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“I Alone Can’t Stop the Spread”: Mid-Level Conduct Professionals Sensemaking Through COVID-19

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The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore how mid-level student conduct professionals (SCPs) made meaning of their professional and mid-level leadership experiences during their institutions’ immediate responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. This study draws on sensemaking as a theoretical lens and literature related to mid-level professionals and student conduct practice to ground its inquiry. Interview data was collected and analyzed from four senior-level student conduct professionals within a single State within the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC) accreditation region. Findings center on three key themes voiced by the participants: the importance of maintaining operational processes, feelings of middle-ness, and reflections on student and personal wellbeing. Discussion and implications for professionals and postsecondary organizations confronting the short- and long-term effects of the COVID-19 pandemic are offered. Here, we highlight the valuable roles student conduct professionals play within postsecondary organizational life and the need for greater attention to these practitioners in both research and practice.

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COVID-19 changed the world in 2020. State and country borders closed, domestic and international travel ceased, and global economies faltered. Nothing was the same. This was especially true for higher education leaders who confronted the challenge of reopening their campuses for the fall 2020 semester. Schools had to balance the health and safety of their student body, their employees, and their local communities while also considering the ever-changing financial needs of their institution (Lederman, 2020). As a result of these challenges, and with a desire to pursue in-person learning, higher education moved to create safer campuses with new policies, rules, and guidelines to prevent the spread of COVID-19. Those efforts included reducing the number of students in on-campus housing, tightly controlling attendance at in-person gatherings, and requiring daily health assessments (St. Amour, 2020). Other efforts included spending millions of dollars to mitigate the effects of COVID-19 with personal protective equipment, new technology, and testing-related expenditures (Whitford, 2021).

Even with these protocols in place, student behavior during the 2020-2021 academic year was the biggest threat to the success of higher education. As Nadworny (2020) observed: "The spread of COVID-19 during the 2020 fall semester [was] connected to college-related events such as

fraternity parties, drinking at off-campus bars, and athletic practices" (para. 4). As this behavior increased, so did COVID-19 positivity rates and the need to mitigate transmission through any means necessary (Hubler & Hartocollis, 2020; Niedzwiadek & Atterbury, 2020). At many institutions, students were required to sign contracts such as "stop the spread" agreements, wherein they agreed to perform various behaviors to reduce transmission of the coronavirus (Anderson, 2020; Svrluga, 2020). These often-extreme measures to force student compliance with rules and procedures showed a desperation for solutions, often issued without a corresponding increase in supports for student affairs professionals (Pettit, 2021).

Across institutions, one group of front-line staff responsible for enforcement of such measures were and are student conduct professionals (SCPs). These individuals work proactively and reactively to provide learning opportunities, promote accountability, and foster responsible citizenship both on and off-campus (Waller, 2013). While the numerous issues in higher education have affected almost everyone at an institution, SCPs have struggled since March 2020 to 'control' the pandemic by addressing student behavior and enforcing violations of campus policies (Svrluga, 2020). In a typical academic year, addressing student behavior is important and meaningful work, but it usually

doesn't affect the daily operations of a university. For example, issues related to alcohol and noise from a large party over the weekend are necessary to address, but the university operations continue regardless of the response to this student behavior. During the pandemic, however, this same event may impact hundreds of students through contact tracing of COVID-19, and students who are hosts or in attendance face disciplinary consequences up to and including suspension or expulsion in some cases (Hubler & Hartocollis, 2020; Niedzwiadek & Atterbury, 2020). Yet despite the central role SCPs played in immediate and ongoing pandemic responses – a role that often added substantial public-health imperatives and the need to rapidly create and enforce policies – little scholarly attention has been paid to professionals serving in this key functional area. This gap provides the rationale for our study.

The purpose of this study is to better understand the effects of the COVID-19 global pandemic on SCPs and their work within colleges and universities. Drawing on the theoretical perspective of sensemaking (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014), this study asks: How do mid-level student conduct professionals make meaning of their experiences during COVID-19? The researchers in this study were particularly interested in understanding how these professionals sense-make with respect to their positional and

relational mid-level leadership roles (Branson et al., 2015) against the unique crises brought on by the coronavirus pandemic. To achieve this purpose, we first introduce our literature review and our theoretical perspectives. We then detail our qualitative methods and present our results. We close with discussion and implications for research and practice as higher education confronts the short- and long-term effects of COVID-19.

