult development theory. In

¹ Because of the period when Levinson wrote about his theory, he only includes discussions about the male gender.

contrast, Baldwin (1979) did find differences in some faculty characteristics that he believed supported the developmental construct that adults do change over time. Essentially, faculty interests in certain roles wax and wane over time as they progress through their career. As this result could be considered a natural part of career evolution it is highly probable this same result would be evident in researching student affairs professionals at various stages of their professional lives.

The obvious limitation in using Levinson's adult development theoretical framework is its reliance on forward-only progress. Most forward-moving stage theories suffer from a limitation which does not allow for movement back to a prior stage or skipping past certain stages. Adult development is a complex issue and no individual develops at the same pace or level as another. This theory was also developed for males and most likely white heterosexual males. It does not take into consideration the large increase in female faculty entering the professoriate or the increase in faculty of color, who may experience this model in a significantly different manner.

Person-Environment Theory

Often there are a variety of reasons someone chooses to follow a specific career path or vocation. Similarly, there are as many different reasons why individuals decide to leave their field or profession. In his work on the attrition of young student affairs professionals, Hancock attributed a high rate to the incongruence existing between young professionals and their work environments (1988). Holland suggested that the theory of choice behavior is an expression of personality (1973). Using Holland's theory of choice behavior, Hancock attributes congruent interactions between individuals and work

environments as beneficial to achieving stable work choices. However, the excessive incongruence of the person-environment can also lead to high rates of attrition (1988).

Lofquist and Davis's (1969) theory of work adjustment also addresses the match of occupational needs and career reinforcers. Individuals seek to achieve correspondence with their environment, and work is one major environment to which individuals must adapt. According to Lofquist and Davis, individuals will ultimately leave their environment (work) if they cannot find or establish correspondence (connection or fit). Holland (1988) argued an extension of the person-environment correspondence (connection or fit) is also the length of employment in a particular position. Additionally, Holland (1988) extended the theory of person-environment fit to the entire profession of student affairs instead of individual positions. He (1988) proposed new professionals who were not finding a fit within the field of student affairs (environment) are leaving the profession at higher rates. He extended the person-environment fit into understanding what occurs to individuals in student affairs graduate programs.

In student affairs, the graduate program is traditionally the more common pathway for launching a career in higher education working in the student affairs field (Hancock, 1988; Richmond & Sherman, 1991; Ward, 1995). The years spent in graduate education have been identified as an important stage in the development of professional identity (Carpenter & Miller, 1981). Typically, the coursework during a graduate program generally focuses on theories and tools in higher education, cognitive development, and research analysis. The Association of College Personnel Administrators (ACPA), a professional association for student affairs professionals, publishes and subscribes to a Statement of Ethical Principles and Standards (ACPA,

2006.). Among the different professional principles and standards it subscribes to are several that guide the program faculty who teach in student affairs graduate programs. However, noticeably absent from this section is a discussion concerning career preparation and career exploration during the graduate program.

Hancock (1988) criticized the apparent lack of actual career preparation, career exploration, or self-awareness in graduate programs to prepare students for the world of student affairs work. If new professionals are to be successful, how does the graduate degree program in student affairs fit their individual career path? How does their new professional environment fit for each individual either in the field of student affairs or in a specific area?

The limitation in Hancock's (1988) study has less to do with the theory he used and more with his research sample and its application to mid-career professionals. He focused solely on graduating students who were preparing to begin entry-level positions in the residence life area. This is the largest area within student affairs for new graduates to enter, which probably created an easier study sample. There is no indication this theory could not be applied to mid-career individuals within any area of student affairs regardless of whether or not they are still working in their original area of specialization. It would appear what matters are that individuals are still employed within the student affairs field, regardless of area. The theories on which Hancock based his (1988) study originate from occupational and organizational research. There is no indication these theories could not be applied to any career stage or any particular professional field. Since Hancock has already used one area of student affairs with this theory, using it to cover multiple areas within the field seems quite reasonable.

Professional Development and a Career Issues Lens

A final framework is also a stage model that has been developed specifically for student affairs professionals. Carpenter and Miller used a model for professional development based on the premise that the field of student affairs constitutes a professional community (1990). This professional community involves three sets of commonalities: shared goals and objectives, the existence of formal and informal sanctions, and attention to socialization and regeneration (Carpenter & Miller, 1990). According to Carpenter and Miller, this allowed human development principles to be applied to professional development. This led to the proposition that “professional development is continuous and cumulative in nature, moves from simpler to more complex behavior, and can be described via level or stages held in common” (1990).

Carpenter and Miller proposed four stages that supported this proposition (1981 & 1990).

- a) Formative Stage: including graduate and/or paraprofessional preparation
- b) Application Stage: encompassing beginning and intermediate practice and further preparation
- c) Additive Stage: involving intermediate to upper-level practice and policy-making responsibility and increase professional sharing
- d) Generative Stage: spanning upper-level practice through retirement and attained by only a select few who influence the entire profession

Based on the model, Carpenter and Miller (1990 & 1981) indicate that mid-managers (mid-career) are somewhere in the mid to late Application Stage or the early Additive Stage. The authors believe mid-managers in either the late Application State or

early Additive Stage are dealing with the issue of “commitment to the profession and will usually have made (or be making) a decision as to whether further education or increasingly responsible experience is the best way to progress” (p. 9). This idea seems key to issues of professional development and satisfaction facing mid-career individuals in student affairs.

The framework of this model could be extended to a study of other issues affecting mid-managers at the late Application Stage or early Additive Stage. Deciding on either further education or increasingly responsible experience might not be the only things to consider during this time. It might also be a time of reflecting on one’s career including issues of job satisfaction, institutional support, professional development, staying in student affairs and personal commitments as they relate to the student affairs field.

Carpenter and Miller (1981 & 1990) developed this stage model to address the professional development and career issues of mid-managers. Its application to study other issues or factors affecting mid-career professionals is the most consistent of all three theoretical frameworks proposed. Again, the limitations of stage models have previously been discussed and the same potential limitations exist in using their theory. However, each stage is focused on skills and competencies gained as individuals progress through their career instead of human behavior. Although the authors make reference in their model to the link in human development theory, their focus on skills and competencies rather than feelings and occurrences separates it from Baldwin’s theory of adult development and its implications for faculty.

Summary of Literature Review

Before examining factors affecting mid-career student affairs professionals, it was important to examine issues facing mid-career professionals from a broader sense. This research, found primarily in the private sector, focused on how individuals were affected psychologically and biologically. Using this background to begin focusing on higher education, this research from the private sector differed quite significantly from theories on adult education which cited the importance of sociocultural factors on professional development and argued for its study in addition to psychological factors. In general application, all have some impact on the professional and career development of individuals within higher education. However, to begin understanding mid-career issues in higher education, the chapter first examined how these issues affected faculty.

In the literature, some of the first research to study the professional and career development of faculty used qualitative studies to examine overall faculty satisfaction and vitality. By the mid to late 1980s, researchers also focused on how institutional policies were affecting the professional development of faculty. A few researchers also focused on mid-career faculty, calling for more research on faculty development. During this time period, the definition of mid-career faculty evolved, attaching either age range or faculty rank as determinants. As student affairs developed into a professional field, the research on professional and career development started with parallels to the research on faculty development.

Early research on student affairs professional and career development focused on new and senior professionals. Some of the first research in student affairs was based on issues of attrition and person-environment fit, and examined individuals finishing

graduate programs in student affairs or working in their first positions after graduation. Researchers identified skills and influences affecting the retention of new professionals and stressed the importance of understanding these issues to create a strong professional core of mid-level managers within student affairs. In contrast, other literature concentrated on the career development of senior student affairs officers (SSAO). Researchers focused on issues affecting SSAOs such as turnover, burnout, the narrowing career ladder, and attrition. Again, much of the research in the area mentioned the importance of preparing and training quality mid-level student affairs managers to succeed the current core of SSAOs.

The research on mid-level or mid-career student affairs professionals has been limited in the past 25 years. The few exceptions studied the career mobility and skills sought by SSAOs for mid-level student affairs managers. Research in the late 1980s was some of the first to propose a career development stage model for mid-career student affairs professionals based on human development principles. All of the literature cited how these issues could affect the retention of qualified individuals within the mid-level student affairs ranks.

The issue of attrition within student affairs has surfaced in all the literature covering new, mid-level, and senior student affairs professionals. The literature cited issues of advancement, narrowing career ladders, burnout, career time-frames, and job satisfaction as some of the main factors affecting attrition within student affairs at all career levels. Some of the literature paid particular attention to the issues affecting the retention of individuals at mid-career, most notably lack of career mobility and advancement as the most important issues influencing attrition. All of the attrition issues

cited in the literature were related to human or adult development theories including identity, fit, and career development. In particular, the three models chosen for this study were developed for either faculty or student affairs professionals and will serve as the framework for understanding the themes developed from the research.

In Chapter 3, I discuss the methodology employed for my study including descriptions of both instruments in this mixed-method study. I also include descriptions of participants and a restatement of my research questions from Chapter 1. I continue by examining my data collection methods for each phase of my study including how I organized and interpreted my data. I complete this chapter with a discussion involving “goodness” in qualitative research and some possible limitations in my qualitative sampling.

CHAPTER THREE

Introduction

Existing research on student affairs professionals has usually concentrated on only those issues pertaining to new and senior professionals. There has been little or no focus on mid-career student affairs professionals, although the literature has addressed problems occurring among all student affairs professionals, but which especially affect mid-career professionals, such as turnover, burn-out, and lack of advancement. These issues have led to discussions in the research on attrition rates occurring primarily during the mid-career stage. Because mid-career professionals form the core of future senior student affairs officers' positions, it is imperative that the profession recognize issues surrounding mid-career attrition and move to correct them. The purpose of the current study was to chronicle the experiences of individuals who self-define as mid-career professionals in student affairs, and examine how the challenges and supports they face at mid-career influence their professional development, satisfaction and intention to stay in the field.

In the last 10 years, the student affairs field has begun to address the professional and career development needs of mid-career professionals. One way has been to include educational and interest sessions at national conferences aimed at these mid-career administrators. But more importantly, both the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA) and the American College Personnel Association (ACPA) have established institutes specifically designed for mid-level managers in student affairs. Attendance at the institute sponsored by ACPA has intentionally been limited (usually about 50 participants) to maintain a small learning atmosphere (ACPA

website, 2005). Workshops, or sessions, usually run over a four-day period, with senior student affairs officers from different institutions serving as faculty.

In addition, another institute, specifically designed for mid-level professionals, was created jointly by the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA) and the Southern Association of College Student Affairs (SACSA). This institute (<http://www.naspa.org/communities/rc/page.cfm?rcpageID=133&rcid=3>) was created 15 years ago, is held over six days, requires a nomination from attendees' senior student affairs officer, and limits attendance. I selected participants from both institutes for my study because I wanted to intentionally attract mid-level student affairs managers who have self-selected themselves as individuals at some point in the mid-career period.

Methodology

This study was designed to chronicle the experiences of mid-career student affairs professionals as a mixed-methods study using a survey instrument and interviews. In a mixed-method study, the researcher combines quantitative and qualitative approaches, methods, and techniques in a single study (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). The survey instrument was an online survey conducted to test themes generated from the existing literature on mid-career student affairs (as discussed in Chapter Two). All individuals from the on-line survey had participated in the Mid-Management Institute sponsored by ACPA (<http://www.myacpa.org/pd/mmi/>). The responses from the survey not only helped inform the questions used during participant interviews, but also guided the second part of the study (a qualitative study) and served as the launching point for more complex and thorough discussions with interview participants.

The detailed exploration of the responses from the qualitative instrument, participant interviews, provided a more in-depth and rich description of the experiences from each of the mid-career professionals. Along with the theoretical frameworks discussed at the end of Chapter Two, there was also an aspect of transformative (Creswell, 2003) procedure within the research. The theoretical frameworks helped guide the identification and discussion of themes in the analysis of the qualitative research where transformative procedures were used. I employed a mixed-method design for my study, recognizing that for my purposes using both quantitative and qualitative instruments is necessary to harness the benefits of matching two separate research methods (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004; Rocco, Bliss, Gallagher, & Perez-Prado, 2003). Ultimately, using quantitative and qualitative techniques and data in my study provided “the best understanding of a research problem” (Creswell, 2003 p. 12), which was how to richly detail and describe the experiences of mid-career professionals in student affairs.

Participants

All participants in the study had to meet criteria defined by “mid-career student affairs professionals,” which was that they had to: be between the ages of 30-55, have a master’s degree, and work in a functional area of student affairs (e.g., residence life, student activities, career activities, counseling, etc.). Further, the study only included those individuals who had participated in an existing institute sponsored by the ACPA or NASPA/SACSA.

Online Survey Participants. Twenty-three individuals responded to the online survey over a two-month period (March – April, 2006). Nineteen of the 23 respondents

completed all 10 questions on the survey instrument, with 13 of the 19 reporting themselves as female, eight reporting as male, and five describing themselves as persons of color. The following functional student affairs areas were reported: student life, residence life, counseling, dean's office, student conduct, fitness, student leadership, and student union.

The reported ages of the participants ranged from the youngest at 26 and the oldest in their 50s. Eighteen reported working at public, 4-year institutions, and five reported they worked at private, 4-year institutions. The majority (15) of the participants, who reported working at public institutions, also described these institutions as having large student populations. For a similar breakdown of survey participant demographics please see the spreadsheet in the appendix.

Interview Participants. Fifteen individuals, who were identified as mid-career student affairs professionals as defined above, and who had participated in one of two mid-managers institutes, were interviewed. I interviewed 15 participants who were all current practitioners in the field (or were when they participated in the interviews) who worked in a functional area within student affairs (e.g., residence life, student activities, career services, etc.). Only three of the interview participants had also taken part in the on-line survey but since that was an anonymous instrument their identity was not known prior to the interviews.

By using individuals who had all participated in one of two institutes developed specifically for mid-career professionals, it was easier to compare and contrast individual experiences of the participants with a common connection in their mid-career time-frame

and their work in student affairs. Individuals with diverse backgrounds and experiences in and out of student affairs and higher education were purposefully solicited.

Research Questions

Throughout the data collection for this study, four research questions guided its progress.

1. What are the experiences of individuals who self-define as “mid-career professionals” in student affairs?
2. How do these individuals define “mid-career”?
3. What challenges and supports are present for mid-career professionals in institutions and student affairs professional organizations?
4. How do the challenges and supports affecting mid-career professionals influence their decision to stay or leave student affairs?

Data Collection Methods

The methods used for this study were an online survey of 23 participants, and interviews with 15 different individuals conducted over a span of approximately three months. The interviews were semi-structured in an effort to utilize the prior information gathered from the online survey in developing themes and threads to discuss with participants during the actual interviews, which provided more meaning and richness to the study. The setting for each interview was at the participant’s institution and conducted via telephone.

The interviews were driven by the responses from the survey and developments in the professional lives of participants. At the conclusion of the surveys and each interview, emerging themes and trends in the data were coded into data “chunks” (Rossman &

Rallis, 1998, p. 17). Examples of topics around which interview questions were framed included: (1) career mobility or advancement, (2) career preparation during graduate programs, (3) career development while in the field. Written summaries were sent to all interview participants at the conclusion of each interview phase.

First Phase of Study - Online Survey

Prior to the interviews, I conducted an online survey to determine whether themes found in the literature on mid-career in student affairs resonated with professionals regardless of their functional areas (e.g., residential life, student life, etc.). The survey did not classify individuals by age, gender, or ethnicity, but instead used these descriptors later when reporting the data within chapters four and five to emphasize study findings. At the beginning of the survey, each participant was given the opportunity to report individual characteristics as well as indicate their specific functional area in student affairs. Ultimately, the data trends aided in the development of research questions and participant interview questions for the qualitative phase of the study. The survey questions were arranged under four central themes developed from the literature: mid-career in student affairs, career advancement, graduate education, and attrition (see survey instrument in appendix B).

I employed a single-stage (Creswell, 2003) sampling procedure using existing data from an institute sponsored by ACPA. The institute is called the Donna M. Bourassa Mid-Level Management Institute (MMI) and focuses on issues important to mid-level and mid-career student affairs professionals. By using the participants from this institute a random sample was created within the context of the intended population design. Each institute is limited to 50 participants annually, to ensure a more diverse sample across

functional areas (e.g., residence life, student activities, career services, etc.) within student affairs.

My study sampled four years of participants beginning in 2002-2005 (ACPA did not hold an institute in 2000 and the participant list for 2001 could not be located because of a database switch). Using stratification for a single-stage sample from an existing dataset helped ensure a unique and diverse sample. In early March, ACPA sent out an invitation to participate in the survey on my behalf via email to their lists of past participants. A reminder email was sent out to solicit participants one month later in April also through ACPA. This resulted in the survey being sent to 102 eligible records (current email addresses), with 21 emails returned because of bad or expired addresses. 23 individuals initially entered the on-line survey site; 19 individuals ultimately completed the entire instrument and submitted a completed survey for data analysis.

Second Phase of Study - Participant Interviews

One of the purposes of the study was to provide richer data for the student affairs field in relation to the mid-career experience, interviewing each participant individually allowed this richness to develop (Creswell, 2003). Integration of the results from the survey and the interviews occurred during the interpretation portion of the study (Creswell, 2003). Again, the quantitative data gathered in the survey was used in part to inform the data gathered in the qualitative phase. Specifically, questions used during the participant interviews were generated from the survey responses. For the purposes of this study, no specific theoretical perspective was employed in relation to gender, race, or location before the interviews were conducted. However, during the analysis of the

interview responses, thematic differences among participants were noted in relation to gender, race, and type of institution.

I recruited interview participants from both MMIs sponsored by either ACPA or NASPA/SACSA. An email was sent out on my behalf from MMI program administrators soliciting individual participation in my study on mid-career. I recruited 15 individuals to participate in the interview phase of my study. Each of the interviews lasted between 45 minutes to one and half hours and 14 of the 15 were conducted over the telephone. The very first interview I conducted was in person at a professional institute held for individuals who work in judicial affairs. I transcribed each interview and sent a copy of the interview via email for member check. Once receiving the return transcript, I began analyzing the data.

Data Analysis and Interpretation of Interview Phase

The data from the interviews was continually organized, categorized, and coded as a means of monitoring changes in the professional lives of the study participants. In support of this process, Merriam (1998) contended that in qualitative research any data collection and analysis must be a simultaneous process in order for major themes and/or ideas to emerge. Thus, all taped telephone interviews were transcribed verbatim and sent to participants for accuracy and integrity. As interviews were transcribed, I began to dissect themes from the responses formed around key topic areas in my study. In a sequential approach as described by Creswell (2003), I also used the survey instrument to obtain themes and test specific areas of inquiry that I explored during the interviews. Because my study was a mixed-methods study using a survey and interviews, I was able to construct a “nested model” (2003) where the results of the survey were often found

within the interview responses. I also developed subcodes which lead into codes (Miles, & Huberman, 1994) and eventually thematic interpretation across all of the data.

Descriptions of Interview Participants

Four of the 15 interview participants were male; two described themselves as persons of color; and the ages ranged from 27 years to 50 years. The participants were given pseudonyms to help maintain the integrity of the data and create a more open and free environment for them to respond more candidly to interview questions. For detailed classification of interview participants including pseudonyms, age, gender, ethnicity, institution type, functional area, and family situation the reader should refer to the appendix A.

Bill M.

At the time of the interview he was working as an assistant dean of students in student affairs at a large, public, four-year institution. He entered a master's program for college student personnel directly following receiving his bachelor's degree. He has worked at four different institutions including his current one since graduating with his master's degree. He also has a doctoral degree in education, which was completed two years ago.

Sarah F.

At the time of the interview she was working as an assistant director in residence life at a large, public, four-year institution. She has a master's degree in student affairs and has worked at four different institutions including her current one since graduating with her master's degree.

Janet R.

At the time of the interview she was working as a director in campus activities (left institution in July 2006) at a medium-sized, private, four-year institution. She has a masters degree in college student personnel and has worked at one institution since graduating with her master's degree, which has included five position changes.

Alice N.

At the time of the interview she was working as a coordinator in Greek affairs at a public, four-year institution. She has master's degree in student affairs and has worked at four institutions including her current one since graduating with her master's degree.

Francis H.

At the time of the interview she was working as an assistant dean at a large, public, four-year institution. She has a master's degree in student affairs and has worked at two institutions including her current one since graduating with her master's degree (includes four position changes).

Slade L.

At the time of the interview he was working as an associate director in student activities at a large, public, four-year institution. He has a master's degree in student affairs and has worked at three institutions including his current one since graduating with his master's degree. He currently has course work completed towards a doctoral degree and considers himself all but dissertation (ABD).

Kathy S.

At the time of the interview she was working as an assistant director in student life at a small, private, four-year institution (she has since left the institution). She has a master's degree in student affairs and she worked at one institution in residence life before

beginning her master's program, worked in residence life at the same institution she was pursuing her master's degree at, and has worked at one other institution since finishing her master's degree.

Mary S.

At the time of the interview she was working as a project manager working with technical and software support within student affairs division at a medium-sized, public, four-year institution. She has a master's degree in mathematics and has worked at her current institution for the past twelve years.

Carrie P.

At the time of the interview she was working as an associate director in a student union at a large, public, four-year institution. She has a master's degree in student affairs and has worked at three institutions including her current one since completing her master's degree.

Frank B.

At the time of the interview he was working in student life in a generalist position at a medium-sized, public, four-year institution. He has a master's degree in college student personnel and has worked at two institutions including his current one since completing his master's degree.

Nancy J.

At the time of the interview she was working in with assessment in a student life department at a large, public, four-year institution. She has a master's degree in student affairs and has worked at two institutions including her current one since completing her master's degree (includes two position changes at one institution).

Joyce B.

At the time of the interview she was working as a coordinator in a disability resource center at a large, public, four-year institution. She is currently working towards a master's degree in management and organizational development. She began her career in the private sector where she spent most of her professional career before entering student affairs. She has worked at one institution including her current one (includes three position changes).

Julie S.

At the time of the interview she was working in a counseling center at a large, public, four-year institution. She has a Doctorate of Psychology and has worked at three institutions including her current one.

George S.

At the time of the interview he was working as a coordinator in student affairs at a medium-sized, public, two-year institution. He has a doctoral degree in higher education and a master's degree in secondary education. He has worked at one institution including his current one since completing his doctoral work.

Margaret T.

At the time of the interview she was working as an assistant dean at a small, private, four-year institution. She has a master's degree in counseling and has worked at two institutions including her current one since completing her master's degree.

“Goodness” in Qualitative Research

The term “goodness” is used in place of more frequently used terms found in qualitative research such as validity or trustworthiness. For my study, the term

“goodness” is used in the same way authors use the terms validity and trustworthiness. I placed emphasis on the qualitative design because I was interested in learning more about the experiences of professionals at mid-career through interviews. The interviews allowed participants to reflect and respond on their professional and personal lives by answering a series of probing questions and statements. This also permitted me to dissect the layers that surround the mid-career professional, layers that are often overlooked by student affairs and institutions when trying to label this time-frame. More than any other method, interviews allowed me to capture more than the titles, positions, and responsibilities participants were and instead chronicle their mid-career experience. Ultimately, it allowed me to put forward some thoughtful and meaningful implications and recommendations for the individuals and institutions working with mid-career professionals. Understanding there are also some challenges that arise when using qualitative methods, in the final section I present research that supports this method of inquiry for this study. This is introduced as “goodness” in qualitative research.