Literature Review

Researchers are still trying to understand COVID-19 in many social contexts, and those in higher education are moving towards a better understanding of its broader impact on students. Articles can be found about the mental health challenges for our students (Hartocollis, 2021; Son et al., 2020), fear of COVID-19 (Moore, 2021), impact of COVID-19 on college finances (DePietro, 2020; Friga, 2021), and opinion pieces about student behavior during the pandemic (Andrew, 2020; Koenig, 2020; Nadworny, 2020; Niedzwiadek & Atterbury, 2020) that offer varying perspectives on accountability and perspectives on what 'successful responses' entailed. While insights change rapidly, stakeholders are starting to understand what it means to consider learning more holistically (Shushok et al., 2009) in the context of widespread public health concerns. This perspective is especially important for this study

as we investigate the leadership and sense-making practices of SCPs, who hold important positions on college campuses in which they can influence students' development and, as a result, the effect of the pandemic on the institution.

Student Conduct Professionals (SCPs)

The individuals at the center of this research are SCPs. Historically, student conduct processes have played a key role in United States higher education. Student conduct is one of many names for the processes and procedures through which colleges and universities manage student behavior. Other common naming structures include codes of conduct, honor codes, judicial systems, and judicial services (Pavela, 2006). SCPs can work in an office dedicated to addressing individual student behavior or they can be coupled with an office or offices that address student clubs (i.e., student organizations), organizational (i.e., fraternity or sororities, housing (i.e., residence life), or academic misconduct (i.e., honor code).

SCPs in today's higher education are educators and teachers, unlike their predecessors during the time of colonial colleges who focused on being disciplinarians and authoritative figures (Association of Student Conduct Administration, 2012; Rudolph, 1962). Interventions on student behavior during colonial times took the form of religious

education, expulsion from the school, and even corporal punishment from faculty. Contemporary education related to student behavior comes in many forms for SCPs, including individual conversations during adjudication processes, proactive campus education about codes of conduct, and learning-focused sanctioning meant to provide educational opportunities rather than punishment.

The complexity of student behavior has also changed since the early days of higher education with the rise of issues related to technology, criminal behavior, academic misconduct, and sexual misconduct (Association of Student Conduct Administration, 2012). Modern, highly collaborative higher education environments require SCPs to have specialized skills and training to effectively carry out the position responsibilities and to investigate and adjudicate complex incidents that involve law enforcement, attorneys, and campus administrators (Stoner II & Lowery, 2004). While some may question why an individual pursues a career in student conduct for a college or university, the primary goal – in close alignment with the ACPA/NASPA Professional Competency Areas (2015) – is for SCPs to be holistically educational, not narrowly punitive (Gehring, 2006).

Mid-Level Professionals

Scholarship that provides a clear definition of a mid-level professional is scarce, especially in the context of higher education (Rodriguez, 2021). Specifically, the student affairs profession is riddled with different position titles and responsibilities across thousands of campuses. This contributes to the difficulty in finding a clear definition. Tull and Freeman (2008) struggled in their efforts to determine common titles for the chief student affairs officers at an institution, let alone a group like mid-level professionals. The National Association for Student Personnel Administrators (2020) conducts a yearly “mid-manager” institute where they invite individuals with at least five years of experience as a full-time professional with oversight and supervisory responsibility of one or more units and professional staff members.

Helpfully, Fey and Carpenter (1996) classified mid-level professionals using the following parameters: 1) holds at least a master’s degree or higher; 2) holds the most senior position in a functional area; 3) reports directly to a senior student affairs officer (SSAO); and 4) supervises at least one full-time professional. Scott (1978) concluded that mid-level professionals are “loyalists” who display their loyalty to the institution as a means of navigating their mid-level positions. Scott identified a significant tension in that mid-level professionals are neither

faculty (who are associated with the academic function of the institution) nor the senior staff (who are associated with overall institutional leadership). As a result of this ‘in-between’ position, Young (2007) found that mid-level professionals have significant opportunities to drive collaboration, leadership, and change within higher education. This ‘middleness’, described by Rosser (2000), means that mid-level professionals must find the balance between superiors’ directions and the needs of those whom they supervise. The positionality of these leaders in higher education administration means mid-level professionals are often forgotten about (Mather, Bryan & Faulkner, 2009), which adds to the difficulty in understanding their leadership during trying times or crises.

Mid-level professionals are essential to the overall operation of a college or university through their administrative and functional roles that support the institutional mission. These professionals, like the SCPs in this study, interact with students, faculty, staff, community members, and external constituents as the ‘face’ of their school or division (i.e., student affairs) (Johnsrud & Rosser, 2000). As such, it is important to understand the leadership impacts of the global pandemic on mid-level professionals relative to their relational and positional standing at their institution – which can be complicated

given their dual-role to both department and organization.

Theoretical Framework

The idea that learning happens in many different aspects of college life (Shushok et al., 2009) provides value and necessity for SCPs and their work with students, as well as shapes the leadership practices of these individuals with their employees. As we establish the importance of the mid-level professional to higher education, in addition to their unique position in the organization and competing interests on the position, we seek to understand more about the meaning making of their leadership experiences.

Over the last decade, the helpful concept and theory of *sensemaking* has permeated various areas of the organizational and leadership literature, including its impact on organizational processes, innovation, creativity, and strategic change. “Sensemaking—the process through which individuals work to understand novel, unexpected, or confusing events—has become a critically important topic in the study of organizations” (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014, p. 57). From the seminal work of Weick (1995), which introduced the concept of sensemaking in organizations, researchers have been trying to understand the various contexts in which sensemaking applies. Most of the early work presents sensemaking as a retrospective

process (Weick, 1995) that isn’t actively occurring as a moment or experience unfolds. Other research throughout the late 20th century studied individuals and their experience with reality (Garfinkel, 1967), how violated expectations impacted sensemaking (Louis, 1980), how social interactions (e.g., language, culture) affect sensemaking processes (Brown & Humphreys, 2003; Cornelissen, 2012; Dunford & Jones, 2000; Maitlis, 2005).

Although agreement is found on the impetus for sensemaking, limited work exists on how it is accomplished or what it entails in the context of complex higher education institutions (Kezar, 2013). The call for leader research in sensemaking dovetails nicely with the complex crises brought on by COVID-19, especially in higher education with SCPs and mid-level professionals. Understanding the leader role during a crisis is especially important because early actions in a crisis “do more than set the tone; they determine the trajectory of the crisis” (Weick, 1988, p. 309). The leader’s role during a crisis cannot be overstated; as a “low-probability, high-impact event that threatens the viability of the organization and is characterized by ambiguity of cause, effect, and means of resolution” (Pearson & Clair, 1998, p. 60), crises provide powerful sensemaking triggers.

In addition to the connections made between COVID-19 responses, crises, and

sensemaking, research in recent years has put more emphasis on the possibility of sensemaking as a prospective (Gephart et al., 2010), or future-oriented process for all types of leaders and leadership moments, rather than a purely retrospective process. This shift in the literature and research environment opens many doors and possibilities for the future as we seek to understand the power of current COVID-19 situations on sensemaking, especially in the context of student conduct and mid-level professionals. We now present our methods.

Methods

To answer the research question, a qualitative study rooted in phenomenological epistemology was conducted drawing on individual interviews to explore the mid-level professional experiences of SCPs during the global pandemic. Consistent with our theoretical framework, this approach was adopted to better understand participants lived realities engaging sensemaking (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014).

Sample

Though recognizing that administrative responsibility is an inherently distributed phenomenon that often encompasses additional staff (e.g., residential life practitioners), we chose to restrict our sample only to positional (i.e., director-level) student conduct leaders

in an effort to fully and deeply understand the narratives of these mid-level professionals during this unique moment in higher education history. Additionally, as interstate differences with respect to COVID-19 responses manifest in collegiate experiences and public-health expectations, this study was restricted to one State in the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC) accreditation region. This state was chosen for its diversity of institutional types as well as expanded potential for participant recruitment. We focused on recruiting mid-level SCP leaders (see Fey & Carpenter, 1996) from four-year, public or private, mid-sized (2,000-10,000 enrollment) and large (10,000+ enrollment) institutions in the state.

Given the subject matter, our final IRB protocols stipulated two levels of consent. We were initially required to achieve institutional-level agreement (e.g., via email correspondence with an authorized university agent) to recruit participants from within the school into our study. We were then able to contact the practitioner to solicit study enrollment and participation. All recruitment was done during the Spring 2021 semester; interviews were conducted in spring and early summer 2021.