Understanding the issue of trustworthiness surrounding the use of qualitative methods to explore phenomenon, I drew upon a term developed by Arminio and Hultgren (2002) when judging qualitative research. The idea of using *goodness* to judge qualitative research requires that certain criteria are used when conducting qualitative research including illustrating meaning-making processes, linking epistemological and theoretical foundations to select methodology, and clear data collection and analysis methods (2002). A final criterion employs all of these conditions to create goodness in qualitative research; the research should offer a new understanding that leads to improved practice

(2002). As suggested by Arminio and Hultgren (2002) the language of goodness creates a way to “view, rather than to define quality in qualitative research” (p. 447).

Particular to this study involving participant interviews as one method of data collection, goodness according to Whitt (1991) includes “thick descriptions rich in details about the setting, its context, and its people” (p. 45). According to Whitt, goodness also includes “finding and selecting participants who explicate the data and text in ways that are consistent with the selected methodology” (p. 454) (Arminio & Hultgren, 2002). Finally, Arminio and Hultgren (2002) cite revealing researcher “biases, perspectives, and experiences of the phenomena to be studied” (p. 454) as a test for goodness.

Important to the qualitative portion of this study was Arminio and Hultgren’s (2002) final criterion where goodness in qualitative research strives to create new understanding leading to improved practice. Due to the lack of current research on the experiences of mid-career student affairs professionals, I am aimed for data that produced usable and rich information for use by the profession and institutions. The information could be in the form of improved professional development, new or changed personnel practices, and overall support for this important career stage in student affairs. The importance of qualitative work as suggested by Brown (1998) relates to “providing new insights useful to members of the profession as professionals” (p. 258). Arminio and Hultgren (2002) offer a final thought on qualitative research adhering to the elements of goodness. The authors believe goodness “requires researchers offer recommendations for how practice can be transformed due to the insights gained from the study” (p. 458) (2002). For me this will be the focus from data collected during this study.

For the purpose of my study, I used the data to detail the experiences of individuals at mid-career so I could illustrate how the mid-career time-frame is often confusing and challenging. By using interviews as a primary method of collecting data, I was trying to elicit responses from participants that would allow for candid and rich descriptions of the mid-career experience. The data collection and analysis were in a clear and consistent manner which involved participants in every part of the process, many of who were interested in my study results. Ultimately, the study data provides some new insight for individuals, institutions, and student affairs in understanding how complex the mid-career time-frame is, and how their practices should change to reflect this complexity.

Qualitative Sampling Limitations

Particular to using interviews, qualitative research notes a potential weakness in gathering data filtered through the views of the participants (Creswell, 2003). Some of the interviews were conducted in a natural setting such as a personal residence but many were conducted at the participant's institutions over the telephone (Creswell, 2003). I would argue for many in student affairs the participant institutions are also more like natural settings for the profession. Regardless, in this particular study I did not see this as a limitation because the study was designed to examine and document the experiences of individuals at mid-career who have attended one of two institutes. I also avoided what Jones (2002) terms "backyard research" by seeking participants either at the host institution or in colleagues with whom he has regular professional contact.

I first identified individuals who are currently at the mid-career stage within student affairs, regardless of their functional area of expertise within the profession. The

definition used for the population will include current or former student affairs professionals between the ages of 30-55, who have completed a master's degree. Second, I solicited only individuals who had participated in one of two institutes designed for mid-level managers in student affairs. In selecting this sample, I also relied on criteria that, according to Jones (2002), that are anchored in the research questions of the study. Addressing the issue of sample size (12 participants), I was concerned more with the quality and depth of information obtained through the interviews and research process and less with the actual number of participants (2002). This also included paying careful attention to constructing a "diverse" sample of participants (Jones, 2002), avoiding the common practice in student affairs of just including participants based on race, gender, or sexual identity.

Finally, I recognized my own biases and subjectivity because of the proximity to the subject matter to my current status as a mid-career student affairs professional. Jones (2002) calls on researchers to understand the importance of "one's own personality and the influence of this positionality on who and what can be known" (p.466). Understanding the "complex dynamics attached to entering communities both similar to and different from one's own" (p. 466) also was important to the quality and validity of this research study.

Conclusion

Using a mixed-methods study design, I was able to test thematic areas and build on the results from a survey instrument for my interviews. The interviews not only allowed me to test themes generated from the literature and the survey but more importantly it allowed me to explore these themes with participants in a manner

permitting the development of rich and complex data. The richness of the participant interviews helped me delve deep into the experiences of individuals who identified themselves as mid-career, and begin to re-define this experience. The next two chapters present data from the surveys and interviews interwoven throughout each chapter. The reader will notice that no attempt was made to separate the responses of survey and interview participants. I believed that the responses from both groups together added to my understanding of the mid-career experience and its impact on these individuals.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS

The Mid-Career Student Affairs Experience

Contrary to a belief that mid-career is one point in a career, participants in this study viewed mid-career as an evolution that began at entry-level, moved into mid-career, and culminated with late-career. It was an evolution often met with professional and personal confusion and frustration that came to symbolize the mid-career experience for participants. In this chapter and the next both survey and interview participants share their thoughts and feelings about their experiences as mid-career professionals in the field of student affairs. The experiences of these participants provide a portrait of a mid-career professional who is simultaneously the core of the field and the hope for the future. These are individuals who exist in the most under-researched and misunderstood professional timeframe in student affairs.

This chapter begins with the participants' descriptions of their current experiences as mid-career professionals at their institutions and in the field, and how these experiences are influenced by the tension found at this career time-frame. Included are descriptions of how other life issues, such as family, graduate programs, and work/life balance influence the mid-career experience. In Chapter 5 I continue where this chapter concludes by examining the participants' satisfaction during the mid-career experience and exploring the different ways professional development affects this time-frame. I

conclude the chapter with a candid examination of how the participants' satisfying or unsatisfying mid-career experiences can influence their decision to leave or remain in the field. Together, in both chapters four and five, I take the reader through the complicated and often uneasy time in the lives of mid-career student affairs professionals.

According to participants from this study, there is no clear definition of mid-career in student affairs. Definitions given by participants were varied and included different elements including title, responsibilities, aspirations, and number of years in the field. Although not every study participant expressed a desire to move into senior-level positions many did discuss how they hoped to gain valuable skills they could use as they advanced professionally. However, many participants were confronted by their inability to leave some of the entry-level responsibilities while assuming those duties associated with mid-level work.

When creating the sample population for this study, I used familiar terms and definitions from the literature and field to describe mid-career professionals in student affairs. However, because the amount of research focusing on mid-career student professionals is small in comparison to research on entry or senior-level professionals, most research on the topic is no more than 15 years old. The dearth of research on mid-career student affairs professionals was a major reason for undertaking this study. Additionally important to this study, I was attempting to create a richer and more expansive definition of mid-career based on the responses of both survey and interview participants. Ultimately, after conducting the surveys and interviews I ended with two, somewhat differing ideas about what it means to be a mid-career student affairs professional, one from the literature and the other from the participants.

In conducting this study, I primarily focused on what the participants had to say about their mid-career experience, while giving only brief descriptors of their age, area of responsibility, gender, and institution to give the reader a snapshot of study participants. I also solicited participants who had self-selected to participate in one of two mid-managers institutes sponsored by student affairs professional organizations. One reason for doing this was to allow individuals to participate in the study who had self-identified themselves as mid-career professionals in what ever descriptions they chose to use.

With both the survey and interview participants, I specifically asked individuals to define mid-career in student affairs and how they believed the field defined mid-career student affairs. Overall, many participant responses paralleled research on mid-career, citing skill sets, age, title, and responsibilities. This included items like supervision of professionals, budgets, and other resources. It also included number of years in the field, number of positions held since completing graduate school, and age. These responses were very similar to how previous research defined mid-career in student affairs. However, as I detail in this chapter, this was only one piece of a more complex definition of mid-career provided by study participants.

All of the study participants viewed themselves as mid-career professionals in student affairs. They used familiar terminology to describe parts of their experiences. But as I detail in this study, many participants also had strong feelings of being caught between two conflicting identities, one carrying the expectation of performing at a higher level, and the other still clinging to lower-level, or entry-level responsibilities. As one participant phrased it, [“it’s like] living in a kind of dual world” (George S.) with high-level expectations and low-level responsibilities. This was often considered a confusing

time for many participants who, on the surface had the mid-career labels and terms used by the field and institutions such as “director,” “supervisor,” or “manager,” but who still held onto such tasks as food purchaser, table mover, or sign poster. The conflict between these two “worlds” created confusion for participants and caused many to question their role at their institution and in the field. This also led some participants to feel stuck at mid-career and think about how long they could remain in the profession. The definition of mid-career and the feelings of existing in two worlds became a critical aspect of how participants viewed themselves professionally, and this idea continued to surface throughout the study. It also contributed to, as I discuss in Chapter Five, participants’ feelings of dissatisfaction from existing in these two often contradictory worlds. Not unlike the importance placed on professional development at mid-career, feelings of being rooted in two worlds at mid-career surfaced throughout the entire study.

I will begin this chapter by discussing some familiar definitions of mid-career in student affairs and detailing how many of the participants echo the familiar mid-career descriptions found in the field and at institutions. I will also discuss participants’ own ideas about what it means to be a mid-career professional in student affairs. I then continue the chapter with participants describing how the definitions of mid-career can often lead to their feeling as if they are rooted in two worlds: still performing entry-level tasks while also performing higher level duties. I build on the idea of existing in two worlds by describing participants’ thoughts of being overlooked or trapped by the field as they advanced from entry-level to mid-career, staying in mid-career, and looking to advance into senior-level positions. I then conclude the chapter by examining how participants’ professional careers in student affairs at mid-career correspond with their

personal lives. This includes experiences involving their families, the balance between their work and personal lives, and how their work in graduate school contributed to their mid-career experience.

Defining Mid-Career

Only as far back as the early 1990s were researchers beginning to define mid-career in student affairs. In 1990, Benke and Disque used the term *mid-manager* and urged researchers to resist the idea to use terminology and research from sources outside of student affairs. Gordon, Strode-Border, and Mann's (1993) research on chief student affairs officers produced a skill-set instead of specific descriptors to describe mid-career professionals. Skills like supervision and direction were cited by the authors (1993). Similarly, Fey and Carpenter (1996) looked at whether the individual reported to a chief student affairs officer or occupied a position one level removed from that individual, and was directly responsible for supervision of other professional staff members. In his earlier research, Carpenter (1990) used a term also mentioned by some participants, that of a *mid-manager* or *mid-level professional*. Fey and Carpenter (1996) also studied skill sets of mid-level student affairs professionals, with their average research participant being a 41-year old female with seven years of experience in the profession and possessing a masters degree. In 2004, the text *Roads Taken* was published, which chronicled the lives of women who were currently in or had moved beyond mid-career in student affairs. While the text does not specifically attempt to define mid-career, certain portions cite age and responsibility in denoting mid-career. Throughout most of this research much was lacking about what it means to be a mid-career student affairs professional.

Perhaps in a nod to the lack of research and inconsistent mid-career definitions in the field, defining mid-career proved challenging and elusive for many study participants. While none of the participants defined it exactly the same, there were some similarities among the responses. Both survey and interview participants primarily viewed mid-career in one of two ways: either as a time of significant and new responsibilities, or as a position related to their title. Participants who did not view it as either a position or as the taking on of additional responsibilities tended to define it as a level achieved by working a certain number of years in the field. Only one participant specifically discussed how the type of institution affected this definition although many did mention it, and a few others either discussed mid-career within a larger context, which included types of institutions, or questioned the term of mid-career outright.

In further discussions about defining mid-career, many participants commented on the differences in positions and institutions that made defining mid-career difficult. This fact seemed even more evident when comparing the demographic breakdown of participants, even among the small sample represented public, private, large, and small institutions. In addition, the range of functional areas represented by participants included almost every position type in the student affairs. While it would seem the participants in this study epitomized the diffuse nature of student affairs in higher education, as the next section will demonstrate, mid-career is less about how positions and institutions define individuals, and more about how the experience defines mid-career.

Positions and Titles

Participants who defined mid-career from a positional standpoint used titles such as Associate Director, Director, and, even Associate Dean. Many participants cited

examples from the field and their institutions to support the mid-career titles they used. However, no participant felt the position of Dean or Vice-President was within the realm of mid-career. One participant described it as “[not]entry-level but yet there are still positions you aspire too” (Francis H.). Another specified the mid-career positions as Director or Associate Director, but also felt they were an individual who was thinking of “moving on, moving up, or over” (Mary S.)

More so than their interview counterparts, survey participants used references to titles or positions when defining mid-career. “Basically, you have too much experience to be considered entry-level and you’re too young to be a Dean of Students or VP of Student Affairs” (survey participant). Another survey participant made a similar comment, “individuals who are not at the Vice Presidential level but who are Directors or Associate Directors of Programs.” Among the interview participants who discussed mid-career in terms of position, only one believed it was tied to a particular institution where a position was located. Both of these sections represent many of the feelings participants expressed about the positions and titles associated with mid-career, an existing connection to entry-level and a time to begin thinking about their future in the field.

Mid-Career Responsibilities and Skills

In discussing mid-career, titles and positions were often mentioned, but participants more frequently used words to describe levels of responsibility or skill-sets that mid-career professionals would normally have achieved. Skills like supervision, budgeting, and managing people or areas were most cited by both interview and survey participants. Interestingly, these were the same skill-sets mentioned by both interview and survey participants as being abilities they were lacking as they moved into mid-

career. Participants also considered this a time when they felt that, as professionals they should have more responsibility for the operation of their department as well as the ability to make decisions that had larger impact on the campus. In the next section of this chapter, I present more thoughts from participants relating to what would become a recurring theme in this study – that mid-career was a professional existence involving lower level responsibilities coupled with that of higher level expectations.

Professional position titles were often mentioned by survey participants, but those who commented on skills at mid-career appeared to agree with the sentiments expressed by the following interview participant: “I think people typically view the mid-manager by [his or her] title, [and] they will assume or not assume that you’re in a mid-manager role by your title” (Slade L.). A survey participant expressed similar thoughts, believing it was responsibility and position together that defined mid-career in the field. As they stated, “A mid-level professional is an appropriate blend of a front-line practitioner and a supervisor.” Another survey participant added this to it, saying, “[to be]...a mid-career student affairs professional means to be supervising professional staff, to be a decision maker and key policy deliverer (and sometimes creator), to be able to make independent decisions on important issues...”

In addition to supervision, budgeting, and managing people, one participant saw mid-career as a time to begin mentoring entry-level professionals in the field while finding new mentors from the ranks of the senior leadership. “A definition that I subscribe to is often the glue between SSAO(s) and entry-level professionals” (Frank B.). This participant also thought mid-career was a time when individuals were considering continuing their education.

While many participants believed the amount of responsibility increased at mid-career one participant felt that even when making decisions with great impact the ultimate responsibility still fell on the senior student affairs administrator. “Of course I am going to be held responsible by him (SSAO) but when it comes outside of the division...he’s going to be the one that’s going to be ultimately held responsible for the actions of everyone in the division” (George S.). Sometimes, the level of responsibility came with the experience or number of years in the field.

Years in the Field

Only a few participants from both the survey and interviews defined mid-career based on the number of years an individual had spent in the field. Of those few, only one relied solely on the number of years in the field as the benchmark for mid-career. This individual had been in the field almost 10 years and contrasted student affairs with the corporate world where she believed mid-career came earlier in terms of the years of experience. “I think once you pass 5-6 years you start to become a mid-career professional. In the corporate world you are still pretty new but in our profession you easily become seasoned especially within your discipline” (Alice N.). Another interview participant defined mid-career by the number of years in experience but also by the responsibility: “...I am thinking a person who’s been in the field full-time five years...who is preferably supervising a few graduate or full-time staff members” (Sarah F.). A survey participant also defined mid-career by the number of years: “...you have been in the field for longer than 5 years, but don’t have the status of being called Dr. or Dean!”

Defining mid-career using the number of years experience was not shared by most participants even though professionals in the field and institutions recruiting for open positions in student affairs often highlight the number of years experience an individual possesses.

Participants never viewed the number of years an individual had been working in the field as the sole descriptor in defining mid-career. Comparisons were made between student affairs and the private sector suggesting lower benchmarks for student affairs professionals in reaching certain career timeframes. Even as institutions and the field often attach years of experience to position requirements, participants still coupled years in the field with some other indicator, such as position or responsibility. Of these two, the types of skills or responsibilities an individual possessed were more frequently regarded as a hallmark in defining mid-career. For many participants, the types of skills one possessed and their current position or title were often tied together in defining mid-career. However, responsibilities, titles, or years of experience was never a complete definition of mid-career and often led to confusion about how mid-career professionals exist.

Mid-Career: Between Two Worlds

The responses from both study groups about the definition of mid-career often included discussions about the feelings of being somewhere between entry and senior-level positions. It was a time for many who felt as if they were caught between having too much or too little experience in the field. This was viewed negatively by some participants because they felt labeled by those professionals who were in senior-level positions. "It means waiting. It means relying on others. It means being subject to others

actions or inactions. It means not being able to properly lead – but to follow, even more than at the entry level.” (survey participant)

As I will present later in this chapter, the issue of feeling “stuck” at mid-career influenced how participants also viewed their mid-career experience and is detailed more fully in the next section of this chapter. However, a few participants who discussed the definition of mid-career also commented on their feelings associated with feeling stuck at mid-career and included it in their definitions. One interview participant felt she was sometimes not viewed as a professional who was prepared to move into different positions. “...at the same time no one sees as you moving up, either too young or don’t have enough experience, kind of caught in the stratosphere...” (Nancy J.). In perhaps a reference to professional development support at mid-career, one survey participant knew where she wanted to go but, “it is an awkward and uncomfortable time. I can see the position I want, but I have trouble figuring out how to get there.”

Another interview participant viewed mid-career from a positive and negative position: “It is an opportunity to learn a lot of knowledge in mid-career about university processes and you are not protected like young professionals. When you move into mid-career you play with the ‘big dogs.’ It means the VP is not smiling for you or happy all the time...” (Kathy S.). A survey participant shared this idea by defining mid-career as “...a position that serves as a important link between the entry level and upper level administration...[the mid-career professional has] the responsibility of being a “gatekeeper” of information as well which can aid or impede the vitality and functionality of a whole department.” Perhaps the most intense yet immensely lasting definition of mid-career was offered by a survey participant. “A mid-career student

affairs professional is probably the worst position to be in. If heaven is being in a senior-level position and hell is being relegated to an entry-level position, then I'm in purgatory." While most participant definitions were not as explicit, this definition does illustrate the feelings of being in the middle for many participants. Overall, participants had a much easier time defining mid-career individually. When asked how the field defines mid-career in student affairs participants had a much more difficult time providing clear definitions.

How Student Affairs Defines Mid-Career

When examining literature on the topic of mid-career in student affairs, definitions of mid-career focused on age, position, or experience. As I presented in the previous section, the reality of how individuals in the field actually define mid-career is more complex. Many interview participant responses included comments on age, position, or experience but they also focused on how it feels to be in mid-career and the kinds of responsibility individuals often possess. Because many participants in this study were active in professional associations and in the field they were also asked to discuss how the field of student affairs defines mid-career. Responses to this question were not as focused as the individual definitions of mid-career but still touched on issues of position, age, and responsibility. Additionally, in this section I only present responses from interview participants because survey participants were not asked to respond this question. What stood out from participant responses was the lack of clarity in the field about what it means to be at mid-career in student affairs.

Confusion in the Field

After attending one of two Mid-Managers Institutes (MMI) sponsored by ACPA or NASPA/SACSA, many participants were still confused about how the field defines mid-career. Some participants believed attending an MMI would simplify the definition based on the types of professionals in attendance. Unfortunately, this did not provide enough clarity and left a few participants relying on their individual feelings about the status of mid-career in student affairs. "...I sat there wondering with some people there (MMI), *are they at mid-level or do they just want to be?*" (emphasis added) (Janet R.) "I thought it was interesting because there were actually some people at MMI who, by title, were in positions that you might commonly think 'oh yeah that goes with mid-manager' but by function they probably were not" (Slade L.). "Having attended MMI this summer we had people really that were at multiple levels - it was all over the map" (Bill M.). In an apparent paradox, the two professional associations attempting to gather and assist mid-career professionals were perhaps unknowingly contributing to the confusion. The confusion for some participants also extended into the entire field of student affairs.

Confusion about how the student affairs field defines mid-career was felt by some participants. Some felt the field did not define it well regardless of one's position or institution. "I don't think the field defines it very well at all" (Kathy S.). "I don't know I get confused about how it is defined" (Bill M.). While not commenting negatively on how the field defines mid-career other participants felt the definition was very broad and covered all types of positions. "I think it tends to run the gamut from that to people who've been in the field for many, many, many years even chief housing officers would be considered in some circles mid-managers as they're not student affairs vice chancellors." (Sarah F.). Another also defined it broadly by concentrating on just the type

of position one possessed, “I truly believe it is the type of position and experience you have had” (Alice N.). Some participants returned to familiar responses (as seen in the previous section) with years of experience, supervision, and handling budgets as part of their responses. “For the field I think that they would probably say you need to have at least five years experience, probably supervise some others, have some budget responsibility” (Slade L.). Another participant added, “probably the Director level with opportunities to go higher, supervising more people...” (Francis H.). Most participants were able to comment about experience or years in the field but some also felt there was something else that made it difficult to define within the field.

Diversity of Institutions

Participants who believed the definition was unclear attributed it to the variety of institutions and positions in the field. Returning to the idea of the diversity of institutions and positions in the field, some participants believed this issue would hamper ever creating a clear and concise definition of mid-career which included the entire field. “...because the fact that titles are so institutionally specific you could be a Director and be more steps away from the President than I am now” (Kathy S). “You could be in year three and be an Assistant Dean somewhere and possibly be heading to another smaller institution to be in an even more upper administrative position” (Alice N.). Another commented along similar thinking, “you might have an Associate Director at a large institution that might equate a Director level at a smaller institution” (Francis H.). The breadth and diversity of the field and, more importantly, institutions, created confusion for some in how the field really defines mid-career. One participant pared it down to a definition which has probably served in the past and will continue to serve the field when

defining mid-career. “The best definition I know is kind of a deconstructionist definition which is not entry level and not senior level” (Kathy S.).

Defining mid-career in student affairs seemed an easier exercise for those participants who used their own ideas and experiences in defining it. Attaching skill-sets, position titles, or years experience were often included in responses. For some participants, it was a time of feeling unsure and overlooked by senior-level professionals to advancing within the profession. Discussing how the field defines mid-career, participants were much less clear and sometimes felt it was confusing even though many believed skills and experiences would be included in the definition. The diversity and number of institutions also contributed to an unclear definition of mid-career. Even as the field, institutions, and individuals attempted to add some clarity and continuity to the definition of mid-career, participants felt the breadth and diversity of their profession was making this an impossible task. This confusion began to seep into how participants viewed their overall mid-career experience.

Ultimately, with so many variables involved in defining mid-career there was no simple and concise way to define mid-career for individuals and the field. While important to the study, adhering to a more structured definition of mid-career or creating a working definition of mid-career was not an initial focus of the study. However, in detailing the experiences of mid-career professionals, study participants from the surveys and the interviews had important experiences and insights that I believed warranted heightened emphasis. The next section details an important insight I developed while discussing the mid-career experience with participants. Participants felt as if their experience at mid-career was often a time of existing in two different worlds.

Rooted in Two Worlds

In the student affairs profession, as individuals move from being entry-level professionals to mid-level, it often creates in them feelings of existing in two professional worlds. As student affairs professionals advance they gain more experience, and the expectations and responsibilities change to reflect new or different job-functions. Moving from an entry-level position to a mid-career position also often presents new challenges and opportunities for student affairs professionals. Unfortunately, for many participants in this study, the ability to completely identify themselves as being in mid-career once they moved out of an entry-level position was hampered by feeling “rooted” in two worlds: One world existed where participants felt like an entry-level professional performing the same tasks they had when they entered the field, while co-existing in a second world where the expectations and responsibilities that often come with being at mid-career were much greater. Participants found mid-career to be a challenging place to exist because they were not entirely clear how they should respond to it and also, if it would ever change. Because changes in their professional and personal lives were affected by the challenges participants faced at mid-career, the experience of moving from entry-level into mid-career and the feelings of existing at mid-career and trying to advance are discussed in the next several sections. In the final three sections of the chapter, I examine how the personal lives of participants often intersect, influence, and even compound their mid-career professional experience.

Moving from Entry-Level into Mid-Career and Beyond

With most of the participants in their third or fourth post-masters position in student affairs, many felt feelings of confusion and dissatisfaction from reaching mid-career and that it did not always translate into leaving entry-level tasks behind. There was a feeling that after reaching mid-career expectations would change for both professional development and career advancement. Some participants believed that even at mid-career they could not completely escape performing some entry-level tasks. “Sometimes I don’t think we ever escape programming responsibility, even as we move up there may be some programs that we are involved in we have direct responsibility for or other times involvement with our other staff” (Bill M.). Another participant commented it might depend on the institution you are currently working at. “It really depends on the institution you are at. I think we will constantly have those entry-level type tasks” (Alice N.). “I think it’s confusing for mid-level people” (Kathy S.). The confusion for some participants turned into how to exist in both worlds and how to deal with those feelings.

While most participants were able to exist in both entry-level and mid-career worlds, some felt this dualistic role could create opportunities where they could be taken advantage of. Clear and deliberate expectations from supervisors were described as one way to combat these feelings. One participant believed one of the supervisor’s roles was to communicate why certain responsibilities were taken on for mid-career professionals. “If you don’t have somebody who can verbalize that well you are going to end up feeling like the cleaning lady who gets asked to do everything but does not get credited for the sparkling house” (Kathy S.). Another participant believed the idea of being rooted in two worlds professionally was difficult for individuals to understand until reaching the level of mid-career. “I will tell you that it is a *very difficult* (emphasis added) concept to grasp

until you've ascended to that level" (Slade L.). It was difficult for some participants while others had a more fluid approach to how they existed in both worlds.

Other participants were less confused and more flexible in how they existed in both worlds. What might be considered a hallmark characteristic of the field, one participant stated, "You are between the two worlds and not feel pressured and just have to roll with it and be ok" (Margaret T.). However, she added, "...or get the PhD and hope to move up quickly" (Margaret T.). Another commented, "We just do it until the job is done" (Sarah F.). Learning to balance the two worlds was often a difficult task for participants.

Balancing the entry-level and mid-career worlds was challenging for many participants in their professional and personal lives. Participants often cited uncertainty in how to act because many were now charged with significant responsibility but they still wanted to support their staff at events and programs. Most interview participants had levels of responsibility not previously experienced, such as supervision, budgeting, and reporting. They often felt stress at having to live in two worlds which sometimes caused confusion and distrust among their staff members because they wanted to be supportive, but at the same time, perform at a higher level within the institution. "We learn all the team building skills, working down with the troops and it is what we talk and what we preach" (Slade L.). He added,

.....but you don't want to be too close to the troops and working with them because if you are then you're going to be seen as still one of the troops...so from the other side that collegiality and that partnership that I

talked about nobody is going to trust you because you're still close to the other side. (Slade L)

Another participant felt torn because she was often in the role of supporting programs from her department or division, but was also expected to make important decisions affecting more of the campus. "I think that it is a very awkward position to be in to be called to make other decisions where you are seen in a much different light" (Francis H.). Some participants had never thought about existing in two worlds professionally until they began to discuss being a mid-career professional. One interview participant described how he lived in these two separate worlds, "I live in this kind of dual world where I am, I may do some kind of entry-level things, in regards to my immediate supervisor I'm thought to be one of those big decision makers by the people who are subordinate to me" (George S.). Sometimes the conflict between the two worlds also seeped into the personal lives of participants.

As participants moved into mid-career positions many took on more responsibility and looked to delegating other tasks within their departments. Asking other individuals within their departments to come early or stay late for a program, setting up food or tables, and being present to support events were examples of delegated tasks given by participants. However, many wanted to delegate more but still had or felt a responsibility to perform some entry-level tasks to assure the success of a program or event. By delegating less it caused stress on their personal lives by taking time away from families and activities outside of their positions. One interview participant commented it was a difficult place to be because "with my family, with my lifestyle I would like to be able to delegate more" (Francis H.). Some participants simply did not have any other staff to

delegate these tasks to, "...let somebody else load the food on the tables, and make sure the plates and cups are there, make sure the signs are put out for such and such event but I don't have anybody to delegate those tasks to" (Francis H.). Ultimately, as many participants struggled with existing in both worlds, they knew whatever they did to support their staffs or perform entry-level tasks, their other work still had to be completed.

At the end of the day, whether or not everybody on my staff thinks 'well that was really cool that you came to that program last night' but if my report's' not turned in my boss is saying 'what do you mean you didn't have time to do that report, you're the Associate Director why is that not done?' (Slade L.)

As the participants moved from entry-level into mid-career their expectations and responsibilities changed in their professional lives. However, some expressed conflicting feelings between these two career time-frames. Many participants were often still performing tasks associated with entry-level positions yet taking on higher level tasks and learning new skills. This created confusion for some participants, and resentment for others which lead to negative feelings towards their institutions and the field. Some participants also felt trapped between entry-level and mid-career, which often lead to feeling they could not advance fully into mid-career or into senior-level positions. Moving from entry-level into mid-career was a difficult time for participants. For many participants, once reaching mid-career they developed feelings of being trapped or "stuck" at mid-career. In the following section, I examine participant reactions and feelings of being stuck at mid-career.

Feeling “Stuck” at Mid-Career

Mid-career is an important time in the professional lives of student affairs professionals. It is a time when issues concerning career advancement and professional development become more important to lives of student affairs professionals because of changes in professional and personal needs. It is also important because more time in student affairs is often spent at mid-career than at either entry or senior level. The limited opportunity for career growth or advancement was one of the three frustrations in the work life of mid-level administrators, according to Johnsrud, Heck, & Rosser, (2000). While some participants expressed a desire to advance in the field, others were content to remain at the mid-career level. This presented a challenge for participants who had chosen to remain at mid-career, or who were simply evaluating what might be the next movement in mid-career when thinking about their professional futures. Benke and Disque (1990) concluded more research was needed on career mobility to address questions of mid-manager immobility and advancement.

The literature has used a term for mid-career individuals in student affairs who are confused or unsure about what steps to take next in their career. The term “stuck” is cited in literature (Benke & Disque, 1990; Carpenter, Guido-DiBrito, & Kelly, 1987; Hancock, 1988) to describe when mid-career professionals are thinking of career advancement but are feeling the inability to advance beyond mid-career. In the following section, I examine participants’ responses to the feeling of being “stuck” at mid-career. Particular

attention was paid to survey participants who used the term “stuck” to refer to mid-career without being prompted by a question from me.

Feelings of being stuck at mid-career centered around two major issues on why this might occur. One issue was based on how individuals who felt stuck dealt with the situation. Some participants believed this centered around personal issues happening at the same time. Others thought whatever the reason, personal or professional, it was up to the individual to change this type of thinking and move on. The second issue for individuals feeling stuck at mid-career involved the narrowing career ladder for student affairs professionals as they looked at advancing into senior-level positions. In 1983, Harder concluded that in 25 years the number of senior student affairs officer (SSAO) positions in higher education would become increasingly smaller. Some participants acknowledged this created fewer and fewer positions for individuals at mid-career who wished to advance in the field.

One of the issues compounding the lack of advancement opportunities was how the field viewed and supported mid-career professionals who did not wish to advance beyond a mid-career position. I discuss this issue in a later section in this chapter that examines how mid-career individuals are often overlooked even after choosing not to advance. Whether the issue of feeling stuck was viewed as an individual concern or as a problem within the field, it was a discussion that elicited a number of responses from participants.

Participants who commented on the issue of feeling stuck at mid-career as an individual concern cited different reasons for why this would occur. Some felt that because mid-career was also a time of many personal changes this “stuck” feeling could

have come from the personal commitments that individuals had accumulated by this point in their lives, such as mortgages or families. One participant described it as “life baggage” that made it “easier to stay stuck or resolve or reconcile the frustration” (Carrie P.). Another described it as an “external pressure to stay where they are” (Mary S.). The idea of where someone was in their life situation was also related to limits of location.

A participant without a partner or family linked it to being geographically restricted because of family commitments. This sentiment was also echoed by participants with families who were limited by location and their family commitments. “If I was willing to do a national search like I was when I was entry level then there would be lots more positions but there are just more factors for me to consider at this point, that is very real” (Julie S.). There were also some individuals who needed to evaluate where they were in their careers, and make some personal choices regarding what they should do next. “The other thing I recognize is that a lot of professionals stay in jobs because they are comfortable long beyond what they should be” (Margaret T.). While not all participants felt as strongly about individual responsibility, many agreed that mid-career was a time filled with conflicting personal issues that contributed to feelings of being stuck.

Some participants also discussed how the professional structure and reality of being at mid-career in student affairs could influence feelings of being stuck. Lunsford (1984) concluded that in order to attain an SSAO position, individuals needed to move out of their current institution if they wanted to move up into senior-level administration. Participants acknowledged that as professionals progressed through student affairs there were fewer senior-level positions for mid-career professionals. Bender (1980), Bossert

(1982), and Evans (1988) all cited fewer advancement opportunities as a factor affecting attrition. “It makes me frustrated... because I see how easy it is to get stuck in the field because of the number of higher level positions” Margaret T.). “When I think about advancement there are much less opportunities, the organizational chart gets very narrower” (Julie S.). “Most departments are pretty flat in term(s) of organizational structure and people don’t leave, meaning there are few opportunities for advancement” (survey participant).

Issues of advancement were also sometimes hampered by changes in mid-career professionals’ personal lives which limited their mobility in seeking out senior-level advancement opportunities. “I think a lot of people might feel stuck if there are no positions at their institution to move to and they enjoy what they are doing. I am sort of in that predicament now, I enjoy what I’m doing but ...I don’t want to go to another institution to get it” (Francis H.). One interview participant cited the broadness of the mid-manager sector and people staying longer in their current positions as they advance as reasons for feeling stuck (Sarah F.). An interview participant felt stuck currently because she felt her supervisors did not see her beyond the position she was currently in.

...being at mid-career is a tough place to be because they...people in a position of authority...don’t necessarily see you as capable. If they have somebody else they can go to who has one more year of experience or a higher degree or a better title even if the responsibilities are the same then sometimes you get passed over. (Nancy J.)

A few survey participants also expressed similar feelings. “I am challenged because I feel in the middle. I am at the Directors level, but am consistently expected to perform at a

level that is one professional step higher than I am compensated for” (survey participant). “I feel like I am “stuck” doing Student Life forever until someone sees my potential” (survey participant). Even as the number of senior-level opportunities narrowed and personal circumstances changed some participants still found ways of not feeling stuck.

As participants grappled with feelings of being stuck at mid-career, some offered ways to combat this issue and remain viable in the field. For some participants this meant changing their career goals and how they saw themselves at mid-career. “Would it be fine to remain pretty much where I am at and find other ways to grow professionally without having to move organizationally? Part of the reconsideration process is rethinking the importance of professional goals” (Julie S.). Presenting at conferences, building their skills, taking on additional responsibilities, and professional collaboration, were examples participants offered as ways to combat feeling stuck at mid-career. One interview participant offered a simple suggestion that had worked for her in the past: “It takes a while for that ideal position to open up you have to be patient” (Sarah F.). Whatever ways participants offered to not feel stuck at mid-career it was clear from the responses more of the responsibility was on the individual than anywhere else.

As many participants offered ways to combat feeling stuck, there were also a few participants who felt differently. Participants felt not only that it was the responsibility of the individual to not feel stuck, but it was also entirely the responsibility of the individual to become “unstuck” at mid-career. One interview participant believed that if someone was feeling stuck, he or she should have a certain level of “ambition and initiative to ...if it is that important to you, you will find a way to become unstuck” (Frank B.). Another

participant portrayed mid-career as a time with many new opportunities so individuals would not feel stuck.

...there are opportunities where people can spend a whole career really at mid-level and maybe even assume new and different responsibilities or become employed in a whole new office, there are opportunities out there if they are creative and can do that. (Bill M.)

One interview participant was not quite as forgiving: "...my reaction to them is 'waaa,' you know it really is a situation where I think that if they are feeling stuck I think the onus is probably more on them...if they are feeling stuck they've limited their options" (Slade L.). Finally, another interview participant commented on how feeling stuck is just part of life at mid-career and perhaps it is not negative as it has been presented. "There is just a world of 'stuckness' at this age...it happens to everybody as you get older you realize that whole world is not open before you, a lot of it is about life" (Kathy S.).

Feelings of being stuck at mid-career in student affairs are triggered by different issues. Narrowing professional advancement opportunities, personal commitments, and comfort level were some examples given by participants. However, many believed that by doing certain things like keeping current, building partnerships, and rethinking career goals individuals could combat feeling stuck at mid-career. Because feeling stuck began at the individual level those professionals who recognized the responsibility of not feeling stuck and found ways to keep themselves professionally and personally engaged at mid-career were more likely to not suffer the negative consequences. Some participants who felt stuck also believed the field of student affairs contributed to this feeling. Interview

participants who had felt stuck or understood why it happened to others at mid-career discussed how the pressure to advance within the field into senior-level positions also contributed to feeling stuck. The pressure to advance often surfaced at times when individuals were evaluating their professional and personal lives. Caught between performing entry and mid-level tasks and feeling like they could not advance beyond mid-career, they believed the field was also contributing to their being overlooked at mid-career. Whether it meant advancing in the field or finding your niche at mid-career, participants often felt unsupported by the field in this decision.

Remaining at Mid-Career

Should participants move up into the senior-level ranks of student affairs or remain content at mid-career? As participants reached mid-career it became an opportunity to ask these questions, and examine their professional careers and their futures. For some it meant moving to the next level typically into senior-level positions within student affairs. But for others it was a time to decide if staying at a mid-career or mid-level position was the best situation for them. The decision to not move up in the field or out of the field completely brought some comments from participants about how the field recognizes individuals who do not anticipate leaving mid-career or mid-level positions. Because some participants believed the field focuses on individuals moving up in the field, they believed this created the potential to overlook professionals who wanted to stay at mid-career. This section examines participant reactions to the issue of overlooking mid-career professionals who are not interested in moving up in the field.

Mid-career was also a time to evaluate how participants' professional career was staying in balance with their personal lives. In Chapter Five, I specifically examine how

participants with families, or thinking of starting a family, were balancing support for their professional and personal lives at mid-career. Much of the discussion in the section focuses on the few participants who did not have a partner or a family.

Throughout the discussions with participants many expressed interest in advancing in the field of student affairs. Some had completed doctoral degrees to further their professional careers. Others had worked many years in the field and were progressing professionally into positions with increasing responsibility and seniority. These participants felt the expectation from the field was for individuals to continue advancing professionally throughout their careers until reaching senior level positions. However, there was a smaller group of participants who were not eager, and even in some cases, completely uninterested in advancing professionally within the field. The reasons were varied: some were planning on stopping to raise a family, while others were continuing their education, or were uninterested in dealing with campus politics. Still, others were leaving the field entirely but staying in higher education either to teach or work in a different area at an institution.

Participants intending to stay at mid-career expressed concern that the field's expectations of mid-career professionals was challenging to overcome and at times counter-productive to professional growth. With the field reinforcing the idea that talented individuals at mid-career advance into senior-level positions, many participants felt this message negatively impacted how they continued to grow professionally while in mid-career. It became an interesting paradox for some participants who saw the field encouraging individuals to advance yet for them, the reality was that they could not or did not want to advance. This was listed as a challenge for one survey participant, "Not

feeling the pressure from others to continue up the ladder. Knowing that I am successful and that I don't have to keep striving to achieve success in the student affairs hierarchy." It was also challenging to an interview participant who thought advancement was tied to how the field viewed career progress. "It is an expectation put on you by the profession because that is how you make more money or move up" (Frank B.).

Another interview participant felt senior-level professionals in the field were very interested in getting mid-career professionals to advance into senior positions. "People who I talk to who are at senior level positions they're always pushing, and pushing, and pushing for those at mid-managers levels to get the additional education, get the experience to get to that level" (George S.). He continued to express concern that mid-career professionals are sometimes put in positions that required them to defend their desire to not move into senior level positions.

People I know who are at mid-managers level who are ok with that it even seems as though when they talk about it, to almost have to defend that...it seems almost (like) they have to defend that position like that is not the norm in student affairs to want to stay at mid-manager. (George S.)

Another participant also felt there was pressure in the field to advance but also took a more realistic approach, "There is a push to move ever upward in the hierarchy, but many of us don't want to be SSAOs, nor can we all be" (survey participant).

Another reason cited by some participants for staying at mid-career was the continued breadth of experience many were getting there. Participants did not want to lose the ability to be involved in many different aspects while maintaining some significant responsibilities at their institutions. Continued contact with students was also

mentioned as a reason for not wanting to move into senior-level positions. “I have been challenged to the point of how much farther up the ladder do I want to move up because with each step up... you move further away from students” (Slade L.). Participants felt once you reached the dean or vice-president level you would lose the daily student contact that many cited as one reason for staying in the field. “I don’t want to be a dean or VP, not something I aspire to...I have my hands in a lot of different things, more experience with campus politics of the university, which I like but I am not ultimately responsible for the final decision.” (Margaret T.)

While some participants bemoaned moving into senior-level positions others were less concerned about the impact of not advancing beyond mid-career. Another participant saw that mid-career professionals were not only getting overlooked by the field in many cases but were also finding an expectation to take on more responsibilities. “Yet the mid-managers are working their butt(s) off but not feeling that we are accomplishing as much as we could. That does have me a bit concerned” (Sarah F.).

Lateral moves within the field were considered viable options by some participants who wanted to be continually challenged in their mid-career positions. “The lateral move is a very viable career option because you want to come to work with excitement and energy and be able to do your best. At mid-level it is more about fit and fitting into your life then it is just having the job.” (Carrie P.)

Another interview participant also felt the field was generally supportive “as a whole” (Francis H.) of professionals who did not choose to move into senior-level positions. “I think the field is very supportive of getting where you want to be and being happy there, and if moving up, moving to those SSAOs is something you want to do then

it's supportive of that but I don't think it shuns those of us who (are) comfortable where we are either." (Francis H.)

She was concerned that different institutions react differently to individuals who choose to stay in mid-career positions.

A lot of institutions even don't look highly upon internal promotions. I see that as an obstacle they always want to bring somebody in from the outside with new ideas or whatever. (Francis H.)

I don't feel that I'm necessarily striving for a senior level position...I feel like I'm intentionally growing professionally that will help me...progress professionally and adapt my position to those new skills. (survey participant)

If being at mid-career is the place someone feels they need to be then it is a place to do strong work. (survey participant)

I think that it's ok to want to, I mean, gee if your gift was to be a middle-manager then live that gift. (Slade L.)

I simply want to be effective in my job and want to have an impact on the students and their learning. If that is buried in middle management then so be it. (survey participant)

Several of the final participants' comments appear to coincide with research on transformative learning which reflects on an individual's struggle to "be who he or she is called to be" (Kovan & Dirks, p. 102), in this case at mid-career.

The expectation that student affairs professionals advance from mid-career into senior-level positions was often felt by many participants. The expectation to advance

was viewed negatively by some participants who saw it as counter-productive to their professional development.. Even with feeling pressure to advance some participants still believed their niche was working in mid-career positions and found ways to enrich their professional lives. For those participants looking to advance, they looked to the field, institutions, and their supervisors to help prepare them.

Preparing Mid-Career Student Affairs Professionals for Advancement

Once individuals reach mid-career their professional needs change from when they first entered the profession. Some of these changes originate from individuals taking on new responsibilities or tasks with mid-career positions. Other changes are related to overall career and professional development to prepare them as they move either through mid-career into senior level positions or continue in different mid-career positions. The field of student affairs creates conferences, institutes, and workshops to assist individuals with their professional development in mid-career. Additionally, institutions can create opportunities for individual professional development available to individuals as needed. Among the participants in this study there were different responses to how professional development happens, where it happens, and what impedes it from happening at mid-career. In this section, I will discuss how mid-career professionals seek and receive professional development when they reach mid-career and beyond.

If senior-level positions were seen by many participants as their next professional move, both survey and interview participants alike were split about where that should occur. Some believed the professional associations in the field are the main conduits for preparing individuals for advancement. Other participants believed it becomes more of an institutional issue with individuals receiving different opportunities depending on their

present positions. Regardless of where participants thought it should happen, most agreed it was occurring in some fashion, but there was some responsibility of the individual to seek out opportunities for advancement. Since all of the participants for this research had attended one of two Mid-Managers Institutes sponsored by two of the larger and more well-known professional associations, the following section details participant responses relating to this area.

Since associations like NASPA and ACPA are better known in the field of student affairs and participants in this study attended one of two sponsored institutes, discussion about advancement resulted mostly from these perspectives. Participants who discussed professional associations believed, generally speaking, that opportunities for advancement and professional development were available. They also believed that conferences, institutes, and workshops for professionals tended to attract a variety of professionals from the field with important issues to share with other colleagues. There were also other niche associations that specifically targeted professionals in certain areas of the field, such as Interfraternity Institute (IFI), National Intramural and Recreational Sports Association (NIRSA) and regional associations like the Southern Association of College Student Affairs (SACSA). While most participants who discussed the role of professional associations in advancement did not create any distinction between NASPA and ACPA, a few did express some differences.

For a few interview participants a difference cited between NASPA and ACPA was more philosophical than functional and appeared to be based on participant experience. One participant believed the advancement and professional development opportunities available at an association like NASPA are developed along more

professional mentoring and informal discussions at conferences and institutes. He felt the value in these types of conversations was more important than opportunities offered from the official “textbook” (Slade L.). There was also no distinction made between title or position among participants in these informal conversations. Comparing ACPA with NASPA the participant felt ACPA had more success in serving different “...pockets through the different commissions” (Slade L.). In the end, the participant believed both associations served a purpose in the area of advancement and professional development at mid-career, but did so with different approaches. Other participants did not express as much satisfaction with the opportunities for advancement created by the professional associations and made no distinction among the different associations.

Even as many participants discussed the value of the professional associations and the opportunities for professional development they provided, some expressed concern about how it was happening. One interview participant stopped short of calling the effort “haphazard” (Carrie P.) but was concerned that the effort might not be intentional or focused enough (Carrie P.). She believed mid-managers were talking with each other and creating opportunities at conferences and institutes for mid-career professionals but was not convinced it was “...outcomes-driven by way of SSAO (senior student affairs officers) folks who are asking how are we cultivating the top dog future?” (Carrie P.). She also commented on the targeted opportunities for entry or senior level professionals. “It is a bit more intentional at the entry-level because that is what our masters programs are doing, and the PhD programs are so out there for some people because of the time commitment” (Carrie P.). “Professional conferences often include LOTS of sessions presented by entry-level individuals who are gung-ho about moving up in their career, but

not many sessions for those in the career a while” (survey participant). “There is professional development at conferences; however, most are aimed towards new and seasoned professionals” (survey participant).