Out of approximately 25 institutions that featured this employment role, we recruited four participants in total to participate:

two from larger public institutions, one from a mid-sized public institution, and one from a mid-sized private institution. We note that a substantial number of institutions did not respond to our request to contact an individual,

did not have a process for granting University-level permissions, and/or did not respond to researchers' post-submission of University-level materials. Table 1 provides additional coverage of our sample.

Table 1.

Study Participants

Pseudonym	Gender Identity	Racial Identity	Inst. Type	Inst. Size
Maeve	Female	White	Public	Large
Val	Female	White	Public	Large
Ramona	Female	White	Public	Mid-Sized
Derek	Male	White	Private	Mid-Sized

At the established interview time, the researchers met with each participant virtually and reviewed the informed consent. At the beginning of the interview, each subject was asked to select a pseudonym. Each interview covered questions across the following areas: introductory; pandemic responses (e.g., Describe the processes your campus enacted to “stop the spread” of COVID-19); leadership sensemaking (e.g., What is a decision related to the pandemic that makes you most proud? That you wish could be re-done?); and futuring (e.g., What support do student conduct professionals like you need over the next year?). Researchers spent 30-60 minutes asking questions of the participants and recording their answers. The interview was conducted and recorded via a

University-supported subscription web-based platform (Zoom).

Analysis

All interviews were emergent coded by each researcher separately in consultation with existing theory and research (Saldaña, 2021). This decision to proceed from an emergent perspective was made because of the distinctive nature of COVID-19 response contexts; though theory and literature exist, no *a priori* scheme existed to justify a deductive approach. Upon initial consideration of coding, and considering the ever-shifting landscape of pandemic-era experiences, researchers decided that this sample of four had achieved thematic saturation with respect to the research inquiry (Beitin, 2014).

Researchers next grouped codes into themes, again in triangulation with existing perspectives. Specifically, we frequently returned to the theoretical presentation offered by Maitlis and Christianson (2014) to ensure that we were not overly reducing participants' sensemaking and instead fostering an "inductive and evolutionary process of investigation" (Saldaña, 2021, p. 213). In this process it was important that study themes expressed, to the best extent possible, the comprehensiveness of mid-level leaders' sensemaking and the reality that multiple issues, practices, and emotions were engaged simultaneously and subsequently reflected on during the interviews. We also returned to the audio recordings to listen for voice, tone, and emotion given our theoretical anchoring in sensemaking and the nature of our inquiry.

Final themes were member-checked by one study participant who agreed to review the entire manuscript to ensure trustworthiness and appropriate voicing of sensemaking experiences. At the end of this process, data were interpreted through use of three overarching sensemaking dimensions. Prior to drafting the manuscript, the researchers again discussed the alignment of themes with data, selecting with care those passages that best reflected sensemaking among study participants. As an additional approach toward developing trustworthiness with respect to experiences at the field level,

the manuscript was reviewed by an external mid-level student conduct professional who provided helpful insights into data interpretation and presentation.

Limitations

Two primary limitations confront this study. First, while the sample provides a comprehensive picture of sensemaking among student conduct leaders, we were not able to fully encompass the multiple aspects of diversity – most notably racial/ethnic and institutional – within the state. The well-founded need to acquire institutional-level approval in addition to individual consent may have restricted our sample, reflecting a necessary trade-off between asking important questions and accessing the most possible data. Second, the temporal nature of this study proved germane and may represent a limitation beyond the typical transformations in life and society that exist in any social scientific research. Interviews were conducted during a period of somewhat relative optimism with respect to COVID-19 on campus: vaccines were being released, budgets within institutions had not been drastically cut as feared, and the spring 2021 semester was reaching its conclusion. As such, the data is not able to capture subsequent sensemaking through the fall 2021 surge of Delta variant, and the spring and summer 2022 surges of the Omicron variants.

Researcher Positionality

The researchers approached this study from positions of both research and professional experience. One of the authors previously served as a mid-level leader in a division of student affairs and now primarily conducts research employing multiple methodological techniques and paradigms. His work interfacing with student affairs divisions guided his understandings of organizational leadership and practitioner wellbeing. The second author currently serves as a mid-level professional in an office of student conduct and, as such, is intimately familiar with the pandemic response at a single institution. We express in this space that the genesis of this study came from dialogue between the two authors regarding the need to consider this understudied population and phenomenon; in fact, the quote in our title comes not from a participant but from the second author during an initial research meeting.