Another interview participant was also not sure the field was creating opportunities for professional development at mid-career but believed the awareness level within the field was increasing.

We are doing a lot more but at the same time when I go to conferences I still don't see that much for mid-managers, still heavy on new professionals and senior like at NASPA. (Margaret T.)

We are just starting to examine chances to provide our level (mid-career) with more deliberate coaching and mentoring for the skills we need.

(survey participant)

I would like to see more money and programs available to us that focus on our growth and development as professionals (survey participant)

One survey participant offered a response in the spirit of what other participants were expressing about professional development at mid-career. “It doesn't, you (are) here, now sink or swim if you want to keep going in this field, and we'll watch to see if you make it.”

Some distinction was also made about advancing within the field or advancing out of the field.

We don't do a good job of telling people how to move up or what you do to move out. The goal of the field is to keep people but we also talk a lot about personal attention really caring about the person but our field is not

like any other and I don't think we do a very good job of helping people if they say 'hey this might not be for me' and finding something else to do.

(Margaret T.)

Other participants echoed this sentiment,

The student affairs field needs to provide training in the area of career advancement (or deciding whether to advance)... A lot of professionals stagnate at this stage because they don't have professional development opportunities to advance their careers. (survey participant)

In order to advance, everyone gives you the same message, 'get a phd!'

What I do not think they tell you is what many individuals have to do in order to successfully complete one. (survey participant)

The notion that to excel or 'move up the ladder,' one has to move to another institution (when people can move up in the same or similar company that is located in the same city). (survey participant).

Another part about being in a mid-career position is that in order for me to advance, I will have to leave my current institution, uproot my family, and move to another institution in another city. Those individuals in senior-level positions will be in their institutions for another 10-15 years. ...I'm in a catch-22 because of my experience and skills. (survey participant)

While some participants still saw the value added by professional associations for professional development at mid-career, many participants also looked to their institutions for this support. In a prologue to Chapter Five, some participants believed the institution and the past and present supervisor had a role in facilitating advancement at

mid-career. Some participants had positive experiences with current and former supervisors who facilitated their professional development at mid-career. However, many participants did not see this as intentional, but more as a function of their particular situation. “I think honestly you have to get lucky, you have to get lucky with a couple of things...gaining the right kind of experience...you also have to get lucky with having appreciative and helpful supervisors” (Alice N.). Another interview participant commented, “It all depends on how their former supervisor or institutions worked to mentor the individuals rather than manage...the whole concept of teaching people how to fish rather than just giving them the fish to feed for the day” (Sarah F.).

A survey participant believed that because of her supervisor’s reaction to professional development her institution was also not involved. “...as my boss has mentioned that she cannot prepare me for where I have to go next...” In talking with other mid-career colleagues at different institutions, one interview participant believed many of his colleagues were not getting the opportunities from their supervisors for professional development that he was (George S.). One survey participant believed her institution did not provide professional development because individuals were easily replaceable, “I do not feel my institution cares if I advance in the field. It is mainly concerned with the here and now. I’ve given them 5 years—I think they believe that we can be replaced very easily.”

Institutional funding, enrollments, and stability were also cited by participants as an encouraging or limiting factor in mid-career professional development. Participants believed together these three factors had the most direct impact on the ability of participants to attend institutes or conferences and increase their professional

development at mid-career. One survey participant connected this issue to attrition which I discuss in Chapter Five, “That’s the problem...my institution does nothing to prepare me to advance in the field. That’s why so many of my contemporaries are leaving the field.” A final thought was offered by a survey participant about advancing and professional development at their institution. “My institution does not help me at all in advancing me in the field, except to give me more job responsibilities on top of what I already have.”

Because mid-career is a time with increasing professional and personal responsibilities, a few participants expressed some concern about having the ability and time to work on professional development. While this issue was not discussed as much as others it did heighten the awareness for some participants who felt that there was an increasing lack of time and resources devoted towards their professional development. Some participants felt if they did not create a conscious effort to take time for professional development it could get lost in the everyday issues of their professional and personal lives. One interview participant commented that perhaps it was the nature of the profession that there was often not enough time to devote to professional development kinds of activities.

I think we are so busy doing our jobs and because of the place at life you are (at). I am so busy during the day I don’t have time to read professional journals and *I am not going to take time away from my family to do that* (emphasis added)...the nature of the profession in that there is not the time for those things...it is very difficult to focus on your own professional development (Francis H.)

In this section participants discussed how their mid-career experience was confused by feeling connected to two professional worlds, one entry-level and the other more mid-career. This confusion was compounded by mid-career participants feeling they were unable to advance beyond mid-career because the field and institutions do not understand the mid-career experience and consequently are not or will not provide adequate professional development. As they struggled with existing in two worlds, participants also experienced a profession associated with high workloads and difficulties in maintaining a professional and personal balance.

The more individuals considered advancing in their careers, the more the issue of balancing professional and personal lives surfaced. Not surprisingly, many participants from both groups discussed the workload and responsibilities many of them had that often conflicted with their personal lives. For some it was with their families, while others experienced it professionally outside of their current positions. Regardless of where the unbalance occurred, participants were concerned with how to maintain an appropriate work/life balance at mid-career. In the following section, I present participant reactions to how difficult it can be to maintain a healthy professional and personal balance, and how the mid-career experience impacts this even more.

The Convergence of Professional and Personal Lives at Mid-Career

According to participants, mid-career was an opportune time in their lives to have a family or begin thinking of starting one. As both groups of participants discussed support at mid-career, many commented on their families and how mid-career was a time where changes in their professional lives were often mirrored by changes in their personal lives. With 10 of the 15 interview participants indicating they had partners and

over half of them having children, I was also interested in how professionals who had families or were thinking of starting a family were supported at mid-career. Survey participants were not asked specific questions about the support at mid-career and families but some did comment on it in their responses. The support many participants discussed covered areas of support including supervisor, institutional, and the field of student affairs which I detail more in Chapter Five.

With the majority of participants graduating from student affairs masters programs, I also examined support and experiences of participants while in graduate school in preparation for their first professional positions and into mid-career. Most participants felt prepared for their first and second professional positions after completing required graduate assistantships or internships. However, many still lamented the lack of certain specific skills not taught or emphasized in most student affairs graduate programs. In the following section, I examine the support mid-career participants with families receive, and how prepared and supported participants felt after finishing their graduate degree.

Families and Mid-Career

Many of the participants interviewed either had or were starting families at mid-career. There were different opinions on how this affected participants at mid-career but most agreed that mid-career was an important time for individuals to begin starting or thinking of starting families. Some were concerned that even though the field expressed support for individuals at mid-career who had families, the realities of how easily this was accomplished were not always clear. In *Roads Taken* (2004) Marshall agreed, concluding that the lack of research about women who are administrators and mothers,

was contributing to a climate of difficult decisions for women in student affairs who were considering starting a family. Others felt that, much like the professional development support, the issue was more institutional and supervisor specific. A number of participants also expressed concern that because, for many, resources were shrinking and workloads in the profession were increasing, without the support of the field, institutions, and supervisors, mid-career was a difficult time to balance having a family and meeting professional obligations.

Many of the participants, who were women, talked about the added difficulties they faced in having families or thinking of starting a family. They said that they often had to deal with feelings of guilt for leaving campus earlier than perhaps they used to when they didn't have children. "I was planning on having a child around Orientation and it is perfect timing that I will not be having a baby around any big event. It definitely impacted my life and decision of when to have a child" (Margaret T.). Some also felt prejudice from others for being away on maternity leave, while others were bothered that males in their divisions, who did not have families or were not the primary care taker, would not consider issues like child care when scheduling meetings at particular times of the day.

It is very frustrating sometimes because our work day begins at 9:00am but frequently other people will organize meetings that start at 8:00am or 8:15am and it is generally a man. But when you have child care issues and you don't plan for your day to begin until 9:00am and are already staying late and have maybe worked out with your spouse or partner to pick up (the) child and all of the sudden you have an 8:15am (meeting) you can't

say 'I have child care issues' because for that person they don't have the same issue...*it really frustrates me* (emphasis added), I feel there are still a lot of assumptions placed by people of what the expectations are.

(Margaret T.)

Another participant also felt a disparity still existed between men and women in the profession, especially at mid-career. "Often men who want to devote to their families are wonderful guys but women who are doing that are just doing their job" (Julie S.). As in the earlier section about mid-career status versus entry-level positions, many agreed that because they felt more comfortable in their position and had proven themselves professionally they might occasionally skip the 8:15 am meeting or late night program. However, feelings of guilt still registered for some participants when missing meetings or programs they would have ordinarily attended.

A challenge for some female participants who had been away on maternity leave or who had taken time away from their jobs to be with their families, was finding balance between having a family now while still producing the same results on campus at work. Some felt challenged to "re-identify" (Carrie P.) with their position almost as if their job had changed entirely.

It was the hardest transition for me being able to feel good about working when I am at work and when I leave at 5:00 going '*oh you are leaving now*' (emphasis added) or if I walk in at 8:10 am I still working my full eight hours? (Carrie P.)

Another participant described feeling "shunned" (Francis H.) for having a family outside of work. "I am pregnant right now...it concerns me about moving forward. I've

heard horror stories from colleagues about having a child or preparing to have a child and they were unsupported ...it worries me a lot” (Margaret T.)

The challenge of balancing a family with mid-career also affected how some participants spent their “free” time during the work day. One example included how lunch hours before having a family might have been spent reading professional journals or contributing to professional associations, but now were times spent checking on their children at daycare or getting a prescription filled. “I am still giving you (the institution) the same amount of work as you’re producing. *I just produce it on different terms* (emphasis added)” (Francis H.). Another participant with children commented, “I put in my 40 hours but often find myself doing an hour or two from home just reading emails or documents” (Bill M.). He also commented on noticing how other people he worked with would not invite him to participate in programs after hours because he had a family and he believed they assumed he could never participate because he was picking up his children. “Sometimes I struggle with providing support to staff but striking good balance. If they feel guilty because my wife and kids are at home and I am out at an event I just want to be there to support them” (Bill M.). The balance between work and family was a continuing theme throughout the discussion about mid-career and family.

The balance often sought between personal and professional lives was a frequent discussion by participants. Many felt the field of student affairs was publicly encouraging and supportive of this balance but in reality the practice was much less defined. A major challenge for one survey participant was the “demanding hours, juggling personal and professional demands” Another participant commented her career in student affairs would suffer if you choose to start a family at mid-career,

I truly don't want to be in student activities even though that is where my career has taken me. I would like to have a more normal work schedule but if I head in the direction that my career would take me that would not change. I know with children I would not be able to balance that very well, I would do a disservice to my career. (Alice N.)

Some felt the balance of being good at work and at home was not rewarded at their institutions or in the field. One interview participant felt one difference between mid-career and entry-level was the ability to discover a balance and be comfortable in expressing it to supervisors and others in the field. "As a mid-career professional (you) learn to really fight for and be honest for what you really need not only personally but professionally as well" (Alice N.).

Others saw mid-career as a time to really think more about personal goals in addition to professional goals. Feeling more established in their professional lives, participants felt more energy to focus on their personal lives. One example given was a more directive job search that included positions with a more eight to five work schedule. "I never wanted an 8-5 schedule, but now I do and have one because I specifically searched for it" (Nancy J.). Several other participants described recent job searches where they concentrated on positions that included more flexibility for their personal lives and families. 'My children come first' was a comment repeated by several participants with families. Another interview participant also felt there was not as much support given to women in the field who have families or are thinking about starting a family. "There is really not as much understanding as there could be for women in the field who choose to

have children. I feel like I'm running all the time to do both and there's times when that makes me angry" (Kathy S.).

The balance between personal and professional lives was an ongoing process that many participants felt was unevenly supported in the field and at various institutions. Ultimately, many participants did feel that working in higher education and student affairs was a positive experience when trying to balance both personal and professional responsibilities. Some participants based career decisions on what they believe the field offered in terms of long-term flexibility with having a family.

My husband and I had job offers in different locations on the same day and what we decided was my career would drive that decision because at the level I was at and the work tasks would allow me to move my family life forward. It was a difficult decision for me but it allowed us to start a family. (Carrie P.)

A survey participant thought "having a spouse working in student affairs and raising a family" was an additional major challenge professionally.

In a reverse of what most participants discussed about the balance of work and family, a participant who left a career in the private sector to work at a university commented on the family-friendly environment in higher education. "I have to admit I am a little jaded because when people complain about it here I have to say oh wake up you have no idea, the private sector is much worse for families" (Joyce B.). This may have been attributed to the fact that while most of the participants had considered working in the private sector, none actually had. As participants discussed the impact of having a family influenced their mid-career experience, other participants took a broader

view of their professional and personal lives and how the balance between the two is sometimes difficult to achieve.

The Work/Life Balance at Mid-Career

The majority of the interview participants for this study had partners and/or families. In their 2000 study of 1,293 mid-level administrators with a 10 campus university system, Johnsrud, et al. (2000) found administrators' perceptions of worklife balance influenced worker morale. There were also some participants who either did not have a family or partner. These participants also discussed professional and personal balance in the field and how being single can impact that balance. Participants with families and/or partners discussed how their professional lives changed to better accommodate the changes in their personal lives. In a nod to what the future might hold for participants wanting to advance in the field, Blimling (2000) found the SSAOs he interviewed also lamented the loss of balance between their personal and professional lives. Participants without partners or families expressed concerns about how their lives often revolved around their professional lives which included feeling the expectation to work extra hours and assume additional responsibilities than professionals with families. Whether this was a perception or reality participants were often challenged by these feelings.

When describing their work habits, many participants used the term "workaholic" to describe their professional lives. Participants with families commented how this description changed professionally once they got married or started a family. Some sought positions that allowed the flexibility to raise a family, others looked to the supervisor and department to assist in handling changes in their personal lives. Before

starting a family comments like “oh I’ll fill in that hole” (Slade L.) were echoed by participants in handling sudden programmatic changes or added responsibilities in their departments. After starting families, many commented on understanding the personal sacrifices they would sometimes make working in the field but balancing that changing expectations for themselves and their staffs. “There is some personal sacrifice...it’s important to maintain that balance” (Slade L.)

You have to say ‘no’ more often which means that you choose whether you go home as opposed to staying on campus-this can cause internalized guilt or friction with other coworkers/supervisors who perceive that you should do what they do (stay on campus). (survey participant)

This balance even proved elusive to participants who did not have partners or families.

Finding the professional and personal balance in life was sometimes difficult for participants without partners or families. One participant was concerned the amount of time he spent at work would sometimes not permit him to pursue other professional interests that would help prepare him for a senior-level position.

That’s really beginning to become an area of concern for me, making sure I am spending time outside of work to build my scholarly portfolio. My professional portfolio will speak for itself ...but getting that other side which I think is becoming more and more important as people are looking for SSAOs. (George S.)

Using the increased amount of professional responsibilities was also cited as a way to occasionally put less focus on personal lives.

I guess (I) avoid a personal life in some regards. It's an interesting balance that I have to be very conscious of. ...it's easy for me to get wrapped up in there and I forget to take care of myself in some regards so I need to be more intentional about that. (Sarah F.)

While this was not unique to the participants without partners or families, they expressed more concern about how much easier it is to lose the professional and personal balance.

Participants without partners or families generally agreed the field was supportive of those who did have families. There was some concern about how taking personal time away from campus was sometimes viewed differently for those without families. "I guess expecting that the singletons take on more because of others having a life outside, I guess you could say it is also a challenge" (Sarah F.). When asked if this feeling was entirely real or self-imposed one participant agreed it was probably a combination of both. "I think it is a combination. At the same time I know there is a greater expectation that I step in rather than the person that has a daughter and wife to do things after hours" (Sarah F.).

To combat losing balance between professional and personal lives, participants without partners or families echoed similar statements made by other participants concerning their current supervisors. Having supervisors who expressed clearly that participants needed to find balance included things such as not coming in early the day after a late evening program or taking time-off after peak work times on campus were mentioned. Participants agreed supervisors who took an active role in helping them balance their professional and personal lives was the most significant factor in alleviating

this issue. Both groups of interview participants had many issues to consider when thinking of moving to another institution.

The balance between professional and personal lives often aspired to by student affairs was frequently elusive to many participants in this study. In a time of decreasing support for higher education and smaller budgets, mid-career participants found it increasingly difficult to achieve the professional and personal balance professionals believe is necessary and the field publicly supports. Often this balance began before professionals even reached mid-career either in their first position in student affairs or for many participants during their graduate programs. In the next section, I discuss how the mid-career experience was influenced by participants' graduate school experience.

The Master's Degree and Mid-Career

For most of the participants, the path to mid-career in student affairs traveled through a master's program in some variation with a student affairs focus. A few participants had master's degrees in disciplines outside of student affairs, two had doctorate degrees, and one participant began working in student affairs while working on her master's degree in student affairs. The literature (Wood, Winston, & Polkosnik, 1985; Richmond & Sherman, 1991; Ward, 1995) discusses the importance of the master's program to retention and attrition in student affairs. These studies concentrated on new professionals entering the field but suggested many of these individuals were ill-prepared about professional field and career options (1991). Since many of the participants had graduated from traditional masters programs in student affairs, in the following section I detail participant experiences in their masters program and the professional preparation they received for their career in student affairs and mid-career.

Nine of the 15 interview participants graduated from masters programs in student affairs. Based on the information provided, 15 of the 19 completed survey participants graduated from a traditional student affairs master's program. One interview and two survey participants completed graduate work in psychology but purposely sought coursework and experience during their graduate training within student affairs. Another interview participant, who did not have a master's degree in student affairs, did complete his doctoral work in higher education administration with an emphasis in student affairs. Still another participant with a master's in counseling chose to specialize in student affairs coursework during her graduate program. Of the final three interview participants, one has a master's degree in communication studies, one has a master's in mathematics, and the final participant is currently working towards a master's degree in management and organizational development. The remaining two survey participants indicated they had master's degrees from programs other than student affairs.

Skills based programs. For the participants who graduated from a master's program in student affairs nearly everyone agreed they felt well-prepared initially as they began their first position. This preparation tended to fall along two types of program backgrounds: a skills-based approach or a theory-based emphasis. Both groups of participants talked about how their master's programs prepared them professionally and which type of approach their graduate program emphasized.

In preparing students for professional work in student affairs, all of the interview and most of the survey participants reported a requirement in their program for either an internship or assistantship within student affairs or both. Among both groups of participants, the majority reported having positive professional experiences in their

assistantships or internships. Most of the participants also reported at the time they completed their masters programs in student affairs, their programs emphasized students acquiring practical skills necessary for professional careers in the field. For many of the survey and interview participants the more important part of their programs was the practical experience they gained during the internships or assistantships. Comments ranged from “pseudo work experience that served me well when I went out to look for a job” (Frank B.), “it definitely prepared me for my first position” (Nancy J.), to “I felt very prepared to step into a job because I had the knowledge background but I also had the work experience” (Janet R). “I don’t think I could have been more prepared,” (survey participant). “I had great preparation in (for) my first position” (survey participant). These comments reflected the sentiment of participants who had a stronger skills preparation in their master’s program.

A few other participants who were still required to hold an internship or assistantship felt their programs were more theory based or, in one case, a balance of the two. Survey participants were also asked how they could have been better prepared for their first position in student affairs. While interview participants were not specifically asked this question, responses from survey participants mirror the comments from the interviews about needing more skills when entering the profession.

When asked what types of things would have better prepared participants for their first position in student affairs, practical skills were mentioned by eight of the 19 survey participants. This lack of professional development in specific skill areas was also discussed by many interview participants. “More classes that were about actual skills, rather than classes all about theory” and “there was no link of theory to practice, no

discussion about ‘the real student affairs world’ (purposeful preparation in practical skills)” were examples of survey participant comments. Skills in supervision, budgets, and dealing with campus politics were again the most popular responses given by survey participants. Crisis management, assessment, and stronger link from theory to practice were also mentioned by survey participants. “I would have liked to learn more about how to handle the bad things (i.e., student death, etc.) that happen and how to manage a crisis” (survey participant). Another survey participant commented on assessment, “a ‘non-scary’ discussion and examination of assessment-what is it, what does it look like, etc.”

The discussion of practical skills by survey participants corresponds to the comments made by interview participants about what skills or experiences they believed would translate outside of student affairs and higher education. Managing people, budgets, and supervision were the skills most mentioned by interview participants. According to participants these same skills were also what they believed helped distinguish them from entry-level. A few survey participants did comment on needing additional experience with higher education theories and linking those to actual practice. From these few participants, only one did not graduate from a traditional student affairs graduate program.

Theory-based programs. For those participants who felt they graduated from a more theory-based graduate program in student affairs, all still believed they earned enough skills to use in their first professional positions. One participant, who graduated from a counseling based program, believed the theories he studied have continued to serve him, “for me the communication skills I learned and student development theory and counseling theories helped me throughout my career.” (Bill M.). Another commented

on the theoretical perspective he gained during his program which he believed gave him a “knowledge base” to draw from but also hindered him professionally.

The institution I chose first off, and I found this with a number of different institutions out there, they really want you to come to work, they want you to do the programs but they don't want you to reinvent things, they don't want you to jumpstart anything, they want you to kind of maintain as well. So what my grad program taught me to do was to go in and assess the situation, find the theoretical elements and the research that can show you a, b, and c and you adapt your program accordingly. That doesn't work necessarily in the real world... that can sometimes really challenge me.

(Slade L.)

Another participant believed her graduate program was a good mixture of theory and skills. “They had a great way of combining not only all the theory you are supposed to know...but they did a great job of combining that with the practical nature of things” (Sarah F.). Among survey participants, some also commented on the presence of a strong supervisor or mentor during graduate school who helped prepare them professionally.

While most participants felt well-prepared for their professional careers after their graduate program, one had a different experience in her program and first position. She believed any graduate program in student affairs should not prepare anyone for their first position but instead address the issue of work/life balance for new professionals. “It should focus more on what I believe to be the hazing ritual of the first three years of the professional career where new professionals give their lives to the job and don't keep some of it for themselves” (Carrie P.). She expanded this idea into the mid-career

timeframe for field. “We cultivate overachievers so when you get to the mid-level you are suddenly challenged with how do I try to cultivate my life while still create my identity on campus” (Carrie P.). The idea of work/life balance at mid-career was discussed by many other participants in an earlier section examining how the field supports mid-career professionals. This participant closed her comments by offering optimism for graduate programs in how they prepared their students through their internships or assistantships. “My hope is those practical experiences in a master’s program offer (or) allow entry level professionals to evaluate how they are continuing to become a professional being. Their assistantship allowing them to watch Directors and Associate Directors in action” (Carrie P.).

There was one participant whose experience was atypical for all the other participants in the study. She was already working in student affairs before she began her master’s program in student affairs. She believed her program was more skills-based when she attended because most of the faculty in the program had a practitioners background within the field and were retiring as they taught in the program (Kathy S.).

Even as their graduate programs and institutions differed, the majority of participants graduating from traditional student affairs master’s programs felt well-prepared to enter their first positions in the student affairs. Participants who described their programs as more skills-based felt better prepared than their counterparts who described their graduate experience with a theoretical foundation. Those who had a different educational background sought out practical experience within student affairs at their institutions. While the professional preparedness in graduate school served participants well in their positions, it did not appear to extend beyond that timeframe into

mid-career. Finally, the culture of over-achievers that one participant saw the field producing was seen as a hindrance to how professionals found a work/life balance beginning in entry-level but more so after reaching mid-career.

Summary of Chapter Four

In this chapter, I have taken the responses of both survey or interview participants and begun to chronicle the experiences of mid-career professionals in student affairs. I started the chapter by discussing characteristics that participants believe the field and their own experiences contribute towards the definition of mid-career. From this definition of mid-career, I examined the ambiguous role that many participants face at mid-career in having entry-level tasks combined with higher-level expectations. I concluded the chapter with a look at how participants define and exist at mid-career and how this is further complicated by the balance and influence of their professional and personal lives. Having begun to dissect the mid-career experience in student affairs, I will continue in Chapter Five chronicling the experiences of participants by examining how the different types of professional development can often lead to a candid assessment of their future in the field.

CHAPTER FIVE

Professional Satisfaction at Mid-Career in Student Affairs

How participants in this study viewed the period at mid-career depended on different factors that influenced their professional and personal lives. In Chapter Four, I detailed how the struggle participants face in defining who they are as mid-career professionals places them in a unique and conflicting position not typically found with entry or senior-level professionals. In Chapter Five, I will examine the impact of this struggle by detailing how participants' confusion at mid-career has been influenced by their feelings regarding their professional development. Participants' professional development experience at mid-career, coupled with existing identity confusion came to symbolize feelings of dissatisfaction at mid-career and for many it was a time in their careers to seriously consider their professional futures. Quite simply, as my research indicates, if mid-career professionals do not feel professionally satisfied for whatever reason, they will consider leaving the field.

Professional and Personal Support at Mid-Career

Every participant, who either took a survey or did an interview in my study, also participated in an institute geared towards mid-career professionals in student affairs. Throughout the discussions with study participants about the mid-career experience, no topic elicited as much emotion and thought as did the topic of professional development. Many discussed their affiliations and connections with various professional associations in the student affairs field, as well as the importance of their relationships with their supervisors and institutions in developing professionally. Yet, for all of their participation

in professional associations and the emphasis placed on outside forces influencing professional development, almost every participant commented on how poorly it was being accomplished at mid-career. For participants, the existence of professional development at mid-career was not a reality in their careers. Instead, it was viewed as a perception that student affairs and institutions believed was benefiting mid-career professionals.

The field supports professional development by sponsoring conferences and institutes that include mid-career professionals. Supervisors believe professional development happens either intentionally or indirectly because they supervise mid-career professionals. The institutions provide funding and occasional professional development opportunities on campus for all levels of professionals, which sometimes includes mid-career individuals. However, after listening to mid-career professionals discuss where and how professional development occurs, the reality appears much different from the current perception offered from the field, supervisors, and institutions. In fact, the absence of professional development had a negative impact on the mid-career period. .

If the field, supervisors, and institutions believe professional development occurs at mid-career, yet participants cite the lack of professional development by any source as a major obstacle at mid-career in student affairs, why is there such a discrepancy between the two beliefs? And if professional development is not occurring to the extent supervisors, institutions, and the field believes, then where is it happening and how? Finally, if mid-career professionals do not believe professional development is occurring to meet their needs, then does this influence the decision to remain in or leave the field? While the interview and survey results do not completely answer these questions they do

provide some insight into what is occurring right now. Additionally, they provide specific examples from the experiences of participants indicating how the lack of professional development could affect their future as mid-career student professionals.

Both the surveys and in-depth interviews began to reveal a potentially important issue for the future of the student affairs field, which was that of professional development at mid-career. While participants also pointed to other issues that affected their decision to remain or leave the field, professional development must be considered equally as important as other factors to the issue of attrition. Many of the participants cited mid-career as a time to assess career goals, personal commitments, and their future in the field. If the lack of consistent professional development at mid-career was considered by participants as a critical issue, then this issue, coupled with familiar issues affecting attrition, such as salaries and campus politics (Evans, 1988; Hancock, 1988; Lorden, 1998) had the potential to create a serious problem for the future professional vitality of the field. The survey and interview data in this chapter construct an important indication of where the future of the field might lead if the issue of professional development at mid-career is not re-examined. Mid-career professionals in student affairs are the backbone of the field, and a significant decrease in their numbers would create a potential vacuum of talent in higher education.

I begin Chapter Five with a look at four different types of professional support that participants discussed from the surveys and interviews. Supervisor and institutional support were the two biggest sources of professional support for mid-career participants. However, support from the supervisor was identified as the most important influence for professionals at mid-career. I continue the chapter with comments from participants on

the importance of institutional professional support and how much it varies from institution to institution. I then examine how participants viewed the responsibility of the field in providing professional development for mid-career individuals. I end this section on professional support with participant comments on the responsibility of individuals on their own professional development and how it took shape for many of them. Because the majority of both survey and interview participants were female, in the next section of the chapter, I examine the experiences of women at mid-career. I also include comments from a few participants of color and their experiences at mid-career.

In the second part of the chapter, I detail how participants felt about staying or leaving student affairs while at mid-career. I include a discussion of how the skills and experiences of mid-career professionals translate outside of student affairs and higher education. I end the chapter with an important examination of the issue of retention in the field of student affairs and how the mid-career period can be the most frequent time for professionals to think about leaving the field. This includes frequent mention by participants of themes covered in this and the previous chapter, such as professional support, work/life balance, and feeling rooted in two worlds. Participants coupled the discussion of retention with suggestions of how the field and institutions could keep mid-career professionals engaged and retained in student affairs.

As student affairs professionals transition into a mid-career or mid-management timeframe the support they require or seek out professionally often changes from their time as a new professional. In the early 1980s, in her research on mid-level administrators, Austin (1984) called for higher education to “improve opportunities for professional growth.” According to study participants, professional support can come in

many different forms, involving different people, and be either directly or indirectly related to current professional goals. How individuals get the support and from whom can be as varied as the types of positions found in the student affairs field. However, one thing was clear from the interviews; the support is necessary and essential to the professional growth and satisfaction of mid-career individuals. For the interview participants the most frequently cited area of support was with supervisors. In contrast, supervisor support was not mentioned with the same frequency among survey participants who tended to discuss the support coming more from the field and institutions. In the following sections, I examine the different types of professional support discussed by participants. Four particular areas of support are highlighted and discussed: supervisor, institutional, the field of student affairs, and individual. Additionally, emphasis was given to participants who identified as persons of color and women in the field.

Supervisor Support and Mid-Career

No area of professional support among interview participants had more mention and emphasis placed on its importance than that of the supervisor. The relationship was also not bound by career period as participants cited its importance as new professionals and when progressing to senior level student affairs positions. It was at times paired with some of the other three areas of professional support mentioned but continued in a more prominent role in the professional development of mid-career individuals. Simply put, positive, strong, and encouraging support from a supervisor(s) was identified as a critical step in the professional development at mid-career. Words like crucial, essential, and

vital were used to stress the importance of professional development support from a supervisor.

Often the first influence of a supervisor came before mid-career when participants were still in their first or second positions. Harned and Murphy (1998) advocated strengthening the relationship of student affairs and institutions with new professionals and supervisors to combat new professionals leaving the field. By developing individuals even before they reach mid-career, supervisors assist in professional development early-on and create a foundation that continues into other career periods. “I believe it is incumbent of supervisors to be cultivating the entry and mid-level” “You keep good people by allowing them to grow themselves.” (Carrie P.). “At the time (entry-level) I had a very good supervisor who spent a lot of time mentoring me and helping me learn more about my position as well as student affairs as a profession (survey participant). This entry level growth from supervisors often translated into the mid-career place in which many of the participants now reside. In her 1992 research, Komives suggested mid-career professionals be mentored during this time to assist their professional development. Once reaching mid-career the emphasis on support from supervisors took on even greater importance as participants discussed how this had affected their development.

As many participants cited the importance of supervisor support during mid-career not everyone had that support currently and many saw it unevenly distributed across the field. Either from personal experience or in talking with colleagues in the field, many participants did not believe this was occurring. One interview participant mentioned after talking to MMI (Mid-Managers Institute) participants he did not get the

sense it was occurring across the field (Slade L). Additionally, he believed if it was happening then “it’s occurring coincidentally rather than by design” Another interview participant talked about friends who are mid-managers in the field and are not given the opportunity to grow and develop (George S.). A survey participant commented “Real support would include supervisors having discussions with those that they supervise about their career plans...supervisors would actually do what they could to get the subordinate experiences that they need and want.” Most participants who commented on supervisors echoed the sentiment that Joyce B. expressed about the role a supervisor plays in an individual’s development “is an investment in the person and in the organization.” Or simply put by Nancy J., “It really depends on who you have in your corner.”

Reasons for why this might not occur were varied but in particular, some commented they felt supervisors believed if professionals are at mid-career then they should have a certain skill set (e.g., budgets, managing people, supervision) and experience, and do not require any additional training or professional development. Supervisors who were not interested in progressing professionally themselves were also cited by many participants as a reason for the lack of support. “If a supervisor is not comfortable in seeing the potential in someone and developing those resources for him or her it can also hinder professional development.” (Nancy J.) Supervisors who are involved professionally in the field also might be the ones who are taking an interest in the development of mid-career individuals. Responses in how development might occur were different but many agreed it should happen with the supervisor.

There were a number of suggestions given as to how supervisors might better support mid-career professionals. One participant commented that supervisors should simply build into the job responsibility the expectation that individuals should be evaluated by their supervisor to see if they are meeting professional development activities and goals (Francis H.). Most saw it as conversations that happened on a regular basis to find out what is working and what they need. This expectation included conversations about educational goals and professional development opportunities. Sometimes it was as minor as presenting professional development opportunities that are in the field to individuals and letting them choose how to respond. Or realizing potential and pointing that out to individuals. All of these suggestions translated into better preparing individuals professionally in their current position but many also saw it as important to their next position, whether that was in or out of the field.

Many interview participants agreed that supervisors should be preparing mid-career professionals for either moving up, moving out, or moving on. Even if someone does not recognize what the next step is, supervisors should be preparing individuals to better answer that question when the time arises. Supervisors who better prepare their employees for their next step were seen as important and effective in the career development of individuals, especially at mid-career. Finally, the support supervisors providing also affects how current mid-career professionals work with the individuals they supervise, who are the future mid-career and senior student affairs professionals.

I have learned from my best supervisors ever that as a younger professional and mid-career professional if I am not preparing GAs

(graduate students) and younger professionals to move on beyond this I am not doing them a service to our profession. (Alice N.)

It is them (supervisors) that really need to pay attention to what I really need to do to prepare this person to move up or move out, or to get a degree, something to that effect, realize the potential and point it out. (Nancy J.)

I truly feel a good supervisor is thinking where are you heading next, whether that be at the same institution with added responsibilities or a new position, moving on from the institution to do something better. (Alice N.)

These final three participant quotes are telling indications from this entire section.

If supervisors are not helping in the professional development of mid-career individuals they are doing a disservice to the field. But are supervisors the only source for professional development at mid-career? What role, if any, do institutions have in the professional development of mid-career professionals? In the next section I examine participant reactions to the role institutions have with professional development.

The Institution and Mid-Career

Professional support from supervisors generated the most discussion among participant interviews. Most participants viewed supervisor support as an important piece in their professional development at mid-career whether they intended to stay in mid-career or move in to senior level positions within the field. Often in conjunction with supervisor support but sometimes separately, participants also discussed support from their respective institutions. While not always seen as crucial as supervisor support, participants expected some professional support at mid-career to come from their institutions either through a student affairs division or a university-wide program. Similar

research on faculty vitality also called on institutions to support the professional development especially at mid-career (Baldwin & Blackburn, 1981, 1983; Karpiak, 1996). Participant responses to how their current or former institutions supported them professionally at mid-career were varied. However, many participants felt professional development was not happening at their institutions at a level benefiting them in their mid-career position and beyond.

It was not clear from interview participants why some institutions provide professionals support at mid-career and others do not but many agreed that institutions should be providing some type of support. Among survey participants, many believed institutions also had a role in providing professional support at mid-career. Some commented that good institutions realize the need for professional development and provide opportunities for staff. *“If the institution is doing what it should be doing (emphasis added) yes I think...there’s a responsibility for the institution to do it.”* (Slade L.). *“The institution should expose me to different opportunities to expand my role/skills...the institution I’m affiliated with does not do anything to support my growth and development”* (survey participant).

For participants, another important factor influencing their ability to engage in professional development depended on if their institution even supported professional development activities at all. *“You are on your own at the institutional level here”* (survey participant). *“My institution does not help me at all in advancing me in the field, except to give me more job responsibilities on top of what I already have”* (survey participant). Some attributed professional development to current funding levels or the leadership within the department or division, which was consistently mentioned by

survey and interview participants. Overall, many participants felt that institutions were not providing professional development opportunities for staff including mid-career individuals.

Of the institutions mentioned that were providing professional development opportunities, many participants believed how much or how little they received also depended on the type of institution for which one was currently working. Participants from some large public campuses with large student affairs divisions had developed intentional professional development programs for all staff including mid-career. One institution has a position created by the Vice-President of Student Affairs who specifically worked with staff development within the division. Another has a committee established for professional development within the student affairs division. However, the same participant commented that while they have a committee designed to create these opportunities they are not allowed to engage in these activities during regular work hours. She expressed concern that most individuals would not give up their personal time to attend professional development activities (Francis H.). A survey participant discussed a mid-level leadership development program offered at her institution for faculty, staff, and administrators.

However, size of institution was not consistent with professional development opportunities as other large institutions had no intentional professional development programs in place. The apparent lack of consistency was considered part of the reason why some campuses offered professional development opportunities while others did not. One survey participant believed the professional support given to administrators should equal what is provided for faculty. “This is difficult to do when faculty support is primary

and the resources are spread too thin. That support should mirror the support given to faculty.” Perhaps large campuses were too big to create and implement effective professional development programs and instead delegated that responsibility to individual divisions or departments within the institution. This could further explain the importance participants placed on supervisors who supported them professionally at mid-career.

With the many different types of institutions it was felt that higher education and the field was too broad and varied for each institution to offer professional development opportunities for everyone. “I believe that the support that the field could offer would be in similar sized institutions providing newer experiences or add more depth to their org. (organizational) charts” (survey participant). Additionally, some practitioners in the student affairs field do not come from an academic background with a student affairs emphasis which causes disparity among individuals. Understanding the different routes participants took to reach mid-career in student affairs, some believed colleagues in their own divisions or even outside the division should be reaching out to mid-career professionals from around the institution to provide professional development opportunities. This shared responsibility, as many participants viewed it, was consistent with an intentional effort at professional development that involved institutions and supervisors. This effort was sometimes modeled after other institutions or outside of higher education.

Examining how institutions could create and implement professional development opportunities for mid-career professionals, participants drew from their experience with different models. Some looked internally and suggested looking at the student affairs models with which they work with students within their own departments. The training

and development opportunities created for students by professional staff could also be translated to other departments within the student affairs division or other areas within the institution.

Taping into other departments either within a student affairs division or in the greater institution, such as career centers or counseling centers was another suggestion. Looking outside of higher education at private or corporate industry was also suggested. Retreats and the multiple staffing opportunities the private sector sometimes provides were suggested as a model for higher education. The suggestions varied as much as the participants but almost all agreed professional development for everyone including mid-career individuals was a multi-layered endeavor.

Ultimately, one of the most important parts of mid-career professional development at institutions was attributed to working with students. More than one participant commented on the impact their own professional development would not only have on their development but also how they worked with students. Some saw the opportunities extended to them as a “trickle down” (Bill M.) benefit to the students at their institutions in providing better service and attention. With the addition of mid-career professional development at each institution participants saw themselves as better educators because they were practicing, learning, and doing new and different things (Bill M.). “My philosophy is the more time and attention, training and development we provide our staffs we serve our students better.” (Bill M.). The sentiment shared by Bill M. speaks to the core of how professional development at all career timeframes, especially mid-career, can benefit not only mid-career professionals but everyone around them.

Even though it was not clear from participants why some institutions provided professional support at mid-career and others did not, many participants discussed examples of professional support at their institutions. Many of these institutions were creating intentional professional development opportunities for mid-career professionals often originating from a division or department. Ways to accomplish professional development at mid-career drew from different sources, in and outside of higher education. Often viewed as an individual benefit, professional development was also seen to benefit the group of individuals student affairs professionals influence the most, students. Even as supervisors and institutions were viewed as the largest influences on professional development, participants did not discount the impact of the field and individuals on their development.

The Individual and Student Affairs at Mid-Career

Though many participants discussed the importance of supervisor and institutional support for professional development at mid-career, there were some who believed the field of student affairs and individuals themselves also played a role in this development. In some instances the level of support was multi-faceted depending on the situation of the individual. While this area of questioning for interview participants did not elicit the same strong responses as the discussion about supervisor and institutional support, participants shared some important thoughts about this topic. One issue became clear in the responses from both groups, regardless of their institution and/or position, the importance of receiving support for professional development at mid-career did not change as it related to individuals and the field of student affairs.

Since all of the survey and interview participants had attended one of two MMI (Mid-Managers Institute) there was some level of belief in how the field of student affairs can support individuals professionally. What was less clear was how much or how little the support was benefiting individuals or how much of it was targeted to mid-career professionals. Many participants felt it was more difficult to find professional development opportunities for mid-career individuals than it was for entry-level or senior professionals. “The student affairs field needs to provide training in the area of career advancement (or deciding whether to advance). It seems that a lot of professionals stagnate at this stage because they don’t have professional development opportunities to advance their careers” (survey participant). Some participants felt what was currently offered for professional development in the form of workshops or sessions at conferences they had already attended or been part of. One interview participant commented there was less out there (in the field) that met her needs. She also felt as she progressed in her career her needs were more specialized (Julie S.). The issue of fewer professional opportunities for mid-career compared to entry and senior-level practitioners was frequently cited by participants.

Another interview participant also felt because of the type of field she was in (student affairs) that the field must be part of the professional development but did believe the field was as supportive with professional development needs as it could be and that perhaps some of the professional statements need to be re-thought (Margaret T.). “It (the student affairs field) would support more programs such as ACPA Mid-Level Managers Institute and provide more resources (job search information, relocation info) as well as they do for SSAO’s and entry level participants” (survey participant). Another

survey participant echoed this sentiment, “There is professional development at conferences; however, most are aimed towards new and seasoned professionals.” Others felt the support was there but was less formalized within the field and more personalized with professionals talking to other professionals at different institutions.

The individual conversations that occurred between professionals in the field often took place at conferences and institutes sponsored by professional associations. Some participants felt more comfortable engaging in dialogue through individual conversations compared to other types of support they had received. As is often the situation at conferences there is ample opportunity to engage colleagues from similar institutions or in similar positions. Several interview participants felt even at MMI they gained more from the unscheduled and informal conversations with other colleagues than the actual sessions offered. Survey participants mentioned informal interactions with colleagues much less frequently during participant interviews.

For some participants the informal conversations among colleagues even extended to the specific MMI they attended. One interview participant commented she was not in the same personal situation as many MMI participants but she found in talking with people who were helping sponsor the institute some common experiences arose, “It was really nice to hear somebody could do it on the same kind of path that is not very traditional.” (Nancy J.). Another felt even the larger professional associations like NASPA were more conducive and almost supported the informal conversations that took place at professional conferences and institutes. “I think it’s a question of anybody who goes to NASPA and sits at a table and has a conversation there’s value there...but I think it really is just focusing in on helping a person achieve their goals and the way you do

that is through personal conversations and revelation” (Slade L.). The support of the field is present, if not in a formal setting such as a conference or institute, sometimes in the ability to talk informally with colleagues about what happens in the field.

According to participants, things like engaging with colleagues, receiving support from supervisors, or institutions all played a part in the professional development of mid-career individuals. With this in mind, almost all participants commented on the individual responsibility of professionals in the field of student affairs to also work towards their own professional development, often in conjunction with other areas of support but occasionally on their own. Many participants saw value in attending conferences, institutes, talking with colleagues, or involving themselves professionally at their institutions. Regardless of their professional situation, many participants felt the ultimate responsibility lies with the individual to take the knowledge or skills gained and apply it to their daily professional and personal lives.

Several participants discussed how opportunities had less value to them if they did not use the newly acquired knowledge to improve their daily practice. They also felt challenged sometimes in how to use the knowledge or skills they gained through professional development. One interview participant commented that understanding how to apply new ideas and skills learned at professional conferences for her own institution was not always open and clear. She also felt unless the senior leadership in her division supported a new idea it might be harder to implement on their campus. “Now that I think about it at our level (mid-career) it is harder to get that new idea (across) unless the VP (of student affairs) jumps on it as well” (Mary S.). A survey participant often saw senior-level professionals in the field less concerned with development because of how the

advanced professionally. “Many of them (SSAOs) progressed through the ranks without such support and perhaps may not see the need for it for others” (survey participant).

Other times it was a question of what skills or knowledge they need for the next position or their own personal growth. This required participants to be more self-sufficient and rely on themselves instead of their supervisor or institution.

In an ever increasing need to assume more individual responsibility for professional development, participants expressed how much of a serious effort it was to realize what skills and abilities they have now and what skills they need for the next position.

I had (to) seek out those opportunities to see... to realize ‘ok these are the skills I have what do I need to have, whether it be for the next position or my personal growth’ it has to be a combination there in. (Sarah F.)

Another participant commented that while the responsibility falls on the individual sometimes it is not clear how to proceed. “The ultimate responsibility falls on the individual. (The) thing is they have to figure out how to do it” (Janet R.). Among survey participants, some commented on the increasing need to fund their professional development with personal funds. “Digging deep into my own pockets to attend a less popular or well known meeting/conference is OK – but I wish someone else was helping out...in terms of financing such opportunities” (survey participant). Individual responsibility and financial assistance were not the only concerns for the participants. In trying to expand what mid-career professionals learn from professional development, there was a call to share that knowledge at their home institutions.

Several interview participants expressed that professional development also had to be a continuous process that involved not only attending conferences or institutes once a year but also then using that information. “Oh look where going to ACPA or NASPA this year and we are done with our professional development...as long it (professional development) is happening year round” (Janet R.). Regardless of how they pursued professional development or what kind of support they received many participants viewed it much as Bill M. and George S. did.

Definitely has to do with the individual because I could have all the opportunities presented to me in the world but if I’m not willing to take on the challenge of growing even being open to those opportunities, I won’t benefit from them. (George S.)

I think as professionals we all have to have our own initiatives. We can’t leave a grad program and just assume we will pick up the skills and knowledge needed to sustain a career. There has to be some initiative on our part to continue reading, to continue to set professional development goals and we have taken some ownership of it. (Bill M.)

The idea of support for professional development is not an issue that mid-career individuals rely on throughout their career. It becomes a combination of professional and personal influences that involves individual desire to seek out and use those opportunities; it also includes outside support from individuals, institutions, or associations that are prominent in the lives of mid-career professionals. But what happens when the professional development support is not present or does not meet the needs of individuals? All the more identifiable sources of support were either non-existent or

inconsistent. Supervisors did not encourage or support development, institutions did not develop resources, and the field was incompatible with mid-career needs. If it was left to individuals to discover their own development and they were unclear of how to proceed in their own professional development then the opportunities for career dissatisfaction likely increase. This situation was compounded for participants who identified as either women and/or people of color.