Findings

We organize our findings around three themes: operational processes, 'middleness' as dynamic leadership space, and wellbeing. Each theme represents a dimension of sensemaking that study participants reflected on during our interview.

Operational Processes

All study participants spoke about the immediate challenges confronting March 2020 concerning how they were going to continue performing the operational duties of their office, especially recognizing the closeness to graduation and the need to resolve cases. The primary concern, as expressed by Val, was "How do we continue what we're doing without losing contact or time with students or having their cases not resolved?" As offices progressed into the summer and fall of 2020, there were also considerations regarding the extent to which work could be conducted safely in person, by whom (Ramona), and through what secure technologies (Maeve).

Another operational consideration expressed by multiple participants was deep concern regarding the possible financial issues that could arise as a result of the pandemic and what University decisions could mean for staff, students, and the quality of work. As Maeve described: "You think about conduct – you know you're going to face a lot of crises, a lot of unknowns, but you know you're going to face it with this team. And what kept coming to the surface with the economic impacts of this was: Do I know that the team's going to be there?" This challenge was further reflected by Ramona, who shared that her institution had cut salaries for employees and several staff had moved on

to different roles, resulting in only two people to do a majority of the student conduct work. This created a sincere operational challenge for an office that “hears everything.” As Ramona further described with notable pressure in her voice: “Because we’ve had a backlog of cases, timing has been tough. We’ve met our deadlines within 30 days, but it’s been tough”. As reflected by participants, this was not simply doing more with less, as is often the case in student-facing work; it was completing all the work while needing, with diminished support, to rapidly determine the best way to even do the work.

Of course, operational considerations were themselves in flux as they were situated within larger organizational systems and subject to external pressures. As Val noted:

“Candidly, my institution.... I don’t think we planned it out very well. I think we took the assumption that everybody gets this, it is serious, people are going to do the right thing, people are going to want to stay safe. So we had talked more about educational approaches when people didn’t wear masks or were gathering in numbers that they shouldn’t, but we still put together – myself and another conduct officer from housing – a rubric thinking ‘there’s a really good chance this is not going to go that smoothly’ and we should probably be

prepared to say: If people are literally endangering each-others’ health that our consequences are going to be severe; but above us there wasn’t really a stomach for starting from that place.”

This perspective leads to our next theme which considers how these operational, policy and delivery considerations were connected to mid-level leadership practice of SCPs.

Middleness

Undoubtedly, operational concerns reflected close consideration of leadership issues and what it meant to be in mid-level student conduct positions, especially during the summer of 2020 when institutions were creating policies for the upcoming academic year. We heard a common narrative across all participants concerning a lack of their involvement in developing protocols, whose implementation would ultimately fall to student conduct personnel. As Maeve stated, “I wasn’t super involved in that process; I wish I had been;” or in the words of Ramona “To be quite honest, I was not consulted at all.” Val further noted: “Student conduct...at this institution...people don’t often think to include us in a conversation. They don’t necessarily recognize that what they’re talking about is conduct-related.”

This omission invited numerous challenges from a leadership perspective in which SCPs were not involved in processes until mid-way through their development, were not provided clear guidance, and/or were caught off-guard by campus-wide communications. As Derek described his feelings during these experiences: “When you have such a tumultuous and stressful fall semester...you have to grow up really quickly.” Capturing some of the organizational dimensions, Ramona expressed: “I’m supposed to be leading people; I’m not steering the ship at all; I’m along for the same ride.” Such issues became especially pronounced as student conduct professionals tended to adopt a “prepare for the worst, hope for the best” (Val) approach while senior administrators were often perceived as being overly optimistic concerning student conduct.

Reflecting further on her own experiences of middleness, Maeve considered the challenges of leading her staff when decisions, priorities, and actions of senior leadership were fluid and not always communicated in advance:

“It never felt like you were ever ahead of the curve; you were always kinda riding the tip of the wave. And especially during a pandemic, where [sigh] everyone’s safety and security and emotions are running high, as a leader to feel like you can’t provide

the stability that you’d like to be able to provide for the people who you already know are rattled was very difficult, and to be rattled yourself in the midst of that.”

While Maeve understood that senior leadership was faced with an unprecedented scenario and near-constant decisions, this still proved challenging from her mid-level organizational positionality.