Women and People of Color at Mid-Career

Even though it was not a particular focus of the study, particular attention was paid to how women and people of color were supported professionally and personally at mid-career in student affairs. I explored how mid-career professionals in the field who identified as women and/or persons of color felt about their current position, achieving higher level positions, and professional support at mid-career. Because 11 of the 15 interview participants and 13 of the 19 completed survey participants were women, emphasis in the section is placed on the responses of these participants. With only two of the 15 interview participants and five of the 19 completed survey participants identifying themselves as people of color, I will discuss their reactions to mid-career support in less detail understanding the limitation this has on the study. One common thread found in the responses from most of the women and a few persons of color were perceived pressures for both groups that were both internal and external. I will discuss this phenomenon in greater detail later in the section.

Even with the demands placed on women in the field at mid-career many of the participants felt women had made great strides in the field, including more women in senior leadership positions and a greater ability to continue working in the field after

starting a family. Many of the women interviewed had children and did feel supported in their current positions. Most attributed the support to their current supervisor who knew how they performed and was comfortable in allowing a flexible schedule. However, several women in that situation felt the reason their supervisor supported this environment was they had already proved themselves capable in their position and were not as concerned about getting the “job” done. However, women who had families or were starting families expressed concern about an increasing number of women in senior leadership positions who did not have families. It is interesting to note while acknowledging the increase in senior-level women as a positive step, some participants thought it also brought about a negative consequence.

The phenomenon of more women in senior leadership positions who had either no children or adult children who no longer lived in the same household was perceived as a negative influence on the balance between professional and personal lives. One participant acknowledged the increasing number of women in leadership positions but was struck by the number of these women who did not have children. “Women are obtaining leadership positions in ways they did not maybe 30-40 years ago but I wonder sometimes at what cost? ...it seems to me the women in leadership positions (in student affairs) don’t (have children) or have grown children.” (Julie S.). After attending an MMI another participant commented on the number of female faculty who did not have families.

They had fast-tracked themselves by moving jobs about every three years, literally every three years, they were really skipping place to place. The only people who were married were the men and the only people who had

kids were men, none of the women who were faculty were married or had kids, they were senior practitioners. (Kathy S.)

One interview participant commented about working with two different vice-presidents in student affairs at the same institution, the first who had no children and the second who had two adult children who were not living at home. “There is really not as much understanding there as there could be for women in the field who choose to have children” (Kathy S.). She continued by sharing something her Vice-President said to her during a candidate search at her institution. “At one point during the director search my VP said to me she was like ‘you know having you have two kids and a husband who commutes it is just too much.’ I thought, that is an interesting comment. What she meant in her comment was it was too many responsibilities for me outside of work.” This participant also suggested how the expectations on women are different from their male counterparts in the field.

Some of the women in the study often felt in the middle because they were treated differently from their male colleagues and supervisors. To one interview participant the stereotypes of women as nurturing and caring individuals were still being perpetuated in the field, “there is an expectation that women continue to give, not just with kids” (Julie S.). Another interview participant saw a different stereotype reinforced with women who were learning to be assertive as managers or supervisors. She felt many women do not enter the field with solid management skills and begin gaining them at mid-career, but they also get viewed as the “care takers for students” (Alice N.). Because many women in student affairs are not given those skills early on in their career it becomes difficult to “find that role without being called the “b” word or being looked at as the mean person

around the office” (Alice N.). Another interview participant took a more localized view of how women were treated.

It is institutional dependant but I do find that the men I have worked with or under, they tend to be very traditional and do not look at women as capable...men in leadership positions that were either direct supervisors or high up in the administrative level that I felt did not treat me as an equal.

(Nancy J.)

As many participants believed stereotypes for women still existed in the field, participants of color also had similar feelings about their experiences as mid-career professionals working in student affairs.

Participants of color working at predominately white institutions felt pressures from being the only one or two individuals who were not white in their departments or divisions. Interestingly, participants thought the pressures they felt about their situation was both an internal and external pressure. One interview participant felt pressure as one of only two persons of color in her department. “I know I have to work a little bit harder to be seen as an equal at times and that could again be my own personal hang-ups” (Sarah F.). Setting an example for other people of color was also mentioned by another participant. “An internal or self-made pressure is my want to be an excellent example to other black males...because I think all students benefit in seeing a black male with a doctorate degree in a senior position at any institution” (George S.). While internal pressure about being a person of color was felt by participants, there was more pressure felt from their department, division, and institution.

External pressure seemed to extend externally for participants in other ways. One participant believed people of color in student affairs have made great efforts to reduce pressure but still felt that inside and outside the field people of color are still looked at more closely than their white counterparts. As an African-American male the participant felt an added pressure to succeed.

I think also externally, people of color, and I will say specifically men, are looked at more intensely...under a greater degree of scrutiny than others, that's just part of everyday life for me as an African-American male, in the academy and outside of the academy. (George S.)

The participant also recounted how this pressure was sometimes real for him as he moved further in his career in student affairs. "*I have experienced already here at this institution there are some people who have a problem with me* (emphasis added) and there is no other basis for it besides me being a black male" (George S.). The internal and external pressures did not deter any participant from achieving success but was an added dimension to their mid-career position that other white participants did not face. A survey participant also commented on how individuals outside of her division made her feel as she needed to prove her ethnicity and skills to the institution.

My colleagues felt that I have the capability to be the director of an office, but I feel that there are students and other administrators who feel that I'm not "Black" enough to appeal or empathize with African-American students on campus and with other students of color for that matter.

(survey participant)

According to participants, support at mid-career came from various areas and individuals. Even as participants viewed support from supervisors and institutions as the most critical to mid-career, many were not encouraged in how that was occurring. Participants also saw support from the field as inconsistent and lacking for mid-career professionals versus their entry and senior-level counterparts. Mid-career persons of color and women in the study encountered additional difficulties receiving support not often felt by their mid-career Caucasian and male counterparts. The discussion about support at mid-career was not limited to professional affiliations and institutions. The issue of professional support coupled with the balance of their personal lives often lead participants to consider their future in the field. If participants were feeling confusion about their mid-career identity and the professional development support was inadequate at mid-career, these issues combined to create an unsatisfactory experience for mid-career professionals. And as many participants had already noted, mid-career was a period that many considered an appropriate time to begin thinking about their professional future.

Why Student Affairs Professionals Stay or Leave, and How to Keep Them

Why was mid-career a time for many participants to evaluate their futures in student affairs? Because many participants had to combat losing balance between professional and personal lives, so often a concern for student affairs professionals at any career timeframe. This evaluation process affected both participants with or without partners or families and crossed gender lines. When asked what would alleviate this pressure, the one unifying agreement among participants on what or whom had the biggest impact on finding and maintaining this balance was with their supervisors. This more than any other issue involving attrition and retention in the field had the greatest

influence on participant satisfaction. The supervisor/mid-career relationship appeared to be the single best way to combat attrition and the worst possible issue affecting retention.

The supervisor/mid-career relationship included having supervisors who expressed clearly that participants needed to find balance, for example by not coming in early the day after a late evening program or taking time-off after peak work times on campus. Participants agreed supervisors who took an active role in helping them balance their professional and personal lives were the most significant factor in alleviating this issue. Interview participants with families had many issues to consider when thinking of moving to another institution. The pressures of balancing professional and personal lives at mid-career, the occasional lack of adequate professional support, and push to advance into senior-level positions often lead participants not to only re-evaluate their careers but also consider leaving the field of student affairs entirely. In the next several sections, I examine how these pressures felt by participants and their responses affect the important issues of attrition and retention in student affairs.

Attrition in Student Affairs at Mid-Career

As many participants discussed in previous sections, mid-career was a time to evaluate their professional and personal lives. Twenty-five years ago, Arnold (1982) advocated further study of mid-career professionals in student affairs because it was a time of building employment dissatisfaction, with many participants in this study expressing similar feelings. Many participants reached mid-career and started families, while others started doctoral programs. Some participants also viewed this time as an opportunity to consider their career path and whether or not it meant continuing to work in the same functional area or in the field. Mid-career was an important time for

participants to begin thinking about or even making important decisions that could impact the future of the field. In this section, I present responses from participants of both groups about their feelings of leaving or staying in the field at mid-career. I also examine the responses of participants surrounding being at the place called “mid-career” and how this important time in their professional lives is often filled with feelings of excitement, anxiety, hope, and confusion about what the next phase of their lives might hold.

After talking about leaving or staying in the field at mid-career many participants had considered it since reaching mid-career but among this small sample most were content to remain in student affairs. Rosser (2004) found among 4000 mid-level administrators, the higher the mid-level leaders’ satisfaction, the less likelihood of them leaving the field. There more of the interview participants who stated unequivocally they would never leave the field compared to those who stated they had considered leaving the field. The survey participants were more unbalanced in their response to leaving the field. Seventeen of the 23 survey participants or 75% indicated they had thought about leaving the field of student affairs entirely and many of the 17 considered leaving in just the last year alone. As not all participants expressed a desire to leave, there were also some participants who discussed why they would not leave the field.

Participants who discussed never leaving the field used phrases like “I am pretty rooted in the field” (Slade L.), “I have never thought about it, I will do this forever” (Carrie P), “that is what I am drawn to and passionate about” (Margaret T.), or “I’m good at what I do and it feels good to have an impact” (survey participant). However, even those participants who offered a few reasons why they might consider leaving the field, ultimately made comments like “I guess there could be some family or other

circumstances that could force me out but I plan to be here” (Bill M.) or “That’s (leaving the field) really hard because I don’t know that I would” (Slade L.). Among interview participants who discussed leaving the field, most had no immediate plans to leave the field at any point in the near future. While this was good news for the profession, among those same participants there were some intriguing reasons discussed that would make the decision to leave the field an easier one.

The participants who considered leaving the field entirely discussed a familiar pattern in why they would leave: issues of campus politics and low salaries. Even as participants agreed getting increased compensation did not factor heavily into their decision to enter the field, most still expressed concern that current salaries were not adequate for the amount of work produced. Austin (1985) studied different categories to determine job satisfaction of 260 mid-level administrators. Among other indications, Austin found extrinsic characteristics such as salary level had an impact on job satisfaction. However, this seem to be contradicted by Rosser’s (2004) study, which found mid-level leaders who were paid higher salaries had a lower level of morale. In support of Austin’s research from 20 years prior, salaries at mid-career were still considered an important and influential issue for many participants.

Participants often cited anecdotal data from the private sector or informal discussions with friends outside of higher education when discussing how much less student affairs professionals were earning. One interview participant even cited research data that reported how student affairs professionals are “horrendously paid” (Julie S.). While most interview participants did not comment as strongly about feeling underpaid, it was an issue that still resonated with participants even at mid-career. When discussing

challenges in the field and leaving the field entirely, 10 of the 19 completed survey participants listed salaries and compensation as one of the biggest reasons impacting that decision. One survey participant commented, “Poor compensation for increased responsibilities or hours.” Another survey participant cited how the lower compensation affects her personally, “I just had a 2nd child and am having a hard time paying for daycare and a mortgage on a student affairs salary.” Finally, one survey participant also compared her compensation to other positions within her own department on a more local basis. “There is a HUGE salary gap between me and the next position higher. I do not feel respected in my current position.”

The perception of lower salaries in the field did generate some discussion among all participants but the issue of campus or institutional politics also seemed to generate similar responses from participants. Many interview participants felt one of the reasons they were unsure of or not interested in advancing to senior-level positions was because of the political climate at some institutions. Among survey participants, campus or institutional politics was also a popular response for a reason to leave the field although it was not as popular as the issue of compensation. Advancing to the SSAO position was viewed negatively because of the amount of time this position would be involved in with campus politics. Comments such as “I was tired of playing politics, worn out from the politics” (Janet R.) or “I definitely don’t want to be a VP or Dean...they deal with a lot of politics” (Nancy J.) were examples used by interview participants. Some participants were concerned about their experiences with campus politics at multiple locations and how that impacted their feelings of staying the field. “If I was in multiple institutions where that was the case that would push me away from the field” (Janet R.). In what

many outside of higher education consider an obstructionist issue facing institutions, participants were no more positive about dealing with the issue of campus politics.

In all the responses from participants about campus politics no one offered any positive responses to working within the political structure. “We talk a lot about being caring people but we get caught up in what the institution wants and what the politics dictate that you forget about the people involved and to take care of them” (Nancy J.). Among survey participants who commented on campus politics everyone viewed it negatively. One survey participant commented on how it affects her ability to try new things on campus. “My perspective within the unit is appreciated but I must be more political with in the organization to have my voice heard.” Another survey participant was facing similar challenges serving in an interim position, “with every month I’m in my interim position, I’m becoming more and more tired of the politics and the ridiculous obstacles that are preventing me from conducting my job effectively.”

Even as many participants were interested in advancing to senior-level positions the issue of working with campus politics was always referred to in a negative manner. “The politics of my position has gotten out of hand and I believe that my superiors don’t know and don’t care to assist me in navigating successfully through the sea of bureaucracy” (survey participant). Salaries and campus politics were the two most common responses for why participants would leave the field but they were not the only issues discussed.

Money and politics dominated the responses among participants for reasons to leave the field. Other responses, such as becoming a faculty member, college president, lack of professional support/development, and family commitments were mentioned by

participants. A survey participant commented on not spending as much time with her family.

I get a lot of the “crap” that no one else will do, and much of that involves being on campus in the evening and weekends. It would not be so bad except that no one else has to be here, and I am missing out on things my family is doing.

Participants who talked about becoming a faculty member had already made that choice before moving into mid-career.

I am not going pursue my PhD in higher education, I’m instead going to be working at management which essentially means I am leaving the field. I don’t see myself as a student affairs practitioner, I feel more comfortable in the world of management and organizational behaviors. I find research more attractive but I don’t have time in my current job. *I will be one of the greatest friends to student affairs as a faculty member* (emphasis added). (Alice N.)

Receiving inadequate support in their current positions was mentioned by a few participants and was similar to the discussion about professional and career development and the critical role supervisors had in supporting it. Another area of concern for some participants as they advance in the field was the possibility of fewer senior-level positions available.

Supported by research which suggests there will be fewer senior student affairs officer positions available in the future (Harder, 1983), both groups of participants were also asked if a fewer number of senior-level positions in student affairs would impact

their decision to remain in the field. Less than half of the survey participants agreed that it would impact their decision while a much smaller proportion of interview participants, four out of 15, expressed concern about fewer senior-level positions. One survey participant tied it directly to her desire to remain in the field. “Why would I want to stick around when I know that my chances of making it are even slimmer? I have to be realistic...I’m already at a disadvantage in the hiring process. I am a white female that comes with children.” Another survey participant was more philosophical about fewer numbers of senior-level positions. “I feel that my generation of student affairs professionals will never see that day when we are considered senior level because those that are at the senior level are still young (they’re not old as dirt).” The idea of fewer senior-level positions available for a much larger group of mid-career professionals was in contrast to the implicit push by the field for mid-career individuals to advance.

An interview participant commented on how the expectation of the field often pressures individuals into advancing, “We talk about pushing people forward because of what you think they should do rather than meeting them at their level and figure out what they want and how letting them choose” (Slade L.). This discussion was in contrast to the information in Chapter Four where participants were concerned about the expectation of the field to advance into senior-level positions. However, these sentiments were expressed by a minority of the both groups of participants.

Reinforcing the idea that participants were not affected by fewer senior-level positions, many participants were content to work in mid-career or mid-level positions for the remainder of their careers or had no desire to advance into senior-level positions. Interview participants who considered leaving the field also discussed how their

professional experience within student affairs would translate outside of the field and higher education. Student affairs practitioners often find themselves working with multiple areas and can develop skills that are highly transferable outside of the field and higher education. From managing people to working with budgets, mid-career professionals have a career path that lends itself to pursuing positions outside the field.

How the Experience of Student Affairs Translates Beyond the Field

From the previous section, where participants discussed thoughts of leaving the student affairs field, some of the same participants also discussed the translation of their current experience outside of student affairs. Lorden (1998) concluded mid-career professionals often leave student affairs to pursue attractive career opportunities outside the field. Most who talked about this issue felt very positively about the translation of their experiences because they had worked in more than one functional area within student affairs. In considering leaving the field some had already thought about how their skills could be marketable outside of not only student affairs but also higher education. Research has suggested many of the skills student affairs professionals possess are highly transferable outside of higher education (Carpenter, Guido-DiBrito, & Kelly, 1987; Barr, 1990). A few participants had very specialized training (counseling), and their skills had some more obvious applications outside of higher education.

Participant responses about the types of fields they could work in outside of student affairs were linked to two types of careers; either working for other non-profits like teaching, or working in a corporate setting in management or training and development. In the following section, I present how participants viewed their current skills and the translation of those skills outside of student affairs and higher education.

Of the participants who responded to the question of how their skills translated outside of student affairs and higher education, all felt they had built marketable skills that could be used outside the field. Because all participants were at mid-career and many were working with budgets, supervision, and staff development these skills were viewed as highly marketable outside of the field. Many considered their current positions as more general in nature which included getting a wide breadth of knowledge and experience, and participants saw this benefiting them not only outside of the field but also higher education. "I have a generalist position which means again I am not specialized... I think they (skills) would translate very well because the things that I do even though we are in a higher education institution I could do in another field" (George S.). This response was also echoed by other participants. The idea of working in a more generalist position allowed many of the participants to work with budgets, supervision, and staff development on a regular basis.

The supervision of staff or managing people, whether it was professional staff or students, was discussed by many participants as the most transferable skill outside the field. Interestingly, the response also had some participants torn because while they believed the skill would translate well outside of the field, it was also one of their least enjoyable aspects of their positions. Regardless, the experience in managing people and the corresponding interpersonal communications was seen as very important for working outside of student affairs and higher education.

I think that the level of delicate interpersonal relations that we ask of people in student affairs would be more than adequate to manage people in

other arenas. I think we really do ask for a very high level of skill in interacting with people. (Kathy S.)

Another participant believed it was a large component of his current position, “Managing people which is big...huge thing” (George S). The skill of managing budgets was also discussed as a transferable skill because participants felt budgets and managing resources were in almost every field and could be viewed in different ways.

As part of their current and former positions many participants worked with budgeting and resource allocation. This skill set is often associated less with entry-level professionals and more in mid-career and senior-level positions. In addition to managing people, participants felt managing budgets and resources were skills that translated outside of the field and higher education because the concepts did not change even if the organization did. “As you move up budgets are budgets, if you know how to talk money and you know how to manage money you can use that in all sorts of ways” (Kathy S). “The transferability of those skills like multitasking, budgets...this is probably a reason why some folks choose to leave the profession” (Frank B.). “I could manage budgets, processes.” (Janet R.) Managing money and people were the most universal responses given by participants for transferable skills outside of student affairs and higher education. However, participants also discussed their experience in training and development, and staff selection as transferable outside of the field especially in a corporate setting.

Participants who had worked with staff either supervising them directly or indirectly felt the training and development aspects of their positions prepared them to work outside of the field. Some also viewed this as piece that could be coupled with

consulting or corporate training. “I think I’ve been fortunate, I say that because I think I have a lot of experience in selection, recruitment, and training and development so I think that could translate well into human resources and other areas” (Sarah F.). “When you think about all the jobs available now in corporate training, consultation-lots of folks in student affairs could market themselves for those positions” (Julie S.). One participant offered that because the field of student affairs was becoming more like the business world the application of these skills was even more transferable. “We seem to (be) becoming... similar to the business world with accountability and I see the business world taking more of the leadership development... various pieces come into play” (Sarah F.). The link between certain skill sets gained at mid-career in student affairs into a corporate setting was not always as clear as with other fields. Experience in teaching and non-profits seemed a more natural connection for some mid-career participants.

A few participants who talked about transferable skills outside of student affairs and higher education had backgrounds in teaching or had taught classes while working in student affairs. This seemed a more natural fit to participants who talked about a teaching background and how they could instruct again outside of the field. Another interview participant who was active in her local church thought the skills of student affairs practitioners could also translate into other non-profit organization outside of higher education. Finally, one interview participant who had a counseling background but worked in student affairs believed the experience working with people could translate outside of the field and higher education. With her background she was also able to teach at a college level or work in private practice.

All of the participants who discussed working outside of student affairs and higher education expressed no hesitation in how their skills and experiences could be translatable. Some commented because of the varied nature of the profession they felt well-prepared to begin working in another field regardless of the industry. One participant described this idea best when she said “I think this is probably one of the most diverse areas in order to prepare someone to do a variety of things outside of the university environment” (Francis H.). In the previous sections, I presented candid responses from participants about the difficulties they face at mid-career coupled with issues of low salaries, high workloads, and work/life balance. Familiar career stresses combined with a belief that mid-career is a time to gain valuable and transferable skill sets creates an increased concern about the retention of mid-career professionals. For many participants, their frustration with mid-career in student affairs translated into a belief that their current skills would position them well to pursue career opportunities outside of student affairs and higher education. However, even faced with difficult professional and personal issues, participants talked as much about why they stay in the field after reaching mid-career as they did about leaving.

Retention in Student Affairs at Mid-Career

The reasons given by participants for staying in the field of student affairs covered some familiar themes for student affairs and higher education. Participants discussed their work and the impact it often had on students’ lives. Others commented on the professional and personal benefits available to them either at their institution or in general throughout higher education. Some enjoyed the changes in the field and higher education that created opportunities to try different things in their professional careers.

Again relating back to the support of supervisors at mid-career, a few participants even discussed current leadership at their institution or in student affairs as a reason to remain in the field. Even as the reasons for staying differed among participants, they viewed mid-career as a time when many positive things were also happening in their professional and personal lives. In the following section, I discuss reasons participants offered for wanting to remain in the field of student affairs after reaching mid-career.

Not surprising to me as someone who also works with students at a university, the two most cited reasons for staying the field were working with students, and the benefits of working in student affairs and/or higher education. Many participants cited working with students as a major factor for entering the field and most still found this to be a rewarding and engaging aspect of their professional lives. Repeatedly participants who talked about working with students used words like “impact,” “interactions,” “rewarding,” and “passionate” to describe their feelings when working with students. “It would be because of the students and the opportunities to have those interactions” (Margaret T.). “I think probably number one (reason) are the students and the fact that we...really have an impact on shaping the lives of people. So I think the students and the work that we do really keeps us here” (George S.). One survey participant stated it very simply, “I LOVE working with students.”

Relating back to an earlier section about advancement in the field, there were similar responses to why some participants had no desire to advance into senior-level positions. A fear of losing the daily and strong connections with students was the most frequent reason for not wanting to advance beyond mid-career and staying in the field. Even as participants also recounted difficulties working with students, many believed the

positive connection they had working with students was an important aspect of their professional lives. “The one honest truth in all of this is I still love the students. I still really get a kick out of working with them.” (Kathy S.) “Students have a vibrancy, an optimism and a sense of being engaged in something important” (survey participant). This sentiment was echoed in spirit by many participants when asked about working with students.

Participants who talked positively about working with students also commented on other internally rewarding aspects that impacted their professional lives including working with other positive colleagues, making a difference, and sometimes affecting change in the world. Some participants felt the ability to work with other like-minded individuals in the field was another contributing factor towards their positive experience at mid-career and wanting to remain in the field.

I think (to) have some good colleagues really gets people wanting to stay. (Sarah F.)

In student affairs you have amazing people you work with overall in comparison to my friends in other fields, you get to work with much cooler people who are much more caring and understanding, who generally want to know about you versus other fields. (Margaret T.)

Working in a student affairs division affords the professional with a readily available group of colleagues who are also bright, verbal, usually interesting people.” (survey participant)

These comments synthesized much of what participants discussed about the impact of working with other individuals in student affairs.

Continuing to make a difference was also cited as a reason to stay, “For me it’s because I make a difference ...when I realize that I’m not making a difference in my job that’s the day I’ll walk away” (Slade L.). Another participant talked about how her partner looked at what she did, “My husband says you know I just go to work and I build things, you go to work and you build people” (Janet R.). Others found the university environment as a whole more supportive and flexible, from such benefits as vacation schedules to personal support. While recognizing that salaries in student affairs are sometimes lower than in other fields, participants viewed the larger benefits of working in student affairs and higher education as a positive factor for remaining in the field. For one participant it was free housing while working in residence life, for a few others it was flexible work schedules, sick and vacation time, and family friendly environments that also impacted their decisions to remain in the field. Only one survey participant commented on a benefit to working in higher education and the ability to work towards her doctorate. There were few participants who also commented on the supervisor support or the leadership within the division as positive influences on their decision to remain in the field. Again, these comments mirror earlier sections, which examine the supervisor’s impact on the professional and career development of mid-career professionals in student affairs.

The support of supervisors or divisional leadership was not cited as often as other reasons for remaining in the field, but its importance was mentioned by a few participants and supports earlier parts of the research stressing the importance of this occurring for mid-career individuals. Participants felt supervisors and SSAOs should be concerned about their staffs, provide positive support, and work to combat issues like burnout. “It’s

an obligation on SSAO(s) that burnout does not happen” (Frank B.). “Burnout becomes a big issue because of not paying attention to staff and getting bored” (Nancy J.).

Participants looked to supervisors and senior leadership as having a direct impact on retaining individuals in the field. “It does go back to hopefully having some good supervisors that really value these folks and provide encouragement...definitely putting us into a positive drive to realize what our worth is” (Sarah F.). The importance of supervisors and senior leadership in professional and career development was frequently commented on by participants in this and other sections throughout this research.

The decision to leave or remain in the field was often complicated by professional and personal decisions. Some familiar stresses were discussed by participants for leaving the field such as low salaries and campus politics. However, there were also some familiar benefits cited by participants for remaining the field like interactions with students and colleagues, intrinsic value, and generous personnel policies. Just as the reasons why individuals enter the field can be very personal, the reasons for leaving or remaining were often as personal. Individuals sometimes make those decisions as simply as how one participant phrased it “I think people just make it work, they’re here because they want to be here” (Francis H.). In making it “work” and getting mid-career professionals to remain tied to the field, I asked participants to discuss how the profession and institutions could enhance their professional connection and ultimately support retention.

As participants answered questions about leaving the field, the translation of their skills outside of the field, and why they remain in the field, they also discussed strategies to counter individuals leaving the field at mid-career. In a previous section, I presented

participant reactions to leaving the field including not surprisingly many looking for higher salaries. Because research shows the two most cited reasons why individuals leave the field are higher salaries and professional burnout (Bender, 1980; Burns, 1982; Evans, 1988), I asked interview participants to respond with strategies to counter attrition without specifically discussing those two issues. Participant answers to the question of combating attrition were varied and sometimes drew on personal experience. However, most answers could be grouped around giving individuals more professional opportunities to counter the negative impacts of lower salaries, and professional burnout.

A few of the participant responses also centered on personal issues that affected individuals outside of their professional lives. Unfortunately for some participants, they believed whatever student affairs or higher education created to counter the issue of attrition there was no one way to counter at the situation because every individual had different reasons for why they might leave. In this section, I detail participant responses about how the field and/or higher education could combat the issue of attrition in student affairs.

The issue of attrition in student affairs has been a recognized concern in the literature for the last 25 years (Bender, 1980; Bossert, 1982; Burns, 1982; Evans, 1988; Wiggers, Forney, & Wallace-Shutzman, 1982). The same literature has discussed different reasons for why this occurs and what could be done to combat the issue. The literature has also examined when attrition most occurs, citing mid-career as a time of higher probability because of the changes happening to professionals during that period. Since all of the participants for this research identified themselves at mid-career and

many have held several different positions in the student affairs they offered different strategies for how the field could best counter the issue of attrition.

Perhaps the most cited method for combating attrition offered by participants was through different opportunities made available to mid-career professionals. The opportunities mentioned included professional development, additional or cross-training, and advancement. Several participants thought these opportunities would allow individuals to grow professionally and personally even if it did not mean advancing beyond mid-career positions.

As a lot of time people burn out because they've been doing the same thing for so long, even in the same position you could be given great opportunities to grow in that position. (George S.)

They are not challenged or they feel if they have mastered their jobs and are not looking to advance or assume new responsibilities. People struggle with new identity there as well. (Bill M.)

Allowing somebody to develop a new set of expertise that would serve the center/department but helped the individual feel like they are growing. (Julie S.)

Often the opportunities participants discussed for growth involved professional development but some felt just providing that option was not enough.

Some participants talked about professional development opportunities to combat attrition but some also believed supervisors and departments were not challenging those individuals engaged in professional development to share their experiences. One interview participant felt even if more resources are made available for professional development and training the expectation should also include presenting that information

to colleagues at an institution. “I think sometimes supervisors send people to conferences and don’t ask them what they learned, there needs to be more accountability, they are not challenged by forcing them to analyze and reflect” (Frank B.). “Getting people to do workshops about what they do it helps them understand that what they do is important and valuable.” (Mary S.)

The continuation and sometimes increase of resource allocation for professional development such as conferences and institutes was also a mentioned frequently by participants. This included more specialized or targeted opportunities for specific areas or career aspects of the field. “I think they (student affairs) are starting to do more like offering special institutes and things to revitalize people, having more conferences that are specific to certain areas” (Margaret T.). “There are other ways to compensate people such as funding specialized professional development...” (Julie S.). Some participants believed one kind of specialized training could include the ability to work in different areas or perform functions not normally attached to their regular position.

The use of cross-training was brought up by several participants as a way to prevent attrition by allowing individuals to learn new skills and grow professionally without having to leave their current institution. A few participants currently had this option available within their division and worked with colleagues who had taken advantage of the opportunity.

Cross-training, other workshops, or activities that gets people out of the office doing other stuff or maybe just changing what they do. At my institution we do cross training... (Mary S.)

Even with the director of financial aid we know that eventually that she wants to move outside of financial aid to move up to another position. (It is giving her opportunities outside of financial aid that will help build her experiences and her resume which could involve even things like serving on judicial boards. (George S.)

There were variations on the idea of cross-training. One participant worked at an institution where the Vice-President of Student Affairs office created a professional internship within the division.

Our VP's office created as a professional internship to encourage specifically minority staff to try out the vice-presidential administrative kind of role. One staff member for one semester at a time to work daily in the VP's office to really see what is going on. (Nancy J.)

Not as many participants had experience with cross-training but those who did thought it a very beneficial counter to attrition within the field. For some participants, the opportunity to just talk with other colleagues instead of working with them was a strategy to consider in combating attrition.

A few participants talked about the ability to network with colleagues either at conferences, at their institutions, or on the same research as a strategy to keep people engaged and help combat attrition. One participant saw this as an extension of professional development opportunities which helped with feelings of burnout, "for me the opportunity to... talk with colleagues across the country who share the same concerns and can vent and share solutions together" (Julie S.). Another took this one step further and viewed her interactions as a chance to talk with mentors, "the strongest thing for me

has been upper-level, or more senior level people at other institutions that I can call and say this what I'm facing and I am dealing with and they can help put it in perspective and navigate" (Janet R.). These were more individual strategies to combat attrition and remain professionally engaged which is how some participants viewed the issue of countering attrition in the field.

The choices that some participants made for their own professional engagement were related to their individual situation as opposed to general strategies across the field or higher education. One participant commented that institutions were too different across higher education to create one or two strategies to combat attrition within the field.

I think you have to meet each employee individually, find out what motivates that individual because I don't think you can make that blanket statement.. I think there are far too many types of institutions, and I think there are far too many types of professionals in the field that I don't know that we are ever going to get our hands around that" (Slade L.)

Another participant believed each individual needed to make choices that suit their specific professional and personal situation at mid-career. "I think (it) has to do with personal choice and what you want to do. We have to make choices...combating burnout is an individual choice of what you want to do." (Francis H.) Even as a few participants commented on viewing attrition from an individual situation there was still some concern about how the field contributes to the mission and goals of higher education.

Even with the numerous strategies offered by different participants whether from an institutional stance such as increased professional development and cross-training or from an individual perspective like talking and working with colleagues and mentors, it

was still unclear what role the student affairs field had in working on the issue of attrition. One participant believed the field was not as successful as it could be in demonstrating its contribution to teaching and higher education. She felt professionals in the field often are not entirely clear if they have contributed to any student learning. According to her, this problem was partially solved by the field being more directive in how they contribute to the learning environment.

I think we need to get better about what we do. A lot of what I see is that we are not focusing on what student affairs contributes to higher education....A lot of us get stuck in what can we do more of, we have something for students, spend their money wisely but have no proof that they are learning anything...One of the solutions is for student affairs to get a little more directive in what they do and what they contribute to a learning environment...Hopefully that will suffice to alleviate burnout because we will be really contributing. (Nancy J.)

This was the only participant to directly discuss the issue of how student affairs contributes to higher education and student learning, and its affect on attrition, although many of the suggestions offered had an indirect affect.

Finally, the issue of having a balanced professional and personal life was also discussed by one participant in addressing this question. Because the issue of work/life balance was the subject of a previous section, I will not repeat the responses of participants on this issue. However, for one particular participant the issue of leading a balanced life was a way to combat burnout and attrition and according to her the only way to stay professionally viable in the field over many years including mid-career. She

viewed this as a skill mid-career professionals needed to learn that involves “selling” (Kathy S.) themselves to their supervisor and senior leadership so they could continually appreciate and give feedback on the work being performed. This was occasionally complicated by senior leadership that sometimes did not value a balanced life because of generational differences. Unfortunately, for many mid-career participants who are not living a balanced life, the field will continue to feel the affects of talented mid-career professionals leaving student affairs.

The strategies offered by participants ranged from institutional to individual to interpersonal. All of the suggestions had merit depending on the situation and motivation of the individual but would need the additional support of supervisors, institutions, and the field together to address issues of attrition in student affairs at mid-career.

Summary

In Chapter Four and Five, I provided a window into the lives of mid-career student affairs professionals and how this period can be a rewarding but often challenging time for many professionals. Participants faced issues of existing in dual worlds with entry-level tasks and higher-level responsibilities. This created feelings of being stuck at mid-career and not being supported as they choose to remain at mid-career or prepared to advance into senior-level positions. These experiences were compounded by the influences of their personal lives onto their professional careers. As Chapter Four concluded with discussions of professional and personal lives converging at mid-career, Chapter Five continued the story of the mid-career experience with a view into how the satisfaction of participants related to the professional development they receive during mid-career. This support came from many different sources including supervisors,

institutions, the field, and individuals. The professional development experience for participants directly affected how they viewed their current and future position in the field. Many participants viewed mid-career as the most important time to reflect and sometimes act on their future in student affairs. However, all was not lost for many participants who remained in the field for many different reasons, and they offered thoughtful and productive ways to enhance the experiences of all mid-career career professionals.

In the next and final chapter, I will review the research questions, methodology, and the participant sample from my study. I then present the major findings from my study surrounding how the mid-career professionals experience is defined and supported. I then discuss the implications these findings have on individuals, institutions, and the field including mid-career identity and retention. From my findings, I conclude with remarks and suggestions for further research on the mid-career experience, and its impact on the future of institutions and the field.

CHAPTER SIX

DISCUSSION AND FINDINGS

This study has examined mid-career student affairs professionals and how their experiences have shaped their professional lives. The study participants were student affairs professionals taking part in one of two institutes for mid-managers, held on an annual basis and sponsored by two of the primary professional associations in student affairs. They self-selected themselves as being mid-career in the field and provided an appropriate background for beginning to study the experiences of mid-career student affairs professionals. Over a period of approximately nine months, these study participants submitted surveys or gave interview discussions regarding their working and personal lives as student affairs professionals.

This chapter will begin with a review of the research study questions, the methodology I employed in my research, and a description of a sample used in both phases of the study. I will then discuss the major findings of my study as they relate directly to the mid-career experience of student affairs professionals. My findings will highlight serious implications for the field of students affairs, as they could impact current and future professionals, as well as the future success of student affairs in institutions of higher education. I conclude chapter six with a call for more needed research on mid-career professionals, especially involving women and persons of color, and how attrition and the mid-career experience impact the field of student affairs.

Research Questions, Methodology, and Sample

Before beginning the study, I developed several research questions to help guide and frame the research.

1. What are the experiences of individuals who self-define as “mid-career professionals” in student affairs?
2. How do these individuals define “mid-career”?
3. What challenges and supports are present for mid-career professionals in institutions and student affairs professional organizations?
4. How do the challenges and supports affecting mid-career professionals influence their decision to or leave student affairs?

The research questions were used to assist in developing topics of inquiry from the existing research. This included a discussion of what attributes contributed to a better definition of “mid-career,” as the existing literature and the student affairs field itself was less clear about this issue, which created some confusion among study participants. Consequently, one of the primary goals of my study was to rely less on traditional definitions offered by the field or past research, and gain an understanding of mid-career through the responses solicited by the participants themselves. These responses allowed me to compare and contrast my findings with those offered by the field and research, and demonstrate that “mid-career” is an issue of confusion and concern by student affairs professionals. Additionally, information offered by participants contributed towards developing a major narrative of the study with a more expanded and elaborate definition of mid-career. This definition was an important piece in the development of Chapters Four and Five, and became the foundation for discussions on participants’ experiences at mid-career.

The research was designed as a mixed-methods study consisting of surveys and interviews conducted over a period of nine months. I then created a survey as an on-line

instrument where participants completed 10 questions on their mid-career experiences, while remaining anonymous. The survey was undertaken first to help test and guide the levels of inquiry for the interviews. During later months, I solicited participants from both institutes to participate in detailed interviews conducted over the telephone with electronic member-check of completed interviews via email. The survey gathered 19 completed responses from 23 total respondents. Using the responses from the survey to help inform the line of questioning for the second phase, the interviews were completed over approximately three months with 15 different participants.

The appendix includes a demographic breakdown of both the survey and interview participants as reported to me. All interviews were transcribed by me and sent to each interview participant for member-check. Because all respondents had participated in one of two institutes for mid-managers no effort was made to recruit individuals by race, gender, age, position, title, or responsibility. However, after organizing the data, some of these factors did have an important influence on the experiences of participants and were reported in chapters four and five.

Major Study Findings

I organized the findings into two chapters in order to chronicle the experiences of participants which ran along a career timeline beginning with entry-level, moving into mid-career, and concluding with their professional futures. Findings indicated an important distinction and contradiction between how the field and institutions define mid-career in student affairs, and how participants actually exist at mid-career. While there were similar descriptions offered by participants as reported by research (Benke &

Disque, 1990; Gordon, Strode-Border, and Mann's, 1993; Fey & Carpenter, 1996), for many individuals it went beyond titles, responsibilities, and positions.

Mid-career was viewed by participants as an often confusing time which contributed to a sense of feeling that they existed in two worlds, performing entry-level tasks but with higher-level expectations. Participants felt the field of student affairs and institutions were not helpful in defining and clarifying mid-career because both subscribed to a one-dimensional view which did not consider the actual experiences of individuals at mid-career. The confusion of existing at mid-career was also compounded by participants trying to balance their personal lives with their working lives, where life changes were occurring simultaneously. The field's definition (Carpenter, Guido-DiBrito, & Kelly, 1987; Barr, 1990; Benke & Disque, 1990; Gordon, Strode-Border, and Mann's, 1993; Fey & Carpenter, 1996), of mid-career and how it was actually unfolding was often seen as a false indicator of how participants were actually viewing their professional futures.

Often, participants' inability to reconcile their own mid-career experiences with what was being offered by the field led many to feel they either could not move beyond mid-career or were often overlooked by the field and institutions. This thread continued to surface throughout my study. Closely linked with the definition of mid-career was how participants viewed their future in the student affairs field. As previous chapters have shown, the issue of retention and attrition in the field of student affairs has been discussed in research (Bender, 1980; Burns, 1982; Evans, 1988). Because mid-career is seen by student affairs professionals as a time of professional and personal change coupled with

confusion about their future in the field, I was interested in drawing out from participants whether their desire to leave or stay in the field was affected by this experience.

The conflicting nature of the mid-career definition was mentioned frequently by participants when discussing their intentions to leave or stay in the field at mid-career. The issue of attrition was compounded for many participants by their feelings of being poorly compensated in their positions involving entry-level tasks and higher-level responsibilities in an atmosphere of frequent institutional political roadblocks. This period in their professional career (Bender, 1980; Bossert, 1982), more than any other segment was seen as one where participants pondered their futures in the field.

A second and somewhat surprising finding from this study involved the professional development or support participants felt should happen at mid-career. For them, professional support came in different forms at this point in their career. The most often cited professional support originated with participants' relationship with their supervisors. Supervisor support was discussed equally among survey and interview participants with both groups highlighting its importance in their development. Many of them also viewed this support as occurring when they were in their first or second positions after graduate school, before they had even reached mid-career. Unfortunately for the field, participants did not believe the support given by supervisors was adequate or happening frequently enough to be of positive benefit to them. The lack of professional support from supervisors had wide-ranging effects for participants. It influenced how they supported other professionals who reported to them, impinged on their ability to advance into senior-level positions, and impacted how they viewed their own future in the field.

The unequal distribution of professional development across institutions and the field also influenced the mid-career experience for participants but was not discussed as much as that of supervisor support. Similar to the feelings expressed earlier of being professionally stuck in two competing worlds, the issue of professional development had participants spending more time thinking about their futures in student affairs.

Taken separately, the two issues of defining what mid-career is and means, along with that of a lack of professional support from supervisors, might not warrant much concern from institutions or the field, but viewed as part of the overall mid-career student affairs professional experience have the potential to influence and impact the current and future position of individuals at mid-career who contribute to the bulk of student affairs professionals in the field.

Implications

There were four major implications resulting from my study that I will discuss in this chapter. They stem from significant areas of concern in the lives of mid-career professionals as discussed above, such as professional support of supervisors and associations, redefining the mid-career experience, and understanding how these issues affect attrition in the field. If these implications are not better understood from within the context of the overall mid-career experience many more talented individuals will continue to question their future in the field. From the issues discussed in the previous chapters, the most serious, yet perhaps easiest implication to address, begins in the departments and divisions where mid-career professionals are working. This is the issue of the supervisor/mid-career professional relationship, which has the most far-reaching consequences of all the findings from my study.

Professional Support from the Supervisor

As in many professions, individuals might expect their supervisor or manager to provide some level of professional support that might assist them in their current position and beyond. Student affairs professionals would not be any different from their counterparts in other fields in looking to their supervisors for support in current and future endeavors at all periods of their careers. Most professionals in student affairs who advance in the field eventually have the opportunity to supervise other individuals, who are either professionals, graduate students, or undergraduate students. So why, after reaching mid-career, do so many participants in this study point to the lack of professional support from their supervisors? Clearly, as shown in my study, this is a recurring issue that is being passed on from generation to generation of professional supervisors. Institutions and the field of student affairs need to look at how and where professional development and support is occurring. My study indicates an obvious connection between the skills involving supervision and managing people and how this experience is influencing the mid-career experience.

Professional Support from Associations and Institutions

Conferences and institutes present many different opportunities for professional development. However, these opportunities do not include ones that address many of the skills mid-career professionals need in order to become good and future supervisors. In addition, conferences and institutes only occur once or twice annually and often focus on specific topics put forth by participants. Still, the professional associations that sponsor these conferences and institutes need to ensure the topic of supervision is addressed at different levels and institutions. Much like the MMI that all of the study participants

attended, professional development opportunities supported by professional associations need to provide more targeted ways to address the needs of its members. Studies like this point to the issues and concerns that many mid-career professionals feel are not being addressed by the field and their institutions. The issue of training supervisors not only to be better supervisors but also to support the mid-career experience is the responsibility of institutions, but it becomes a multi-faceted approach that should combine the cooperation of professional associations in the field as well as institutional resources.

Many participants also believed the variety of institutions did not encourage consistent strategies for combating attrition within the field, by providing the necessary kinds of development for their professional future. This issue could also go hand-in-hand with that of needed professional support from supervisors. Ironically, it is the institutions that contain the resources for providing the kinds of strategies, or development, needed to enhance the supervisor/mid-career professional relationship, as well as for other professional areas. Development workshops could benefit supervisors who have limited experience in supervision and assist in ending the cycle of poorly trained supervisors. These same supervisors are the professionals who reach mid-career after experiencing inadequate professional development during entry-level positions and continue to repeat this experience for the individuals they supervise.

When mid-career student affairs professionals do not feel supported or professionally engaged, their divisions, institutions and the field suffer from stagnation and risk losing involved and active professionals who keep the field of student affairs moving ahead. Mid-career professionals emulate their experience of being supervised and it helps shape their own supervisory experience. The field supports the professional

development of individuals and graduate programs help prepare them for a career in student affairs. Unfortunately, graduate programs only last as long as commencement and professional conferences are not always cost effective and only occur annually. This leaves individuals who work along side mid-career professionals to encourage, provide, and create the professional development opportunities that mid-career individuals feel they are not receiving. This support originates from within divisions, institutions, and the field. It means mid-career professionals are connecting with other mid-career professionals and senior-levels who mentor them from all over the field. In creating these professional networks for mid-career individuals it helps evenly spread the responsibility of their development at mid-career across higher education.

Redefining Mid-Career

Once they reach mid-career, who exactly are the professionals that make up the largest segment of the student affairs population? Are they just the titles and positions they have achieved, along with reaching a “certain age” that the field suggests characterize mid-career, or are they, instead, a combination of expectations and responsibilities that create a multi-layered experience at mid-career? The answer for participants in this study is a mixture of both, thus creating an often confusing and frustrating experience at mid-career. When asked to define mid-career, participants gave familiar answers found in the literature from the field and institutions. However, it was the actual experience participants were having at mid-career that transcended their position that labeled them as mid-career. The mid-career experience, combined with familiar definitions from the field, creates an unsettled time for individuals who question their role in student affairs.

This ambiguous role creates a professional identity crisis for mid-career student affairs professionals, where they exist in parallel worlds of entry-level responsibilities and high-level expectations that often compete for their professional time and expertise. This could result in individuals never fully recognizing their professional potential because they fluctuate between two competing priorities. This would suggest that the field, institutions, the supervisors, and even the student affairs individuals themselves need to subscribe to a more detailed and complex definition of mid-career. It should also be characterized by a multifaceted understanding of the numerous roles played by many mid-career professionals and how these roles impact their effectiveness in their positions and at their institutions.

The mid-career experience for participants in this study often centered less on the title or position they occupied, but more on the feelings they had about their everyday responsibilities. Participants often described the dualistic existence of performing entry-level tasks combined with higher-level responsibilities and expectations, as a confusing place to reside in their professional careers. Had they in fact arrived at mid-career as their position indicated, or were they still lingering in entry-level positions as evidenced by some of their responsibilities? Indications from the field and their institutions seemed to suggest that they had indeed arrived at mid-career. Yet, after attending an institute for mid-managers and returning to their institutions with a renewed sense of “mid-careerness” and using that new awareness in their work, they arrived back on campus even more confused about their “place” in their career and still struggling with existing in two worlds.