Wellbeing

Our third theme engages SCPs expression of sensemaking with respect to wellbeing throughout the past year – for themselves, their staff, and their students. Each participant ultimately had to make sense of what it meant for themselves and their communities to remain holistically well in the context of both COVID concerns and organizational challenges. Several participants described in their own language that they felt, based on their previous experiences and desire to pursue this work, very comfortable with moments of ambiguity and “having difficult conversations” (Val). Each also expressed striving, if at times uneasily, to achieve a semblance of balance between their personal and professional lives, especially those caring for young children and other loved ones amidst the pandemic. As Ramona reflected, what worked for her was:

“Boundaries, listening, taking my time off...I really tried to focus on keeping myself in a good headspace, sleeping...because it weighs on ya....really trying to separate that personal and that professional...looking inwards...I can’t help others if I’m not gonna help myself first.”

This was a challenge for student conduct professionals; yet, all mentioned that they still derived significant satisfaction and a sense of wellbeing from their work and its people.

Derek also accurately predicted in summer 2021 a reality that is gaining increasing traction during the 2021-22 academic year and beyond: concerns about college student mental health (e.g., Elfman, 2022; Son et al., 2020). As he reflected: “I think we’re going to be seeing a lot of residual effects with mental health. I think there are ripple effects we’re going to be seeing years to come because of the pandemic. We think of it over the last year and a half but think of the damage it has done to people and their mindset.” Derek expressed how this realization was shaping conversations he was having heading into the fall and an awareness he planned to continue raising given his leadership role. Reflecting on the past year, Derek also considered where he was and what kept him going:

“I enjoy what I do, despite it being really stressful. I wouldn’t even say I was trying to keep my head above water; it was almost just trying to get off the bottom of the lake last year. Cause I’ve definitely been in jobs where I hated what I did and I was miserable and I truly like what I do and...the people that I work with. I wouldn’t have been successful this past year without them.”

This reflects a theme we heard throughout that SCPs overall still found personal fulfillment in their work and found their way into this effort through a variety of education-based and non-education-based experiences.

Discussion

The researchers for this study set out to answer the following question: How do mid-level SCPs at public and private institutions in one state make meaning of their experiences during COVID-19? We frame our discussion around this important insight on sensemaking offered by Maitlis and Christensen: “Unexpected events do not necessarily trigger sensemaking; it occurs when the discrepancy between what one expects and what one experiences is great enough, and important enough, to cause individuals or groups to ask what is going on, and what they should do next” (p. 70). Through this

lens, we may better contextualize our participants' voices and consider how our findings could translate into necessary conversations and worthwhile practices.

First, we highlight the interconnectedness of our three themes and the ways in which operational processes, middleness, and wellbeing reflected different dimensions of individual and, at times, unit-level sensemaking processes. For our participants, as for many student-facing staff during the pandemic, questions concerning the *how*, *what*, and *who* of their work exist in a swirl of no easy answers and myriad stressors. We engage this reality with respect to operational sensemaking and consider how our participants innovatively strived toward achieving the imperatives of their offices and institutions amidst a constantly-shifting landscape. Here, ensuring the job was done required leadership and an approach to centering shared wellbeing that was always present, if not always stated.

Second, perhaps our most robust finding – and certainly the finding around which we heard the most emotion and feeling in our participants reflections – pertained to participant's mid-level leadership journeys (see also Savarese, 2019). In their own way, each SCP needed to make sense of this 'middleness' and constantly occupy dual positionalities of being responsible *for* themselves and their staff while also being

responsive *to* senior administrators. Throughout, we heard moments of empathy for senior administrators, moments of frustration with lack of inclusion in processes, and moments of deep concern regarding the impact of the work on themselves and their employees. Collectively, the interviews for this research showed that SCPs felt their people – and themselves – could rise to any challenge and that university communities eventually realized the value of student conduct perspectives, especially when dealing with novel, unique, and ever-changing situations.

Connected to this takeaway is the understanding others have of the student conduct profession. Before this global pandemic, it's possible senior leadership at a university and other leadership within student affairs didn't have a clear understanding of policy, accountability, and requirements of due process. SCPs are attuned to the not-so-positive side of student life on and off campus and the affect that has on the higher education experience. After the 2020-2021 academic year, eyes are (we hope) opened to the intricacies and requirements of the profession and how important it is to involve SCPs in decision-making process that concern their work.

We also reflect on the sensemaking dimension associated with wellbeing. In a unique way, SCPs were perhaps better prepared for this global pandemic when

compared to their peers because of the nature of student conduct work. SCPs never know what to expect from their day, can be hit with an emergency at any point, are typically on call after hours and weekends, and learn to embrace the ambiguity of their work. This necessitates flexibility, patience, level-headed thinking, and collaboration with peers – all skills that have benefited higher education professionals when making decisions during the global pandemic. On this front, we uncovered a heartfelt investment in student wellbeing among this group of professionals and a founded concern about how their roles – and, indeed, divisions and Universities – must unwaveringly support student health.

Taken collectively our findings encourage considerations for mid-level leadership as an important constellation of identities, experiences and practices that interact simultaneously at the intersections of operational practice, organizational position, and practitioner development. From this vantage, findings suggest that mid-level leadership and feelings of middle-ness must be considered as dynamic and evolving processes – for SCPs, their teams, and their institutions. This reflection was made very evident during the immediate pandemic response. While true that “in crises leadership it is imperative that a leader *take courageous action*” (James & Wooten, 2005, p. 148), the reality

that mid-level leaders are often constrained in such action, or even take such action at the expense of their own wellbeing, must be carefully considered now and into the future. In short, our findings on mid-level leadership and its associated practices and perspectives have demonstrated notable concurrence with previous perspectives (e.g., Savarese, 2021; Scott, 1978; Young, 2007) regarding the importance of mid-level leadership and offered perhaps a notable extension: crises only heighten expectations and experiences of middle-ness.

Implications

We now offer implications for practice and research. Findings reveal several important considerations for student conduct professionals, mid-level leadership, and student affairs work during these unprecedented times. To begin, we encourage senior administrative leaders to proactively, not reactively, engage student conduct professionals in creating policies and executing decisions that such professionals will ultimately have to implement. As stories of pandemic responses revealed, overlooking student conduct professionals can fail not only to create safe learning environment for all students, it can also generate discomfort and uncertainty for the professionals involved. SCPs must be fully acknowledged at the most prominent levels of institutional decision-making as

highly knowledgeable professionals charged with mission-critical responsibilities.

Relatedly, institutions should provide additional supports to mid-level student conduct professionals – and, perhaps, mid-level leaders generally – with respect to building sustainable careers within their home institutions (Rodriguez, 2021). As both participants and scholars (e.g., Marshall et al., 2016) note, field attrition is a pressing issue; finding ways to ensure that student conduct professionals who helped carefully steer and continue to guide institutions through the pandemic landscape are encouraged to elevate their institutional knowledge to senior ranks will prove vital. Importantly, such supports may include increased transparency concerning budgeting and staffing, especially as workloads continue to increase in the pandemic-era.

Turning to research, this study could open opportunities for additional investigation into the practices, conditions, and impact of student conduct professionals. One avenue might be to expand the parameters of this study into additional empirical terrain to explore a wider sample of student conduct professionals and the effects of the pandemic on their working and professional lives. Such a study could benefit from collaboration with professional organizations such as ASCA. Another opportunity for future work could rest in understanding how student

conduct professionals fit within broader ecologies of student-facing staff and taking a more comprehensive approach to understandings of the processes and practices associated with developing and implementing student conduct. A third idea could be to consider such a study from the perspective of students; how have student conduct professionals been influential in their COVID-era collegiate experiences?

Conclusion

This research showed that SCPs are knowledgeable, highly competent, and necessary additions to any decision-making process that involves student safety. They have the pulse of the student body that others don't, and they aren't afraid to put development and education of the student above their own needs. Due to the experiences and desires that bring them to the student conduct profession, SCPs are uniquely qualified to deal with crisis and the complicated decisions that result from something new and unexpected. This qualification means they are proactive in thinking about crisis because of its role in their work lives, but they are also reflective in evaluating crisis and making sense of what happened, how it happened, and how best to prevent it from happening again.

We wonder, then, how experiences voiced by participants in this study might catalyze innovations within and beyond the

conduct arena. These might include increased uses of virtual formats for conduct hearings or other developmental conversations in an effort to promote feelings and personal safety and emotional security for involved parties; renewed consideration of how SCPs expert knowledge can meaningfully contribute to campus-wide conversations about the nature and meanings of

justice; and closer consideration for ensuring that staff wellbeing is a priority. Whatever routes are taken, we hope this study shines a light on the value SCPs bring to their organizations and the critical roles they play in helping postsecondary institutions fulfill their holistic educational missions amidst the COVID-19 pandemic and its long-lasting effects.

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