Attrition in Student Affairs

The confusion felt by mid-career student affairs professionals could eventually lead to dissatisfaction in their professional and personal lives, and because research has shown that mid-career is often a time when individuals examine their professional future, the dissatisfaction could easily lead to attrition from the field. Added to this confusion is a lack of professional development offered by supervisors, institutions and the field, and it becomes an increased attrition problem for a profession already symbolized by low salaries, unsustainable workloads, and overwork. Fortunately, all was not lost for many participants in this study when it came to issues of attrition.

Participants offered suggestions they believed would help combat attrition, such as increased supervisor support, cross-training within divisions, a professional mentoring network across the field, and opportunities to enhance professional vitality modeled after faculty programs. Unfortunately for many, the culture of student affairs does not encourage professionals to be balanced in their professional or personal lives, and this makes many of these suggestions unattainable. So where do mid-career professionals go in their search for a mid-career identity? As participants discussed in the study, they do not go to their supervisors or institutions for assistance, because the ambiguous signals in the field of student affairs tacitly encourages confusion and a lifestyle of pressure and stress. Instead, these mid-career professionals leave their positions, either remaining in higher education but occupying another professional arena, or they leave higher education entirely.

Although, by leaving the field of student affairs, mid-career professionals don't provide a much-needed solution to the problems that remain behind, their departure does highlight the fact that mid-career is filled with anxiety, confusion, and uneasiness. This

recognition of the problem by the field of student affairs and institutions could be the first step in changing the mid-career student affairs experience for the largest group of professionals in the field.

The next and crucial step for the field and institutions is to act on the mid-career experience and begin to create initiatives and programs to help change the mid-career experience for many individuals, thus reversing the stereotypical view that mid-career in student affairs can be a negative experience for professionals.

Study participants offered various strategies for assisting in keeping people in the field; some as simple as mentoring mid-career professionals and others as complex as providing a more comprehensive understanding of the mid-career experience on a national level. If the mid-career experience is not more fully recognized and understood then as the increasing numbers of retiring senior-level practitioners begins to accelerate as some suggest, there will be no experienced, committed, and dedicated professionals to fill the void. This is a serious and potentially field-changing occurrence that could take years to reverse and could erase all the gains made by the field over the last 40 years.

Future Research

In both the survey sample (15 out of 23) and interview sample (11 out of 15), the majority of participants were women. Many of these women had either partners, families, or were thinking of starting a family, and a few, but significant number of participants, identified themselves as persons of color. As a result of having a majority of women participate in the study, I advocate the need for further research on women in student affairs with an emphasis on women in senior-level positions and their influence on women at mid-career. I also call for additional research on persons of color and the

additional challenges and hurdles they face at mid-career. Finally, I call for more specific research into the link between the mid-career experience and attrition in student affairs, which includes an improved understanding on the effects of the supervisor/mid-career professional relationship, re-defining mid-career, and the institutional climate for mid-career professionals.

Women Advancing at Mid-Career

The majority of women participants in both the survey and interview components of the study and their responses to their experiences as mid-career women in student affairs, suggest they still face some familiar and often ingrained challenges. The demographic breakdown of study participants showed many had partners and either had or were seriously considering having children while at mid-career, and many of their responses echoed complaints many women in the workforce have voiced for decades. Issues such as inflexible work schedules, career prominence in a partnership, male supervisors without children or a spouse who takes care of them, and a professional lifestyle not modeled around having children, all affected the mid-career experience. An interesting aspect to the issue of mid-career women was also discussed by participants involving women in senior student affairs positions who either did not have children, or whose children were not living with them. While many of the participants embraced but also challenged things occurring for women in student affairs, many were dismayed at the apparent lack of women in senior student affairs officer positions on their campuses, who might have chosen not to have children to advance in the field or whose children were grown. Participants felt their female supervisors in this situation might not understand or appreciate their family situation. Some participants attributed this occurrence to an issue

of advancement, commenting that perhaps women had to sacrifice a family life at mid-career in order to advance in the field.

As women in student affairs continue to reach mid-career and begin thinking about advancement in the field, the issue of family and personal commitments can become a more complex issue. An important area to research beyond this study might include how women at mid-career are thinking about families and how it factors into their desires to advance in the field. As this study has shown, mid-career is a time to evaluate how personal and professional commitments coincide. If mid-career women are feeling a disconnect between wanting to begin a family and advancing in the field, and they decide to leave the field because of this conflict, this attrition cause eventually leads, too, to fewer talented professionals progressing into the senior-level positions in the field.

Race and Ethnicity at Mid-Career

This research also revealed how the issue of culture, race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic background can detract or enhance this experience and would be an important component to be added to a study of mid-career in student affairs. While none of these factors were a focus of this study, there was enough discussion from participants who identified themselves as persons of color to warrant further study about how mid-career presents additional challenges in these areas. Research has shown that those individuals, not identifying with the white majority, continue to face issues in professional environments that could overlap and complicate their existence in mid-career. The added issue of external and internal pressures faced by some persons of color further complicates the mid-career experience. It would be important to note why and how these pressures still exist in higher education and, specifically, in student affairs. In

this study, the challenges mid-career women and persons of color in student affairs face relate back to the discussion about retention and attrition in the field. As the study has shown, mid-career becomes an important time for individuals to evaluate their professional and personal lives in the field.

The Impact of Mid-Career on Attrition

Even as this research specifically studied how the experiences at mid-career can influence attrition in student affairs, it is still not entirely clear how much of an effect it created, although there was enough data to warrant continued research into this issue. If there were enough factors to influence participants to seriously consider leaving or remaining in the field, further research is necessary to determine which issues might have a higher correlation during mid-career to influence such a decision. The familiar issues of low salaries and increased workloads have been documented in the literature (Austin, 1985; Rosser, 2004), and while study participants mentioned these issues as influential in discussing attrition from the field, there were many other issues as well that impacted study participants' discussions.

The concern around retention and attrition for student affairs and research is the lack of in-depth and longitudinal studies of this issue which could establish a clear link between mid-career stressors and professionals leaving the field. Past research on mid-career includes attrition as a concern, (Bender, 1980; Bossert, 1982; Burns, 1982; Evans, 1988) an issue student affairs professionals discuss with their colleagues still in the field and with those who have already left the field. However, there are no specific studies documenting this as a concern for student affairs so that the field and institutions can develop strategies to specifically address the reasons why people are leaving field. This

includes studying individuals who have left student affairs, but remain in higher education, and individuals who have left the field and higher education entirely. These experiences are what research should focus on to understand the true scope of the issue and to what extent it negatively impacts the field. Until this happens in a purposeful and meaningful way, student affairs will have to rely on small examples of research, such as this study, that hint at this issue, but is not comprehensive enough to make informed and educated decisions about retention and attrition.

Responsibility for Professional Development at Mid-Career

As this study has shown, professional development involving supervisors was seen as a critical influence on the mid-career student affairs experience. Less clear from the research was how much professional support should occur between supervisors and mid-career professionals. Based on the discussion of participants from this study, there is an apparent disconnect between how institutions and the field believe professional development and support occurs and how mid-career professionals are actually experiencing it. One possible reason for this was suggested earlier in this chapter involving a closed loop involving past new and mid-career individuals who did not receive adequate professional development. Those same professionals are now the senior and mid-career individuals responsible for supervising a great majority of new, and more importantly, mid-career professionals, who are experiencing the same lack of professional support and development. There are conference sessions and institutes in student affairs, and professional development at many institutions specifically targeting how individuals become good or better supervisors. So why are supervisors not being

trained to help develop and support their staff to prosper professionally at an institution and in the field?

The Vital Mid-Career Professional

One of the goals of this study was to report on best practices for institutions, as well as the field. As discussed in the research on mid-career faculty (Baldwin, 1979; Baldwin, 1990), institutions need to understand how to create professionally vital environments for their mid-career student affairs professionals. The field of student affairs seems to have a better sense of the mid-career period, yet still falls short of how to keep those individuals engaged as part of their experience. Study participants discussed several ways of helping prepare supervisors to develop mid-career professionals. This would be a first step in understanding the complexities of the supervisor/mid-career professional dynamic. Comprehensive and institution-specific studies of how universities and colleges provide professional development for supervisors in order to better support them should be encouraged and developed by the field, researchers, and practitioners in student affairs.

These types of studies not only legitimize the concerns of many mid-career professionals who do not feel supported by their supervisors, it also informs the field and institutions of best practices that can be adopted or encouraged by senior student affairs officers in their own divisions. This study began identifying an important missing component in the supervisor/mid-career professional relationship. It is now up to the field and institutions to better understand this separation through research and create ways to enhance this experience.

The “New” Definition of Mid-Career

Throughout the study, participants voiced concern about how student affairs defines and classifies the mid-career experience. How mid-career was defined by many in this study was in significant contrast to the classifications student affairs was using to label and define these same professionals. It seems important for the field to embark on an evaluation of the terms and methods it uses to define mid-career professionals and begin research to enhance and improve those definitions that encompass a more thoughtful description of the mid-career experience. This study suggests the current language used by the field to define mid-career professionals negates the richer, yet complicated experience that is mid-career. Further research on how mid-career in student affairs is often limited by the labels attached by the field and institutions would assist mid-career professionals in interpreting their own experiences once reaching this important period.

The complex definition of mid-career offered by study participants, also generated the feelings of existing in a dualistic world. The world for participants was one part entry-level and another part higher-level, both often in conflict with the other in their professional and personal lives. The definition of mid-career can no longer just be subscribed to mere titles or positions; it must include the experiences of mid-career professionals in the field whose lives have been chronicled and studied across all areas in student affairs. The research must support the need to understand this critical timeframe in the lives of mid-career professionals and how they are more than their titles or positions. This new research should include qualitative and quantitative studies which enable the field to encompass the wide-ranging types of institutions that exist in higher

education where mid-career professionals reside. New and on-going research must demonstrate to the field and institutions that the rewarding, confusing, and often muddled time known as mid-career is not something to dread reaching, but instead a time to develop as competent student affairs professionals.

Conclusion

Mid-career student affairs professionals compose the largest group of individuals in the field and perform many of the vital functions found at institutions. This puts mid-career individuals in a unique situation to have a greater impact on the students they work with and in the field of student affairs. Unfortunately, as this study has demonstrated, mid-career in student affairs is also one of the most misunderstood and challenging career timeframes in the field. The challenges originate from several different areas that continue to enhance the confusion mid-career professionals experience in their roles at their institutions and in the field. These challenges contribute to an uncertain time in the lives of mid-career professionals that erode the vitality and significance of this core group of individuals.

This study pointed to a student affairs field which, for many participants, contained numerous concerns for them at mid-career. It began with a lack of a clear and consistent definition of who a mid-career professional was, and culminated with a sense of their existing in two worlds, which was detrimental, not only to their current roles in student affairs administration, but also impacted how they envisioned their future in the field. Even as the field attempted to create more meaningful and thoughtful ways to alleviate some of the issues facing individuals at mid-career, participants instead viewed student affairs as one of the main sources of their frustrations. For many in this study, the

field was clearly not doing all it could to address the difficult issues facing mid-career professionals.

Taking a more local view of their mid-career experience, many participants looked to institutions and their colleagues for assistance in understanding and developing at mid-career. All of the study participants had supervisors and some worked at institutions that supported their development in varying ways. Supervisors were seen as the key individuals to help make sense of mid-career by encouraging and supporting professional development at the institution and in the field. But for participants it often fell short of their expectations and for some it was lacking almost entirely. As participants searched for a clearer identity at mid-career their institutions and supervisors did not meet their expectations. Without a clear definition of who they are as professionals, and lacking support for their development from supervisors and institutions, participants began to question their future in student affairs. If they did not feel supported professionally and were not even sure who they were, participants faced the task of trying to understand their mid-career status on their own.

This time of professional uncertainty was coupled with changes in mid-career individuals' personal lives. All of these factors came together to create an environment open for the possibility of leaving student affairs. Adding such issues as low salaries and high workloads to the uncertainties of mid-career created for them the potential for leaving the field. While there is not yet a serious drain of talent from the field, this study has shown that the experiences of mid-career student affairs professionals could have an impact in accelerating this trend.

It is now time for the field, institutions, and individuals to recognize that mid-career is not just one more stop along the career path in student affairs, but a time of significant professional achievement, influence, and vitality. There must now be a concerted effort by all three stakeholders to understand who mid-career professionals are and how their experiences are shaped and influenced by all of them. Without this shift in thinking, the future of mid-career student affairs professionals will remain as uncertain and unclear as this study suggests.

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APPENDIX A: PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS

Table of Survey Participants

DEMOGRAPHIC SUMMARY OF ON-LINE SURVEY PARTICIPANTS

all demographic information was reported by participant to researcher

<u>AGE</u>	<u>SEX</u>	<u>RACE/ETHNICITY</u>	<u>INSTITUTION TYPE</u>	<u>FIELD</u>
30	F	African-American	4-year, private	student activities
34	M	?	small, private, 4-year	executive director
48	F	?	old, British, large institution	counseling
50's*	F	African-American	urban, large, commuter	student life
43	F	Caucasian	small, public, 4-year	student life
44	M	?	large, public, 4-year	?
26	M	Caucasian	small, public, 4-year	student life
32	F	Caucasian	large, public, 4-year	residence life
38	F	Caucasian	large, public, 4-year	counseling
32	F	?	private, urban, 4-year	campus activities
42	F	Caucasian	large, private, 4-year	student life
32	M	Asian-American	large, public, 4-year	student activities
33	M	Caucasian	large, public, 4-year	?
31	F	Caucasian	large, public, 4-year	student leaders
32	M	?	large, public, 4-year	student activities
32	F	Caucasian	large, public, 4-year	student conduct
47	F	Caucasian	small, public, 4-year	counseling
33	F	Caucasian	Mid-sized, private, 4-year	student union
30	M	African-American	large, public, 4-year	residence life
40	M	?	public, 4-year	residence life
36	F	African-American	large, public, 4-year	dean's office
42	F	Caucasian	large, public, 4-year	student activities
34	F	Caucasian	large, public, 4-year	fitness
Average				
Age*=				
37.09				
*used				
age of 55				
for non-				
specific				
age				
reporting				

Summary Table of Interview Participants

DEMOGRAPHIC SUMMARY OF INTERVIEW PARTICIPANTS

all demographic information was reported by participant to researcher

<u>PSEUDONYM</u>	<u>AGE</u>	<u>SEX</u>	<u>RACE/ETHNICITY</u>	<u>INSTITUTION TYPE</u>	<u>FIELD</u>
Joyce B.	45	F	Caucasian	large, public, 4-year	disability re
Julie S.	38	F	Caucasian	large, public, 4-year	counseling
Frank B.	27	M	Caucasian	mid-size, public, 4-year	student life
George S.	30	M	African-American	mid-size, public, 2-year	student affa
Margaret T.	30	F	Caucasian	small, private, 4-year	dean's offic
Nancy J.	mid 30's*	F	Caucasian	large, public, 4-year	student life
Carrie P.	mid 30's*	F	Caucasian	large, public, 4-year	student uni
Sarah F.	33	F	person of color	large, public, 4-year	residence
Janet R.	32	F	Caucasian	medium, private, 4-year	campus act
Bill M.	34	M	Caucasian	large, public, 4-year	dean's offic
Alice N.	31	F	Caucasian	public, 4-year	student life
Francis H.	34	F	Caucasian	large, public, 4-year	dean's offic
Slade L.	37	M	Caucasian	large, public, 4-year	student act
Kathy S.	37	F	Caucasian	small, private, 4-year	campus ac
Mary S.	50's*	F	Caucasian	medium, public, 4-year	IT (within st *not directly researcher
Average age*	35.53				
*used age of 35 and 55 for non-specific age reporting					

<u>PSEUDONYM</u>	<u>FAMILY</u>	<u>CHILDREN</u>
Joyce B.	?	yes
Julie S.	divorced	yes
Frank B.	married	?
George S.	single	no
Margaret T.	married	?
Nancy J.	married	?
Carrie P.	married	yes
Sarah F.	single	no
Janet R.	married	no
Bill M.	married	yes
Alice N.	married	no
Francis H.	married	yes
Slade L.	married	expecting
Kathy S.	married	yes
Mary S.	?	?

APPENDIX B: ON-LINE SURVEY

MID-CAREER IN STUENT AFFAIRS

1. Consent and Confidentiality

You are being asked to participate in a pilot study examining possible factors influencing the retention and attrition of mid-career or mid-level student affairs professionals. In this pilot study you will complete a questionnaire concerning specific themes developed from the literature on mid-career time-frames. There are 6 questions sometimes with multiple parts designed to elicit short answers based on individual experiences as a mid-career student affairs professional. It should take you approximately 15 minutes to complete. Please indicate in your responses which question you are replying to e.g. #4a., #5, or #9c., etc.

Your completion of this questionnaire is voluntary, you may choose not to participate at all, or you may refuse to participate in certain procedures or answer certain questions or discontinue your participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits. Your privacy will be protected to the maximum extent allowable by law. All questionnaires will be kept confidential by the researcher to the maximum extent allowable by law.

If you have any questions about this pilot study you may contact the investigator, Michael Houdyshell, 4001 W. McNichols, Detroit, MI 48219, (313) 993-1033, or houdyshe@msu.edu. If you have any questions or concerns regarding your rights as a study participant, you may contact-anonymously, if you wish- Peter Vasilenko, PhD, Chair of the University Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects at Michigan State University (UCRIHS) by phone (517) 355-2180, fax (517) 432-4503, ucrihs@msu.edu, 202 Olds Hall, East Lansing 48824. By completing this questionnaire, you indicate your voluntary consent to participate in this pilot study and have your answers included in the project data set. If you choose to not continue with the pilot study please exit this questionnaire now.

2. Professional Background

1. Please briefly describe your experiences in becoming a professional in student affairs.

In your response please indicate your age, gender, title, type of institution you currently work at, and if you consider yourself part of a traditionally underrepresented group.

3. Student Affairs and the Mid-Career

How would you define what it means to be a mid-career student affairs professional?

Do you think the student affairs field provides enough professional support to individuals reaching mid-career time frames?

What does that support (skills) look like or what could it look like?

4. Professional Advancement

Would a decrease in the number of senior level student affairs positions influence your decision to remain in the field as you progress professionally?

How does the field of student affairs prepare you professionally as you advance in the field?

How does your particular institution prepare you professionally as you advance in the field?

5. Professional Preparation

What helped prepare you for your first position(s) in student affairs?

What kinds of things could have better prepared you for your first position(s) in student affairs? e.g. stronger link of theory to practice in your graduate program, stronger supervisor, more assistantship/practicum experience, etc..

6. Attrition

Have you thought about leaving the field of student affairs entirely in the last year?

In the last 2-5 years?

If you answered yes, please list any reasons affecting these thoughts. e.g. institutional issues, personal commitments, burnout, advancement

If you answered no, please list the reasons why you chose to remain.

If you have already decided to leave the field entirely in the next year please list what factors contributed to this decision. e.g., institutional issues, personal commitments, burnout, advancement

Are you interested in participating in a longitudinal study further exploring factors that influence the retention and attrition of mid-career professionals?

7. Follow-up and Future Study

Thank you for your participation in this questionnaire. Your responses will help further research on mid-career issues. If you are interested in a follow-up

telephone conversation concerning your answers or would prefer to answer these questions over the telephone please email the researcher at houdyshe@msu.edu or call 313-993-1033.

APPENDIX C: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL FOR MID-CAREER STUDENT AFFAIRS INTERVIEWS

To be completed before each interview begins

1. *email solicitation sent to target population seeking participation*
2. *interested participants have received follow-up email explaining study*
3. *informed consent form completed and returned to researcher*

PARTICIPANT BACKGROUND INFORMATION

1. Please describe in detail what you currently do in student affairs and how you entered the profession. *opening interview statement*
- 2.

MID-CAREER AT STUDENT AFFAIRS

1. How would you define what it means to be at mid-career in student affairs? *key question*
2. How do you think the student affairs field chooses to recognize and define mid-career? *probing question*
3. Talk about your experiences moving from being a new professional (first or second position) into more mid-career student affairs positions? *probing question*
4. Discuss your reactions to defining mid-career in student affairs more broadly such as with the different professional experiences or more specifically such as with the number of years in the field and/or position title? *probing question*
5. Some in student affairs have commented that being at mid-career in student affairs is an important time in their career to decide whether to continue in the profession. What do you think of this statement? *probing question*
6. What is your reaction to the idea that individuals at mid-career in student affairs are often rooted in two worlds-one, performing some entry-level tasks and two, expectations of performing higher level functions and responsibilities? *probing question*

GRADUATE SCHOOL OR ASSISTANTSHIP PREPARATION OR PRE-FIRST PROFESSIONAL POSITION

1. If you graduated from a traditional student affairs master's program, how did it prepare you for your first professional position? *key question*
2. What would the pre-professional or graduate assistantship preparation look like to prepare you for your first professional position and beyond? *key question*
3. If you had an assistantship in a student affairs area during graduate school what things during that time helped prepare for your first position? *follow-up to question number 2*
4. In your graduate program do you believe you received more skills based or theory based training? *Key question*
5. Discuss how the link from theory to practice was taught and/or established during your graduate program? *key question*

PROFESSIONAL AND INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT AT MID-CAREER

1. Talk about how you believe the field prepares individuals professionally as they advance in their career especially at mid-career. *-key question*
2. Where should the responsibility of providing adequate professional support should fall? *Follow-up to question 1*
3. Discuss the role institutions play in providing professional support for student affairs professionals. *follow-up question to question 1 and 2*
4. Talk about how the field provides professional support for individuals at mid-career who do not choose to advance to a senior level position. *probing question*
5. Discuss the role supervisors have in supporting someone professionally at mid-career? *probing question*

PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL CONGRUENCE

1. How does being at mid-career in student affairs correspond to your personal situation? *-key question*
2. Talk about how the field supports individuals at mid-career who have families or are thinking of starting a family. *-key question*
3. How do you think being at mid-career in student affairs impacts the decision of when to start a family? *Follow-up question to number 2*
4. How does the number of hours beyond the traditional 40-hour work week that is often required of student affairs professionals impact mid-career individuals? *probing question*
5. Discuss some of the additional pressures exerted on women at mid-career in student affairs. *probing question*

CAREER LADDER AND SENIOR STUDENT AFFAIRS POSITIONS

1. Discuss your reaction to the idea that the number of senior level positions in student affairs gets smaller as individuals move through mid-career. *-key question*
2. Please define what it means to be in a Senior Student Affairs position. *probing question*
3. If you were ready to move into a senior level position, how would it impact your decision if you needed to move to another institution and/or move out of the area to attain a position? If you have a family? *Probing question*
4. Talk about your reaction to the idea of feeling “stuck” at mid-career because of the inability to advance beyond mid-career. *probing questions*
5. If you choose to leave the field, discuss how your skills and experiences would translate outside of higher education. *Probing question*

ATTRITION IN STUDENT AFFAIRS AT MID-CAREER

1. What reasons would cause you to consider leaving the field after working in mid-career? *-key question*
2. Research cites low salaries and burnout as the two most common reasons given for mid-career individuals leaving the field. If raising salaries and decreasing responsibilities are currently not available options to combat the problem of attrition, how else could institutions and the field combat this problem for mid-career professionals? *-key question*

3. Again, given that low salaries and burnout are the two most common reasons why individuals leave student affairs, why do you think more people choose to remain in field then leave? *–key question*
4. If you chose to leave student affairs, talk about why or why you would not remain in higher education. *Probing question*